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Transgressive Migrations: Gender Roles, Space, and Place In American Novels, 1900-1999

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TRANSGRESSIVE MIGRATIONS: GENDER ROLES, SPACE, AND PLACE IN
AMERICAN NOVELS, 1900-1999

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to the memory of my parents, who always encouraged my curiosity and determination. Thank you, Mama and Dad. I love you.

I also dedicate this to my husband. During the dissertation process, I found strength in his compassion, wisdom, and humor. How wonderful it is to know that using these qualities, we will continue to support one another—and help those in need—for many years to come. Thank you, Steve. I love you.

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I examine how gender roles combine with changes in space and place to affect women protagonists in twentieth-century American literature. I argue that as these characters migrate, the (self-)perception of their identities shift. Particularly, their outward performances as well as their internal awareness change. My analysis concentrates on the novel genre because of specific characteristics—plot, characterization, and narration. The chosen literary works on which I focus are *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), *Quicksand* (1928), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *The Dollmaker* (1954), and *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1996).

Concepts that I draw upon in this dissertation include transgression and paradoxical space. Female characters exhibit transgressive behavior as they migrate; their stress levels increase as they are around different people (who sometimes also judge them) as well as restrictive social mores and expectations. As a result, they become overwhelmed and act transgressively. The idea of paradoxical space emphasizes that the female self has an inner space (i.e., her emotions and thoughts) and an outer space (i.e., her external actions)—and she does not always express sensation in her behavior. I argue that women protagonists in migration literature (which my chosen novels represent) experience difficulties in achieving and maintaining a paradoxical space balance because a difference in geography leads to differences in their social and family environment. These changes affect gender roles that these women play, and correspondingly, they suppress their inner states in order to give expected external self-performances.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My writing focuses on the intersection of gender roles with concepts of space and place in twentieth-century American novels—specifically, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), *Quicksand* (1928), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *The Dollmaker* (1954), and *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1996). Through their plots, novels represent the passage of time, the migration of characters, and the effects of time and place on those characters. Through their narration, which blends external events and internal impressions, novels show the shifts in thinking and emerging awareness in migrating characters. Finally, through characterization (particularly of women protagonists), novels demonstrate that gender roles and identity performance transform when a character leaves her original context, even (or perhaps especially) when the new geography is threatening or strange. As a microcosm of the migrant's experience, the modern American novel has much to teach us about the relationship between mobility and self-perception, particularly for women who are traditionally associated with home and hearth.

All of the novels that I cover in this dissertation represent several migrations that happened in twentieth-century America. The westward migration of midwestern farmers featured in *The Grapes of Wrath* was prompted by the Dust Bowl (a years-long series of large-scale environmental losses and agricultural errors during the 1930s). *Quicksand* is set during the Great Migration—beginning in 1916, millions of African Americans

moved from southern states to the North. During the 1930s, African American migrant workers moved among areas in Florida (such as the Everglades); *Their Eyes Were Watching God* describes these settlements. *The Dollmaker* features the migration of Appalachians, in search of employment and economic advancement, to Northern cities in the 1940s. Like *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Under the Feet of Jesus* focuses on migrant workers (specifically, an undocumented Chicana family in California). Even though there is no explicit reference to when *Under the Feet of Jesus* is set, it is probably during the 1960s or 1970s: the author dedicates her writing to Cesar Chavez, who led multiple activist movements during these years in support of Californian migrant farm workers.

Although the time settings differ in my chosen texts, there are commonalities in the motivations for migration. In all the novels, there is an economic need that compels each protagonist to migrate in search of work. Also, the texts' specific migrations underscore a change in geographic identity. Both *Quicksand* and *The Dollmaker* show a shift from the South to the North, while *The Grapes of Wrath* emphasizes the difference between the mentality of Middle America and that of the West. Although there is not a regional identity shift in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Under the Feet of Jesus* (because the protagonists do not leave the states of Florida and California), the intrastate migrations emphasize issues that these characters experience in other identity roles (namely, race and ethnicity).

