

University of Nevada, Reno

**A Crisis of Space: Identity, Subjectivity, and Materiality in Postmodern
American Fiction**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in
English

by

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Abstract

The material world as it is represented in postmodern American novels accounts for subjectivity and identity in ways that remain critically unexplored. This dissertation, therefore, examines representations of space, the subject, and materiality in three postmodern American novels: *Housekeeping* by Marilynne Robinson, *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, and *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. For the protagonists in these novels, finding refuge in a material world attenuates the power exerted in socially constructed spaces. In this way, spatial relationships empower the individual character in a struggle against the discursive representations and socio-political forces that seek to define, limit, and determine identity performance as a means for maintaining social and political domination. Although these three novels contend with different subjects and time periods, representations of transience and spatial movement unify them, and in each novel transience is the means by which the subject disrupts discourses of power. Analyses of these novels indicate contemporary changes in how subjects are produced, and they also indicate how interpretations of subjectivity and identity as concepts have changed over the previous forty years.

Dedication

For Eleanor and John.

Without you, this would not be possible.

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CHAPTER 1: SPACE, MATERIALITY, AND THE POSTMODERN AMERICAN NOVEL

This dissertation interrogates and combines two concerns. The first centers on literary representations of identity and subjectivity, especially as they relate to the use of imagined spaces in the postmodern American novel. The second contends with identity, identity formation, and the subjectivity imposed on marginalized individuals by social, cultural, and political structures that seek to control them. Examining these two concerns together reveals the extent to which American postmodern authors are invested in identity performance in post-industrial political and social landscapes that simultaneously glorify and disempower the individual. I argue that these concerns as they appear in the postmodern American novel are important because they indicate a heightened awareness among American authors of how social and political subjects are formed. These critical concerns also enable us to investigate how much control individual subjects have over the formation and performance of their own identities as they are represented in the novel. To this end, many recent American authors investigate the constructed nature of identity, especially in postmodern political and social environments that undermine and destabilize agency in the individual. Many of these authors seem to question whether or not we must cede the individual to the absolute relativism of postmodern subjectivity. If not, is there some foundation to individual identity, one that lies beyond the social and political structures that bind the subject to a particular position of control? A critical investigation of spatiality in the novel provides some answers to these questions, and for the texts I include in this study, spatial relationships to the social, political, and material worlds are important for the identities and subjectivities of individual characters. To clarify before

proceeding, in this dissertation I make a distinction between “subjectivity,” a term I use to represent the systemic control imposed on the individual through social, political, and patriarchal discourses of power, and “identity,” an expression or performance that provides the individual with marginal agency and limited self-determination.¹

Take, for example, Marilynne Robinson’s novel *Housekeeping*, a coming of age story published in 1980 but set in the 1950s centered on a young teenager struggling to establish her identity while being pulled between two incongruent social worlds. At a climactic moment in *Housekeeping*, Ruth, the young teenager and the novel’s narrator, finds herself alone in the overgrown, untrammelled forest that lies on the outskirts of her hometown, Fingerbone. Cut off from the castigating gaze of Fingerbone’s narrow-minded

¹ This is a somewhat arbitrary and over-simplified distinction. The human subject is at once a social, political, philosophical, and material entity defined by shifting relationships to other subjects and to other political, social, and material systems that are themselves defined by continual change. As Nick Mansfield argues, “No matter how exhaustive our analyses of our selfhood in terms of language, politics and philosophy, we remain an intense focus of rich and immediate experience that defies system, logic and order and that goes out into the world in a complex, inconsistent, and highly charged way (4). Or, as Ruth Robbins notes, “The vast majority of [definitions of subjectivity] focus on the extent to which the subject is powerfully *subjected to* forces outside itself,” and therefore the relationship the subject has to outside forces enables the subject to acquire self-knowledge (14). And finally, as Susan Lurie argues in *Unsettled Subjects: Restoring Feminist Politics to Poststructuralist Critique*, “we need a model [of feminist subjectivity] that links discursive regulation not only to a subject’s stable, exclusionary identity but to the way identity itself is inherently unstable, constituted as an interarticulation of a subject’s multiple positions and investments” (19).

“Interarticulation” is a key descriptor that ties subjectivity and identity together in ways that make my separation of the two terms somewhat artificial. However, agency—as connected to both the subject and to identity performance—forms a cornerstone of my arguments in this dissertation. The agency any individual possesses is closely connected to the identities she performs in relation to subject positions thrust upon her by material, social, and political circumstances that mainly lie outside her control. For that reason, there is value, I argue, in teasing apart the terms “identity” and “subjectivity” for determining not only how agency applies to each, but also for identifying how material, social, and political circumstances help shape them. Simply stated, I want to pull these terms apart in order to better understand how they fit together.

residents who form the small-town culture that both inhabits and inhibits her identity, Ruth encounters a mysterious force that emerges from the natural world:

I walked out of the valley and down the little apron of earth at its entrance. The shore was empty and, after its manner, silent. . . . I sat on a log and whistled and tossed stones at the toe of my shoe. I knew why Sylvie felt there were children in the woods. I felt so, too, though I did not think so. I sat on the log pelting my shoe, because I knew that if I turned however quickly to look behind me the consciousness behind me would not still be there, and would only come closer when I turned away again. Even if it spoke just at my ear, as it seemed often at the point of doing, when I turned there would be nothing there. In that way it was persistent and teasing and ungentle, the way half-wild, lonely children are. (154)

The consciousness that approaches Ruth at the edge of the lake haunts her. As an amalgam of the ghosts of settlers who have long since perished, it forms an historical consciousness that embodies the identities of every resident of Fingerbone. But the consciousness also emerges from the material world as well, the world of nature apart from all the historical events that torment Fingerbone's residents. For Ruth, this consciousness is spatially defined. In the natural world, separated from social space and its panoptic eye, she attempts to forge a new relationship to her identity.

However, Ruth's efforts to contextualize the consciousness she encounters, to locate it in a physical space, or to engage it as a material artifact are perpetually delayed. She can know this external consciousness only tangentially as an echo that emerges in the material world that surrounds her, but one that does not seem to have any material origin.

This “consciousness” haunts Ruth in countless ways as she tries to negotiate between two powerfully conflicting forces: the identity she adopts and the subject position thrust upon her by a society that seeks to control and define her. Consequently, Ruth constructs her identity partly as a reaction to her social anxiety, partly by the virtue of her willfulness, and partly by her relationship to the wilderness in which she immerses herself. The loneliness and isolation she feels, exacerbated by the social exile forced upon the identity she adopts, compels her to seek refuge in nature. Ruth is a subject who struggles with the powerlessness of social isolation, and yet in the spaces defined by nature, she finds some agency. She discovers a way to connect history and identity to the spaces that constitute them and that provide her life with meaning.

As Ruth struggles with her identity, she finds that she cannot escape it, and an important dimension of Robinson’s novel lies in the narrator’s portrayal of Ruth’s subjectivity as a force that acts upon her, even as Ruth believes that she has some control over her self-expression. In *Housekeeping*, then, what emerges is a novel-length exploration of how subjects are formed and what happens when certain gendered identities do not or cannot conform to the regulations imposed by culture and society. Ruth does not resist her culture because she wants to, necessarily, but rather because she feels that her subject position, as a marker of social difference, leaves her with little choice. Yet, as a means for solidifying allegiance among its conforming members, the society Ruth resists helps create the very subversive identity that Ruth uses to resist it. In this way, the novel tacks between polarizing positions: identity is an expression the subject performs on the one hand, while on the other hand subjectivity enforces a constructed social and gender performance. The narrator centers this investigation in the

character of Ruth, who exists as a physical body moving through space and who depends on her relationship to the natural, non-social world as a way to bolster and affirm her identity. The passage above exemplifies the challenge for Ruth of maintaining a relationship to non-social space. The physical, material world she values exists beyond language, and every time she tries to acknowledge this world or this “consciousness” through language, it disappears. When she turns quickly to look behind her, the consciousness “would not still be there, and would only come closer” when she turned away again. Ruth discovers that the formation and performance of identity operates according to similar principles. For her, any identity informed by the material world must exist in extra-discursive space; as soon as she tries to define identity through language, it slips from her grasp. As both protagonist and narrator, Ruth investigates the tension between language and materiality. She desperately wants to define herself, but every attempt to do so returns her to the discursive structures that restrict her consciousness.

The questions that arise from *Housekeeping* suggest broader questions about postmodern American fiction. Late twentieth-century American authors capture the complexities of identity politics in a world dominated by capitalism, a system that hinders individual liberty by valorizing identity. At first this statement seems contradictory because we might assume that identity performance is proportionate to an individual’s freedom. But in many postmodern American novels, the right to assert or perform identity is an act that limits personal freedom by binding the individual to particular relationships in social space. These relationships reinforce structures of power as defined by a capitalist society. In *Housekeeping*, Ruth evokes a profound concern for limitations placed on identity performance, and the novel forces us to ask difficult questions about

identity formation, expression, individual liberty, and the control exerted by language in a world where the individual becomes increasingly more compartmentalized and isolated.

The purpose of this dissertation, then, is to investigate how the protagonists in several different American novels prioritize and explore relationships between identity, materiality, and space. From each text emerges a critical analysis of identity and identity formation that illuminates the complex relationship between identity and power.

Furthermore, each of the three texts I include permits a critical examination of identity performance from a different subject position: a gendered subject position in the case of *Housekeeping*; a racial one in the case of *Beloved*; and a privileged one in the case of *The Road*.² Considering these three texts elicits broader questions about how American literature mediates between dominant and oppressed identities, the material worlds in which those identities locate themselves, and the various discourses of power that seek to enforce particular relationships between subjects. What power do these postmodern novels harness in an attempt to delineate identity formation? Can American fiction adequately capture the ways in which identity performance is not just socially controlled but also materially dependent? From these novels, can we definitively determine the relationships between individuals and the material spaces that surround them?

² Gender is as important in *Beloved* as it is in *Housekeeping*, but for my arguments, I am focusing on gender, race, and class as they appear in each of these novels respectively.

IDENTITY, SUBJECTIVITY, AND FICTION

In *The American Novel Now* (2010), an analysis of narrative trends in contemporary American fiction published after 1980, Patrick O'Donnell suggests the complex process of representing identity in the novel:

No chronology or mapping of the adventures of identity in contemporary American fiction, nor any categorical division of individual novels according to school, epoch, or 'ism,' could possibly be responsive to the complex mixture of social force, linguistic process, and imaginative line of flight that goes into the making of identity for many contemporary writers.
(81)

If the forces that act upon the American identity have become impenetrably complex, as O'Donnell suggests, what has happened since 1980 to make them so? The critical reception of post-structural debates is partly responsible, for these debates destabilize the traditional conception of identity as an essential, innate phenomenon. Accepting the possibility that identity is not essential, or is not foundational, or that it does not arise from a mysterious center located in the human experience, forces the individual to question the origins of identity. In other words, how is identity socially and politically constructed in such a way that we think we have complete control over it when actually we might have very little? O'Donnell alludes as well to other complexities generated by the multiplicity of voices that have gained purchase in a postmodern world. He argues, "the alterity and 'otherness' of identity variously discerned in poststructuralist theories is clearly analogous to the exploration of other selves and other lives to be found in a new literary canon committed to cultural pluralism" (82). This commitment to pluralism

embodies a critical reaction against the cultural uniformity that pervaded American literary studies through the first half of the twentieth century. These two ideas about identity are closely related: if identity is relative, it is also culturally plural, and that plurality partly exists because of the political and social forces that act upon identity. In other words, a marginalized identity exists in part because of the forces of marginalization. The complexities that fascinate O'Donnell arise because any analysis of contemporary American novels can demonstrate how identity mediates between social forces and individual agency, both of which operate through cultural expression.

For some postmodern American writers, the control imposed on the individual manifests through identity performance. During the previous thirty years, some American writers have made political subjugation, gender oppression, and racial discrimination central to their novels as a way to explore or test the boundaries of post-structural conceptions of identity. These novels connect oppression and discrimination to the social and cultural laws that manipulate individual perceptions of identity, subjectivity, and materiality. To arrive at a better understanding of the relationships between identity and power warrants a complicated and complex interrogation of the nature of identity in the postmodern American novel. Such an investigation might also reveal the extent to which individuals can exert agency in a system of social and political control—a system that controls the production and performance of identity as a means for translating legal power into limitations placed on the individual.

In such a system of control, we use that which constructs identity in our attempt to understand identity, which means that our theoretical analyses are always already compromised. These complexities are ascendant in all of the novels I explore in this

project, for all of them attempt to locate identity and subjectivity at least partially in a material realm beyond the social and political worlds that construct the human subject. American postmodern authors explore what is at stake when postmodern relativity threatens to obliterate the individual at the precise moment when marginalized identities find their voice, so to speak.

To perform an identity is to reject, at least partially, that which connects human subjects to one another. To identify anything is to separate the perceiving subject from the perceived object. Subjectivity and identity cannot exist without connecting the individual to everything from which she differs. In this way, an absence generates identity, and from this theoretical perspective, identity is not an innate human possession. Only by declaring what the individual is not is she able to declare who or what she is. That which controls this lack, this absence, this difference, or sets boundaries, limitations, and restrictions on thought, speech, and action, also controls and determines the individual as a subject with a constructed identity. The pervasive cultural and social belief that identity is individually determined and controlled prevents the individual from perceiving her subjectivity as equally determined by social restriction, by law, and by moral code.

These claims suggest that the subject has no power over the production and performance of his or her identity. They obviate any agency the subject might claim over performance and personal expression. From this theoretical perspective, all desire to express the self through identity performance derives from a contentious relationship to power, and this power operates through the political and social structures that bind the individual to a particular racial, gender, or class orientation (or all three). For obvious

reasons, these theoretical assertions are discomfoting, for what hope do we have for enacting change if all identity is externally formed and controlled? Certainly, many critics have addressed this issue, and feminist and African American theorists, of course, strongly resist the absolute relativity of post-structural thought because it disempowers marginalized voices.

How, then, do we reconcile post-structural theories that disempower marginalized voices? Michel Foucault and Judith Butler help establish a theoretical foundation for my arguments that define subjectivity as the control exerted over the individual on the one hand, and that position identity as a field in which the individual might acquire agency on the other. Specifically, Foucault frames subjectivity as something controlled by discourses of power, while Butler advances identity as a performative field in which some of that power can be reclaimed. If discourses of power bind the subject to political and social control, as some post-structural theories assert, Foucault offers one possible solution. In volume one of the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault identifies a place where individual agency exists in discourse. He writes:

We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (101)

If Foucault is right about the use of discourse as a starting point for resistance against social and political control, is the individual then able to use identity performance as a

means to temper the ways in which these structures of power subject the individual to a particular social orientation? Can the premeditated performance of identity, and the marginal control over the formation of that performance, provide a mode of resistance to the structures of social and political control that permeate daily living? Or is Foucault's analysis of identity and subjectivity here just another master narrative? If it is, does his attempt to reveal the way structures of power operate serve instead to further hide those operations from view? Can any endeavor to understand the origins of identity succeed, or does the discursive attempt—the self-conscious recognition that an “I” exists—prevent all knowledge of the self outside the structures of language?³

These questions help structure my analysis of the postmodern American novel and provide a starting point for my investigation of how American authors approach identity politics in their work. Each of the three texts I examine in this dissertation revolves around a politically controlled subject seeking to assert a subversive identity in circumstances that threaten to obliterate it. Each character—each subject—contends with very different discourses that transmit and produce social and political power. Each one engages discourses of power through identity performance, even though these discourses are responsible for producing the performance itself. As Foucault suggests, discourses of power expose their own weaknesses, and we can locate in many postmodern American

³ For Foucault, the devices of power are so prolific, so apparent, “in this society that has been more imaginative, probably, than any other in creating devious and supple mechanisms of power,” that power is tolerable only by virtue of its ability to keep itself hidden (86). “Its success,” he writes, “is proportional to its ability to hide its own mechanisms” (86). By providing the individual with the illusion of self-determination or with the illusion that he or she can control identity formation, power maintains the very mask that is so crucial to its operation. It is for this reason that the distinction between subjectivity and identity is so important, for subjectivity denotes control whereas identity denotes the particular methodology of control.

novels ways to test these weaknesses through the identity performances of specific characters.

The destabilizing potential of identity performance is crucial for Judith Butler. For Butler, some answers lie in gendered expressions of identity. According to her analysis, individuals can resist power by exposing the patterns of logic that determine how social actors perform identity. She argues, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (34). Here Butler undermines the idea that identity is an innate, centralized locus of individual existence. In doing so, she reveals how deeply imbedded the concept of an innate identity remains in social consciousness. Notions of an intrinsic or innate identity rest upon an immutable, seemingly timeless foundation from which the individual produces his or her own expression of identity.⁴

Building upon Foucault, Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* that an essential identity is a myth perpetuated by discourses of power that hide behind the very essentialism they produce. The various social and legal structures of power that perpetuate this myth are responsible for the decisions humans enact under the illusions of free will and self-determination. Concepts such as free will and self-determination produce particular expressions of identity that maintain the structures of power that determine identity. How? By allowing individuals to believe that they have more control over their actions

⁴ This rational, logical, Enlightened figure must abandon reason, however, when accounting for the foundation of identity from an unexplainable origin of human self-consciousness. The absence of an identifiable origin becomes the proof that an origin must exist, which is an error in logic. In other words, we rely on the fact that we can point to the self to claim that the self exists, without ever identifying what actually composes the self.

than they actually do, illusions such as free will and self-determination mask the structures of power that produce the human subject. But if expressions of identity are responsible for identity, as Butler argues, from what do those expressions derive? Is there a cause that precedes identity expression, or do expressions of identity manifest from nothing? More important, is using cause and effect logic simply the wrong approach for theories of identity formation?

Butler is cautious in her approach to possible solutions to the origins of identity. In seeking a “subversive repetition [that] might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself,” she labors to avoid the binary causalities that reproduce the foundation and expression of Enlightenment theories about identity formation (44):

To claim that gender is constructed is not to assert its illusoriness or artificiality, where those terms are understood to reside in a binary that counterpoises the “real” and the “authentic” as oppositional. As a genealogy of gender ontology, [my] inquiry seeks to understand the discursive production of the plausibility of that binary relation and to suggest that certain cultural configurations of gender take the place of “the real” and consolidate and augment their hegemony through that felicitous self-naturalization. (45)

To perceive gender identity as a binary struggle between that which is culturally produced and that which is authentic or real is itself a construction. In other words, to be distracted by the effort to identify and separate the real from the inauthentic is to fail to recognize that the “real” does not exist. Any attempt to distinguish the “real” in any

expression of identity is to revert to the essentialism Butler cautions against.⁵ To think about identity in terms of what is real and what is inauthentic is to participate in the discursive construction of identity.

According to Butler, then, we need to escape this binary trap altogether and in doing so arrive at some understanding about who or what constructs this particular binary for us. If “cultural configurations of gender . . . consolidate and augment their hegemony” by supplanting the “real,” then I argue that the “real” identities they replace are merely conceptions or self-delusions about the existence of the real (45). At a theoretical extreme, real identities do not necessarily exist, but rather only beliefs, emotions, and intellectual conceptions about them do. Social constructions of identity create or produce the idea that the real exists. The act of performing what the individual perceives as real merely reinforces the social construction while simultaneously solidifying the concept “real” as an essential foundation for identity. For example, when Ruth from *Housekeeping* rejects her socialized identity and performs one instead that more appropriately captures the truth of her existence, she still performs an identity that is socially constructed. Fingerbone’s residents need—and in fact produce—her subversive stance in order to solidify their own dominant positions. For the individual, the real becomes an object of desire in opposition to the cultural construction of identity, but the

⁵ In Foucault’s theory, then, Enlightenment ideals extolling the power of the individual to manifest a fundamental identity proved to be the most damaging to the freedom of the human subject. Under the illusion that agency resided in the individual, the disciplines proliferated while simultaneously normalizing identity from pedagogical, medical, psychiatric, and penal perspectives. The errant student, the noncompliant patient, the cultural iconoclast all occupied the space of lack, or of difference, or of the absence against which the presence of a normalized, acceptable identity could be formed.

desire to pursue the real—to pursue one’s “true identity”—then becomes the public performance that binds identity to the power it resists.

Gender identity for Butler is “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts in a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (45). If to live requires action, be it social, physical, political, or otherwise, that action must occur in social and material contexts, and these contexts, the regulatory frames, establish not only how the subject is formed, but also the means by which the subject performs identity. If the individual defines and negotiates these regulatory frames discursively, the original material object, the body, becomes something immaterial: the gendered body. The repeated stylization of the body produces in the end something other than a body, something that has “the appearance of substance” and that appears natural, or appears to rest on an essential foundation.

If these arguments about the power of culture and language are correct, perceptions of the material human body are filtered through a skein of discursive interpretations. What actually composes the material world and what actually lies underneath the language we use to describe it might never be known. At the very least, if we were able to perceive this “reality,” we could never communicate it. The material world, then, is a form of reality directly accessible to the individual only, if it is accessible at all, and never to a community of language users. Social identity, conversely, can never be isolated to the individual and must rely on communal identification; identifying that which differentiates an individual from all others is one cornerstone of

identity.⁶ Identity in this sense, therefore, is not what the individual assumes as his or her own, but rather is that which is thrust upon the individual by a community that identifies difference. Social actors might exploit that difference in order to perform particular expressions of identity, and especially of gendered identity, but performances fundamentally rest on the premise of communal identification and on the language we use to understand that identification.⁷ The performance of identity has no meaning if no other social actor perceives it.

Most conceptions of identity and subjectivity, then, seem to reject the material in favor of the discursive. Indeed, as Robert Strozier argues, “The individual is nothing more than material prior to being produced as a ‘discursive subject’” (12). The underlying assumption in his claim is critically important. To argue that the individual is *nothing* more than material is to argue that the material can have no relevant influence on the subject or on identity formation. In this claim lies the premise that the social, cultural, and political forces that act upon the subject are the only forces that create the subject. Nothing material exists, in other words, beyond the language-driven social world. To acquire agency in the highly regulated social, cultural, political, and patriarchal worlds is to become aware not only of the performative act that inscribes and re-inscribes identity

⁶ Building on Lacan’s arguments about the alienating effects of language, Lorenzo Chiesa argues, “the subject is necessarily alienated in language insofar as language already exists before his birth and insofar as his relations with other human beings are necessarily mediated by language” (37). From what is the subject alienated? For Lacan, alienation in language means never being able to communicate desire exactly or precisely while simultaneously communicating more than what was intended (Chiesa 38). This type of alienation in language also implies an alienation from that which lies beyond it, and any attempt, therefore, to apprehend a material other, this world “worlding around us,” cannot succeed through the mediating lens of language alone.

⁷ For an extensive discussion on place and the politics of identity, see Keith and Pile.

and its function in social space, but also to become consciously aware of the function and construction of the framework itself.

What is at stake and which structures of power benefit by perpetuating identity as an expression or a performance that arises inside the individual? As a social construction that forms the basis of identity, the subject is immaterial. But as the physical body controlled by cultural mores and political power, the subject is simultaneously material. Somewhere the line that separates identity from body, and language from material world, is blurred. The critical questions that arise here interrogate how that blurring between identity and body—between the immaterial and the material—occurs and to which particular manifestations of power the subject responds when identity is formed.⁸ If some structures of power benefit by perpetuating identity as an expression or a performance that arises from in the individual, how do we account for the external, material world?

The following, then, are the central arguments in this dissertation. The material world as it is represented in postmodern American novels accounts for subjectivity and identity in ways that remain critically unexplored. Those worlds separated from the human, the worlds of space, place, and nature, of beings and energy, the world “worlding around us” according to Heidegger, act on characters in these novels as forces that exist

⁸ This is not to argue that the material unknown can be rendered fully known, or that a project that seeks to identify the “true” nature of a referent would be successful. But the inherent gaps that separate the referent or material object from the signifier used to represent that object are important for critical study because closing those gaps in order to make sense of “reality” implies certain assumptions about the way the social and cultural worlds must be ordered. If the real practice of daily living requires that humans assume as real an unexamined connection between the physical, unknowable, external material object and the language we use to identify that object, then the gaps between object and language indicate how discourses of power manipulate human perception and identity formation.

separately from the social and political discourses of power and knowledge.⁹ For the protagonists to find refuge in a material world that attenuates the power exerted in socially constructed spaces allows them to become subjects who operate somewhat independently of the structures of power that seek to control them. In the postmodern American novel, therefore, the material world becomes both a site and a mode of resistance, the place where we might perceive Foucault's "stumbling block and point of resistance" (101) in discourse, or the "regulatory frame" that for Butler generates gender binaries (45). This is not to suggest that the characters' perceptions of the material world exist separately from the discourses they must use to understand that world. Rather, for them the material world is a site of material intersubjectivity that allows them to form social relationships that do not depend on a social or cultural order.

The intersections between these theories of identity and American novels are critically illuminating because postmodern American writers expose the influence of materiality upon identity through the construction of fictional spaces. The agency with which different characters assert identity in these imagined spaces is partly determined by the material objects that help define these spaces. For these postmodern novels, an anchor for identity lies in a material world that is somewhat separated from social space, or that provides temporary relief from the overbearing control exerted in society. This anchor empowers the individual character in a struggle against the discursive representations and

⁹ See David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous* for a compelling argument about the inter-subjectivity between humans and the biotic worlds upon which they depend. Edward O. Wilson's controversial biophilia hypothesis also addresses the material agency of non-human life systems and their impacts upon human subjectivity. See Kellert and Wilson's edited collection of the same name. For an extended discussion on the differences between place and space as they relate to the environmental imagination, see chapter three in Buell: "Space, Place, and Imagination from Local to Global."

socio-political forces that seek to define, limit, and determine identity performance as a means for maintaining social and political domination. Compellingly, the imagined social and material spaces postmodern American authors create actually reflect the material and social worlds that surround them. The fictional worlds they create, therefore, become imagined sites of real resistance to those social and political structures that perpetuate gender bias, racial discrimination, and class division.

MATERIALITY AND IMAGINED SPACES

Part of the purpose of this dissertation is to determine just how effectively these imagined sites of resistance destabilize and disrupt sites of political and social control in the novel. Using spatial theory in my analysis of the postmodern American novel, therefore, provides a critical apparatus with which to examine these complex questions about identity formation, subjectivity, materiality, and power. I argue that representations of space in some postmodern American novels challenge traditional concepts of identity and materiality and provide a starting point of resistance to the structures of power that influence identity. Many American postmodern writers construct fictional space to establish setting, mood, and tone in such a way that representations of the material world significantly affect plot, character development, and narrative resolution. By analyzing literary constructions of space, place, and landscape, I present arguments about space and materiality as they both relate to and disrupt subjectivity and identity formation. How characters engage with space and the material world, I contend, helps determine the

agency with which they perform identity in contrast to the social and political forces that enforce their subjectivity.¹⁰

Spatial analyses of literature are not new, of course, and many critics have considered the theoretical implications of spatial representation in fiction. Franco Moretti, for example, demonstrates how the spaces represented in nineteenth-century novels shifted from the uniform, circular space of the village to the fractured, linear space of the factory. Moretti argues that these representational shifts accompanied a concomitant shift in the ways writers thought about these spaces ideologically. “The force ‘from without’ of large national processes,” he argues, “alters the initial narrative structure beyond recognition, and reveals the direct, almost tangible relationship between social conflict and literary form” (64). In other words, literary forms evolve to reflect changes in material and ideological circumstances. How the novel instructs readers to think about ideology, for example, is closely tied to changes in the material world from which that novel emerges.¹¹ In his analysis of spatiality in the novel, Robert Tally, Jr., “emphasizes the ongoing interplay between text and world—the ability of literature not only to reflect the world around us or even to shape our understanding of it but also to inflect the history of the places in question in a reciprocal relationship akin to a positive feedback loop” (3). Building on the work of Edward Said, Fredric Jameson, Edward Soja, Gilles Deleuze,

¹⁰ For other examinations of place and subjectivity, see Jeff Malpas’s “Finding Place: Spatiality, Locality, and Subjectivity,” as well as Jonathan Maskit’s article on the impossibility of “wilderness” in relation to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of wildness (“Something Wild? Deleuze and Guattari and the Impossibility of Wilderness.”)

