Strange Dwellings: Inhabiting American Literary Modernism

by

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Abstract

This dissertation probes the relationship between sexuality and the home in American literature from the early twentieth century, asserting forms of dwelling that challenge the values given to itinerancy and vagrancy in criticism on queer modernism. Within queer theory, which since its inception has prescribed an anti-social, anti-normative position, scholars have mined modernist texts for their transgressive potential. Indeed, modernist texts frequently exhibit precisely the qualities that American culture negatively associates with queerness: urbanism, exile, dislocation, disorientation, loss, and infertility. However, I argue that narratives of queerness that privilege anti-social behaviour risk occluding more granular discussions of the murky relationships that queer subjects have with ordinariness and normativity. The basic premise of “Strange Dwellings” is, therefore, that sexuality in American modernism indexes a range of concomitant concerns and anxieties, including a pervasive fascination with home. Affective ambivalence permeates many of the texts in this project, which simultaneously express profound nostalgia and strain toward new aesthetic, social, and political realities. While the home may find its form in the house, home is ultimately an affective state, I conclude, rather than a material space. I re-direct our attention to the ways in which modernist texts refuse to assimilate
to traditional social and literary formations, and yet strive to recuperate and transform them.

“Strange Dwellings” examines instantiations of the queer home in texts by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Willa Cather, and James Agee. While my aims extend well beyond those of a revisionist project, I deliberately return to well-trodden critical ground in order to consider modernism’s fraught relationship to the peripatetic. Rather than pursuing questions of recovery or canonicity, I contend that the authors I take up envision their place within literary history by conceiving of *place* in physical terms. Just as their texts come to constitute forms of housing, writing serves as an act of homemaking. These authors mobilize form itself as a dwelling space, recasting the home as a site of endurance. In doing so, they treat writing as a practice with the capacity to aesthetically re-imagine the social.
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We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*
Introduction

“You are all a lost generation,” Gertrude Stein once famously remarked to Ernest Hemingway, and, in doing so, neatly summed up the sense of displacement that permeated the particular cultural moment we have come to refer to as high modernism. Stein’s comment also urges an important question: if Hemingway’s generation has been lost, then what would it mean for it to be found? History tells us that his generation did indeed suffer immense loss, but Stein uses “lost” here as an adjective, grammatically figuring Hemingway’s generation as a missing object that haunts the present only through its absence. According to Stein, the “lost generation” experiences an absent presence as both a subject that has lost, and as an object that has been lost.

“Lost,” of course, also retains a different meaning, one that is rooted more in space than in time. To be “lost” is a form of phenomenological disorientation. Time is touted as modernism’s great fixation yet in the texts that I herein examine, time is often explored through space, or rendered secondary to it. This dissertation challenges the values given to itinerancy and vagrancy in modernism and queer theory, instead positing a notion of dwelling that may at first blush appear normative or even conservative but which in point of fact constitutes what I term recuperative sociality. Specifically, I probe the relationship between sexuality and the home in American literature from the early twentieth century, a period in which rapid socioeconomic, political, and technological changes were undermining the stability of the concept of home.

While my aims extend well beyond those of a revisionist project, I am deliberately returning to well-trodden critical ground in order to consider what we have overlooked in our rush to champion the negative and the peripatetic. Rather than pursuing questions of recovery or canonicity, I contend that the authors I take up envision their place within literary history by

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1 Hemingway attributes this line to Stein in his epigraph to The Sun Also Rises (Scribner, 2006).
conceiving of place in physical terms. Just as the text comes to constitute a form of housing, writing serves as an act of homemaking.

Within queer theory, which since its inception has prescribed an anti-social, anti-normative position, scholars have mined modernist texts for their transgressive potential. Indeed, modernist texts frequently exhibit precisely the negative qualities that American culture associates with queerness: urbanism, exile, dislocation, disorientation, loss, and infertility. However, I argue that narratives of queerness that privilege abjection and transience risk occluding more granular discussions of the murky relationships that queer subjects have with ordinariness and normativity. “Radical antinormativity throws a lot of babies out with the bathwater,” Biddy Martin wisely contended over twenty years ago. “An enormous fear of ordinariness or normalcy results in superficial accounts of the complex imbrication of sexuality with other aspects of social and psychic life,” she observes, “and far too little attention to the dilemmas of average people that we also are” (Martin 123). By honing in on those mundane “dilemmas” that are too often relegated to the sidelines, or overlooked entirely, I am ultimately asking what is lost when we lose sight of the powerful forms of quotidian world-making that are occurring not off in imaginary or utopian spaces, but right under our very noses in the actual and textual realities that we inhabit.

“Strange Dwellings” attends to critically neglected instantiations of queer domesticity in texts by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Willa Cather, and James Agee. These authors mobilize form itself as a dwelling space, recasting the home as a site of endurance. In doing so, they treat writing as a practice with the capacity to re-imagine the social. Rather than attempt a comprehensive historicist account of the American home during the early twentieth century, a project that would surely be too broad, dry, and nebulous to succeed, I am instead exploring affinities between modernism and the present. In
this sense, I am performing a method of lateral reading that is inspired by Kathryn Bond Stockton’s notion of “growing sideways.” While Stockton develops her theory through the figure of the queer child, I extrapolate upon its implications for understanding the slow creep of history. Modernist texts are in many ways queer children, uncertain about the future; affectively, they evoke a “frightening, heightened sense of growing up toward a question mark” (Stockton 3). Following Heather Love, I am at the same time careful to avoid manipulating these texts to fulfill my own desire that they anticipate and address the present. Just as the queer child, even nominally, is brought into the world by its adult self in a “retrospective” and “backward birth” (158) because society deems the child ontologically incapable of possessing a sexuality, contemporary scholars are often invested in coercing historical texts into a teleological relationship to the present. Yet by always already expecting to discover within these texts a particular narrative, we lose sight of the myriad other things those texts are and do.

**Homemaking**

The basic premise of this dissertation is that reductive narratives of American modernism that only find value in the liberatory potential of the abject and the transient overlook the complex ways in which sexuality indexes a range of concomitant concerns and anxieties, including a pervasive fascination with dwelling. Since Foucault, the inherited maxim has been that society likes to believe that the nineteenth century gave rise to a particular form of “repression,” that of the “imperial prude.” “Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home.” This schema of sexual repression took as its ideal social form “the legitimate and procreative couple.” Assuming the throne from which it “enforced the norm, safeguarded the truth, and reserved the right to speak while retaining the principle of secrecy,” this couple took as

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2 See *Feeling Backward.*
its castle the family house. At “the heart of every household” sat a “single locus of sexuality” that was socially acceptable precisely because “it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents’ bedroom” (Foucault, *History* 3). All other sexual practices, and the spaces in which they were enacted, carried with them the stigma of sterility and the “taint of abnormality” (4). While Foucault famously proceeds to challenge this logic of repression by arguing that this “prude” society, in its obsession with controlling sexuality, was in fact completely obsessed with sex, he maintains a fundamental link between the heteronormative and the domestic. Insomuch as modernism is conceived of as a moment of rupture from the Victorian past, it supposedly registers a breaking away from this model of the heteronormative home. Yet identification with deviancy does not actually result in liberation, from a Foucauldian perspective; rather, those who try to subvert the system are merely folded back into it.

While some modernists lamented the loss of conventional family structures and their spatial analogues, many saw this displacement from the domestic as an opportunity to revision the idea of the home. Both, however, acknowledged a sense of disconnection from the past, and it is this sense of epistemological rupture that cleared space for the imagination. As I detail in my first chapter, F. Scott Fitzgerald forges a connection between the Jazz Age and sexuality, arguing that “[t]he word jazz in its progress toward respectability has meant first sex, then dancing, then music. It is associated with a state of nervous stimulation, not unlike that of big cities behind the lines of war” (Fitzgerald, “Echoes” 16). In “The Crack-Up,” he takes the image of a cracked plate as a trope for his mental breakdown, but as Fitzgerald was wont to do, he also teases out parallels between personal and national history. Writing in the middle of the Great Depression, he confesses: “I had been drawing on resources that I did not possess, [I] had been mortgaging myself physically and spiritually up to the hilt” (“The Crack-Up” 72). In her essay “Character in Modern Fiction,” Virginia Woolf contends, “in or about December 1910, human character
changed. I am not saying that one went out, as one might into a garden, and there saw that a rose had flowered, or that a hen had laid an egg. The change was not sudden and definite like that. But a change there was, nevertheless; and, since one must be arbitrary, let us date it about the year 1910” (Woolf 38). Similarly, Willa Cather prefaces Not Under Forty with the assertion that “[t]he world broke in two in 1922 or thereabouts, and the persons and prejudices recalled in these sketches slid back into yesterday’s seven thousand years” (v). For many writers, even the most begrudging, this sensation of no longer being tethered to the past produced a troubling feeling of disorientation, but it also inspired a sense of opportunity. Following Ezra Pound’s well-known injunction to “make it new” (265), modernism became a moment in which it became possible to step outside of the home and create new forms of public sociality. Literature played a crucial role in imagining what those new forms might look like; etymologically, poetry emerges out of poesies, Greek for “to make.” It tried, quite literally, to remake the world.

The dissolution of the Victorian home, however, produced anxiety even for those writers who maintained a fraught relationship to it. Affective ambivalence permeates many of the texts in this project, which simultaneously express profound nostalgia and strain toward new aesthetic, social, and political realities. Modernist representations of sexuality are bound up in this temporal tension, perhaps best captured by Sartre’s comparison of Faulkner to “a man sitting in an open-topped car and looking backwards” (109). “As to Faulkner’s heroes,” Sartre continues, “they never look ahead. They face backwards as the car carries them along” (115). This temporal backwardness often finds its analogue in what Joseph Frank calls the “space-logic” (15) of modernist texts; if time cannot be experienced coherently then perhaps space can be, these texts seem to suggest. Far from fully celebrating cosmopolitan mobility, the texts on which I focus disclose feelings of nostalgia that mitigate America’s obsession with novelty. While newness, self-invention, drifting, migration, transience, and transgression hold a crucial place in the
American cultural imaginary, these texts display vexation at chronic change. Novelty figures prominently, both formally and thematically, but largely as the object of critique.

“Regional modernism,” in its generic preoccupation with the home’s spatial dimensions, is especially interested in dwelling. Following Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse, I understand region less as a term of geographical determinism and more as discourse or a mode of analysis, a vantage point within the network of power relations that provides a location for critique and resistance” (11). Regionalism provides an “aesthetic of cognitive mapping,” Fredric Jameson’s corrective to spatiotemporal disorientation, which “seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system” (54). While Jameson addresses a postmodern context, his strategy is already at work, I want suggest, in modernist texts that turn to space to work through modernity.

It is through the local, for instance, that Hemingway’s recurring protagonist, Nick Adams, comes to understand the larger “network of power relations” (11) in which he is implicated. While Hemingway is typically associated with cosmopolitan European expatriate communities, his Michigan stories, which he largely wrote while living in Paris, reflect his intense nostalgia for the Midwest. “Big Two-Hearted River” begins as Nick steps off the train into a town that has been decimated by fire. Disoriented, he finds a “burned-over stretch of hillside, where he had expected to find the scattered houses of the town.” However, “the river was there” (Hemingway, In Our Time 133), a trope for life’s one certainty: the change time brings. As Heraclitus’s adage goes, “No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it is not the same river and he is not the same man.” “Part 1” details how he sets up his camp with great precision:

3 For more on regional modernism, see Herring’s Another Country as well as the special issue he edited of Modern Fiction Studies (55.1) dedicated to the topic.
Already there was something mysterious and homelike. Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent. He had not been unhappy all day. This was different though. Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. It had been a hard trip. He was very tired. That was done. He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there, in the good place. He was in his home where he had made it. (139)

Nick adapts over the course of the story, like the grasshoppers that he notes have turned black in response to the fire; here, he has “settled” into a homely feeling through spatial order. Fishing mimics this order in “Part 2” as Nick regains his virility and his appetite: “Nick stood up on the log, holding his rod, the landing net hanging heavy, then stepped into the water and splashed ashore.” Newly confident, Nick declares he will eventually “fish the swamp,” a dark, “tragic” (156) stretch of river that connects to Nick’s sexuality through the phallic symbol of the erect rod. Nick’s retreat “back to camp” confirms his successful re-orientation.

The grand obsession of modernism, or so the story goes, is the creation of order in a crumbling world. There are two obvious tendencies that this obsession spurred, which render themselves most evident in poetry. One is to look backward towards the past in search of renewable models, a move exemplified by *The Waste Land*, in which Eliot’s obscure references scold the Western reader into a sense of shame and grief over what the poem identifies to be a profound cultural loss of cognition. In a poem that famously begins by decrying society’s perverse inability to regenerate--“April is the cruellest month” (Eliot 1)--the speaker fears that civilization has already reached its apex; hence, “these fragments I have shored against my
ruins” (431). Eliot’s modernism is melancholic; it fails to grieve. By contrast, myriad poets rebuked the nihilism of *The Waste Land*, chasing in their poems the promise of cultural redemption. Turning Eliot’s trope of spring on its head, William Carlos Williams writes in *Spring and All*, “It is spring. That is to say, it is approaching THE BEGINNING.” Williams’s text signals a renewed faith in spring’s cyclical ability to mark a “beginning”; the end of spring brings not sadness, but summer: “suddenly it is at an end. THE WORLD IS NEW” (10).

Yet perhaps Williams and Eliot share a common project after all. Despite their disparate poetics, both authors treat the text as a space of reorientation. While *The Waste Land* is bleakly nihilistic, and *Spring and All* almost manically optimistic, the two texts take up Eliot’s question: “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/ Out of this stony rubbish” (19-20)? Writing becomes, in Sara Ahmed’s words, a “homing device” (9). The texts that I examine are radical in the original sense of the word: they make new the root. The home is rooted but not static, it affords a different kind of growth than transgressive mobility. The pith of my argument is that these texts opt to remake the home rather than abandon it—rather than throw it out with the bathwater, to return to Martin’s formulation—and in doing so take the home and “make it queer.” While I take up texts and authors whose relationship to dwelling has been queered by social marginalization, however, I argue that they are not fundamentally different from their contemporaries. Rather, in a culture of displacement, both real and perceived, a queer epistemology heralded not only deviancy and exclusion, but also new kinds of language, feeling, and knowing that radically expanded literature’s capacity to imagine.

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4 Seth Moglen employs a similar rhetoric in *Mourning Modernity*, in which he differentiates between melancholic texts, and those that are capable of mourning. Interestingly, Freud’s sense of mourning enables us to consider how “mournful” modernists literally use place to re-place the lost object—epistemological certainty, civilization “as we know it”—and thus formulate new object relations. Indeed, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud himself invokes a spatial analogy, likening the ruins of Ancient Rome to the human psyche, an analogy in which he discusses Rome as both a site of physical dwelling and a trope, albeit an imperfect one, for “a psychical entity” (8) in “historical sequence” (9).
We Other Butlerians

This dissertation began as a response to what I perceived to be a disjuncture between the complex ways in which desire structures ordinary life and the ways in which queer theory (as distinct from queer studies or gay and lesbian studies) has approached the ordinary. Since its inception, queer theory has been caught up in what José Munoz calls “the romance of the negative” (11). Negativity is only one word for this mode of thought; it has proliferated a veritable grab bag of terms. In 1993, Judith Butler suggested that queerness should be “never fully owned, but always and only redeployed, twisted, queered from a prior usage and in the direction of urgent and expanding political purposes” (19). Over two decades on, however, polemics such as Lee Edelman’s No Future have “twisted” queerness into its own foreclosure: a shutting down of possibility through reductive prescriptivism. Worse, while Edelman’s universalizing of queerness as an anti-identity performs inclusivity, it actually works to erase and minimize the real power differentials and desires that exist within “queer.” Claims made by queer theorists who advocate a turn away from the social risk doing violence to those who have only ever possessed a tenuous grasp on the social. With Jay Prosser, I would posit it is tantamount to “critical perversity” (49) to encourage abjected subjects to embrace their abjection, and would assert that the untenable quality of radical negativity is most fully evident in the lives of those who contend with intersectional forms of oppression.

My project is fundamentally opposed to the implication of the negative thesis that individuals sacrifice material and psychic safety in order to attempt to live transgression. If, in Edelman’s words, “queerness attains its ethical value precisely insofar as it accedes to that place [of negativity], accepting its figural status as resistance to the viability of the social while insisting on the inextricability of such resistance from every social structure” (3), then my project asks what it would look like to critique the social and yet reconcile oneself to living within it.
Edelman offers a vital critique of “reproductive futurism,” but his prescriptivism, in an argument that he acknowledges affords no praxis, cuts to the very heart of what is wrong with queer negativity: it is uninhabitable. It is an “impossible project” (4) that provides no feasible material or psychological model by which we might live. Worse, it excludes individuals who lack the physical or mental endurance to constantly assume an anti-social homelessness. Such a stance “locates transgressive value in that which makes the subject’s real life most unsafe” (Prosser 275). In turning away from this impossible position, I turn toward the home as a site of possibility.

Butler’s vision of queerness as a signifier with no fixed referent at first glance appears to be antithetical to my call for a queer politics of dwelling, yet I am in fact putting her logic to good use by imagining how one might “redeploy” queer theory in order to honour and attend to the struggle to craft a viable life within the social. Over the lifespan of this project, I have in a sense been engaged in a parallel project. Just as the authors I examine reflected extensively on their relationship to literary history, I have been pondering how my own project inhabits the critical landscape. A dissertation takes time, and during the years that I have been engaged in this work queer theory has continued to transmute. New conversations have begun to develop around the place of negativity within the field, which have helped shape my thinking. Munoz’s *Cruising Utopia*, for example, offers an insightful response to *No Future* by drawing attention to the importance of the future to queer people of colour. In his intervention, Munoz cautions us against thinking the social outside of race, and helps re-direct our focus to the important work that is being done on intersectional forms of queerness within a range of scholarly communities. While Munoz wants to “understand queerness itself as being filled with the intention to be lost” (72), however, I am more interested in how queerness opens up spaces of retrieval, discovery, and arrival. Others, such as Lauren Berlant and Michael Snediker, have explored the contours of
queer optimism, while “queer ordinariness,” which served as the title of a panel at the 2013 Modernist Studies Association, has popped up in the work of Love and others. The February 2015 special issue of *differences*, on “Queer Theory Without Anti-Normativity,” also bears close resemblance to my own agenda. Along with the editors, Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson, I ask what queer theory might look like without a commitment to the anti-normative, and share their concern that much has been lost in the shift to treating anti-normativity as a political stance rather than as a site of critical inquiry.⁵

While I pick up on these efforts to think beyond the negative, I do not swear allegiance to one particular rhetorical or discursive camp. From the outset, this project has been more informed by trans studies, a field in which *home* is rhetorically pervasive and which puts pressure on queer theory’s valorization of displacement. It is, Prosser reminds us, “because transsexual narratives originate in an unhomely relation to sexual difference that makes publicly claiming that ‘outside’ home such a fraud” (203-4). There are few identifiable transsexual characters within modernist literature, and I have been careful to avoid treating transsexuality figuratively in this dissertation. Nevertheless, I am interested in the epistemological insights trans studies offers into the importance of *feeling* at home. In his paradigmatic study of transsexual autobiography, Prosser invokes a “politics of home” that would “not disavow the value of belonging as the basis for livable identity” (204). It is in this vein that I pursue a “politics of home” that finds its realization in the space in which the figurative and the literal meet. Modernist texts similarly index a moment of transition in which the future looks radically

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different from the past. What we might interpret as a moment of negativity also marks an important site of transformation in which authors reaffirmed their investment in old forms.

In the chapters that follow, I am attuned to the ways in which the authors and characters that I read are themselves reading the social. My method is reparative; I am trying to think with these figures rather than about them.\(^6\) Rather than uncovering something radically new, I am affecting a shift in emphasis. In other words, despite my critique of a queer politics of negativity, I have taken pains to avoid being polemical. While the polemic has its place, I am here more interested in participating in the kind of weak theory that constitutes what Mark Seltzer identifies as “the incrementalist turn” (727) in the Humanities. This critical gravitation towards micro change and subtle reorientation echoes the perspectival shifts that the texts that I explore enact. Thus, in thinking with these texts, I am necessarily slowing down and attending to the granular textures of everyday life. I am also pushing back against the assumption implicit in historicism that, as Rita Felski notes, context “will invariably trump the claims of the individual text, knowing it far better than it can ever know itself” (574). While modernism emerged out of a historical context, I am more attuned to how these texts understand their relationship to their current moment than I am to how that historical moment shaped those texts. “Theory’s affinity for a modernist rhetoric of marginality and negativity,” Felski claims, “prevents us from seeing that a text’s sociability—that is, its embedding in numerous networks and its reliance on multiple mediators—is not an attrition, diminution, or co-option of its agency, but the very precondition of it” (589). My focus on textual sociality constitutes both a reconsideration of the relationship between sexuality and the social, and a statement on why and how we read the past. What is it, I

\(^6\) See Conclusion for a more sustained engagement with Sedgwick’s theory of paranoid reading.
ask, that spurs us to read certain texts and not others, to identify with some authors and characters over, and at times even at the expense of, others?

My method in this project is thus bound up in affect. I am unabashedly guided by my pleasure in discovering in the past fellow homebodies, not along identitarian lines but along affective ones. As much as I am attempting to think with these texts, I am also trying feeling with (rather than about) them. Affect theory has been particularly useful in helping me to think beyond oppositional politics, and to attain a better understanding of the relationship between the aesthetic, the psychic and the political. Berlant’s beautifully generative Cruel Optimism is similarly interested in how and why one might continue to maintain affective attachments that fail to register as positive. Berlant fixates on toxic or impossible attachments while I focus on the transvaluation of the home, but we share an interest in the ways by which one might live within an “impasse.” What happens, Berlant queries, when we conceive of an impasse as a “holding pattern” that provides us with a kind of “temporary housing” (Cruel Optimism 4)? I am also compelled by the work of Kathleen Stewart, who in her ethnographic approach to the ordinary resists the impulse to try to fully comprehend her objects of study or to fossilize them within a master narrative. Instead, she attempts “to fashion some form of address that is adequate to their form: to find something to say about ordinary affects by performing some of the intensity and texture that makes them habitable and animate.” Ordinary life is idiosyncratic, “a reeling present…composed out of heterogeneous and noncoherent singularities” (Stewart 4). Sometimes subtle shifts in familial relations—the use of the correct pronoun, a Christmas invitation extended to a partner—can feel like a seismic shift, one that fuels optimism, or at the very least enables tangled attachments to endure.

Within queer theory, perhaps the greatest example of the mode of thought that I am pursuing is Ann Cvetkovich’s Depression, in which she experiments with different genres of
writing in order to think through her affective relationship to home. Reflecting on the personal memoir she includes at the start of the book, Cvetkovich realizes: “my narrative seemed to be telling me that a connection to where you are from, especially if it’s been denied to you, is crucial; if anything, naturalization covers over the hard process of making home somewhere on the planet.” The contradiction she identifies in feeling nostalgia for places that suffer “histories of genocide and displacement” (Cvetkovich, Depression 81) speaks to the complexity of honouring one’s affective yearning for home when home is a fraught and contested space. Yet it is precisely because home holds space for these complexities, Cvetkovich suggests, that it also serves as a productive opportunity for self-reflection and growth. In the chapters that follow, I attend to the “structure of feelings” (R. Williams 133) that pulls characters toward home rather than away from it. In doing so, I do not intend to overlook the processes of settler-colonialism that have been enacted on and exacted from those sites, nor the patriarchal histories that have confined women to the domestic, and thus complicated their agential relationship to the home. Quite the opposite, I am interested in why the home remains an important site of refuge both despite and in response to these histories.

**Forms of Dwelling**

While my emphasis in this project is more on sexuality than on gender, the home is an undeniably gendered space that carries with it for many women real connotations of violence, oppression, and boredom. The physical house itself can be a form that traps and immobilizes. Over the past century, feminism has made crucial interventions into discourses on the domestic, both within literature and theory. As I explore in my chapter on Stein, women’s writing from the early twentieth century often discloses a sense of ambivalence towards the home. It is impossible to truly appreciate this ambivalence without considering the gendered history of the separate spheres that accompanied the increased distinction between private and public in the nineteenth
century, and the rise of the nuclear family that Foucault so well documents. Yet what these
women writers resist, I contend, is not necessarily the home itself, or at least not the idea of the
home, but rather the toxic forms of compulsive domesticity that strip women of an agential
relationship to the domestic and bar them from full participation in the public sphere.

In Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*, for instance, Edna Pontellier eventually abandons her
marital home and takes up residence in the adjacent pigeon house. There, she takes great
pleasure in the domestic, even hosting a dinner party to warm her new living space. Her
frustration in the text is not exactly with the home, or even with marriage, but with the cultural
logic that treats marriage as a kind of business transaction and expects her to flawlessly perform
the role of “a mother-woman.” Such women “idolized their children, worshiped their husbands,
and esteemed it a holy privilege to efface themselves as individuals and grow wings as
ministering angels” (Chopin 51). Ultimately, Edna asserts agency through suicide, the one
individual act that her society affords her; the expansive space of the sea stands in jarring
juxtaposition to the dark, cramped Pontellier house. She refuses to be a victim of “the Cult of
Domesticity,” which Amy Kaplan rightly argues “links the familial household to the nation but
also imagines both in opposition to everything else outside the geographic and conceptual border
of home” (581). Notable texts from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries rebel against
the Liberal treatment of the domestic as a synecdoche of the nation, and thus as the privileged
site of national production through the biological reproduction of the (white, middle-class,
heterosexual) family.7

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7 Progressive Era feminist texts that treat the heterosexual home as an oppressive environment for women include Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *Women and Economics* (1890); *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903); *What Diantha Did* (1910); *Herland* (1915); Jane Addams’s *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910); Edith Wharton’s *Ethan Frome* (1911).
Part of the intervention that I am making, however, is to suggest that home is not reducible to the domestic. While the home may find its form in the house, home is more an affective state than a material space. During modernism, we see a remarkable number of texts by or about queer women who revitalize the home by teasing out the affective and phenomenological connections between house and home. In my second chapter, I hone in on Stein’s treatment of wandering and settling, but it would have been equally generative to look at Willa Cather’s rhetorical fixation on home and dwelling in her novels, especially *The Professor’s House* and *My Ántonia*, or at Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, or Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*. Lesbians, of course, did not have sole purchase on rethinking gender and the home. Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is exceptional in its ability to untangle the relationships between race, gender, sexuality, and the domestic in a heterosexual context, and to envision in lieu of the Liberal domestic sphere a new form of home that is predicated on collective solidarity, gender equality, and love.

Perhaps no text better exemplifies queer modernist homesickness than Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*, long queer theory’s teacher’s pet. More has been written on gender and sexuality in this novel than I could possibly do justice to in this introduction, but I will say this: *Nightwood* employs sexuality in the service of addressing loss and longing, the desire to know and be known, relationality and its failures. In *Nightwood*, sexual difference merely produces variations of the same kind of endless human suffering that is the inevitable result of sexual desire in a world in which no one seems capable of ever getting what she wants. Certain readers might think they bear nothing in common with this cast of freaks, only to realize a profound sense of identification. Based loosely on Barnes’s own heartbreaking split with her lover Thelma Wood,

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8 For an interesting transhistorical study of the house in American fiction, specifically in relation to architecture, see Chandler.
the novel explores the trauma that Robin Vote inflicts on her lovers through her perpetual abandonment of them. Robin is the centre of a text in which “the centre cannot hold” (Yeats 3). Like a jilted lover, the reader struggles to keep up with her, to anticipate her next move, and to make sense of the devastation she creates. The text is fascinated with non-normative bodies and orientations—Jane Marcus calls it a “prose poem of abjection” (231)—yet it refuses to dwell in difference. In fact, to read the text in terms of difference is to misread it. Rather, Nightwood is about broader forms of social dislocation that queerness renders visible.

The text asks the reader to identify with the pain of its characters at the same time that it foregrounds the untenable nature of abjection. So many of its characters paradoxically want to free themselves from the stifling nature of identity only to wander within the social, deeply homesick. Even as Robin’s self-expulsion from a stifling domestic, familial context frees her up for radically new forms of attachment, she agonizes over her impossible desire to arrive home; in Robin, “there was this tragic longing to be kept, knowing herself astray” (Barnes 63). Thus, the novel is preoccupied with the dislocations and bad affects that sex instigates. Nightwood rejects the normative institutions and narrative modes that pathologize its characters, but it also recognizes the impossibility of escaping the social. In this sense, Nora Flood is the most important character, for she must discern how to inhabit a damaged present. A deeply historical figure, Nora has inherited narratives that no longer serve her; as in The Waste Land, they persist as sheer fragments. If Barnes offers her characters one hope for dwelling, it is that one can develop new, more sustainable narratives, ones that articulate grief with surgical precision, and in doing so realize that one does not dwell alone.

It is ultimately through this conscious and self-reflexive relationship to dwelling that one arrives at dwelling as a practice. In “Being, Dwelling, Thinking,” Heidegger contemplates the relationship between dwelling and building, distinguishing between those who die (the
“mortals”) and those who do not (the “divinities”). Dwelling, in his sense, transcends shelter, yet provides a useful template for a sustained meditation on the home. Heidegger looks at dwelling in several ways: architecturally, etymologically, and philosophically. “We attain dwelling, so it seems, only by means of building” (Heidegger 145). Nevertheless, he cautions, “not every building is a dwelling.” Here, his logic is akin to that of Gaston Bachelard, whose *The Poetics of Space* takes pains to differentiate between house and home. Yet while house and home are not the same, the house gives us a form for thinking through the home. For Heidegger, the home is where the literal and the figurative meet. “The real dwelling plight lies in this,” he argues, “that mortals ever search anew for the nature of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell.” How does one authentically dwell, then? By thinking. “What if man's homelessness consisted in this,” Heidegger demands, “that man still does not even think of the real plight of dwelling as the plight? Yet as soon as man gives thought to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer” (161). This formulation productively comprehends of dwelling beyond the material, which is not to say that the material is irrelevant, but rather that in conceiving of the home in terms other than a physical house, we find new language for understanding what the home is and does. That language, I argue, is the language of affect. It is in the strange commingling of affect and form that the home finds its shape in these texts.

The chapters that follow are organized thematically rather than chronologically; though the texts that I cover span from 1909 to 1936, my inquiries are not grounded in rigid historical specificity. Just as Woolf imagined the world changed irrevocably in 1910, I begin with a year—1925—that arguably marks the apex of American modernism. In my first chapter, I examine how

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9 For Bachelard, the house and home are not incommensurate. Far from it, the house is the material space onto which we project our daydreams and fantasies. Thus, it is not enough to merely provide a geographic or ethnographic account of the house. Rather, it is through phenomenology that we can begin to understand the psychic and affective forces that transform the house into a home, which is inextricable from the imagination (4).
F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* takes as its central theme the larger problem that the dissertation confronts: the cleavage of the material structure of the house from the affective realm of home. While Jay Gatsby is nearly metonymic with his impressive mansion, the house is eerily unlived in. Desiring home in and through his ex-lover Daisy, but unable to arrive at that place, he opts for the “cruel optimism” of toxic proximity. By contrast, Nick Carraway, who I read as a closeted homosexual, finds solace in his regional attachments to his hometown. Nick’s queerness registers as a form of regional homesickness that causes him to feel “both inside and outside at once,” eventually prompting his return to the Midwest. Putting to use Henry James’s “house of fiction,” I argue that *Gatsby* offers the act of writing, and self-authorship in particular, as a strategy for redressing homelessness. A frame narrative, the text constitutes a narrative architecture within which Nick houses both Gatsby, who lives on through the book’s endurance, and himself. By playing with the trope of the novel as a house, Fitzgerald offers a metacommentary on literature’s potential to contend with nostalgia and to stage scenes of arrival and assembly.

In my second chapter, I hone in on Gertrude Stein’s concept of “settled language,” a phrase that she employed to describe English, which Americans inherited but obviously did not invent, and which she thus tasked herself with transforming. Uniting recent queer work on affect and temporality with feminist critiques of the private sphere, I argue that Stein privileges domestic attachment as a valuable mode through which to bind oneself to the social. I posit that Stein’s domestic contentment with Alice B. Toklas paradoxically enables her to wander more freely on the level of grammar and style in *Tender Buttons* than in her previous texts. *Tender Buttons* envisions home as a space that accommodates non-normative forms of coupling and belonging, and literally imagines new forms and orders. In turning to poetry in order to represent a world of domestic delight, Stein reorients her relationship to the social through language, at
once constructing a queer home and yet employing a notoriously difficult style in order to shield
its inhabitants from the reader’s gaze.

A focus on poetry recurs in my third chapter, in which I read together fantasies of
belonging in the Harlem Renaissance that are typically viewed as hostile or antithetical to one
another. Starting with Wallace Thurman’s satirical novel *Infants of the Spring*, and then turning
to the poetry and poetics of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, I consider the centrality of
houses in black writing from this period in the context of the long history of African-American
displacement. All three of these writers examine queerness and race in intersectional ways in
their texts. Cullen’s poems in particular challenge visual logics of race and queerness,
championing new forms of poetic privacy. Enamored of classical poetry, Cullen demonstrates
how marginalized writers might inhabit conventional poetic forms. Paying particular attention to
formal and geographical allegiances, I argue that Harlem Renaissance authors who were divided
by their political agendas and stylistic investments shared a common longing for home.

The dissertation culminates in a chapter on James Agee’s representation of the domestic
realities of three poor white tenant families in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Agee’s text,
which meditates on the ethics of documentary form, takes as its central fixation the Gudger
family. I argue that Agee turns their house into an archive, envisioning himself as an archivist.
Reading Agee’s treatment of this archive through Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, I suggest that Agee
challenges the patriarchal and heteronormative logic of the scripture from which the book’s title
is derived. Recognizing both the impossibility of accurately representing a world that would
forever remain unintelligible to him, and the fraught ethics of trying to penetrate it, Agee instead
positions himself as a failed documentarian. Putting pressure on the critical tendency to reduce
Agee’s understanding of family to the heteronormative, I argue that *Famous Men* is highly
attuned to sexual difference. The text attributes the tenants’ damaged relationship to sexuality to
the tenant system, which treats heterosexual reproduction as a form of labour. In this vein, the
text imagines their redemption not as a retrieval of the normative, but rather, as the rediscovery
of sexual pleasure. For Agee, sexuality is fundamentally spiritual, and its spiritual value lies not
in its social utility but rather in its revelation of the sanctity of the individual and of the home in
which he or she dwells.

There is a degree to which a critic, like an author, is fundamentally an archivist. We
gather together and arrange in new and often odd formations our idiosyncratic object choices.
Even in instances in which he or she feigns objectivity, or leans on the cold shoulder of history,
the critic’s choice of texts is always informed, on the most rudimentary level, by his or her
preferences. In some instances, the archive one constructs can be more interesting than what one
actually has to say about that archive. I am reminded here of Berlant’s witty recollection of the
colleague who once approached her after a talk in order to confess, “I really loved your thinking,
but---I hate your archive” (Queen 11). The colleague, Berlant deduced, felt that she was reading
the wrong theorists, that her archive was somewhat amiss. While I employ in my conclusion a
personal anecdote as a point of departure, I make this move not to reveal myself as my true
object of inquiry in this dissertation, but to demonstrate how the affects that animate textual
readings emanate both from the critic and the text; the two exist in dynamic relation. As
Roderick Ferguson puts it, “I merely wish to offer a work whose insights and failures might
incite other ways to be” (ix). Undoubtedly, some readers will find this project too broad in its
scope and yet too narrow in its focus. To them I would say that this archive by no means claims
to fully capture the complexity of dwelling in American modernism. Rather, it hopes to
encourage small shifts in perspective. As in the instance of the foxes that Agee records at the end
of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, it is a call seeking a new response.
Chapter One: Gatsby’s Nostalgic Futurity

In a love affair most seek an eternal homeland. Others, but very few, eternal voyaging. These latter are melancholics, for whom contact with mother earth is to be shunned. They seek the person who will keep from them the homeland’s sadness. To that person, they remain faithful.

---Walter Benjamin, One Way Street

It is man’s misfortune that he is a temporal being.