In terms of scope, the genre of migration literature can be characterized by its openness; it focuses on the physical movement of a person or people, but there are no further parameters such as cause or impetus that delineate the motivating factors behind

such physical movement. Immigration literature, on the other hand, specifically focuses on those who enter another country. Motivating factors in immigration literature could be positive (e.g., the pursuit of financial gain) or negative (e.g., threats of personal violence leading people to seek asylum). So, migration literature encompasses immigration literature, and a literary work can actually be an example of both—for example, *Under the Feet of Jesus* presents issues of migration *and* immigration. In my dissertation, I am curious about what happens in migration literature when a parameter *is* added—namely, a place’s creation or realized existence. Linda McDowell explains this process in *Gender, Identity, and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*. She writes, “Places are made through power relations which construct the rules which define boundaries [and parameters]. These boundaries are both social and spatial—they define who belongs to a place..., as well as the location or site of the experience” (McDowell 4). To me, my chosen novels exemplify this regional focus—with other twentieth-century American novels (such as *My Antonia* [1918] and *Mama Day* [1988]) providing other women protagonists for further study.

I focus on women protagonists in my dissertation because of my interest in their attempts to create themselves during times of migration, despite pre-existing power relations and social rules. One form of novel is the *Bildungsroman*—which features the main character’s internal development, at times during moments of external change or stress. In the nineteenth century, this type of novel often highlighted masculine self-creation; the twentieth-century version of the *Bildungsroman* emphasizes this “building of self,” too—but sometimes, the focus is on women. I am interested in how women create themselves during social periods of flux and while experiencing attempts to control

their outward performances (no matter where they move). Specifically, in my chosen novels, these protagonists who migrate to new spaces discover a reinforcement of social norms and stereotypes that existed in the spaces they left.

The originating spaces, however, are not always home for the protagonist. Indeed, the chosen novels in my dissertation demonstrate that the concept of home is complicated. Though some protagonists (such as Ma Joad and Gertie Nevels) value the space they call home, economic need and the social expectation of playing prescribed gender roles inform the choice to migrate. For others (Helga Crane, Janie Crawford, and Estrella), their multiple moves render the declaration of “home” to be a temporary statement. In addition, for all the protagonists in my project, maintaining a relationship with valued people informs what they call “home”—the physical location alone does not define this.

With the discovery of pre-migration social mores and stereotypes, the women react in multiple ways: they experience sensory overwhelm, adopt new social roles, employ rhetorical strategies, and exhibit transgressive behavior. Functionally, these plot elements unite the chapters of my writing. In their novels, the authors describe their protagonists’ thoughts, feelings, and senses upon moving to a new space; at times, these characters become so overwhelmed that they cannot control their external self-performances. Also, their verbal interactions with others while in a new space illustrate how they draw upon rhetorical strength for survival. Lastly, the novels’ endings suggest that existing in a new space results in two outcomes. Either the protagonist’s mobility and action are constricted (e.g., Helga Crane’s pregnancies and Gertie Nevels becoming wooden when facing economic and domestic pressure), or the protagonist has discovered

a freedom in how she sees herself and others (e.g., Ma Joad's expanded view of "family," Janie Crawford's successful interaction with the concept of "horizon," and Estrella's self-contemplation while stargazing).

Each female protagonist in these novels learns about herself—especially the disparity between her interiority and her external actions. However, instead of showing how the protagonists become liberated, the novels chart how they are contained regardless of the space they occupy. These literary works also show the risks involved as these women attempt to achieve liberation as they define it.

Methodology

For my dissertation, feminist literary theory has proven foundational. For example, Barbara Johnson explores the struggles of women characters (such as Helga Crane and Janie Crawford) in achieving and accessing an interior-exterior balance. In my connection of geographical ideas to literature about gender roles, I have been encouraged by her approach to characterization. Also, my approach to this project has been influenced by Sara Ahmed (in particular, her explanatory writing style). In her development of the concept of intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw has proven very helpful in thinking about the relationship of feminism and certain geographical concepts (such as circles in Viramontes's novel). Finally, Sidonie Smith's work on female mobility in literature emphasizes how complicated migration can be: "Women have always been in motion and for a variety of complex reasons; and their traveling has always been gendered and embodied traveling, situated within complex social, cultural, and historical forces" (Smith xiii).