¹¹ See Terry Eagleton’s *Criticism and Ideology* and Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel*.

and, more recently, Bertrand Westphal, spatial analyses demonstrate how literature not only reflects certain constructions of space, but also influences them.¹²

Indeed, Westphal argues, “fiction does not reproduce the real, but actualizes new virtualities that had remained unformulated, and that then go on to interact with the real according to the hypertextual logic of interfaces . . . Fiction detects possibilities buried in the folds of the real, knowing that these folds have not been temporalized” (80). The implications of this theoretical perspective are crucial to the work I present here, for Westphal identifies a site of social and political resistance in discourse—the site that Foucault sought in specific discourses of power.¹³ I argue that characters in some American postmodern novels enact identities “buried in the folds of the real,” and in doing so forge relationships to a material world that exists beyond the discursive control of society. As Eric Prieto claims in his analysis of literary spatial theories:

Human subjectivity and agency are embodied and, therefore, inextricably intertwined with the material environment from which the dualist tradition has tended to separate it. . . . no matter what the starting point—whether psychological, social, identitarian, political, or environmental—and no matter how much of a tendency we have to forget this basic fact, human identity, indeed the very ability to be the kind of creature who has an

¹² Particularly germane to this analysis, as Tally notes, are Said’s “Geographical Inquiry into Historical Experience” in *Culture and Imperialism* and Jameson’s cognitive mapping in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*. Equally important are Edward Soja’s *Thirdspace* and *Postmodern Geographies*.

¹³ See also Maurice Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature*, in which he argues that literature creates a conceptual space in which the reader/listener is more important than the language used to communicate narrative. Blanchot’s ideas suggest, then, that the reader has agential control over the language used in discourse.

identity . . . is inextricably bound up with the places in which we find ourselves and through which we move. (18)

The imaginative work, then, that creates ideological and material spaces in the novel also creates relationships between characters and the fictional material worlds they occupy.

But what do any of these fictional representations have to do with actual materiality, the real human subject, and the social and material crises that permeate identity formation? Emerging theories that posit “agential materialism” provide some clues to the connections between fictional representations of the human subject and the material circumstances that relate to them. In *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (2010), Stacy Alaimo investigates the influence of material forces on the human body, and she presents the following argument:

[U]nderstanding the substance of one’s self as interconnected with the wider environment marks a profound shift in subjectivity. As the material self cannot be disentangled from networks that are simultaneously economic, political, cultural, scientific, and substantial, what was once the ostensibly bounded human subject finds herself in a swirling landscape of uncertainty where practices and actions that were once not even remotely ethical or political matters suddenly become the very stuff of the crises at hand. (20)

Specifically, Alaimo refers to the proliferating number of toxins dumped into the environment that are accumulating exponentially in the human body (and in all bodies) and that are causing a host of diseases and afflictions whose breadth and scope we are only beginning to understand. Her argument suggests that the human body is a material

system entirely enmeshed in material circumstances and these material circumstances are subject to continual change. One reason why popular perceptions of identity persist as solidified, fixed, and relatively unchanging is because these perceptions enable a subjectivity produced by social and political discourses. But as Alaimo's argument suggests, the very idea of a solid identity contradicts actual human experience.

For Alaimo, then, "ethical considerations and practices must emerge from a more uncomfortable and perplexing place where the 'human' is always already part of an active, often unpredictable, material world" (16-17). As I argue in this dissertation, the language, ideas, and tropes found in postmodern American fiction indicate how the physical, material world constructs identity and subjectivity in ways that have not been critically recognized. "Material" identity differs from "social" identity by virtue of an ideological centrality placed on the concept of the "I." Society develops and endorses the singular identity, the "I"; materiality does the opposite. Material relationships construct identity in concert with a profusion of material and physical forces.

When individuals adopt "ecological thinking," Lorraine Code argues, subjects are "repositioned as self-consciously part of nature, while anthropocentric projects of mastery are superseded by projects of displacing Enlightenment 'man' from the center of the universe" (32). For Alaimo, this argument "explains how an epistemological shift can become an ethical matter; trans-corporeal subjects must also relinquish mastery as they find themselves inextricably part of the flux and flow of the world that others would presume to master" (17). I argue, then, that conceptions of identity as singular, centralized, and/or fixed create a false sense of separation from the rest of the world (or from "reality") that the individual fiercely defends. Identity is "mine," as the thinking

goes, and it is the one thing over which the “I” has mastery and control. The subject is overwhelmingly afraid that this mastery will be taken away. And yet, Alaimo’s and Code’s arguments suggest that this mastery never exists in the first place. They suggest that we are always already implicated in larger processes that extend far beyond both the discursively created consciousness and the materially determined body.

From these theories I assert two possibilities. First, imagined spaces in the postmodern American novel are intricately bound to the material spaces that inform them. Even though they are fictional spaces, they emerge from a complex field of material relationships that help shape them. This is not to suggest that materiality forms a fundamental “reality.” Rather, building upon Butler and Alaimo, I argue that the only fundamental “reality” to which we can realistically point is that composed of the relationships themselves. Therefore, and second (and building upon Tally Jr. and Westphal), the fictional material spaces constructed in the novel influence the way individuals perceive actual material reality. If “fiction detects possibilities buried in the folds of the real,” as Westphal argues, that fiction also changes the real, or at least our human understanding of it.

In my reading of American postmodern novels, spatiality and materiality disrupt a binary between the individual subject and the social—a binary produced by political and social discourses that reduces identity formation to a discursive construction. As Guattari argues in *Trois Écologies*, there is a theoretical danger of reducing spatiality to a binary between the material and the social (or between nature and culture) because this binary forces human subjectivity into one category or the other, primarily the latter over the former. His concept of *ecosophy* destabilizes this binary by examining human

subjectivity and identity formation as a complicated and constantly evolving series of relationships between the material world, the individual, and social relations. Part of the purpose of destabilizing the binary, Guattari argues, is not as a “discovery of some essence of the subject,” not in other words as a quest for an essential identity, but rather, “as a reinventing of a whole network of different types of relations in which subjects find themselves and which are, at least partially, constitutive of subjectivity itself” (Maskit, “Subjectivity” 135). This is similar to Butler’s argument that gender identity is not essential and does not derive from a pre-existing foundation, but rather is constituted only through the performative act. Indeed, the rigidity of the binary between the material and the social perpetuates social and political control over the subject, and this is why Guattari’s desire to reinvent “a whole network of different types of relations” is demonstrably subversive to those social and political discourses that produce the subject. If Guattari’s ideas help the subject form new relationships to the material world, these new relationships operate outside the determinative discourses of power that create the normative subject position.

Just how subversive is the literary-spatial imagination in postmodern American fiction? For Guattari, a particular social disruption occurs when individuals focus on the complicated sets of relations that compose their subjectivities. This disruption, which “strives to capture existence in the very act of its constitution, definition, and deterritorialization,” creates signifying ruptures in an “existential territory” (Guattari 44). The protagonist in some postmodern novels, therefore, does not perceive her subjectivity as something grounded to society, but rather as an ephemeral conglomeration between society, materiality, and place. An investigation of spatiality and materiality in the novel

is crucial, therefore, because spatial and material contexts permit and produce social relationships. As Maskit argues, “All of our most private and personal ways of being—how we relate to our friends, our mates, and our children; how we act; how we make love; how we think of ourselves—are shaped by a media culture that exists, first and foremost, to maintain an economic and political order and to make of us the types of subjects who will fit into and support that order” (“Subjectivity” 138). To disrupt this type of internalized subjectivity, Guattari argues that the subject must establish new relationships to all the personal behaviors, routines, and beliefs that compose one’s subjectivity.

How does a character in a novel accomplish this daunting task? Considering the fact that most of these behaviors, routines, and beliefs are inculcated from birth and are formative to the ways subjects think about themselves, achieving the type of normative disruption Guattari desires is not easy. As Maskit suggests, “these ruptures are events or developments which cannot be made sense of in current forms of discourse” (“Subjectivity” 136). Nevertheless, in some postmodern American texts—texts that emerge at a time when integrated world capitalism has reached a zenith of control over the individual subject—two circumstances exist in which rupture is likely to occur: in a character’s relationship to the material world as it exists beyond social stricture, and in the particular organization of space that permits certain characters to engage that material world.

In the postmodern American novel, nonsocial space, or the space of the natural, material world, is a site of potential liberation, because it can exist independently from

the influence of social space and because it is imbued with material agency.¹⁴ The characters in these novels form identity partly in response to the spaces they occupy and partly in response to what they are able to accomplish in those spaces. Space, in other words, partly determines action and agency, and agency partly determines identity.¹⁵ The extent to which characters are able to move between social and nonsocial spaces is pivotal, because the movement between spaces illuminates multiple lines of inquiry about identity, subjectivity, and agency. Primary among these lines of inquiry are the extent to which characters possess control over movement, performance, and action in particular spaces and the extent to which these movements, performances, and actions are determined for them. Furthermore, some characters in these novels recognize a disjunction or a gap between social and nonsocial or natural spaces. Part of my project here is to critically and theoretically interrogate the gap between these spaces because doing so reveals the underlying structures of both types of space. All perceptions of “reality” in this case are mediated by structures imposed on space and that depend on each other for existence. For social space to exist and for it to exert influence on the

¹⁴ Material agency used here is the influence the material world has upon an individual independent of the social world. This is not to argue that the material world has a singular, volitional affect on identity formation, but rather that the material world exposes the proliferating relationships that create *intersubjectivity*. The extent to which the natural environment influences subjectivity, identity, and perception is contingent upon an individual’s experience with it, a quandary made more difficult by how humans define the terms “natural” and “environment.” As Glen Love argues, however, definitions are merely semantic, and the material world influences human identity regardless of how the individual defines her relationship to semantic terms. Love writes, “The challenge that faces us is . . . to move beyond a narrow ego-consciousness toward a more inclusive eco-consciousness. As I have suggested, perhaps the most harmful contemporary version of this ego-consciousness is the extreme subjectivism of much postmodernism” (25).

¹⁵ For a more nuanced discussion of the geographical imagination, nature, and the ethics of spatial representation, see Jeremy Tasch’s “Altered States: Nature and Place in the Russian Far East.”

subject who operates in it, humans must also construct nonsocial space. Similarly, nonsocial space cannot determine material influence over the actions and identities of individuals without the creation of social space; individuals, therefore, cannot exist in material spaces without bringing part of the social world with them.¹⁶ In my reading of these novels, therefore, I interrogate the extent to which natural spaces (i.e. material, physical spaces) and social spaces influence the performance of individual identity in relation to an individual's subjectivity.

Why is the status of identity in the postmodern American novel so critically important? Guattari argues that, "now more than ever, nature cannot be separated from culture," for it is precisely this separation that empowers the social construction, manipulation, and control of identity by minimizing the effect of material relationships (43). Guattari wants to recast these relationships "so as to illuminate a possible escape route out of contemporary history" (43-44). He writes, "It is not only species that are becoming extinct but also the words, phrases, and gestures of human solidarity. A stifling cloak of silence has been thrown over the emancipatory struggles of women, and of the new proletariat: the unemployed, the 'marginalized,' immigrants" (44). Concerning the efficacy of human efforts to regain control over subjectivity, Guattari is hopeful that individuals will become more united and increasingly different, functions of subjectivity that oppose integrated world capitalism, for liberation occurs when individuals establish new relations to the material world:

¹⁶ Krista Comer argues for a regional component as well, and that gendered space conforms to regionally defined restrictions, especially as they manifest in the American West. Ursula Heise, conversely, identifies the ways in which individual identity and perceptions of the environment are linked to global perceptions of space and global relationships. See Heise's *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*.

[S]ubjectivity is able to install itself simultaneously in the realms of the environment, in the major social and institutional assemblages, and symmetrically in the landscapes and fantasies of the most intimate spheres of the individual. The reconquest of a degree of creative autonomy in one particular domain encourages conquests in other domains—the catalyst for a gradual re forging and renewal of humanity’s confidence in itself starting at the most miniscule level. (69)

Guattari’s ideas provide a good starting point for thinking about identity and subjectivity in the novel with a critical eye toward reclaiming agency, but a problem lies in the fact that any endeavor to recover identity must begin in identity itself. If identity is already constituted by the social and political structures that control the novel’s character, attempts to recover identity might solidify the power of those structures and diminish the agency of the individual. That which controls identity and that which controls the subject, also controls to some extent her efforts to reclaim agency. The subversive gender performance, for example, can have the unintended effect of solidifying the heteronormative position of society. In this case, the subversive subject remains a product of the very binary she struggles to destabilize.

Guattari’s desire to recast a subject’s relationships, however, does allow me to direct a critical interpretation of identity in the novel toward the material and spatial influences that act upon the individual character. Though it may not be possible to truly know a material world as it exists beyond language, the material world can provide sites of rupture that disrupt current forms of discourse. As Maskit argues, “these a-signifying ruptures are events or developments . . . which resist current practices of signification

and, through that resistance, call for a resignifying change” (“Subjectivity” 136). Is this resignifying change possible? Answers emerge in the postmodern American novels I analyze in this dissertation, and I attempt to answer this question by examining identity as an ever-evolving product of myriad relationships, some of them social, some of them material, and some of them spatial. As Karen Barad argues in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, in which she explores intersubjectivity and material agency, “attending to the complex material conditions needed to specify [performative] ‘intentions’ in a meaningful way prevents us from assuming that ‘intentions’ are (1) preexisting states of mind, and (2) properly assigned to individuals” (23). As such, the intentional performance of identity, from internal moral judgments to external exhibition, “might better be understood as attributable to a complex network of human and nonhuman agents, including historically specific sets of material conditions that exceed the traditional notion of the individual” (23). The complexity, efficacy, and agency of this “complex network of human and nonhuman agents,” and how this network operates in the novel, are what I seek to understand in this dissertation.

ORGANIZATION

In this project, I investigate how the postmodern American novel represents relationships between the subject and identity formation. These representations, I argue, rely on material physical worlds as much as they rely upon social and discursive ones. Yet how material “reality” helps form identity remains critically unexplored, especially when considering how materiality lends agency to individuals in their efforts to subvert

dominant social and political discourses. In seeking to uncover an agency situated in the material world, Barad argues the following:

The world is a dynamic process of intra-activity and materialization in the enactment of determinate causal structures with determinate boundaries, properties, meanings, and patterns of marks on bodies. The ongoing flow of agency through which part of the world makes itself differentially intelligible to another part of the world and through which causal structures are stabilized and destabilized does not take place in space and time but happens in the making of spacetime itself. It is through specific agential intra-actions that a differential sense of being is enacted in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency. That is, it is through specific intra-actions that phenomena come to matter—in both senses of the word. (140)

The relationships between material phenomena are responsible for the existence of phenomena, Barad argues. Material phenomena do not exist first and then subsequently establish the relationships that bind them together. Rather, material phenomena are embodied by the very relationships that connect them. This is one of the reasons why spatial relationships are so important, for these relationships establish the very phenomena that exist in those spaces. As Brian Jarvis argues in his analysis of the postmodern geographical imagination, the terms “*Space, Place, and Landscape . . .* are clearly central to any analysis of the geographical imagination. Each of them denotes not a fixed and static object so much as an ongoing process, a spatial praxis. Spaces are not simply the passive backdrop to significant sociohistorical action, rather they are a vital product and determinant of that action” (6-7). If true, the places, spaces, and objects that

form the material world retain a significant, if not dominant, influence upon identity formation even though much of that identity formation is discursive.

These are some of the issues I address in chapter two, where I examine the relationships between spatiality, gender performance, and social subversion in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping*. In this chapter, I examine the extent to which Fingerbone's society constructs and produces the subversive identity the novel's protagonist, Ruth, adopts as she struggles to escape social control. Social space and natural space are clearly delineated and strongly counterpoised in the novel, and each, according to my analysis, produces not just individual identities, but also the agency with which characters navigate both social and material worlds. Ultimately for Ruth, identity exists in the relationships she establishes to the natural world—relationships that enable her to move freely through material physical space, but that severely constrict the power she has in social space. I argue that representations of the natural, material world in *Housekeeping* demonstrate how certain characters destabilize their subject positions by shifting identity formation to a material realm beyond the social. Shifting identity formation outside these realms empowers certain characters to adopt non-normative subject positions. Gender performance in *Housekeeping*, then, is subject to different ideologies associated with space and spatial movement.

In chapter three, I continue these lines of inquiry by examining tensions between historical memory and the present as applied to political and racial delineations of spatial structure. Historical consciousness is vital in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, as are the ways in which the novel's main characters attempt to negotiate memory and the material places attached to those memories. A critical analysis of history, identity, and materiality in Toni

Morrison's *Beloved* helps frame how characters form relationships to a natural world in which the social codes imposed by a dominant ideology are minimized. Nature becomes a space in which *Beloved*'s protagonists assert control over identity performance and self-expression, and my analysis of spatiality in *Beloved* helps me understand relationships between identity, race, and history. I argue that characters relate to history and identity by virtue of their spatial relationships. The characters in *Beloved*, then, reimagine African American history from a nature-centered perspective that exists beyond the dominant discourses of power.

Chapters two and three examine contemporary American novels that address history and whose primary action takes place in the past. Chapter four, conversely, explores materiality in a dystopic American future. In *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy imagines what happens to the subject once the fundamental social, cultural, and political discourses of power that define identity no longer exist and are replaced instead by an unforgiving, unyielding, ungoverned material environment. I argue that in *The Road* language shapes both human perceptions of "reality" and human functionality in that "reality." My analysis of the novel questions how language circumscribes the entire horizon of human understanding. If, as I argue, language is at least partially responsible for society's demise in *The Road*, how has language in the novel become so determinative that the novel's characters cannot understand reality without it? How has language become an arbiter of the "reality" these characters must negotiate in order to make sense of their subject positions within post-apocalyptic society? A solution to these dilemmas is available, but any solution to the problems of language in *The Road* requires a closer examination of the discursive construction of the normative subject. Considered

together in spatial, material, and cultural contexts, these three texts, *The Road*, *Beloved*, and *Housekeeping* provide a critical temporal range in plot, setting, and action, and allow a highly nuanced exploration of identity, subjectivity, and representation.

**CHAPTER 2: IDENTITY FORMATION, THE SUBJECT, AND SOCIAL AND
NATURAL SPACES IN MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S *HOUSEKEEPING***

In this chapter I analyze Marilynne Robinson's 1980 novel *Housekeeping* to determine how subjectivity and identity in the novel function in relation to spatial representation. By analyzing gender performance, materiality, and spatial expression in *Housekeeping*, I argue that spatial relationships enable the fictional subject to exercise some control over her subjectivity in relation to social power. By "materiality," I mean the physical, natural world that exists separately from social and cultural realms. And by "spatial relationships," I mean the freedoms given to, and the constraints placed upon, individual subjects in the social, political, and material spaces that surround them—freedoms and constraints that in *Housekeeping* produce identity. I argue that *Housekeeping* reimagines human relationships to the natural, material world,¹ and because certain characters value material experiences outside societal control, I demonstrate how the freedom to move through space can be tantamount to both political autonomy and social condemnation. In the larger picture, this novel allows us to see how the individual subject might recover agency by linking identity to uninhibited spatial movement through the natural world, a theme that will reemerge in different contexts in subsequent chapters.

¹ The terms "natural, material world," and "natural, material space" are ungainly, but I want to emphasize a difference between the material objects that help define social space and those that help define natural space. "Nature" and "natural" are problematic terms as well and I try to avoid any interpretation that positions the natural world as a utopian solution to society's control over the subject. Rather, I want to investigate how the material space of nature is separate from public social space, and therefore presents individuals with an opportunity to exert some control over identity formation, or that at the very least complicates an individual's subjectivity.

Set in the 1950s, *Housekeeping* revolves around two sisters, Ruth and Lucille, and their formidable attempts to negotiate their adolescent identities in a small town in northern Idaho called Fingerbone. Abandoned by their father at a young age, Ruth and Lucille are left to the care of their unstable mother, Helen. Exasperated by the agency denied her in her role as a single mother, Helen drives her car into the cold depths of nearby Lake Fingerbone, returning only as a specter in the imaginations of her two young daughters. After their mother's death, Ruth and Lucille are raised by their grandmother, Sylvia, and then by two overly cautious great-aunts who do not want the responsibility of caring for them. Eventually Ruth and Lucille fall into the guardianship of their aunt Sylvie, a transient by choice, who finds both comfort and freedom in the wilderness that surrounds Fingerbone. As Ruth and Lucille enter into the most difficult stages of adolescence, Lucille acquiesces to the behavioral expectations associated with her gender. Eventually, she abandons the home she shares with Ruth and Sylvie and moves in with her school's home economics teacher. Ruth, conversely, identifies with Sylvie's free-spirited relationship to nature, a relationship that leads to social exile. She resists the social and cultural pressures that shape Lucille's identity, a subversive act that leads her to a life of transience. The novel's final scenes follow Ruth and Sylvie as they set fire to their home and then escape across the town's railroad trestle to an uncertain future.

Space in the novel is not simply an empty area in which particular actions occur, but rather provides a critical context for understanding material objects. Because materiality in the novel is connected to spatial contexts, spatiality affects identity formation. Without spatial relationships, identity formation could not occur. Social and natural spaces in the novel are encoded with particular meanings, so that social spaces

control the individual while isolated, natural spaces grant characters some control over their own subjectivity. In the novel, certain types of space are conflated with both control and freedom, or with destiny and free will. By the novel's end, Ruth possesses the freedom to wander through natural space, a space liberated from social control and subject to continual change, but one denied consistency, reliability, and security. Lucille, conversely, trades this type of far-ranging spatial freedom for one more localized and politically circumscribed, and with it she derives the freedom to move through social and cultural spaces, a space of safety, security, and accountability.

Many critical analyses of *Housekeeping* investigate the function of gender and subjectivity in the novel, especially as they relate to the novel's disconcerting conclusion. However, critics have underemphasized the role of spatial relationships between characters and the social and environmental spaces that shape their identities. Consequently, the range of *Housekeeping's* criticism does not adequately explore how characters are shaped by the encoded spaces that determine their physical movements. Nor do critics recognize how spatial concerns determine the social agency available to those characters. If characters in the novel are embodied by codes that are attached to space, as I argue, then we can meaningfully analyze *Housekeeping* for how the novel's spatiality partially determines the identity of the characters. In the novel, precise representations of social and environmental spaces reveal the access characters have to social agency. Identity performance, therefore, is important. Those characters who can conform to cultural expectations of gender and identity gain access to social and political space. Those who choose not to conform gain access to natural space where they find marginal freedom from the social forces that shape their identities. This analysis is

important because it allows us to see how something often overlooked—space—is powerfully encoded and exerts significant influence on a character's subject position in a social system of control.

Although critical analyses have overlooked the role of spatiality in the novel, many critics have looked closely at the controlled subject position of certain characters. For example, some critics analyze how *Housekeeping*'s plot validates the transient subject's disempowered social role by associating transience with liberation from social mores. Defining transience as movement through space, some critics seek context for a transient lifestyle in the novel's temporal setting in 1950s America. Maggie Galehouse, for example, argues that, "by ascribing formal, historical, physical, and temporal dimensions to transience, Robinson offers shape and scope to a shifting and, often, anonymous social condition" (135). For Galehouse, the social contracts implied by the relationships between power, transience, and domesticity valorize the transient lifestyle as a mode of social activism. Representations of transience and how it exists both in reality and in the popular imagination depend on what the opposite of transience implies. "Ultimately," she argues, "Robinson suggests that stasis . . . either keeps the past so much at bay that memory and understanding are inhibited or allows it so much sway that it threatens to overwhelm the present" (134). The tension between transience and stasis delineates the physical spaces where individuals struggle to define the present; Galehouse suggests, therefore, that the real power of Sylvie's transient lifestyle lies in her ability to control her sense of history and to determine the influence that history has over present action. If so, I argue that the novel not only helps us understand the transient other, but

also helps us understand why the transient's spatial freedom is subversive: spatial freedom allows the subject to partially detach identity from the forces of history.

Other critics contend with the novel's underlying complexities, specifically first-person representations of the transient subject that portray her as an other. For Stefan Mattessich, the novel is important for the "interest it takes in a universalizable substrate of experience" (61). This substrate is the novel's "'outside,' where we, like Robinson's characters, always are: the negative ground of every determined or external difference, even that governing our opposition to the metaphysical tradition" (61). Mattessich's argument seems counterintuitive. To establish a "substrate of experience" as universal is to argue that human experience occurs from a shared field that is fundamentally the same for all individuals. But Mattessich doesn't attempt to qualify this experience in any way other than to suggest that what is universal to all humans is simply that from which all difference arises, thereby both collapsing and supporting a binary between self and other.

By virtue of this argument, Ruth, Lucille, Sylvie, and all of Fingerbone's residents are as similar as they are different, for their differences must arise out of common reactions to the spaces in which they locate their identities. What this suggests about power is particularly compelling, for the subversive subject does not necessarily oppose structures of power. Rather, successful subversion for Ruth and Sylvie relies on the recognition that the formation of identity occurs as a common reaction all identities share, no matter how differently they assert themselves through performance. This is not to devalue the power of identity performance for the novel's protagonists, but it does allow a particular framing for Ruth's approach to her identity formation, which rests upon her recognition that all identity exists in opposition to, and therefore as a result of, power.

Toward this end, Christine Caver argues that “*Housekeeping* represents the power of traumatic experience to destroy not only language and the illusion of a coherent self capable of agency but also a person’s place in a larger community” (111). Consequently, Caver suggests that both Ruth and Lucille are disappearing subjects who, contending with their mother’s violent death, become consumed by social forces that refuse to offer the emotional support they most need. The social, political, and patriarchal systems of power that confront Ruth and Lucille create two very different subjects while minimizing the control they each have over their own identities. Sinead McDermott argues that this loss of control creates *Housekeeping*’s narrative voice, which “serves to construct a poetics of nostalgic mourning . . . that longs for what might have been rather than what was” (259). For McDermott, longing for what might have been creates the impetus for change, a subversive impulse that helps characters recover identity.