---Jean-Paul Sartre

One spring evening in Paris during May of 1924, roughly five months before he mailed the completed manuscript of The Great Gatsby off to Scribner’s, Scott Fitzgerald and his wife took to the café l’Univers to write letters. “The moon is an absolutely au fait Mediterranean moon with a blurred silver linnen [sic] cap + we’re both a little tight and very happily drunk,” he merrily explains to fellow Minnesotan author, Thomas Boyd. Then, he goes on to make an illuminating statement: “I’m going to read nothing but Homer + Homeric literature—and history 540-1200 A.D. until I finish my novel…” (Fitzgerald, “Thomas Boyd” 68). Fitzgerald’s interest in Homer as he concluded The Great Gatsby is not entirely surprising given that the novel reads largely as a modern odyssey. From Jay Gatsby’s inability to transform his monstrous mansion into a proper dwelling to Nick Carraway’s return to the Midwest after Gatsby’s death, the novel revolves around the provocation that, à la Thomas Wolfe, “you can’t go home again.” This anxiety animates the Homeric symbolism of its closing lines, which are writ across Fitzgerald’s tombstone: “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” In the novel’s penultimate image, we run, like Gatsby, arms outstretched toward the green light. Yet precisely what “orgastic future” does the green light signify?

Shortly after Gatsby was published, Fitzgerald’s uncle claimed derisively that the novel “sounded as if it were very much like his others.” Fitzgerald appealed to his editor, Maxwell
Perkins, in a letter dated 10 April 1925, asking if “we could think of some way to advertise it so that people who are perhaps weary of assertive jazz and society novels might not dismiss it” so easily. “I confess that today the problem baffles me—all I can think of is to say in general to avoid such phrases as ‘a picture of New York life’ or ‘modern society’—though as that is exactly what the book is it is hard to avoid them” (“Perkins” 106). Because it provides such a vivid “picture of New York life,” the novel appears to conflate “modern society” with urbanism and cosopolitanism. But, as the novel teaches us, appearances can be deceiving. I contend that Gatsby capaciousness examines a range of regional and relational attachments, ultimately pursuing displacement as its central concern. While Gatsby’s “huge incoherent failure of a house” (*Gatsby* 179) overshadows the novel, it is far from an actual dwelling space. In a text replete with houses, there are few homes. Rather, motion permeates the narrative, producing a toxic stew of instability. Daisy moves North from Louisville to marry Tom, Gatsby returns to the South after the war to seek out Daisy, all of the Midwesterners have moved East, and Nick eventually returns West, just as the Wilsons had aspired to do. Tellingly, Myrtle’s death takes place in the Valley of Ashes, a mess of railway tracks and highway; the “fresh green breast of the new world” has devolved into “a fantastic farm where ashes grow like wheat into ridges and hills and grotesque gardens; where ashes take the forms of houses and chimneys and rising smoke and, finally, with a transcendent effort, of men who move dimly and already crumbling through the powdery air” (23). If the European colonizers envisioned the new world as Eden, then surely the Valley of Ashes is purgatory—a transitory, miserable place. Why one would label *Gatsby* a society novel when it is hell-bent on epitomizing New York as a wasteland is confounding.

There is, however, another form of motion in the novel, one that, like regional displacement, proves the source of much discontent. That motion of course is sex. So engrained is sex in the novel that Fitzgerald was adamant that the word “orgastic” be preserved in his final
description of the green light, even though Perkins found the word distasteful. “‘Orgastic’ is the adjective from ‘orgasm’ and it expresses exactly the intended ecstasy,” Fitzgerald insisted in a letter dated 24 January 1925. “It’s not a bit dirty” (“Perkins” 95). There is, he implies, a sexual quality immanent in the futures to which his characters gravitate, at times against their better judgment. Their attachment to the green light is a relational one, imbued with the promise of pleasure. In his 1931 essay, “Echoes of the Jazz Age,” Fitzgerald posits that the Jazz Age saw “a whole race going hedonistic, deciding on pleasure” (5); Gertrude Stein describes it more succinctly as a “modern orgy” (“Letter” 308). In Fitzgerald’s estimation, “something had to be done with all the nervous energy stored up and unexpended in the War” (“Echoes” 13).

Commencing at the end of the Great War and meeting its demise on Black Tuesday, the Jazz Age took as its central metaphor jazz, which, “in its progress toward respectability had meant first sex, then dancing, then music” (16). The jittery state of modernity, constituted literally and metaphorically by the coming together of nervous bodies, expresses itself through sexuality. This relatively simple statement is hardly contentious. Yet while modernist literature compulsively documents its uneasy obsession with sexual transgression, what renders this moment in literary history remarkable is the fact that such transgression is no longer the purview of those who are deemed deviant.

Precisely because it registers the breakdown of heteronormative reproductive futurity, modernist literature is particularly ripe for queer theoretical readings. Indeed, the conservative journalist Westbrook Pegler makes this connection clear when, in his contemptuous obituary of Fitzgerald in The Daily Mirror, he refers to Fitzgerald and his peers as “a queer bunch of undisciplined and self-indulgent brats who were determined not to pull their weight in the boat and wanted the world to drop everything and sit down and bawl with them” (“Fair Enough”). Pegler takes Gatsby’s partygoers as metonymic for their creator, a claim that is decidedly unfair
given Nick’s work ethic and the novel’s overall critique of hedonism. Fitzgerald even commented to Stein once, “like Gatsby I have only hope. It puts me in a false position I feel” (“Letter to Stein” 115). Pegler’s characterization of the Lost Generation, while vulgar, draws attention to the queer quality of both *Gatsby* and its historical context (as it endures in the contemporary cultural imaginary). My aim is not to go back and deem certain authors or characters as queer along identitarian lines, but rather to examine how the affective and relational echoes between *Gatsby* and the present can help complicate our readings of queer modernism.

Fitzgerald’s Jazz Age writings constitute an ideal ground on which to work through certain meta-critical questions about dwelling. In particular *The Great Gatsby* articulates diverse instantiations of displacement that calcify into a particular affective state, one we might call homesickness. Taking homesickness as the dominant affect in the text, I argue that Nick’s queerness is coded as a backward desire for home in a modern world in which lingering and settling are antithetical to the overarching mood. What renders Nick queer is not just his proclivity for men and masculinity—a claim I will soon substantiate—but his fundamental incapacity, at a time when “the universal preoccupation with sex had become a nuisance” (“Echoes” 18), to latch onto any particular sexual object. While queerness is typically associated with urbanism and mobility, Nick demonstrates a desire for exactly the opposite. Discordant with the modern, he is strangely old-fashioned; his backwardness and his queerness are mutually constitutive. Consider, for example, the fact that upon moving to New York, Nick opts to pair off with another man and “take a house together in a commuting town” even though “the

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10 Backwardness is an important keyword in both queer theory and regionalist studies, and Nick’s backward move at the end of the text unites these discourses in a fascinating way. Much work has been done in both fields on the affiliation between backwardness and negativity. Love and Stockton, for example, each explore the relationship between affect and temporality that develops when one has been marked backward by queerness. Brodhead refers to the “backwardness” (115) of regional cultures.
practical thing was to find rooms in the city” (*Gatsby* 3). The housemate drops out of the deal but Nick prefers to set up camp at the margins, favouring his rural “weather-beaten cardboard bungalow” over the bright lights of Manhattan. In a world in which heterosexuality was increasingly an extra-domestic orientation and a public performance—in “Echoes,” Fitzgerald recalls a friend of Zelda’s, a “perfectly mated, contented young mother,” who felt pressure to pursue an affair, “though she had not one especially in mind” (18)—Nick is an odd duck.

The story that *Gatsby* tells puts pressure on readings of modernism that locate queerness only in the negativity of the transient and the peripatetic. Nick’s queerness enables us to radically re-think the significance of the green light and the possibilities of an “orgastic” future. In the final instance, I want to suggest, the green light represents the very promise of home itself, a position at which Nick hopes to arrive through the act of writing a frame narrative that is structured around the twin acts of departure and return. Home, that nebulous beast, is a cluster of affects and relations. So too is writing: a process of asserting order, of curation, of selective inclusion that plays with the riddle of the outside and the inside. Out of diction and syntax, Nick constructs the “house of fiction” within which he dwells. In a metatextual sense, Nick treats the text as a relational space in which he stages the arrival scene that he so badly craves. At the same time, his invocation of the pronoun “we” in “we beat on” (180) positions homecoming as a collective process. Through his disavowal of the couple form and his invitation to the reader to form strange kinds of relations, Nick imagines a new form of textual sociality. The elusive movement toward the green light is, for the reader, the act of textual interpretation, in which we struggle to render the text homelike, intelligible and familiar. Insomuch as he is reborn in every reading of the text, re-interpreted into life, Nick’s textual dwelling is crafted to endure across time. *Gatsby* is, above all else, a story of queer futurity that is predicated on a paradoxical
futurist nostalgia, on the longing to return to a scene of belonging that has not yet occurred but which hovers on the horizon like the strange promise of an inhabitable utopia.

1.2 Nick at the Window

In an episode that reveals the complex spatial and sexual dimensions of his displacement, Nick accompanies his odious cousin-in-law Tom Buchanan into Manhattan to pass the evening in Tom’s uptown pied-à-terre. Along the way, they pick up a motley crew of guests, including Tom’s mistress Myrtle, a puppy (which they subsequently neglect), Myrtle’s sister Catherine, Mr. McKee (“a pale, feminine man from the flat below”) (30), and McKee’s wife. The well-established critical tradition of reading Nick Carraway as queer leans heavily on the bewildering scene at the end of Chapter Two in which Nick follows Mr. McKee down to his apartment to conclude the night of debauchery. Early in the chapter, as McKee dozes off, Nick tenderly “wipe[s] from his cheek the remains of the spot of dried lather that had worried him all the afternoon” (36). The seminal image of the shaving cream in close proximity to McKee’s mouth, and Nick’s anxiety about it, suggests not only that Nick has been paying close attention to McKee’s body, but also that he wants to protect it from the threat of disorder. This sets us up for what will ensue hours later as they descend in the elevator together, a movement that counters Gatsby’s association with ascendency. I will briefly rehearse the events that rapidly transpire: a male operator snaps at McKee, “keep your hand off the lever”; the phallic subtext of this comment foreshadows Nick’s confession a few lines later: “I was standing beside his bed and he was sitting up between the sheets, clad in his underwear, with a great portfolio in his hands” (37--

1 Keath Fraser first suggested the possibility of Nick’s homosexuality in his 1979 essay, “Another Reading of the Great Gatsby.” Edward Wasiolek picked up this line of argument in 1992 and greatly expanded some of Fraser’s claims. More recently, Maggie Gordon Froehlich has written about queerness in the text, including Jordan Baker’s potential homosexuality. Lionel Trilling first suggested this reading with his reference to “the vaguely guilty, vaguely homosexual Jordan Baker” (252).
8); then, this odd line: “Beauty and the Beast … Loneliness … Old Grocery Horse … Brook’n Bridge …” Reciting the titles of the photographs that McKee is showing him, Nick draws out a connection between the descent into incoherence and the aesthetic, which both conceals and reproduces the broader sensation of disorder. The narrative breakdown ultimately registers Nick’s intoxication, but also his inability to represent or even fully endure this encounter. In response to the elevator boy’s imperative, for instance, he responds that he would “be glad to” (37) stay away from “the lever,” and yet clearly he does not do so. This disparity between Nick’s words and his actions exposes both his unreliability as a narrator and his sexual ambivalence.

By the following chapter, Nick has decided upon a substitute for McKee: Jordan Baker, an athletic and “small-breasted girl, with an erect carriage” (11) and “hard, jaunty body” (58) whom Nick likens to a “young cadet” (11). When Nick’s fantasizes about Jordan, he imagines “a faint mustache of perspiration appear[ing] on her upper lip” (58) when she plays tennis. Jordan is safe for Nick precisely because she is seemingly queer herself; she is another “rotten driver” who deviates from what Sara Ahmed aptly terms the “straight line” (70). If the Buchanans are “careless people,” Nick and Jordan are precisely the opposite because they each have secrets that they closely guard.12 Nick tries to distance himself from Jordan, deeming her “incurably dishonest” (Fitzgerald, Gatsby 58), only to undermine himself through his admission that Jordan “instinctively avoided clever, shrewd men” (57). It is through this logic of substitution that Nick survives his summer out East, and yet Nick’s maturation over the course of the novel results in the insight that he is “too old to lie to [himself] and call it honor.” Necessarily, he splits from Jordan, only “half in love with her and tremendously sorry” (177)—a decisive action that contrasts with his brief affair with the “girl from Jersey City,” which he ended when she was on

12 Froehlich argues persuasively that Nick “perceives [Jordan] as a comrade” because he recognizes that, “like him, she is concealing something” (89).
vacation by “let[ting] it blow quietly away” (56). Nick’s evolution suggests that the text is as least as much about him as it is about Gatsby, and also, perhaps more importantly, that his writing it serves as a form of orientation.

But let us return once more to that Manhattan apartment. As the evening plummets towards its nadir—Tom smashing in Myrtle’s nose—Nick suppresses a strong urge to withdraw into solitude: “I wanted to get out and walk eastward toward the park through the soft twilight,” he confesses, “but each time I tried to go I became entangled in some wild, strident argument which pulled me back, as if with ropes, into my chair. Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I saw him too, looking up and wondering. I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled by the inexhaustible variety of life” (35). Here, Nick imagines himself both as the object of the viewer’s gaze and as the viewer himself, strolling the sultry summer streets and concocting stories about the people clustered above. The “inexhaustible variety” of narrative threads produces in him a kind of terrifying excitement; while he remains planted, his mind wanders, drawn towards the endless possibilities of the future. What is perhaps most fascinating about this scene is that rather than represent this dynamic of the rooted body and the wandering mind as a form of ambivalence, the text seems to suggest that there is the possibility for imaginative growth to occur when one is physically quite still. This scene also begins to gesture towards an anticipatory nostalgia, as Nick suggests that the inside is perhaps most attractive from the outside, a contention that speaks to both the inside of the domestic and to the inside of the country: the Midwest.

Nick’s fantasy also registers his position as both narrator and character. Playing a role in the story that he tells, he exists both “within” the very fabric of the story that he narrates from “without,” removed now from the scene that he recalls. Temporal slippages occur across the
novel, however, between the narrative present of the framing narrative and that of the narrative being framed. In fact, we can spin this image of Nick of being “within” and “without” out in multiple dimensions. Nick is both “within” the story itself and “without” in the frame, just as he is now, presumably, “within” the middle of the country while the story takes place on the nation’s edge. Nick is also inebriated in this scene, not in the act of writing it, but in the memories that he reflects upon. In Nick’s mind, “everything that happened has a dim, hazy cast over it” even though “the apartment was full of cheerful sun” (29) for most of the evening. Inebriation prevents him from accurately remembering or witnessing the scene; thus in the present in which he is writing, Nick must go “within” his imagination for insight, much as he does on that evening, as he chews on the “inexhaustible variety” of life.

This scene is crucial in establishing Nick’s anomie and his frustration with the mess that he encounters in the East, from which he subsequently tries to extricate himself. When much later in the novel Tom laments, “I suppose you’ve got to make your house into a pigsty in order to have any friends—in the modern world” (130), his statement is deeply ironic. Like Gatsby, whose lavish parties end with cars in ditches, their wheels spinning into oblivion, Tom and Daisy have “drifted here and there unrestfully” before settling in the East for no apparent reason. Daisy assures Nick “this was a permanent move,” but Nick remains unconvinced: “I felt that Tom would drift on forever seeking, a little wistfully, for the dramatic turbulence of some irrecoverable football game” (6). Nick loathes the peripatetic impulses of the wealthy. Rather, he wants “the world to be in uniform and at a sort of moral attention forever” (2).

declaring, “I am one of the few honest people that I have ever known,” Nick casts himself as fundamentally different from the “careless and confused” (179) Buchanans. During his final days in New York, for example, he tries “to leave things in order and not just trust that obliging and indifferent sea to sweep [his] refuse away” (177). Here, as elsewhere, he is keenly
conscious of the reader’s gaze, a fact he admits early in the novel: “Reading over what I have
written so far, I see I have given the impression that the events of three nights several weeks
apart were all that absorbed me. On the contrary, they were merely casual events in a crowded
summer, and, until much later, they absorbed me infinitely less than my personal affairs” (55-
56). Working all day and reading most evenings, Nick initially spends the remainder of his time
fantasizing about entering into affairs with strangers the street. By the end of the novel, however,
urban anonymity has lost its charm. He longs for his hometown, “where dwellings are still called
through decades by a family’s name.” Yet even once he returns there, West Egg haunts Nick’s
“more fantastic dreams”:

I see it as a night scene by El Greco: a hundred houses, at once conventional and grotesque,
crouching under a sullen, overhanging sky and a lusterless moon. In the foreground four
solemn men in dress suits are walking along the sidewalk with a stretcher on which lies a
drunken woman in a white evening dress. Her hand, which dangles over the side, sparkles
cold with jewels. Gravely the men turn in at a house—the wrong house. But not one knows
the woman’s name, and no one cares.

In this schema, West Egg represents the alienation of the modern world, “the wrong house,”
while the Midwest offers the promise of community and belonging. While Nick’s dreams might
more properly be described as nightmares, his juxtaposition of the fantastical quality of the East,
which even in its most seductive moments was always tinged for him with a foreign “quality of
distortion” (176), with the “real snow” of a Wisconsin night underpins the fact that what Nick
truly desires is to live his life according to a certain style of realism.

In “The Art of Fiction,” Henry James argues “the air of reality” is “the supreme virtue of
a novel—the merit on which all its other merits...helplessly and submissively depend” (581). At
the same time, “it will be difficult to give you a recipe for calling that sense into being,” James
cautions. “Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms; the most one can affirm is that some of the flowers of fiction have the odour of it, and others have not” (580). Nick’s success as a realist writer, in the Jamesean sense, is dubious. His authorial presence lends an air of artifice to his narrative rather than of organic reality. Nevertheless, as a reporter of “modern society,” he does effectively draw attention to literature’s ability to produce new realities. Rather than trade an old reality for another, however, Nick wants to recuperate his old organic ancestral home, as we shall see, in the same way that he is playing with the novel form, which is at once artificial, in the sense that it is constructed, and capable of altering the organic world.

The apartment in which Nick sits, contemplating the “line of yellow windows” (Fitzgerald, Gatsby 35), recalls another building—this one metaphorical—that has “in short not one window, but a million” (James, “Preface” 669). That building, of course, is Henry James’s “house of fiction.” Directly after introducing us to his reading habits, Nick insists, “life is much more successfully looked at from a single window, after all” (Fitzgerald, Gatsby 4). If Nick’s aim is to construct a persuasively realist narrative then he fails resoundingly, for his singular narrative view renders the reader acutely aware of his biases and his hypocrisy; as Nick himself admits, Gatsby’s death has rendered the East “distorted beyond [his] eyes’ power of correction” (176). What Nick realizes over the course of the novel is that a singular perspective is necessarily distorted, and that any mode of realism that attempts such an approach cannot also pretend to objectively document. The single window trope foreshadows both the scene within Tom’s apartment and Nick’s description of Gatsby waiting for Daisy to telephone on the afternoon that he was killed. “I have an idea that Gatsby himself didn’t believe [the call] would come,” Nick states, “and perhaps he no longer cared. If that was true, he must have felt that he had lost the old warm world, paid a high price for living too long with a single dream.” Rudely thrust out of his fantasy, Gatsby slowly confronts the “new world,” which is “material without being real”; an
“unfamiliar,” “frightening,” “grotesque” and “raw” reality in which ghosts float around “breathing dreams like air” (161). This is the world of The Waste Land, “A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,/ And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief,/ And the dry stone no sound of water” (Eliot 22-24). We wonder, along with Nick: “What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/ Out of this stony rubbish” (19-20)? Gatsby’s sense of rupture is occasioned by the demise of his fantasy; unaccustomed to the real, he finds himself homeless. It is Nick who then attempts to construct a narrative in which Gatsby might dwell. Nick projects onto Gatsby a yearning for rootedness, but it is not clear that Gatsby ever really shares this desire.

In a peculiar turn of phrase that appears to implicate both the reader and the author, James describes the windows of the house of fiction as “mere holes in a dead wall, perched aloft; they are not hinged doors opening straight upon life. But they have this mark of their own that at each of them stands a figure with a pair of eyes, or at least with a field-glass, which forms, again and again, for observation, a unique instrument, insuring to the person making use of it an impression distinct from every other.” These eyes watch “the spreading field, the human scene,” and the window through which they watch is “the literary form,” but “they are, singly or together, as nothing without the posted presence of the watcher—without, in other words, the consciousness of the artist” (James, “Preface” 669). In Gatsby, a novel notoriously preoccupied with vision, the looming eyes of T.J. Eckleburg survey the Valley of Ashes, reflecting the absence of divinity. As in Eliot’s poem, this is a fallen, forgotten world. At once a symbol of capitalism (they’re part of an advertisement, after all) and a reminder of its failures (the good doctor has, presumably, long ago closed up shop), the eyes powerfully represent the imperfection of vision. They also connect back to Nick’s relationship to sight; as in Tom’s apartment, Nick is both watching and being watched. It is the writer who tries to replace God, the writer who might
cure his generation’s myopia. Yet Nick’s “distorted” vision (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 176) occludes access to the omniscient perspective to which he aspires. Following James’s logic, the more interesting aspect of the narrative is how Nick chooses to represent his struggle with representation, not whether or not he is being “honest” with us; Nick’s obsession with honesty is precisely beside the point. The self-reflexivity of the characters is, in this sense, much more important that anything the plot might reveal. What is particularly intriguing about the novel is that its protagonist also styles himself as its author. The tropological centrality of the house to the novel thus does the metatextual work of examining what fiction can be and do.

Through writing, Nick is not trying to go back to the past but to go home. He does so by producing a sense of narrative order that counters the “carelessness” of the modern heteronormative home. Homecoming is thus an act of visual readjustment and reorientation. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed asks, “what would it mean for queer studies if we were to pose the question of ‘the orientation’ of ‘sexual orientation’ as a phenomenological question?” This is, ultimately, a question of “how we come to ‘feel at home’” (Ahmed 7) and “the starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the ‘here’ of the body and the ‘where’ of its dwelling” (8). While Nick’s body is conspicuously lacking within the narrative, he is interested in precisely this process of return that is so often foreclosed for queer subjects.

Nick’s desire for *realness* stands in stark juxtaposition to Gatsby’s romanticism. The image of Nick waking up on McKee’s bed, then “lying half asleep in the cold lower level of the Pennsylvania Station, staring at the morning Tribune, and waiting for the four o’clock train” (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 38) is a far cry from the one of Gatsby returning to Louisville after the war, when Tom and Daisy were off on their honeymoon. Nick claims that Gatsby “wanted to recover something, some idea of himself perhaps that had gone into loving Daisy. His life had been confused and disordered [since he’d met her] but if he could once return to a certain starting
place and go over it all slowly, he could find out what that thing was…” (110). Gatsby builds his house to try to win back Daisy because she is for him inextricable from housing, especially the house in which she grew up, which “had always seemed to him more mysterious and gay than other houses,” bound up in “his idea of the city itself” and its “melancholy beauty” (152). The parallel between Nick’s nostalgia for the Midwest at the end of the novel and Gatsby’s nostalgia for Daisy (which in turn transmutes into a nostalgia for her childhood home, which in turn extends into a nostalgia for Louisville) is striking. The difference, however, is that Nick yearns to return to a house over which he at least nominally lays claim. Gatsby’s fixation on Daisy results in a total loss of self; like his house, he is a shell and an enigma. In this vein, it seems that dwelling, as a concept that bridges house and home, is bound up in self-creation. One may share his home with another person, but the text cautions against setting up another person as home. Nick is able to transform his ancestral home into his own, or at least he imagines that he can, precisely because it is not a person.

While Nick seeks a firm footing in life, Gatsby wants to ascend above the “hot struggles of the poor” (150) through his relationship with Daisy, to climb to that “secret place above the trees” and “suck on the pap of life, gulp down the incomparable milk of wonder” (110) from the “fresh, green breast of the new world” (180). Yet because Gatsby’s dream involves climbing up above the “quiet” houses down below, because it seeks to transcend the everyday, it cracks into “a fragment of lost words.” The “appalling sentimentality” of Gatsby’s romanticism is simply a language that Nick cannot speak; in response to hearing Gatsby describe Daisy, Nick’s “lips parted like a dumb man’s” and “made no sound.” Even as Nick attempts to articulate Gatsby’s dream for him, he recognizes that it is “uncommunicable forever” (111). In short, the drama of home is for Nick a generic one, but because of Nick’s regionalism and his realism, it is also closely linked to material space. James prescribes the novel “the air of reality”; what happens
when that reality is a queer one? Finding his own sexuality as difficult to put into words as he does Gatsby’s dream, Nick ultimately figures his queerness as a spatial drama.

1.3 “Somewhere Back in that Vast Obscurity”

Immediately after Gatsby’s funeral, Nick flashes to a childhood memory of riding the train back to the Midwest from prep school at Christmas. “When we pulled out into the winter night and the real snow, our snow, began to stretch out beside us and twinkle against the windows,” he describes, “and the dim lights of small Wisconsin stations moved by, a sharp wild brace came suddenly into the air. We drew in deep breaths of it as we walked back from dinner through the cold vestibules, unutterably aware of our identity with this country for one strange hour, before we melted indistinguishably into it again.” The rare tone of joy in Nick’s voice here is the joy of returning home after a long journey, of adolescent camaraderie, and of anticipation. Nick’s urgency also resonates profoundly because he articulates a clear desire--the awareness of feeling at home--with a decisiveness that has previously eluded him. Unsurprisingly, he announces: “when the blue smoke of brittle leaves was in the air and the wind blew the wet laundry stiff on the line I decided to come back home.” “Haunted” by Gatsby’s death, Nick returns to the Midwest, concluding, “I see now that this has been a story of the West after all…” (175-6).

In a sense, Nick’s comment is an admission of the novel’s regionalist undertones. Yet if regionalist narratives typically involve an urban, northern outsider who penetrates a hermetic community and reports back to a sophisticated audience—as Richard Brodhead puts it, “the local provides entertainment for the cosmopolitan in American local color fiction, never the reverse” (4)—then Gatsby represents a significant reversal of generic conventions. In Gatsby, it is Nick, a so-called “Westerner,” who recounts the misadventures of other Westerners (“Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I”), all of whom “possessed some deficiency in common which made
[them] subtly unadaptable to Eastern life” (Fitzgerald 176). Notably, Fitzgerald openly acknowledged his indebtedness to Willa Cather. In fact, he was infatuated with her 1923 novel, *A Lost Lady*, which he first encountered when he was mid-way through his first draft of *Gatsby*. Recognizing parallels between his characterization of Daisy and Cather’s “description of a woman’s charm” (“Willa Cather” 100), he even wrote Cather preemptively to convince her that he had conceived of Daisy well before reading her novel, offering to mail along an early draft as evidence. 13 My aim here is not to claim Fitzgerald as a regionalist writer, though the possibility that he was pursuing a form of urban regionalism is compelling. He frequently bashed local fiction, famously ranting in a famous letter to Perkins from June 1, 1925 against the idea of “the American peasant,” claiming that the rural American is not “bound to the soil at all as the English + Russian peasants were” and that “using him as typical American material is simply a stubborn seeking for the static in a world that for almost a hundred years has simply not been static (“Perkins” 119). Rather, Fitzgerald’s engagement with regionalism was always one that was refracted, albeit in complicated ways, through modernism. Like Cather, he took the genre and stood it on its head.

When Nick returns to the Midwest at the end of the novel, it is unclear if, like Gatsby, he too is being “borne back into the past,” both geographically and through the twin acts of remembering and narrating his summer on West Egg. Indeed, it’s uncertain if Nick truly can build a new home back West, or if he too is doomed to suffer chronic displacement—if the security about which he fantasizes is “already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night” (*Gatsby* 180).

13 Cather was unfazed. Incidentally, she had already read *The Great Gatsby* before receiving Fitzgerald’s letter and responded to him on April 28th indicating that plagiarism had never crossed her mind (Fitzgerald, *A Life in Letters* 100).
Baz Luhrmann’s recent film adaptation, for instance, places Nick, who appears visibly ill and decrepit, in a sanitarium. Yet Nick’s present location is in fact ambiguous. Excluding the opening and closing frames, the entire novel takes place in Nick’s memories. Where, and how, is Nick as he narrates?

Just as Gatsby builds a house for Daisy, I contend, Nick constructs a narrative home in which to preserve both Gatsby and himself. The frame narrative situates Nick as observer and participant, author and protagonist. What’s more, his deep attraction to Gatsby, and his desire to see Gatsby as exceptional, lends an air of romance to his recollection. While he was superficially seeing Jordan Baker that summer, it is Gatsby who continues to captivate him. Reflecting on the chaos of their brief time together, Nick turns to narrative as much to confront the haunting sensation of displacement that he first experienced out East--to tell his own story, in other words--as he does to tell Gatsby’s story. Playing with the trope of the novel as a house, Nick imagines the novel as domestic space, and writing as homemaking, a method for producing order. Nick ultimately dwells in the narrative; he is, after all, a character. As there is no Gatsby without Nick, there is no Nick without Fitzgerald. By casting Nick as a writer, Fitzgerald models literature’s potential to render an old form habitable.

1.4 Warm Centres, Ragged Edges

At the beginning of the novel, Nick must negotiate the relationship between narrative and self-fashioning. We witness him try on stiff old narratives, in an act that mirrors his attempt to live within the worlds that his family has constructed for him. The future that Nick initially attaches himself to in New York is not exactly one of his own making. Rather, he enters the “bond business” just like “everybody [he] knew,” after first securing the approval of his aunts and uncles, who, Nick explains, “talked it over as if they were choosing a prep school for me.” Financially supported by his father, Nick demonstrates an inability to cut the apron strings, and
thus a lack of self-reliance and self-coherence. At first, he tries to contextualize himself within a familial narrative. Relaying useless details about his familial origins, including the inane fact that he apparently bears a striking resemblance to his great-uncle, “the founder of [his] line,” Nick constructs a personal history that has peculiarly little bearing on his present life.

As I have shown, Nick begins his narrative with a series of displacements, but they eventually enable a scene of arrival back to “the warm center of the world, the Middle West.” This circular movement is not a conservative one, however, for the narrative suggests that he has been transformed by his experiences on the margins. Very quickly we discover that Nick’s move to New York is in actuality a double displacement. The cultural values that attach successful futurity to urban eastern spaces in turn render the Midwest, the site of Nick’s primary spatial attachment, “the ragged edge of the universe” (3). Quite literally, Nick must spatially re-orient himself and take up a style of world making that leaves him perplexed. Unlike the many drifters of the novel—the Buchanans, Gatsby, Dan Cody—Nick hopes to replicate in the East the simplicity of inhabiting the “the Carraway house” (176). When he first arrives in West Egg, he is overcome with pleasure when taken for a local by a man who is lost. Offering directions, Nick fancies himself “a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler.” Through this simple exchange, the man “casually conferred on [Nick] the freedom of the neighbourhood.” Initially, Nick articulates a fantasy that “life was beginning over again with the summer,” replete with the pathetic fallacy of “sunshine” and “great bursts of leaves growing on trees” (4). Even the testicular symbolism of “West Egg” and “East Egg,” which resemble “the egg in the Columbus story” (5), posit this new world a site of reproductive futurity. But Nick quickly discovers that he cannot simply graft his
Midwestern values onto this strange place, not because of sexual and affective queerness, but because the East does not feel like his home to remake. 

While at first it appears that Nick’s queerness is a trope for disorientation, his sexual deviance in fact spares him from the fate of the heterosexuals in the novel, who end up either miserable or dead. Nick’s queerness enables him to make a backward return to the region, a move that is symbolic of an epistemological shift and re-orientation. As Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse observe, the region is “less a term of geographical determinism and more [a] discourse or a mode of analysis, a vantage point within the network of power relations that provides a location for critique and resistance” (11). Their work on regionalism rightly articulates its counter-discursive nature, rejecting the pervasive assumption that regionalist texts merely shore up nationalist imperatives. By treating the region as a subversive space rather than as a synecdochal one, this new school of regionalist criticism addresses the dynamic ways in which marginalized subjects assert agency over textual, material, and relational dwellings. 

Regionalism, according to Fetterley and Pryse, typically affords an alternate futurity to that of the nation, one that is queer in its non-reproductive emphasis. 

Thus, while Nick’s return at first glance reads as his desire to re-embed himself within the patriarchal, heteronormative narrative trajectory of the Carraway “clan,” we must recognize that, by virtue of his queerness, this is a narrative housing from which he will potentially be disinherited. If Nick’s queerness is representative of something beyond the specificity of his own sexuality, arguably that something is the broader sense of displacement that is endemic to modernity. It is in and through his

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14 I am here in direct disagreement with Chandler, who argues that Nick “is an itinerant” who seeks to “free” himself of the intimacy of houses (220). Likewise, just as she identifies him at the end of the text as “in transition, uprooted, belonging nowhere in particular” (243), I see his return to the Midwest as precisely the opposite: the desire to escape Gatsby’s fate of becoming “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere” (Fitzgerald, Gatsby 130).

15 For more work on regionalism as an alternative to nationalism, see Powell and Joseph.

16 See their excellent chapter on “Regionalism as ‘Queer’ Theory.”
queerness that Nick is freed to pursue non-teleological, non-reproductive futures—in this instance, through the act of textual production.

Over the past decade, a proliferation of work on temporality has emerged out of queer theory. Bracketing some notable exceptions, work on queer spatiality within North American contexts has been comparatively scant.\(^\text{17}\) To a certain degree, however, queer theory has since its inception been compelled by the division of public and private, and by the spatial dimensions of affect, visibility, and secrecy. Perhaps the most visceral symbol associated with queer life, the closet, is spatially loaded. Even one of queer theory’s most foundational texts, Foucault’s *History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*, begins with a spatial premise: during the Victorian period, “sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home.” Foucault clearly places the heteronormative couple in a domestic setting. “A single locus of sexuality was acknowledged in a social space as well as at the heart of every household,” he writes, “but it was a utilitarian and fertile one: the parents’ bedroom. The rest had only to remain vague; proper demeanor avoided contact with other bodies, and verbal decency sanitized one’s speech” (Foucault, *History 3*). A decade later, Gayle Rubin would theorize the centrality of the domestic realm to “the charmed circle.” At the centre of the circle are eleven qualifiers of normative sexuality: “no pornography,” “bodies only,” “vanilla,” “heterosexual,” “married,” “monogamous,” “procreative,” “free,” “coupled,” “in a relationship,” “same generation,” and, notably, “at home.” Beside each of these descriptors, she lists a social antonym; the opposite of “at home,” she posits, is “in the park” (Rubin 281). It feels not insignificant that when Nick sits at the window of the faux-home that Tom has purchased for his mistress, simultaneously aroused by McKee and repelled by the proximal

\(^{17}\) There is, of course, a large and growing body of work on space in queer postcolonial studies. Much of the work that has focused on queer North American spaces has been borne out of the intersections of queer theory, feminist studies, and critical race theory. I am thinking here of recent texts by Jack Halberstam, Scott Herring, Jose Munoz, Shane Vogel, Karen Tongson, Martin Manalansan, and Ann Cvetkovich.
fornication of Tom and Myrtle, he declares, “I wanted to get out and walk eastward toward the Park through the soft twilight…” It is this proverbial “walk eastward toward the Park” that Nick takes later that night when he joins McKee in his apartment, having cruised him all evening in the “wild” (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 35) environment of Tom’s heterosexual love nest.

Precisely because queer sexuality has been exiled from the heteronormative home, at once scrutinized and afforded no refuge, queer theorists have taken pains to recuperate and transvalue shameful forms of public sexuality. It is the transgressive quality of public sexuality that Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant champion in “Sex in Public”; in “Live Sex Acts,” Berlant goes on to describe the heteronormative home as a “dead space,” despite its reproductive futurity, because it contains rehearsals of flaccid and immobile forms of sociality.  

How, Foucault asks in “Friendship As A Way of Life,” “can a relational system be reached through sexual practices? Is it possible to create a homosexual mode of life” (137)? In this oft-cited interview, Foucault denounces an ontological paradigm of homosexuality in favour of a social one. “To be ‘gay,’” he opines, “is not to identify with the psychological traits and the visible masks of the homosexual but to try to define and develop a way of life” (138). Rather than reading Nick’s dalliance with McKee as an act of narrative disclosure, I am instead, following Foucault, interested in the non-sexual markers of Nick’s queerness. For one thing, it is highly unlikely that Fitzgerald would intentionally hint at Nick’s homosexuality given the ample evidence of Fitzgerald’s homophobia.  