In each of my chosen texts, there are moments in which the protagonist transgresses or resists: she gives an external self-performance that differs from what she is expected to play—particularly in terms of gender. Migration proves to be an accelerant for transgression: the female protagonists are increasingly stressed, for they continue to be perceived (and sometimes judged) by new groups of people. At times, this creates emotional overwhelm, and they act transgressively in response. In his monograph entitled *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*, Tim Cresswell considers the relationship between performance and place. He explores how in all environments, value systems and social mores can shape external self-performances: “Transgression, and the reaction to it, underlines those values that are considered correct and appropriate” (Cresswell 21).

Another concept that I explore in my dissertation is paradoxical space. Though originally developed by Jillian Rose as an idea of feminist geography, I argue that it is also useful in literary studies as a spatial metaphor. The premise of paradoxical space focuses on sensation and behavior (namely, the inner state and the outer state). To Rose, these are two areas “that would be initially exclusive if charted on a two-dimensional map—centre and margin, inside and outside” (Rose 140). There exists a divide between the psychological interior and the behavioral exterior; in other words, a female’s external self-performance does not always reflect her thoughts or emotions. At times when she is playing prescriptive gender roles or is facing social stereotypes, she might intentionally separate her interior from her exterior as protection: this way, she can give an accepted, expected external self-performance without being suspected of acting transgressively. I argue that paradoxical space imbalance (*and* balance) is a fundamental aspect in

migration literature because geographical change brings contextual changes (e.g., social, cultural, and familial). As those changes shape gender roles, female protagonists correspondingly alter their outward performances.

Throughout this project, I refer to the behavioral poles of paradoxical space in terms of *control* and *emotional overwhelm*. As I stated earlier, a female keeps control of her paradoxical space division through maintaining a conscious, purposeful separation between her thoughts/feelings and her actions. Sometimes, she achieves an interior-exterior balance, which can bring a confident harmony to her external self-performance. To me, Janie Crawford finds this paradoxical space balance in the ending of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. However, when a female character's psychological state becomes engulfed by stressors from migration (e.g., still experiencing pre-migration social mores and stereotypes after she moves), the intensity of her inner state overpowers her ability to manage her outward performance. She does not necessarily understand or process the sensory impressions that move through her. As a result, she experiences emotional overwhelm, which can result either in withdrawal and isolation (as in Helga Crane throughout *Quicksand*) or in transgressive behavior (such as Estrella's actions at the medical clinic in *Under the Feet of Jesus*). One of the problems with being overwhelmed by affect is not just that the character displays her thoughts and feelings—it is also that they make demands on the physical body. In turn, this complicates her outward performance as well as obscures the division of her paradoxical space. I argue that migration makes it more likely that women protagonists encounter sensory stimuli that they cannot manage.

Chapter Summaries

In twentieth-century American literature, *The Grapes of Wrath* is the most well-known novel of domestic migration; its status as a canonical work has become established over the decades since its publication. Because of this, I start my dissertation with this text and then follow a chronological order in my subsequent chapters. Also, this organization allows me to bookend my dissertation, with my opening and closing chapters using the same setting (migrant farms in California).

As readers are introduced to various members of the Joad family, they note how gender roles provide scripts for the various family members to follow (e.g., their physical positions during family meetings). However, Ma Joad's external performance changes throughout the family's difficult migration. Before the family leaves Oklahoma, her gender role focuses on domesticity; as the Joads travel to California in search of farm work, her identity expands with her assumption of family leadership, the realization of how migrants are stereotyped, and her expanding definition of "family." The changes are also emotionally overwhelming to Ma Joad, and with this lack of control, she recognizes that she is unable to balance her interior with her exterior. Occasionally, she acts transgressively in reaction to the frustration she feels as a woman who is expected to act in a restricted, gendered manner. At the end of Steinbeck's text, though, she manages to achieve power over how she performs her gender and migrant status—in part because she embraces the idea of an expanded family unit.