The role of spatiality in this recovery is critical. Spatial relationships influence both Ruth’s decision to adopt a transient’s identity and Lucille’s efforts to pursue a domestic one. At first, Ruth, Lucille, and Sylvie agree to live together more or less harmoniously. However, Ruth gradually identifies with Sylvie’s transient lifestyle, while Lucille willingly abides by the social pressures that encourage her to conform to society’s gender expectations. While Ruth is mostly passive, unassertive, and acquiescent in her progression from domestic space to transient space, Lucille’s desire for social acceptance is active and determined, forceful even. As Ruth passively accepts Sylvie’s transient philosophy as a framework for her own identity, Lucille actively seeks the guidance of her home economics teacher as a way to locate or enforce her identity in predictable structures of power, control, and social hierarchy. A complex, multilayered spatial matrix

appears, one that operates as a palimpsest in which gender codes overwrite the physical spaces in which they occur. These gender codes, which determine appropriate behaviors in various public and private spaces, are subconsciously read and understood by many of the novel's characters. In the natural spaces surrounding Fingerbone, Ruth neutralizes the power of these codes. For her, natural, material space provides the foundation for her subversive identity.

In this chapter, then, I present three arguments. First, representations of the natural, material world in *Housekeeping* demonstrate how characters disrupt social and political subjectivity by shifting identity formation to a site outside of social and cultural realms. Second, shifting identity formation outside of these realms empowers certain characters to adopt non-normative subject positions that subvert dominant ideologies. Their power to adopt these non-normative subject positions, however, becomes complicated when these positions collide with predominant gender expectations produced by the dominant ideology. Gender performance in the novel, then, is complicated by competing ideologies that are attached to specific representations of space and spatial movement. Third, and finally, an analysis of spatiality in the novel reveals how some characters adopt spatial relationships to the material and the social worlds that empower their subversion. This analysis examines how certain characters move through, or are barred access to, specific types of space, and identifies the explicit gender and cultural codes that Fingerbone's society attaches to those spaces. An analysis of spatial representation in the novel, therefore, reveals a complex, interdependent web of relations between identity, space, and materiality. From this web we might determine how a

character's relationship to space and materiality can help liberate her subjectivity from the social and political forces that partially construct and control it.

TOWARD AN ALTERNATIVE SUBJECTIVITY

In *Housekeeping*, Ruth tries to establish a non-normative subjectivity founded on those things that Sylvie, as a transient, values the most: detachment from material wealth, attachment to the natural world, and unrestricted mobility. This non-normative subject position sharply contradicts those positions adopted by most of Fingerbone's residents, and it allows Ruth to resist the atmosphere of social and gender conformity that pervades this 1950s-era small town. However, this isn't a subject position that Ruth adopts abruptly. Rather, she gradually develops this position as the plot progresses. At the novel's outset, for example, Ruth is a subject more or less committed to Fingerbone's social order; similar to the other girls her age, she attends school, obeys her elders, and generally tries to accommodate her peers. By the novel's end, however, she has developed into a subject who rejects most social order altogether, and she chooses the transient's freedom over Fingerbone's restrictive social norms.

Ruth's relationships to time and space help her develop her alternative subject position, for these relationships are fluid and transitory, and they allow her to explore and test her identity as something formed in close connection to her family members, both living and dead. Time and space for Ruth are not strictly circumscribed, and as the novel's first-person narrator, Ruth recalls memories, impressions, and experiences of other characters that she could not normally have access to. For example, the novel opens with Ruth describing details about her grandmother's life that occurred before Ruth had

been born. Ruth, as narrator, discusses her grandmother's relationships with her daughters—Ruth's mother and aunts—and the sense of emptiness she felt when all three left home. With rich detail, she imagines what it was like for her grandmother to feel the wind against her legs and to notice how it “made strands of her hair fly” (16). She recalls intimate details about her Grandmother's relationship to her husband, Edmund, and how his death led not to mourning but rather to its absence (17). And in a particularly powerful passage, in which Ruth recalls her grandmother's experiences in her garden, Ruth's close connection to her grandmother becomes clear:

One evening one summer [Sylvia] went out to the garden. The earth in the rows was light and soft as cinders, pale clay yellow, and the trees and plants were ripe, ordinary green and full of comfortable rustlings. And above the pale earth and bright trees the sky was the dark blue of ashes. As she knelt in the rows she heard the hollyhocks thump against the shed wall. She felt the hair lifted from her neck by a swift, watery wind, and she saw the trees fill with wind and heard their trunks creak like masts. She burrowed her hand under a potato plant and felt gingerly for the new potatoes in their dry net of roots, smooth as eggs. She put them in her apron and walked back to the house thinking, What have I seen, what have I seen. The earth and the sky and the garden, not as they always are. And she saw her daughters' faces not as they always were, or as other people's were, and she was quiet and aloof and watchful, not to startle the strangeness away. (19)

The passage grants readers privileged access to Sylvia's private thoughts as she tends her garden in the late summer evening, but Ruth and Sylvia speak to the reader simultaneously. These are Ruth's words, but they are Sylvia's emotions—emotions elicited by Sylvia's perceptions, impressions, and experiences. As Ruth relays these thoughts and emotions, the barriers that separate their subjective experiences dissolve.

It is important for Ruth's subjectivity that these barriers between subjective experiences dissolve because, even at this early stage in the novel, Ruth resists the strictly defined boundaries that determine the subject positions occupied by Fingerbone's other residents. In this passage, it is as if Ruth and Sylvia, her grandmother, share life experiences first hand. Time seems to have little meaning as something that divides Ruth's and Sylvia's subjective experiences. In this way, Ruth subsumes her individual identity in order to connect to Sylvia through their shared appreciation of the natural world. Because it is not possible for Ruth to know that Sylvia "heard the hollyhocks thump against the shed wall," or that the new potatoes she felt in the rich soil of the garden felt "smooth as eggs," and because there is no way to determine which of the two characters is responsible for these impressions, the passage suggests that both of them are (19). Ruth conveys her grandmother's personal and poetic impressions of light and sound, where the earth is "soft as cinders," and the trees are "full of comfortable rustlings" (19). Her access to the impressions, thoughts, and emotions of other characters—Sylvia, Edmund, her aunts, and her mother—forms a communal knowledge that helps her arrive at an understanding of her own subject position.

To be sure, Ruth's subject position also represents a particular class orientation, one that Sylvia, Edmund, and her aunts also help define for her. As much as Sylvia

attempts to maintain some social distance between her family and the rest of Fingerbone's society—a distance that the neighbors interpret as a “formal manner” indicative of “quiet tastes”—Ruth and Lucille are not members of Fingerbone's social elite (75). The argument could be made that Edmund's untimely death, which occurs when the train he's conducting slips off the tracks and disappears into the dark waters of Lake Fingerbone, marks the beginning of the family's social demise. After Edmund's death, Sylvia tries her best to maintain the family's middle class standing, but by the time Sylvie takes up housekeeping with Ruth and Lucille, their impoverishment has been solidified. As a subject, Ruth finds herself intimately connected to her family's history, which makes her inter-subjective access to the thoughts and emotions of other characters that much more important for how she understands her identity.

Furthermore, Ruth's access to the private experiences of other characters occurs in those material spaces that these characters share. In this way, the material world becomes the foundation that unifies these characters across time and space. As Sylvia returns from the garden, she questions her experience through Ruth's voice: “What have I seen, what have I seen. The earth and the sky and the garden, not as they always are” (19). The “I” here refers to Sylvia, not narrator Ruth who relays these questions. The line that immediately follows, however, returns us to Ruth's perspective: “And she saw her daughter's faces not as they always were . . .” (19). Shifts in tense, from past to present to past, also occur, destabilizing the temporal unity of the recollection. The narrative combines the past and the present, colliding and combining separate identities so that representations of the material world become the one constant that unifies them. The fact that everything that surrounds Sylvia undergoes dramatic change—the earth, sky, and

garden, as well as the faces of everyone she knows—indicates the malleability of perception and memory, especially as those memories cross boundaries between identities.

It is not just with Sylvia's memories and perceptions that Ruth finds identification. She establishes emotional connections to the thoughts and impressions of other family members as well. Ruth's affinity for Lake Fingerbone connects her to Helen, her mother, who was a "music I no longer heard, that rang in my mind, itself and nothing else, lost to all sense, but not perished, not perished" (160). In Sylvie, her aunt, she finds Helen's reflection mirrored in the lake beneath her where, "anyone that leans to look into a pool is the woman in the pool, anyone who looks into our eyes is the image in our eyes, . . . and so our thoughts reflect what passes before them" (166). When Ruth and Lucille are forced to spend a night alone outside on the shores of Lake Fingerbone, Ruth claims, "Lucille would tell this story differently. . . . Everything that falls upon the eye is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world's true workings" (116). For Ruth, nature and the space of nature unifies all of these impressions. Specifically, Lake Fingerbone is a shared material space that allows these characters to connect to each other and to forge a common, though not absolute, identity. But Lucille has a very different impression of their experience by the lake. For Lucille, Lake Fingerbone is not a material space she and Ruth share, but rather one that divides them. Lake Fingerbone and the surrounding woods represent everything Lucille abhors about Ruth and Sylvie's connection to nature, namely that their affinity for the natural world separates them from the social agency Lucille most desires. Furthermore, their affinity for nature fuels their social isolation, and their social isolation signifies their acquiescence to their status as lower class subjects. This

shared material space that lies outside Fingerbone's social boundaries affords Lucille no meaningful social opportunities to enact a gender performance that might augment her agency. Instead, her perception of Ruth sitting by the shore of Lake Fingerbone is one of intense animosity, for Ruth and Sylvie are constant reminders that her gender performance is her only means for overcoming her class position.

In many ways, the simple assertion that, "Lucille would tell this story differently," captures the essence of the subject's performative mode. For Lucille, the social world is her only meaningful reality, and when Ruth continually refuses to participate in those gender performances that Lucille associates with agency and power, Lucille ultimately must shut her out of her life altogether. Ruth, conversely, establishes relationships to time, space, and the natural world to help establish the foundation for a transient subject position she adopts—a position that becomes increasingly contentious as the novel develops. As a narrator, Ruth is intimately connected to the other characters, and she enjoys privileged access to their private experiences that affect her identity. Sylvia's affinity for the natural world, for example, helps Ruth form her own sensitivity to the forces of nature that surround Fingerbone, and this sensitivity becomes a fundamental component of her identity. In this way, ideological boundaries that separate identities dissolve when they are exposed to the natural world. Compellingly, as the boundaries between identities loosen in natural space, they become more rigid in social space, and as identities become less prominent, less meaningful in the natural world, they become more rigidly controlled in the social world. As Lucille becomes a rigid, gendered subject in the social world, one who asserts the power of her singular identity, Ruth's identity becomes nebulous and multi-layered, and more susceptible to the influences of her aunt.

GENDER PERFORMANCE AND PUBLIC, SOCIAL SPACE

For Ruth, the social world becomes a space where the pressures of social and gender normativity solidify her burgeoning transient subject position. But this does not happen overnight. When Sylvie assumes responsibility for Ruth and Lucille, her form of housekeeping causes the two young girls to develop radically different identities. Lucille quickly ascertains that Sylvie's transient lifestyle threatens her social position, and consequently she "had begun to regard other people with the calm, horizontal look of settled purpose with which, from a slowly sinking boat, she might have regarded a not too distant shore" (92). Ruth, however, is "content with Sylvie" (92). She resists the gendered changes that Lucille so willingly pursues, and she finds little value in the dress patterns, the yards of "cream-and-brown-checked wool," and the magazines full of hairstyles and setting instructions that for Lucille symbolize relief from Sylvie's unconventional lifestyle (125). Eventually, Lucille moves out of the house permanently in order to live with Miss Royce, the school's home economics teacher. Ruth moves in the opposite direction, finding refuge in the natural world where she obtains temporary relief from the pressures her peers thrust upon her to conform to the behavioral norms associated with her gender.

As Ruth spends more time in the natural world seeking solace, the fluid spatial boundaries she experiences at the novel's outset become more solid and less permeable. Her subversive, non-normative identity collides with society's gender expectations, which solidifies the subject positions of the novel's other characters and firmly establishes space as an ideological construct. The fluid boundaries that separate each character's identity also solidify, eventually becoming impermeable. Because Ruth

possesses the freedom to move through the countryside, and because she identifies so closely with the physical and metaphysical elements of the natural world, she conflates nature and transience. Spatial boundaries between social space and natural space become increasingly more rigid, and as Ruth and Lucille become more polarized near the novel's conclusion, so too do the types of spaces they occupy.

Therefore, a closer examination of gender performances yields compelling questions about the origins of individual agency in the novel's social spaces, the value of the novel's natural spaces as a starting point for subversive resistance, and the connections between gender performance and subjectivity. What is it about the way that Ruth presents and represents herself—her awkwardness, her ungainliness—that makes her socially unacceptable? More important, why do these traits make her so? What do Fingerbone's systems of social power gain by enforcing conformity to predetermined social and behavioral codes that buttress the status quo, and why do these particular traits succeed in Fingerbone's society? Is social agency in this novel a function of biological reproduction, and if so, what agency does the individual possess when confronted by biological determinism?

How Fingerbone's residents react to Sylvie's lifestyle reveals how individual agency is tied to behavioral expectations in certain social spaces. Ruth notes that the town's residents have always done what they could to accommodate transients short of actually providing them with homes and with food. "Fingerbone," she declares, "lived always among the dispossessed. In bad times the town was flooded with them" (179). But "neighbor women and church women" cannot abide the gradual ruin they perceive overcoming Sylvie's home because it seems to mirror a similar deterioration in Ruth's

social values (179). They call upon Sylvie and Ruth often, bringing them casseroles and coffee cakes, and for Ruth, “knitted socks and caps and comforters” (179). Sylvie’s parlor has long since ceased to act as a space for receiving guests, which is why it is absurd that “the visitors glanced at the cans and papers as if they thought Sylvie must consider such things appropriate to a parlor” (180). The town’s women who come “to speak to Sylvie had a clear intention, a settled purpose,” namely to pressure Sylvie to conform to their expectations regarding social and domestic conventions (178). Barring this, they intend to take Ruth away.

Sylvie, of course, finds nothing wrong with her domestic situation. She is comforted by the slow but ineluctable progression of nature that breaks down the barriers between the interior space of the home and the exterior space of nature. The half-feral cat Sylvie brought home to catch the mice proliferating in the kitchen behind the stacks of cans and brown paper bags had littered twice. Preying on swallows that had begun to nest in the second floor, the cats “often brought the birds into the parlor, and left wings and feet and heads lying about, even on the couch” (181). If Sylvie finds comfort in this deteriorating boundary, the townsfolk are appalled by it, and their reactions delineate ideological spaces that are coded by gender expectations. The townsfolk expect Sylvie to maintain a household that reflects an appropriate gender performance, one of domestic servitude. But Sylvie consistently resists gender conformity, not because she does not see the value of household convention, but rather because she does not understand Fingerbone’s version of it: Sylvie keeps the stacks of cans and newspapers “because she considered accumulation to be the essence of housekeeping, and because she considered the hoarding of worthless things to be proof of a particularly scrupulous thrift” (180). In

other words, it is not convention that Sylvie resists, but rather a particular type of convention that, in this case, determines a woman's status by virtue of the orderliness of her parlor.

After spending an entire day and night in the woods around Lake Fingerbone, Sylvie and Ruth jump onto a freight train and ride it back to town under the wary eyes of Fingerbone's residents. The town's pity turns to censure when the unresolved gender issues symbolized by her household's disrepair escalate to a legal transgression. Allowing Ruth to spend an entire night by the lake and then allowing her to ride the freight train home pushes Ruth too close to Sylvie's non-normative subject position, and the townsfolk intervene on Ruth's behalf. Spurred by the town's collective concern, the sheriff asserts a legal right to intervene—jumping into the boxcar of a moving freight train is not legally permissible—in order to extract Ruth from Sylvie's home. In this way, the town's residents form a social collective and bestow upon the sheriff the legal power to ensure Ruth's conformity, and they ensure conformity by imposing increasingly rigid forms of control: from social mores, to gender expectations, to the law.

What is interesting about the application of the law in this example is that Sylvie rides freight trains somewhat regularly as a part of her transient lifestyle. Yet, it is only when she rides the freight train with Ruth that the townsfolk intervene on behalf of what they claim is an illegal act. Consequently, Fingerbone's society seems less interested in "reforming" Sylvie than it does in preventing Ruth from adopting Sylvie's transient subject position. As Ruth notes, "Their motives in coming were complex and unsearchable, but all of one general kind. They were obliged to come by their notions of piety and good breeding, and by a desire, a determination, to keep me, so to speak, safely

in doors” (183). By maintaining Sylvie’s marginal social position as an other, the townsfolk concentrate ideological power in the status quo. Fingerbone’s society establishes Sylvie as an undesirable other in order to make more rigid the definition of “acceptable” or normative subjectivity, which they try to instill in Ruth. For this reason, it is not in the townsfolk’s best interest to reform Sylvie’s transient subject position, for Sylvie’s non-normative subjectivity strengthens and affirms the opposing subject positions occupied by Fingerbone’s concerned women.

But Ruth resists the town’s efforts to instill a normative subjectivity in her, and her resistance is most apparent in her refusal to adopt an “acceptable” gender performance. Furthermore, if gender performance in the novel is a contentious site between dominant and subversive ideologies, Ruth and Lucille enact those ideologies as a function of their movements through social and natural spaces. In this way, Lucille finds agency in social space, while Ruth finds some relief from social pressure in natural space. Lucille rejects Sylvie’s transient ethos by acquiescing to the town’s gender expectations. The sewing patterns, fabric, hairstyles, setting gel, and nail polish captured in style magazines become the gender performance that provides her with social agency. For Ruth, excursions to the drugstore are painfully oppressive and she “felt the notice of people all over me, like the pressure of a denser medium” (121). Lucille thrives in this denser medium. She befriends older girls whose stylistic advice helps her to define strict boundaries for her femininity in direct opposition to Sylvie’s household. By entering the drugstore occupied by the older, cosmopolitan girls, Ruth has crossed a spatial boundary that requires immediate changes in behavior and affect. As she and Lucille move into this space, Ruth is “increasingly struck by Lucille’s ability to look the way one was supposed

to look. . . . She had even developed a sauntering sort of walk that made her hips swing a little . . .” (121).

Ruth has no desire to adapt to this social space and therefore contrives her escape. Initially, Lucille follows her down the street, exhorting, ““We have to *improve* ourselves! . . . *Starting right now!*”” (123). The “improvement” Lucille desires is closely tied to the gender performance she enacts while in various public social spaces. These public spaces comprise not only the drug store, but also Ruth and Lucille’s school, Fingerbone’s streets, and the homes of Fingerbone’s socialites, whose daughters are acquaintances Lucille desperately wants to keep. Ruth, conversely, feels cast out of these public spaces. When she is in school, Ruth reveals that she “could not appear to pay attention to the teacher for fear she might call on me . . . This was to divert my thoughts from the impulse to walk out of the room, which was very strong” (188). Feeling “increasingly struck by Lucille’s ability to look the way one was supposed to look,” Ruth’s sense of her own awkwardness intensifies in social spaces (121). But her awkwardness exists only when she inhabits those social spaces that demand she conform to gender expectations. As soon as she leaves these social spaces, she is “left alone, in the gentle afternoon, indifferent to my clothes and comfortable in my skin, unimproved and without the prospect of improvement” (123). She retreats to the safety and security provided by Sylvie’s home—“that’s *Sylvie*’s house now,” Lucille contends—a domestic space that is supplanted by natural space (123).

The tension between social and natural spaces increases as Ruth and Lucille navigate the chaos of adolescence. They both seek security, and they find it in opposing ideological spaces in which they assume different gender roles. Lucille finds security,

comfort, and safety in the public spaces rigidly tied to the gender expectations that lead to her “improvement,” and where “the older girls became patronizing and voluble” (122). Ruth, on the other hand, leaves social space, “where it seemed to me then I could never wish to go,” because “nothing [she] had lost or might lose could be found there” (123). Returning home, she finds security in natural space, where “each particular tree, and its season, and its shadow, were utterly known to me, likewise the small desolations of forgotten lilies and irises” (124).

In this way, social and natural spaces are encoded by “gender performance” and “absence” respectively, codes that correspond to dominant and subversive ideologies. The public, social spaces Lucille moves through are encoded by strict behavioral expectations closely tied to the performance of a gendered identity, one particularly subjected to the cultural mores of 1950s America. It is no accident that, Miss Royce, the town’s home economics teacher and self-appointed guardian of social convention, becomes Lucille’s mentor and savior. Conversely, Ruth finds in natural spaces an attractive state of absence: the absence of behavioral expectations, the absence of social law, and the absence of gender identity. This absence generates the particular type of transient freedom—the freedom to move through non-social space without being judged or controlled—that Lucille abhors. Upon finding the transient’s freedom in natural space, Ruth discovers what Sylvie has known all-along: by the novel’s end, she can carry this freedom into public spaces as well where she no longer succumbs to the pressure to conform to gender expectations. As the narrative proceeds toward its climactic conclusion, a recipe for successful social and political subversion begins to appear based

not on direct confrontation with systems of power, but rather on an ethos of passive non-engagement.

Willingly or not, Ruth embodies this subject position of passive non-engagement, and Ruth's passive acceptance of her fate is important for my analysis of the novel's portrayal of non-normative subjectivity. If Ruth were born with Lucille's natural grace and composure, would she also choose social conformity? Because Ruth passively accepts her fate as a social outcast, she seems to have little control over her identity. If Ruth actively chose to resist society and gender normativity, then the novel might not be much more than a compelling resistance narrative, one whose heroine acts symbolically as a lightning rod for issues of gender and subjectivity. But Ruth does not actively resist. Instead, she is cast out of society by virtue of the fact that she feels physically and emotionally unable to participate in the social conventions that reinforce Lucille's gendered behavior. Upon returning from her all-night excursion with Lucille by Lake Fingerbone, Ruth senses that she is moving further away from those social conventions that might salvage a gendered identity: "I knew that my decay, now obvious and accelerating, should somehow be concealed for decency's sake, but Sylvie would not look up from her magazine. I began to hope for The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion, and then I rolled out of my chair" (119). Later, she admits, "Lunches were terrible. I could scarcely swallow. It seemed as if I were trying to eat a peanut-butter sandwich while hanging by the neck. . . . I knew nothing then, and I know nothing now, of the mechanics of such things as attitudes, and if it pleased [the school's principal] to say that I had one, and that it had changed, I would not argue" (136). Ruth never reveals why she does not possess the appropriate behavioral characteristics to

conform to social convention, only that she does not have them, which seems to suggest that she has always already lacked the fundamental attributes necessary to thrive in society.

Ruth's passive attitude is further complicated by the fact that both of the sisters possess a sophisticated awareness of behavioral expectations. Both Ruth and Lucille are aware of the codes written into social and natural spaces, they both have a precocious understanding of the behavioral expectations associated with those codes, and they both are able to analyze those expectations with intelligence. They are able to do so because Sylvie's behavior and her subject position make certain social conventions glaringly obvious. When Sylvie tries to make her home more respectable to avoid losing Ruth to the Sheriff, "she undertook the most ordinary things with an arch, tense, tentative good will that made them seem difficult and remarkable and she was delighted with even partial success" (187). The "ordinary things" that make housekeeping socially acceptable become exceptional and remarkable under Sylvia's contrived efforts. Ruth and Lucille are further able to analyze social and behavioral expectations because they both develop an intimate knowledge of the differences between natural and social spaces. For Ruth, the difference is comforting; for Lucille, it is terrifying. Consequently, they react to these spatial codes based on the agency each associates with her identity. Lucille finds that, by rejecting Sylvie's style of housekeeping, she acquires the social agency she needs to adopt the appropriate gender performance that will ensure her "improvement." Ruth finds that, by rejecting Fingerbone's gender expectations, she acquires the transient's agency to move seamlessly through all those spaces that lie beyond the control of society.

Compellingly, it is difficult to determine a point of origin for the agency associated with either one of these characters. The novel seems to suggest that Lucille's agency—her ability to exert some measure of control over her identity—derives from the fact that she already possesses acceptable, superficial characteristics that conform to social perceptions of beauty and attractiveness. She carries herself with a degree of confidence, she walks with a swagger, and unlike Ruth she is physically appealing. Conversely, Ruth's tall stature fuels her self-consciousness and her social paralysis. As Ruth remarks, the "easy and casual appearance" Lucille tries to instill is "very much compromised by my ungainliness, my buzzard's hunch" (121). Moreover, if Ruth has any agency, she seems to acquire it by default. Her ability to wander freely through the natural spaces beyond Fingerbone derives from the fact that she lacks the same agency to move freely through the social spaces in Fingerbone.

Because part of Ruth's sense of her own subject position is centered on her status as a social pariah, readers are left to wonder whether or not Ruth would have made different choices regarding her life if she could have. Under the school principal's inquisition, she has no agency to speak for herself, and she relies on Lucille to speak for her: "'She knows what you're going to say,' Lucille said. 'I don't know if she'll work harder this year or not. She will or she won't. You can't really talk to her about practical things. They don't matter to her'" (135). As much as Lucille implores Ruth to improve herself "*right now*," the type of improvement Lucille seeks is simply not available to Ruth, and she is forced to seek refuge in extra-societal worlds. These conclusions challenge my arguments about the relationships between space, subjectivity, and gender performance, for if Ruth is simply socially inept at birth, I cannot contribute her lack of

agency to a gender performance she refuses to adopt. My analysis here points to questions about origins for a gender ontology that seems innately determined. Ruth and Lucille are presented with identical domestic and social circumstances, yet social conformity is readily available for one and seemingly impossible for the other. Ruth's social exile framed by her physical awkwardness makes it seem as if her identity is innate or essential.

However, perceiving her identity as innate or essential redirects her social awkwardness away from the very social institutions that produce it. This is why Ruth's passive acceptance of her fate and her passive engagement with natural space are critically important for successful subversion of the dominant ideology. Confronted by the school's principal, she remains non-committal. Approached by the town's religious women, she "would be a ghost, and their food would not answer to my hunger, and my hands could pass through their down quilts and tatted pillow covers and never feel them or find comfort in them" (183). Visited by the sheriff, Ruth recalls, "I went up to my room and left my fate to work itself out" (191). Her passivity is not, at this point, a deliberate strategy she uses to resist gender conformity, but she is highly conscious of the advantages it provides: "Like a soul released, I would find here only the images and simulacra of the things needed to sustain me" (183). Active confrontation would solidify the control society exerts over her because her confrontational identity depends for its existence on the systems of power she wants to subvert. Passive non-compliance, however, diminishes the power these systems hold over her. Ruth must interact with natural spaces separated from public social spaces, and therefore separated from social

influence, in order to form a non-normative subjectivity somewhat separated from the dominant ideologies of power.

NON-NORMATIVE SUBJECTS, HISTORY, AND IDEOLOGICAL SUBVERSION

In *Housekeeping*, relationships characters establish to the past and to the present partially determine how they relate to social and natural spaces. Those characters who have social agency, and who move freely in social space, and who are committed to gender performances that support the dominant ideology, also exhibit a connection to Fingerbone's historical consciousness. Conversely, for those characters who move freely through natural space and who have minimal social agency, an attachment to history is less important than consciously living in a present moment detached from the past. Detaching the present moment from the history that precedes it seems illogical if not impossible because historical events create the present. Nevertheless, Sylvie and Ruth make concerted efforts to rebuff those historical forces that partially determine the subject positions of other characters in the novel.