Nick may be the narrator of Gatsby’s story, but he is also Fitzgerald’s creation. It is possible to read Nick’s homosexuality as either symptomatic of...

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18 See Berlant’s “Live Sex Acts (Parental Advisory: Explicit Materials).”
19 In an undated letter from August 1930, Zelda accuses her husband of a homosexual affair with Hemingway (Fitzgerald, *A Life in Letters* 194). Incensed, Fitzgerald later recounts this paranoid accusation to Zelda’s psychiatrist, Dr. Forel: “This coincides with complete and never entirely renewed break of confidence with husband” (204). Both Fitzgerald and Hemingway also loathed Robert McAlmon for telling people that they were “fairies” (See Donaldson 154-160).
the ills of cosmopolitanism and the loss of a certain “moral attention” (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 2) or as an example of what Foucault calls “homosexual ascesis” (“Friendship” 137). Either way, Fitzgerald’s intentions are irrelevant. What I am arguing is that there is something suspiciously queer about how Nick inhabits time and space. The text affords us room for a queer interpretation, but one that rejects the easy conflation of *queer* with *transgressive*. Nick’s queer relationship to temporality may be transgressive but, as I will shortly explore, his queer relationship to space is anything but. His queerness is radical in the etymological sense of the word; it takes hold, quite literally, at the root.

Nick’s disidentification with heteronormative temporality predicates a curious shift away from the urban, which is widely privileged within queer culture as a space of liberation and community. Yet Nick does not approach homosexuality through the paradigm of liberation, or “coming out.” He is, in his own strange way, a good Foucauldian. Lionel Trilling observes “how innocent of mere ‘sex,’ how charged with sentiment is Fitzgerald’s description of love in the jazz age…it takes upon itself reality, and permanence, and duty discharged with an almost masochistic scrupulousness of honor” (*Liberal* 246). Of course, there is sex in the novel, lots of it, but it evades the scopic eye of the reader. In a novel rich with visual symbols, the lack of explicit sex is conspicuous. At the same time, the novel’s preoccupation with “love” rather than “sex” suggests that it is more concerned with the relational implications of sexuality than an epistemological agenda; in other words, it is more concerned with what sex can *do* or *undo*, than with what sexuality reveals or determines.

Unlike in Foucault’s schema, the novel charts out in painful detail the unraveling of the heterosexual home. This is not a world in which heterosexuals such as Tom carry on affairs in private, unbeknownst to their social worlds. Rather, throngs of party-goers trample through the extra-marital home Gatsby has built to lure Daisy away from Tom, and Daisy’s daughter is an
after-thought who makes all of two brief appearances. In the penultimate chapter, Tom and
Gatsby argue drunkenly over Daisy in a Manhattan hotel room. No matter how much ice they
order up or how much cold liquor they consume, the late summer heat wave renders this
cramped temporary space akin to hell. As Gatsby pressures Daisy to admit that she “never loved”
her husband, and Tom dredges up memories of their Hawaiian honeymoon, Daisy breaks down
into tears, exclaiming, “I did love him once—but I loved you too” (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 132).
Daisy’s admission reveals two things. Firstly, she is not as stupid as she pretends to be; after all,
as Fitzgerald posits, “the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in
the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function” (“The Crack-Up” 69).
Secondly, Daisy through this revelation transgresses the sacred bonds of marriage and exposes
her own to be a sham.

If marriage, as Foucault argues, works to regulate and control sexuality, it can also
produce stunted forms of relationality, forms that he hopes homosexuality can imagine beyond.
Not only does Daisy engage in extramarital sex *at the same time* that she also upholds all of the
markers of heteronormativity, she also locates her affective loyalties outside of her marriage, a
fact that is surely far more dangerous than Tom’s “foolish” affair; “Once in a while I go off on a
spree and make a fool of myself,” Tom announces, “but I always come back, and in my heart I
love her all the time” (*Gatsby* 131). As the wife of an adulterer, Daisy knows firsthand the chasm
between the social ideal of marriage and the unpleasant reality of her own. Her relationship to
modernity is thus ambivalent. The telephone, for instance, is an invention that at once forces her
to witness her husband’s affairs, and at the same time allows her to carry out her own. This is the
world within which, according to Fitzgerald, “by 1926 the universal preoccupation with sex had
become a nuisance” (“Echoes” 18). While the Buchanans are the only couple in the novel who
endure, they appear just as affectively homeless as Gatsby. At the end of the chapter, Tom and
Nick return to the Buchanans’ house in East Egg. “Daisy’s home” (Gatsby 141), Tom remarks, noting that she has arrived before them, yet we can just as easily read his comment as a description of the house itself. As Tom retreats inside, Gatsby emerges from the bushes, claiming he has promised Daisy he will watch out for any signs of “brutality” by Tom. But what ensues is perhaps equally as disturbing. Rather than fighting, the couple sits at the kitchen table eating a mundane dinner, “talking intently,” and eyeing each other “in agreement.” Resigned to their marriage, they trade happiness for the “natural intimacy” of “conspiring together.” Surely this is one of the more sinister descriptions of marriage in American literary history. Sensing that his gaze “marred the sacredness of the vigil,” Nick “walked away” and “left [Gatsby] standing there in the moonlight—watching over nothing” (145).

It is the nothingness of the Buchanan’s marital home that Nick writes out of his own future through his series of refusals of heterosexual relationships. The novel indexes the ways in which the normative institutions of heterosexuality were coming apart at the seams during the 1920s; in Gatsby, it is the homosexual who possesses the ability to fashion a home that is other than the “pigsty” of Gatsby’s mansion or the vacuity of the Buchanan house. Myrtle’s death brings into relief Nick’s distaste for the future that he was prescribed. As he and Jordan shuttle unknowingly toward the scene of the accident, Nick realizes it is his thirtieth birthday. The chapter is alarmingly prescient in its mingling of personal and national histories; just as the 1920s culminated in the stock market crash, Nick’s twenties end with a car crash and a woman lying dead on the road, “her left breast…swinging loose like a flap” (137). In “Echoes,” Fitzgerald posits that “the mobile privacy of [the] automobile” (14) spurred youth sexuality and independence, causing the Jazz Age to bloom. Soon, the Jazz Age “raced along under its own power, served by the great filling stations full of money” (18). The car that kills Daisy, which Gatsby owns, is a “death car” (Gatsby 137) and a “circus wagon” (121). Tellingly, Nick prefers a
nineteenth-century mode of travel: the train. Hence Nick describes speeding east to Long Island on his thirtieth-birthday, in precisely the opposite direction of home, as driving “on toward death” (136). Thirty to Nick is “the promise of a decade of loneliness, a thinning list of single men to know, a thinning briefcase of enthusiasm, thinning hair.” In Jordan he finds a companion who “unlike Daisy, was too wise to ever carry well-forgotten dreams from age to age.” Their friendship emboldens him to abandon the dream of the East and to let Tom and Daisy “and all their tragic arguments fade with the city lights behind” (135).

Abandoning the East, Nick eschews the version of home to which Gatsby aspires—one that quite literally killed him. Gatsby may seek the fixity of home as well, in and through Daisy, but the more chilling image that we are left with is of Gatsby in his grotesque car, “behind many layers of glass in a sort of green leather conservatory.” The car, like Gatsby’s house, is an object attained through conspicuous consumption.\(^{20}\) In its vulgar materialism it is, like the books in Gatsby’s library, both materially real and wrought with artifice. While Nick initially describes the car as “a rich cream color” (64), not unlike the virginal white with which Daisy is associated, by the end of the novel it is simply as “yellow” (139). “[B]right with nickel” details, a cheaper metal than silver or gold, which “mirrored a dozen suns,” the car is a giant, “swollen” and “monstrous” (64) illusion, not unlike Gatsby himself. It is the green interior that interests me most: for Gatsby green signals motion, for Nick it is the colour of settlement. Green is at once the colour of (new) money and of the pastoral. Green beckons Gatsby toward Daisy, her whiteness propped up by her gold interior, just like the flower itself, her voice “full of money” (120), but it is also what prompts Nick, by contrast, to flee the city and opt out.

\(^{20}\) Thorstein Veblen created this term to describe members of the upper class who strategically spent their wealth to flaunt their socioeconomic power. In Veblen’s estimation, the wives of rich men were particularly drawn to this type of behaviour. See Veblen 49-59.
It is significant that we never learn from which exact city Nick hails. Though he is presumably from Wisconsin, we are left only with the vague impression that Nick is a Midwesterner—or, as he puts it, simply a “Westerner.” When Nick crosses the bridge on his thirtieth birthday, he realizes that it is time to “grow up” and that opportunities are slipping away. Disinclined to that model of futurity, he returns to the region in what we might conceive of as an act, in Kathryn Bond Stockton’s formulation, of “growing sideways.” Rejecting the “vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up,” Nick instead engages a process of “lateral growth” (Stockton 11). What is fascinating about this move is that through his disavowal of reproductive futurity, symbolized foremost by his rejection of Jordan, Nick affirms his position within the family that has cast him off, cast him East. In A Queer Time and Place, Jack Halberstam argues, “the time of reproduction is ruled by a biological clock for women and by the strict bourgeois rules of respectability and scheduling for married couples.” At the same time, “the time of inheritance refers to an overview of generational time within which values, wealth, goods, and morals are passed through family ties from one generation to the next. It also connects the family to the future of both familial and national stability” (5). By returning to the Midwest, Nick inscribes himself again in this “time of inheritance,” but, oddly, in doing so he accentuates the temporal disjunction between the future of his family and that of the nation. Here, the regional attributes of the Midwestern home grind up against the frantic lonesomeness of the East, a place in which even the couple form fails to produce any meaningful sort of relation.

Nick’s queerness, then, figures not only as a refusal of heterosexual coupling, but also as a rejection of what Halberstam terms “metronormative logics” during a historical period in which urban queer cultures across the Western world were starting to flourish. As Halberstam describes it, “the metronormative narrative maps a story of migration onto the coming-out narrative” (36). Yet this narrative overlooks the reality that “many queers from rural or small
towns move to the city of necessity, and then yearn to leave the urban area and return to their small towns” (37). Nick’s narrative trajectory away from the city and back toward the region parallels his seeming inability to fully embrace or articulate his queerness. To be clear, I am not suggesting that Nick’s move back to the Midwest is commensurate with his sexual liberation; to a certain degree, I am arguing just the opposite. A queer reading of Gatsby is not one that enables us to linger on scenes of identification and affirmation, but rather to dwell in queer temporalities and spatialities that signal the potential for new forms of relationality that defy precisely the model of “liberation” that Jazz Age socialites, queer and straight, embraced. In fact, given that the Jazz Age fancied itself to be a rejection of the “strict pubic morality” that governed the nineteenth century (Fitzgerald, “Echoes” 16), and that its most notable trait according to Fitzgerald was sexual promiscuity, then the story Jazz Agers told themselves was exactly the narrative of sexual liberation that Foucault’s “repressive hypothesis” exposes to be false. As if aware that Jazz Age sexuality and hedonism liberate precisely no one, Nick turns away from this model of liberation and seeks an alternate logic.

As of 1920, according to the US census, more Americans were living in urban locales than in rural ones for the first time in the history of the nation (“Urban and Rural Areas—History”). We are uncertain where Nick is in the narrative present, and it is entirely possible that he is living in a Midwestern city rather than in a small country town. While I do not want to conflate the regional with the rural, in this era when the idea of “national time” was first emerging, it was beginning to ambivalently coalesce around the urban and the cosmopolitan. Put another way, as Halberstam argues, to move from national time to local time signals a queering of time, one that is attuned to differences in scale (Time 6). We might think of the difference between the local and the national in terms of Eve Sedgwick’s twin concepts of the minoritized and the
universalized.\textsuperscript{21} If Fitzgerald’s version of the Jazz Age posits universal claims about how people experienced history, then Nick’s extrication of himself from the masses that attend Gatsby’s parties results in his minoritization. As with Sedgwick’s schema, wherein the minoritized subject dwells in a specific identity, Nick too pronounces his difference from those out East. His is a story of queerness that is coded as a story of regional difference; the two are impossibly bound up. When Nick states, “I see now that this has been a story of the West, after all,” he may as well claim, “I see now that this has been a story of queerness, after all.” Each of the “Westerners” that he implicates in this story—“Tom and Gatsby, Daisy and Jordan and I” (Fitzgerald, \textit{Gatsby} 176)—in some way subvert the institutions that uphold normative conventions of gender and sexuality. In his return to the Midwest, I am arguing, Nick is not seeking the security of such conventions, but instead a space in which endurable forms of relationality are still possible, in which his defiance will not lead to him to (social) death.

Much American literature from the late teens and early twenties examines the psychological reasons for urbanization and expresses an increasing ambivalence toward the rural. Texts such as Sherwood Anderson’s \textit{Winesburg, Ohio}, Robert Frost’s \textit{North of Boston}, Edgar Lee Master’s \textit{Spoon River}, Sinclair Lewis’s \textit{Babbitt}, and Jean Toomer’s \textit{Cane}, to name a few, explore the claustrophobia and nastiness of small-town life. Rejecting the romantic utopianism that Nick still partly embraces, which relies on a naïve belief in organic community as an ideal alternative to rampant individualism, these texts paint a picture of small-town America that is at best unpleasant. One of the best readers of this archive, Scott Herring, has gathered together in \textit{Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism}, a counter archive of queer modernist regionalist texts that, in their rejection of “modernist metronormativity” (31), “present us with a guidebook to a

\textsuperscript{21}See \textit{Epistemology of the Closet}. 
few social and geographic spaces that urbanized high-culture texts tried and failed to remainder” (36). Reminding us that the gravitation of queer individuals to urban centres was occurring within and alongside such other phenomenon as the Great Migration, Herring delves into the “backcountry of critique” (25) in search of forms of queer “worlding” that “voice dissatisfaction from inside the confines of queer urbanized modernism” (35).

While Herring focuses largely on an archive that “relays a queer-based non-metropolitanism into a queer-laden anti-urbanism” (10), I am here explicitly working through a text that is both highly metropolitan and not easily identifiable as queer. Rather than constructing a counter archive, I am instead reading one of modernism’s most canonical metropolitan texts for its geographical critique. As Herring points out, the divide between urban and rural is “not only a geographical marker wedded to an arbitrary population count” but also “a social fantasy whose cartographies are as much psychic, emotive, stylistic and relational…” Hence, at the same time that queers were flocking to Manhattan, they were also retreating to Fire Island (13-14), a place not too far from the fictional West Egg, which we learn was once a small “fishing village” (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 107).

As the population shift in the late teens ultimately tipped the scales from rural to urban, the United States came to imagine itself as a fundamentally urbanized culture. This urbanization accompanied American’s transformation after the First World War into a superpower. “We were the most powerful nation,” Fitzgerald writes. “Who could tell us any longer what was fashionable and what was fun” (“Echoes” 14)? By linking America’s power to questions of fashionability, Fitzgerald speaks to larger issues of self-fashioning and self-styling. These are the issues that Herring takes up in the context of queer culture and the emergence of what he identifies, in what initially appears to be an oxymoronic figuration, as the “charmed circle” of queer urbanity (26). The texts that push back against the cosmopolitan biases of queer
modernism, such as Willa Cather’s “Paul’s Case,” draw our attention to what has been lost in this rush to unsettle, to urbanize, to modernize, to become stylish. The urbanization of queer culture alongside the urbanization of the United States suggests that modern queer communities have often replicated national trends as much as they have also served as sites of resistance to them. Nick registers the melancholy of the displaced queer who abandons the world he once knew for the promise of a better one, yet he ultimately abandons passive adherence to the fashion of cosmopolitanism in favour of the more active pursuit of self-fashioning.

If the feeling that structures Nick’s life out East is nostalgia, and if home is an affective state as much as it is a material one, then is it possible for Nick to arrive home? Nick’s intense nostalgia recalls its own etymology: nostos (“return home”) and algos (“pain”). Nick can return to his hometown, but can he—or anyone, for that matter—return home? In part, this is a temporal issue. As Gertrude Stein declares in *Everybody’s Autobiography*, upon visiting the site of her demolished childhood home in Oakland, “there is no there there” (289). Put another way, by Nick himself, “you can’t repeat the past” (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 110). In order for home to remain home, it cannot exist in the past, it must have future orientation. Its security lies in its promise of endurance. In this sense Daisy and Tom have a home, it’s simply an unpleasant one. What does home look like for Nick? The response to this question lies in the future he hopes to inhabit, it lies in the concept of dwelling. For Nick, dwelling is intricately linked to writing; he dwells in the space of the narrative. As with Gatsby, whom he houses in this narrative, Nick produces a home for himself through writing. The text is space of endurance, the site of futurity through which he reaches ever outwards to new readers with whom he forms endlessly new kinds of relations with Nick and with the text. The past, preserved in the text, finds its future through reading.
Nick’s fascination with Gatsby hinges on Gatsby’s self-authorship. Gatsby’s flawed logic is that he wants to live fully in his memories, which results in his finding the present-day Daisy jarring. Conversely, Nick does not believe that he can inhabit the past, but desires only to record it as it “flits up” (Benjamin, “Theses” 255). Nick starts out as a milquetoast Ivy Leaguer who fills his bookshelves with crisp editions of books on finance. Gatsby, a man who has never even cut the pages of the books in his own library, teaches him a different kind of reading. At the outset, Nick proclaims himself “rather literary” and explains he began the summer with “the high intention of reading many other books besides” (Fitzgerald, Gatsby 4) the ones he has purchased. In the end, it is the inscrutable Gatsby whom he tries to render intelligible, and who frustrates his investments in seeing life through a “single window.” To return to Fitzgerald’s aphorism, Nick discovers the importance of being able to hold “two opposed ideas in mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function.” Gatsby is both the corrupt bootlegger who consumes wastefully and attempts to control the woman he desires, and the diehard romantic who values human relationships over the many things he has amassed. This ability to see beyond one single narrow perspective on the world, to hone multiple narratives, to understand the importance of perception and the subjective nature of reality that James so well articulates, is what enables Nick to author himself. Perhaps what Nick best learns from Gatsby is not to repeat his mistakes.

In short, homebuilding is a practice that is closely linked to the imagination. Material conditions do not produce a dwelling; they are integral to it, but they facilitate and give form to a phenomenon that pre-exists. As Heidegger contends, “we attain dwelling, so it seems, only by means of building,” and yet “not every building is a dwelling” (145). Gatsby’s mansion, which dilates in and out of clarity, signifies many things—a site for parties, a container of luxurious objects, a workplace for Gatsby’s employees, an energy drain---but it is decidedly not a home. Gatsby dies because he does not know how to dwell, and he cannot dwell because he never built.
Rather, he takes short cuts, cheating the law to make his money and cheating time to regain Daisy. Gatsby clings to the image of Daisy as his home, much like America clings to the American Dream. What he doesn’t realize is that Daisy, like the American Dream, has long forgotten him. The green light at the end of Daisy’s dock is, to Gatsby, like a reflection in the rearview mirror. “What if man's homelessness consisted in this,” Heidegger demands, “that man still does not even think of the real plight of dwelling as the plight? Yet as soon as man gives thought to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer” (161). In his desire to erase his past, Gatsby lacks a self-reflexive relationship to the present. At the outset of the novel he is already dead, and he dies over and over again for us with each re-reading, but Nick, by comparison, is constantly striving, constantly aching to arrive.

1.5 Away from Paris

“One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless and yet be determined to make them otherwise,” Fitzgerald urges in “The Crack-Up” (69). Nick has been told that there is no future for him in the Midwest, but he returns there determined to stake one out, realizing that there is also no future in the very place that he has been promised there would be one. Unlike some of the more marginalized characters that I examine in subsequent chapters, Nick grew up with an original sense of belonging. This is not to say that he can easily recover the old joy and security, but rather to suggest that to even have a physical space—a house, a hometown, a family—to which to return proves increasingly to be a privilege within a modern world that so easily discharges past structures and replaces them with the flimsy and the ephemeral. Without glorifying the past, as Tom Buchanan does in his nativist rants, I want to make space for modernist nostalgia as an essential aspect of dwelling. In Fitzgerald’s writing, and specifically in Gatsby, dwelling is intricately related to the question of what it means to feel historical, not only in the sense of possessing a past, but also in possessing a future that exists in complex relation to
that past. Nick hitches his wagon to a star that was there long before his birth, when he was merely a twinkle in his father’s eye, and which glitters onward into the darkness of time and space.

Just as dwelling animates building and renders it viable, the novel’s final image of running with arms outstretched toward the “orgastic future” only to be “borne back ceaselessly into the past” suggests that home is a practice rather than a static place or relational dynamic. There is no final scene of arrival, no ending; the text, like the home, endures through constant renewal. Queer writers and critics especially are tasked with the labour of re-working typically exclusionary traditions. While modernists such as Djuna Barnes and Gertrude Stein experimented with new forms, others such as Countee Cullen, Willa Cather, and, I would add, Nick Carraway struggled to transform and reanimate conventional forms. For Nick, this act of recuperation extends beyond the formal architecture of the narrative space to regionalist concerns. Fitzgerald may have written the novel in Paris, reflecting back on his homeland, but his treatment of the United States is far from totalizing. Rather, he is attuned to the same regional dynamics that Hemingway is when in *A Moveable Feast* his younger self muses: “Maybe away from Paris I could write about Paris as in Paris I could write about Michigan” (19). Ironically, the memoir is his older self is doing precisely that. Fitzgerald also turned to European scenes in later work such as “Babylon Revisited” (1931) and *Tender is the Night* (1934). As was the case for Hemingway, it required a degree of nostalgia, predicated by a remove, for him to set his sights afar. Immanent in Nick’s longing for the Midwest is the rosy-hued longing of the expatriate author, hunkered down in a Parisian café and wistfully remembering the local scenes of his childhood.

Such nostalgia is equally a desire to return home, like Odysseus in his boat, and a recognition that, as Odysseus discovers and as L.P. Hartley so aptly puts it, “the past is a foreign
country; they do things differently there” (5). For a young Fitzgerald in Paris, the past quite literally did occur in a foreign country, although *Gatsby* riffs on the many senses of this conceit. While “the fresh, green breast of the new world” once brought explorers “face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to [Gatsby’s] capacity for wonder,” by the 1920s such a capacity exists only retroactively. It exists “behind” Gatsby, “somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.” The ambiguity of this image hinges on the spatiotemporal possibilities of the word “behind.” Is the “vast obscurity” in fact the Midwest, imagined here as “the dark fields of the republic” (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 180), or is Fitzgerald hinting at an American pastoral that has long since disappeared? Is this a comment on the radical alterity of the past, or the temporal alterity of the region? And what are we as readers to make of the chasm that exists now between the America of 1925 and the America of today?

Texts such as *Gatsby* afford their readers a lateral relationship to the past; they are our passports to that other world. This is not to say that we can alter the past, or even fully understand it, but rather that in modernism we may discover strange affinities that remind us that modernity is an ongoing and often recursive condition, an ongoing “structure of feeling” (R. Williams 133). *Gatsby*, which attempts to take the moral pulse of its time, trades not in symptoms, causes and cures, but rather in an affective economy that reveals to us what it felt like to live through the 1920s as a white man with enormous privilege—as a man who was bred to feel a sense of possession over the past, and by extension the future. Nick’s queerly troubled relationship to the past, we might argue, is the queerness of modernity itself. In any case, it presents an opportunity for change.

There are, of course, enormous problems with Nick’s fantasy of America’s past, which entirely overlooks the very real violence that the settlers’ “wonder” has exacted. Given his
condemnation of Tom and Daisy as “careless people” who “smashed things and creatures” (Fitzgerald, *Gatsby* 179), his inability to connect his critique of bourgeois immorality to a broader history of settler-colonialism is striking. Cather may have influenced by Fitzgerald, and vice versa, but Fitzgerald, unlike Cather, pays scant attention to Native Americans in his writings. *Gatsby* entirely overlooks the slavery and genocide that was a concomitant dimension of colonization. In refusing to perform what Sedgwick brands “paranoid reading” (123) here, I am not trying to gloss over these profoundly problematic aporias. Rather, I am searching for ways in which this text, often hailed as “the great American novel,” might be salvaged and inhabited anew. The antidote to sitting like an anxious lover by a telephone that never rings is to sit down and place the call.
Chapter Two: Settling Gertrude Stein

How do you like what you have.
---Gertrude Stein, “Portraits and Repetition”

Anyone who knows anything about Gertrude Stein knows that she was a homebody. Her apartment with Alice B. Toklas at 27 Rue de Fleurus became an epicentre of early twentieth-century art and culture. She did her best writing there, nestled in amongst her paintings, books and sundry personal effects. She and Alice even remained in Nazi-occupied France during the Second World War, despite the pleas of friends and officials that they seek safety elsewhere. In fact, Stein only returned to the United States once during her entire adult life, in 1934. Three years later, she would document her US tour in Everybody’s Autobiography, boldly declaring: “except in daily life nobody is anybody” (109). Stein’s texts likewise respond constructively to a fraught historical moment in which the normative conventions of the nineteenth-century home were losing their grip. Both in her life and in her writing, Stein often played with the increasing elision of the boundary between private and public. Her writing re-deploys a once “settled language” (Narration 9) to reflect domestic arrangements that were socially quite unsettling.

A major figure within high modernism, Stein is more readily associated with her avant-garde aesthetics than she is with the home. In fact, she paved the way for texts such as The Great Gatsby, which emerged out of a generation of writers that quite literally looked up to her, often sitting at her feet during visits to her home, where she remained planted in her favourite chair. What is often overlooked in Stein criticism, however, is the complex interplay between style and domesticity in her work. The characters in her early texts suffer chronic exhaustion as a result of their wanderings, wanderings that figure largely in sexual terms and which leave them going nowhere fast. In this chapter, I turn to Three Lives and Tender Buttons in order to isolate the moment in her career in which she begins to sublimate her own errant desires into stylistic
experimentation. In learning to contain her own wandering tendencies within the realm of writing itself, Stein both saves herself from the fate of her characters and makes a powerful case for settling down.

Mobilizing Stein’s texts in order to make a broader intervention into critical discourses on the domestic, I argue that *Three Lives* and *Tender Buttons* stage a recuperation of the private realm that renders the domestic a dynamic source of daily pleasure. Stein uses grammar to reorient her relationship to the social and to produce aesthetic strategies for inhabiting modernity. Centering on errant sexuality, *Three Lives* and *Tender Buttons* put errancy to constructive use in ways that differ wildly from the more antisocial investments of contemporary queer theory. They thus offer a radical reassessment of the home and its social function. Far from staking out an oppositional position to the normative, Stein, according to the narrator of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, “dislikes the abnormal, it is so obvious. She says the normal is so much more complicated and interesting” (83). *Three Lives* exposes attitudes towards transgression that the text reveals to be untenable. By contrast, *Tender Buttons* both finds value in ordinary domestic scenes and relishes in them. Against the position that the text rejects interpretation, I argue that Stein ekes out a textual space of privacy precisely through inscrutability. Employing a “difficult” style to protect the murky, meaningful inside of the text from the reader’s view, Stein treats writing itself as a homemaking practice. *Tender Buttons* creatively envisions the home as a discrete private realm that shelters its inhabitants from the burden of making themselves chronically socially intelligible. Settling becomes a highly idiosyncratic aesthetic and material act. In its final instance, *Tender Buttons* is not simply a radical revision of modern homemaking, but the long-awaited response to Stein’s early writings, in which homesickness quite literally proves deadly.
Understandably, feminist and queer scholars have condemned separate spheres for decades. The home has been the space to which queer people have been denied access or from which they have been exiled. At the same time, the cult of domesticity has cut women off from public and intellectual life and hidden abuse. The late Canadian Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau once famously declared, “there’s no place for the state in the bedrooms of the nation” (*Omnibus Bill*). While Trudeau hones in on the bourgeois Liberal fantasy that the intimate realm of the home should afford the individual a space of sexual freedom and privacy—and here, it is important to note, Trudeau meant to extend such rights beyond the heterosexual couple—the state’s biopolitical agenda relies heavily on the politicization of what happens in the bedroom. Even his formulation, “the bedrooms of the nation,” implies a link between the domestic realm of the bedroom and the domestic realm of the nation. In *The Way We Never Were*, Stephanie Coontz outlines the historical shift that occurred in the nineteenth century, a period that saw the private sphere grow starkly gendered. The subsequent dissolution of the public sphere in twentieth-century, in which the private, familial realm emerged as a microcosm of the nation, represented a “sharp break” from Classical and Enlightenment models that value a robust public sphere. This “scrutiny of private life” and “turn toward home…not only impoverished public life but made private relations more problematic than ever” (Coontz 121). For precisely this reason, recent feminist scholarship has wanted to re-direct the cultural focus away from the home and revalue the public sphere. These critics rightly lament the use of the private as the basic unit of society because it effaces the public, roundly dismissing the private as the sphere of inequality.

22 Notable examples include Elizabeth Maddock Dillon’s *The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere* (Stanford UP, 2004); Michael Warner’s *Publics and Counterpublics* (Zone, 2002); and the *No More Separate Spheres!: A Next Wave American Studies Reader* (Duke UP, 2002), in particular Berlant’s “Poor Eliza” and Kaplan’s “Manifest Democracy.” See Blair for an excellent overview of Stein’s salon, and the place of the home in the avant-garde. While Blair argues that Stein opens up the division between public and private through the circulation of her avant-garde writing into the domestic sphere, I am more focused on the place of the home within avant-garde writing itself.
Stein suggests, however, that privacy is both essential and imperative. In employing Stein to recuperate the home, I uncover modernist modes of thinking critically about privacy that are not reactionary or negative, but which suggest that privacy is most vital to those individuals from whom it has long been withheld.

2.2 Wanderings

Famously influenced by the post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne, Stein wrote *Three Lives* over the course of 1905 and 1906 “under [the] stimulus” (*Autobiography* 34) of one of his paintings. She was regularly posing for Picasso as he completed her portrait. As if summoning the ghost of Walt Whitman, Stein would stroll through Paris between sittings, “and the poignant incidents that she wove into the life of Melanctha were often these she noticed in walking down the hill from the rue Ravignan” (49).²³ Yet *Three Lives* feels a world away from the life of a Parisienne *flaneuse*. Each story takes place in the fictional town of Bridgepoint, a rough approximation of Baltimore, where Stein spent her teenage years. Its sandwich structure sees two short, bleak narratives of German immigrant women bookending a longer meditation on an unfortunate young woman’s tragic flaw: a propensity for misdirected, circular wandering. All three women die at the end of their stories. Perhaps the bleakest aspect of *Three Lives* is that their lives are so miserable that their deaths feel almost welcome. “The Good Anna” and “The Gentle Lena” play a crucial role in framing the central story in *Three Lives*, “Melanctha: Each One as She May.” Both stories focus on women who are socially and psychically stuck in

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²³ Stein acknowledges her debt to Whitman in “Poetry and Grammar” in 1934. Two decades earlier, Prof. Georgiana Goddard King of Bryn Mawr, in a clipping that Stein saved and which now belongs to the Beinecke, published an article on *Three Lives* in *The International*. Stein was struck by the article, and wrote out sections of it in her journal, seemingly at random. King notes that Stein, like Whitman, recorded her own idiosyncratic perceptions of the world, focusing on perception itself. “Whitman in his day provoked ridicule,” King notes, “but this tune is stranger than Whitman’s” (157). The influence of the Transcendentalists on Stein remains curiously under-examined.
oppressive circumstances from which they cannot seem to break free. Read in this light, their stories illuminate Melanctha’s wandering desires, and yet it is Melanctha’s story that best animates the larger issue of settling that I am gesturing towards.

I read “Melanctha” as the synecdochal story of Three Lives insomuch as it probes the twin problems of wandering and stagnancy that engulf the characters within all three stories. Stein models two competing psychological profiles through Jeff Campbell and Melanctha Herbert. Melanctha is a beautifully peripatetic figure whose racial and sexual liminality serve as sources of anxiety for her, an anxiety that is compounded by her ambiguous and often contradictory desires. She “was always losing what she had in wanting all the things she saw.” At times “sudden and impulsive and unbounded in some faith,” she alternately “would suffer and be strong in her repression” (Three Lives 62). Wandering in Melanctha’s story serves as a thinly veiled trope for sex, as critics have widely acknowledged and as the text’s repetitive diction underscores. She “always loved to be with horses; she loved to do wild things, to ride horses and to break and tame them.” Traipsing through “dark and smelly places,” she flirted with crass workman and “serious foreign sailors.” However, “it was not from the men that Melanctha learned her wisdom” but from Jane Harden, an alcoholic prostitute who “had many bad habits” (72).

Melanctha’s sexual relationship with Jane informs her entire understanding of love: “in every way she got it from Jane Harden.” Jane exposes Melanctha to heterosexual sex, but the two develop an intense mutual fondness for each other and come to wander “more to be together than

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24 John Carlos Rowe asks if blackness is just an aesthetic category in the story and thus a form of literary blackface, whether it works to denounce essentialist identity-based categories, or if it analogizes Stein’s own marginalization. Race underpins the complicated relationship between sexuality and respectability in the text, yet I would contend that race is the euphemism Stein appropriates in order to represent queerness from a safe distance. As Bridgman points out, she would eventually invent “an aesthetic rationale” for these substitutions but they began as “a form of evasiveness” that “permitted the broaching of taboo subjects” (56).
to see men.” This wandering tapers into a loving domestic arrangement. “There was nothing
good or bad in doing, feeling, thinking or in talking, that Jane spared her. Sometimes the lesson
came almost too strong for Melanctha, but somehow she always managed to endure it and so
slowly, but always with increasing strength and feeling, Melanctha began to really understand”
(74). Melanctha abandons Jane—who “really went to pieces”-- because Melanctha “was ready
now herself to do teaching” (75). After abandoning Jane, she sets her sights on Jeff, a middle
class African American doctor whose attitudes towards the domestic are by contrast far more
bourgeois and staid. Knowing of the affair with Jane leads Jeff to view Melanctha cynically, but
he is also attracted to her capacious attitude toward love. The word “love” recurs endlessly in the
story, as if we are reading the lyrics to a high modernist pop song. In a pivotal scene, Jeff insists
there are “just two kinds of ways of loving.” One way “is like one has a good quiet feeling in a
family when one does his work, and is always living good and being regular.” This type of love
is not necessarily sexual, but intimate and familial. The other kind of love, however, is
something more like the lust that consumes “any animal that’s low in the streets together.” Jeff
finds this latter usage of the term a vulgar offense to his bourgeois sensibilities, and adamantly
opposes it to the first. These are “all the kinds of love I know Miss Melanctha” (87), he then
concludes. We quickly determine that Jeff’s desire to compartmentalize bodily pleasure and to
set it apart from familial home life is impossible. He is chronically anxious and ambivalent. As
he yields to his attraction to Melanctha, he senses he is sulllying himself by indulging his lust for
a deviant woman whom he might also come to love.

In his clumsy effort to parse different types of love along the lines of respectability, Jeff
has simply revealed his own naïveté. The story insists that there are certain forms of experiential
knowledge that an academic education simply cannot deliver. Hence, Melanctha’s claim: “you
always looking as if you was thinking, and yet you really was never knowing about anybody and
certain not being really very understanding.” Melanctha caustically derides Jeff’s fear of “losing being good so easy,” suggesting that prudery “certainly don’t amount to very much.” The slippage between these two types of love produces a knotted cluster of meaning that thickens and changes shape as the narrative progresses. Each time “love” repeats it signifies something new, mimicking Jeff’s process of falling in love for the first time. Jeff exclaims, “I got a new feeling now, you been teaching to me, just like I told you once, just like a new religion to me, and I see perhaps what really loving is like, like really having everything new together, new things, little pieces all different, like I always been thinking was bad to be having, all go together like, to make one good big feeling” (112). The repetition of the term “love” is a form of defamiliarization that demands we critically examine and re-think a word’s meaning.

Still, Jeff cannot abide by Melanctha’s wanderings. He insists, “I got plenty experience just living regular and quiet with my family, and doing my work, and taking care of people, and trying to understand it” (82). He laments African Americans like Melanctha who “just keep running around…only just because they want to get excited,” and his attraction leaves him anxious and frustrated” (85). “She went so fast and Jeff was so slow to her” (116). Like two different radio frequencies that cannot converge, Jeff and Melanctha eventually “fell away from all knowing of each other” (146). Their torrid love affair, the unstable centre of the story, suddenly vanishes from the narrative altogether. Melanctha continues to wander into failed attachments, only to contract Tuberculosis and die in “a home for poor consumptives,” a trope on both her insatiable desires and her homelessness.