In Nella Larsen's novel *Quicksand*, Helga Crane's multiple migrations illustrate how she seeks relief from a paradoxical space imbalance. With each failing attempt to fit in with a city and/or a group (through opulent furnishings and clothing), she grows

lonely. Also, her racial identity informs her external self-performance; as a biracial woman who identifies as black, she feels like she does not belong to a sole place or people. I argue that Helga's attempts to find happiness through consumerism are fleeting. In those moments in the text, Larsen's protagonist is able to shape her exterior, and she hopes that this ability to form will have momentum, allowing her to gain control over her interior, too.

However, the inner-outer state equilibrium does not last—regardless of her geographical location, Helga eventually feels overwhelmed, and her loneliness turns into a desire to be alone. This seclusion becomes the impetus for another migration. Sometimes, the inability to maintain a paradoxical space balance causes her to become engulfed by what she feels and thinks, resulting in her perception of stereotypes (such as how she is treated while in Copenhagen) as well as transgressive behavior (e.g., speaking angrily to the headmaster of the boarding school that also employs her). Although Helga has a variety of experiences and personal realizations in *Quicksand*, the cycle of loneliness-fueled migration continues throughout the text, which suggests that she is an example of a female protagonist in migration literature who does not achieve a paradoxical space balance.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston, I argue that Janie Crawford's gender performance metamorphoses throughout her migrations in Florida. As a teenager, she learns that her beliefs about love and relationships differ from those of her grandmother, who teaches her that an enhanced ability to acquire possessions and social advancement should be the deciding factors in entering a romantic relationship. She follows this advice in her first two marriages, and she plays the socially accepted

gender role of submissive wife. However, with the realization that she is being controlled, Janie acts transgressively by participating in black vernacular wordplay; this behavior continues when she becomes a widow, as she marries a younger man and migrates to the Everglades.

Although she finds lasting happiness with her third husband, Janie still experiences an imbalance between her inner and outer states. The concept of the horizon (a visible yet unreachable place) and its connection to love suggests a pathway for her to achieve a complete paradoxical space balance through discovering inner serenity. Also, finding a romantic relationship in which there is mutual admiration motivates Janie to perform her gender and race without worrying about stereotypes and boundaries based on social mores.

Throughout Harriette Simpson Arnow's novel *The Dollmaker*, Gertie Nevels struggles with the gender roles that she is expected to perform, both by her rural Kentucky community as well as by her family members. Her struggles to perform her gender in order to fit the expectations of those around her increase when she migrates to Detroit; there, she learns that she is expected to incorporate domesticity and passivity into her gender performance. Not only does Gertie have problems in carrying out this altered gender role, but her inner state is also overcome with her family's problems. Eventually, she has to return to being the family economic stabilizer that she was while in Kentucky.

To be successful in this, however, Gertie must knowingly suppress what she thinks and how she feels in how she portrays her exterior. Thinking about what makes her happy—esthetic matters (specifically, her woodcarving) and her children—stabilizes the deliberate paradoxical space imbalance. As a result, this allows her to focus on being

the family economic breadwinner without worrying about losing work because of being consumed by her emotions or behaving transgressively. I argue, though, that Gertie's concentration on the dual aspects of happiness ultimately fails; long-term, she cannot avoid how social mores and stereotypes (about both migrants and females) restrict her outward self-performance, and the resulting loss of control over her inner state forces her to choose between her family and her art.

My final chapter focuses on Helena María Viramontes's novel *Under the Feet of Jesus*. In my chosen texts, the teenaged Estrella is the youngest female protagonist, but she often finds herself fulfilling adult responsibilities (e.g., acting as a second mother to her siblings as well as translating for the non-English-speaking adults in her life). To me, Estrella and Ma Joad are similar in that, despite the historical and social differences, they share a need "to keep the family together" and the ability to speak for others. Despite family and community expectations for her to streamline her external self-performances, the protagonist remains loyal to her multiple identity roles (female, teenager, Chicana, bilingual, etc.) throughout Viramontes's writing. Specifically, this commitment guides Estrella whenever she is in institutional settings (such as schools and medical facilities), even though her migrant and Chicana identities predetermine how representatives of those institutions interact with her.