Put another way, in the novel social spaces are diachronic because the behavioral codes attached to those spaces are formed by the accumulation of past events. For example, the women who attempt to save Ruth "were obliged to come by their notions of piety and good breeding," which are moral positions they possess because "they had been made to enact the gestures and attitudes of Christian benevolence from young girlhood" (182-83). Natural space, on the other hand, is partially synchronic. While floating on Lake Fingerbone, Sylvie "had no awareness of time. For her, hours and minutes were the

names of trains . . . and any present moment was only thinking, and thoughts bear the same relation, in mass and weight, to the darkness they rise from” (165-66). In this moment, at least, Sylvie’s connection to place depends less on the historical forces that inform it than on thoughts and impressions that are merely “arbitrary” (166). To this end, Henri Lefebvre provides some context for the distinction between diachronic and synchronic spaces. For Lefebvre, the history of a particular space, be it social or material, partially determines how humans interact in that space. In *The Production of Space* he argues:

The historical and its consequences, the “diachronic,” the “etymology” of locations in the sense of what happened at a particular spot or place and thereby changed it—all of this becomes inscribed in space. The past leaves its traces; time has its own script. Yet this space is always, now and formerly, a *present space*, given as an immediate whole, complete with its associations and connections in their actuality. (37)

The past collectively provides context for present action, and yet present action—the performance of identity, for example—can change an individual’s relationship to the past or to collective historical events.²

That Sylvie forms a relationship to place and space based on her conscious

² For Lefebvre, Marxist analyses of social space recognize how space can be split according to its functionality. In *The Production of Space* he argues, “More generally, the very notion of social space resists analysis because of its novelty and because of the real and formal complexity that it connotes. Social space contains—and assigns (more or less) appropriate places to – (1) the *social relations of reproduction*, i.e. the bio-physiological relations between the sexes and between age groups, along with the specific organization of the family; and (2) the *relations of production*, i.e. the division of labour and its organization in the form of hierarchical social functions” (Lefebvre 32).

detachment from history helps explain why Fingerbone's residents stigmatize the transient so emphatically.³ Transience does not threaten social adhesiveness, because it actually does the opposite; it unifies society in opposition to the transient other. Furthermore, it unifies society because the transient lifestyle threatens to destabilize behavioral codes associated with different types of space. This destabilization occurs because the transient's connections to historical consciousness are constantly shifting. The transient's movements defy the historical rootedness that partially constructs the identities of Fingerbone's residents. This explains why Fingerbone's residents are unsettled by Sylvie's decision to adopt a transient lifestyle, for transience alludes to a type of freedom they cannot fully understand. Upon leaving Sylvie and Ruth, Fingerbone's concerned women "strolled home to houses they now found wanting in ways they could not understand," and as pious as they were, the town's ladies didn't want to see Ruth "pass into that sad and outcast state of revelation where one begins to feel superior to one's neighbors" (184). Sylvie's freedom to perform her subversive identity in natural space combined with the continuous movement associated with transient culture reveal how she and Ruth relate to and encode the spaces that surround them. In other words, the freedom the transient experiences is inversely proportional to the control to which the rest of Fingerbone's residents submit. Sylvie's self-identification as a transient makes this control abundantly clear to those who perceive her as an other.

Following the example of Sylvie's life, Ruth liberates herself from the restraints imposed by a subservient and gendered identity. Ruth embraces the metaphysical and

³ As George Handley argues, "Robinson's narrative of Sylvie's extravagances hardly offers a comforting and viable model of ecological harmony and balance; instead it opens up a new possibility for existential terror" (510).

existential uncertainties associated with the space of nature precisely because doing so allows her to form and express an identity that parries and challenges that which Fingerbone's society thrusts upon her. Keeping vigil by the lake at night allows her to "let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones" (116). "Everything that falls upon the eye," she declares, "is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world's true workings. The nerves and the brain are tricked, and one is left with dreams that these specters loose their hands from ours and walk away . . ." (116). In nature, Ruth sees clearly the veils of social control that prevent her sister from understanding how gender performances are constructed for her. For Lucille, this prospect, this conscious awareness, this understanding, could not be more terrifying. On the same evening, under the same sky, and occupying the same space, Lucille sings to herself to fill the surrounding emptiness. Sitting beside Ruth on the lakeshore, Lucille is "never still, never accepting that all our human boundaries were overrun" (115). Indeed, Ruth observes that she engages the natural space "for the wood's own sake, while, increasingly, Lucille seemed to be enduring a banishment there" (99).

For Lucille, entropy implies annihilation worse than death. She associates the dissolution of material form with the dissolution of historical consciousness, and she relies upon this consciousness for the social agency attached to her gender performance. In everything, Lucille sees the "potential for invidious change. She wanted worsted mittens, brown oxfords, and red rubber boots," and she wanted these things to exist in a space separated from time (93). Nothing abhorred her more than the fact that "Ruffles wilted, sequins fell, satin was impossible to clean" (93). This is partly why she abandons Ruth and Sylvie and moves in with Miss Royce, the home economics teacher. Both

materially and symbolically, Miss Royce unites Lucille to what she most desires: a predictable social structure in which historical consciousness—in this case, the mass of cultural codes accumulated over time—informs her gender performance. Social structure lends to identity the illusion of incontrovertibility, which is the very opposite of the irresolvable metaphysical illusions Ruth embraces in the natural world.

If Lucille's historical consciousness provides the foundation for the gender performance that makes her socially successful, how does the lack of historical consciousness inform Sylvie and Ruth as non-normative subjects? How does a synchronic relationship to place and history empower their subversive identities? If Sylvie's relationship to natural space can help liberate her from the social and political forces that construct her subjectivity, then she must also alter the social and cultural codes that determine those spaces. She alters those social and cultural codes in opposition to the social and historical forces that initially created them. Put simply, the social forces that Sylvie opposes are the same social forces that constitute her subversive identity, and her oppositional stance exists by virtue of that which she opposes.

As such, does Sylvie's attempt to reject history enable and empower the way history controls her? Contrary to the power and agency we assume Sylvie possesses as a transient, her subjectivity partly derives from society and her subject position strengthens the power society exerts over her. Furthermore, Sylvie's oppositional stance strengthens society's control over all those who willingly conform to it, and her resistance, therefore, also strengthens Fingerbone's control over Lucille. When Lucille attempts to act as an "intermediary between Sylvie and those demure but absolute arbiters who continually sat in judgment of our lives," she knows that "such arguments were extraneous. She herself

regarded Sylvie with sympathy, but no mercy, and no tolerance” (104-05). Lucille’s lack of compassion derives from the response Sylvie’s lifestyle elicits from Fingerbone’s socialites whereby “ignorance of the law is no excuse,” and “ignorance of the law is the crime” (104). Lisa Walker provides some context for this issue when she argues that, “an account of subjectivity that relies too heavily on intentionality does not take into account how people are compelled and constrained by the very regulatory norms of gender identity that are the condition of our resistance. This means that many of us do not experience our gender identities as being very fluid or available to choice” (76). Consequently, because she stands so clearly in opposition to the social and gendered expectations her culture thrusts upon her, Sylvie provides the other characters in the novel with the means for reaffirming and solidifying their own identities. Rosette Brown and her mother, Miss Royce, the sheriff, and the many unnamed citizens who visit Sylvie, Ruth, and Lucille in their home use Sylvie’s identity performance and spatial practice as a means for reifying class, gender, the law, and culture respectively.

However, Fingerbone’s power over Sylvie is only significant if she is invested in the historical consciousness that forms Fingerbone’s society. Sylvie minimizes her attachment to historical consciousness, and therefore also minimizes its influence on her identity. Sylvie adopts a transient lifestyle by inhabiting a present moment that functions in opposition to a past that constitutes other subjects. Sylvie, Ruth indicates, “inhabited a millennial present. To her the deteriorations of things were a fresh surprise, a disappointment not to be dwelt on” (94). Sylvie’s ability to release her attachment to the home and its attendant decay derives from her desire to impose new meaning on the spaces she, Ruth, and Lucille occupy, an act that succeeds only because she minimizes

her attachment to Fingerbone's history. By performing a transient identity in the space of the home, Sylvie hopes to change how characters interact in it as well as the values they derive from it. As Ruth observes, "Sylvie kept her clothes and even her hairbrush and toothpowder in a cardboard box under the bed. She slept on top of the covers, with a quilt over her, which during the daytime she pushed under the bed also. Such habits (she always slept clothed, at first with her shoes on, and then, after a month or two, with her shoes under her pillow) were clearly the habits of a transient" (103). Ruth is "reassured by her sleeping on the lawn," and she takes comfort in the fact that, if Sylvie can maintain her transient lifestyle, even inside the space of her home, then she might not abandon Ruth as her mother and her aunts had (103). Lucille, however, is appalled by Sylvie's behavior. She imagines what the "sleek and well-tended girls at school" would think if they could witness first-hand how Sylvie was attempting to alter behavioral expectations in the rigidly gendered space of the household (103). While Ruth finds a kindred spirit in Sylvie, Lucille can only imagine the "disapprobation" thrust upon her by her class-conscious friends and their socially refined mothers (103).

As the narrator, Ruth continually resists any personal or historical explanations for Sylvie's choice to adopt a transient's identity. Sylvie and Ruth appear "dysfunctional" to Fingerbone's socialites to the extent that "dysfunction" precludes "normal" social inclusion. Sylvia, the grandmotherly matriarch and mother of Sylvie, made every effort to raise her children and grandchildren to exist in society as harmoniously as possible, and there are no psychological, historical, familial, or monetary explanations for Sylvie's transience. Ruth observes that, "for five years my grandmother cared for us very well," and that "she whited shoes and braided hair and fried chicken and turned back

bedclothes, and then suddenly feared and remembered that the children had somehow disappeared, every one” (24-25). At one point in her past, Sylvie (not Sylvia) does attempt to conform to heteronormative social expectations by choosing to get married, but her marriage ended, in practice if not in divorce, years before she assumes her guardianship of Ruth and Lucille. Between her youth, her marriage, and her return to Fingerbone, mystery prevails over the intervening years in Sylvie’s life, and Sylvie consistently refuses to fill in those gaps, even when Lucille repeatedly presses her for information. Responding to Lucille’s persistence, Sylvie responds, ““You must know, Lucille . . . that some questions aren’t polite”” (69). Personal, social, and cultural histories are less important to her than the mutability she finds in the present moment, which empowers her identity performance as a transient subject.

By inhabiting the present, and by remaining unattached to time, loss, and the home, Sylvie refuses the diachronic behavioral codes connected to social space. For her, the present is eternal, and home can be wherever she lays her head. When Ruth and Lucille discover Sylvie sleeping on a public bench, Lucille is mortified because Sylvie’s act in this public space invokes cultural codes that determine her social status. Lucille, “white with chagrin,” desperately asks, “What should we do?” and then “took off, running toward home” (105). For Lucille, sitting on a park bench implies leisure, reflection, meditation, and affluence, but sleeping on it implies homelessness. Lucille wants to police the cultural codes embedded in public and private spaces because for her conformity is essential for social success, and that success is rooted to historical concepts of the home that are directly opposed to Sylvie’s transience. Sylvie takes pleasure in ignoring these codes because ignoring them allows her to access social and spatial

freedoms that remain unavailable to most of Fingerbone's residents.

Indeed, throughout the novel, Sylvie strives continually to create her own identity as a function of space separated from time. Doing so allows her to move through both natural and social spaces as a subject detached from Fingerbone's historical consciousness—the same historical consciousness against which Ruth struggles and to which Lucille ultimately succumbs. This argument yields a particularly constructive interpretation of the novel's ending because the freedom from structure Ruth and Sylvie enjoy rests upon their conscious act of separating history from identity, or time from space. It is difficult to critically examine the nature of the freedom this separation enacts because Fingerbone's residents determine perceptions of freedom by the social controls that construct behavior and inform gender performance. Ruth and Sylvie conceptualize freedom as that which opposes the social mores to which they're expected to conform.⁴ But doing so means that Ruth and Sylvie can no longer actively participate in Fingerbone's social space with any degree of agency. Sylvie realizes "that her first scheme to keep us together had failed," and "she had little hope that the [custody] hearing . . . would turn out well" (198-99). Despite their desperate attempts to wash the china and polish the windows ("or those that still had panes")—or, in other words, to return the space of the home to something more socially acceptable and gender

⁴ This conclusion might seem particularly germane in the scope of William Burke's argument that the novel is "an unconventional primer on the mystical life" (717). This primer, Burke argues, expands the consciousness of both Ruth and the reader "through a process of border crossings—social, geographic, and perceptual," and in doing so fulfills Robinson's ultimate purpose for the novel, namely to engage conversations about contemporary subjectivity (717). For Burke, border crossings are key and the ability to move across "social, geographic, and perceptual" borders is what constitutes the freedom the characters enjoy.

appropriate—the sheriff will still come in the morning to take Ruth away (199, 207).

Of all the characters in the novel, Ruth is the most critically perceptive of spatial codes and the impact they have on both her identity and her subject position. Ruth does not actively seek freedom from those social mores that demand she adopt a constructed gender performance. Rather, she finds liberation simply by not participating in any social contract whatsoever, where she is “unimproved without the prospect of improvement” (123). Ruth finds great freedom in this new subject position:

I learned an important thing in the orchard that night, which was that if you do not resist the cold, but simply relax and accept it, you no longer feel the cold as discomfort. I felt giddily free and eager, as you do in dreams, when you suddenly find that you can fly, very easily, and wonder why you have never tried it before. I might have discovered other things. For example, I was hungry enough to begin to learn that hunger has its pleasures, and I was happily at ease in the dark, and in general, I could feel that I was breaking the tethers of need, one by one. (204)

For some, Ruth’s passivity in this passage is disconcerting, especially among feminist scholars who claim that liberation from the patriarchal restrictions placed on gender is closely linked to an individual’s ability to assert an identity that destabilizes the systems of power seeking to subject and subdue her. However, identity performance—even a subversive one—might subject Ruth to the very social control from which she seeks freedom. It is useless for Ruth to actively confront the society that partially determines Lucille’s gender performance, for doing so would lock her into a binary with the systems of power that control her—a relationship that leads to further subjugation.

The residents of Fingerbone want to prevent Ruth from following in Sylvie's footsteps. Yet she escapes at the conclusion of the novel, implying that she acquires agency despite Fingerbone's efforts to contain her. Ruth declares: "I could not stay, and Sylvie would not stay without me. Now truly we were cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping" (209). As their housekeeping comes to an end, so too ends Fingerbone's attempts to control them, to modify their behaviors, and to enforce gender performance. If the unacknowledged social purpose of Sylvie's identity is to solidify the positions of the townsfolk who object to her lifestyle, does Ruth's transience function in the same way? To what extent does gender performativity enact and reify power in public and private spaces, and to what extent, as Minelle Mahtani argues in her analysis of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*, do "bodily performances themselves constitute or (re)produce space?" (68). Does Ruth's choice to identify with transience constitute or produce a non-normative subject position that is partially defined by the transient spaces she must occupy? In her analysis of subjectivity in the novel, Paula Geyh analyzes the problem from a slightly different perspective:

Does the transient subjectivity of Sylvie and Ruth represent a new formation in itself, or is it only an inversion of the settled subjectivity, an oppositional structure that, despite its power to deconstruct the oppositions through which the settled subject constitutes itself, remains still bound in the conceptual framework of those same oppositions? (119)

For Ruth and for Sylvie, liberation from social conformity and from patriarchal control lies in a passive but total rejection of the entire system, a course of non-action whose efficacy seems dubious. The novel's conclusion suggests that by asserting the identity of

the other, Ruth does not subvert the dominant system of power, but rather substantiates it. Ultimately, Ruth's destiny is much like Sylvie's, one determined by the transience of a drifter who occupies physical spaces that lie beyond—and therefore, validate—social, cultural, and political control. Any ambivalence or disappointment the reader might feel by the novel's conclusion derives from the discomfiting notion that real freedom might require the individual to abandon sustained social contact all together.

Many critics have attempted to wrestle with the novel's conclusion by framing it as a realistic portrayal of the limited choices available to Sylvie and Ruth in a society that produces gender expression. Ruth and Sylvie must accept the social and cultural exile associated with transience in order to form and embody identities that exist beyond social, political, and patriarchal determination. Some of these critics find liberation in Ruth and Sylvie's final departure from Fingerbone, an act which severs ties to the type of domestic housekeeping that might otherwise bind and suppress their identities. As Anne-Marie Mallon argues, "Robinson's women . . . will make their own way in the world, inviting us as readers to release both ourselves and them from structures, domestic or narrative, that would inhibit that journey. Thus the challenge of *Housekeeping* lies in Robinson's refusal to 'save' Ruth from herself, from Sylvie, and ultimately from homelessness" (95). The desire to "save" Ruth and Sylvie from homelessness, however, is one that originates in the subjectivity created by the dominant ideology. If Robinson offers "shape and scope to an anonymous social condition," as Galehouse argues, then she also locates or affixes transience to the very social structures that it operates against. By doing so, the novel permits certain interpretations of transience at the expense of others; as readers we define, claim, and control representations of transience not on its

own terms, but rather from the very structures of power that create it (and us).⁵ As readers, we might prefer the social centeredness we associate with the home. But the fact remains that Ruth and Sylvie *prefer* transience to domesticity.

The more Ruth rebels against the society that attempts to control her, the more she envisions herself as socially immaterial. Conversely, the less she conforms to social expectations in social space, the more she gains a material presence in that space, at least as society perceives her. In other words, as a subject trying to conform to society's expectations, Ruth is all but invisible. But as someone who attempts to liberate herself from convention, she suddenly becomes a highly visible and dangerous non-normative subject whose threats to the social order unify the forces that operate against her. Fingerbone's residents become desperate to ground her again and to reestablish her material, physical presence in social space. In this way, *Housekeeping* defines what is at stake in a contemporary world in which individual actors must negotiate identity, subjectivity, and identity formation, and in doing so imagines possibilities for liberation in a social field dominated by systems of social and cultural power. To accomplish this, the novel represents environmental space and social space as binary opposites, and as the narrative progresses, Ruth's and Lucille's positions in these spaces become increasingly

⁵ In *Postmodern Geographies*, Edward Soja presents the following argument about the functions of physical and social spaces: "The structure of organized space . . . represents, instead, a dialectically defined component of the general relations of production, relations which are simultaneously social and spatial. . . . the two sets of structured relations (the social and the spatial) are not only homologous, in that they arise from the same origins in the mode of production, but are also dialectically inseparable" (78). From Soja's Marxist perspective, the dialectic between individual agency and social power serves larger interests (and indeed, might be fabricated by those interests), namely that of capital. He argues that the struggle between agency and conformity, between the individual and society, veils the structures of power that use the struggle as a means for consolidating its influence. See Soja's *Postmetropolis*.

rigid. This rigidity, then, enables Robinson to use her characters to explore issues of identity, agency, and subjectivity, and this reading of the novel reveals the extent to which subjectivity and gender performance are closely tied to a set of behavioral expectations whose origins remain mostly hidden to the very subjects who adopt them.

Freedom and control are fundamentally spatial issues, easily recognizable by Sylvie's choice, for example, either to follow a sidewalk into town or to walk across the open field. To acknowledge the transient lifestyle Sylvie and Ruth adopt at the end of the novel is to acknowledge the freedoms Fingerbone's socialites lack, for real freedom must come at the expense of the social, cultural, and political systems that bind them to security, structure, and hierarchy. Ultimately, this is not just an argument about subjectivity, but also one about how postmodern American literature investigates and reevaluates subjectivity. In the novel, relationships between space, materiality, and identity determine how characters empower themselves despite cultural mores that seek to limit identity formation to particular acceptable norms. In this way, *Housekeeping* helps define what is at stake in a contemporary world where individuals must negotiate identity, subjectivity, and identity formation in particular configurations of space.

CHAPTER 3: SPATIALITY, IDENTITY, AND HISTORICAL NARRATIVE IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELLOVED*

An analysis of memory, identity, and materiality in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* broadens my spatial investigation of postmodern American fiction. As in *Housekeeping*, the characters in *Beloved* form relationships to natural spaces that allow them to minimize dominant social codes. *Beloved*'s protagonists have more control over identity performance and self-expression in nature than they do in urban spaces. Whereas my analysis of *Housekeeping* involved spatiality, gender performance and identity, spatiality in *Beloved* helps me analyze relationships between identity, race, and history. I argue that spatiality partially determines how characters relate to history, and how they relate to history affects how they form identities. The characters in *Beloved*, then, reimagine their personal histories from a perspective founded on a material world that exists beyond the dominant discourses of power.

The novel chronicles the experiences of several former African American slaves as they attempt to reestablish personal and familial relationships destroyed by slavery and its legacy. The plot focuses on Sethe, who escapes slavery with Denver, her newborn daughter, by crossing the Ohio River. Sethe's mother-in-law, named Baby Suggs, her two sons, Howard and Buglar, and Sethe's first daughter, named Beloved, greet Sethe upon her safe arrival in Ohio. However, Sethe's safety is not guaranteed even in the emancipated north. Faced with recapture under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, she decides to kill her children rather than permit her former master to return them to the horrors of slavery. Having retreated to a shed behind Baby Suggs's house, Sethe slits Beloved's throat when confronted by her captors, led by the nefarious Schoolteacher.

Believing that any mother who would resort to infanticide could never again be a productive slave, Schoolteacher abandons his pursuit before Sethe kills any more of her children. Nevertheless, for most of the novel this murder haunts Sethe who isolates herself in her house at 124 Bluestone Road and where her identities as a mother, a lover, and an ex-slave unspool and dissolve in madness. For eighteen years, Beloved's ghost haunts Sethe's house before it becomes embodied in a mysterious young woman who appears in Sethe's front yard. A powerfully symbolic force of history, trauma, and the slave subject, Beloved forces all of the novel's African American characters to confront the legacy of slavery's raw and uninhibited violence. Beloved's murder and her mysterious return become focal points for the memories of the novel's other protagonists—Baby Suggs, Paul D, Stamp Paid, and Denver—who form identities as northern “free” subjects while contending with the forces of history that precede them.

Considering the ex-slave's struggle to form identity, I consider memory and historical narrative in this chapter as ideological forces that act on identity and that are at least partially controlled by a dominant culture. For the novel, this dominant ideology represents the social, cultural, and political interests of white northerners who want to maintain a position of political power, material wealth, and social superiority. For example, northern “free-soil” ideology operates most conspicuously through the words and actions of the Bodwins of Cincinnati who help secure Baby Suggs's freedom and who own the house at 124 Bluestone Road. The Bodwins are proud of the freedom they secure for southern slaves. Yet, as the conditions they place on Baby Suggs's new freedom demonstrate, the Bodwins maintain social, political, and material control over their lives. Fighting against the forces of slavery, northerners such as the Bodwins adopt

an ethos of self-righteousness—a rectitude that helps them justify the continued subjugation of African American subjects. The social and material pressures created by this level of control affect how characters form identity in the novel, for the institutionalized repression they feel in the free north partially reanimates the identities they had in the enslaved south. In this chapter, I also think about history as a material force that operates independently of the dominant, northern ideology. I am not referring to material forces of history in the Marxist sense where material circumstances established by capital dictate not only the conditions of an individual's life, but also the identity she claims. Instead, I am more interested here in analyzing material conditions of the natural, physical world, which, I argue, exist at least somewhat independently of the social and political forces that determine an individual's subject position. The experiences many characters have in nature help them to forge new relationships to memory and personal history.

Many of *Beloved*'s critics have explored history's relationships to the novel's central concerns: loss, memory, reconciliation, community, and agency. Emma Parker, for example, argues that, "the novel's central protagonists can be read as hysterics: subjects haunted by the past, characters who unconsciously express repressed memories of psychic trauma through physical symptoms and use a corporeal discourse to articulate what is otherwise unspeakable" (1). Indeed, one prevalent reading of the novel analyzes how individuals contend with the "unspeakable" horrors of slavery's violence and how personal trauma relates to more encompassing historical forces. For Parker, "Morrison's novel highlights the importance of confronting, reclaiming, and transforming history, and . . . it points to the healing potential of memory" (1).

But what does it mean to “transform history,” as Parker suggests? Partial answers emerge in *Beloved*’s sharp focus on those aspects of nineteenth-century African American history repressed by dominant ideological narratives that portray emancipation as a product of American democracy. For example, ostensibly free African American subjects in the novel still must contend with the oppression enacted by a dominant northern culture that wants to preserve social and political power. In the novel, emancipation does change the subject’s status, and characters undoubtedly enjoy greater social and material freedoms. Yet, their subject positions are constrained: Sethe, Paul D, Stamp Paid, and Denver have no political agency with which to change the subservient subject positions they occupy by virtue of the work they’re allowed to do and by virtue of the types of space through which they are permitted to move. For Bo Ekelund, this means that “it is for the reader to register the way that history is active in this spatial organization, how ‘Sweet Home’ and Cincinnati are the concrete products of the history that appears in a distorted mirror in the official images of real History” (149).

This tension between African American perspectives of memory and history in the novel and “the official images of real History,” registers most significantly in the novel’s postmodern structure, which incorporates formal changes, changes in points of view, and shifts in time. A postmodern approach to *Beloved*’s narrative might seem contradictory because postmodernism can diminish historical meaning, and the histories of African American social and political struggles are precisely what *Beloved* imbues with meaning. Yet I argue that the novel’s postmodern structure enables us to attach new meanings to the histories Morrison calls attention to. As Kimberly Davis argues,

While the novel exhibits a postmodern skepticism of sweeping historical narratives, of ‘Truth,’ and of Marxist teleological notions of time as diachronic, it also retains an African American and modernist political commitment to the crucial importance of deep cultural memory, of keeping the past alive in order to construct a better future. Morrison’s mediations between these two theoretical and political camps—between postmodernism and African American social protest—enable her to draw the best from both and make us question the more extremist voices asserting that our postmodern world is bereft of history. (242-43)

Beloved’s historical recovery, I contend, frames the novel’s indictment of American narratives about democracy and progress, and how these narratives perpetuate an ideological discourse that maintains racial discrimination.

To this end, Linda Krumholz analyzes historical recovery in the novel as a process that destabilizes dominant ideological narratives by replacing them with first-person slave narratives. She argues:

In *Beloved* Morrison brings together the African American oral and literary tradition and the Euro-American novel tradition to create a powerful and intensely personal representation of slavery in America. In this way, Morrison indirectly critiques historical and pedagogical methods prevalent in the United States. She counters a fact-based objective system with a ritual method, based in initiatory and healing rituals, in which the acquisition of knowledge is a subjective and spiritual experience. (122)

Beloved presents an epistemological challenge, Krumholz suggests, to the social and political controls imposed on the subject.¹ Here she suggests that certain historical frameworks that value objectivity privilege ideological narratives that also limit how we think about past events. To work against this, she contends, the process of acquiring knowledge, including the knowledge of one's own identity, evolves into a "subjective and spiritual experience" by the novel's conclusion (122). How do narratives produced by dominant ideological discourses create, manipulate, and form historical knowledge in the novel?² Because of segregation, the novel's main characters must subsist outside the

¹ Arlene Keizer builds on this argument when she claims that Morrison uses musical improvisation in *Beloved* to lend agency to slaves in their quests for identity and self. In this way, "the novel intervenes in current debates about black subjectivity, helping to define a position for the black subject between essentialism and postmodern fragmentation" (105). Keizer argues that in the novel, "black individuals and the African American community try to construct and maintain a sense of selfhood under the pressure of atomizing injunctions from those in power. They use many different strategies to heal and hold themselves together; some of these strategies are drawn from philosophies and rituals of the West African past" (109). For Keizer, Morrison's use of African belief systems and African characters reveals African American identity and subjectivity in ways that are often hidden by "Eurocentric or Anglocentric concepts of self" (110).