“Melanctha” is most obviously about sexuality, but, as Lisa Ruddick argues, “one might as easily reverse the emphasis and say that sex itself stands in the story as a metaphor for a certain type of mental activity. Melanctha’s promiscuity is part of an experimental promiscuity, an inability or unwillingness to approach the world selectively” (Ruddick 18). In this sense, the
story is far more than a salacious account of promiscuous sex. It proves to not really to be about sex at all but rather about wandering as a world-making practice, one that circumscribes sex as well as all of the attendant relational aspects of inhabitation. “Melanctha,” in other words, depicts a refusal to settle. The text may eye sexuality unflinchingly but it also interrogates the underlying impulse to seek shelter in another person. What are the perils of doing so, it demands? What desires must one sublimate? A meditation on inimical desires, “Melanctha” asks if it is even possible to be at home with another person. Melanctha figures as a vagrant whose wandering leads her nowhere, like a wheel spinning in mud. Negative to the core, she symbolizes the deathly dislocation that has long been associated with queer characters, and also valorized by dominant narratives in queer theory. Stein, however, rejects this version of wandering. In “Melanctha,” Stein projects identities onto her characters only to withdraw from them, redirecting her own errant impulses into language. It is precisely this stylistic errancy that later flourishes and finds a more positive articulation in the domestic scenes of Tender Buttons.

Three Lives is a text that is fed up with dialectical thinking. “Melanctha,” for instance, echoes the oppositional tone of the unpublished novella on which it is based: Q.E.D., Stein’s largely autobiographical novella about a sordid lesbian love triangle. Q.E.D. ends with its protagonist declaring, “very well, I am afraid it comes very near being a deadlock” (262). Much of Stein’s writing up until Three Lives is haunted by this sense of “deadlock.” In fact, the characters from Three Lives suffer from the same sense of impasse and exhaustion, but unlike in the case of Q.E.D., the text offers a way out through style itself. Stein models a realm beyond the impasse, one that she accesses through repetition. Stein’s syntax becomes what Kathryn Bond Stockton calls a “moving suspension” in which “meaning is moving and growing…even while time almost seems to hang suspended” (26). Stein asks how people from different cultures and experiences of “daily life” can employ the same language and “make it their own”? The answer
lies in the movement of words. Movement, another version of “insistence” or “emphasis,” informs meaning. Through movement, writing is “creating its existing” (Stein, *Narration* 10). While “a language that is settled does not change any more that is as to words and grammar,” the writer can put “pressure upon those words to make them do something that they did not do for those who made that language.” Stein finds this “a very interesting thing to watch” (4). This impulse to transform language drives her textual re-envisioning of the domestic.

Stein’s inimitable prose style produces a strangely mimetic relationship between the affects and the actions of the characters and the mood and movement of the prose itself. Yet while her prose appears endlessly repetitive, she maintains: “I never repeat that is while I am writing” (*Lectures* 79). Outlining her position on repetition in “Portraits and Repetition,” she declares: “I am inclined to believe there is no such thing as repetition. And really how can there be” (166). Stein’s refusal provokes amusement and incredulity. After all, reading her work can feel like listening to a skipping record. Her point, however, is that repetition in its purest form means sameness yet nothing is ever repeated the same way twice. The difference lies in the “emphasis,” which is never “exactly the same.” Inherent in the repetition of words, then, is the promise of difference, and with that difference, the inception of change. Melanctha seeks such change through the repetition of sex, but the text suggests that wandering without settling is like travelling down a dead-end street.

When she wrote *Three Lives*, Stein felt that the experience of time was shifting. The “past present future” was giving way to a “prolonged present” (“Composition” 31). In “Composition as Explanation,” she describes *Three Lives* as “groping for a continuous present.” Laying out her theories of the avant-garde, she claims: “Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition” (26). “The composition” is life as it is lived. People “are the composing of the composition that at the time they are living is the
composition of the time in which they are living” (29). Often unconsciously, artists work out of and with the “composition” of their own historical moment and in doing so produce something fundamentally new. Unlike the groping but productive artist, Melanctha proves “remarkably constant,” as Bryony Randall notes, and curiously immobile in her wandering. Infatuated with the present, she lacks any “short term or limited aim, rendering her experience entirely contingent on its momentary setting, and so psychically unavailable to her to re-examine and build on with hindsight” that “her experiences are, then, ultimately unable to initiate change” (Randall 110).

Queer characters have long been associated with Melanctha-style wandering, which is promiscuous, infertile, deathly. In her writing after Three Lives, however, Stein rebels against the standardizing dimensions of language in order to produce an ordinary vision of queer life in which familial love and lust co-exist. This vision crystallizes in Tender Buttons. By confining her wandering impulses to the realm of style, Stein finds an endurable way to inhabit the social, which she always engages foremost on the level of grammar. Her writing practice comes to hinge on the concept of settling. In On Settling, the philosopher Robert Goodin enumerates the positive benefits of settling, an act that he juxtaposes with striving. Goodin describes how within late capitalism striving has become one of the biggest “sources of discontent” (10). He addresses settling down, settling in, settling up, settling for, settling on, claiming, “what runs through all these forms of settling is a quest for fixity” (3). These small shifts in prepositions recall Stein’s argument about repetition, as the term is redeployed each time with a slightly different orientation. “Nothing is fixed forever,” he admits, but “the phenomenology of settling is such that, once something is settled, it stays settled, at least for a while” (7). Settling is a “counterpoint to striving, not an absolute alternative,” though “in the end, a judicious mixture of both is required” (4). Settling can mean settling for something that is “less than ideal, less than all you
wanted,” but Goodin suggests that fixity outweighs endless possibility (24). Its value is “intrapersonal, interpersonal, and social. The sheer fact of fixity enables people to exercise their agency effectively, in some temporally extended fashion. It enables them to formulate plans and pursue them, to make commitments and keep them, to craft narrative identities and live up to them” (29). Temporally, settling allows you to “plan your life” and staves off the exhaustion of always trying to weigh all options at all times (33-4). This certainty produces a sense of agency.

One of patriarchy’s most insidious qualities is that it estranges women from domestic life by stripping them of an agential relationship to it. *Three Lives* demands that women strategically transvalue the domestic and thus reclaim that which is oppressive when it is prescribed insomuch as it is devalued through its prescription. The fantasy that individuals can free themselves from the oppressive systems in which they are implicated remains just that—a fantasy. Yet *Three Lives* urges the reader to consider forms of resistance that are vital to living within these systems, and which occur most powerfully on the micro level of the ordinary. This seemingly conservative investment in slow change resonates in recent critical theory. For instance, Mark Seltzer has recently described “the incrementalist turn” within Humanities departments that are themselves shrinking (727). This “turn toward the minor and scaled down” addresses the failure of master narratives of shock, crisis, trauma and revolution to capture the nuance with which we inhabit modernity. Stein’s texts offer a way of engaging in precisely this mode of thinking the everyday by coercing their readers into producing a transformative relationship to life’s repetitive details so that they can endure the process of reading. As Sianne Ngai puts it, by “inducing a series of fatigues or minor exhaustions, rather than a single, major blow to the imagination, [Stein’s style] paradoxically forces the reader to go on in spite of its equal

enticement to readers to give up…pushing us to formulate new tactics for reading” (255). What Ngai nicely identifies is the affective texture of the ordinary, and in this sense she foregrounds Kathleen Stewart’s lovely account of ordinary affects, which Stewart claims, “give things the quality of a something to inhabit and animate. Politics starts in the animated inhabitation of things,” which is necessarily attuned to repetition and the difference it makes. “There’s a politics to difference in itself—the difference of danger, the differences of habit and dull routine, the difference of everything that matters” (15-6), Stewart asserts. My aim in this chapter is to demonstrate how Stein’s texts come to thrive on this grammar of the ordinary.

2.3 Domesticating the Avant-Garde

*Tender Buttons* offers an alternative vision of the errant: a world in which aesthetic wandering produces a composition of playfulness and domestic satisfaction that is grounded in exquisitely fine-tuned shifts in emphasis. Gone is the angst that riddles *Three Lives*. The speaker of *Tender Buttons* announces, “the difference is spreading” (Stein 19). The narrator repeats a variation of this phrase mid-way through “Food” when she claims, “so little is more.” Register the difference that one slice of food can make: “A sudden slice changes the whole plate, it does so/ suddenly” (52). More noticeable than the small and bizarre snippets that she gives us of these little pieces is her repetition of key food groups and images. There are two stanzas entitled “milk,” for instance. What is the difference between them? Nothing. And everything. “Food” opens with a long passage about roast beef. It teaches us quickly what we already know, that no two roast beefs are the same. Few things illustrate the potential for sameness and difference between objects than food. Chicken is chicken, but once you have eaten one you cannot physically ingest the same bird twice. More broadly, chicken can be raised, prepared, cooked and served in countless different ways. In its repeated usage, chicken becomes “a dirty word” and also a “dirty bird” (65). As Liesl Olson puts it, Stein “describes the stuff of ordinary life, of habit,
but she abstracts this stuff by rearranging its relational context.” Thus, *Tender Buttons* challenges “the ways in which we habitually associate things together” (99). Attuned to the habitual, the text works to defamiliarize the domestic without undermining its value. In fact, it locates value precisely in the unpredictable quality of domesticity.

*Tender Buttons* echoes the old idiom, “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” The objects in the text appear constantly mobile as the narrator constantly reorients herself in relationship to them. At first *Tender Buttons* appears to be a far cry from the collection of “still lifes” that Richard Bridgman deems it to be; the text riffs on this pictorial method, but its visual economy is fluid and dynamic (127). Yet a still life is not, in point of fact, inherently still. Rather, as Stewart asserts, “a still is a genre that captures the liveness of animate objects” by imbuing them with “desire” (18). Just as “[o]rdinary life, too, draws its charge from rhythms of flow and arrest,” a still life might consist of “the fragments of experience that pull at ordinary awareness but rarely come into full frame” (19). Stein’s text, like Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, for instance, trades in fragments, and yet its fragments work to reveal a world of more palpable “potential” (20). Quite the opposite of an impasse, “a still life is a static state filled with vibratory motion, or resonance. A quivering in the stability of a category or trajectory, it gives the ordinary the charge of an unfolding” (19). By parsing the relationship between a “still”—here, a noun rather than an adjective--Stewart reveals how settling down, slowing down, growing still, allows the speaker to grow more attuned to the texture of the present she inhabits.

Settling is not commensurate with stillness, in other words; it possesses its own motion. Stein’s speaker seems almost bewildered by the freedom and pleasure she exacts from the present. In “Food,” she literally absorbs the world around her. As she contemplates roast beef, she remarks, “considering the circumstances there is no occasion/ for a reduction” nor for “obligation.” “Considering everything and which way the turn/ is tending, considering
everything why is there no restraint, considering everything what makes the place settle and the plate distinguish some specialties.” Here, the speaker asks what makes settled places distinguishable. Ordinary domestic life, served up on a blank plate. No two meals are the same, just as no two families are the same. Composition is reduced to the level of the personal, and everyone does it differently. The speaker is caught off guard that she does not feel “restraint,” given the recent “turn” of “everything” in her life. She then admits her inability to fully understand her circumstances. “The whole thing is not understood and this is not strange considering that there is no education,/ this is not strange because having certainly/ does show the difference in cutting, it shows that/ when there is turning there is no distress.” The reason that “the whole thing is not understood” is because this speaker has been given no “education” in queer domestic life (44).

Notably, this passage describes domestic activity as “turning” rather than wandering. “Turning” becomes the movement of settling. Minutes turn over into hours, hours into days, days into weeks, as calendar pages turn over onto new images, fresh promises. Someone turns the laundry over into the drier, turns over the potatoes, starts a new job and thus turns over a new chapter. Sleepless, she tosses and turns in bed. The world turns on its axis and, with it, our own small worlds in their own small universes. Turning implies a certain staying in place that also affords development. It differs from “cutting” because nothing is lost while something is potentially gained. Gone is the “distress” that plagued Melanctha. Where once Anna felt “empty” at home, there is now quite literally a full plate. Stein’s speaker imagines the “tender turn” of entering into domestic life with another. There is a “stouter symmetry” to this home. “Around the size that is small” and “inside/ the between that is turning, all the region is measuring/ and melting is exaggerating” (45). This domestic arrangement is about the safety of the inside. “Claiming nothing, not claiming anything, not a claim/ in everything, collecting claiming, all this
makes a harmony.” In fact, “it even makes a succession.” In this new order of things, there is “hope” in mundane objects, such as spoons, doors, tables and dates. But the poem also takes pains to distinguish between sameness and “difference”: “The kindly way to feel separating is to have a space between.” “This shows a likeness.” A “likeness” is a similarity that is not coercive. It allows for difference and “space,” but it also enables attraction (47).

*Tender Buttons* formally rejects the logics that ground a queer politics of difference in visibility. Certainly, it trades in the visual, but the domestic and sexual economies that it puts on display--and remember that “tender” is another word for money--circulate in abstraction. Foucault maintains in *The Will to Knowledge* that discourse can actually produce new forms of oppression, trapping us in the deadlock of identity politics. In *Tender Buttons*, Stein avoids this pitfall by creating an endurable relationship to language and writing. She claims in “Poetry and Grammar” that “every one must stay with the language their language that has come to be spoken and written and which has in it all the history of its intellectual recreation.” This belief produces for Stein “the problem of poetry” that she first confronts in *Tender Buttons*, in which she tries “to constantly realize the thing anything so that I could recreate that thing” (*Lectures* 241). Ostensibly positing a relationship between form and cathexis, she turns to poetry to rearrange objects and her feelings about them, to renew her relationship to the world. For Stein, this occurs first on the level of grammar, which she finds “very exciting” (220). Grammar is a form of orientation and settling—settling because the writer must always make do with the imperfections of language. Moreover, grammar is evident for Stein in the most ordinary of circumstances. She even credits her realization that “sentences are not emotional but paragraphs are” to “listening to Basket my dog drinking. And anybody listening to a dog’s drinking will see what I mean” (223).
In *Tender Buttons*, Stein’s attention turns to nouns, which she identifies as the basic unit of poetry. She recounts the pleasure of saying the name of something or someone that you love yet wonders, “was there a way of naming things that would not invent names, but means names without naming them” (236). Locating herself in a Whitmanian tradition, she laments, “we who had known the name so long did not get a thrill from just knowing them.” But then Stein, whose theories of genius render her not exactly the most democratic of poets, makes an interesting move: she claims, “everybody has to be a poet.” In other words, everybody has to figure out how to create something without “naming it.” This is because we must rediscover how to delight in language, for a naming a thing “is no longer anything to thrill any one except children” (237). Through the re-naming of objects, we “recreate” the world. Stein’s belief in language’s transformative potential is clear from the beginning of the text: “All this and not ordinary, not un-ordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading” (*Tender Buttons* 19). *Tender Buttons* takes ordinary objects and strips them of their familiarity. In this process of defamiliarization, it is not the home that changes but the inhabitant’s relationship to it. The text pays homage to the idiosyncrasy and difference that homosexuality circumscribes despite its etymological dependence on sameness. The “prolonged present” of “Melanctha” grows wonderfully heterogeneous.

2.4 “Act so there is no use in a center”

It is helpful to consider how Gayle Rubin’s concept of the “charmed circle” might frame the de-centered home world of *Tender Buttons*. In “Thinking Sex,” Rubin describes how sexual minorities in the West have long been entangled in a juridical nightmare, a web of laws that have both penalized and excluded them from the protections that heteronormative couples enjoy. “For over a century,” Rubin explains, “no tactic for stirring up erotic hysteria has been as reliable as the appeal to protect children” (146). Because queer sex is generally non-reproductive, it is
tantamount to social suicide—or worse, murder. “Small differences in value or behaviour are often experienced as cosmic threats” within this repressive landscape (151). Rubin then diagrams the “sexual hierarchy” of US society. At the centre of the circular diagram is “the charmed circle,” which encompasses “good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality.” At the “outer limits” is that which is “bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned” (153). Favoring a politics of sexual liberation, she goes on to denounce a feminist politic that pathologizes non-normative sexualities (166).

Rubin’s text has been foundational within sexuality studies because of the radical challenge that it poses to the very notion of an evaluative approach to sexuality and sexual practices. Her theory of the “charmed circle” animates my discussion of the home precisely because, within queer theory at least, the charmed circle and the home have become commensurate. Queer sex happens elsewhere, beyond the home, in what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner term “queer zones and other worlds” (547). It is forcibly public and enjoys no privacy, nor should it if we are to follow the negative logic of theorists who wish to use “sex and theory [to] unsettle garbled but powerful norms” that shore up the privileges of straight sex.

*Tender Buttons* likewise embraces so-called sexual perversion but, in stark contrast, it reincorporates queer sexuality into the home. In fact, queer sex grows rather ordinary. Nipples become “buttons,” a vagina a “box,” and an orgasm a “cow.” In re-sexualizing the home space of the text, but in a way that is largely illegible to the reader, Stein formally constructs the privacy that so many queer people are denied. While the text seems to put her life on public display, I want to argue that it in fact re-inscribes the home with a sense of privacy through its inscrutable aesthetics. Take Stein’s use of private language, pet names and inside jokes, which critics have patched together over the years. In her detailed account of Stein’s notebooks, Ulla Dydo lays bare the connection between “the creative act and the sexual act”: 
Always it is Stein, the husband, who makes love to Toklas, the wife, which culminates in her *having a cow*, or orgasm (the verb *to cow* also appears). Toklas’ sexual fulfillment inspires Stein to write, which in turn represents sexual fulfillment for herself. It produces literature, or what she at time calls *babies*. Toklas’ *cows* are equivalent to Stein’s *babies*, but both cows and babies are also their joint creations. (28)

Dydo unpacks the relationship between the figurative, the literal, and the tropological in Stein’s writing, which becomes the ground on which Stein likes to play. Arguably, these junctures also serve as fodder for critics. At the very least, they allow us to ponder the recurring image of roast beef in the text in a rather different light.

In “Live Sex Acts,” Lauren Berlant implicitly extends Rubin’s argument to argue that while domestic privacy is a legal privilege that has been conferred upon heterosexual marital sex, “the zone of privacy” that such sex enjoys is in fact morbid (381). As sex becomes idealized, fixed, stale, hidden away, it can only ever belong to the world of “dead citizenship” in which “identities are not live, or in play; but dead, frozen, fixed, at rest” (383). Berlant contrasts this with “live sex acts” that “do not aspire to the privacy protection of national culture, nor to the narrative containment of sex into one of the conventional romantic forms of consumer romance heterosexuality.” While we might instinctually conceive of queer sex as closeted, or at best under-represented, instead it is straight sex that hides beneath a “deep shadow” (386). At the same time that the powers that be pretend to stay out of the sacred “bedrooms of the nation,” they also consciously reject the “live sex” that creeps up from the margins, reminding us of the sheer “fantasy” of sexual purity and heteronormative reproduction. Berlant warns queers against seeking admittance into this lethal zone. Knocking the final nail into the coffin, she argues women disproportionately suffer as they are “both the bearers of the value of privacy and always exposed and available to be killed into identity” against their own will.
Berlant’s argument is both compelling and reductive. Of course, we now inhabit a different juridical landscape than we did in 1995 when it was published, and laws around homosexuality have changed considerably within the United States. This does not change Liberalism’s project, but it undeniably affects how queer sexuality is lived on the ground. She observes that queers confront two options—“assimilation” and “banishment” (402)—as they ambivalently seek “the promise of corporeal safety and the privacy of deep shadow” (395) that civil rights seemingly afford. I would venture, however, that these oppositions are in the process of collapsing, as assimilationist fantasies become juridical reality. My larger contention is that Berlant overstates the law’s power to determine lives and identities and give shape to everyday experience. By framing sexuality in terms of citizenship, she exposes the disciplinary structures that govern our desires, but she also overlooks the powerful importance of “fantasies” of privacy (404) that take as their terrain ordinary life. Her oppositional thinking—sex is either live or dead—results from her juridical approach to sexuality in this instance, in which one is either inside or outside of the law, but unlike as is the case in her more contemporary thinking, this foundational argument fails to conceive of alternate modes of privacy, or to grasp its crucial role in allowing us to feel safe, secure, and renewed.

Feminist scholars and activists have made crucial interventions to reveal the ways in which the home is culturally constructed; my aim here is not to dismiss these interventions but to extend such lines of thought in new directions. For some, there can be something distinctly unsexy about the marital bed, yawning out from the master suite at the centre of the suburban ranch-style home. But I want us to think about how one might re-make that bed, about what it looks like when one puts that house up for sale and moves in somewhere a little less predictable, a little bit more like the rooms in Tender Buttons. There are good and obvious reasons why one would be wary of the home, historically a site of incredible shame and repression for many, but
to reduce the home to the normative is to contribute to a new kind of shame in being ordinary that emerges within the cult of what Biddy Martin calls the “extraordinary homosexual.” “In some queer work,” Martin laments, “the very fact of attachment has been cast only as punitive and constraining because already socially constructed, so that indifference to objects, or the assumption of a position beyond objects—the position, for instance, of death—becomes the putative achievement or goal of queer theory.” In this paradigm, queer radicalism demands that one “located oneself outside or in a transgressive relationship to kinship or community” (25). And yet the social is inescapable; we necessarily inhabit the social. Even queer theorists enjoy their creature comforts, run errands, cuddle their pets (and, gasp, partners), binge watch popular television shows, clip their toenails, hold the door for strangers, scrub the bathtub on a rainy Sunday afternoon. These are ordinary social acts. Radical negativity perpetuates a glaring theory-practice divide that more or less spits in the face of one of the most crucial and vital tenets of feminism and other social justice movements: praxis. Far from devaluing the ordinary, we should attend to the ways in which the ordinary empowers a spectrum of possibilities and modes of inhabitation. This more reparative approach to the home invites us to discern how to live with and find potential in the things that scare us.

If the home is the dead space that Berlant suggests, it is curious that proponents of queer negativity have not embraced its lethality. Rather than plumb the home for its negativity, I wonder how we might inhabit it anew. Stein and Toklas find themselves in a peculiar position: they inhabit a society that prescribes heteronormative reproductive coupling and largely confines women to the domestic, yet in which queers are unable to access or enjoy the privilege of privacy that such coupling rewards. They suffer a kind of theoretical homelessness by which home is at once an impossible place for them to normatively access and also the space to which they as
women are socially assigned. In this sense, their queerness renders them failures. Yet failure, in turn, becomes impetus for creativity. *Tender Buttons* plays with forms of exclusion and participates in reconfiguring the “charmed circle.” “Act so that there is no use in a center,” the speaker declares (Stein, *Tender Buttons* 73). The de-centered home is dark, fluid and unpredictable. At the same time, the imperative use of “act” at the beginning of the sentence suggests that to behave as if “there is no use in a center” is just that: an act. The text suggests the importance of feeling centered in life, but the problem of modernity is that “the center cannot hold” (Yeats 3). In this sense, home is not the fixed, rotting centre of society but a site of creative resistance that we must constantly attend to and remake.

Alice’s Picasso chairs provide a fascinating instantiation of such a modernist recuperation of the domestic, one that the narrator of *The Autobiography* lays out with great humour:

That lovely little painting [Picasso] copied for me many years later on tapestry canvas and I embroidered it and that was the beginning of my tapestrying. I did not think it possible to ask him to draw me something to work but when I told Gertrude Stein she said, alright, I’ll manage. And so one day when he was at the house she said, Pablo, Alice wants to make a tapestry of that little picture and I said I would trace it for her. He looked at her with kindly contempt, if it is done by anybody, he said, it will be done by me. Well, said Gertrude Stein, producing a piece of tapestry canvas, go to it, and he did. And I have been making tapestry of his drawings ever since and they are very successful and go marvelously with old chairs. I have done two small Louis fifteenth chairs in this way. He is kind enough now to make me drawings on my canvas and to color them for me. (175)

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26 For more on queer failure, see Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure.*
These chairs bring high-modernism inside the home and appropriate it for conventionally feminine purposes. Yet the gendered dynamics here are far from conventional. Rather, two lesbians are manipulating the most famous male artist of the twentieth century into repurposing his work for a queer domestic context, and doing so precisely by capitalizing on his male ego. As with Alice’s chairs, Tender Buttons use modernism’s disorienting aesthetics not simply to queer the home but instead to reveal the ways in which the home might already be queer. Ahmed makes the crucial point that, “for some queers, at least, homes are already rather queer spaces, and they are full of the potential to experience the joy of deviant desires” (176). Tender Buttons simply brings these extant queer traces to the fore.

2.5 The Knock at the Salon Door

Indeed, Tender Buttons likewise depicts a world in which “a bent way shows no result” (Stein 53) but one in which the speaker busily interprets, crafts and re-organizes the objects around her. While modernist texts often register anxiety about shifting norms around gender and sexuality, for queer authors these changes can signal more positively. In its focus on use and uselessness, Tender Buttons unhinges the domestic from biological reproduction, and demonstrates how writing can create alternate worlds. Its emphasis on relational space serves as a reminder that Lesbos is an actual place. The Autobiography reveals that Stein “always was, she always is, tormented by the problem of the external and the internal” (119). It is precisely this tension between the two that renders the text so peculiar. The spaces it depicts are intensely familiar and even sexual but at the same time stand at a remove. This is a couple’s world and a couple’s world is always somewhat illegible to the outside observer, who lacks the skills to interpret its secret language. In this sense, Tender Buttons does something fascinating: it produces a private queer world in a culture in which queers have long been denied privacy. This is part of a larger program by which Stein rejected elements of punctuation, such as the comma,
because she saw them as patronizing. Stein also believed in the separation between the reader and the text. She would not have bought into reader-response theory. Rather, she believed in the fixity of a text’s meaning. This is not to say that the reader lacks what Lisa Siraganian terms “a private experience of reading the text,” but rather that the reader’s “context does not affect the text’s inherent meaning” (32). Siraganian parses Stein’s unusual attitudes toward reading by contrasting them with those of the New Critics. While they militantly sought “to protect the objective meaning of the text from the reader,” in Stein’s schema the text is “indifferent” to the reader and thus “never in danger of being effaced” (45). Siraganian connects Stein’s concern with preserving the reader’s privacy to her anti-paternalistic and “liberal” political values. Stein, in other words, did not want to control the reader (32-33).

While Siraganian focuses in depth on the reader’s privacy, I want to contemplate the privacy of the text. The notion that a text might mean separately of its reader might feel deeply counter-intuitive to contemporary literary scholars, and yet there is nevertheless something fascinating about the premise that Tender Buttons is an epistemologically inaccessible world. It is, in short, a private world.27 What is the point of Stein creating a textual home into which the reader cannot enter? Perhaps, I want to suggest, impenetrability is the point. My argument here differs sharply from the strain of criticism that dismisses the text as nonsensical. I am proposing, rather, that instead of framing Stein’s eccentric gestures as an attempt to flee from stable meaning, we might treat them as “Do Not Disturb” signs that signal a system of intelligibility to which the narrator intentionally denies the reader access. Stein often played with the line between private and public in her writing, in part due to her lifelong desire to be popular. Much to her chagrin, it was The Autobiography that finally won her fame. While Stein was keenly

27 Bridgman also picks up on “the private language of Tender Buttons” (138).
aware of the blurring of the public and private spheres that is a necessary result of late capitalism, she also lamented the loss of privacy. The narrator of *The Autobiography* recounts how Stein would answer her door asking, “*de la part de qui venez vous*, who is your introducer.” However, the question was “mere form, really everybody could come in” (Stein, *Autobiography* 13). Sarah Wilson identifies the text’s “faith in the malleability of the most conventional and exclusionary of forms” (185). The knock on the salon door, she observes, appears at first glance to show “unfettered circulation between market and home” since no one is ever denied entrance (184). Yet the knock in fact reinforces the materiality of the door by drawing our attention to its presence, both literal and symbolic. In this sense, Stein’s question insists on the sustained separation of private and public even as she recognizes this to be an impossible aspiration.

*Tender Buttons*, however, treats privacy as a necessity. Asking how we might reclaim the home, the text re-works the relationship between private and public so that the home is not repressive but rather shelters the abject from the burden of intelligibility. *Tender Buttons* trades in a domestic economy of organic images and small things; “buttons” (read: nipples) become “tender,” a riff on their function as an erotic currency. The text follows a similar logic to *The Human Condition*, in which Hannah Arendt famously historicizes the public and the private realms, defending separate spheres precisely because she is invested in domestic privacy. She turns to Classical models to critique the social and to recuperate forms of privacy of which we are now bereft. According to Arendt, the Greeks saw the home and the political realm as oppositional (24). The division between the two was elided by the creation of the modern phenomenon known as “society.” The social now makes public the affairs of the household, which are largely related to the body. As one’s body is one’s most important piece of property, its displacement into the social sphere signals a dislocation from a “worldly place of one’s own”
One is coerced into a standardizing body politic, and this in turn produces the sensation of homelessness.

Arendt does not want to return to the binary division of (public) equality and (private) inequality on which the republican model depended, but she makes a stunning case for the private home. “The four walls of one’s private property offer the only reliable hiding place from the common public world,” she posits, “not only from everything that goes on in it but from its very publicity, from being seen and being heard. A life spent entirely in public, in the presence of others, becomes, as we would say, shallow” (71). She goes so far as to claim that we need the “darkness” of “a privately owned place to hide in.” In antiquity, there “was quite literally a wall” that cordoned off the home (63-4). Privacy was the “dark and hidden” counterpart to the public, “and while to be political meant to attain the highest possibility of human existence, to have no private place of one’s own (like a slave) meant to be no longer human.” The “modern discovery of intimacy” has robbed us of the “shelter” (64) of the private, and in doing so stripped us of our humanity. In turning to a Classical model of privacy as opposed to a Liberal one, Arendt connects property and privacy through a logic that precedes capitalism, and thus carves out a space in which to imagine how objects might be reclaimed and put to protective use.

Arendt craves walls, and she sees property as the material with which to erect them. As Michael Cobb observes, “there are obvious shortcomings here, if not absurd political amnesias.” Namely, “politics hardly seem radical if they’re predicated on home ownership as the condition needed to defend us against the totalitarian forces that standardize culture” (Cobb, Single 133). Like Cobb, however, I want to consider the capaciousness of her argument. She does in fact lament the rise of private property at the detriment of the “common wealth” (Arendt 63). There is also something incredibly appealing about the idea of the house as a dark space in which one can hide away from the public glare and experience the freedom to be messy, contradictory and
illegible. Hiding oneself is entirely antithetical to a politics of liberation that relies on visual
binaries in which one is either “closeted” or “out,” and yet in this sense such an act interfaces in
potentially productive ways with theories of queerness that denounce the political imperative to
announce oneself as any particular identity. In other words, Arendt’s notion of privacy offers a
creative solution to the problems of visibility that Foucault denounces in his repressive
hypothesis, and to the experiences of misrecognition with which Sedgwick’s Epistemology of the
Closet is concerned. Just as Sedgwick recognizes the fraught production of social legibility,
many modernists demonstrate their deep investment in creating hidden spaces and sites of
refuge.  

Stein, like Arendt, is interested in the recuperation of the private but the walls she erects
are stylistic rather than physical. There are no visible humans in Tender Buttons; instead, there
are walls of small things. The so-called “difficulty” of her style is a fortress that protects the dark
world within. Tender Buttons is hardly an invitation towards a radical lesbian collective
movement. It could care less about identity politics or what the reader thinks. It does not invite
the reader in for a cup of tea (or a pot-luck). Rather, it is the yellow window one trudges past on
a snowy night in a foreign neighbourhood, trying to catch a glimpse of life inside. These empty
spaces expose the latent queer potential of the home through its economies of domestic objects.
In its abstraction, Tender Buttons allows us to ponder questions about the relationship between
aesthetics, sexual politics and the home that are not reduced to questions of identity. We feel we
are witnessing an intimate scene but we are only getting the morning after. The push and pull of

28 In this foundational text, Sedgwick famously disrupts the binary distinction between homosexual and
heterosexual, and the trope of the closet on which that binary depends. She argues that “coming out of the closet” is,
in fact, a performance that one must stage repeatedly, rather than a singular act. What is particularly useful about
Sedgwick’s argument for my purposes is her contention that the act of “coming out” often produces scenes of
misrecognition rather than feelings of affirmation, insomuch as identity categories can be as violently reductive as
they can be liberating.
familiarity and absence recalls an intimacy that exists only in our imagination, as queerness becomes the fantasy onto which we project our own desires for home.

In the period just between *Three Lives* and *Tender Buttons*, Stein embarked on a series of portraits. With *Tender Buttons*, her focus shifted from people to “rooms and food” and “things and enclosures” (Stein, *Lectures* 188-9). She began to prioritize “looking” over “listening or talking” (198). This marked, as I have mentioned, her newfound interest in the external world. Stein was motivated by a simple question: “How do you like what you have. This is a question that anybody can ask anybody. Ask it” (171). She posed this question to the people of whom she made portraits, and then she seems to have asked it of herself. *Tender Buttons* is her response. The question generates a series of more complex questions. What is it that you have? What does it mean to “like” something? What does it mean to “have” something? Note that the question is not “do you like who you are,” or even “do you like what you have.” Rather, the question demands how you like what you have. The emphasis here is on the style in which we come to appreciate the things in our lives. This returns us to a fundamental insistence of *Tender Buttons* that I have been driving at all along: learning how to like “what we have” and how to settle for it, in it, and with it can be liberating and pleasurable. *Three Lives* and *Tender Buttons* teach us how to settle for texts that both fall short of and exceed our expectations of what language can do. With them, we are swept away by the intensity of ordinary life—by what it could be if we learned to read it, and thus make it, right.
Chapter Three: Queer Harlem and the Poetics of Habitation

I’m looking for a house
In the world
Where the white shadows
Will not fall.

There is no such house,
Dark brothers,
No such house
At all.

---“House in the World,” Langston Hughes

“I’m disappointed in this house,” laments the landlady of Wallace Thurman’s Infants of the Spring towards the end his biting satire. “When I turned it into studios for you people, I thought I was filling a real need in the community.” Expounding the error of her ways, Euphoria resolves to evict her tenants, concluding her speech with the emphatic declaration: “I won’t have people accusing me of running a miscegenated bawdy house any longer.” Based on the actual house at 267 West 136th Street in which Thurman lived for a time along with Richard Bruce Nugent, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston and others (Wirth 15), the so-called Niggeratti Manor of Thurman’s roman à clef serves as both a trope for and the material space of home. By literally circumscribing the Harlem Renaissance within a house, Infants reifies Alain Locke’s conception of Harlem in The New Negro as “the home of the Negro’s ‘Zionism’” (14).

It is by now a commonplace that in the early twentieth-century Harlem served as a destination for migrants from the South and beyond. Harlem had been conceived of as a discrete neighbourhood and built up accordingly. “It is not a slum or a fringe,” James Weldon Johnson states, but is “made up of new-law apartments and handsome dwellings” (301) that resemble prosperous sections of the city. Displaced Africans from around the world moved to Harlem out of a desire for better housing, and landlords capitalized upon this growing demographic; Harlem
was “overbuilt” and black people offered an easy solution as tenants (303). As whites fled, increased financial opportunities for African-Americans during and after World War One, and the devaluation of local real estate precisely as a result of this demographic shift, enabled African-Americans to buy up homes and businesses and to form a vibrant and successful community. Locke envisioned Harlem as “the laboratory of the great race-welding.” If up until this point “American Negroes [had] been a race more in name than in fact,” Harlem promised “group expression and self-determination” (Locke 7). “In the very process of being transplanted,” Locke argues, “the Negro is becoming transformed” (6). By the time Thurman wrote Infants, however, Locke’s optimism appeared somewhat delusional. Harlem had promised both a physical home and a collective psychic space, yet the concretization of home as a specific locale with a unified culture proved hostile to difference. The tropological vision of Harlem overlooked alternate geographical and relational attachments and did particular violence to queers, for whom home can be as much a scene of anguish and exile as a space of belonging. In their zeal, the New Negroes sought a unified and collective vision of home that slighted the idiosyncratic.