As she migrates among California farming communities, Estrella finds herself negotiating boundaries that influence her external self-performance. I argue that in her text, Viramontes represents those boundaries as circles. Indeed, the motif of circular patterns in *Under the Feet of Jesus* illustrates not only how Estrella shapes her behavior in accordance with cultural and social mores—but also how migrants like herself can be

disciplined, organized, and sometimes unrecognized by representatives of institutional spaces. Regarding this institutional control and her emotional overwhelm, she threatens transgressive behavior, but the text's ending suggests that this outward performance will not alter Estrella's probable future (which might include a continued lack of balance in her paradoxical space).

Application

Although it focuses on the impact of spatial ideas and gender roles in migration literature, this dissertation's scope suggests other topics for analysis. For example, my work features poor and working-class characters, which alludes to a causal relationship between continued economic insecurity and mobility. Consequently, this reasoning connects femininity to the sensation of instability. My project also highlights a rural derivation: each women protagonist inhabits rural spaces either at her respective novel's beginning or throughout the text. After migration, she must find a path through patriarchal familial relationships and destructive social constructs *en route* to survival. I argue that we can learn much about these two topics—and others in migration literature—from the novels analyzed in this dissertation.

CHAPTER 2

HOW SPATIALITY INFLUENCES MA JOAD'S BEHAVIOR IN *THE GRAPES OF WRATH*

John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) is a foundational text in migration literature. In portraying the saga of the Joads making a difficult migration from their weather-ravaged Oklahoma home to California, which they expect will be a promised land of agricultural and financial opportunity, Steinbeck illustrates how spatial and social changes can overwhelm migrants' emotions, causing them to alter their external self-expressions. In Steinbeck's text, the family matriarch, Ma Joad, acutely senses these changes as she witnesses her six children's migratory experiences. She also sees these changes in herself. Migration allows her to realize an expanded authority that her previous gender performances, which focused on a prescribed domesticity, could not access. As the Joads move, she struggles to reconcile her interior space with her exterior space because her familial role keeps changing. Eventually, her external self-expression of a farmer's wife no longer fits her reality; in California, because Ma Joad is now a migrant worker, she feels a broader sense of affiliation, and her gender performance reflects how her concept of "family" has expanded beyond biological parameters.

Ma Joad's shifting relationship to gender over the course of *The Grapes of Wrath* derives from her predetermined familial position, which also suggests her purpose. In

“From Patriarchy to Matriarchy: Ma Joad’s Role in *The Grapes of Wrath*,” Warren Motley notes that one of the text’s key metaphors is structured around the female protagonist’s familial position: “Ma Joad is a ‘citadel,’ not because she takes action,... but because she can absorb experience” (Motley 407). In claiming that Ma Joad is passive and can therefore only incorporate what happens around her, Motley overlooks the social mores and patriarchal viewpoint that restrict her control over her external self-performance. Indeed, as her varying responses throughout Steinbeck’s text demonstrate—from verbal persuasion to threats of physically transgressive behavior—she is not passive.

Motley suggests that due to this fortress-like quality, Ma Joad can provide guidance to others, yet this static viewpoint limits the range of her performance, not acknowledging the reach of her familial influence. Motley posits, “As the image of an immovable fortress suggests, her strength gives no particular direction to the family” (407). Though Ma Joad sits on the outside of the family circle during their decision-making discussions, her participation is nonetheless so central to its operations that the Joad men pause the family meeting whenever she has to leave to tend to domestic matters. Throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*, she continues to perform her domestic role (cooking, cleaning, childrearing, etc.), but she also takes on a new leadership role and overrides Pa in his attempts to limit familial belonging. In spite of her own emotional overwhelm, she models resilience and recovery for the men around her. She takes on familial decision-making duties when Pa Joad becomes so overwhelmed with loss (land, life, and a masculine dominance in how the Joad family operates), and her rhetorical strength increases across the course of the novel.