² Other critics, such as Mae Henderson and Ashraf Rushdy, investigate how language constructs meaning in the novel. Many critics are especially concerned with the politically and socially marginalized realms in which those constructions occur. For Henderson, *Beloved* shifts meaning and value by changing the dominant metaphors of racial subjugation from white to black, and from paternity to maternity (95). She argues, "Through this process of deconstructing and restructuring, of decoding and recoding, the author redefines notions of genesis and meaning as they have constituted black womanhood in the dominant discourse" (95). By shifting the dominant metaphor of control in the novel, *Beloved* subverts the dominant political and social discourses that attempt to define the identities of newly freed slaves. In this way, Rushdy argues, the novel creates "some of the mandates for establishing a form of literary theory that will truly accommodate African American literature—a theory based on an inherited culture, an inherited 'history,' and the understanding of the ways that any given artistic work negotiates between those cultural/historical worlds it inhabits" (38). Rushdy here captures the essence of a rather difficult problem. *Beloved* must work with African American cultures and histories that have been inherited. Although part of *Beloved*'s narrative reaches backward through time before the onset of the slave trade, the novel still must

dominant social discourses that privilege northern white power, and yet, by virtue of their social exclusion, the characters are subjects produced by ideology. As subjects produced by this ideology, their identities are at least partially determined for them. Yet, exclusion allows them to exist in, form relationships to, and define their identities by a material reality separated from the social and cultural discourses disseminated by the dominant ideology. If characters in the novel contend with historical narratives that have been produced by discourses of power and that falsely proclaim equality for the African American subject, can we as readers reimagine their histories beyond the limitations imposed by those discourses? If the novel challenges us, as readers, to rethink how we *can* think about historical narrative—and the subjects and identities those narratives produce—can we create new narratives to represent historical perspectives that exist independently of the ideological structures they resist? Put simply, can *Beloved*'s readers imagine history and identity as anything other than ideology?

I argue that *Beloved* explores how changes in legal status, spatial freedoms, material relationships, and historical narratives form human subjects. The novel is important for its representations of historical discourse, emancipation, subjectivity, and identity. In this chapter, I construct three main arguments about spatiality, history, and narrative structure in *Beloved*. First, racial exclusion allows characters to form identities in a natural, material world that is separated from the social and political worlds. Second, because of their relationships to the natural world, some of the novel's African American characters exert control over identity formation and identity performance despite the

contend with an African American history that has been produced for its characters by white discourses of material domination and social control.

pressures applied by dominant social discourses. Doing so enables these characters to recover a personal history that subverts the dominant ideology of northern whites because it destabilizes northern ideological claims about emancipation. In the novel, this recovered form of history prioritizes the ex-slave's experiences and perspectives. Third, the novel's postmodern structure, which relies on multiple perspectives, a disjointed sense of time, and changes in narrative form, further destabilizes ideological and historical narratives created by the dominant culture that construct the African American subject.

SPACE, IDENTITY, AND DOMINANT IDEOLOGICAL DISCOURSE

If, as I contend, characters in the novel recover African American identity and history by attaching them to a natural, material world that lies beyond the social and political discourses of the dominant class, how do they accomplish this? The characters in the novel experience as much unmitigated freedom as their subject positions allow when they enter into the space of nature. Nature in the novel is not valorized as a restorative space of healing. The characters do not represent it as something imbued with an anthropomorphic, spiritualized affect in opposition to the engineered cities and industrial complexes that seek to destroy it. Rather, some representations of nature in the novel depict a dangerous, challenging, and impartial environment encountered by those characters who struggle to survive as they move through it. Natural space is important not necessarily for what it provides the characters, but rather for what it lacks: nature is a space where the laws enacted by the novel's dominant social class are mostly absent. Those social and political discourses that articulate class distinction and racial

discrimination are concentrated in urban social space—the spaces occupied by the Bodwins, for example. The characters in the novel use these two spaces, the natural and the social, to create a binary that partially constructs identity and subjectivity. Emancipation gives ex-slaves spatial freedoms they have never known, but it does not provide them with social and political equality. Their identities represent social and political inequality, especially because they are subjects constituted by Cincinnati's white culture. Nature thus becomes spatially determined by these ex-slaves as a site in which the novel's African American characters can establish subject positions defined by greater personal freedoms without fearing reprisals from northern white society.

Denver's birth at the edge of the Ohio River, a scene that appears early in the novel, demonstrates how, for the novel's characters, changes in subjectivity can occur in nature. The Ohio River symbolizes Sethe's legal freedoms, of course, but the river also helps her connect to the spatial freedoms of the natural world. Sethe fears her pursuers, but she identifies with the woods and with the river, which she associates with newfound agency, one that elicits a feeling of safety and comfort: "Sethe was looking at one mile of dark water . . . It looked like home to her, and the baby (not dead in the least) must have thought so too" (88). Schoolteacher's homicidal violence at the Sweet Home Plantation had forced her to flee, and by fleeing into the Kentucky wilderness, Sethe finds some protection in the wild, uninhibited spaces of nature. Pursued by her captors and nearing the edge of panic, she fears the dogs and guns she imagines are behind her (82). Moving through nature, she confronts the reality that she is a subject who is entirely dominated and controlled by her master, and her escape brings this control into sharper focus. Fearing an impending capture, she realizes that she has already lost everything that once

was meaningful to her, “that after her husband had disappeared; that after her milk had been stolen, her back pulped, her children orphaned, she was not to have an easful death” (33). At this point, alone, desperate, but unafraid in the woods at night “because she is the color of it,” Sethe finds a moment of power and resistance: “something came up out of the earth into her—like a freezing, but moving too, like jaws inside. . . . Suddenly she was eager for [Schoolteacher’s] eyes, to bite into them; to gnaw his cheek” (82, 33). Perhaps for the first time in her life, Sethe finds agency, a primal impulse to retaliate against those who have subjected her to their domination.

As Sethe and Amy Denver approach the Ohio River, then, the impending freedom it represents intensifies:

At noon they saw it; then they were near enough to hear it. By late afternoon they could drink from it if they wanted to. Four stars were visible by the time they found, not a riverboat to stow Sethe away on, or a ferryman willing to take on a fugitive passenger—nothing like that—but a whole boat to steal. It had one oar, lots of holes and two bird nests. (88)

Sethe and Amy’s movements through space in this passage define the spaces of freedom they associate with the river, a freedom materially connected to the physical environment. Their movements through natural space are closely connected to three different types of sensory perception: sight, sound, and taste. To see, to hear, and to taste the river is to see, to hear, and to taste freedom, and as Sethe experiences self-determination for the first time, she finds freedom both in her body and in the physical world that encapsulates her. Furthermore, time in the passage helps the reader link spatial movement to Sethe’s sensory perceptions of the natural, material world. As afternoon progresses to evening,

the four visible stars signify the approach of night, the security of darkness, and the culmination of Sethe's journey toward freedom. Significantly, nature has reclaimed the decrepit skiff that Amy hopes will ferry Sethe to the Ohio side of the river. The holes in the skiff make it a part of the river, instead of something that floats on it, and birds have found enough safety in its depths to build nests that at some point in the past presumably have protected both eggs and offspring. The passage, in other words, reveals an ecological balance.

Denver's birth, which occurs while Sethe is immersed in the waters of the Ohio River, signifies hope and denotes liberation of Sethe's body and spirit. A slave for her entire life, Sethe has had no control over her subject position. On the plantation, Sethe's subjectivity was partially determined by her reproductive fertility, which, from the slaveholder's perspective, perpetuates slave labor. To the other male slaves, Sethe is little more than an object of sexual desire; when Sethe arrived at Sweet Home, the other slaves had spent a "year of yearning, when rape seemed the solitary gift of life. . . . dreaming of rape, thrashing on pallets, rubbing their thighs and waiting for the new girl" (11). Occurring literally at the edge of freedom, Denver's birth symbolizes hope for a change in Sethe's subject position. "Panting under four summer stars," half submerged in the river, with a baby born "drowning in its mother's blood," and struggling under "a shower of silvery blue," Sethe, Denver, and Amy exist in constant contact with the natural world that surrounds them (88-89). This material realm does not guarantee their survival. But it is significant that in this transition into birth and rebirth, from slavery to freedom, from one side of the river to the other, Denver and Sethe's new lives begin wholly immersed in

a material space they define by virtue of its detachment from the ideological discourses of both southern and northern societies.

Indeed, Sethe and Amy do not rely on any contact with the society that otherwise supports them. They are temporarily free from the controlling gaze of a culture that seeks to define them, though to be sure they are hiding from it: “A pateroller passing would have sniggered to see two throw-away people, two lawless outlaws—a slave and a barefoot whitewoman with unpinned hair . . . But no pateroller came and no preacher” (89). As twilight descends on them on the riverbank and under the light of four stars, “there was nothing to disturb them at their work. So they did it appropriately and well” (89). In social space, Amy’s and Sethe’s subject positions demand that they adopt very different relationships to identity and agency. Amy, the former indentured servant, must submit to the sexual advances of her master. Sethe has no political agency either before or after emancipation. Although Amy is acutely aware of the risk she assumes by associating with Sethe, and declares that she “wouldn’t be caught dead in daylight on a busy river with a runaway,” in this natural space, the two women temporarily exist beyond the social and political discourses that control them (89).

The redundancy is salient in Sethe’s legal status as a “lawless outlaw.” As an “outlaw,” she temporarily exists outside the legal structures that control and determine her subjectivity. For these few hours leading up to Denver’s birth, the spaces through which she moves lie beyond the legal boundaries that society is willing to patrol. Indeed, she runs from captors whose pursuit she desperately fears, and Sethe is certainly still subject to the law she struggles to escape. Nevertheless, this space of lawlessness presents her with as much freedom as she has ever experienced, a freedom she finds

symbolically represented in the spores of the bluefern that fall about her (89). Here, she does not replace one legal system with another, but rather moves into a natural space where her social and political subjectivity is tempered. The narrative constitutes Sethe and Amy as “two throw-away people” in the eyes of those who might see them, in this case, a “pateroller” patrolling the spatial boundary between slavery on one side of the river and freedom on the other. Significantly, no one does see them, and in the absence of a controlling, patriarchal gaze—one that would otherwise construct their subject positions—Sethe and Amy are able to do their work “appropriately and well” (89). In the sanctuary of this extralegal space she escapes her subjectivity as an other for the first time in her life, a subjectivity enforced by the scrutinizing gaze of a dominant society that constitutes its superiority by casting her as an other.

As she moves across the spatial boundary that separates slavery from freedom, the dominant patriarchal discourses that controlled Sethe on the Sweet Home Plantation are subsumed to the dominant cultural discourses that control her in Cincinnati. In between she exists in an extralegal, extra-social space defined and circumscribed by the natural world. In this way, spatiality in the novel denotes subversion. Sethe connects her new identity as an ex-slave subject with natural, extralegal, extra-social space, thereby demonstrating the potential in this space to subvert the white culture’s normative discourses. This natural space of the Ohio River exists beyond the immediate control of the dominant society, and it is separate from the discourses and social actions that otherwise construct reality for the subject.

If in these moments on the banks of the Ohio River Sethe enjoys a new sense of identity defined by the equality she shares with Amy, she shortly thereafter loses this

equality when she becomes reconstituted as a social subject. In this space of nature, she gains free will, self-determination, and agency, but she quickly loses them as she reenters social space on the opposite side of the river. The stark juxtaposition between spaces demonstrates the division between controlling ideologies on the one hand and self-determination on the other. On the southern, slave side of the Ohio River, but in the extra-legal space of nature, Sethe is a free subject. She must relinquish this freedom as she moves to the northern side of the river. As a slave subject constituted by physical, material power on the southern side of the river, and as a “free” subject constituted by discourses of power on the northern side, Sethe’s only moments of real freedom occur in an interregnum defined by nature. She loses this freedom when she crosses through the spatial boundaries that separate two competing political ideologies. Moving into an abolitionist state, which on paper guarantees her legal freedoms, Sethe’s subjectivity is reconstituted by northern abolitionists as a subservient African American ex-slave.

For the novel’s African American community, freedom is a reality they can achieve, experience, and perform only in those spaces that are entirely separated from the controlling ideology created by northern whites. Because the influence of this ideology reaches into every aspect of their lives, even in the private sphere of the home, individuals do not have absolute control over self-expression. The social isolation Sethe creates in the confines of her home is partially a product of the dominant culture’s ideological control that determines the relationships she and Denver establish with the rest of the African American community.³ The young “whiteboys” who pulled down the

³ Willis offers an interesting perspective on this issue when she argues that “Morrison develops the social and psychological aspects that characterize the lived experience of

fence around 124 Bluestone Road after Beloved's murder, who "yanked up the posts and smashed the gate leaving 124 desolate and exposed," mark the end of the house as a busy "way station" for the community (171-72). That Schoolteacher has the legal right to recapture Sethe and her family forces her to seek "safety with a handsaw" (172). Beloved's violent murder is a stark reminder to the rest of the African American community that white culture imposes severe limitations on their freedoms, and it is this reminder as much as the violent act itself that leads to Sethe's isolation.

African American subjects in the novel, therefore, can experience freedom only when they enter into those spaces that are completely separate from the controlling political and social spheres. Toward this end, the most important space for the African American community is located in the woods outside of the city in a place known as the Clearing. In the Clearing, the African American community gathers to sing, dance, and cry without the inhibitions placed on them by northern whites. The Clearing is "a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place" (92). Created and abandoned by a northern farmer, this place has been reclaimed by nature and is completely cut off from the social, cultural, and patriarchal spaces in which the novel's characters must otherwise define their identities. In the Clearing, individuals reconnect to material freedoms that

historical transition" (86). For the African American moving into northern, emancipated space, the first of these social and psychological aspects is "alienation" (86). This alienation, she contends, is a product of a white bourgeois society produced by a system of wage labor under capitalism (86). As such, we might analyze Sethe's extreme social isolation as product of northern hegemonic power. A condition of Sethe's emancipation, then, is her participation in the economic forces that led to the Civil War and its aftermath, one that determines her subjectivity as an isolated individual cut off from all those sources of social support that might undermine northern capitalism.

supersede their subject positions as African Americans. Compromised by the social controls imposed on them, their legal freedoms exist on paper only. As Baby Suggs leads the community into the Clearing, she declares, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs . . . Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. . . . And O my people, out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck unnoosed and straight” (93). The Clearing—the place that is separate from “out yonder”—provides them with the appropriate social and material contexts to articulate freedoms that center on the body.⁴ Focusing on their flesh (“[the whites] despise it”) their eyes (“they’d just as soon pick em out”) their hands (“those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty”), Baby Suggs asks the community to love their bodies, part by part, for in this natural space the body is free from torture and domination (93).

In the Clearing individuals become a part of a collective identity defined by the African American community: the children laugh unrestrained, the men dance in freedom, and the women cry for all the sorrows that have befallen those whom they love. After some time, the gender and age restrictions Baby Suggs places on these roles dissolve:

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until,

⁴ Girshin argues that Morrison reconnects the body to the earth and recognizes all beings as universal—an intercorporeality that recognizes universal equality among all organisms, animate or inanimate. In doing so, “Morrison constructs an ethic of corporeality as an antidote to the Western tradition based on rationalism—an ethic that is in alignment with the interests of much of the contemporary environmental justice movement” (151).

exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart. (93)

In these moments of ecstasy, politics based on gender, race, or class do not exist. Everyone has the freedom to express innate emotions related to the human experience: laughter, celebration, and sorrow. The freedom they experience in this natural space reflects a concomitant lack of freedom they experience in dominant social space where a homeless Paul D, for example, is forbidden from drinking underneath a crucifix (243), and where Baby Suggs must silence her thoughts while demonstrating her gratitude: “you got my boy and I’m all broke down,” she muses to herself, “You be renting him out to pay for me way after I’m gone to Glory” (153).

Compellingly, their experiences in the Clearing demonstrate the failure of emancipation to legislate equality in the dominant social sphere. For those who live on Bluestone Road, slavery has ceased to exist in legal terms only. This makes the social limitations placed on their subjectivity that much more severe because legal emancipation threatens the dominant culture’s position of power. In other words, white society exerts its domination more assiduously through social space because legal emancipation mitigates the control they can exert over the other. This is apparent, for example, under the conditions of employment the Bodwins force on Baby Suggs. At first, Baby Suggs is ecstatic about the possibility of earning an income: “They would pay her money every single day? Money?” (152). But instead of paying her, the Bodwins decide to maintain control over Baby Suggs by binding her livelihood to a series of chores. In return for an exhaustive list of services, “they would permit her to stay there,” and although Baby

Suggs is “sorry to see the money go,” she is “excited about a house with steps—never mind she couldn’t climb them” (153). By denying her the opportunity for fiscal gain and by determining where she will live, the Bodwins reinforce Sethe’s dependency on them.

Baby Suggs does not use her power in the natural space of the Clearing to preach religious doctrine. Rather, she avoids preaching because she recognizes that religious dogma restricts the freedom this particular space represents:

She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. ‘Here,’ she said, ‘in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard.’ (93)

Two important revelations occur in this passage. First, Baby Suggs does not condone Christian dogma and its convictions, which promise redemption and salvation to those whom society has rendered powerless. To “clean up their lives” and to “sin no more” ultimately is an act that serves the politically and fiscally dominant white society, for doing so enforces order, peace, and stability, especially in social space. If in her sermons she were to convey the message that those in her community were also the “blessed of the earth,” or the “inheriting meek,” Baby Suggs would reinforce the idea that the ex-slaves in this community could achieve salvation only on death. According to this message, their salvation would be available to them in heaven alone, which encourages the very type of resignation to a life of subordinate compliance that reinforces the power of the dominant culture. Instead, Baby Suggs provides all of the members of the community

with the agency to determine their own salvation. If they can imagine it, they can have it, which gives each member of this community power over her own life and over her own destiny. It is a power that none of them have ever had before.

Furthermore, Baby Suggs ties this power to the body, to the same material flesh that in social space denotes subservience. In the natural space of the Clearing, the individual liberates the flesh from its racial marker. Baby Suggs asks each member of the community to recognize the body not as something denoted by skin color, which is a distinction the dominant culture makes, but rather, she asks them to recognize what makes them universally human: “More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize” (94). Here, the body is the body without racially-inscribed meaning.⁵ Baby Suggs declares, “*You* got to love it. This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance; backs that need support; shoulders that need arms, strong arms I’m telling you” (93). Baby Suggs never mentions the spirit, or the soul, the intellect, or even identity itself. If she were to discuss spiritual matters as though they were separated from the physical experience of material reality, she would turn the freedom they seek into an untenable abstraction. This type of abstraction serves a dominant religious discourse whose abstract spiritual ideals sometimes require an intercessor. Baby Suggs refuses the role of spiritual intercessor and

⁵ Much of what I find fascinating about Morrison’s treatment of the body in *Beloved* has to do with her treatment of the body as a physical testimony to the violent abuse of slave culture. For Sethe, especially, the extreme physical deformity of her back acts as an unequivocal physical register of the dehumanizing abuse that the novel’s northerners want to ignore. In real ways, the physical body remains a testimony to the institutional abuses imparted by discrimination even after emancipation. Toward this end, see Patricia Yaeger’s chapter, “The Body as Testimony” in *Dirt and Desire*.

instead becomes a facilitator who empowers every individual in the community. For the community, the Clearing represents a celebration of materiality. The natural material world separated from the dominant social world is the realm of the body, and through the uninhibited expression of the material body, the community achieves both freedom and spiritual ecstasy.

The freedom the community discovers is not necessarily intrinsic to the natural space of the Clearing. Social space is not inherently restrictive and freedom is not essential to nature. It is possible that if the novel's African American community had the means to achieve spiritual ecstasy in its own church, then the Clearing would figure less prominently in the community's identity. As they are described in the narrative, however, the African American churches do not provide the same spatial freedoms found in the Clearing: "In winter and fall [Baby Suggs] carried [her heart] to AME's and Baptists, Holinesses and Sanctifieds, the Church of the Redeemer and the Redeemed. Uncalled, unrobed, unannointed, she let her great heart beat in their presence" (92). When the weather turns warm, "Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her heart to the Clearing" (92). The Clearing exists as a space in which the community finds freedom beyond the confines of the church. It is a space liberated not only from social stricture, but also from a religious ideology at least partially connected to the dominant class. Because this level of freedom is not available to the community in Cincinnati's social space or in the church's religious space, the discourses of power that define these two spaces are also responsible for bestowing material freedom on the natural space of the Clearing. The freedoms they experience

here, therefore, reflect the restrictions they experience in the confines of Cincinnati's social space.

One problem with this analysis, however, is that this particular configuration of space recreates the binary between dominant and subversive social groups, and maps that relationship onto the spaces each group occupies. By placing limitations on individual liberties in urban social space, the dominant, white culture helps constitute the Clearing as a space where the African American community seeks freedom. The performative acts that occur in the Clearing, on the other hand, reify dominant social space as a realm in which those performative acts are inhibited and proscribed. Broadly conceived, the dominant white culture and the subversive African American culture create, substantiate, and ossify the social and political power each group possesses. The more that the African American community embraces freedom in the Clearing, the more they represent themselves as an other to white northerners, thereby attenuating the social and political liberties they are guaranteed by law.

But this perspective assumes that the African American community in the novel attaches the same value to both types of space. This perspective assumes that Sethe, Paul D, Stamp Paid, Baby Suggs, and the others strive for equality in those spheres determined by the dominant white culture, and it assumes that they seek equality in the various discourses that operate in social space. These characters, however, want as little interaction with the dominant culture as possible, and they simply seek the freedom to associate with each other as a part of a human community that defines itself in opposition to the inhumanity of the northern whites. Only at the carnival are Sethe, Paul D, and Denver excited to interact with "whitepeople," and their excitement derives from the joy

of “seeing whitepeople loose,” and of “seeing the spectacle of whitefolks making a spectacle of themselves” (51). They can enjoy this spectacle only because the carnival is segregated on “Colored Thursday,” which “gave the four hundred black people in its audience thrill upon thrill upon thrill” (51). The carnival is the only social space in the novel where African Americans can interact with white northerners without having to be subservient and obsequious, and this is partly due to the fact that the white carnival operators were “a lot less than mediocre” (51). In typical social situations involving northern whites, African Americans in the novel must exhibit servile compliance at all times. When an anonymous dandy on a horse in “high Eastern saddle” castigates Paul D for drinking in front of a church, Stamp Paid agrees: “‘Yes, sir,’ said Stamp. ‘You right about that. That’s just what I come over to talk to him about. Just that’” (243). But outside these social interactions, Stamp Paid is exasperated by the horrific crimes committed against African Americans—“whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky.” Stamp Paid exclaims, “What *are* these people? You tell me, Jesus. What *are* they?” questions that capture both the violence of the slave economy and the inhumanity of those who run it (188-89).

This is the main reason why the natural space of the Clearing is critically important for the African American community: it is the one space in which they can experience a modicum of real freedom. As Paul D explains, “Grass blades, salamanders, spiders, woodpeckers, beetles, a kingdom of ants. Anything bigger wouldn’t do. A woman, a child, a brother—a big love like that would split you wide open in Alfred, Georgia. He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, *that* was freedom”

(170-71). Real freedom, which Paul D identifies as the expression of uninhibited desire, remains a rare experience for the ex-slaves. The Clearing is important because it provides the community with the space to perform identities and enact a subjectivity without restriction in ways that separate them from the dominant discourses that otherwise control them. Their flesh, their eyes, the skin on their backs, their hands, their faces, their mouths, their necks, their livers, their hearts, and all the inside parts that whites would “just as soon slop for hogs”—all the parts of the African American body are reclaimed in the Clearing.

HISTORICAL RECOVERY AND POSTMODERN NARRATIVE

Because of their relationships to the natural world, some of the novel’s African American characters, such as Baby Suggs, Sethe, Paul D, Stamp Paid, and Beloved, exert control over identity formation and identity performance despite the pressures applied by dominant social discourses. Doing so enables these characters to recover African American historical narratives that subvert the dominant ideology of northern whites because they destabilize northern ideological claims about emancipation. In the novel, this recovered form of African American narrative prioritizes the ex-slave’s experiences and perspectives and demonstrates how emancipation on paper translates to limited freedoms in practice.

The perspectives of ex-slaves in *Beloved* reveal profound levels of inequality in a society that values legal freedom. Having won the civil war, the north achieved economic domination over the south. But northerners also had to contend with racial assimilation as ex-slaves, such as those represented in *Beloved*, sought economic opportunities in

northern cities. In *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*, Amy Kaplan analyzes nineteenth and twentieth-century American imperialism for the dangers it wrought on the discourses of a dominant culture as it existed inside U.S. borders. She argues that, “the dream of imperial expansion is the nightmare of its own success, a nightmare in which movement outward into the world threatens to incorporate the foreign and dismantle the domestic sphere of the nation” (12). Nineteenth and twentieth-century imperial expansion, according to Kaplan, created a perceived need for increased homogeneity inside American borders. For example, acquiring new territories created a concomitant fear that transnational cultures would adulterate white racial purity at home (12). These fears became codified in a series of U.S. Supreme Court decisions that gave the government the authority to rule colonial territories while simultaneously denying legal rights to colonial subjects.⁶ These cases asserted that colonized nationals could achieve the American dream of legal equality only through complete cultural assimilation. In this way, Kaplan’s arguments apply to early examples of American imperialism as they relate to the slave trade and the rapid influx of African slaves on the American continent. Only when ex-slaves, for example, relinquished connections to African cultures and histories—only when they completely assumed “American” identities—could they aspire to legal equality. Kaplan underscores the inconsistency of this logic when she argues, “If the fantasy of American imperialism aspires to a borderless world where it finds its own reflection everywhere, then the fruition of this

⁶ According to the 1901 Supreme Court ruling in *Downes v. Bidwell*, Caribbean subjects were “foreign to the United States in a domestic sense,” while simultaneously living in a place that was “not a foreign country, since it was subject to the sovereignty of and was owned by the United States” (Kaplan 2).

dream shatters the coherence of national identity, as the boundaries that distinguish it from the outside world promise to collapse” (16).