Published in 1932, seven years after Locke’s landmark anthology, Thurman’s novel eulogizes the Renaissance, casting its central characters as a motley crew of delinquents who have ultimately failed to transfigure their house into a home. As if anticipating African-American literature’s turn to social realism in the ensuing decades, Euphoria announces that she is going to convert the house “into a dormitory for Negro working girls” (Thurman, Infants 268), citing the dearth of appropriate lodgings “for decent” (269) young women in New York City. Euphoria’s moralism is to a certain degree ironic; she is disillusioned with racial solidarity and believes that “only with money can Negroes purchase complete freedom.” She long ago decided to “exploit” the influx of African-Americans to the city, people who “needed homes, and jobs” (89), in hopes
of one day actualizing her ambition of becoming a full-time writer. Her expulsion of her current tenants, who are more devoted to “gin parties” (56) than they are to actually creating art, is surely in part economically motivated. But her decision also indexes the dissolution of the Harlem Renaissance during Great Depression, an event that Nathan Huggins argues “shattered the Harlem Renaissance” (303) by revealing the link between art and economy that the Renaissance, in its modernist devotion to alternately art-for-art’s-sake or art-as-uplift had sought to conceal.

Huggins, the first scholar to seriously attend to the Renaissance, damned it “a fantasy-become-reality of the minstrel personality” (305) that in its “enslavement to white forms” offers as its “most important gift” only “a lesson from its failures” (308). For Huggins, Thurman’s depiction of a house divided and ultimately destroyed provides a visceral representation of this failure. Huggins was not, of course, the only critic to denounce the Renaissance. Indeed, the thesis of its failure dominated the critical discourse until the publication of Houston Baker Jr.’s Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance in the late 1980s. The Harlem Renaissance “never could have been a success” (Modernism 12), Baker argues, within an academic culture that “forces Afro-Americanists to begin with given assessments of black intellectual history and then laboriously work their way to dire conclusions” (13). Attending to the mutually constitutive domains of cultural history and aesthetics, Baker treats form as a generically flexible and open “space” (16). He contends that African-American writers have ostensibly followed two formal strategies: the “mastery of form” and the “deformation of mastery.” While these two approaches are typically set in opposition to each other—the former, for example, is deployed by Booker T. Washington, and the latter by W.E.B. Du Bois—both in fact don a “minstrel mask” (33) that

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29 See David Levering Lewis for a notable counter-argument to Huggins. Like Huggins, he treats the Renaissance as a failure, but his contention is that it failed because it was too broad and ambitious in its scope.
secures them “an enclave” (45) from which to speak. Baker envisions the minstrel mask as “a space of habitation” (17).

While Huggins argues the Renaissance failed in part because its authors could not shed their double-consciousness and embrace “their patria, their nativity” (309) in an unhyphenated American literary history, Baker recognizes the incommensurability of Afro-American literature and American literature at large due to the racial logics that have structured African-American experiences of dislocation, exile and home. The Harlem Renaissance may have participated in contemporaneous white modernisms, but it was also responding to entirely differently experiences of modernity—in other words, to race and the difference it makes.30 Yet in the nearly three decades since Baker’s book pivoted Renaissance studies, the scholarly assessments of these formal spaces of habitation have at times grown troublingly narrow and evaluative. Within queer theory, critics have tended to identify certain errant forms as emblematic of queer negativity. The emerging queer narrative of the period is, in Shane Vogel’s words, a reaction to “an increasingly narrow, increasingly normative understanding of the gay and lesbian Harlem Renaissance” that instead hopes to account for “the complexities of queer associational life” (19). My worry is that this counter-narrative might lose sight of the complexity it seeks. Ever since Henry Louis Gates Jr. observed in 1993 that the Renaissance “was surely as gay as it was black, not that it was exclusively either of these” (“Burden” 233), scholars have grappled with the rich implications of his second clause. Gates’s formulation implies that sexuality and race are inextricable while at the same time noting the fraught position of fixed identity categories within the Harlem Renaissance, which may have been gay and black but also exceeded such discursive categories.

30 I draw here, of course, upon Gates (1985).
In many ways the story I am telling is one of how African-American writers in the early twentieth century understood their place within literary history at large. The joint fascination with form and the rhetorical and aesthetic centrality of houses to Harlem Renaissance literature suggests that these writers were as invested in the project of claiming homes for themselves within the literary as they were in attending to the material and spiritual crisis of displacement that engulfed them. Homesickness is hardly specific to this period; from the haunted house at 124 Bluestone Road in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* to the “houses” in *Paris is Burning* to Kara Walker’s *Dust Jackets for the Niggerati*, or her recent exhibition, “A Subtlety,” contemporary African-American art has continued to fixate on the spatial implications of slavery and the difficulty of securing space for oneself in its aftermath. In returning to the Renaissance and reconsidering the burgeoning relationship between textuality and dwelling, I am arguing that literature was not only crucial in enabling writers to restage and work through the historical drama of black habitation in the United States but that, in the final instance, they discovered that artistic production, like queerness, could be an act of homecoming.

This chapter begins with a reading of *Infants of the Spring*, but it winds up in a markedly different neighbourhood: the poetry of Countee Cullen. Audre Lorde once called for feminism to imagine itself as “the very house of difference rather than the security of any one difference” (226). Seeking to transpose Lorde’s reminder of the ethical importance of difference to any social justice movement into a literary context, in this chapter I argue for a critical re-evaluation of the role of aesthetic difference within the Harlem Renaissance. Challenging Langston Hughes’s dismissal of Cullen as a self-hating poet who aspired to assimilate into white literary culture at the expense of his racial integrity as a black man, I read Cullen within a broader modernist context of queer aestheticism. The chapter quickly moves from a discussion of the material housing conditions within Harlem to the function of the aesthetic in enabling black
authors to re-imagine what it means to dwell more abstractly. At stake in the debate between Hughes and Cullen is a fundamental question: what does it mean to dwell in literature? More precisely—what dwelling place might black authors claim within literary canons? Through his appropriation of conventional forms, Cullen demonstrates both an allegiance to aesthetic identity over and above the racial unity that the New Negroes sought. In taking possession of “white” literary genres, he craftily used genre itself as an instrument for deflection, protection and security—a space in which to seek refuge in a world in which he, as a black queer popular author, was constantly a spectacle. Through his self-reflexive canonization, Cullen not only wrote himself into multiple traditions (queer formalism, Romanticism) from which people of colour had typically been excluded, but he also asserted the vital role that the aesthetic and the generic might play in the transformation of the sociopolitical landscape.

3.2 Homesick at Home

In her forward to the landmark anthology Black Queer Studies, Sharon P. Holland begins with the premise that “home is a four-letter word.” Reflecting upon the fact that the discovery of one’s queerness can be its own form of homecoming, but a homecoming that results in concomitant forms of exile, Holland contemplates the degree to which black queer studies might serve as her academic home, “a place of refuge and escape.” She concludes that the field necessarily “embodies all of [home’s] double-meanings” (xii). The rhetorical centrality of house and home to contemporary black intellectual discourses speaks to the ongoing importance of these terms within the African-American cultural imaginary. Jackie Goldsby observes that while Du Bois treated the home as “the unproblematic site of Black cultural salvation,” it has transmuted into a “fount of homophobia that damns difference and sponsors rejection” (113-14). Du Bois, like the New Negroes, arguably conceived of the black home as heterosexual; in other words, he failed to contend with the “intersectionality” of lived experience that Siobhan
Somerville insists must inform any analysis of race (5). Picking up on Goldsby’s logic, Chandan Reddy unpacks this distinction, concluding that queers of colour “might be the subjective location from which to interact, remember and practice the contradictory relations of people of color to home and housing in the United States” (359). While Reddy recognizes the “houses” in *Paris is Burning*, for instance, as radical alternatives to the culturally loaded notion of home, I am arguing that Renaissance writers such as Thurman, Hughes and Cullen were invested in bridging this chasm between house and home.

In this vein, my argument is perhaps closest to that of Roderick Ferguson in his hugely important book, *Aberrations in Black*. Ferguson notes that for Reddy, “national culture constitutes itself against subjects of color” while “culture produces houses peopled by queers of color, subjects who have been expelled from home.” Insomuch as “it fosters both identifications and antagonisms, culture becomes a site of material struggle”—quite literally, “the terrain in which formations seemingly antagonistic to liberalism…converge with liberal ideology.” The intervention of “queer of color analysis,” then, according to Ferguson, is to “examine how culture as a site of identification produces such odd bedfellows and how it—as the location of antagonisms—fosters unimagined alliances” (3). My argument in this chapter is ostensibly that all of the authors that I read turn to culture to address feelings of homesickness, and to express a deep investment in the home. While a text such as Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, for instance, might seem the obvious choice for such an analysis, I turn instead to Thurman, Cullen, and Hughes because of their fascination with the connection between form and housing. Quite literally, their texts become the “terrain” on which they contest the politics of the black home.

In recent years, many articulations of queer formalism have rejected standardized poetry in favour of the avant-garde or the transgressive. Dubbed “the Cabaret School” by Vogel, a
coterie of Renaissance authors has been given centre stage in queer courses and articles on the Renaissance, in particular those poets whose work explores the extra-domestic spaces of “public intimacy” that, following Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant, cleave queer sexuality apart from the predictable locations of heteronormative sex.31 “The queer work of the Cabaret School compels us to ground our analysis not in the bedrooms or private lives of prominent Harlem Renaissance figures but in the public enactments of intimacy as an alternative to the emergence of a privatized sexual identity informed by white-racialized middle-class norms,” Vogel argues. “The historical cabaret,” he explains, was a form and content that—in ways not always predictable, often in spite of itself—brought bodies, sounds, and histories together in ways that disorganized and reorganized desires, selves, time, and space” (Vogel 23). Similarly, in his reading of rudeness as a queer aesthetic strategy, Michael Cobb makes a strong case for the ways in which Renaissance queers confronted “the difficulties of dwelling inside questions of race and sexuality” by opting to “exploit the abjectness of queer form, the rudeness of a queer image or symbol, to create a new form of black literary expression” (“Insolent” 343). It is the “break with traditional form,” Cobb insists, that “enables the queer to exist in content and form at the same time” (346). The formal and aesthetic strategy that these queers enact is summed up by a word that recurs throughout his argument: “wandering.”

To be clear, I am deeply appreciative of the important contributions these theorists have made to queer Harlem Renaissance studies, and specifically of the ways in which they attend to the complex intersectionality of race and sexuality without subscribing to the identificatory logic of common revisionist reading practices, a logic that is anathema to the more luxuriously dense articulations of desire, sexuality and the social which queer theory has provided over the past

31 Vogel draws extensively on their essay “Sex in Public.”
several decades. My aim here is not to reject or lambast the transgressive version of the queer Renaissance that Vogel, Cobb and others have described, but rather to pursue a more expansive account of the ways in which Renaissance writers conceived of and represented queerness—often, I argue, more as a heuristic than as a problematic that meets its resolution in a particular literary form. What can get lost in narratives of queer resistance that are predicated on forms of abjection and transience is a more granular discussion of the fraught and often murky relationship that queer subjects have with concepts of ordinariness, endurance, and even normativity.\(^\text{32}\)

In fact, I am convinced that the “Niggeratti” and the “New Negroes” were often compelled in their art and in their politics by a shared desire: the desire for an inhabitable home.\(^\text{33}\) They may have sought radically different instantiations of home across wide divides of private and public, rural and urban, but these writers were united in their treatment of literary form as an aesthetic space in which to dwell, mentally if not physically. By locating the proper scene of queer sexuality outside of the home, we risk situating queerness in opposition to the home and thus compounding the sense of homesickness that has been immensely detrimental to so many queers. Considering the forces of displacement that long robbed African-Americans of a sense of control over their ability to construct a private, domestic realm at all, never mind according to their own needs and desires, both during slavery and under the racist policies that curdled in its aftermath, it seems particularly myopic to align a queer of colour critique with a paradigm of gay shame that has largely focused, as Jack Halberstam notes, on “a white and male

\(^{32}\) Darriek Scott makes a compelling argument about the potential for empowerment through abjection. I too recognize potential in the abject, but am arguing in favour of the transformation of abject forms into something less negative and more endurable.

\(^{33}\) For a thorough distinction between the Niggeratti and the New Negros, see Cobb (2000), chapter two of Schwarz, and Pinkerton.
self whose shame in part emerges from the experience of being denied access to privilege” (“Shame” 223). In this vein, I want to consider the degree to which narratives of the home that brand it a site of repression are predicated on the assumption that, upon realizing one’s queerness, one has a secure home to lose in the first place.

The eviction of the characters in *Infants* suggests that Harlem is far from the site of acceptance and security that it promised to be. Rather, the drama of dislocation that found its first enactment in transatlantic slavery, and which was then reproduced during the Great Migration, bears down yet again on a new generation in the North. What stands out about Thurman’s representation of black homelessness, however, is the manner in which the novel yokes together a specifically racialized history with the unsettling forces of modernity. In doing so, the novel makes clear the historical depth of these forces, which find their antecedents in the very Enlightenment philosophies that justified modern slavery. The sharp edges that distinguish the peculiar experiences of settler colonialism and the affects they produce have been blunted by the permeation of a more universal sensation of feeling unearthed—of feeling, paradoxically, ahistorical. If for white Westerners modernism produced the fearful feeling of coming untethered from history, like a balloon that has slipped from the hand of a small child and floats ever upwards towards the stratosphere, then for African-Americans modernism is complicated by the longstanding assumption that black people were, by definition, “lacking a formal and collective history” (Gates “Writing Race” 11).

Raymond, the novel’s protagonist, conceives of his dislocation as both fundamentally modernist and specifically racialized. “You see, I am a member of Gertrude Stein’s lost generation,” Raymond confides at one point to his friend Steve, a Scandinavian-Canadian whom he met at the University of Toronto and who has moved to New York to begin graduate school at Columbia. Like a good modernist, he concedes: “I’m too busy trying to find the borderlines in
this new universe of ours ever to strike out on my own.” While the Victorians “have been so thoroughly demolished…it’s too soon to rebel against the present régime of demolition.” Yet he also confesses, “the real reason is that I am too easily seduced by the semblance of security to risk the loss of creature comfort” (Thurman, *Infants* 220). He ultimately threatens “to renounce Harlem and all it stands for.” Of the “quarter million Negroes” in Harlem, he notes, “it is fashionable only to take notice of a bare thousand…the cabaret entertainers, the actors, the musicians, the artists, and the colorful minority who drift from rent party to speakeasy to side-street dives…Because we live in an age when only the abnormal is interesting the rest are ignored.” Raymond traces the racial contours of normalcy. Faulkner and Hemingway “are so interested in normality,” he argues, but “the Negro [has] never known such a state.” For Raymond, this is decisively negative. He conceives of the Negro as “a product of his age and of his race, which has been carried along at such a pace that never has there been time for him to sit by the side of the road and reflect upon what it all might mean’ (222). Through this quiet metaphor, Raymond calls into question the Jazz Age and gestures towards the historical processes that gave rise to it. He also identifies the desire to linger that fueled many a move to Harlem and accounts for its appeal within the black cultural imaginary.

The fact that home is if not inaccessible then often perilously alienating to queers does not render the home antithetical to queerness in the texts in this chapter. In recognizing the affective primacy of homesickness to queer experiences, I am pursuing a queer politics that takes home as its desired object. Rather than prescribing an ideal form of home, I want to track the formal strategies that various authors have used to re-make and invent homes under conditions that set up roadblocks to homemaking at every turn. These homes may enjoy conventional forms, or they may be hard won through labour, often through the labour of love. I want to take as my point of departure the closing scene from *Infants*, which revolves around the suicide of the
character Paul Arbian. Paul is a thinly veiled fictionalization of the openly gay author and artist Richard Bruce Nugent, a fact the novel makes crystal clear through Paul’s last name (a homonym of Nugent’s initials). If Infants is, in Thomas Wirth’s estimation, “a collection of campy brunch conversations about the escapades of Niggeratti Manor’s residents,” then it is Thurman and Nugent, as characterized by Raymond and Paul, who stand out “as the reigning divas” (15). Wirth’s diction is apt, for the house feels more like a nightclub at times than it does an actual home—a scene that bears witness to the consumption of copious amounts of alcohol, fistfights, hangovers, and even a rape. The Manor’s inhabitants are chronically short on their rent, much to Euphoria’s chagrin, and far from providing the “security” after which Raymond pines, the rooms are in constant disarray. In stark contrast to the promise of futurity that accompanies the conventional home, the Manor’s tenants engage in a series of self-sabotaging refusals of stability and permanence.

Take, for example, the “donation party” episode. Guests begin to trickle in at 10 p.m., each giving generously, and soon the party swarms into a “mob” (Thurman, Infants 178). By 1:30 a.m., the twenty-dollar bill that a nouveau riche white patron has gifted “for Negro art” (177) has already been spent on gin. As the party rages, money is not the only thing that goes to waste. Bags of food spill onto the floor, including a dozen eggs that “oozed stickily over the linoleum.” If there was ever an image to accompany the critique of queer anti-reproductive futurity, surely this is it. Thanks to another clumsy guest, the slick floor assumes a “gritty” quality as it is coated in spilt sugar. “Shuffling feet made rasping sounds” (183), aurally signifying a slippage from debauchery to degeneracy, as well as the hosts’ utter disinterest in the Humanistic project of Uplift. Even the political potential of interracial friendship falls away. In the frenetic motion of the night, “[w]hites and blacks clung passionately together as if trying to effect a permanent merger. Liquor, jazz music, and close physical contact had achieved what
decades of propaganda had advocated with little success.” And yet, “[t]omorrow all of them will have an emotional hangover,” Raymond cautions. “This, he kept repeating to himself, is the Negro renaissance, and this is about all the whole damn thing is going to amount to” (186).

As if to drive the final nail in the coffin, the event prompts Steve’s suppressed racism to burst through to the surface. Hitherto absolved of any implication in American white supremacy by virtue of his foreignness, Steve has played the role of an innocent bystander--one who, because he is more authentically “Nordic” than most white Americans could ever hope to be, demonstrates white supremacy to be an attitude learned through socialization rather than a foregone conclusion. Moreover, Steve’s foreignness has served a leveling function; he too is strangely “Other.” The entirety of the New York City, not just Harlem, is “all Greek” to Steve (12). Yet after the party, Steve concludes with disgust, “I’ve drunk my fill of Harlem.” He maintains, “I have no prejudices, you know; yet recently my being has been permeated with a vague disquiet. I feel lost among Negroes” (190). Steve, who had been living in the Manor, moves out and severs ties with his friends. His emergent racism and his sensation of feeling “lost” in Harlem, rather than drawn to it through a recognition of common humanity, signals the failure of the politics of “respectability” that Raymond rejects. “I don’t owe anything to anyone but myself” (198), Raymond tells Dr. Parkes (Alain Locke) in the midst of the party. Towards the end of the novel, however, he is singing a different tune. Disillusioned with both the more staid racial politics of Dr. Parkes, Raymond tells Steve, “I can’t see the skyline from the ground, and I’ll probably become a Humanist just because they are interested in establishing boundary lines” (220).

If Raymond’s final resolve appears reductive and bleak, then Paul’s demise is even bleaker. A self-described “genius” who believes “Oscar Wilde is the greatest man that ever lived,” Paul is a decadent artist with a “soft-toned and melodious” voice and “slender hands” to
match. Openly bisexual, he is also a “vagabond” who wanders in part because he often lacks the “carfare” but also out of an aversion to home. “Homes are boring places when you don’t feel homely,” he tells his housemates. “It’s nicer just to drop in any place” (44). Yet Paul’s adventures are often decidedly not nice. Passing out in the lobby of an elegant apartment building, for instance, he is awoken by the “shrill scream of a frightened [white] woman” and chased across rooftops by policemen until he makes his way back to the Manor. Likening the apartment building to “Eden,” he recalls the feeling of “supreme ecstasy” that overcame him as he was approached by an “ivory body” he names Beauty. Just as he and Beauty experienced “a complete merging” (45), he wakens to realize that he has “been discovered” (46). If at first Paul’s dream reads as an allegory of colonialism, wherein the black subject is displaced from one’s “thickly foliaged” home and thrust into the position of fallen criminal, it soon becomes equally apparent that it is also a story of queerness. When he admits Beauty’s indeterminate gender to his friends, questions ensue: has Paul ever “indulge[d] homosexuality?” Does he prefer sex with men? Paul responds ambivalently. “After all there are no sexes, only sex majorities, and the primary function of sex is enjoyment” (47). In rejecting the logic of these questions, Paul positions himself as a pleasure-seeker whose desires cannot be ossified into a fixed identity. Just as he finds home “boring”—for if the Niggeratti Manor is boring, surely no home can be interesting—Paul implies that he is a vagabond in other realms as well.

Upon his eviction from the Manor, he moves to Greenwich Village, where he participates “in the idiocies of another lunatic fringe” (271) and eventually kills himself in the middle of a party by slashing his wrists in the bathtub. “Had Paul the debonair, Paul the poseur, Paul the irresponsible romanticist,” Raymond wonders as he rushes downtown, “finally faced reality and seen himself and the world as they actually were? Or was this merely another act, the final stanza in his drama of beautiful gestures? It was consonant with his character, this committing
suicide” (280). The reader quickly discovers that Raymond is “not so much interested in the fact that Paul is dead as he [is] in wanting to know how the death had been accomplished” (281). In this shift towards social realism, the text suggests that generic conventions are essential to the ways in which one establishes the terms of an endurable life. In Cobb’s reading of the novel, Paul is doomed not simply because he is queer but because “those who break away from the dominant articulation of the race, those who wander away from the symbolic and physical Harlem organizing the artistic and emotional lifeworld of the novel, are condemned to exist in a mode of individuality that is characterized through toxic terms” (341). Refusing to accommodate individuals who assert their individualism in defiance of a prescribed model of “collective racial expression,” the New Negro movement is, in Cobb’s estimation, doomed to fail. And Paul, a character who wanders in clear refusal of such expression, is “the literal author and artist of the New Negroes' representational death” (342). Cobb rightly attributes Paul’s death to the exclusionary nature of the New Negro movement rather than treating it as metonymic of the failure of the Harlem Renaissance as a whole. At the same time, to read the novel in this way is to read it largely as a critique. Yet, I wonder, under what conditions would Paul be able to live? What does Infants teach its reader not just about the costs of exclusion—metaphorized through the tenants’ eviction—but also about new modes of inhabitation?

The melodramatic quality of Paul’s death suggests that he is driven as much by aesthetic and emotional impulses as he is by a critical one. It is important to note that Paul is intensely rebellious throughout the novel, often abandoning all sense of propriety. In one scene, he jokes that Steve is “permanently becoming a nigger” (Thurman, Infants 44), throwing into crisis any sense of racial identification as rooted in a collective experience of oppression. Flippantly suggesting that one can simply become “a nigger” by moving to Harlem and befriending African-Americans, Paul speaks directly to contemporary anxieties about the interracial
dimension of the Renaissance. Towards the end of the novel, Raymond holds a salon at the Manor at the request of Dr. Parkes. All of the major figures of the period attend, only very faintly fictionalized through pseudonyms. When DeWitt Clinton (Countee Cullen) begins counseling Paul on his “heritage,” Paul retorts, “Which ones?” (236), recounting his “German, English, and Indian” (237) blood and eventually stating that he is “not an African” but “an American and a perfect product of the melting pot” (238). By muddling the bloodlines that fictitiously lead them back to a shared origin in African, he intentionally displaces himself from the collective. Paul’s political and aesthetic allegiances here are blatant, but my point is that his politics, like everything in his life, are shaped by his aesthetic orientation rather than the other way around. In the Wildean universe of “art for art’s sake,” Paul could care less about the political implications of his art. Even Paul’s primary sexual orientation is towards “Beauty” itself. In this sense, it is Paul’s attraction to decadence that presupposes his suicide. When Raymond wonders, if Paul has “finally faced reality” or if “this was merely another act, the final stanza in his drama of beautiful gestures” (280), he is grasping for the appropriate generic conventions through which to understand Paul’s death. Read within a realist tradition, Paul’s death symbolizes his inability to endure in a world in which he fails to attain a viable social location. Yet read within a decadent tradition, it is an act of artistic creation.

Paul’s suicide fulfills an aesthetic vision that can find no grounding in the world; Paul dwells in form, but ultimately he can dwell only in death. Of course, Nugent did not die in such a manner—he once jokingly told Wirth that suicide was “the only way Wallie could think of to end the book” (qtd. in Wirth 15)—but he did suffer throughout his life from a lack of permanent housing. During the 1930s, Wirth notes, “Nugent’s precise whereabouts are hard to trace. True to form, he drifted from place to place and man to man” (32). Wirth’s formulation, “true to form,” can be taken quite literally here, for Nugent was as restless in his writing as he was in his life.
His best-known story, “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” is replete with sexual and stylistic adventures. Forty years on, Nugent continued to struggle. He took to sleeping in his studio at 150 Nassau Street. “The building was locked on weekends,” Wirth explains, “during which time he was essentially homeless” (37). He eventually moved to an “unkempt apartment” in Hoboken, where he lived as “an unregenerate Bohemian to the very end.” Unlike Paul, Nugent enjoyed a full and active life, often agreeing to interviews and even providing shelter to “young men from his neighborhood” (40). He outlived many of his peers despite his wandering, even if his artistic output was comparatively minimal. By contrast, Paul is given short shrift. One wonders if Thurman is not making fun of Paul precisely by casting his decadence as a form of melodrama, within which his suicide is “merely another act.”

In this sense, Paul recalls another character with whom he is closely aligned: the Paul of Willa Cather’s “Paul’s Case.” A “dandy,” Paul experiences “a hopeless feeling of sinking forever back into ugliness and commonness” every time “he came home” (Cather, “Paul’s Case” 107). Just as Paul Arbian subscribes to Wilde’s logic that “Nature imitates art” (Thurman 244), to Cather’s Paul “a certain element of artificiality seemed…necessary in beauty.” In Cather’s text, Paul imagines his suicide on aesthetic terms. Similarly, before killing himself, Paul Arbian donned a crimson mandarin robe, wrapped his head in a batik scarf of his own designing” (282), tacked on the wall “a group of his spirit portraits,” and lay out on the floor the pages of his unfinished novel. Yet in slashing himself with “a highly ornamented Chinese dirk,” Paul inadvertently splashes bloody water all over his manuscript (283). As at the ending of Cather’s text, wherein Paul’s “picture making-mechanism was crushed” (121), Paul Arbian’s suicide results in aesthetic unintelligibility.

I draw on “Paul’s Case” in order to situate *Infants* within a broader landscape of queer modernist texts that are concerned with aesthetic inhabitation. Both texts suggest that these
characters die not because their queerness rendered the world uninhabitable but because their version of aestheticism was so resistant to everyday life that it was ostensibly a suicidal aesthetic. At the end of *Infants*, Paul leaves behind a drawing of “a distorted black skyscraper, modeled after Niggeratti Manor.” The building’s foundation “was composed of crumbling stone,” and “it could be ascertained that the skyscraper would soon crumple and fall, leaving the dominating white lights in full possession of the sky” (Thurman, *Infants* 284). The racial metaphors of this image are obvious, and we might easily read the fall of the Manor as the demise of the Renaissance itself. Such a reading, however, relies on the reader’s subscription to Paul’s aesthetic understanding of the world. In his rigid attachment to impossible forms, Paul chooses theoretical wandering over earthly dwelling. Nugent himself never pursued such an orderly praxis, opting for the pleasures of this world over the promise of an aesthetic achievement that he himself could paradoxically never enjoy. In “Paul’s Case,” death forces Paul’s body into intimacy with the material reality he abhors. These narratives are less cautionary tales about the perils of rebellion against a society that misreads queer individuals and assigns to them failed forms; rather, they ask how queer subjects might alter a generic form from within.

### 3.3 Aesthetic Taste and the Difference It Makes

We tend to think of queerness as radical in the sense of *uprooting*. Instead, I am interested in exploring how certain authors in this historical moment envisioned a queer politics of rootedness. I want to caution us against two assumptions: that an avant-garde style necessarily signals transgressive content, and that queerness is always already transgressive. In fact, there is a long and rich history of authors returning to classical forms in order to provide for their characters the weight of a mythological context for self-understanding. From Plato’s *Symposium* to E.M. Forster’s *Maurice* to Anne Carson’s *Autobiography of Red*, not to mention the vast majority of Henry James’s *oeuvre*, there exists a thick genealogy of queer texts that have
positioned themselves in a chain of formal and aesthetic influence and that exist on a continuum with earlier identities and epistemologies. These authors have sought out historical forms and strange kinships with past texts in order to make sense of ontological quandaries that feel frighteningly new.\(^{34}\)

Over the past several decades, Langston Hughes has emerged as the poster-boy of the queer Harlem Renaissance, precisely because of his predilection for the peripatetic and the anti-bourgeois. Delightfully ambiguous in his sexual preferences, he has ever since Isaac Julien’s 1989 film, *Looking for Langston*, come to represent a larger problem for literary critics: the fact that historical characters, as Heather Love points out, often resist “our advances toward them” (8). Love cautions against the impulse to “frame the past as the unique site of need, as if the practice of history were not motivated by a sense of lack in the present” (33-34). Within this framework of “need,” which we might instead call desire, the temporal impossibility of ever cultivating a fully satisfying relation with a historical object comes to represent the queerness of the relation itself. The queerness of lived temporality resonates profoundly in this disconnect between critic and text, or critic and author. In drawing our attention to the desiring critic, I want to ask us to consider the contemporary forces that structure our desires. In other words, what makes Langston Hughes so desirable in our current critical climate and not Countee Cullen?

Arguably no single author has been more displaced from the queer Renaissance canon, or more misread, than Cullen. In fact, he has been downright bullied. From Thurman’s depiction of DeWitt Clinton to Nugent’s portrayal of Cullen’s character in *Gentleman Jigger* as “a little brown pig” (169), Renaissance texts have made a game out of mocking Cullen’s looks and his demeanour. Starting with Hughes’s polemic “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Cullen

\(^{34}\) See Nealon for a fascinating study of pre-Stonewall queer affects and forms, and the contemporary desire to identify with historical texts.
has been thoroughly unpopular with the Niggeratti and their followers. Once dubbed the “poet laureate of Harlem,” Cullen caught serious flack from Hughes for announcing, “I want to be a poet—not a Negro poet.”

35 Hughes interprets Cullen’s statement as follows: “I want to write like a white poet”; meaning subconsciously, "I would like to be a white poet"; meaning behind that, "I would like to be white." Because “no great poet has ever been afraid of being himself”—and to Hughes, Cullen is fundamentally a Negro poet—Hughes comes to doubt “this boy would ever be a great poet” (“Negro Artist” 40). Envisioning what he perceives as “the race toward whiteness” as fundamentally reliant on “the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization,” Hughes ostensibly relegates conventional black poetry to the dustbin of history.

But it gets worse. Hughes attributes Cullen’s taste in poetry to Cullen’s upbringing in the Methodist parsonage of his adoptive parents, one that Hughes deems “fairly typical home of the colored middle class.” “One sees immediately how difficult it would be,” Hughes continues, “for an artist born in such a home to interest himself in interpreting the beauty of his own people. He is taught rather not to see it, or if he does, to be ashamed of it when it is not according to Caucasian patterns” (40). In Hughes’s reading, Cullen is full of shame and self-hatred, clinging to white forms that he has been taught to value over the folk culture out of which Hughes made his art. Moreover, Cullen is in Hughes’s estimation a snob. While Hughes concedes that the New Negro movement from whence Cullen sprang should be praised for forcing African-Americans to start thinking about black cultural production, he anticipates that the world’s “truly great Negro artist” will emerge out of the “low-down folks, the so-called common element” (41).

35 Hughes is paraphrasing Cullen’s comment in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle from the 10th of February 1924: “If I am going to be a poet at all, I am going to be POET and not NEGRO POET.” See Jackson (xxx).
Insomuch as this group is conceived of as more grounded and at home within themselves than the black middle-class that Hughes critiques, Hughes’s comment also represents a commitment to homemaking. Yet insomuch as Hughes’s vision of this kind of homemaking project exists in binary opposition to the New Negro model, it works to similarly advocate for a unified vision of home that is prescriptive rather than inclusive. To Hughes, it is jazz that is “one of the inherent expressions of Negro life in America.” Hughes’s manifesto insists upon the vernacular expression of experiential knowledge. “Most of my own poems are racial in theme and treatment,” he explains, “derived from the life I know” (43). What we quickly discover in reading Hughes’s short polemic is that, according to the terms that he has established, the next “truly great Negro artist” (41) is Hughes himself.

There are numerous ironies to Hughes’s essay. The first is made clear by his closing statement: “An artist must be free to choose what he does, certainly, but he must also never be afraid to do what he must choose.” Hughes’s prescription is a tautology. How can one choose freely if one is never allowed to choose out of fear? And who says Cullen was afraid? In fact, Cullen was highly self-reflexive. In the biography he includes in the 1927 anthology *Caroling Dusk*, which he edited, Cullen admits: “as a poet he is a rank conservative.” However, he clarifies that he is not “blind to the virtues of those poets who will not be circumscribed.” Rather, “he is thankful indeed for the knowledge that should he ever desire to go adventuring, the world is rife with paths to choose from” (Cullen, *Caroling* 179). Cullen’s conservatism is less a political position than an impulse to conserve, which in the aesthetic realm figures as an orientation toward literary tradition rather than away from it. In response to Hughes’s conclusion that Cullen will never be a great poet, this statement is extremely gracious. Still, Cullen stands his ground, acknowledging that while the fact that “he wishes any merit that may be in his work to flow from it solely as the expression of the poet—with no racial consideration to bolster it up”
is “sickening to some of his friends,” he is “still of the same thought.” Within this exchange, it is Hughes who homogenizes the proper forms of African-American poetry; Cullen refuses to lump the anthology’s contributors together into a “Negro school of poetry.” While “their work is not varied to the point of being sensational,” Cullen believes that “theirs is a variety within a uniformity that is trying to maintain the higher traditions of English verse.” “The poet writes out of his experience, whether it be personal or vicarious,” Cullen concludes, “and as these experiences differ among other poets, so do they differ among Negro poets; for the double obligation of being both Negro and American is not so unified as we are often led to believe.” In short, his survey of the best and brightest of contemporary black poets reveals “the individual diversifying ego transcends the synthesizing hue” (x).

Cullen’s poetic orientation may be “conservative,” but his attitude toward artistic freedom is expansive. Yet I want to go further and claim that Cullen is in many ways more recognizably modernist than Hughes, as evidenced by his investment in the high over the “low-down” and the “common,” and his interest in thinking poetics transhistorically. Cullen’s focus on artistic freedom squares with Baker’s contention that African-American modernism was driven less by “a fear of replicating outmoded forms or of giving way to bourgeois formalisms,” and more by a desire to redeploy forms that allowed them to “move clearly up, masterfully and re-soundingly away from slavery” (Modernism 101). The fraught aspect of Cullen’s refusal to conceptualize black poetry as a “school” is his attitude that “their work will not present any serious aberration from the poetic tendencies of their times” because “theirs is also the heritage of the English language” (Carolinx ix). Yet the fact that Thurman mocks Cullen as a poet who is obsessed with a shared black pagan heritage shows the Cullen was as much misread in his own

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36 Kuenz reaches a similar conclusion (514).
day as he is in our own. DeWitt Clinton is a reductive parody of the poet, and a shoddy one at that. In reality, Cullen bears far more in common with Paul Arbion, who is self-consciously working within a queer European tradition, than he does with the Lockean character of Dr. Parkes.

Cullen was, in Major Jackson’s words, “a formalist’s formalist” during a decade in which T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* bulldozed through the terrain of contemporary poetry and made room from a groundswell of experimental verse. He was also in the wrong place at the wrong time. Cullen’s initial popularity stemmed from his mastery of European poetic forms, but it was precisely this formal mastery that prompted his rapid demise. Cullen’s “meteoric rise and subsequent fall as poet laureate of the Harlem Renaissance,” Jane Kuenz notes, “might be seen as an object lesson in how not to be modern and black” (509). Cullen found himself stuck between a rock and hard spot, between “a modernist reaction against traditional poetry conventions and a bourgeois desire to win legitimacy” (513). Cullen’s impossible position reveals the fraught conditions of African-American modernism more broadly; the very popularity that the New Negro movement worked so hard to realize in a black poet is exactly what leads elite modernist circles, who disdained popular audiences and the “mass market” dissemination of texts, to dismiss Cullen (511). Within the span of a few years, he became, as Thurman notes, “the symbol of a fast disappearing generation of Negro writers” (“Negro Poets” 420). Cullen’s apparently easy relationship to home, to Christianity, and to literature itself contributed to the tacit conclusion by his peers that he was at best a tepid mama’s boy who lacked real artistic vision and at worst a product of the minstrel tradition, propped up by the likes of Alain Locke and W.E.B. Du Bois, his head jerked backwards, like Benjamin’s angel, toward the wreckage of history.