Ma Joad draws upon rhetorical strategies that she used pre-migration when she was playing a prescribed domestic role but expands their application. Indeed, I argue that a shared characteristic of female protagonists in migration literature involves the use of rhetoric as a way to maintain control of the divide between interior and exterior space in a potentially overwhelming situation. For those who are rhetorically masterful like Ma Joad, this interrupts the progression from sensory overwhelm to physical transgression: although Steinbeck describes moments of verbal transgression and physical advancement, he does not note any instance of Ma Joad injuring people or property.¹ Rhetorical strength has also been part of her maternal identity. Ma Joad is the only adult who disciplines the misbehavior of Ruthie and Winfield; she is also the only family member who listens to Rose of Sharon's pregnancy complaints and dissuades her fears. Ma understands that life changes brought by migration are not easy to navigate, and she deftly and empathetically addresses Rose of Sharon's fears. To me, her compassion, coupled with her rhetorical strength, is why she does not respond with fury upon learning of Ruthie's spiteful reference to Tom's fugitive status (due to his murder of Jim Casy's attacker), and that is why she expresses pride at Rose of Sharon's decision to breastfeed a starving man.

Regardless of the strains of physical migration and in spite of mores that have restricted her pre-migration gender role, Ma Joad is intent on keeping the family intact, and her rhetorical skills help her pursue this goal. She claims the protection of the family circle for herself, her charges (the Joad children), and vulnerable others. Though the

¹ Examples include her confrontation with other Joads when they consider splitting up the family (Chapter 16), her exchange with a threatening police officer (Chapter 18), and her encounter with a store clerk at the Hooper Ranch (Chapter 26).

circle is a symbolic configuration of bodies rather than a roof over the families' heads, it provides psychologically sustaining shelter because Ma Joad's rhetorical performance invests that circle with affective power.

Jessica B. Teisch writes about the demographic and agricultural damage that the Dust Bowl had not only on migrants like the Joads but also the decimated farmland that was abandoned. She explains, "Between 1910 and 1950 over one million farmers and agricultural workers had left the Great Plains. By 1950, Oklahoma had lost 55 percent of its agricultural labor force" (Teisch 161). Ma Joad acknowledges this human cost of the Dust Bowl through her expanding concept of family, which extends beyond the biological to include others who have been stereotyped by society and institutions but who are actually victims of these structures. Occasionally, Ma Joad struggles with this imbalance, and her senses become overwhelmed, leading to threats of physically transgressive behavior (e.g., when the Joad men plan to split up the family during migration). However, Ma Joad's belief in the sustaining power of the family circle helps her to regain control over her external self-expression, both in terms of her gender performance and her identity as a migrant.

Archetype of the Family Circle—Form and Function

In *The Grapes of Wrath*, Ma Joad's physical positioning reflects an unspoken expectation for family members (especially females): "They [the Joads] seemed to be a part of an organization of the unconscious. They obeyed impulses which registered only faintly in their thinking minds" (Steinbeck 103). With the initial Joad family meeting,

Steinbeck provides a spatial template to illustrate every family member's position.² The family head occupies a special, reserved place within the meeting circle. All Joads acknowledge this status: "Grampa... no longer ruled. His position was honorary and a matter of custom. But he did have the right of first comment, no matter how silly his old mind might be" (Steinbeck 105). In the initial meeting, he sits on the truck's running board, a concession to his advanced age as well as a literally and symbolically elevated position among the other males. Women in the family "[take] their places behind the squatting men," and children of either gender stand alongside them (104). Those who wield decision-making privileges form the circle's perimeter, and those who are deemed ineligible to make family-level decisions take any available position on the meeting's exterior. Furthermore, the difference in body positioning intimates a gender-based division among the adult Joad family members. The males dedicate themselves to decision-making and problem-solving; by crouching and squatting, they adopt physical positions that render them unavailable for any other task. By standing at the periphery of the family meeting, though, females are available to tend to any needed chores. In other words, the implicit expectation for females is the maintenance of the domestic quality of life. By "put[ting] their hands on their hips," they communicate this readiness for action (104).