In practice, then, only overt racial discrimination could maintain the dominant culture’s control in a world where imperial expansion caused spatial boundaries to collapse, which in this case was the spatial boundary between the north and the south. The characters in *Beloved* must contend with the consequences of northern expansion, which requires the subjugation of the other in order to preserve the racial purity of the dominant class. Even though Sethe successfully escapes to a free state, any rights she might have as an ex-slave living in free territory are subsumed to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850. Because this was prior to the Civil War, Sethe was threatened with re-enslavement, and she declares, “Oh no. I wasn’t going back there. I don’t care who found who. Any life but not that one. I went to jail instead” (44). In Ohio, jail is her only option, short of returning to Kentucky and the horrors of the plantation. From the perspective of a white, northern patriarchy, the assimilation of emancipated slaves into northern culture proved to be one of the more challenging consequences of the Thirteenth Amendment. To preserve a perceived racial purity that supports an unadulterated, white, national identity, ex-slave subjects who moved north had specific subject positions created for them. These subject positions preserved spatial boundaries between races that otherwise collapsed under the auspices of legally guaranteed freedoms. In other words, the north had its cake by enforcing emancipation in the south, and ate it too by enforcing racial discrimination in social spaces in the north. For Sethe, Paul D., Stamp Paid, and Baby Suggs, defining identity becomes a process of negotiating specific de facto spatial boundaries that delimit acceptable behavior, especially in social space.

These de facto spatial boundaries are crucial for my claims about imperial expansion because segregation at the local level, I argue, provides the novel's dominant culture with the means to assert racial control. Baby Suggs encounters these local spatial boundaries immediately upon acquiring her freedom. At first, she is intoxicated by the new corporeal freedom she feels after crossing the Ohio River: "Something's the matter. What's the matter? What's the matter? she asked herself. She didn't know what she looked like and was not curious. But suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, 'These hands belong to me. These *my* hands'" (148). Significantly, Baby Suggs associates her new legal status with her physical emancipation, an emancipation she locates in her body. From the knocking she felt in her chest, she "discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. Had it been there all along? This pounding thing?" (148). Despite these material freedoms, however, her new social status demands an attendant solidification of her racial identity, one that she closely associates with her slave identity: "Baby Suggs thought it was a good time to ask [Mr. Garner] something she had long wanted to know. 'Mr. Garner,' she said, 'why you call me Jenny?' (149). As her former owner, Mr. Garner explains to her that Jenny Whitlow was the name provided for her on her original bill of sale, and he opines, "'if I was you, I'd stick to Jenny Whitlow. Mrs. Baby Suggs ain't no name for a freed Negro'" (149-50). But her slave name is all that remains of an identity tied to a broken and scattered family whose surviving members she desperately wants to reunite. Acquiring her freedom, therefore, provides her with the authority to relinquish her patronizing "bill of sale name," Jenny Whitlow, in order to retain the identity she formed when she was a slave subject, one closely connected to the African American community.

The Bodwins offer Baby Suggs the use of their house at 124 Bluestone Road, but they deny her the fiscal means by which she might acquire both goods and power: “In return for laundry, some seamstress work, a little canning and so on (oh shoes, too), they would permit her to stay there. Provided she was clean. The past parcel of colored wasn’t” (153). The Bodwins bestow on her the right to occupy certain physical spaces as long as she protects the equity invested in those spaces by keeping them “clean.” Although she experiences physical freedom for the first time, Baby Suggs immediately encounters limits placed on the spatial conditions of that freedom. She has no choice but to live on Bluestone Road, a road located on the outskirts of the city that in the novel denotes those spaces occupied by the African American community. The narrator sharply contrasts the house on Bluestone Road with the Bodwin’s respectable home in the heart of the city, located “in the center of a street full of houses and trees,” where there are “two-story buildings everywhere, and walkways made of perfectly cut slats of wood” (150). Spatial configurations that reinforce racial boundaries also reinforce the center-periphery distribution of power perpetuated by dominant-subservient discourses.

These racial boundaries are at once physical, as represented by the community that lives on Bluestone Road, as well as behavioral, as represented by the identities Baby Suggs must assume when crossing from one spatial boundary to another. While on Bluestone Road, for example, Baby Suggs is a spiritual leader and healer who unifies the African American community. In the city, however, and specifically in the Bodwin’s home, Baby Suggs must be servile, compliant, and grateful. In Baby Suggs’s new life, her work as a laundress, a seamstress, a canner, and a cobbler does not translate to fiscal gain. Nor does her work translate to the ownership of property. Instead, she is permitted

to “stay” in the Bodwin’s house, provided that she keeps it clean. In overt ways, therefore, the Bodwins maintain a master-slave relationship with Baby Suggs, for they have the authority and the power to deprive her of both her livelihood and the home in which she resides. This master-slave relationship corresponds to the center-periphery spatial arrangement that reinforces Baby Suggs’s dependence on the dominant culture. Although the two communities exist separately—Bluestone Road on the periphery, and urban homes with perfect walkways in the center—the Bodwins retain authority over most aspects of Baby Suggs’s life.

The fact that she must keep “clean” not only implies behavioral norms adjudicated by a dominant culture of whites, but also that the Bodwins have the fiscal and social authority to enforce cultural mores that engender a particular identity for Baby Suggs. Baby Suggs, I claim, is a subject whose relationships to northern whites—relationships based on an economy of service—mitigate her newly acquired legal freedom, making it something of value on paper alone, despite her “heart that started beating the minute she crossed the Ohio River” (154). In the end, Baby Suggs “agreed to the situation, sorry to see the money go but excited about a house with steps—never mind she couldn’t climb them” (153).

The Bodwins reinforce what they perceive as their own white racial superiority by reestablishing spatial boundaries that maintain racial division. When she is in urban spaces, symbolized by the Bodwin’s domestic space, Baby Suggs must adopt an attitude of subservient gratitude, which differs from the attitude she adopts in the home at Bluestone Road. Nevertheless, at all times, in all constructed spaces—even on Bluestone Road—the Bodwins assert behavioral control over her. They permit her to stay in their

home, but only if she agrees to, and abides by, the conditions they set upon her: that she keep it “clean,” do their laundry, seamstress work, canning, and cobbling (152-53). As Kaplan indicates, fears about racial and social adulteration became codified in laws aimed at preserving a nascent cultural purity centered on northern politicking and military force. Because spatial boundaries between the north and the south collapsed, the Bodwins bolster spatial boundaries locally to demarcate individuals by their access to social power.

The novel’s characters value stories about Africa because they create shared, communal knowledge of a time that precedes both slavery and the hegemonic control imposed by northern whites during emancipation and reconstruction. This sounds counter-intuitive at first because the emancipation guaranteed by the Thirteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution also should have guaranteed freedom for all individuals. Although the amendment outlawed slavery and involuntary servitude, it did not, of course, guarantee equality. Thus, in *Beloved* emancipation and reconstruction become discourses that deploy a rhetoric of racial freedom while simultaneously imposing control on African American subjects. African American narratives about Africa are closely connected to the narrator’s descriptions of space and of material reality that empower individuals to perform identities outside the dominant/subversive binary. This binary otherwise binds them to an ideology that values rhetorics of emancipation.

Beloved challenges this ideology by reconnecting African American history to African culture as it existed prior to the Middle Passage. The character Sixo, a slave not born in America but captured in Africa and transported through the Middle Passage, is integral to this challenge particularly because his relationships to land and space are

markedly different from his cohorts on the Sweet Home Plantation. As Paul D remembers, “Sixo went among the trees at night. For dancing, he said, to keep his bloodlines open, he said. Privately, alone, he did it” (26). Sixo speaks a native language and wanders freely through the woods at night, crossing spatial boundaries that otherwise contain the other slaves on the plantation. He feels closely connected to the Native Americans who once occupied the land, and on one of his “night creeps,” he discovers “a deserted stone structure that Redmen used way back when they thought the land was theirs” (25). Sixo asks the stone structure’s permission to enter and acknowledges “the Redmen’s Presence” (25). Sethe’s memories of her wet nurse, Nan, a slave born in Africa, are also important because Nan retains linguistic connections to the African continent. Nan “used different words. Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now. . . . What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in” (66). Though Sethe has forgotten the language, “the message . . . was and had been there all along” (66). Sethe’s mother arrived from Africa with Nan, and “Both were taken up many times by the crew;” of all the children she had to bear, Sethe was the only one her unnamed mother kept (66). Her mother exists in Sethe’s memory as a luminous and liminal figure, a mystery every bit as profound for Sethe as the history of her race. Sethe eventually connects this mystery to the horrors of her past—her personal history—and the past becomes something she must ignore, a part of the “day’s serious work of beating back the past” (77).

***BELOVED* AND POSTMODERN STRUCTURE**

The novel's postmodern structure, which relies on multiple perspectives, a disjointed sense of time, and changes in narrative form, further destabilizes ideological and historical narratives created by the dominant culture that construct the African American subject.⁷ *Beloved* is situated in a postmodern context that produces two conflicting value systems: scientific empiricism, which asserts material power over subjects; and subjective relativism, which diminishes the agency of those same subjects.⁸ Considering these late twentieth-century values, Morrison's use of a "Euro-American novel tradition" combined with an "African American oral and literary tradition" is important (Krumholz 122). Morrison chooses a postmodern medium to challenge and destabilize how individuals and cultures construct history and meaning.

The postmodern structure of the novel, therefore, further challenges historical discourses of slavery and emancipation by questioning the meanings that the novel's dominant culture attaches to those discourses. In his analysis of the postmodern literary techniques that appear in the novel, Rafael Perez-Torres suggests that *Beloved's* historical

⁷ Toward this end, Barbara Rigney offers an interesting perspective about how the novel subverts dominant narratives that reinforce a particular view of American history. She argues, "In all of Morrison's fictions what is left unsaid is equally as important as what is stated and specified, what is felt is as significant as what is experienced, what is dreamed is as valid as what transpires in the world of 'fact.' And none of these conditions of being is rendered as opposites; there are no polarities between logic and mysticism, between real and fantastic. Rather, experience for Morrison's characters is the acceptance of a continuum, a recognition that the mind is not separate from the body nor the real separate from that which the imagination can conceive. She writes from the maternal space, which is consciousness but also the unconscious, the dream world; but those dreams have substance, teeth, and they are part of a world conception in which terms like 'fact' seem superfluous" (143-44).

⁸ See Kenneth Warren's *Black and White Strangers* for an in-depth analysis of the connections between nineteenth-century American realist fiction and racial discrimination during the reconstruction era and beyond.

narrative neither reclaims overlooked facts, nor imagines a mythical emancipated culture. Rather, he argues, “the movement in the text among the modern and premodern, the reexamination of historical signification, suggests a critical engagement with history as a narrative, a construction implicated in ideology” (183-84). The novel undermines the structures and conventions of genre that determine how readers relate to narrative forms. In other words, the novel subverts the ideology espoused by Cincinnati’s dominant white culture by subverting the narrative scaffolding that supports it.

The danger in subverting the narrative scaffolding in this way lies in the possibility that, rather than achieving a post-ideological space in which subordinate subject positions cease to exist, the novel merely replaces one ideology with another, one dominant discourse with another, or one epistemology with another.⁹ As Perez-Torres argues, “linguistic and narrative variation [in the novel] demonstrates a concern with the production of meaning of language. The text thus spins a story woven of myth that creates a patter of elaborate linguistic play” (180). The implications of this linguistic play for identity formation cannot be overstated, for the novel represents identity as both a

⁹ Fuston-White argues that *Beloved* presents a direct challenge to Eurocentric, Western constructions of identity and epistemology, and replaces Western assumptions about identity formation with those centered on the African American experience which contributes to the African American subject: “in the bounds of Enlightenment thought, neither Du Bois nor any other member of a socially marginalized group could cast himself as a thinking subject because he was necessarily constituted as Other. Enlightenment tradition alienated African Americans from knowledge and all its rewards—history, identity, language” (461). One of the ways in which the novel does this is by presenting a story “so horrific that it cannot be ignored, but it can be reasonably explained, despite its brutality” (463). Fuston-White claims that the novel “confronts head-on the intellectual tradition which has structured Western thought for centuries. By removing the center, it breaks down marginality. By subverting reason and the master’s language, it gives a strong, authoritative voice to black culture. Through its fragmented narrative, it legitimizes the decentered self” (471).

process and a product grounded to conflicting discursive representations of history, culture, and place. At stake is not just the way in which individuals form identity, but also the very epistemological structures that produce and limit the social and material variables from which identity takes shape.

Considering these epistemological structures, *Beloved* must negotiate representations of identity in ways that neither canonize nor fetishize the African American experience.¹⁰ Social subversion in the novel forms one pole of a dominant/subversive binary, thereby helping to define, support, and solidify the very representational discourses the novel's African American subjects react against. The novel's protagonists attempt to circumvent this binary by connecting African American identity, subjectivity, and history to a material realm that supersedes the social discourses that define white dominance. The novel also attempts to circumvent this binary through its postmodern form: shifts in narration between first and third person; first-person perspectives that frequently shift between characters; and, most notably, a poetic stream of consciousness that dissolves boundaries imposed on the subject.¹¹ These postmodern techniques help the characters weaken the dominant/subversive binary by demonstrating

¹⁰ The novel seems to ask, how are contemporary changes in community structure connected not just to the ways in which identities are formed, but also to the relationships individuals have to the material worlds that support them? More important, how are these changes enacted through time and in historical perspective? As Madhu Dubey argues: "In the two most influential critical paradigms that have governed African American literary studies—revolving around uplift and vernacular tradition—print literature is imbued with broad-based representative powers" (6). The uplift model connects African American literary expression to the canon that seeks to control and define it through the process of inclusion and exclusion. The vernacular model, on the other hand, fantasizes and primitivizes African Americans "as the guarantors of everything that is felt to be at risk in the postmodern era—bodily presence, palpable reality, political intentionality" (8).

¹¹ See also Patricia Waugh's *Feminine Fictions* for a more in-depth analysis of literary postmodernism in the works of contemporary American women writers.

how they redefine identity as communally shared as opposed to individually defined. Some of these postmodern structural techniques appear most conspicuously in Part Two of the narrative in which the markers of identity that separate Sethe from Beloved disappear completely. In this passage, Sethe and Beloved try to reconcile the violence Sethe used to prevent Schoolteacher from recapturing the entire family. Sethe asks, and Beloved responds:

Tell me the truth. Didn't you come from the other side?

Yes. I was on the other side.

You came back because of me?

Yes.

You rememory me?

Yes, I remember you.

You never forgot me?

Your face is mine.

Do you forgive me? Will you stay? You safe here now.

Where are the men without skin? (226)

It is important that, at this point in the novel, Beloved regains material form—that she transmogrifies from an inanimate spirit into a material body. In this passage, the question and answer format between Sethe and Beloved echoes the call-and-response narrative sung by Hi Man and Paul D's chain crew—a call-and-response that simultaneously

affirms individual vitality, solidifies community, and subverts authority.¹² In the call-and-response couplet, “You rememory me? / Yes, I remember you,” Sethe and Beloved embody two different types of memory. Sethe’s fascination with “rememory” implies that memory is an active, agential process, and not merely a passive recollection of historical events. Memories are recreated, reenacted, and recast so that their existence is contingent on the actions of the present.

Sethe’s “rememory” represents her attempt to redefine the actions of the past in the circumstances of the present, and doing so allows her to change how her past actions define her identity. Beloved, however, is a manifestation of Sethe’s past. As much as Sethe wants their lives to move beyond the events that form their history, Beloved exists in her present form because of it. That Beloved remembers Sethe and does not “rememory” her juxtaposes the immutable consequences of the past against Sethe’s desire to suppress them. The next couplet solidifies this relationship between memory, identity, and the past when Sethe asks, “You never forgot me?” to which Beloved responds, “Your face is mine.” Beyond the familial connections, Beloved’s response is almost accusatory: she exists because Sethe made her so. The consequences of Sethe’s act, be it murder or euthanasia, are inescapable, and Beloved’s return to material form affirms the continuing impact of a particular historical moment.

That Beloved calls Schoolteacher and his associates “the men without skin” is also important because, for Sethe and Beloved, white slave owners who have no skin are abstract representations of dominant social discourses. Black skin, or skin of any color, is

¹² For Paul D and the chain crew, liberation came in singing, “garbling the words so they could not be understood . . . They killed a boss [symbolically through song] so often and so completely they had to bring him back to life to pulp him one more time” (114-15).

not abstract, and in this line Beloved casts skin as a material marker of identity connected to a material body grounded to a particular space. Despite Sethe's assurances that "You safe here now," Beloved cannot feel safe until she knows confidently that the men without skin cannot reach her. Beloved's question, "Where are the men without skin?" offers forgiveness, for the question implies that Sethe, ultimately, was not responsible for Beloved's death; Beloved is safe in the company of the mother who took her life, *unless* the white slave owners have returned.

These six lines from the text are an example of one of the ways in which the novel subverts the aforementioned binary that locks the African American subject in a struggle for identity between dominant and subversive historical narratives. On the one hand, the passage participates in traditional representations of a subversive African American identity through a vernacular tradition that, as Madhu Dubey might argue, fetishizes the African American body as a racial other. On the other hand, the poetic structure of the passage, the line-by-line shift in narrative perspective, and the absence of quotation marks creates couplets that supersede the novelistic form in which they appear. The entire passage, which continues for two more pages, seems to exist in its own metaphysical space as a part of the novel in which it appears and simultaneously separate from it.

For Sethe, the passage helps define her life and life-story, and yet, it simultaneously pulls the reader into a singular present—into a meditative discourse between two characters who are individual and yet indistinct, who have voices and yet who refuse their identities. As the passage progresses to the end of the chapter, the distinction between characters becomes increasingly blurred until they are both effectively the same, and Beloved asks, "Will we smile at me?" (226). Eventually, as the

two voices intertwine and become one, the reader can no longer determine who speaks, or which identity is responsible for which line. The cumulative effect is climactic, for Sethe and Beloved refuse to define identity as something distinct and individualized, or as something determined and controllable. Instead, two African American characters allude to and speak about the horrors of slavery as well as the consequences of those horrors on identities they refuse to adopt.¹³

CONCLUSION

Beloved asks its readers to re-imagine not only the dominant discourses of emancipation, but also the very structure of those narratives. Narratives about slavery and emancipation disseminated by dominant northern whites enforce a particular way of thinking about nineteenth-century American history as cumulative, progressive, and teleological. From the victor's perspective—that is, from a northerner's perspective—the decades-long progression from slavery through emancipation and into reconstruction marks the ideological progress of a democratic experiment seeking moral and ethical

¹³ Anita Durkin argues that by privileging orality in *Beloved*, critics fail to acknowledge the importance of the novel for its impact on the canon of American literature. Durkin argues, "Morrison situates her study of American literature in the context of the irreducibility of identity, suggesting that white American authors (and critics) have constructed their works, their aesthetics, and even themselves as authors in, on, and through the uncertainties of racial identification" (541). Durkin is primarily concerned with the ways in which "white American literature constructs itself against blackness" (554). The absence of critical attention to the act of writing in the novel (and of the novel itself) is similar to the blindness suffered by American authors as they "construct themselves and their texts by the codes and conventions of exclusion" (554). Durkin constructs some fascinating arguments about identity formation here. Schoolteacher's act of writing during the rape scene overwrites the "writing" and scarification whipped into Sethe's back. The scars that emerge on her back form a text that identifies whites "as violent, brutal, all the characteristics, in essence, that schoolteacher assigns to Sethe" and that slaveholders assign to African Americans (547).

perfection. The ideology that drives this quest for moral and ethical perfection creates a narrative framework for the specific historical narratives that substantiate northern claims to moral and ethical superiority. In this particular narrative framework, northern society becomes the logical and inevitable benefactor of African American freedom, and it finds its own position as such to be irreproachable. What this analysis of *Beloved* helps destabilize is that the incontrovertible morality of legal emancipation masks institutionalized racial discrimination. The postmodern form of the novel is important, for the form exposes emancipatory narratives for the teleological foundations that support them and for the ways in which the dominant ideology constructs them.

In the novel newly freed slaves are ideologically controlled by dominant culture that determines their subject positions. If the south exerted material power over the lives of African slaves prior to emancipation, the north exerted discursive power over them after it by controlling their subject positions in all realms of dominant social space. A cumulative, progressive, and teleological narrative structure—from slavery to emancipation to assimilation—supports a racial ideology that maintains white, patriarchal dominance. *Beloved*, then, asks us not only to rethink American history as it relates to identity, but also to rethink how we *can* think about that history.

The structure of narrative in *Beloved*, therefore, is critical for my analysis of identity, subjectivity, and spatiality among the African American subjects on Bluestone Road. *Beloved* recasts the history of American slavery from the slave's perspective, thereby destabilizing white, patriarchal, and northern narratives that depict emancipation as integral to the progress of democracy, freedom, and equality. This analysis demonstrates that, in *Beloved*, maintaining racial inequality after emancipation is crucial

for the novel's dominant class to maintain Euro-American social and political power. The dominant culture in this case is composed of white northerners who support patriarchal narratives that exploit the experiences of African American slaves to buttress a history that casts American democracy as a progressive experiment whose officially stated goal is equality among all subjects. My reading of *Beloved* demonstrates how newly freed subjects do not participate in ontological fictions of identity that support the dominant culture. The spatial imagination that emerges in the novel is crucial for this project because it establishes two types of space that exist beyond the control of the dominant ideology: the space of nature in which characters negotiate identity and freedom; and the space of memory in which characters recover their own history.

CHAPTER 4: “THE DAY TO SHAPE THE DAYS UPON”: MORALITY, THE SUBJECT, AND LANGUAGE IN CORMAC MCCARTHY’S *THE ROAD*

In the previous two chapters, I examined how *Housekeeping* and *Beloved* connect identity and subject formation to gender, race, and spatiality. In *Housekeeping* and in *Beloved*, characters combat ideological control from subversive subject positions where the social production of identity is most at stake. In this chapter, I would like to shift my focus to Cormac McCarthy’s 2006 post-apocalyptic novel *The Road*, in which the collapse of social and political power causes changes in the subject positions of the novel’s central characters. If *Housekeeping* and *Beloved* endow the subversive subject with some control over identity and, therefore, power, in *The Road* social and political ideology produces and maintains a privileged subject.

For the characters in *The Road*, survival is a never-ending struggle. Except for the few remaining stragglers of the human race, Earth is devoid of life. Although the narrator never explicitly reveals the cause of society’s annihilation, the novel’s unnamed protagonists, a father and his young son (referred to as “the man” and “the boy”), encounter denuded landscapes along the road that suggest the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust.¹ Unwilling to succumb to death, the man and the boy embark on a formidable

¹ The apocalyptic event begins with “A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions,” after which “The clocks stopped at 1:17” (52). At the end of the novel, the man and the boy encounter a coastal city with “buildings vaguely askew . . . the iron armatures had softened in the heat and then reset again to leave the buildings standing out of true. The melted window glass hung frozen down the walls like icing on a cake” (272). And, as they move through this city, the protagonists encounter this scene: “Along the interstate in the distance long lines of charred and rusting cars. The raw rims of the wheels sitting in a stiff gray sludge of melted rubber, in blackened rings of wire. The incinerate corpses shrunk to the size of a child and propped on the bare springs of the

journey toward the ocean and the promises of warmer temperatures, stores of food, and communities of survivors. Pushing a shopping cart full of what meager supplies they can scavenge, the two traverse a sunless, post-apocalyptic landscape burned black and covered by ash. They avoid human contact as much as possible and witness unimaginable horrors perpetrated by roving gangs and de facto armies who find in human flesh the necessary sustenance for survival.

For the man and the boy, a metaphorical “fire,” which symbolizes moral integrity, compels them forward through a reality emptied of hope. To be one of the “good guys” is to “carry the fire,” and to abide by moral principles that dictate behavior: do no harm, do not steal, and attend to the needs of others (McCarthy 77). The novel’s narrator juxtaposes the “fire” they carry to the immoral acts of other survivors they meet on the road. From the narrator’s perspective, humanity’s fate—its benevolence, compassion, and mercy—rest upon the man and the boy and the obdurate courage by which they maintain their moral compasses. Scouring the landscape for sustenance, the two breathe air filled with swirling ash and endure frigid temperatures, snow-covered mountain passes, and freezing rain. Ever fearful for their lives and in continuous danger, the man spurs the boy onward, never resting for longer than a few days at a time, until finally they reach the coast. Once there, illness overcomes the man, forcing him to leave the boy in the care of a family of survivors who are among the Earth’s last remaining “good guys” (283).

The Road’s conclusion is somewhat optimistic about the future of humanity. After an interminable journey through unimaginable peril and unspeakable violence, the boy’s

seats” (273). The sudden, destructive intensity portrayed by these images strongly suggests that nuclear war causes global apocalypse.

salvation seems assured. Upon the death of his father, the boy joins a new family who also seem to be carrying “the fire,” and who “would talk to him sometimes about God” (286). However, barring the few other humans the man and the boy encounter on the road, life is entirely absent in this post-apocalyptic dystopia. Nothing grows. Nothing regenerates. The innumerable bodies of the dead they encounter are mummified and desiccated, but otherwise perfectly preserved, suggesting that even bacteria and parasites are extinct.² In this post-apocalyptic world where cannibalism has become a necessary means for survival, almost all traces of society and culture have disappeared, and for survivors to take moral and ethical positions actually exacerbates the danger of their situations. Society’s demise strips human behavior of many of its social and cultural referents, and without the possibility of biological renewal, the novel’s hopeful ending fades into a reality of cold lifelessness. The ocean, which symbolized hope and renewal for the man and the boy, was “Cold. Desolate. Birdless” with a “wall of smog across the horizon,” and the end of the novel suggests that, in this post-apocalyptic landscape, no life will ever regenerate (215).

Despite its simple, declarative sentences and sparse, arid dialogues, *The Road* is a dauntingly complex interrogation of subjectivity, subject formation, and materiality. Indeed, the novel raises questions about the very foundations of subjectivity by imagining what becomes of it once separated from cultural and political norms. Moreover, the novel’s protagonists demonstrate that morally inspired behavior depends on historical,

² The following is typical of the corpses the protagonists encounter on the road: “The mummied dead everywhere. The flesh cloven along the bones, the ligaments dried to tug and taut as wires. Shriveled and drawn like latterday bogfolk, their faces of boiled sheeting, the yellowed palings of their teeth” (24).

pre-apocalyptic society; the boy is born after the apocalyptic event that destroys the world, but his father inculcates a pre-apocalyptic moral code in him. He is able to understand materiality, identity, and morality solely based on the lessons imparted by his father. As such, the man's desire to revive pre-apocalyptic morality as a means for reconstructing privileged social structures and class positions fuels his quest for survival.

The novel's critics must contend, in one way or another, with this reality of cold lifelessness. Scholarly criticism of the novel is understandably limited, though, because the novel was published just six years ago. Nevertheless, McCarthy's critics have written about some of *The Road's* thematic concerns, which center on the mutability of language and meaning in a post-apocalyptic dystopia. Some critics have asked, for example, what it means to wander across an ecologically devastated planet where biodiversity exists only in the memories of those unlucky enough to survive catastrophic annihilation. Toward this end, Laura Godfrey examines the narrative tension between the father's pastoral memories of healthy, natural landscapes and the brutal devastation that overcomes those landscapes after the apocalypse. With a critical lens focused on contemporary environmental anxieties, she investigates "the ways in which the world's geographical and emotional meaning has been broken in McCarthy's text," and how the text connects pastoral memories to an American literary tradition of pastoral nostalgia (146). Modern industrial and technological advancements, and the environmental and social degradation they cause, fuel this pastoral nostalgia, Godfrey argues. For Godfrey, then, the novel is less about the terrors of a post-apocalyptic wasteland than it is an elegy for an American wilderness that has been lost.