Cullen’s home life did not help this artistic death sentence. He was so invested in staking
claim to Harlem as his home that he re-wrote his personal narrative in *Caroling Dusk*, stating that he was “born in New York City, May 30, 1903 and reared in the conservative atmosphere of a Methodist parsonage” (179) when in all likelihood he was born in Louisville, Kentucky (Molesworth 7) and did not move into said parsonage or assume the name Cullen until his adoption in 1917 at the age of fourteen (12). As if prompted by Hughes’s description of Cullen’s home, critics often return to Cullen’s amended origin story. “Though the young Cullen was unhoused from his original birthplace,” Charles Molesworth notes, “he found secure lodgings by the time he was fourteen” (15). In comparison to Hughes or Nugent, his adult life was relatively staid. But as with all origin stories, there are cracks in this one, and they have not gone critically unobserved. As Molesworth registers, there are also longstanding rumours that Cullen’s father, a prominent minister, lusted after choirboys and even cross-dressed on occasion (18). Regardless of the veracity of these rumours, they imply an uneasy relationship between the private home life that Hughes deems “fairly typical” and the public image that both Countee Cullen and his Reverend father occupied.

Let us agree, for the sake of argument, that Cullen was a homebody. What of it? Bracketing the potential irrelevance of his biography to rigorous critical readings of his texts, it strikes me as particularly myopic of his readers to dismiss him for his attachment to shelter given both the larger crisis of meaning in modern Western civilization and the haunting legacy of slavery, which, as Hortense Spillers explicates in “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” made a point of trying to annihilate black intimacy and domesticity. Worse, parodies of Cullen tend to associate his domesticity with a failed masculinity. In *Infants*, for instance, the narrator describes DeWitt Clinton in misogynistic terms as possessing a “high-pitched, nasal voice,” at which
Raymond “could not suppress a snort.” Raymond laughs not at his ideas per se but at “the vivid mental picture of that poet’s creative hours” that Clinton’s “few words” have inspired: his “eyes on a page of Keats, fingers on typewriter, mind frantically conjuring African scenes. And there would of course be a Bible nearby” (Thurman, *Infants* 236). According to this image, Cullen is merely mimicking Keats, “frantically” figuring out how to reconcile the public demand for a Primitivist aesthetic with his Romantic orientation. Cullen turns away from experiential knowledge and from his own community in search of utterly foreign forms. Paradoxically, Cullen is too domesticated in his personal life yet too foreign in his literary one. Hughes is the obverse: struck with wanderlust yet dwelling in a homegrown aesthetic world. If his wandering style is not at odds with African-American experience, it is because up through the twentieth century black life was often marked by a pervasive sense of uprootedness. Hughes’s poetry wants to transvalue mobility and re-signify it as a form of potential; Cullen, however, gravitates towards a different kind of shelter.

In cultivating an appreciation of modern black formalism without reducing it to an outdated mode of Victorianism I am also recognizing political potential in the transvaluation of standardized forms. A perusal of Cullen’s reception history reveals pervasive misreadings of the poet and his work, and necessarily instigates a call for a less narrow narrative of how queerness constitutes itself first place. “Critics are often embarrassed by the poet who is out of step with the age” (*Poetics* 52), Baker argues in relation to Cullen, but is not queerness fundamentally a sensation of feeling “out of step”? Wallace Thurman describes how Cullen’s second collection, *Copper Sun*, sees him “marking time or side-stepping rather than marching forward” (“Negro


37 For an in-depth discussion of the relationship between Cullen’s gender expression and his critical reception, see Powers.
Poets” 420), a movement akin to Kathryn Bond Stockton’s notion of sideways growth. In the moment that Cullen becomes unpopular and thus untimely, he redeems himself within the very narrative of queer modernism that seeks to denounce him. Might we not also interpret his disavowal of the identity “Negro poet” as an effort to avoid over-determining the word poet, just as queer theory has taken pains to unhinge the term queer from specific identity categories? Why should Cullen call himself a “Negro poet” anymore than he should call himself a “gay poet” or a “male poet” or an “urban poet” or a “Romanticist” or, god forbid, “a Keatsian”? Cullen have may been clear in his loyalties—Thurman mocks DeWitt for showing up “accompanied, as usual, by his fideles achates, David Holloway” (Infants 232), a stand-in for Cullen’s longtime lover and friend, Harold Jackman—but he remained decidedly unwilling to reduce those loyalties to a specifically racialized social identity.

Vogel claims that Cullen “had little difficulty adopting the privileges and double standards of middle-class gay male identities in the early twentieth century” (20), yet the steady decline in his productivity and prowess as a poet over the course of his career tell a different story. Cullen’s work bears out his struggle with the pressure he felt as the poet on whose shoulders the future of black poetry most ludicrously teetered. Cullen’s poems painfully document his effort to fully reconcile form and content in a context in which black bodies and culture were treated and incommensurate with Anglo-American aesthetic standards of beauty. His poems at once want to redress this ill and yet also speak to a longing for privacy and refuge in a world in which he is under the constant glare of the public spotlight. In other words, they register an anxiety about the burden of representation. Rather than turning to bourgeois or Uplift conceptions of the private, heteronormative home, however, Cullen’s poetry fundamentally re-imagines the social by identifying strategies for carving out a space of refuge within conventional forms. Put another way, Cullen’s poetry hopes to salvage the space of the “open
secret” (Sedgwick, *Epistemology* 22) in which he hides within the spectacle of his own annunciation.

In the disjuncture between form and content, Cullen’s poetry critiques the burden of representation and suggests a relationship between aesthetics and politics that is not predicated on opposition or resistance. Cullen’s refusal to abandon a poetic tradition that gave him immense pleasure speaks to the centrality of pleasure to both his writing and to his transhistorical love affair with John Keats, and produces an interesting counter-narrative to the modernist obsession with “difficulty.” Yet this is not to say that his poems are not difficult in their own right. Their conventional form may render them deceptively conventional, but their content was often anything but. He was keenly aware of the inextricability of African-American literature from Anglo-American literary traditions and literary institutions. For Cullen, these traditions are ultimately connected through desire. His tortured poem, “To John Keats, Poet. At Springtime,” begins: “I cannot hold my peace, John Keats” (Cullen 10). Cullen’s use of apostrophe and his sense of urgency underscore the desire that structures the poem. “I am helpless in the toil/ Of Spring, as any lamb that bleats” (2-3), he continues, trying to affirm his innocence. Yet by the third stanza, he has conjured up this romantic invitation: “And you and I, shall we lie still,/ John Keats, while Beauty summons us?” (15-6). The speaker imagines he can “feel [Keats’s] sensitive will…pulsing up some tremulous/ Sap road of a maple tree” (17-9). As the leaves “grow” (20), Keats springs alive through Cullen’s engagement with his poetry; “Through dust,” the speaker states, “your fingers can still push/ The Vision Splendid to a birth” (23-4). Positioning himself at once as Keats’s lover and inheritor, Cullen dismisses the idea that Keats is “dead” (27), for he has heard Keats’s “full insistent cry” (28) and “[k]now[s] that John Keats still writes poetry” (30). Those who doubt this, the speaker announces, “do not know that you,/ John Keats, keep revel with me, too” (35-6). The sexual imagery of the tree filling with sap and Keats’s probing
fingers result in a form of birth: the creation of a poem in which Cullen and Keats “lie still”
together, queer bedfellows, to return to Ferguson’s formulation, inhabiting the strange
temporality of the text.\footnote{Cullen is, in a sense, animating his poetry through the re-animation of Keats. In this vein, it would be interesting to read his texts through recent theories of racial animacy. Ngai, for instance, contends in \textit{Ugly Feelings} that “animatedness” is the condition by which texts works reduce people of colour to bodily impulses, and depicts their bodies as excessively emotive and alive. In the case of Cullen and Keats, however, it is Keats’s body that is powerless to the motions it performs. As I argue later in the chapter, Cullen produced a largely disembodied black poetics in which affect is not commensurate with embodied emotions. See also Chen.}

Cullen may not have not have turned to folk forms, but his poetry frequently takes
blackness or queerness (or both) as its subject. Unlike Hughes, he refused both a white patron
and Carl Van Vechten’s offer to arrange a publisher for his first book, \textit{Color} (Molesworth 78).
Instead of turning to “authentically” black forms, he set about a very different project: making
European forms his own. “Cullen was the anti-type of the minstrel show buffoon in his personal
demeanor,” Jackson notes. His style was “freshly free of the melodramatic, role-playing masks,”
an expression of inner truth “rather than a performance put on for others” (Jackson xxviii). The
fact that Hughes deems Cullen self-hating because of his attraction to European forms positions
his detractors as utopian in their separatism, if not delusional. Even Zora Neale Hurston states in
her 1934 essay, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” that originality is a sham. Taking up the
stereotype that “the Negro is lacking in originality,” Hurston maintains: “it is obvious that to get
back to the original sources is much too difficult for any group to claim very much as certainty.
What we really mean by originality is the modification of ideas.” Even Shakespeare’s plays, she
suggests, as if anticipating Harold Bloom, recycle history. From this perspective, the Negro is “a
very original being,” for “[w]hile he lives and moves in the midst of a white-civilization,
everything that he touches is re-interpreted for his own use” (359). Despite his denunciation of
Cullen’s poetic orientation, Hughes seems oddly in agreement with Hurston. In “House in the
World,” which I take as an epigraph, the speaker is “looking for a house” (1) free from “white shadows” (3). The brevity of this poem, which is only two quatrains in length, and the speed at which the speaker reaches his conclusion that there “there is no such house” (5), demonstrates the poem’s keen awareness of the impossibility of stepping outside of race in America. Race permeates the most private and intimate of spaces, even when the foundation of a house has been torn down and rebuilt according to a different logic. Through the house, poetic form powerfully intersects with notions of domesticity and housekeeping, expressing the capacity to index such concepts on the level of the literal, figurative, local, and national.

A cursory glance at the complete list of Hughes’s poems reveals that, even nominally, home organizes much his poetry; titles include “Empty House,” “Homecoming,” “Homesick Blues,” “House in Taos,” “House in the World,” “Little Song on Housing.” Add in the titles that speak to specific locales and the list grows exponentially. Hughes was not alone in this fixation. From Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem to Rudolph Fisher’s “City of Refuge,” scores of Harlem writers latched on to home both as a rhetorical device and as a thematic. Hughes believed that the poet must write out of his own social and national context (Rampersad 5). He refused to separate his poetics and his politics, and as such his poetry demonstrates his marked interest in the ways in which intimate spaces were structured by sociopolitical realities. Home may function as an idea in several poems, but it is almost always grounded in material reality, whether that be the brick-littered sky of Harlem, the dusk drenched cotton fields of the rural South, or the “empty hell” of an “empty house” (3-4 “Empty House”). His “Little Lyric (Of Great Importance)” consists of merely two lines: “I wish the rent/ Was Heaven sent” (Hughes 1-2). This poem, perhaps more than any other, instantiates the fundamental rift between Hughes and Cullen. Despite his assertion in Caroling Dusk that his “chief problem has been that of reconciling a Christian upbringing with a pagan inclination,” Cullen remained a Christian throughout his life.
Financially, he stayed afloat thanks to his initial success as a poet, followed by his steady income as a high school French teacher (Molesworth 207). Cullen’s poetry rarely grapples with houses; it examines inhabitance more abstractly. “Heritage,” for instance, considers the psychic effects of colonial displacement, while “Tableau” documents the sensation of social dislocation that arises from an interracial queer friendship. Cullen’s poetry “is in harmony with his overall conception of the poet as a man who dwells above mundane realities” (Baker, Poetics 53). Hughes, by contrast, adhered to a materialist orientation. Yet just as Cullen struggled to reconcile Christianity and Paganism—long read as code for his queerness—Hughes’s poems show that stylistic wanderings do not rescue modern subjects from homesickness.

Hughes wanted to dwell in the ordinary whereas Cullen wanted to transcend it, but both turned to form in order to create a space in which to do so. Rather than foreground the problems of dwelling through a modernist struggle with language and grammar, Cullen instead does so through genre. Invoking certain generic conventions, he surprises the reader with the racially or sexually charged content of his poems. “For two generations,” Thurman writes, “Negro poets have been trying to do what Mr. Cullen had succeeded in doing: first, trying to translate into lyric form the highly poetic urge to escape from the blatant realities of life in America into a vivid past and, second, fleeing from the stigma of being called a Negro poet…” No contemporary poet, white or black, in Thurman’s view, “can make the banal sound as beautiful as does Mr. Cullen” (“Negro Poets” 420). Thurman’s comment, with its insinuation that Cullen’s poetry is “banal,” reads at first as a backhanded compliment, but such a reading assumes he means the word derogatively. Intentionally or not, Thurman identifies Cullen’s ability to transvalue the banal as a site of comfort and beauty.

As I have previously mentioned, however, Cullen’s attraction to conventional forms did not correlate with a homogenizing attitude towards poetry—either his own, or that of African-
American poetry more broadly. In “To Certain Critics,” which begins the section “Color” from his 1929 collection *The Black Christ and Other Poems*, Cullen responds to Hughes’s accusation that he is a race “traitor”: “I’ll bear your censure as your praise/ For never shall the clan/ Confine my singing to its ways/ Beyond the ways of man” (1-4). The speaker’s stark refusal to allow the logic of racial solidarity to determine his choice of poetic style speaks to Cullen’s belief in a heterogeneous racial politics. “No racial option narrows grief,” he continues, “Pain is no patriot” (5-6). Precisely because Cullen’s poetry trades in abstraction, in ideas and emotions that are not always reified in specific bodies, it tends to gravitate towards representations of the universal over the particular.

Cullen’s poetry is, one might argue, a *disembodied* poetry, which is precisely what renders it so ripe for critique. How does one write about race, or about sexuality, without involving the body? Furthermore, why would one want to do so? My belief is that Cullen’s poetry expresses a deep distrust of visual logics. By turning to conventional forms, he hides behind the density of genre, and in fact uses genre to problematize the relationship between content and form, between inside and outside, between private and public. In doing so, he deflects the reader’s gaze, using genre as a shield behind which to hide. Genre is the barrier that impedes access to the specificity of the body, so that even poems that emerge out of the most intimate of personal experiences express themselves in more general terms. One of Cullen’s most well known poems, “Incident,” speaks to the anxiety of being the object the white reader’s gaze, as the speaker recalls an extended childhood visit to Baltimore, during which he “saw a Baltimorean/ Keep looking straight at me” (3-4). The child naively smiles at the stranger, who in return “poked out/ His tongue, and called me, ‘Nigger.’” “I saw the whole of Baltimore/ From May until December;/ Of all the things that happened there/ That’s all that I remember” (9-12). Yet another poem, “Two Who Crossed The Line (*She Crosses*),” speaks of the perils of
motherhood for women who pass, while “Two Who Crossed The Line (He Crosses),” examines race and the difference gender makes. These poems foreground the betrayal of the body: a betrayal contingent on the gazing judgment of the spectator.

3.4 Instruments of Desire

While critics such as Jackson and Kuenz have initiated an important reassessment of Cullen’s work, his love poems remain critically neglected. In their troubling of visual logics and their search for mythical or metaphorical ways to represent queerness, Cullen’s love poems carve out spaces that are impossible within the material conditions of everyday life, and yet which are problematically utopian—a good place, but also no place. Copper Sun, published soon before Cullen’s disastrously short marriage to W.E.B. Du Bois’s daughter Yolande, is replete with poems about love and failure. Cullen and Yolande were married with great fanfare in April of 1928, but the marriage petered out and by 1930 officially ended in divorce. While critics have been frustrated by the lack of definitive evidence that they were ever lovers, it is a commonplace assumption that Cullen’s relationship to Harold Jackman played a role in the demise of his marriage. Letters between Cullen and Jackman reveal that their intimacy pre-dates his relationship with Yolande, and persists well into his second marriage to Ida Mae Robertson. In 1925, he sent Jackman a letter from Harvard, prefaced by the warning that it is “for your private consumption” only. He begins with the confession: “I slept in silk pajamas last night” (28 Sept.). Weeks later, he sent another letter, stating, “I really believe that true friendships, instead of marriages, are made in heaven. I fail to see any divine diplomacy behind most marriages; they are too easily disrupted. I’m glad you miss me, for it would be unfair to have me do all the missing” (7 Oct.). A letter from the following spring, which Cullen sent Jackman on a trip to Egypt, is more blunt: “I really do wish you were along with me. There is a certain kind of fun which we enjoy together that I can never quite approximate with anyone else…” (15 Jul.). After
his marriage a year later, Cullen sailed for Paris. Yolande would later join him but, tellingly, it was Jackman who was by his side as the boat pulled away from the harbour (Molesworth 137).

Cullen’s marriage offered him the perfect opportunity to write publically about his failed heterosexuality while doing so under the guise of writing about unrequited or impossible love. While these poems are often highly intimate and affectively charged, it proves difficult to determine much about either the speaker of the poem or his or her audience. Take, for example, “In Memoriam”:

You were a path I had to take  
To find that all  
That lay behind its loops and bends  
Was a bare blank wall.  
You were the way my curious hands  
Were doomed to learn  
That fire, lovely to the sight,  
To the touch will burn.  

That yours was no slight role, my dear,  
Be well content;  
Not everyone is blessed to be  
Wisdom’s instrument.

Read one way, the poem addresses a lost lover and mourns the death of their love, which burned too quickly and is now spent. However, an alternate reading suggests that this lover taught the speaker a very divergent lesson: the lesson of indifference. The speaker finds the lover’s touch painful and unpleasant. His relationship with the lover leads him to a dead-end, “a bare blank wall.” Yet is the poem describing the bland impassion of forced heterosexuality, or the social death that can result from homosexuality?

Other poems are more explicit. “Words to My Love” draws on the trope of the poet as Nightingale, but one seemingly engaged in a sexual act: “What if you come/ Again and swell/ The Throat of some/ Mute bird;/ How shall I tell?” In the final line of this stanza, the speaker reveals his double bind. On the one hand, he is too choked to utter words; on the other, he is
registering his own anxiety about the ineffability of his sexuality. The poem plays on the tension between the speaker’s urge to express desire, and his inability to do so. Perhaps more than any other of his short lyric poems, “Tableau” gathers together these anxieties about race, sexuality and the visual. Cullen dedicates the poem to his white lover, Donald Duff:

Locked arm in arm they cross the way,  
The black boy and the white.  
The golden splendor of the day,  
The sable pride of night.

From lowered blinds the dark folk stare,  
And here the fair folk talk,  
Indignant that these two should dare,  
In unison to walk.

Oblivious to look and word  
They pass, and see no wonder  
That lightning brilliant as a sword  
Should blaze the path of thunder.

The boys in “Tableau” deflect the hateful gaze that is directed at them as a result of their interracial queerness. While Cullen resists the stylistic complexity of the modernists, the seemingly simplistic and conventional form of the poem stands at odds with its difficult subject matter. “Tableau” demands that we read between the lines. These boys are a spectacle, but their legibility is only skin-deep. “Locked arm in arm” (Cullen, “Tableau” 1), they are coded in visual terms as “black” and “white” (2), “golden splendor” (3) and “sable night” (4); we know little else about them. The fact that they remain “oblivious” (9) to the gaze indicates that they have eked out an impenetrable world for themselves within this fishbowl. As readers, we participate in the voyeurism of the spectators, yet we too lack access to these boys’ thoughts and feelings, just as we lack context for their relationship. In this sense, the poem preserves their privacy at the very

39 See Molesworth (52) for more on this relationship.
moment that it appears to have been dispelled. The poem severs the connection between visibility, legibility and epistemology, suggesting that while the body may be unavoidably publicly visible, its complex history and its relationship to other bodies might be invisible even as discursive codes impose power differentials.

The boys “pass” (10) as legible, even though racial and sexual codes cannot fully signify individual subjectivity. Cullen’s refusal to grant us access to the interiorities of these characters demarcates the interpretive limits of reading. In fact, we know nothing more about these boys by the end of the poem than we did at the beginning. The poem becomes a tabula rasa onto which we project our assumptions, which the poem in turn forcefully deflects. Perhaps reading these boys as subjects is in fact entirely beside the point. What if Cullen is personifying his attraction to European forms? Cullen’s queerness directs his attraction to Keats, temporally and affectively, just as the boys in the poem are “day” (3) and “night” (4), two time zones that by definition can never overlap. Treating the space of the poem as a microcosm of the social, Cullen positions his speaker as the strange “bedfellow” of earlier white authors, housing them under one roof. “Tableau” thinks how one might endure in one’s attraction to difference. By coding queerness here in terms of race, and yet as irreducible to race, the poem also speaks to the reality of difference within queerness, and thus to the possibility of different queer forms.

The boys in the poem respond to their voyeurs with indifference. In this sense, they reject oppositional politics in favour of pursuing a more oblique turn inwards. Reading the poem in phenomenological terms, Sara Ahmed notes how in locking their arms, the boys cross both “the color line” and “the straight line” at the same “moment.” Their refusal to acknowledge their “union” as spectacle, and their insistence on their own ordinariness in the face of viewers who

40 Ahmed discusses how tableau stems from the Latin tabula (168).
want to treat them as extraordinary, literally forges a new path. More importantly, queerness brings into “proximity” lives that “should not meet” (Ahmed 169). In other words, by crossing one line, they free up a space in which to explore new forms of sociality. The space of spectatorship is not an impasse, not the “bare blank wall” (Cullen 4) of “In Memoriam,” but one through which they “blaze a path of thunder” (“Tableau” 12). “Perhaps this is a different kind of politics of sides,” Ahmed states, wherein “one is not asked to ‘take sides’ when one is ‘beside’—one walks beside and alongside.” Falling temporally into step, these boys enact a form of political solidarity “in which one is not left behind” (Ahmed 169). If Infants portrays a house divided, “Tableau” moves beyond binary oppositions into a space of dwelling in sideways affinities that enable forward motion. Exploding the doubleness of racial experience in America by suggesting that consciousness emerges out of intersectional experiences, the poem demonstrates that a queer black youth can feel just as set apart by the gaze of other black people as he can from his white interpellators.

“Tableau” is a far cry from “Cross,” Hughes’s poem about the intergenerational violence that stems from interracial sex. The biracial speaker’s “old man’s a white old man” (Hughes, “Cross” 1) and his “old mother’s black” (2); his parents’ lives were disparate if not oppositional. “My old man died in a fine big house./ My ma died in a shack./ I wonder where I’m gonna die,” the speaker wonders, “Being neither white nor black” (9-12)? Contemplating his future, the speaker links his biracial background to his sensation of feeling un-housed. The poem revolves around this sense of dislocation and suggests that neither the “big fine house” of his father nor his mother’s “shack” are viable options. Unlike the boys in “Tableau,” Hughes’s speaker is trapped in an impossible dialectic. In this final vision, the crossing of the color line leads nowhere fast: his parents die within their socially assigned homes, whereas the speaker himself can find nowhere but the poem in which to dwell. Yearning for a material house, he is
Hughes responds to the crisis of displacement in his poetry by finding a genre—the Blues—with which to represent precisely this experience of feeling un-housed. What differentiates Cullen as a poet is his sense of entitlement to the English literary tradition. The boys in “Tableau” are out on the street, exposed to the gaze of both white and black spectators who, as in Hughes’s poem, stare out from behind the windows of their houses. Yet in Cullen’s poem, the boys enjoy a private world. Rather than orienting themselves outward, in an act of “double-consciousness” (8), as Du Bois famously terms it, they assert their own right to privacy and ordinariness within a scene in which they are the objects of discourse. They literally see “no wonder” (Cullen, “Tableau” 10) in their presence. Crucially, it is the aesthetic dimension of literature itself that allows Cullen to re-position the two boys beyond the reductive categories of “dark” (5) and “fair” (6) to which the gawkers are consigned. By reimagining the boys as “the golden splendor of day” (3) and the “sable pride of night” (4), Cullen at once inscribes them as racialized subjects and obscures their corporeality through trope, shielding their bodies from the reader. In doing so, he imagines a way of dwelling together in the world in queer interracial intimacy.

Cullen’s diction in “Tableau” tellingly echoes a comment he made to Alain Locke about his own queerness two years earlier in a letter in which he thanks Locke for recommending Edward Carpenter’s 1902 anthology of poems, Iolaüs: an Anthology of Friendship. Carpenter’s text grapples with questions of homosexuality and friendship by drawing upon Greek mythology, and specifically the figure of Iolaus, who was likely Heracles’s lover. “It opened up for me Soul windows which had been closed,” Cullen tells Locke, and “threw a noble and evident light on what I had begun to believe, because of what the world believes, ignoble and natural.” Cullen’s use of the world “noble” in “Tableau” echoes this earlier usage. “I loved myself in it” (To Alain
Locke” 215) he gushes, identifying not only with Carpenter’s poems but also with Classical literature. In 1935, Cullen would go on to publish a translation of The Medea, “the first major first translation” of a Classical text by an African-American (Molesworth 190).

Thurman may mock Cullen for his interest in his African heritage, but in fact Cullen’s poetry betrays his grave sense of disconnection from a racialized past. His most famous poem, “Heritage,” struggles with the question “What is Africa to Me?” In “Heritage,” Cullen oscillates between a detached Christian perspective, in which Africa is “A book one thumbs/ Listlessly, til slumber comes” (31-32) and the Primitivist fantasy of Africa as a seductive jungle space. As a black poet, he is torn between contradictory loyalties and representational systems—Christianity and Paganism—but his letter to Locke suggests that his understanding of himself as a queer poet is much more secure. I am not advocating that we read Cullen through the rubric of identity. However, I am suggesting that we attend to the link between settling and canonicity. Cullen’s affiliation with Locke and Keats registers one way when we think these relationships in terms of race, yet they register rather differently when we think them in terms of queerness. Is it not erroneous to “confine” Cullen, to use his word from “To Certain Critics,” to a black literary canon within which Cullen would have loathed being housed when in fact the home he concocts for himself is far less predictable, more capacious, and more queer in its accommodation of interracial, transhistorical desires? Cullen’s canonical position undermines his own self-identification and puts pressure on our methods for approaching authorial identity.

Cullen permitted himself to engage queer canons at the expense of being labeled a race traitor. Seen in this light, Hughes’s seemingly progressive attitude towards the racial mountain grows tinged with a more troubling hue. Cullen was not an antiquarian who was simply collecting old forms; he was transforming those forms from the inside. These debates about form may seem a distraction from the project of building real homes, but my point is that these authors
treated the aesthetic and everyday life as mutually constitutive. In considering the place of aesthetic form within modernism, I am arguing that diverse Harlem Renaissance writers were precisely interested in the relationship between poetic form and housing. A dominant narrative of queer modernism argues that queers embraced abjected forms and, through them, new futures. Part of what I am asking in this chapter is how this narrative might be revised to account for the queer embrace of forms that, at first blush, appear somewhat more conventional. Just as the New Negro leaders against whom the Niggeratti rebelled notoriously sought to squelch overt expressions of queerness during the Renaissance, their dissenters were themselves policing the utopia to expunge certain remnants—not because those remnants were queer, but because they were queer in the wrong way. Cullen’s reception history ultimately raises larger questions about the primacy of race in canonical formations, and the exclusion of individuals from certain canons based on their strange affinities.
Chapter Four: The House is an Archive: *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*

So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

---Sylvia Plath, “Daddy”

In the passage of their lives together every object in the garden, every item in the house, every word they spoke, attested to their mutual love, the combining of their humours...such was the museum of their encounter.

---Djuna Barnes

Amongst the many strange declarations that James Agee makes at the beginning of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, perhaps the strangest one is this: “If I could do it, I’d do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement.” Extending his pattern of launching accusations at his readers, he states with disdain, “I could trust a majority of you would use it as you would a parlor game.” This book, Agee reminds us, is not a game. It is, at least in premise, not even fiction. Rather, it is “a piece of the body torn out by the roots,” an account of “human beings, living in this world, innocent of such twistings as these which are taking place over their heads” (Agee 10). In short, the houses and people in the book exist already, “as you do and as I do, and as no character of the imagination can possibly exist” (9). Long before poststructuralism revealed the chasm between the sign and the signifier, Agee took to the page to express his frustration with the inherent limits of textual representation.

Because he obviously cannot offer up the objects (and subjects) that he describes in their material glory, he settles into a prolonged meditation on the impossibility of his ideal project: to
give us “human actuality” (xi), not as a representation but in its raw immediacy. For Agee, there is a fundamental disparity between the “actual” and “art” or “formalism” (199). Thus, his effort to represent actuality across the entire four hundred odd pages of the text is somewhat akin to him repeatedly ramming his head against a brick wall. “We found no one family through which the whole of tenantry in that country could be justly represented,” he laments, ultimately deeming the Gudger family “the most nearly representative of the three” (ix) that he and the photographer Walker Evans came to know. 41 As Alan Spiegel puts it, “Agee never seems to run out of eloquent ways to remind us of just how badly he has betrayed the majesty of his ideals.” The “rise-and-plunge, surge-and-halt rhythm” of the text constitutes the soundtrack to his “failure” (51). Yet what Agee and Spiegel deem failure is also the impetus for Agee’s productive generic experiment. Many critics have long grappled with the text’s generic illegibility. Still others have read it as a challenge to the ethics of documentary form—specifically, as a denunciation of contemporaneous Depression-era photography projects by artists such as Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell, whom Agee satirizes in “Notes and Appendices.” In this chapter, I am less interested in placing the text within a genealogy or literary tradition, or in historicizing. Against the grain of the critical tendency of focusing on Agee’s biography at the expense of his texts (5), I want to explore the formal role Agee inevitably plays in Famous Men, a role I will argue is strikingly akin to that of an archivist.

In describing the material traces of the people in his book, unnerved that he cannot show us them in their material realness, Agee makes instead an archive of words. And the architecture of the archive that he creates is, as with the world he wishes to reveal to us, that of a house. Drawing on the historical association between houses and archives, I will ask both how the

41 Agee used pseudonyms for the three families: Gudger for Burroughs, Ricketts for Tengle and, rather playfully, Woods for Fields.
objects in the tenants’ houses present themselves as archival objects, and how the archive functions as a relational space, and thus an ethical one. Just as Agee refers to a country church as “God’s mask and wooden skull and home” (35-6), he transforms the Gudgers' house into a psychic and spiritual archive. Its façade is a “blind face” (123), its walls “a skin of one thickness” (125), its beams “skeletal” (126), and the knots in its wood “musculatures” (128).

This is an archive of affects as much if not more so than of material things; this is an archive of Agee’s mind. It is therefore a mistake to read *Famous Men* as ethnography, for the text is far more psychological than it is sociological. In the pages that follow, I will develop two connected arguments: first, that we might conceive of Agee’s actions in the text, and his narrative approach, as forms of archival practice, and second, that insomuch as that practice is guided by Agee’s desires for home, for lost origins, for belonging, it best reveals itself to us through his recurrent confessions around sexual desire. Ultimately, as we shall see, Agee produces through his relationship to the archives that he both bears witness to and constructs a new form of “sexual ethics” (256) that is bound up in his faith in the redemptive function of sexuality.

Reading *Famous Men* alongside Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, I argue that Agee invokes *The Book of Sirach*, from which he draws his title, in order to challenge the heteronormative and patriarchal logics of the Biblical covenant that serves as his intertext. In doing so, he posits a fundamental link between sexuality and spirituality, and employs this connection in order to re-inscribe within the house of the human family individuals who possess a queer relationship to the social, and thus to the archive, by virtue of their poverty. Class becomes the mechanism by which Agee is compelled to queer the archive, as poverty prevents the families that Agee examines to adhere to the standards of both heteronormativity and whiteness. As Agee increasingly discloses his own sexual desires to the reader across the duration of the text, he reveals a longing for the archive to respond to his lust and longing, and frustration at its failure to
do so. Yet it is precisely this failure, I conclude, that forces Agee to self-reflexively consider the ethics of archival relations, and to imagine the house as a place that can accommodate forms of social and sexual deviancy. Ultimately, the ethical problem that persists in the text is less that Agee comes to eclipse the tenants, but that Agee loses sight of the fact that the tenants and their descendents persist as temporal beings whose lives inevitably exceed the borders of the archive in which he wants them to perpetually dwell.

4.2 In the Archive of Agee’s Desire

Famous Men is a book about dwelling as a practice, in which houses dominate the text’s rhetorical and visual economy. But these houses are not just houses: they are, Agee insists, also homes. In fact, he is fascinated by the methods and aesthetic strategies the tenants employ to turn the derelict shelters they inhabit into homes. The text also provides a formal architecture in which to house these figures and their things, quite literally delineating the various rooms of the house in Part Two, and then making an important rhetorical shift from the secular to the religious in “Inductions,” which begins with Psalm 43: 4. “I will go unto the altar of God:/ Even unto the God of my joy and gladness” (318). These sections in Part Three recast the house as a church, framing Agee’s experiences in it as a prolonged service. While I will focus more on Agee’s text than on Evans’s photographs, it is significant that the word camera, like the word stanza, means room in Italian. As Janis Bergman-Carton and Evan Carton argue, the text’s “interpretative difficulty arises not because the text is generically unhoused, its words insufficiently stabilized or objectified to be securely grasped, but because it is so devotedly housed, even entombed.” Building on their premise that the text is “intended as a house, a tomb, a devotional object, an icon” (Bergman-Carton and Carton 3), and that we as readers struggle to interpret that space, like sinners kneeling at the altar of God, aware that our knowledge is forever fragmented and impartial, I read the text as a reflection on the ethics of archival practice, one that is impossibly
bound up in the trope of the text as a house. Moreover, I read Agee’s archive as queer insomuch as, in Ann Cvetkovich’s words, it is “composed of material practices that challenge traditional conceptions of history and understand the quest for history as a psychic need rather than a science” (*Archive* 268). In this vein, I understand the archive as a practice and a psychic space rather than as merely a collection of things. For all that he wants to evacuate the role of mediator, Agee is, in the final instance, keenly aware of the impossibility of his own self-effacement.

The Society of American Archivists defines archives as “the non-current records of individuals, groups, institutions, and governments that contain information of enduring value” (“The Archives Profession”). Yet as Cvetkovich points out, certain “lived experiences and the cultural traces they leave are frequently inadequate to the task of documentation” (*Archive* 9). Of course, the 1930s was a time in which New Deal programs such as the Federal Writer’s Project and the Federal Arts Project, under the auspices of the Federal Project Number One of the Works Progress Association, did lead to the documentation of aspects of American life that had thereunto remained largely unrecorded. From July 1935 through to 1939, the Federal Writer’s Project, directed by Henry Alsberg, employed nearly 6600 writers, who produced the iconic *American Guide Series*, along with a collection of slave narratives, and other oral and folk histories (“Federal Writers’ Project”). Such programs saw the rise of the “artist-as-worker within the emergent culture industries” (Allred, “Boring” 42), and these artists were tasked with precisely the job of deeming archivable the “cultural traces” of marginalized Americans in deprived areas of the country.
Agee made his living in a different way, however. While he was engrossed in what Michael Szalay terms “New Deal modernism,” his income was derived from non-public sources: namely, magazines such as Time and Fortune. Agee and Evans went down to Alabama in the summer of 1936 on assignment by Fortune, which had asked them to come up with a 10,000-word article on the plight of sharecroppers in the rural South. From its inception, Agee was wildly excited at the prospect. “He was stunned, exalted, scared clean through, and felt like impregnating every woman on the fifty-second floor,” his friend and colleague, Robert Fitzgerald, recalls. Fitzgerald and Agee proceeded to a bar on Third Avenue, where Agee laid out “what might be called the theory of Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, a book that was conceived that day…” (R. Fitzgerald 37). Fitzgerald’s use of “conceive” here crucially suggests that Agee transferred the sexual energy that he at one point wanted to direct toward the insemination of his female colleagues—a disturbing image at best—into a form of artistic creativity. Indeed, at this moment in his memoir of Agee, Fitzgerald rhetorically sets up a prevalent dynamic around conception within Famous Men. While it is impossible for us to know what plans Agee hatched over scotch and peanuts on that cold Manhattan evening, his enthusiasm makes clear the fact that, if we follow the conception metaphor to its logical conclusion, Agee anticipated a part of himself going into the text. If books are “working as much to produce an archive as to analyze one” (Cvetkovich, Archive 8), then the archive that Agee ultimately creates in Famous Men is, in essence, largely an archive of himself.

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42 Szalay begins his book with a prolonged reading of Famous Men and of Agee’s relationship to the literary marketplace. He claims Agee treated writing as a “performance” of labour and that this “performative aesthetic” finds its “strongest formulation” in the Federal Writer’s Project (27). I share with Allred, however, a sense that Agee had a more complicated and ambivalent relationship to the publishing industry.