This archetypical structure perpetuates gender bias, as it only allows males to change their physical position in the family circle based on self-definition and age. For instance, the only person who does not participate in the initial Joad family meeting is

² Warren Motley notes the specificity of this arrangement, writing how "it reflects the traditional authority of the pioneer as clearly as would a legislative chamber" (Motley 402).

Jim Casy: “out of delicacy,” he sits away from the circle (104). With this behavior, he demonstrates his sensitivity to social mores and how he is defined by them: “He was a good preacher and knew his people” (104). When Al enters the circle for the first time, his position shift reflects his new decision-making power as a young man with mechanical expertise. When he was a child, “he had stood behind with the women”; now that Al is an adult male, though, he moves to the interior (104). The tone of his speech reflects his own sense of the heightened seriousness of his family role: “he [makes] his [automotive] report solemnly” (104). Other Joad males praise his masculine performance, with Grampa speaking first: ““You’re all right, Al.... You’ve growed up good”” (105). Because these compliments happen within the family circle, they take on a pedagogical quality; Al is learning how to be a man and a leader.

By featuring the initial Joad family meeting, Steinbeck demonstrates that Ma Joad both accepts and rewrites the socially prescribed assignment of gender roles. Moreover, he shows how the other family members, without objection, accept how Ma Joad redefines her standing within the family circle. As the men plan the family’s imminent migration to California, the setting sun signals supertime, and Ma repeatedly leaves the meeting in order to prepare the meal. In her absence, all deliberation stops, and the Joads “[wait] for her to come back across the darkening yard, for Ma was powerful in the group” (133). This acknowledgement of her standing among the Joads does not refute any socially prescribed expectations of domesticity. However, it does show that Ma Joad can transcend this because she has established her reputation for leadership and wisdom.

Before the Joads leave their homestead, Steinbeck gives readers a sense of how the family circle conducts the decision-making process, particularly when it comes to

expanding the group beyond biological ties. In this first family circle, they discuss the possibility that Jim Casy will join the migration, and their procedure features the participation of all of the men in the group and the dominance of masculine voices in the debate. First, Tom makes his proposal, providing reasons why Jim Casy should migrate with the Joads: ““He’s a wise fella.... We’ve knowed him a long time”” (105). As the titular head of the family, Grampa speaks next to “the brooding council”: he advocates for inclusion due to his belief that having a preacher, whether active or not, portends good luck (105). Pa Joad argues against Casy’s inclusion, adopting an analytical view—even though it reduces people to parts of an equation—over a subjective one: ““They’s more to this than is he lucky, or is he a nice fella.... We got to figger close. It’s a sad thing to figger close”” (106).³ He counts all the family members and animals that will be migrating:

“There’s Grampa an’ Granma—that’s two. An’ me an’ John an’ Ma—that’s five. An’ Noah an’ Tommy an’ Al—that’s eight. Rosasharn an’ Connie is ten, an’ Ruthie an’ Winfiel’ is twelve. We got to take the dogs ‘cause what’ll we do else? Can’t shoot a good dog, an’ there ain’t nobody to give ‘em to. An’ that’s fourteen.” (Steinbeck 106)

³ Daniel Worden notes that such mathematical analysis represents “the denigration of thought” (Worden 131). In “Specters of Masculinity: Collectivity in John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath*,” he explains how the divide between subjectivity and objectivity illustrates a major philosophical split in the novel: “Activity that stems from or accompanies thought is portrayed as helpless, futile, while activity that emerges out of passion, emotion, or affect sutures the disenfranchised together for survival” (131). Pa Joad is unconsciously incorporating verbiage and philosophy of certain institutions (banks and the farming industry) that also “figger close.”