Other critics have pursued similar analyses, and interpret the novel as a warning about society's impending disintegration. For many of these critics, society's demise is caused by a twenty-first century social and cultural ethos that privileges the individual over the community, and that values humanity, language, and reason over biodiversity, materiality, and phenomenal experience. For example, Ben de Bruyn and Stefan Skrimshire argue that the novel evokes "a mode of relating to nature that is . . . lost," an idea that is particularly compelling given the novel's representations of nature (de Bruyn 788). Upon the near-complete annihilation of society, the novel's characters establish new connections to a more primitive, pre-social world, one that had been subsumed to the rational discourses that dominate human reality. In the silence that follows cataclysmic destruction, pre-discursive relationships to the physical world emerge, grounding human survivors to a material realm that supports them. The names of things become less important than the things themselves, and survival for the novel's characters becomes more instinctual and less intellectual. This idea is not new, of course. Similar arguments emerge in David Abram's text, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, which examines the phenomenological perspectives of the planet's rapidly dwindling indigenous populations and how those perspectives clash with Western culture. And in both *Forests* and in *Gardens*, Robert Pogue Harrison argues that the future of humanity depends on our willingness to return to ancestral relationships with primeval forests, a transformation that begins with a shift in perception that helps us recognize how our self-serving interference with the natural world fails to improve upon it. What is clear for all the characters in *The Road*—for the protagonists and their enemies—is that establishing these types of ancestral relationships is important prior to the apocalypse. In *The Road*'s post-

apocalyptic reality, the natural, material world is damaged beyond the point where humans can rely on it for much support. If the novel serves as a warning to its readers, it does so by demonstrating that the values humans once attached to the pre-modern world cannot exist again in the post-apocalyptic one.

The Road, then, emerges in a peculiar, twenty-first century cultural context in which humans are complicit in the destruction of ecological systems on which they must rely for their own sustenance. The novel alludes to the suicidal danger of maintaining an environmental ethos that privileges humanity over all other forms of life. The imagery of dying nature is ubiquitous. In the “muted crankings” of migratory birds that “circle the earth as senselessly as insects trooping the rim of a bowl,” we see mirrored in anthropogenic destruction the slow demise of all life (37). In no uncertain terms, *The Road*, honest and direct, demonstrates precisely what it would be like if humans had to exist on this planet entirely alone. In its representations of survivors who have “reptilian calculations [of] cold and shifting eyes,” “gray and rotting teeth,” and bodies that are “Claggy with human flesh,” the novel seems to question whether or not the human race can redeem itself before it is too late (37). It is a clichéd question, to be sure, and one that echoes the concerns of too many environmental narratives whose titles proclaim the fears on which they stand (for example, *The End of . . .* or *The Last . . .*³), but *The Road* works hard to avoid disintegrating into yet another mournful jeremiad. More than just a story

³ See David Gessner’s *My Green Manifesto* and *Sick of Nature* in which he suggests that blind, uncritical faith in classic environmental texts and the ethics they espouse create unrealistic environmental ideals while exacerbating the general population’s aversion to nature.

about human survival, *The Road* valorizes the potential of human relationships to overcome the most demanding hardships.

The theme of redemption, and what it means for the human species to redeem itself, persists throughout the novel. In his analysis, Skrimshire presents a compelling argument defending the “redemptive” ending of the novel by questioning the concept of redemption in a post-apocalyptic context: what can redemption mean in a world whose total destruction makes history and culture completely irrevocable? Perhaps, to survive and to be redeemed in McCarthy’s post-apocalyptic world is a curse and not a gift. *The Road*, Skrimshire argues, “powerfully engages the reader with the very porous nature of redemption in the context of its post-apocalyptic environment” (2). For the boy to continue living at the end of the novel means either that he will subsist in a perpetually bleak environment whose social contexts are morally and ethically bereft, or that his survival symbolizes the first, regenerative moment of a technologically-obsessed, post-industrial culture destined to end again in an apocalyptic nightmare.⁴ For the man, the world’s destruction makes it “possible at last to see how it was made. Oceans, mountains. The ponderous counterspectacle of things ceasing to be. The sweeping waste, hydroptic and coldly secular. The silence” (274). From this “sweeping waste,” he hopes a new world will arise again, carried forward into the future through the life of the boy. Will the

⁴ Skrimshire suggests that the novel’s ending offers little hope for a regenerative future: “For the conclusion lies not in the Messiah’s entrance, with the ‘real fire’, into Jerusalem, but rather in the extension of ashen road further into what looks more like the seventh circle of Hell. The final word is not the triumph of life over death, good over evil. The final word concerns the new agonal meanings of hope in the landscape of irretrievable loss” (Skrimshire 11).

ethical codes the boy carries—the “fire” within—eventually recreate the identical social, cultural, and political circumstances that led to society’s self-destruction?

Critical analyses of *The Road* turn on this point in particular. Ecological destruction precipitated by a nuclear holocaust is not the only outcome that contributes to humanity’s demise. Culture and society and the discursive structures that shape them seem to be at least partially responsible as well. Toward this end, Sauder and McPherson argue that *The Road* presents a “negative case” that powerfully demonstrates the social construction of reality. Posing some compelling questions that arise out of the novel’s central predicament—the good of humanity versus the evil that seeks to destroy it—Sauder and McPherson ask what type of moral and ethical structure individuals can create in a world where morals and ethics have no value. In this chapter, I carry this line of reasoning further. I argue that *The Road* demonstrates how language shapes not just human perceptions of “reality,” but also our functionality in “reality.” Through the thoughts and actions of the characters as well as the narrator, the novel helps us question how language limits the entire horizon of human understanding. What is at stake for this particular novel to use language as a way to destabilize language as the primary device humans use to shape reality? If language is at least partially responsible for society’s demise in *The Road*, as my analysis of the novel suggests, how has language in the novel become so fundamental for its characters that they cannot understand reality without it? A solution to these dilemmas is available, but any solution to the problems of language in the novel requires a closer examination of the discursive nature of the human subject. This type of interrogation of the subject emerges from my analysis of *The Road*.

In the novel, formally organized, cultural, political, and legal spaces that once exerted control over the subject and its formation all cease to exist. Not only are these formal spaces physically or materially annihilated, but also they no longer retain much meaning in the memories of the characters. Most of the survivors in *The Road*, therefore, become fractured subjects who no longer identify with culturally and politically constructed spaces. For example, shorn from its cultural meaning, the space of the home transforms into a dungeon and an abattoir where humans are stored and processed as food. Desperately seeking sustenance, the man and the boy enter a basement where “Huddled against a back wall were naked people, male and female, all trying to hide, shielding their faces with their hands” (110). These prisoners await an end in the “forty gallon castiron cauldron of the kind once used for rendering hogs” (109). Human subjects in the novel, therefore, are formed not by their relationships to ideology, but rather to the material spaces they occupy as well as the demands those spaces place upon them. If the historical subject comes to an end—and by “historical” here, I mean pre-apocalyptic—the new human subject appears to the reader’s pre-apocalyptic sensibilities as morally dysfunctional at best, and at worst shockingly depraved. The narrator juxtaposes this morally dysfunctional behavior, marked by slavery, torture, rape, and cannibalism, to the moral and ethical positions adopted by the boy, whom the man perceives as humanity’s only hope and last remaining savior, a “god” who moves with “light all about him,” and who is “God’s own fire Drake” (31,172, 277).

Unlike most of the novel’s human subjects, who do whatever they must in order to survive, the protagonists possess a moral code of behavior that bears little connection to the material world in which they now exist. In fact, the moral code the man and the

boy use to make critical survival decisions actually exacerbates the dangers thrust upon them. In a reality in which the legal structures of society cease to exist, moral and ethical behavior diminishes the characters' chances for survival, putting them at greater risk of starvation, enslavement, great bodily harm, and death. My reading of the novel, then, investigates the foundation of "goodness" and morality as concepts, and destabilizes the essentialism the narrator attaches to them.

The subject positions of most of the survivors in the novel have not ceased to exist, but are reduced instead to basic, material forms. Individuals are the subjects of power exerted by other individuals, mostly through the practices of slavery and cannibalism. For them, no encompassing legal, social, or cultural systems exist to establish them as political and cultural subjects. Direct, one-to-one relationships of power established between human individuals—the instinct to kill or be killed—produces subjectivity for many of the novel's characters. The cannibal the man shoots in the woods, for example, becomes nothing more than a meal to his associates, "a pool of guts [that] looked to have been boiled" (71). This is not the case, however, for the man and the boy. For them, identity is an artifact that links them to the historical world prior to the Earth's destruction. In a world in which many ethical relationships, especially between strangers, are no longer necessary and indeed dangerous, the man and the boy maintain goodness—the "fire"—as a means for reconstructing a social, cultural, and political heritage mostly destroyed by the apocalyptic event. The fire they carry recreates an historical—that is, pre-apocalyptic—subjectivity, enforcing relationships between individuals that maintain the political power of class privilege. Originating from a privileged, pre-apocalyptic subject position, the man maintains his morality as a means to

instill in his son the social agency of his former subject position. That the narrator never questions the validity of the man and the boy's moral positions indicates how effectively political structures transmit power through unquestioned moral principles, especially because the narrator seems to share their perspectives. As readers, of course, we support the man and the boy's plight—we root for them—and we sympathize with their moral virtue. But why do we do so?

By providing food and supplies for starving strangers they encounter on the road, the man and the boy reconnect to a philanthropic moral position that is no longer relevant to other survivors. In a world of rapidly vanishing resources in which large, supportive communities no longer exist, helping survivors on the road accelerates their own demise. For them, though, the “fire,” or morally and ethically sound behavior, becomes the most important justification for continuing their journey on the road. The narrator never explicitly states why the two characters are so thoroughly invested in maintaining and perpetuating moral behavior. Implicitly, however, the narrator links moral behavior to the hope that the pre-apocalyptic world can be revived in the life of the boy. “There were times,” the narrator comments, “when [the man] sat watching the boy sleep that he would begin to sob uncontrollably but it wasn't about death. He wasn't sure what it was about but he thought it was about beauty or about goodness. Things that he'd no longer any way to think about at all” (129-30). Because the man is losing his capacity to think about beauty and goodness, both he and the narrator place the responsibility of preserving them on the boy: “You're not the one who has to worry about everything,” the man declares. “Yes I am,” the boy replies, “I am the one” (259). The social and cultural history of the world before its destruction determines the man's behavior. Pre-apocalyptic history

produces his subjectivity, and he tries to recreate and perpetuate his subject position in his son by inculcating an anachronistic moral code.

If, as I argue, morality can hinder individual and group survival by thrusting characters into situations of heightened danger, morality In *The Road*'s post-apocalyptic world is not a valuable survival tool. The man, however, clings to a moral compass as a justification not only for his own existence as an historical subject, but also for that of his young son. The man's dogged attachment to his moral code indicates how his historical—or pre-apocalyptic—subjectivity maintains its control over him and over the boy, in whom the man inculcates an historical identity. Upon closer analysis, the moral code by which they guide their behavior partially operates as a way for the man to recover and re-inhabit certain class privileges as they existed prior to the apocalypse. As the novel progresses, tension in the narrative builds between the immoral behavior required for survival and the moral positions of the protagonists, codes the narrative closely links to the subject and class positions of the characters. For the “barbaric” antagonists, violent acts are neither moral nor immoral; the material circumstances of the post-apocalyptic world necessitate violence as a means for survival. For the novel's protagonists, however, morality always already exists intrinsically. As the narrative progresses toward its climax these two moral positions resolve into a rigid binary between good and bad, at least as the man, the boy, and the narrator perceive it, and they associate intrinsic morality and goodness with the historical world, and extrinsic immorality with the post-apocalypse.

The implications of this narrative development are important, I argue, for the narrator never acknowledges that pre-apocalyptic subjectivity is socially mediated.

Instead, the narrator assumes that the value of the man's subject position is essential and innate. For example, when the narrator describes the process by which the man carefully examines the contents of his wallet before discarding it—"Some money, credit cards. His driver's license. A picture of his wife"—the narrator assumes that the wallet symbolizes the loss of a world which once had value (51). In other words, as readers, we are supposed to sympathize with the fact that the wallet no longer retains any meaning. But this assumes that the world symbolized by the contents of the wallet—a world of capital, fiscal responsibility, and heteronormative relationships—is meaningful. Because most of the man's memories manifest from the historical world, the precise way in which the narrator structures the narrative of memory in the novel reinforces the moral values the man and the boy embrace. In doing so, the novel calls attention to the value of language. The protagonists' moral positions, I argue, reveal the narrator's profound concern for the origins of language and for the meaning humans attach to it. As much as the man attempts to recover and maintain a moral position that reflects his historical subjectivity, he is powerless against the post-apocalyptic erosion of language. As language vanishes into oblivion, the reality it circumscribes follows, a fate against which the man struggles throughout the novel. Ultimately, I argue, a powerful statement emerges concerning the primacy of the material world and of material space, especially as they create the subject and inform the subject's social and political positions.

Morality, Memory, and Class

I argue that one of the reasons why an overt moral framework emerges in *The Road* is to help readers imagine what survival might be like if the social structures that

maintain civility and mutual respect suddenly vanished. The novel's powerfully vivid imagery puts the reader in the protagonists' predicament, a position from which it is easy to assume that their moral positions are justified. Confronted with horrific acts of violence perpetrated by those who seem to have no moral principles, we assume that the "fire" the man and the boy carry is innately good, perhaps even spiritually justified. For sound reasons, we might fear the novel's post-apocalyptic world, and we might adopt the man's moral stance as a way to allay those fears.

It is important, however, to set aside fears about violence to look closely at the man and the boy's moral and ethical positions, especially because the narrator assumes that these positions are justified. The man/narrator explains to the boy, "You wanted to know what the bad guys looked like. Now you know. It may happen again. My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God" (77). What makes the "bad guys" bad, however, is their opposition to the man and the boy as subjects seeking to preserve a particular moral foundation established by an unquestioned "God" upon whom the man relies for moral direction. Neither the man nor the narrator questions the origins of this moral direction. Profound images of violence help conscript the reader to adopt a sympathetic attitude toward the protagonists' ethos, and we might even argue that these images act as rhetorical devices—a pathos that obscures an underlying subject position created by the man's pre-apocalyptic class position.

The fact that the man and the boy cling so desperately to what they perceive as inviolable moral laws indicates four things: first, the values by which they govern their lives do not address the material demands of the reality they now inhabit; second, the man and the boy perceive morality as something intrinsically justified while the events of

the narrative seem to suggest the opposite—that morality develops according to changes in material circumstances; third, by carrying the symbolic fire and instilling moral value in his son, the father seeks to recover his pre-apocalyptic, historical culture; and fourth, through the medium of morality, the historical American culture that existed just prior to the apocalyptic event continues to influence the political and social subjectivity of both the man and the boy.

In a material realm of rapidly diminishing resources in which anarchy replaces law, morality has no survival value, which means that the man's moral position remains firmly attached to, and arises out of, the pre-apocalyptic world. From the man and the boy's perspective, morality exists by its own justification. However, outside the moral universe the man and the boy establish for their lives, morality and immorality cease to have any meaning whatsoever. It is only by the man's assertion of morality that the "immoral" acts of cannibals become condemnable.⁵ This is not to argue about the value of right or wrong, *per se*, but rather that the moral code the man and the boy continue to

⁵ Cannibalism is the novel's most effective rhetorical device because it arouses the greatest amount of cultural repugnance. However, because edible resources are both finite and rapidly depleting, at some point the man and the boy will necessarily have to make the choice either to eat human flesh or to cease existing. By continuing on as if they will not be faced with this choice, they maintain their delusions about the nature of survival in the world they now inhabit. Because the act of cannibalism incites revulsion (perhaps a culturally produced revulsion), it is easy to overlook the illogical position they adopt: under no circumstances would the man and the boy eat human flesh, "no matter what" (128). The history of human survival, however, is replete with incidents in which, presented with dire circumstances, individuals have consumed one another when suffering from starvation. A few notable examples: The Donner Party resorted to cannibalism in the winter of 1847 (however, recent archaeological discoveries do cast some doubt on the extent of their cannibalistic acts); Stella Maris College rugby team survivors notoriously resorted to cannibalism after being stranded in the Andes in October, 1972; more recent accounts from North Korean defectors indicate that many North Koreans resorted to cannibalism during the 1995-1997 famine that swept the country (see Struck).

heed no longer has a foundation in the world they inhabit. This moral code is produced by the man's historical, pre-apocalyptic culture.

This historically produced moral code, I argue, structures the man's desire to recreate class privileges he once enjoyed. As the man socializes his young son according to the values of the pre-apocalyptic culture, I argue that he recovers a class history he hopes to instill in the boy. Doing so will ensure the continuation of that history in the life of the boy. A long passage near the beginning of the novel defines the boundaries of the historical world the man wants to recover and incisively portrays the man's social and cultural values, especially as they relate to the pre-apocalyptic world:

There was a lake a mile from his uncle's farm where he and his uncle used to go in the fall for firewood. He sat in the back of the rowboat trailing his hand in the cold wake while his uncle bent to the oars. . . . His uncle turned the boat and shipped the oars and they drifted over the sandy shallows until the transom grated in the sand. A dead perch lolling belly up in the clear water. Yellow leaves. They left their shoes on the warm painted boards and dragged the boat up onto the beach and set out the anchor at the end of its rope. A lardcan poured with concrete with an eyebolt in the center. They walked along the shore while his uncle studied the treestumps, puffing at his pipe, a manila rope coiled over his shoulder. He picked one out and they turned it over, using the roots for leverage, until they got it half floating in the water. Trousers rolled to the knee but still they got wet. They tied the rope to a cleat at the rear of the boat and rowed back across the lake, jerking the stump slowly behind them. By

then it was already evening. Just the slow periodic rack and shuffle of the oarlocks. The lake dark glass and windowlights coming on along the shore. A radio somewhere. Neither of them had spoken a word. This was the perfect day of his childhood. This the day to shape the days upon. (12-13)

A privileged world appears in this passage that the man is desperate to recover. The passage not only locates the man's subject position in the historical world, but it also identifies his class orientation, one associated with leisure and with unlimited spatial movement. His memory, of course, may be unreliable, and the nostalgic world he creates in this particular moment might be romanticized. Nevertheless, romanticized or not, precisely how the man remembers this moment is important.

The man remembers the lake near his uncle's farm as a safe, idyllic, privileged, exclusive, and pastoral space unavailable to most individuals. The bucolic lake, located in the semi-wilderness removed from the farm and twice removed from the urban city, establishes the setting for this leisurely childhood outing. The man and his uncle turn and ship and drift over sandy shallows without urgency. The rowboat's painted boards are invitingly warm and its homemade anchor suggests both the simplicity and the ingenuity of a farm life determined by self-sufficiency. Together they move through this space freely, methodically, and without outside interruption, taking their time as they study "treestumps," carefully choosing one among many, and then rowing home slowly. As the night settles around them, their world dwindles to the methodical rhythm of oarlocks, the reassurance of distant lights, and the muffled sounds of a radio. The absurdities that frame this nostalgic memory, however, do not occur to the man. For example, the dead

perch and the yellow leaves hint at a rapidly approaching autumn. To spend this “perfect day” hunting for a stump that will only yield a few pieces of firewood suggests the wastefulness of their enterprise, especially considering how much wood they must harvest to keep a farm heated through the winter. Certainly, this day could be a day of simple rest and time well spent for an uncle and his nephew, but in this memory the hard realities of life are entirely absent.

The nostalgia that pervades the lake passage exemplifies the man’s pre-apocalyptic class position, and the narrative structure of the passage itself helps connect the reader to the man’s idyllic desires. The precise way in which the narrator presents this memory of the lake to the reader reveals the man’s subject position in the pre-apocalyptic world. This memory of a day spent at the lake is important to him because it is familial, leisurely, and exemplifies his once carefree existence. With carefully crafted images of the natural world—of birth, death, and rejuvenation—the passage illuminates the narrator’s peaceful acceptance of the cycles of life, and the narrative yokes memory, time, and nostalgia into a particular set of values. Time for the man is linear: the day proceeds in a logical, linear direction from daylight to darkness. As such, the man remembers this day as one of the best of his life, as a “day to shape the days upon,” and a mold for all future days (13). It is a foundation, or a structure, even, and the structure of this particular day matches the structure of the narrative itself: time is linear, the setting is vividly detailed, and words and phrases in the passage maintain an emotional constancy. In this way, the narrative action refuses a climax, which helps establish the nostalgic character of the passage. In the man’s memory all action must carry the same weight and value for the nostalgia to be effective. In other words, the nostalgic value of this passage

exists by virtue of the timelessness and sense of permanence it conveys in a space that is thoroughly structured and constructed by time.

These qualities reflect both his class privilege and his subject position, I argue, by virtue of the social and cultural representations *not* contained in the passage. This is not a passage marked by urbanity, by work, by race, or by particular vectors of social and political control. The man does not work in a factory, nor does he labor in his fields, and he is not constrained by socially constructed, ideological spaces. Considering the life he leads in this nostalgic moment, we must ask, who is this person? Who is he as a subject? How does his subject position construct his experiences at the lake, and are these experiences available to him by virtue of his race and gender? The man's sense of freedom becomes the leitmotif that constructs the social and cultural value of his memory. The passage draws attention to class privilege by representing his attitude of leisurely, philosophical contemplation, a class privilege the narrator attempts to mask by centering the man's contemplative attitude on the rural pastoralism of his youth. In these nostalgic moments on the lake, the man is undoubtedly free, and his freedom is not created by his material circumstances alone. He also exists as a free subject because his subjectivity is not overtly constituted by outside forces. He appears free to construct his own subject position, and the freedom he enjoys to do so reflects the class privilege afforded to him. Yes, this is a memory from his childhood, and nostalgic childhood memories generally reflect the freedoms children enjoy. However, if this was indeed "the perfect day of his childhood," and a "day to shape the days upon," then an emotional maturity pervades the man's recollection precisely because it represents freedoms the man and the boy have lost (13).

Time, too, is an important construct in the man's memory, and he wants to recover a particular relationship to time because that relationship helps define his subject position. The lake memory creates an escapist fantasy for the man that exists outside of time; it is a world in which the man and his uncle exist beyond time's control. They possess the freedom to move through space according to their own desires, and on this day, they are bound by nothing—no responsibilities at the farm, no chores, no appointments beckon their return to the world of time. For them to escape time, however, time must exist.

The narrator sharply juxtaposes this construction of time to the man's post-apocalyptic reality in which he feels as though no time exists. Hence, his sense that time is absent eliminates the possibility that he can exist freely outside of it. The man observes that without the concept of time, everything has lost meaning for him: "No lists of things to be done. The day providential to itself. The hour. There is no later. This is later" (54). What "grace and beauty" the man constructs out of "grief and ashes," he cobbles together in the life of the boy (54). Contained in the "fire" they carry is the man's vision for the future, one in which the "future" can exist again as a temporal concept.

The lake passage, which appears near the novel's beginning, reveals the man's pre-apocalyptic subject position and represents an idealized, pre-apocalyptic world he wants to recover. The man assumes that the nostalgic ideal of the lake has intrinsic value. When confronted with post-apocalyptic reality, he looks back upon his lake memory as something whose value is fundamental to human desire. Implicitly, he suggests this "day to shape the days upon" is a model for all and is something all subjects should strive for. In this way, he assumes that the value he assigns to the bucolic, pastoral lake always

already exists. The cultural values he associates with the freedom he experiences on the lake constitute his vision of the unencumbered subject position he believes once defined his identity. However, I argue that his social and culture contexts create the ideals he associates with this memory. By attaching himself to this ideal subject position—a position he defines by the freedom to move without restriction through space—the man reifies class division without overtly recognizing that he does so. That the man desires to reconstruct this world through the life of the boy indicates his subconscious desire to recreate the class structure and class privilege he once enjoyed. When the boy asks the man whether or not they will be okay, that “nothing bad is going to happen to us,” the man replies, “Yes. Because we’re carrying the fire” (83). In this example, the “fire” they carry symbolizes the world as it once existed, and he believes that his unwavering faith in the value of that world will protect them. For this reason, it is important to the man that he show the boy the house where he grew up, “where we used to have Christmas when I was a boy,” and where “On cold winter nights when the electricity was out in a storm we would sit at the fire here . . . doing our homework” (26). Christmas and homework mean nothing to the boy, and as the boy watched the man, he “watched shapes claiming him” that the man “could not see” (26). The shapes that claim the man represent memories from the former world, and the fact that he can neither see them nor understand their hold over him indicates his inability to understand the nature of his subjectivity.

The moral code the man adopts and imposes on the boy becomes the outward means by which the man reconstitutes the class privilege and subject position he had in the pre-apocalyptic world. Throughout the novel, the man and the narrator continually assert that the boy’s morality is intrinsic to the boy’s existence and is something that

derives from his godliness. For the man, the boy's hair is a "golden chalice, good to house a god," and when he looks at him, he believes that "there is no prophet in the earth's long chronicle who's not honored" by the boy's presence (75, 277). He tells Eli, the old man they meet on the road, "what if I said that he's a god" (172). When the boy insists on giving Eli some of his food, the man tells Eli, "You should thank him you know . . . I wouldn't have given you anything," implying that the morality associated with the child's god-like stature is not something the man taught the boy (173). However, these assertions about the intrinsic nature of morality only serve to mask its constructed nature. Both the man and the narrator assume that the boy's moral position is innate and is not learned, and they never acknowledge how the man instills morality in the boy. As the novel progresses, tension in the narrative builds between what the narrator presents as intrinsic moral states and extrinsic immoral behavior, codes that are closely linked to the subject and class positions of the characters. As this tension develops, we see that the demands placed on the "barbaric" antagonists by their material circumstances create their "immoral" behavior, but for the novel's messianic protagonists, morality always already exists intrinsically.

A LANGUAGE UNSTABLE, FLEETING, AND EVANESCENT

The tension between material circumstances and morality is most evident in the protagonists' encounter with the thief near the end of the novel. Upon catching and subduing the thief who had stolen all of their gear and food, the man forces the thief to remove and relinquish all of his clothing:

Standing there raw and naked, filthy, starving. Covering himself with his

hand. He was already shivering. . . . He bent and scooped up the rags in his arms and piled them on top of the shoes. He stood there holding himself. Don't do this, man.

You didn't mind doing it to us.

I'm begging you.

Papa, the boy said.

Come on. Listen to the kid.

You tried to kill us.

I'm starving, man. You'd have done the same. (257)

This marks an important moment for the man whom we perceive until now as a morally upright, sympathetic character. On the one hand, being one of the “good guys,” the man wants to preserve the “fire” he and the boy carry, which would mean that he must show mercy for the thief. On the other hand, he feels compelled to protect the boy at all costs, which in this case means eradicating those who might harm him. The man chooses the latter course of action and imposes a particularly cruel punishment on the thief: leaving him without clothes condemns him to a certain death, but not before he suffers interminably in the gathering cold. Only by the boy's insistent intervention does the man eventually return with the thief's clothes. But by then it is too late. The thief has vanished into the salt moorland, ostensibly to die. For both the thief and the man, material circumstances demand that each dispenses with morality—in order to survive, the thief must steal and the man must murder. The boy, however, upholds the “fire” they carry because he is the one who has to “worry about everything” (259). When the man completely loses his moral bearing, the narrator draws sharp attention to the boy's own

moral compass, which seems here to manifest from nothing.