43 Agee carefully distinguishes between sharecropper and tenant. While the former is “the generic term” in the north, a tenant is an individual who “owns a mule and some farm implements” and who thus “can arrange to yield less of his two major crops in payment to rent to the landowner.” A sharecropper, by contrast, owns neither of these things and thus “must pay his landowner half his cotton and a third to half his corn” (402).
A popular cartoon in 1936, part of the “Merrie Melodies” series by Looney Tunes, was entitled *I Wanna Play House*. The cartoon depicts two bear cubs engrossed in a game of hide-and-go-seek, unbeknownst to their snoozing father. One of the cubs hides out in a trailer, where he eats a snack and imbibes cider. It is all fun and games until the other cub finds him and picks a fight, which results in them accidentally releasing the brake. The trailer—cubs, cider jug and all—starts careening down the mountain, ultimately smashing into a tree trunk. Papa bear comes running, spots the cider jug, and drama ensues as he blames the wrong son. While the cartoon contains elements of slapstick humour, it also serves as a reminder of the perils of play.

Similarly, the notion of “playing house” is at first blush antithetical to Agee’s comment that the book is not a “parlor game.” However, *play* has connotations beyond sheer fun or whimsy. As evidenced by the experimental nature of the text, the Gudgers’ house becomes a space of exploration for Agee. Bucking New Critical conventions, and “utterly uncompromising with himself and his motives, he ultimately becomes his own most important topic” (R. King 208). In “playing house,” he dangerously reveals more about himself as a curator and documentarian than he does about the objects that he documents. We might conclude that meaning lies not in the material house itself, but in Agee’s desiring relationship to it.

As Derrida lays bare in *Archive Fever*, the archive and the home are fused together at the root. First delivered as a series of lectures at the Freud Museum in London in 1994, and later published as a collected text, Derrida’s deconstructionist account of the archive is perhaps more concerned with the archival impulse than it is with the space of the archive.\(^44\) Taking as his object of analysis Freud’s last house in London, the very building within which Derrida gave his lectures, Derrida explores the conversion of the personal home into a public archive. The

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\(^{44}\) Cvetkovich makes a similar observation (*Archive* 268).
occasion of these talks provided Derrida with an opportunity to examine the psychic dimensions of the archive, and what better case study for interrogating how psychoanalysis has irrevocably transformed our relationship to the archive than the “archivization of psychoanalysis itself” (Derrida 16)? According to Derrida, the archive is “not only the place for stocking and for conserving the archivable content of the past”; rather, “the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event” (17). Not much happens in Famous Men beyond description and beyond the tenants’ daily labour, which for the most part is out of sight if not out of mind. The scant motion that occurs seems to emanate from Agee himself, as he struggles to express his frustration with all things literary and sexual. What Agee best records is the event of his encounter with the Gudgers’ house itself, a building that “lost nothing in its stasis” (Agee 35) but which Agee describes time and again as “a world in which all members were stationary” (360). Prowling in and around the dwelling, Agee becomes, in Richard King’s words, “the voyeur of his own lust” (227).

The real drama of the book begins one hundred and twenty pages in, in the “The Gudger House” subsection of “Shelter.” The scene, which documents Agee’s first full day alone in the house, is actually chronologically preceded by Agee’s first night in the house, which we are not privy to until nearly the end of the book. “They are gone,” he states. “No one is at home, in all this house, in all this land” (Agee 119). This is a false statement, of course, for someone is indeed at home: Agee himself. But Agee’s rhetorical effacement of his own presence works to underscore both his ambivalence about including himself in his record of these people’s lives—his ambivalence that the archival objects exist inevitably in relation to the archivist—and, perhaps more importantly, his sense of dispossession. While later in the text, Agee re-conceives
of the home as his home, and of the Gudgers as his kin—a turn of events to which I will shortly return—at this particular moment Age still perceives of himself very much as “a reverent and cold-laboring spy.” “Here I must say, a little anyhow: what I can hardly hope to bear out in the record,” Agee begins, likening the house to a space of “such sorrowful holiness…as no human consciousness shall every rightly perceive, far less impart to another…” His failure to record this house as it is, and to only record his fallible human perceptions, is predicated by its ineffable divinity. “This square home,” Agee claims, “as it stands in unshadowed earth between the winding years of heaven, is, not to me but of itself, one among the serene and final, uncapturable beauties of existence” (117). Recognizing he cannot continue this line of thought because he is fully unable to capture the house’s metaphysical essence, he instead narrows the scope of his project to telling “about an ordinary house, in which I lived a little while, and which is the home, for the time being, of the Gudger family” (118). Agee’s qualifier, “for the time being,” registers his shifting relationship to the house; while the Gudgers lay claim to the house only for the specific duration of their lease, Agee also implies that as mortals their time on earth is finite, and that the house is a site of evolving human relations.

When the family leaves to work in the fields, Agee doesn’t just play house: he plays God. “I am being made to witness matters no human being may see,” he writes. He then shifts from an image of George, “at this instant, hard, in the strenuous heat,” to a memory of himself, spending “the whole of a cavernous and gloomed afternoon” alone in his grandfather’s house when he was “in hot early puberty.” Then, as now, Agee felt the “cold beating” in his “solar plexus” as he “with a most bitter, criminal gliding and serpent restiveness” in his stomach “would wander from vacant room to vacant room examining into every secrecy” with his penetrative touch and gaze. He describes “trying to read; trying to play the piano; ravening upon volumes of soft-painted nudes; staring hungrily and hatefully into mirrors; rifling drawers, closets, boxes,” only to
eventually strip off his clothes, lie down on every bed in the house and, finally, “plan[t] [his] obscenities in the cold hearts of every mirror in foreknowledge” (120). There were, apparently, no limits to his exploration: “I permitted nothing to escape the fingering of my sense nor the insulting of the cold reptilian fury of the terror of lone desire which was upon me” (120-1). As in the Gudgers' house, the younger Agee strives for an impossible omniscience.

Much later in the book, in “Inductions,” Agee describes in more starkly sexual terms the sensation of childhood loneliness, epitomized for him by the “emptiness” (334) of a hot Southern Sunday afternoon. He dredges up this image: “I, this eleven-year-old, male, half-shaped child, pressing between the sharp hip bone and the floor my erection, and, thinking and imagining what I was able of the world and its people and my grief and hunger and boredom….and sweating and shaking my head in a sexual and murderous anger and despair.” Snapping back into the present, Agee continues: “[I] thought of my grandfather, whose house this now was, and of his house itself, and of each member of his family, and of all I knew so keenly and could never say.” This memory seizes him “so powerfully by the root of the throat that,” he admits, “I wished I might never have been born” (335). Read together, these two vignettes suggest that Agee’s position is hardly that of the intrusive northern reporter who has travelled south to exploit the tenants’ abjection in exchange for the commercial success of entertaining a cosmopolitan readership. Rather, he turns the occasion of visiting the Gudgers’ house into an occasion for self-reflection, in precisely the same way that Derrida does in Freud’s house when he confesses that “in speaking of a colleague, [Yosef Hoyim] Yerushalmi,” and his haunted personal engagement with Freud's ghost, really, “I am speaking of myself” (56). Agee thus uses the archive as, in Valerie Rohy’s words, a “technology of identity” (354).

The relationship between the archive and the family home is an historical one, Derrida reminds us, and in this sense it stages the drama of identity, or the archival “quest” for identity,
to return to Cvetkovich’s formulation, within the home. While Ella Zohar Ophir argues “Agee responds to the composition of tenant rooms as though they were gallery installations” (136), Agee in fact does precisely the opposite: he wants to preserve the domestic dimension of the house, projecting his own fantasies, memories and desires onto the space in order to re-centre himself as the object of analysis. In turning the Gudgers’ house into an archive of his own desires, and his time there as an occasion to ruminate on his relationship to the past, Agee circuitously finds a way around the ethical problem that frustrates him with journalism to begin with: that it likes to “pry intimately into the lives of an undefended and appallingly damaged group of human beings, an ignorant and helpless rural family, for the purpose of parading nakedness, disadvantage and humiliation of these lives before another group of human beings” (Agee 5). Derrida claims at the beginning of Archive Fever, “the meaning of the ‘archive,’ its only meaning, comes to it from the Greek arkheion: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons” (9-10). Noting “official documents” were typically stored in the houses of prominent men, Derrida argues that it is “in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that the archive takes place. The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently, marks this institutional passage from the private to the public, which does not always mean from the secret to the nonsecret” (10). Similarly, Famous Men documents Agee’s act of making public the private lives and belongings of the tenants. But, following Derrida’s logic, what Agee actually discloses in this transaction are his own secrets, his inner world.

The archive also has “the force of the law, of a law which is the law of the house (oikos), of the house as place, domicile, family, lineage, or institution.” Just as Freud’s house, in becoming a museum, “takes on all these powers of economy” (12), Agee imbues the Gudgers’ house with the power of the law. As in the case of Freud’s house, which is governed not only by the laws of psychoanalysis but, insomuch as psychoanalysis is bound up in the notion of a
“Jewish science” (31), the laws of God, the Gudgers’ house makes evident a set of laws that are not secular but rather divine. It belongs to an alternate temporality—the Gudgers, like Agee, are just passing through—and thus enables Agee to reflect upon the idea of a sacred human family. The fact that the Gudgers do not own the house in which they live is precisely what allows Agee to conceive of their relationship to the house in a paradigm other than one of Liberal home ownership. These citizens inhabit a world far apart from Herbert Hoover’s vision of the American home with “a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage.” But it is this distance that Agee identifies as a source of potential for reimagining the social.

Crucially, the laws that Agee ascribes to the house are not ones that he imposes but rather which he detects. This is precisely the attitude towards the role of the artist-as-detective that he articulates in his introduction to the photographer Helen Levitt’s 1965 book, A Way of Seeing. “The artist’s task,” Agee writes, “is not to alter the world as the eye sees it into a world of esthetic reality, but to perceive the esthetic reality within the actual world, and to make an undisturbed and faithful record of the instant in which this movement of creativeness achieves its most expressive crystallization.” While the photographer’s “eye” and “instrument” gives him “a leverage upon the materials of existence which is unique” (Agee qtd. in R. Fitzgerald 66-67), Agee tries to produce a kind of camera out of his own sensory perception, knowing full well that he will fail. Similarly, Jacques Rancière argues Agee’s “problem is not to glorify handiwork that testifies to the artfulness of the poor” (254) but rather to “spur the recognition of an art of living in this handiwork: beyond any adaptation of a life to it surrounding circumstances, there is a way in which life rises up to the height of its destiny” (255). He settles for making an “I” out of his “eye” by reflecting on his relationship to this “art of living.”

Agee detects in the house a pattern of human relations that transcends the material circumstances of the present. Part of the ethical trouble the book poses is its tendency to
universalize the particular, to salvage the dignity of the tenants by framing their lives as equal to, perhaps even holier than, the lives of other Americans. Agee turns to religious rhetoric to undergird this epistemological move, describing the tenants in the language of human suffering. In “Inductions,” he imagines his first night in the house as a recognition scene. Having up until this point disclosed to his reader scenes of startling autoeroticism, in which empty houses literally produce from him an erection, Agee is suddenly evacuated of his lust. Sitting around the kitchen with George Gudger and his wife, Allie Mae, Agee once again takes up the temporal possibilities of the tenant house: “the feeling increased itself upon me that at the end of a wandering and seeking, so long it had begun before I was born, I had apprehended and now sat at rest in my own home, between two who were my brother and sister, yet less that than something else; these, the wife my age exactly, the husband four years older, seemed not other than my own parents” (Agee 365). This moment of anagnorisis is a fantasy of arrival. Agee, who grew up in Knoxville, Tennessee, left the South to attend Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire at the ripe age of fifteen. From there, he went on to Harvard, followed by a career in journalism in New York City. Surely, part of the pleasure he derives from his time in the South stems from his homesickness. He is also invested in casting himself as a salt-of-the-earth type, radically different from his sycophantic colleagues. Taking his title from The Book of Sirach 44:1--“Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, and their fathers that begat us”--Agee reminds his reader, “[t]he Lord hath wrought great glory by them through his great power from the beginning.” Some of these men are “rich men” and “leaders of the people,” but “some there be which have no memorial; who perished, as though they had never been; and are become as though they had never been born; and their children after them.” Yet “these were merciful men, whose righteousness hath not been forgotten,” and all of “their children are within the covenant.” Agee wants to render literal the final verse: “Their bodies are buried in peace; but their name liveth for
evermore” (393). Through the text-as-archive, Agee and the tenants find everlasting life, if only nominally.

Agee treats these individuals as co-creators. He continues, “this was my right home, right earth, right blood, to which I would never have true right. For half my blood is just this; and half my right of speech; and by bland chance alone is my life so softened and sophisticated in the years of my defenselessness, and I am robbed of a royalty I can not only never claim, but never properly much desire or regret” (365). In the end, it is not the secretaries on the fifty-second floor whom Agee impregnates but the Gudgers’ house, without which the text could never have been conceived. This is, after all, the logical conclusion to the metaphor of Agee penetrating the house, to his trope of visiting the land as “prostrat[ing] himself as upon a woman” (346), and to the image of Agee seeing the house for the first time, “standing vertical” as an erection “to the front center of the house,” which awaits “dead black.” Here, Agee’s entirely body “grow[s] full of shame and of reverence” (362), full and ready to enter. But rather than a baby, what emerges is a book, a book that is conceived as if by immaculate conception during the month that he spends in the house, and which gestates for a good many years.

4.3 Archive Fever, Sexual Fervour

It goes without saying that Agee’s fantasy of kinship with the Gudgers is problematic, as is his claim to the Gudger home. “In all the time we have stayed in this house, and in all we have sought, and in each detail of it, there is so keen, sad, and precious a nostalgia as I can scarcely otherwise know,” Agee admits (365-6). Eventually this nostalgia overpowers him and completely occludes his pursuit of “an independent inquiry into certain normal predicaments of human divinity” that is “exhaustive, with no detail, however trivial it may seem, left untouched” (x). The fantasy is evident from the beginning. One of the text’s many epigraphs, which Agee borrows from Louise Gudger’s third-grade Geography textbook, Around the World With the
Children by F.B. Carpenter, proclaims the following: “The world is our home. It is also the home of many, many other children, some of whom live in far-away lands. They are our world brothers and sister.” Acknowledging, “everyone needs food, clothing and shelter,” Carpenter continues, “in our travels we shall wish to learn what our world brothers and sisters eat, and where their food comes from. We shall wish to see the houses they dwell in and how they are built. We shall wish also to know what clothing they use to protect themselves from the heat and the cold” (qtd. in Agee xiv). It is according to this logic that Agee is able to imagine George and Allie Mae both as his brother and sister, insomuch as they are children of God, and as his parents, the “famous men” from which he descends.

Agee critics have paid oddly scant attention to the relationship between sexuality and kinship in the text, I suspect because Agee’s constant slippage between the metaphorical and the literal renders the two seemingly disparate and tricky to parse. But I want to explore how the two cleave together. In doing so, I wish to dispel the pervasive idea that Agee’s ideal family is heterosexual—or, more properly, heteronormative. To reduce Agee’s attitude towards sexuality in the text to a deification of the mother-father-child triad is erroneous, and yet it is precisely this scenario that Ageeans routinely trot out, often by pointing to Agee’s relationship with his own parents, and to the Follett family in his Pulitzer-winning posthumous novel, A Death in the Family (1957). What such a reading does is to take a literal family--either the Folletts, the Gudgers, or the Agees--and treat them as metonymic for kinship. This is a mistake. And it is a mistake for two reasons. The first is that such a move overlooks the fact that Agee’s spiritual conception of kinship, as evidenced by his claim on the Gudgers as parents or siblings, conceives of family in forms beyond the biological. In the same way that Agee can comprehend of conception both in biological terms as insemination and in literary terms as textual production, signaling his appreciation the polyvalent dimensions of creativity, he also expresses quite
adamantly in places his expansive views on kinship. My second and closely related point is that 
Agee is sharply attuned to sexual difference. This is a point that requires some fleshing out.

Perhaps the most arresting example lies in the final paragraphs of “On the Porch: 3,” in 
which Agee describes lying on the Gudgers’ porch one night, the liminal space where he and 
sometimes Evans slept, listening to a strange noise. He and Evans sat utterly quiet, picking up on 
two animals performing a call and response. Every time the noise cut through the thick night air, 
shrill and chilling, it was with a slight variation. “One time it would be sexual,” Agee explains, 
“another, just a casual colloquy; another a challenge; another, a signal or warning; another, a 
comment on us; another some simply and desperate effort at mutual location…” (411-12). There 
is a musical quality to the event that makes clear Agee’s belief that his book has “a form and set 
of tones rather less like those of narrative than like those of music” (215). This final vignette of 
“the calling of two creatures should by rights be established at very least as a poem, or a piece of 
music,” Agee continues, reminding us he is insufficiently “gifted” to do the scenario justice; to 
Agee, nature is fundamentally superior to art (206). Still, he refuses to “relinquish the ultimately 
hopeless effort simply because that effort would be, above most efforts, so useless” (415). Here, 
Agee renders apparent the obvious parallel he sees in the relationship between the creatures and 
his relationship to the tenants.

But he also implicates another figure: a nameless, Platonic female. Agee finds in these 
foxes (he deduces they are foxes) both “the frightening joy of hearing the world talk to itself, and 
the grief of incommunicability.” Ultimately, he finds comfort in the belief that pure 
communication, when it comes to love, “is not only beyond possibility but irrelevant to it.” I 
want to hone in momentarily on Agee’s depiction of love as a place “where we find ourselves so 
completely involved, so completely responsible and so apparently capable, and where all our 
soul so runs out to the loveliness, strength, and defenseless mortality, plain, common, salt and
muscled toughness of human existence of a girl* that the desire to die for her seems the puniest and stingiest expression of your regard which you can, like a proud tomcat with a slain fledgling, lay at her feet.” What at first appears to be a nauseating description of heterosexual romance—the nameless girl pursued by the valiant “tomcat”—is thrown off kilter by the curious footnote that Agee appends. It reads: “I would presume this to be quite as possible, and of no less dignity and valor, in homosexual as well as in heterosexual love” (414). This seemingly benign comment offers an entirely new way to read the entire text.

*Famous Men* does not reify love through a particular couple or family. Nor does biology guarantee the joy that love promises to “arrest”; rather, “it is beyond the power of all biology and even while, like the fading of flowerlike wonder out of a breast to which we are becoming habituated, that exquisite joy lies, fainting through change upon chance, in the less and less prescient palm of the less and less godlike, more and more steadily stupefied, human, ordinary hand” (415). What bothers Agee about love is precisely what bothers him about writing: both remind him that while he may be made in the image of God, according to this Anglican upbringing, he is in fact a human, a mortal. Love, like writing, promises to bring him closer to God, but it also works to confirm his fallibility. In a letter to Fitzgerald from December 1940, right before the publication of *Famous Men*, Agee laments the demise of his second marriage. “I am much too vulnerable to human relationships, particularly sexual or in any case heterosexual,” Agee writes, “and much too deeply wrought-upon by them, and in turn much too dependent in my work on ‘feeling’ as against ‘intellect.’ In short, I’m easily upset and, when upset, incapable of decent work; incapable of it also when I’m not upset enough” (qtd. in Fitzgerald 52). This curious distinction between “sexual” and “heterosexual,” which mirrors the footnote in *Famous Men*, underscores Agee’s awareness of the complexity of human sexuality. It also suggests that he does not buy into identity-based exceptionalism. His universalizing approach to joy, grief,
biology, and sexuality does not spare particular relational forms from the broader existential crises that sex induces, and which he examines in the book through the notion of sexual failure. However, this failure, as we shall see, is also a source of imaginative potential.

The problem with heteronormative readings of Agee’s texts is that they perceive at the centre of his “auto-mythology” (Spiegel 22) and his “ancient search for home” (23) one particular prelapsarian image: the “indelible tableau,” which Spiegel locates in A Death in the Family, “of a man, a woman, and a child lying on a quilt on a lawn on a soft, southern evening.” In this scene, the couple “harmonize spirituals, but in deeply different registers,” while the child, who is of course Agee himself, “lies between them, looking up at one, the other, at both, watching, listening.” In Spiegel’s view, the heterosexual family constitutes “everything Agee would ever know or conceive of the unitary existence of integrity and the apple unfallen” (24). Moreover, this triangulation of love and desire, which sees the child struggling to insert himself into an “odd-couple fantasy” that is predicated on gender difference, apparently becomes a kind of repetition compulsion in Agee’s work, evident in the pairing together of “generally earthy, outgoing, sensual, tolerant, easy, and spontaneous” men such as Jay Follett and George Gudger, and their “prim, proper, genteel, shy, loving, deeply devout, and highly principled” wives (27).

The family is also a scene of irrevocable loss for Agee, whose own father died tragically in an automobile accident when Agee was only six years old. Thus for Agee, a sense of “personal fatherlessness,” King suggests, “was mirrored by the lack of a tradition to which [he] could belong or which had shaped [him]” (196), and this orphaned relationship to tradition reveals itself most viscerally through the “obviously self-referential nature” (198) of Agee’s writing. These readings identify the palpable intermingling in Agee’s texts of personal biography, anxiety around tradition, homesickness, and mythology. Yet I want to re-think the relationship between the literal and the metaphorical in Famous Men by turning to sex and the difference it makes.
Agee’s treatment of sexuality in *Famous Men* is bound up in the scripture on which the title relies. Agee, I want to contend, strips *The Book of Sirach* of its patriarchal qualities and in doing so remakes the Freudian family drama on spiritual terms. Crucially, he organizes the family not around gender difference but rather around love, a word that recurs across the book, and which structures the communication between the foxes. It is also the word Agee invokes in his refusal to distinguish between the “dignity and valor in homosexual as well as in heterosexual love” (Agee 414). Agee does take the image of a heterosexual couple as the crux on which the literal and the metaphorical hinge together: “A man and a woman are drawn together upon a bed and there is a child and there are children.” He also envisions the family as “drawn together within shelter” (49). However, the family is provisional, constituted not through biology or heterosexuality but through interdependence within the shelter. In this vein, Agee is careful to inscribe within the shelter of his text both the footnote about homosexuality, and a peculiar list of words in the notes section, including: “sex fiend,” “perversion,” “normal,” “virgin,” “frigid,” “prick,” “box,” “syphilis,” “sex,” “sexual,” “sexuality,” “homosexual,” “heterosexual,” “asexual,” “fairy,” “pansy,” “swish,” “les,” “lesbie,” “lesbian,” “genitalia,” “parts,” “privates,” “psyche,” “balls,” “nuts,” “father,” “mother,” “dad,” “mummy,” “mumsy,” “mumpsypum,” “daddy,” “daddyboy,” “chickabiddy,” “sexual intercourse,” “depravity,” “amoral,” “coitus” (404). This list signals the variations within the human family that the text yearns to house.

While Agee touches on elements of his own biography throughout *Famous Men*, he does so to universalize from the particular. His grandfather’s house is the archive of his childhood, and in one particularly nihilistic scene Agee threatens to kill himself in the way that his father died, by wrapping his car around a tree (not unlike the little cubs in *I Wanna Play House*). “My father, my grandfather, my poor damned tragic, not unusually tragic, bitched family,” Agee curses, “and all these millions of each individual people that only want to live in kindness and
decency, you never live an inch without involvement and hurting people and ---ing yourself everlastingly” (339). The ethical violence implicit in simply being alive is what haunts Agee and what he struggles against reproducing. This statement concludes a long, winding drive down from Birmingham, where Agee and Evans have been holed up in a hotel, to Centerboro, the town near where the tenants live. At the outset, Agee confesses, “I knew I very badly wanted, not to say needed, a piece of tail,” an urge he contemplates satisfying first through a roadside “whore,” whom he later demotes to “that piece of head-cheese,” then through a woman named Estelle, but she proves “not worth the sacrifice of this solitude.” Finally, Agee “began to realize where it was [he] was going in such a hurry” (332). We have to wait another eight pages for the true announcement: “The one I wanted to see was Gudger, to himself, or anyhow just with his family” (340). It is this displacement of desire from a (female) sexual object to a father figure that invites a tropological reading of sexuality in the text more broadly.

As Agee approaches the Gudgers’ home later that night, abandoning his stuck car in a muddy ditch, he flashes to memories of his grandfather’s farm. Agee lurks passively in front of the house until Gudger, conscious of a foreign presence, strides out “ready for trouble.” Expecting “a nigger,” Gudger is relieved to find Agee, who quickly ascends to the status of “half-stranger” (363), a move that underscores the racial logic of kinship in the United States. In this reunion, which is followed by the scene in the kitchen, Agee does indeed seem to rehearse his desire for loving inclusion within a white, Christian, intergenerational, and ultimately celestial heterosexual family unit.

However, the text offers a very different story of the relationship between family and sexuality, one into which Derrida offers insight. Freud, according to Derrida, sees “transgenerational memory” as an archive. This memory is the source of the “essential history of culture” and of our individual psychic relationships to that culture (Derrida 27). For Jews, and,
Derrida wonders, perhaps for psychoanalysis as well, one’s relationship to memory is messianic, fixated on archiving a future that has not yet arrived, and which serves as a teleology and a kind of covenant. If for Jewish males circumcision is the moment in which one enters the covenant, in which one becomes archivatable, then, Derrida asks, what is the relationship to the archive of Freud’s daughter, Anna Freud (31)? As in *Famous Men*, the problem lies in the relationship “between the figure and the literalness” (33)—here, of circumcision. If we are all “en *mal d’archive*: in need of archives,” what happens when you lack a claim on the past, when you find yourself on the outside? To suffer from “*mal d’archive*” is “to burn with a passion,” in Derrida’s estimation. “It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there's too much of it, right where something in it anarchives itself. It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement” (57). What potential does Judaism, as a matrilineal religion, Derrida wonders, possess to rethink gender in the archive?

For Agee, the problem of the archive is also in part a problem of gender—the slippage of his literal desire for women and their relative absence from the archive. It is precisely his sexual failure and his obsession with women that force him to consider the relationship between gender and the archive. Agee problematically sexualizes women in the text, yet he also collapses the virgin-whore binary, treating sexuality as inimical to ordinary life. The text tracks the failure of the heterosexual family, whose poverty has stripped them of their privacy and their dignity, to adhere to sexual norms. However, it is not the Gudgers who have failed society, but society that has failed the Gudgers. As a self-proclaimed Communist (Agee 220) and a Freudian—Agee refers to Freud as an “unpaid agitator” (181)—Agee employs sexuality to critique the tenant system. In his enthusiastic review, “Greatness with One Fault in It” from 1942, Lionel Trilling
calls *Famous Men*, “the most important moral effort of our American generation.” But he does so with the caveat that the text contains one failure: “It is not a failure of anything literary; it is a failure of moral realism.” As a result of “Agee’s inability to see these people as anything but good,” he occludes “what it is a part of the moral job to take in.” Attributing this failure to Agee’s “guilt” over his “own relative freedom” (“Greatness” 102), Trilling implies that Agee tacitly, in his idealization, overlooks both the tenants’ agency and their status as fallen Christians. I would argue that the text is not quite so reductive, however.

Many scenes in the text make clear the fact that these individuals are the recipients of at least one form of privilege: white privilege. In addition to Gudger’s repugnance at the prospect of a “nigger” on his porch, Agee documents a range of disturbing interactions between whites and their black neighbours: The New Deal executive, Harmon, stops in at the black “foreman’s home” and forces a group of young black men to entertain them with song, an “interruption that filled [Agee] with regret” (Agee 25); Agee, in search of information about a country church, pursues a young black couple, unwittingly “shattering…their grace and dignity” (38); the Woods family “attribute[s] the sickness” of their well water to the “family of negroes who live beneath them in the hollow” with whom they share it; Pearl Woods enjoys hiding out “at the top of her bank” and pelting the family with “rocks” and “chunks of wood” (168), instilling such fear in the children that they have resorted to visiting the well only “at times of day when they will be least expected” (169). Despite these horrific encounters, the local black families are exceptionally kind to the tenants. One, Woods recounts, gifted them “some corn and some peas. Without those niggers there was no saying what they’d be doing by now. Only the niggers hadn’t had a bit too much for themselves in the first place and were running very short now” (33). It appears the tenants are far from “good.”
Part of Agee’s failure as a documentarian is his frequent treatment of the tenants as innocent while simultaneously providing evidence to the contrary. He is more concerned with examining the ruptures that poverty produces in the tenants’ relationship to “food, clothing, and shelter” (xiv). It is poverty, after all, which enables Agee’s penetrative presence in the tenants’ lives, and which leads to myriad forms of gendered and sexual failure. The women, in particular, simply cannot adhere to conventional middle-class etiquette around dress and behaviour. Allie Mae pays closer attention to hygiene and style than the mothers in the other two families and even owns up to five dresses. Still, they “are all cut deep at the breast for nursing, as all her dresses must have been for ten years now.” On Saturdays, she goes to town “keenly conscious of being carefully dressed” and invariably returns deflated (229). Men’s shoes are “worn out like animals to a certain ancient stage” and then “become the inheritance of a wife” (239); women generally “go barefooted” (238). While the men’s clothes “are all ready-made” and “any deviation from this is notable,” the clothes of the women and girls are nearly all “made at home.” As a result, “[i]t is hard to say what is ‘normal’ here and what is not.”

The women in the three different families all improvise differently according to their means. Allie Mae is “‘above’ the ‘normal’” (243) in her aesthetic and material abilities. Mrs. Woods, however, owns only “two work dresses,” which are “both made of fertilizer sacks” (244). The worst off is Mrs. Ricketts, whose one work dress is “the most primitive sewn and designed garment [Agee has] ever seen” (245). The girls’ clothes are typically made of “flour sacks” (247). The most “fortunate” girl is Paralee Ricketts, who owns “a new dress, and it is fully and exactly of the kind which middle class girls of her age wear in town.” Nevertheless, “it isn’t exactly of that kind. In the wish for brilliance and emphasis and propriety, everything is overstepped” (250). These girls face an unbearable burden: if they do not marry by age eighteen “they are drifted towards the spinster class, a trouble to their parents, an embarrassment to court
and be seen with, a dry agony to themselves.” Worse, “these girls must wear” these flour sack
dresses and sad approximations of middle-class garb “to attract men and to qualify as
marriageable” (251). “Mrs. Woods and her mother are of the sexually loose ‘stock’ of which
most casual country and smalltown whoredom comes,” Agee informs us, and her daughter Pearl
is “already showing the signs, is effortlessly let drift her own way” (247). While Agee praises the
mothers’ creativity and ingenuity, he also registers their shame.

The section on clothing ends with this humiliating image: Mrs. Woods standing in a
drugstore, awaiting a dentist who will “attend to her abscessed tooth while the men at the soda
fountain [turn and watch] her.” She lacks all of the sartorial symbols of social decency: “She
wears no hat, nor stockings, nor shoes.” Instead, she has on a dress “made at home of thin
pillowslip cotton, plain at the throat, cut deep for nursing, without sleeves.” Agee likens her
dress to “the plainest sort of nightgown,” implying its inappropriateness in a public setting.
Pregnant, she shifts her weight from foot to foot, enduring the leering men. Despite the fact that
she wears a slip under her dress, “the materials of both are so thin that her dark sweated nipples
are stuck to them and show through, and it is at her nipples, mainly, that the men keep looking.”
Agee then provides a brief counterpoint: a description of a hat of “particular splendor” that Allie
Mae likely wore on her wedding day. At sixteen, “her skin would have been white, and clear of
wrinkles, her body and its postures and her eyes even more pure than they are today.” More
importantly, “she would have been happy, and confident enough in her beauty to wear it without
fear,” for on her wedding day, Allie Mae was surely “such a poem as no human being shall
touch” (252). And yet she has been touched, touched and worn down.

What angers Agee most is the systemic degradation of the tenants, which plays out on the
intimate realm of the body. The greatest affront to their dignity is their lack of privacy. They lack
access to the “charmed circle”\textsuperscript{45} of heterosexuality that I have detailed at length in previous chapters, but this time their queer relationship to the home cannot be attributed to homosexuality. Rather, their sexuality is queered by their failure as heterosexuals to live up to the standards of heteronormativity, just as they are “white trash” because they are worse off than their black neighbours. These fecund houses are the opposite of Gatsby’s empty, sterile mansion; they brim with human bodies. “There is no possibility of privacy for any purpose.” The text thus cautions against the assumption that the heterosexual marital home is automatically a site of privilege, demonstrating how poverty queers the tenants’ relationship to the home. “The beds, the bedding, and the vermin” in the Gudger home “are such a crime against sex and the need of rest as no sadistic genius could much improve on” (184). Huddled in one back room, the entire family typically sleeps within an arm’s length of each other. “Even when [the children] are in the next room,” apparently “the partition is very thin.” Children aside, “such parents are limited enough that they are deeply embarrassed and disturbed by noises coming of any sexual context and betraying it.” How Agee knows this, we can only wonder. The room is poorly equipped for sexual intimacy: “the bed frames are insecure, the springs sag weakly, the mattresses are thin and lumpy, the sheets are not very pleasant.” Yet it is “on these beds” that the tenants “get whatever sexual good they ever have of each other, as noiselessly and with as little movement as possible” (155). Prying through the house once the Gudgers have left for work, Agee exclaims, “there is here no open sexual desire.” Rather than naturalizing the de-sexualization of this “tabernacle” (121), however—and this is absolutely crucial—Agee does precisely the opposite: he implies that by robbing the tenants of sexual desire, the “tenant system” has committed a fundamental sin. In fact, he praises “sexually loose” women like Mrs. Woods and her mother, who “appeared

\textsuperscript{45} See my discussion of Rubin in chapter one.
to be by far the best satisfied and satisfying women, of their class or of any other, whom [Agee]
happened to see during this time in the south” (247-8).

Agee rightly recognizes that sexuality is the practice that enables the family archive to
endure, and that the tenantry system thus threatens the very covenant that claims “their seed shall
remain for ever, and their glory shall not be blotted out” (393). Of course, the many children are
evidence of sexual intercourse, but “the crime against sex” committed by “the tenant house,”

itself “created itself by the tenant system” (181) is to strip sex of all pleasure and dignity, to
make it shameful. At first Agee tries to correct this problem by re-introducing sexuality into the
home. He hone[s] in on any possible sexual inference. We note how Harmon shoves his hands
down his pants and “squatting with bent knees apart, clawed, scratched and rearranged his
genitals” (26); how the house serves as the “bisexual center” (112) of the land; how it possesses
“the look of the utmost possibly extreme of flimsiness and nudity” (180), and how sleeping out
on the “rear seat of a Chevrolet sedan” on the porch, “you made sustaining springs of your feet,
and this was slightly and invariably reminiscent of sexual intercourse” (198). Agee even
imagines certain tenant women conspire to seduce him. He rehearses a comical scene wherein
Woods requests that he and Evans stay elsewhere “because, well, you fellers know, got me this
woman, here, not that I don’t trust yuns (glittering merrily) but some way don’t look right…”

Bud Woods’s concern is that he is an “old man,” fifty-nine in fact, whereas his second wife, Ivy,
is only in her mid-twenties. Agee legitimizes this logic and extrapolates on it. “There has really
been no need in his putting it so delicately: Ivy is a strong young, goodlooking woman, he is a
weakening and nearly old man, and she knows and he does, and we do, and we all know of the
knowledge of each other, that she is also a serenely hot and simply nymph, whose eyes go to bed
with every man she sees” (328). This scene precipitates Agee’s decision to stay with Gudger;
ironically, it is Woods’s anxiety about his wife’s promiscuity that prompts Agee to consequently
intrude upon his daughter (Allie Mae). We have already learned of Ivy’s supposed lustfulness through Pearl, but here we see deviancy framed as an intergenerational force.