But what is this “everything” about which the boy must worry? No world remains that can be lost, their circumstances cannot be more dire, and the only comfort they have derives from the relationship they share with each other. The “everything” he worries about suggests a larger purpose for his life, larger than his father’s, whose only purpose is to protect his son. Whatever the boy’s purpose is, it is served and defined by his moral bearing, and the boy’s attitude indicates that he feels responsible for recreating a world in which his morals have value. This world, I have argued, would reestablish the man’s subject position as it existed prior to the apocalypse, but the fact that the boy’s moral position is sometimes represented as something innate suggests that the protagonists also perceive their subject positions as innate. My reasoning here is deductive: if the narrator represents the boy’s morality as innate, and if that morality recreates a pre-apocalyptic subject position, then the pre-apocalyptic subject position must also be innate. This is one of the unexamined assumptions on which the novel rests, and it is how the protagonists advance the values of a particular social class without recognizing that they do so.

As the man attempts to recover a moral position that reflects his historical, pre-apocalyptic subjectivity, he is powerless against the post-apocalyptic erosion of language. When language vanishes into oblivion, reality follows, and the growing instability of language fuels the man’s desperate attempts to maintain his subject position. Because the man recognizes the instability of language and because he mourns its irretrievable and inevitable loss, he betrays his concern for the fate of meaning and discourse. The man’s desperate attempts to preserve a morally functional world not only reveal his concern for his subjectivity, but also his fear for the gradual, post-apocalyptic loss of language and its

material referents. The man uses morality as a rationalizing foundation for his desire to recreate the historical world. In other words, perhaps he cares less about morality than he does about the historical world from which his moral position arises. What he fears most about the loss of that world is the loss of language and, more important, what the loss of language implies about human existence. After trudging through another night's darkness, sodden from the rain and trying to make the boy as comfortable as possible, the man muses to himself silently:

He tried to think of something to say but he could not. He'd had this feeling before, beyond the numbness and the dull despair. The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible entities. The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true. More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve heat. In time to wink out forever. (88-89)

This paragraph conflates the perceptions held by a semi-omniscient narrator with those held by the man, making it difficult for the reader to determine whose vision is attached to which perspective. The paragraph begins with the perspective of the narrator, who relates the man's cognitive processes. Quickly, however, the narrative telescopes into the man's direct thoughts, and verb tenses shift in almost every phrase thereafter. By the paragraph's conclusion, the two voices are so closely entwined that they seem to be one, singular voice.

This passage predicts certain consequences of the loss of terrestrial biodiversity,

and it presents an argument about the relationship between material diversity and linguistic meaning. The narrator places meaning and language squarely upon materiality. The human imagination, the narrator suggests, is no match for the material world on which the sign relies for its referents. As those referents disappear, so too do the words and meanings attached to them. Though the narrator never explicitly addresses this issue, the logical extension of this argument limits the human capacity to imagine, define, and think about reality. Language certainly manipulates human perceptions of material reality, the narrator suggests, but it cannot exist without that material reality.

For the man, the “sacred idiom” is now “shorn of its referents” because those material referents have ceased to exist (89). The names of colors, birds, and certain types of food lose all meaning because, in the material reality that now surrounds the man, these objects have become extinct. Compellingly, oblivion swallows truth as well, or at least what one believed to be true. Without the material world as an anchor for human claims about “truth,” or the truth of the world, the essential nature of the universe—that which exists beyond language and beyond apprehension—appears. The gradual annihilation of material objects strips what remains of the material world of the delusions humans attach to it through language and discursive structure. As such, this passage introduces a thematic association between materiality and meaning that the narrative sustains throughout and that becomes increasingly more important as the novel’s plot progresses toward its conclusion. *The Road*, in other words, presents an argument for the primacy of the material world. The material world not only determines the relationships between material objects and language, the material world also determines the particular meanings attached to that language.

How so? We find examples of this as the man's relationship to language becomes increasingly unstable. The man cannot reconstitute the material species that have become extinct. He cannot breathe life into the referents now forever lost. As language and meaning dwindle and subside, the discursive meanings the man attaches to material space lose context, and the absolute reality of the material world appears before him:

He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it. (130)

As much as he confronts the "absolute truth of the world," he remains unable to accept it on its own terms simply because doing so means relinquishing forever the pre-apocalyptic world he values. The borrowed "time," "world," and "eyes" refer to the historical world from which his subjectivity derives. The language he uses to describe this world (which, at times, is the language used by the semi-omniscient narrator operating through his consciousness) helps him maintain an emotional attachment to his former life that is wholly dependent on the world as it once was. He has "rich dreams . . . he was loathe to wake from" of "things no longer known in the world" (131). His memories of the boy's mother are infused with nostalgic longing; he remembers her "crossing the lawn toward the house in the early morning in a thin rose gown that clung to her breasts" (131). Counterpoised to these memories, the earth's trajectory through space is "cold" and "relentless" (130). But these are relative terms. The former depends

on human interpretations of temperature relative to the body. The latter depends upon human interpretations of time; for the turning of the earth to be relentless, its opposite must exist, if only conceptually. The implacable darkness and the “crushing black vacuum of the universe” are pertinent only to a human subject intimately familiar with the power of language to mask this “absolute truth of the world” (130).

The destruction of the earth and the destruction of language are only meaningful to a subject who is familiar with what they were before they were destroyed. This, then, constitutes the primary fear that drives the man: what will become of meaning when humans have forgotten the existence of meaning? If the man is helpless in the face of material extinction, if he cannot breathe life into birds that no longer exist, his only recourse is to reestablish the word’s and the world’s meanings, and he does so through the life of his son. This is why he forges a vision of the future that foists pre-apocalyptic morality onto the post-apocalyptic present. The man’s obsession with his memories of the historical past fuels his need to prevent meaning from disappearing into oblivion. The narrator indicates that “the boy knew what he knew,” that forever is not a long time, but rather “no time at all,” a world with neither a beginning nor an end in which time does not exist and has no meaning (28). Forever also means that nothing has ever existed: no material world, no humans, no language, and no meaning, at least as humans discursively understand them, for these things can only exist in time. Forever, then, is the oblivion the man fears.

The man solidifies his orientation toward materiality and language in a passage in which he meditates on the ruins of a charred library. In this scene, the man presents an argument about the relationship between language and materiality, demonstrating how

the material world precedes the meaning humans impose on language:

Years later he'd stood in the charred ruins of a library where blackened books lay in pools of water. Shelves tipped over. Some rage at the lies arranged in their thousands row on row. He picked up one of the books and thumbed through the heavy bloated pages. *He'd not have thought the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come. It surprised him. That the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation.* He let the book fall and took a last look around and made his way out into the cold gray light. (italics mine, 187)

At the end of the world, the passage suggests, individuals are suddenly confronted by the material reality of life on earth, one in which language reveals the facades and fantasies by which individuals discursively construct both society and identity. They must suffer the loss of the linguistic facades centered on—and so deeply symbolized by—the book with its “lies arranged in their thousands, row on row.”

If the material world determines meaning, why does the rage exist against the lies in their thousands arranged row upon row? A partial answer exists in the man's surprise at discovering that “the value of the smallest thing predicated on a world to come,” suggesting that the post-apocalyptic world that develops always already eradicates the value of the book. He was surprised, in other words, because he believed that the value of the smallest thing—the book—should have been intrinsic to the book itself. The man is surprised that the abstract value of language, materially symbolized by the printed word, does not supersede the material conditions in which it exists. The social and cultural worlds that produced the book also determined its value. When the material world no

longer supports the cultural world, and culture subsequently collapses, so too collapses the value of the book. The same is true for language. Language, he discovers, depends on the material world for its value. If, as I've argued, the man portrays the boy's morality as innate, he also asserts that such innate meaning is impossible, and that all meaning is relative to or dependent on the material circumstances in which it exists. What, then, do the man's competing assertions about meaning and morality reveal about those unexamined assumptions that allow the protagonists to advance the values of a particular social class without overtly understanding their own motivations?

The man is surprised by his discovery "that the space which these things occupied was itself an expectation," in this case, society's expectation. By "things," he refers to the ruined books in the library, but also more abstractly to the value of concepts, whatever they may be. He was surprised to discover that the value of the books was "predicated on a world to come," that their ultimate value was determined not by their existence, but rather by the world in which they exist. Their value, in other words, is determined by the post-apocalyptic world, and in that world, their value diminishes as language disappears. Furthermore, prior to the apocalypse, the man believed that the actual space the books occupy—their very existence as meaningful concepts—determined the world he expected to arise. Put another way, the space the book (or the object, or the concept) occupies determines human expectations for a future world that will support, reify, buttress, or reinforce the meanings we believe these objects hold. From this passage, I contend that an argument emerges about human assumptions: the man assumes that objects have innate meaning and that the world will form itself in such a way to reinforce that meaning. From the man's perspective, the opposite is true, for the post-apocalyptic world,

stripped of meaning, reveals to him that the material world determines the meaning humans attach to those objects that occupy space. For the man, agency lies in the material world, and it is against this revelation that he fights so ardently. It is against this revelation that he wants to rebuild the historical world as he knew it, to restore social and cultural value as a function of language. As a subject produced by pre-apocalyptic ideologies about language and society, the man must contend with the gradual, but total, erosion of his identity in a world where the relationship between the word and the material object is permanently broken. Eventually, he fears, language will become nothing more than illegible black marks printed on an object whose cultural meaning is forever indecipherable.

CONCLUSION

At its heart, is *The Road* a reactionary text that professes morals and values and supports a particular political and social order? Is it a hegemonic text that supports a particular bourgeois orientation toward society and culture? At their core, the moral values the boy adopts—do no harm; help one another; value the kindness of strangers—do not seem bourgeois or hegemonic. The man and the boy adopt this moral code, however, because it reanimates an historical world in which morality determines the subject position of individuals in relationship to other social actors. The man's memory of this historical world loosely delineates the subject position he once enjoyed. It is important, then, to ask why the narrator associates "goodness" with the man and his son. Why does the narrator present them as "good guys" who are "carrying the fire" through a world of darkness, evil, and barbarity (77, 83)? For the casual reader, the man's moral

code is justifiable, especially in contrast to the horrific acts perpetrated by the other. However, the moral code they adopt also acts a screen that masks the man's underlying motivation to restore class privileges that once defined his subjectivity. The man's subjectivity, I argue, requires the subjugation of the "barbaric" other as the other existed in pre-apocalyptic society. His subjectivity, therefore, is partly produced by the other.

Curiously, none of the survivors the man and the boy encounter on the journey join together in large social groups or work collectively to increase their chances for survival. The narrative presents many examples of small bands of humans working together, but these bands are limited in both size and purpose, and most never exceed a handful of individuals. The narrative, then, never fully resolves the following questions: why does society fail to reorganize itself? Why are the man and the boy the only travelers on the road who seem invested in rebuilding society? Given the altruistic capacity of human culture, larger-scale social organization would benefit the few remaining survivors. The man upholds the altruistic option in principle while foregoing it in practice because he advocates for a particular social and class structure that operates according to the same methodology. That is, he advocates for a social structure that privileges class over altruism. (This is the same methodology that appears in *Beloved* when northerners guarantee Baby Suggs's freedom while simultaneously producing her as a subservient, unequal, subject.)

In this way, the text establishes a binary between the "good guys" who carry the fire and who are thoroughly invested in reestablishing moral and ethical relationships, and the "bad guys" who refuse social organization and whose physically dominating positions permit them to perform horrific acts of violence against other human subjects:

They began to come upon from time to time small cairns of rock by the roadside. They were signs in gypsy language, lost patterns. The first he'd seen in some while, common in the north, leading out of the looted and exhausted cities, hopeless messages to loved ones lost and dead. By then all stores of food had given out and murder was everywhere upon the land.

(181)

The “lost patterns” contained within the rock cairns represent the disintegration of communicative language into its most primitive forms. The messages contained by a dying language are “hopeless”; communicative moments are perpetually disrupted, and yet they are still interpretable by those survivors who encounter them as symbols of society that dies when language dies.

What delineates the boundaries of hell for the man is not the destruction of language per se, but rather that he remembers its unity. He laments the loss of colors and birds because he can remember them. The language that describes the historical world lives only as long as he does, and it dies as he exhales his final breath. This is a sad realization for the man, and these statements also declare something about the way the reader uses language to circumscribe reality, for the same relationships apply. In other words, human knowledge of the self is as much determined by what is not present in material reality as what is, and the individual knows nothing of a former world that at one time might have composed reality. Human identity, human subjectivity, and human awareness of space depend on the material constructs that surround the subject. However, identity and subjectivity are what they are partly because of what they are not. The man's awareness of “reality” and of his subject position drives his desperate concern for his

son's future. What will the boy become and what will constitute his identity in a world in which language has lost both referent and meaning?

These issues emerge from the novel, I argue, on a discursive level, and the narrative contains a profound concern for how language manipulates reality and the human subject. Desperately fearing its absence, the man works hard to positively assert meaning when meaning has ceased to exist, and he does so by assigning priority to a set of irrelevant, pre-apocalyptic morals. The man preserves the boy's life through unimaginable danger, but whether or not he arms the boy with the best survival strategies after the man's death is questionable. In doing so, the narrative draws attention to its own contradictions: the man assumes that culture and a society have intrinsic value, while simultaneously demonstrating precisely how culture and society *produce* that value. The novel is simultaneously postmodern and reactionary. As such, it reflects the dilemma many contemporary American authors confront in a twenty-first century culture when they must rely on a postmodern fragmentation of meaning and purpose to reassert both meaning and purpose.

CONCLUSION

In this project, I closely examined three postmodern American novels for how they approach identity performance and subject formation in relation to space and materiality. At the outset, I posed several questions about the postmodern American novel as a viable medium for exploring political and social controls imposed on the fictional subject. Specifically, how does the American postmodern novel mediate between dominant and oppressed subjects, the material worlds in which those subjects locate themselves, and the various discourses of power that enforce relationships between them? If representations of space and the material world account for subjectivity and identity in ways that remain critically unexplored, how effectively do these representations destabilize and disrupt political and social control in the novel? Do the relationships characters establish to space help them destabilize their subject positions by shifting identity formation to a material realm beyond social space? Or do their non-normative subject positions merely reinforce the social and political systems that wield power over them?

My arguments about space, materiality, and non-normative subjectivity benefit from novels that approach these topics from different perspectives. In *Housekeeping*, for example, the non-normative subject subverts discourses of power at the expense of her social and political agency. Indeed, this relationship between subversion and agency is central to Ruth's search for a viable subject position that strengthens her self-determination and her desire for freedom. Ruth's experiences in the wilderness empower her identity and her freedom because the space of wilderness in the novel disrupts networks of social and political power that wield control over her. Furthermore, because

the natural world empowers Ruth's and Sylvie's alternative subjectivities, they allow nature to gradually consume those highly symbolic spaces in the home that otherwise signify conformity to an idealized gender performance. Separated from the judgments of her peers and from the gender expectations associated with certain social spaces, Ruth performs an identity otherwise proscribed by the novel's characters (and by Lucille especially).

However, this performance comes at a cost. The more that Ruth adopts Sylvie's transient subjectivity, the more she relinquishes what little social agency she retains. For Ruth, the loss of social agency is not terribly disturbing because agency was never something to which she had much access. But in the larger scope of the novel's thematic concerns, this loss of agency is troubling because it mitigates Ruth's ability to help others achieve similar levels of freedom. Instead, her non-normative subject position, a subject position partially forged in non-social space, strengthens the power society wields over other subjects. Lucille, for example, uses Ruth's subversive identity as a means to solidify her resolve to fit in with society and to conform to its expectations. In this way, Fingerbone benefits—and actually helps produce—Ruth's subversive subject position. As a transient subject, she is a symbolic pariah, one whose seemingly self-centered individuality serves as an overt warning to all other social actors about the supposed dangers that lie beyond social space. Indeed, transience might be the only subject position Ruth can adopt at the novel's conclusion. Without any social or political agency, and subjected to those laws that seek to redefine her as a ward of Fingerbone's society, Ruth's only option is to move continually through space.

Sethe and the characters in *Beloved* do not have the same freedom of unrestricted movement that Ruth experiences at the end of *Housekeeping*. Although transience is a crucial component of Morrison's novel, especially for those characters who seek freedom from slavery, the novel's African American subjects adopt more sedentary lifestyles by virtue of their relationships to northern white culture. In *Housekeeping*, Ruth and Sylvie subvert social discourses of power and control as one-time members of the dominant culture, and they contend with a society that wants to return them to normative modes of gender-based behavior. In *Beloved*, conversely, Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Paul D contend with discourses of power that control them but that also prevent them from acquiring agency in the dominant culture. The possibility of participating in dominant social discourse exists for Ruth and Sylvie should they choose to conform to normative expectations. Sethe, Baby Suggs, and Paul D do not have the same option, mostly due to racial discrimination. The characters in *Beloved*, therefore, respond quite differently than the characters in *Housekeeping* to those social forces that produce the subject and that influence identity performance.

For *Beloved*'s African American subjects, a unified community is pivotal for their ability to subvert the dominant culture. If Baby Suggs's sermons in the Clearing demonstrate the collective power available to the community in their efforts to acquire agency, Sethe symbolizes the danger of individualism. The isolation she imposes on herself and on Denver yields very different results from the isolation Sylvie and Ruth adopt in *Housekeeping*. One reason for this contrast lies in the radical differences in spatial mobility available to the characters in each of these novels. As an ostracized subject, Sethe has no access to the African American community, and as a minority

subject she has no access to white society. Without agency in either social realm, Sethe predominantly confines herself to her home on Bluestone Road, and, unlike *Housekeeping's* Ruth, she finds no solace in wide-ranging spatial movement through the natural world that surrounds her. The natural world is important for the community, however, and each African American subject finds power in the communal identity they express collectively in the Clearing. The power of this communal identity stands in marked contrast to the impotency Sethe experiences as an isolated individual.

The novel's postmodern narrative form further complicates these issues. A profusion of individual voices combined with a semi-omniscient narrator construct a rich, temporally unstable narrative about slavery, history, and the African American subject. Much like the agency associated with community for the novel's characters, unity in the novel derives from multiple shifting viewpoints that collectively circumscribe the historical and psychological experiences of southern Ohio's ex-slaves. *Beloved*, however, redresses those aspects of literary postmodernism that define humanity, culture, and art as meaningless. It is through *Beloved's* postmodern structure—through this profusion of fractured voices and subjects, and through its juxtaposition of forms and disjointed time—that the novel creates new meaning for the African American identity. The novel ties this identity to the experiences characters share in those social and material spaces that lie outside the realm of control exerted by the Cincinnati's northern white culture.

Two very different subversive strategies drive the narratives in *Housekeeping* and in *Beloved*. *The Road* presents a third case or third perspective on identity and subject formation in relation to space and materiality. As in *Housekeeping* and *Beloved*, transience and spatial mobility in *The Road* are critical features of an individual's search

for agency and identity. However, unlike Ruth or Sethe, the man in *The Road* occupies a culturally empowered subject position that he desperately wants to retain. The man's pre-apocalyptic subject position provides both meaning and purpose, and without this subject position he struggles to form a post-apocalyptic identity. The narrator presents the man and the boy in a strongly sympathetic tone that helps portray their moral positions as virtually irreproachable. That neither the narrator nor the man questions these moral positions reveals the extent to which social and cultural perspectives of subjectivity, agency, identity, and power are thoroughly ingrained in the individual subject. The novel implicitly questions the systems of belief that undergird the protagonists' moral stance. As such, *The Road* presents a strong case for the fact that a culturally inculcated identity produces the social and political subject. This analysis of *The Road*, therefore, provides an interesting foil to both *Housekeeping* and *Beloved*, for *The Road* undermines the possibility that the subject can exert even a modicum of control over his or her subjectivity. The effort to acquire agency as an individual subject derives from those social and political forces that produce the subject. This analysis of the novel suggests that the contrasting struggles that seek either to undermine dominant discourses of power or to restore them do nothing but strengthen the control those discourses exert over the individual.

These conclusions stand somewhat at odds with each other. In *Housekeeping*, only the individual can subvert discourses of power. In *Beloved*, community is paramount for social and political subversion. *The Road* implicitly demonstrates how all normative and non-normative subjects are produced by power and that social and political subversion, therefore, is not possible. Considering the realm of postmodern American

fiction, how viable are these narrative projects in their efforts to delineate and understand how the subject has changed—or how our understanding of the subject has changed—in the previous forty years? In the novel, how effective is the effort to explore non-normative subjectivity and to return to the individual subject some level of agency, either through individual identity performance or through communal relationships?

One of the difficult—but unsurprising—conclusions to emerge from the analyses of these three texts is that normative subject positions exist because of the non-normative subject's subversive attempts to acquire agency and identity. In other words, the socially and politically conforming subject exists because of the non-conforming, subversive subject, and vice versa. Each position informs and creates the other, and neither of these positions, it seems, has much power. The struggle for agency, for freedom, and for power seems to produce their opposites. The very struggle—the effort itself—to develop one's identity and to exert marginal control over one's subject position signifies that the individual has little control over identity and subjectivity, otherwise there would be no need to strive for them. From this perspective, identity has nothing to do with self-expression and in fact has nothing to do with the self whatsoever. Rather, identity is a measure of social and political control. Any expression of identity, any performance, be it normative or subversive, merely indicates the precise way in which the subject has been produced by various social, cultural, and political discourses of power.

These are unsettling conclusions, and perhaps they do not withstand a more rigorous analysis. After all, *Beloved* concludes as Sethe's daughter Denver takes her first tentative steps out of social isolation and finds comfort and hope in the community that surrounds her on Bluestone Road. She seems to assume some control over her life, and if

her actions do not change her identity, they certainly will alter her subject position in both the African American community and in the dominant social sphere. Furthermore, the argument could be made that Ruth and Sylvie choose transience at the end of *Housekeeping* not because they have to but because they *want* to. They prefer it. Any discomfort the reader feels surrounding their transience reflects the reader's subject position more than it reflects Ruth's or Sylvie's. Moreover, *The Road* concludes with a subject who has hope for the future simply because he does not have one. Temporal relationships reflect subjectivity as well, and with no time, no future, and no father the boy seems to have the potential, at least, to exert his own independence. In larger historical contexts beyond the novel, subversive subjects have certainly caused fundamental changes in society and have helped increase the power available to, and wielded by, marginalized individuals from historically oppressed classes.

However, of grave concern to some American postmodern writers in the last forty years is the degree to which these advances in individual liberty, gender equality, and racial tolerance ultimately augment and intensify the power wielded by the dominant class. This is why these three novels are so important for an analysis of novelistic representations of identity, materiality, and subjectivity. The protagonists in each of these novels originate from opposing cultural, racial, and gendered social positions; each novel illuminates, values, and attempts to understand the individual subject and his or her relationship to history, culture, society, materiality, and space; each novel assigns different values to the individual's struggle for independence, free-will, and self-determination; and each one of these fictional subjects is tied to representations of transience and spatial movement. In fact, representations of transience and spatiality

unify these three very different postmodern novels, because transience for each novel is the means by which the subject disrupts discourses of power.

At the outset of this project, I created an over-simplified binary between fictional representations of normative and non-normative subjects and their relationships to space and materiality. This binary elicited the following question: if identity is a reflection of the discourses of power that create it, is it possible for the individual subject to establish relationships to the material world that lie outside those discourses, and if so, can these relationships to the material world empower the subject in her effort to exert some measure of control over identity and identity performance? Put another way, is it possible for the subject to exist outside those discourses that produce subjectivity? The analyses that arise from this project don't necessarily bring us closer to specific answers, but they do help us to see the elaborate complexity of the topic. The over-simplified binary I established at the outset must be revised to incorporate a proliferation of subject positions produced by relationships to power that are themselves determined by history, materiality, race, gender, and cultural and temporal contexts. Some American postmodern novels, I contend, are concerned with the fate of the individual subject, and although they do not necessarily offer "solutions," per se, the American postmodern novel does identify and delineate the breadth and scope of the subject's ever-changing relationships to power. Part warning and part exploration, these novels point to contemporary changes in how subjects are produced, and they also mark changes in how we understand subjectivity and identity as concepts. Of primary concern among American authors are the ways in which power is taken away from subjects at the very moment when they seem to acquire more of it. Future analyses, therefore, should examine more closely American postmodern

novels written by and about marginalized individuals to circumscribe the precise ways that fictional subjects exert control over identity and how that control ultimately is taken away.

For this project, I have focused on representations of subjectivity and identity in the American novel, and I have limited my inquiry to those literary concerns that arise out of it. However, moving outward from the novel and from literary study in general, the analyses I present in this project suggest some ways we might think differently about identity and subjectivity as closely related theories about lived human experience. Particularly compelling is the suggestion that emerges from my analysis of *The Road* that identity and subjectivity are discursively produced by systems of social and cultural power. If this claim is true, then the language used in the production of identity is always already mapped onto an external, material world whose composition can never be known directly. That is, language distorts human perceptions of the material world in ways that reinforce structures of language, and those structures of language buttress those systems of power that discursively determine identity. My suggestion here is that a gap persists between the material, non-human world and the language humans use to represent, understand, and describe that world. The inconsistencies inherent in human discursive definitions of identity mask the very structures of power that influence identity formation. In other words, the concept of identity determines how humans think about and understand identity.

The concluding passages of *The Road* suggest that, for the novel's characters, the material world becomes increasingly inaccessible through language. Language persists, of course, and the characters use language to communicate with one another. However, as

various elements of the material world disappear—colors, birds, and “The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion”—the function of language as a means to control perception begins to wane (McCarthy 88). Arguably, this is precisely what most terrifies the man and the boy: a material world presents itself that exists beyond discursive comprehension, one that obliterates the discursive stability that once connected identity to subject formation and to social and political systems of power. At the outset of this project, I was curious to know to what degree subjects can map identity formation onto an external world separated from the language used to describe that world. How, I wondered, do subjects balance this particular mapping against other subjects and against the social and political structures that create them? My analyses in this project suggest that mapping identity onto an external world separated from language is impossible. For the subject to be intelligible not only to the social worlds through which she moves, but also to herself, she must “produce” her own subjectivity through a system of complex relationships that bind together agency, identity, history, memory, society, culture, and language. What my analysis of *The Road* suggests is that, without language, subjectivity and identity cannot exist as functions of history or of the past.

I began this project with the assertion that work on subjectivity has undervalued the material world, and work on place has undervalued subjectivity. By bridging the gap between the two, I argued that we might posit new conceptualizations of subjectivity while reassessing the value of the material world and of place within the American novel. My analyses do not support my initial hypothesis that the external world operates as a discrete material and temporal staging area in which the subject can resist the social and political systems of power that inform and control identity. In other words, human

subjects cannot establish non-discursive relationships to the material world that empower their efforts to resist dominant discourses of power. However, these analyses do suggest that human relationships to the external, material world and to space and spatiality can complicate and destabilize power by providing subjects with a richer contextual understanding of their identities are formed.

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