For a time, it seems as though Agee might participate in this perpetuation. In “A Country Letter,” he divulges his attraction to Allie Mae’s sister, Emma, who at sixteen “married a man her father’s age” (53) who is jealous, manipulative and controlling. Denied a full childhood, she yearns to spend time with “people her own age.” She frequently retreats the Gudgers’ house, but George feels helpless to intervene. Moreover, Agee asserts Gudger is “unconcealably attracted” (54) to Emma. Roughly the age that Allie Mae was when they married, Emma is a reminder of that past girl after whom George still lusts. Allie Mae “gives no appearance of noticing the clumsy and shamefaced would-be-subtle demeanors of flirtation which George is stupid enough to believe she does not understand for what they are.” As for Emma, she “could not be too well trusted either.” “Each of us is attractive to Emma,” Agee explains, “both in sexual immediacy and as symbols or embodiments of a life she wants and knows she will never have.” Likewise, “each of us is fond of her, and attracted toward her.” And yet “there is nothing to do about it on either side.” There is value in the “tenderness and sweetness and mutual pleasure” of the dynamic, “which one would not for the world restrain or cancel, yet there is also an essential cruelty, about which nothing can be done,” for this is “a cruel and ridiculous and restricted situation, and everyone to some extent realizes it” (55). Sex represents the promise of movement, change and mobility, but in this instance Emma’s optimism is really “a relation” of what Lauren Berlant calls “cruel optimism”: “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (2).

Here, Agee gets stuck on the disjuncture between reality and fantasy. It is as if he wishes the text were a novel, even though he has already specified it is not. “In a novel, a house or a person has his meaning, his existence, entirely through the writer,” Agee posits. And while he
goes on to declare that “here, a house or a persona has only the most limited of his meaning through me” (9). Agee craves the powers of imagination in this instance not merely to describe what is occurring, but to will it otherwise. “[S]upposing even that nothing can be helped about the marriage,” he muses, “supposing she is going away and on with it, which she shouldn’t, then if only Emma could spend her last few days alive having a gigantic good time in bed, with George, a kind of man she is best used to, and with Walker and with me, whom she is curious about and attracted to…” (55). Agee presumes that these three men are to Emma both “tangible and friendly and not at all to be feared” and “have for her the mystery or glamour almost of mythological creatures.” He further fantasizes that this possibility has “come through very clearly between all of us except the children” in the days leading up to her departure for home.

Realizing that the fantasy cannot be indulged, however, Agee reverts from the particularity of the situation to waxing philosophical about the universal. He takes the scenario as an example of how “almost any person, no matter how damaged and poisoned and blinded is infinitely more capable of intelligence and of joy than he can let himself be or than he usually knows” (56). Thus, adhering to his obligation to depict these people as “human beings” rather than as figures “of the imagination” (9), he shifts to trying to register their desires (and his own) from trying to transform them. Riding in the wagon alongside Emma as she travels home, he is alert to the moments in which their “flesh touched” and their “hot” bodies “intimately communicated” (59). Agee’s desire for Emma is irreducible to lust; he wants to use sex to create other worlds for her, and this grows painfully clear as he oscillates between his acknowledgment of his sexual urges and his protective desire “to kiss and comfort and shelter her like child” (58). For Agee, a return to childhood innocence is not a return to asexuality, but, rather, a return to a mythical sexuality that has not been corrupted by the cruel conditions of adult life.
In discussing his sexual attraction to Emma, Agee ultimately changes his own narrative position by acknowledging the effect of his own body on the people whom he purportedly wants to document objectively. Ophir notes, “sympathetic critics read [Agee’s confessions] as part of his attempt to level the imbalance of power: as he invades his subjects’ privacy and exposes their humiliations, so he bares to his audience his own selfishness, vanity, despair, raw lust, and abject need” (139). While I find this argument persuasive, I would add that Agee invokes the confessional to do more than compensate for the sin of his own curiosity. In disclosing to the reader his own humiliating desires, he reveals himself to be a kindred spirit in and through his own failures. This shared failure opens up for Agee—and, in Agee’s mind, the tenants—new horizons of possibility.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam critiques the fact that “success in a heteronormative, capitalist society equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation” (2). Rather than redefining success, he wants to subvert it altogether. “Under certain circumstances,” he maintains, “failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2-3). Halberstam asks what possibilities hegemonic models of success paradoxically foreclose, taking as his archive “not labor history or subaltern movements” but “queer lives, gender and sexuality” (19). Similarly, my unconventional reading of *Famous Men* argues the text treats gender and sexuality reparatively as sites of creative potential. “Really imaginative ethnographies,” in Halberstam’s account, “depend upon an unknowing relation to the other,” favouring radical openness and interpersonal “conversation,” such as the one that took place that first night in the Gudgers’ kitchen, over “mastery.”

Halberstam’s approval of conversation as “one very concrete way of being in relation to another form of being and knowing without seeking to measure that life modality by the standards that
are external to it” (12) mirrors Agee’s insight that the documentarian’s task “is not to alter the world as the eye sees it into a world of esthetic reality, but to perceive the esthetic reality within the actual world” (qtd. in R. Fitzgerald 66). In “losing our way” (Halberstam 25), we are paradoxically able to discover alternate life worlds and ways of thinking.

In *Famous Men*, failure affords Agee the ability to make an ethical correction. Recognizing that an archive may offer up real objects for interpretation, but that it is far from an objective space, Agee shifts his emphasis from the archive itself to the practice of archiving. Before launching into the painstaking details of the tenants’ lives in Part Two, Agee cautions that description is “a word to suspect.” Art likes to ignore the fact that “words cannot embody; they can only describe” (Agee 210). Starting out, “most young writers and artists roll around in description like honeymooners on a bed. It comes easier than anything else.” While they eventually “grow or discipline themselves out of it,” Agee wonders if “the lust for describing, and that lust in action,” is in fact a “vice.” What would happen, Agee asks, “if the describer become more rather than less shameless”? Here, Agee takes up the possibility of subjective description that Halberstam hints at in his proposition of failed ethnography. Moreover, he is interested in a method of subjective description that is guided by lust. Gudger may be “a man,” Agee admits, but “in the effort to tell of him (by example) as truthfully as I can, I am limited. I know him only so far as a I know him, and only in those terms in which I know him; and all of that depends as full on who I am as on who he is.” At best, Agee concedes, he can only give us “a relative truth.” “For that reason and for others,” Agee continues, “I would do just as badly to simplify or eliminate myself from this picture as to simplify or invent character, places or atmospheres” (211-2). As Allred puts it, “the text reflects its authors’ attempts to *dwell* with their relatively immobile and earthbound inhabitants” and to represent that experience in “as intact a state as possible” (*American* 95). If all truth is relative, then a subjective representation of
Gudger is perhaps the more honest one. By acknowledging his complicated presence in the picture, Agee brings the picture into relief, revealing that he needs the tenants much more than they need him.

In the final instance, the house is the only “character” upon which Agee bestows his lust. By personifying the house and directing his attention to it, Agee is really asking the archive to love him back. Agee is experiencing, in other words, *archive fever*. In his account of queer archival logics, K.J. Rawson examines how frustration, queer desire, and the archive interface. Unlike Heather Love, who in *Feeling Backward* wants to explore queer theory’s relationship to the past in terms of “failure rather than negativity” (Love 23), and who cautions against the nonconsensual appropriation of the past for present agendas, Rawson asks what it would mean to assume that archives also have desires. “If a traditional archival logic responds to a researcher’s desire to find archival materials in a satisfactory way,” he writes, “queer logics can flip that idea by embracing a different kind of satisfaction that recognizes that collections can have desires and want to be touched, too” (Rawson 137). While Agee’s encounter with the tenants and their objects occurs first in the present tense, by the time of his narration, Agee necessarily must situate the archive of that encounter *in the past*. In other words, when in Alabama he is already consciously constructing the archive that he wants his text to inhabit. Agee’s archival practice lies in this temporal duality, for this is an archive that always already anticipated a future. And this archive, like Agee, signals above all else a desire for human touch.

### 4.4 Redemption Song

In order to construct an archive that endures, Agee links the temporality of sexuality to the temporality of the spiritual, a move that finds its best representation in Agee’s descriptions of the Gudgers’ altar and family Bible. At first glance, as in other places in the book, Agee comes off as an inimitable surface reader, supposedly “quot[ing]” to us from the “notes” that he made
his first night in the house upon discovering the Bible on the bureau in his room. “In the room: the testament” contains the one image not snapped by Evans; it could not have been because it represents an impossible fiction. For the first time, we realize the extent of Agee’s deceit and embellishment. Itemizing and partially transcribing the contents of the Bible for the reader, Agee provides a facsimile of the family record. According to that record, the Bible, which “gave out a strong and cold stench of human excrement” (Agee 374)—i.e. it’s bullshit—was supposedly “presented to George Gudger by Allie Mae Gudger,” whom she married on April 19th, 1924. The image presents cursive that is presumably Agee’s handwriting, for there is in fact no “Gudger” family (recall that the name of the family with whom Agee stayed was actually Burroughs).46 Through this fictionalization, Agee knowingly alters the archival record. The comparison to Freud is, again, striking. Derrida dwells at length on the family Bible that was given to Freud by his father, which records the event of his circumcision (20-21). Linking the father’s “inscription” to the cut of the scalpel against the foreskin, and to the “new skin” in which the father has bound the Bible, Derrida notes that the inscription acts as a kind of “impression” (23), both textually and psychically. Yet while Derrida is unable to reconcile the question of Anna Freud’s inheritance, Agee does imagine a different future for the Gudgers through his alteration.

The Gudgers’ Bible differs from the Freuds’ in two notable ways beyond the New Testament. First, the Bible was given by Allie Mae to George, from a woman to a man, as opposed to from a father to a son. Secondly, it records the birth of all of their children, including the girls. Out of their brood, Louise Gudger is the family’s Anna Freud. Remember that the entire book has been structured according to Louise’s textbook. She has played an important hand from the beginning. Louise “has an intelligence quick and acquisitive above the average.”

46 Bergman-Carton and Carton compare Agee’s “forgery” to the “transparent forgery” (17) of Evans’s photographs by Sherrie Levine in her exhibit “After Walker Evans.”
For this reason, her parents are “excited over her brightness and hopeful of it: they intend to make every conceivable effort by which she may continue not only through the grades but clear through high school.” Her goal is to become a teacher. Unlike Emma, Louise doesn’t need sex to escape; her mind is her ultimate get-away vehicle. By comparison, her brother Junior “is still almost entirely unable to read and write” and Burt will face “great difficulty” (Agee 266). Louise takes after Allie Mae, who “can read, write, spell, and handle simple arithmetic.” “In fact,” Agee quips, “whereas many among the three families have crippled but very full and real intelligences, she and to a perhaps less extent her father [Bud Woods] have also intellects. But these intellects died before they were born; they hang behind their eyes like fetuses in alcohol” (269). As in the sexual realm, poverty threatens to break the covenant. “It is hardly to Louise’s good fortune that she ‘likes’ school,” Agee laments, “school being what it is.” Despite her relatively thoughtful attire, and the fact that she is “bright,” “serious and dutiful,” “well-thought-of,” and “one of the stronger persons [Agee has] ever known,” she is starting to show “traces of a special sort of complacency.” Even Louise will be slowly corrupted and corroded by material struggle. Louise lives in a world in which “the standards of education, which seem even more monstrous than those of the law, are thus imposed as law is not, and are made identical with knowledge” (276).

Agee finds redemption for her in another law: the covenant.

In the final instance, Agee yokes together biological and creative forms of reproduction through the rhetoric of the spiritual. Early in the text, he likens conception to crucifixion: “Here we have two, each crucified, further crucify one another upon the shallow pleasure of an iron bed and instigate in a woman’s belly a crucifixion of cell and whiplashed sperm: whose creature is our center, our nerve we spoke of; in this instant already his globe is rounded upon him and in his prison, which might have been his kingdom” (90). In birth, the baby is first “uprooted, up-cut” (92). It is the original displacement. Agee then wishes to “specialize” this baby “a little
more” (94), by making him a tenant who is, through poverty, “nailed into cheating of [himself]” (88). His house is a “cracked nipple,” the spoiled land a “wrung breast” that “yield[s]” only “blood and serum in its thin blue milk” (113). This early image meets its match in the text’s final paragraphs, which describe Allie Mae “nursing” Squinchy, her youngest, disabled child. Squinchy “is so many things in one, the child in the melodies of the womb, the Madonna’s son, human divinity sunken from the cross at rest against his mother.” But Agee continues, “for at the heart and leverage of that young body, gently, taken in all the pulse of his being, the penis is partly erected.” This odd statement connects Agee’s strange commingling of the sexual and the familial in the text: the erection signals the desire for the mother in an Oedipal sense, but it also echoes Agee’s own desire for the home, that figurative “nipple” that has induced in him over the course of the book many an erection. Famous Men does not end with Squidgy, however, but rather with Ellen Woods, Bud and Ivy’s youngest child, sleeping on the porch. Ellen’s navel is the “center and source, for which we have never contrived any worthy name” and which “shall at length outshine the sun” (390). Ellen is the covenant’s recipient and the future’s literal progenitor. Within this schema, the navel scar, the ruptured bond with the mother, replaces circumcision, expanding the covenant to all humanity.

In the failure of heteronormativity, in its impoverished brokenness, Agee finds the potential to re-conceive of the world. There is no pleasure in heterosexual sex when it merely becomes a form of labour. Sex is the motion that does the expository work of revealing the disjuncture between the world as it is and as it should be, between Agee’s ambitions for the text and the text’s reality. Agee’s knows he will fail to suture this gap, but he strives to do so nonetheless. In this sense, Agee is no different from Allie Mae, who strives to beautify her home. Uttering, “I will go unto the altar of God” (101), Agee describes “the altar”: in the center of the front room’s “one ornamented wall” stands a “mantel and square fireplace frame,” each covered
in a thin coat of paint as “blue-white” as the breast milk. A small blue table sits in front of the fireplace, draped with a “white cloth.” On it sits “a small fluted green glass bowl in which sits a white china swan, profiled upon the north.” On the mantle rest “two small twin vases” and “a fluted saucer, with a coarse lace edge, of pressed milky glass, which Louise’s mother [Allie Mae] gave her to call her own and for which she cares more dearly than for anything she possesses.” Along the mantle’s edge, Allie Mae has designed and hung “a broad fringe of tissue paper.” On the surrounding wall, Allie Mae has put up a picture frame, “the glass broken out” (143), containing a photo of her mother and Emma, in whom the “blossoming inheritance” of her mother’s demeanour is beginning to show. Beside the photo there is a calendar of advertisements, a locket, pictures from “a child’s cheap storybook” (144), paper “torn from a tin cup,” and, dried in whitewash, “the print of a child’s hand” (145). The altar marks Allie Mae’s last effort to “make this house pretty” (143), and suggests the spiritual quality of uncovering aesthetic beauty in one’s ordinary life, even in seriously depressed circumstances.

Set in the Great Depression, Famous Men’s focus on the relationship between spirituality and the practice of collecting, which comes into sharpest clarity in its discussion of the altar, echoes Cvetkovich’s theorization of the “utopia of everyday habit” in Depression. In a lesbian-feminist adaptation of the Foucauldian self-care model, Cvetkovich contends quotidian routines help produce value out of the fabric of daily life. If depression is an embodied affective response to the chronic trauma of systemic forms of oppression, then one’s survival strategies must be similarly habitual. Spiritual practices, like archival practices, involve devotional objects that exceed their market value. Mingling personal memoir and academic criticism, she describes building an altar out of nostalgic items during a time of great homesickness and depression. Readily acknowledging the myriad problems of feeling homesick for colonized places, Cvetkovich “explor[es] the nature of attachment” to home, which includes histories of separation
and loss, both of [her] own and those of colonization” (*Depression* 81). Similarly, Agee is attuned to the continuous presence of systemic racism in Alabama. It is unsurprising that the tenants “lived under the most brutal conditions, often not too much better off than slaves” given that the “cotton tenant system was devised by plantation owners after Emancipation” (Maharidge and Williamson xvi). Undoubtedly this similitude enrages the tenants, whose whiteness is their sole source of social power. Nostalgia in *Famous Men* meets its limit in race. But it is precisely by holding this damaged world up to the potential of what it could be, by exposing latent traces of divinity in the most unlikely of people and places, that Agee puts the archive to good use.

### 4.5 After Louise

Why would I end a dissertation about queer modernism with a chapter on a lapsed Anglican author whose text concerns itself primarily with (failed) heterosexuality? Why *Famous Men* and not, say, Djuna Barnes’s *Nightwood*, another text that obsesses over origins, bloodlines, Old Testament covenants, sexual misadventures, damaged children and religious icons? That novel similarly ends with a “contrived altar” and “the image of a Madonna” in a “decaying chapel” (Barnes 178), the site of a quasi-bestial sex scene between two angst-ridden lesbian lovers. *Nightwood* also stages a battle between the peripatetic and the settled, which bears itself out in Robin’s wanderings and Nora’s chronic homesickness. Like *Famous Men*, it is less about sex and identity politics than about sexuality and endurance more broadly. Both texts interrogate the relationship between sexuality and history, spirituality, belonging, and the home. To be sure, it would be fascinating to read the two together.\(^{47}\) A list of queer modernist texts that conceive of the home would, in fact, be exhaustive. As Kathryn Rose Taylor

\(^{47}\) In this vein, it would be equally fascinating to compare modernist instantiations of the house-as-archive with contemporary queer archives that are physically located in houses, such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn and the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives in Toronto.
argues, lesbian writers such as Barnes, Willa Cather, and Gertrude Stein wrote back against “the feminist and modernist desire to get out of the home,” by trying to “make room,” if only on the textual level, “for same-sex relationships, in what might seem to be a return to the home, but which is actually a restructuring or re-envisioning of the home through the intermediary figure of the museum” (15). In turning to Famous Men rather than to one of these well-trodden texts, I am excavating a form of queerness that is as much formal as it is discursive. The text’s length renders it a frustration teach, its babbling discourses are a headache to unpack, and its prolonged monologues and exhaustive descriptions are tiresome to even the most devoted reader. Yet in its decision to do something other than elegize the demise of heteronormative relations and traditional gender roles, unlike much work by white male modernists, Famous Men offers a reparative example of sexual difference and the home in American modernism. More importantly, it offers a compelling opportunity to consider how the archive of queer modernism might be cracked open and expanded.

Trilling was wrong when he wrote that Famous Men only contains one fault; in fact, it contains many. Perhaps its greatest one is this: that it attempts to freeze in time real people and real things when all it can do is grasp at their traces. Unlike a novel, whose temporality is circumscribed, a documentary text acts like a snapshot, capturing only a particular moment or series of moments in time. As readers, we must be careful always to do the very thing that Agee at first resists: to centre him within his own text. This is not a book about the tenants’ lives; it is about Agee, and about the lives he desires for them. Forty odd years after Famous Men’s publication, a journalist by the name of Dale Maharidge, accompanied by the photographer Michael Williamson, travelled to Alabama to find the families that Agee and Evans had documented. They completed the majority of their research in “July and August of 1986” (Maharidge and Williamson xv), an uncanny emulation of Agee and Evans’s trip precisely fifty
years prior. The book they produced, *And Their Children After Them* (1989), is a journalistic counterpart to Sherrie Levine’s solo exhibit at Metro Pictures Gallery in 1980, “After Walker Evans,” which displayed Levine’s exact replications of Evans’s photographs from *Famous Men*—her photographs of his photographs—in a quintessentially postmodernist and feminist gesture that has since been dubbed “appropriation art.” Maharidge and Williamson had been wrapping up a project on “the new poor” (xv) in America when they were gifted a copy of *Famous Men*. Out of curiosity, they decided “to find out what happened to the lives with which Agee had become so intimately entwined.” In the text, they imagine themselves as investigative reporters returning to “the scene of the crime” and Agee as a “figurative rapist,” though they admit some of the families viewed them as nothing but “coconspirators” (xxi). They too take their title from the Bible, and specifically from Ecclesiasticus.

So whatever happened to Louise Gudger? The first chapter of *And Their Children After Them*, preceding the preface, is entitled “Maggie Louise.” It is the key to all else that follows. Adhering to Agee’s pseudonym—Louise’s real name was Lucille Burroughs—Maharidge summarizes her encounters with Agee, of whom “she’d speak warmly” (iii) to friends long after his departure. “She never did become a nurse or a teacher,” we learn. Instead, at fifteen she married a man who would beat her and whom she would soon leave for another man; on her marriage license, “her occupation was listed as ‘school girl’” (79). In marriage, “her dream of going on in school…died its quiet death” (78). Like her mother, Louise raised her children and picked cotton for a living. “Each passing year mocked the dreams she had dreamed with Agee, reducing her a little each year” until one day she “finally discovered she could no longer aspire to anything, because the part of her that used to aspire was no longer there” (recall here Agee’s trope of dead intellect as a fetus suspended in alcohol). One day in February 1971, after accompanying her mother and sister to the grocery store, Louise shut herself in her bedroom and
consumed an entire bottle of rat poison. Her sister desperately tried to force it up but Louise “clenched her teeth in refusal,” later tearing the IV tubes out of her arms at the hospital (iv). Determined to die, she did so “just after midnight.” She was forty-five years old. Maharidge reports her final words as, “Tell Mama I’m happy now” (v).

Perversely, Louise went on to endure the precise fate that Famous Men hopes to and fails to shelter her from. Failure, in this regard, is not an opportunity for radical change, but the slamming shut of a door, an act of foreclosure. She kills herself, Rancière argues, “not because her beautiful teenage dreams had been shattered by reality, but because before her adolescence she had been deprived of the very possibility of having such dreams” (257). Louise, like Agee, ultimately could not inhabit a text. She was, as Agee knew all too well, a real human being. When Agee died of a heart attack in 1955, time was already beginning to have its way with these people and their belongings, to differentiate between their archival presence in the text and their contemporary realities. And now, in 2015, most of these people are dead and gone, these houses destroyed, and in their place new structures built wherein the tenants’ descendents live, exposed to the violence of new forms of poverty, new ethnographers, new anxieties.

Because the text is fundamentally an archive of words, not of real things or real people, in the end all we are left with is words. The reader animates the archive, penetrating it as Agee did the Gudgers’ house, yet these words on their own merely describe rather than embody (Agee 210); they simply cannot capture what Rancière identifies as the “fullness of being” (251) that lies beyond the page. But even if Famous Men fails to will it otherwise, fails to repair the damage, fails to restore the sanctity of the fallen, its struggle to recognize the dignity of the abject, to conceive of a sexual ethics that universalizes without reducing, to find beauty in the everyday, and to treat the aesthetic as a source of optimism serves as a valuable reminder that the hoards of readers who compulsively return to this text, or who lose whole nights of sleep upon
discovering it for the first time, find in it not only the archive of Agee’s desire for new and better forms of relationality, but, in and through our relationship with the text, a newfound desire for the same.
Conclusion

They say that moving homes is one of the top three most stressful things that one can do in life, even if it is voluntary. In fact, it’s up there with death and divorce (neither of which I have experienced nor hope to any time soon). Sylvia Plath writes in “Lady Lazarus”: “[d]ying/ is an art, like everything else./ I do it exceptionally well” (43-5); the same might be said of me and moving. If memory serves, I have changed residences roughly twenty times in the thirty odd years of my life (this excludes student dormitories and time spent travelling). Each instance was invariably exhausting, but none of them felt quite so dramatic as the first time. When I was twelve, my parents sold their house in Toronto, a sprawling Georgian that had been the only house I had ever known, and uprooted our family to St. Louis, Missouri. Their marriage, already on the rocks, would barely hold on for another five years; they would never buy another house together, not in St. Louis nor anywhere else. “The house we were born in is more than an embodiment of home,” Bachelard writes, “it is also an embodiment of dreams” (15). If leaving that house constituted my first heartbreak, the move in general felt like a kind of death: the death of my childhood. Plucked out of a life of relative privilege and security, I was re-settled in a bland suburb that was fundamentally alien, and in which I appeared to my peers to be nothing short of an alien. The road to hell, I quickly learned, is paved with Republican country clubs.

But I didn’t feel different simply because I was Canadian. I began to realize that I was dissimilar to my peers in other ways as well. During the first two years that we lived in St. Louis, we moved five times. It was as if this external jostling of my young self mirrored the feelings that were engulfing me inside. I eventually found an exit plan in the form of a scholarship to Phillips Exeter Academy (where, incidentally, I lived in the same dorm as Agee), the school that become my surrogate home for four years, until after graduation I was thrust out once more into
the cruel world. While my classmates immediately headed off elite universities, I took the long way around to academia, more interested in participating in activist and artistic communities than I was in theorizing them. I turned down scholarships in order to travel, write, rage, and explore. Yet such itinerancy proved exceptionally draining. When I did finally return to Canada to begin what would evolve into two degrees and a decade of study at the University of Toronto, the long-awaited homecoming was even sweeter than I could have imagined. I relished in having a space to call my own, one that I would eventually come to share with other beloved beings. While I have moved around a fair share since I’ve been back in Toronto, it somehow feels different than it did when I was a child. I have a theory behind my practice.

This dissertation emerged out of my frustration with the disjunctures between high theoretical accounts of gender and sexuality, and the ways in which gender and sexuality are lived on the ground. In this time of crisis within the Humanities, both real and perceived, we would do well to nourish connections between the scholarly work that we do in the academy and the knowledge production that occurs simultaneously in the world beyond, within the very communities that we claim to understand and perhaps even represent. Queer theory has done a superb job of reclaiming and transforming public space; in this project, I am inspired instead by the question of what goes on behind closed doors, not in the closet but in the intimate space of the private. This is the story of the morning after, or perhaps of the night that never happened. I ask here what happens when one chooses to “look away,” as Rei Terada puts it, not only from the heteronormative but also from the queer privileging of extroversion, visibility, performance, and subversion.

In her critique of “subversivism,” Julia Serano challenges “the practice of extolling certain gender and sexual expressions and identities simply because they are unconventional or nonconforming,” a practice she attributes to a “particular reading” or even “misreading” “of
work of various influential queer theorists over the last decade and a half” (346). Serano is especially concerned with how the fetishization of non-binary gender presentations has resulted in the perpetuation of misogynistic attitudes. She tracks the emergence of an inverse binary that shames and denounces individuals whose genders and sexualities appear normative. The burden of subversion, she observes, is disproportionately heaped upon transsexuals, who often but by no means always identify with or pass through queer communities at some points in their lives, and whose supposed normativity on the level of the visual may not register the complexity of their own epistemological insights into gender, sexuality, and culture more broadly. Serano’s critique echoes many of the groundbreaking arguments made by early trans studies scholars, such as Jay Prosser and Viviane Namaste, to which queer theory has been largely indifferent. Prosser’s work has been especially important for my own because of his rhetorical usage of the term *home* and his attention to the affective condition of *feeling at home*. Trans studies, which has been going through a renaissance as of late, has much to teach us about the uselessness of anti-normativity as a paradigm, and the limits of exceptionalism as a method for empowerment.

The chasm between queer negativity and the practices that it both inspires and overlooks constitutes an ethical problem, one that trans studies has deftly honed in on but which also requires greater attention from within queer theory. While polemics such as Lee Edelman’s *No Future* have provoked rigorous debate, negativity has until only very recently maintained a stranglehold on the field. But queer negativity glosses over the more granular relationship that individuals possess to the social. It valorizes the queer superstar, all gussied and trading caustic barbs and gossip at the bar, at the expense of attending to the complex affective reality that persists for the holiday version of that same person, who endures the annual family visit feeling cold, small and clenched. What about the people who can’t make it out to the bar, to the sex party, to the die in, to the exhibit opening, to the show; who are exhausted, broke, disabled,
depressed, stressed, bored, introverted; who have young kids at home or old parents; who feel excluded from queer scenes for all of the many reasons that we name over and over again? What happens when we privilege the extra-domestic over the small worlds that so many of us have fought so hard to create and cannot afford to lose? These worlds are relational; they bind us to the social.

So often when reading theory that champions negativity, I find myself retuning to Sedgwick’s essay on paranoid reading, an essay that has provided me with much inspiration and solace over the years. I include below an excerpt that, while long, puts its pulse on precisely the affective malaise that transpires when one feels compelled to grasp endlessly toward one particular affective model:

A disturbingly large amount of theory seems explicitly to undertake the proliferation of only one affect, or maybe two, of whatever kind—whether ecstasy, sublimity, self-shattering, jouissance, suspicion, abjection, knowingness, horror, grim, satisfaction, or righteous indignation. It’s like the old joke: ‘Comes the revolution, Comrade, everyone gets to eat roast beef every day.’ ‘But Comrade, I don’t like roast beef.’ ‘Comes the revolution, Comrade, you’ll like the roast beef.’ Comes the revolution, Comrade, you’ll be tickled pink by those deconstructive jokes; you’ll faint from ennui every minute you’re not smashing the state apparatus; you’ll definitely want hot sex twenty to thirty times a day. You’ll be mournful and militant. You’ll never want to tell Deleuze and Guattari, ‘Not tonight, dears, I have a headache. (Sedgwick, “Paranoid” 146)

Here, Sedgwick (who never gives me a headache) wittily draws attention to the paradox of feeling interested in, and perhaps even persuaded by, certain theories and the desire to escape them because they are all-consuming, all-governing—in short, prescriptive. When we become trapped within theory, when we develop feelings of guilt and inadequacy because we cannot
truly put theory into practice, then theory has failed us, not the other way around. My hope is that this dissertation has gone some way toward excavating strategies for living that were taken up by moderns before us and which survive in textual forms as theories in their own right.

I have suggested that we are still in the moment of modernism, that the anxieties with which early twentieth-century texts grapple continue to structure our daily lives. We remain haunted paradoxically by shared histories and by the sensation of feeling cut off from those histories—in this vein, the tradition with which modernism has provided us has not exactly served as a salve to feeling ahistorical, cut off from the root, adrift. What characterizes modernity most acutely is perhaps the sensation of feeling homesick at home. In a world in which everything is seemingly for sale, the inability to buy oneself home proves perplexing. The home, as an affective state that is bound up in one’s relationship with capital, but which remains distinguishable from the house, which is a form of capital, serves as a reminder of all that lies in the space beyond market value. At once an historical site of incredible oppression, particularly for women, the home is also the source of enormous potential for creative resistance.

As much as this dissertation advocates for praxis, it is not intended to serve as a concise roadmap or manual. Rather, I have tried to hone in on literature’s potential to transform the social, on its ability to teach rather than to merely register and symptomatize. In this vein, I have pursued what Sedgwick envisions a method of “reparative” criticism that does not presume we always know more than the text, nor demands that we exact from it our pound of flesh. Instead, I have strained to approach these texts openly, even with a degree of humility. Homebuilding, like writing, and like much anything else, is ultimately a practice that takes many forms. I have not attempted to be comprehensive here; in an expanded form, this project would more fully examine texts that confront the enduring effects of settler-colonialism, immigration and diaspora, which were concomitant with other, more exploratory and agential forms of modernist
movement, such as the migration of American writers to Paris. Rather than focus on texts in which questions of home are notoriously central, I have instead returned to the usual suspects and asked what we have overlooked. While my topic is capacious, my aim has been to explore the discursive significance of a narrative of modernism that relies perhaps too heavily on the oppressive qualities of Victorian domesticity without recognizing how modernist literature transvalues rather than abandons the home.

Homemaking occurs in these texts on a range of levels, including the somatic, the relational, and the material. It is a nebulous, slippery, provisional project that is always already bound to fail because it is optimistic, but this is precisely what renders home such a productive telos. The home is a space that we often (but not always) share with companions, both human and animal. It is the place that American culture associates most with privacy, even though access to domestic privacy is very much contingent on social privilege. Home is the refuge we retreat to when we are exhausted, the place we pine for when in exile, it is the centre that promises to hold. Home is where we indulge in a hot bath and a bowl of cereal after a night out, in which we may consume endless hours of television, in which loud sex and anxious telephone conversations occur; it is a space that contains puttering and writing, plants, dog baskets, cleaning supplies under the kitchen sink. All of these objects and actions inhabit unique temporalities. Home is the place that we know we will return to—in our minds, if not physically. We assume it will exist in the future in some form, and we attach that future to the home. We might sign a mortgage, for example, and make a financial commitment; we might marry and have children, implicating ourselves in domestic arrangements that are meant to endure; or, we might make a string of more ephemeral moves, such as trying out new friendships, exploring local parks and restaurants, or shifting our accent or choice of beer. All of these actions index a decision to bind the present to the future by staking out a home.
Settling implies compromise; it demands a give and take. We abandon sheer mobility and transgression in order to create a domestic scene that offers shelter from the overwhelming chaos of the outside world. One does not easily have two homes. One has, typically, a primary residence, a primary partner, a primary occupation. Each commitment that we make, each relational or geographical space that we render primary, forecloses the possibility of another primary existence. Especially today, in the digital age of “third culture kids,” the world seems to sprawl out literally from our fingertips. Many North Americans spend their youths fantasizing about places they might roam and settle, about the subcultures they want to inhabit and the career hats they want to try on. Some stray far from their roots, while others circle back close to their original homes. Those who shun a peripatetic lifestyle we label “homebodies”: people who are often nostalgic, often overwhelmed by the endless possibilities of inhabitance that sparkle on the horizon, at the same time that those possibilities lure them out temporarily for road trips, beach holidays, or the odd late night dance party. Twenty-first-century western subjects live networked lives. We tend to move with ease between the virtual and the “real,” and the present and the past, which is endlessly conjured through old artefacts that are now easily retrievable online in the form of a song, a computer game, or an arcane sitcom episode. These objects slide out of the past into the present, allowing transhistorical affiliations. This sense that the past is increasingly retrievable alters our relationship to the present, which we try with increasing vigilance to document for the future.

Academia and popular culture alike seem invested in these themes of renewal and return. In literary studies, for example, there have been calls for a revival of formalism, for supposedly more elegant and simplified modes of reading that isolate reader and text by wiping away the messy presence of theory. Philosophers such as Alain Badiou have called for a “new universalism,” a return to a conception of the social as unified rather than disparate, relative--in a
word, complicated.\textsuperscript{48} Surely nostalgia also fuels the recent proliferation of period-piece
television series. Critical distance and hindsight dupe us into believing that the characters on
these shows lived in vaguely simpler times, even as \textit{Downtown Abbey} or \textit{Mad Men} document a
sense of impending crisis (or living \textit{within} crisis) that reminds us that the project of modernism
has never really ended.

The mobility that technology enables has produced at least as many feelings of anxiety as
it has feelings of liberation. This saturation of technology infiltrates the home space and erodes
the division between private and public. Social media makes it possible to be virtually social
without stepping outside of the house, or even coming into fleshy proximity with another person.
These processes have utterly transformed the modes that sociality assumes. For homebodies,
such a transformation is both a blessing and a curse. Of course, in some ways these digital
networks are nothing new. Emily Dickinson famously would stay holed up in her room for days,
concealed by a white sheet and communicating with the outside world only through textual
correspondence. Still, the sensory modes of virtual communication feel markedly different from
anything that has come before, even if we can position them within a genealogy that gives them a
kind of historical weight.

Like the modernists, we struggle to go about the messy task of world building in a
moment in which it is uncertain if such a task is even sustainable anymore. The current climate
of crisis that permeates post-9/11 America echoes the sense of devastation that World War One
produced. Perhaps the difference is that now such devastation extends far beyond the realm of
culture. The barren landscape of \textit{The Waste Land} seems all too real in the context of global
warming; as the climate changes, the figurative assumes the contours of the literal. The stakes of

\textsuperscript{48} See Badiou’s \textit{Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil} (Verso, 2000) and \textit{Saint Paul: The Foundations of
Universalism} (Stanford UP, 2004).
the kinds of questions Eliot’s poems raises are no longer merely aesthetic or cultural, they are more than ever deeply material. Just as Lauren Berlant queries how one might come to inhabit a world of “cruel optimism,” the texts that I have explored in the preceding chapters bear witness to and attempt to dwell within their own historical moment. They imagine a mode of dwelling that is dynamic, recuperative, transformative, and deeply social, and thus move against the grain of modernist negativity, even as they superficially appear to be swimming with its murky current. In doing so, they offer strategies for endurance in the strangest of places.

I still dream about the house in which I grew up; sometimes I even drive by it, downshifting into first gear, eyes wide open with emotion. But it’s always beyond my grasp. Nick Carraway was right when he said, “You can’t repeat the past” (Fitzgerald, Gatsby 110). These days I prefer the texture and density of the present. In her late essay, “Thinking Through Queer Theory,” Sedgwick asks, “What if the most productive junctures weren’t the ones where everything means the same thing?” (200). “Strange Dwellings” marks one effort to take up this question, specifically in the context of queer modernism. The continued viability of both fields lies in their commitment to resisting reductivism—of queer to a political position of negativity, of modernism to the peripatetic. It is in this move away from oppositional thinking that we clear space to discover the rich textual worlds we have glossed over. By sitting with what James Agee terms “the cruel radiance of what is” (9) and probing its malleability, we might just find that the familiar is endurable. Perhaps it is even enough.
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