By ending his detailed explanation with a rhetorical question (“‘An’ kin we feed a extra mouth?”), Pa Joad shows confidence in his argument as well as in his role as head of household (106). In noting that Pa Joad talks to Ma “[w]ithout turning his head,” Steinbeck implies that Pa Joad acts not out of shame but out of confidence that she will not challenge his decision-making in such a public way (106). There is a dismissive purpose to that body language: through it, Pa Joad wordlessly reminds everyone that Ma Joad’s prescribed role (along with that of all other females) does not include family-level decision-making. Also, this reminder of her outsider status emphasizes the patriarchal organization of the Joad family.

With her response, though, Ma Joad draws upon her perspective as an outsider in her own family in order to advocate for those who are without any protection that a family unit can provide. She revises Pa Joad’s terms: “‘As far as ‘kin,’ we can’t do nothing...; but as far as ‘will,’ why we’ll do what we will” (106). In this way, she readjusts the family’s priorities, reminding its members that although their ability to act might be restricted by uncontrollable outside conditions (e.g., the cramped space in the family car), this will always be superseded by an ethical responsibility and willingness to act. Ma Joad then reminds the family members of their long-time philanthropy: “‘I never heerd tell of no Joads or no Hazletts [her individual lineage], neither, ever refusin’ food an’ shelter or a lift on the road to anybody that asked” (106). She finishes her response with an ethical appeal, implying that current family members have the power to write their own histories: “‘They’s been mean Joads, but never that mean” (106). Her argumentation and confidence catch Pa Joad off-guard. Whereas he began the deliberation self-assured, he now understands that even though his wife has always been

relegated to the family circle's exterior, she is very capable of ethical leadership. This realization makes him "ashamed," and as a result of his shame and his loss of the moral high ground, Pa Joad "[twists] his neck to look up at her" (106). He refutes Ma Joad's argument, protesting the lack of room—in response, she adopts Pa Joad's enumerating style, inverting it to emphasize hospitality and generosity. She argues:

"There ain't room now.... One more ain't gonna hurt; an' a man, strong an' healthy, aint never no burden. An' any time when we got two pigs an' over a hundred dollars, an' we wonderin' if we kin feed a fella—" (106)

Ma Joad's persuasive verbal control enables her to shape the family's decisions in spite of the patriarchal norms of the family circle. After her intervention in this debate, the Joads not only choose to allow Jim Casy to join their migration and their deliberations, they also continue to operate by this inclusive ethic. For example, Pa Joad thenceforth welcomes non-Joads (e.g., asking Muley Graves, a family friend, to accompany the family). Moreover, Ma Joad's participation in this family meeting establishes the basis for her role during migration as protector of an intact family.

Struggles with Paradoxical Space and the Family Structure

Because she has always occupied the exterior of the family circle (due to social mores' organizing parameters), Ma Joad has been restricted in crafting her gender performance. She has become accustomed to this because she does not feel threatened by judgment from other family members who have first-hand knowledge of her joys and heartbreaks. Regardless of the family's location or condition, she considers that others will be gazing upon the Joads, perhaps with judgment or punishment on their minds. For

example, when the Joads first arrive in Weedpatch, she learns of an upcoming visit by a committee composed of prominent women in the government camp. Eager to impress these non-Joads, she hurriedly cooks breakfast and urges the family members to bathe and wear clean clothes, telling Pa Joad, ““This here’s the time the fambly got to get decent”” (318). Ma Joad explains to a nauseous Rose of Sharon that sometimes, one’s external self-expression takes precedence over one’s inner state: ““They’s times when how you feel got to be kep’ to yourself”” (318). The urgency of Steinbeck’s female protagonist comes not from her attempts to climb a social ladder but from her anxiety of social judgment, despite her lack of control over the family’s physical appearance as well as her paradoxical space divide. So, despite her thoughts and feelings, she will maintain a socially appropriate and expected gender performance around non-family members. The emotional strain deriving from the migration’s circumstances—fallow land and institutional insensitivity—occasionally appears in her external self-performance, however.

Throughout *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck hints at the strain Ma Joad feels in trying to preserve the family unit and present domestic unity to the world while experiencing the pressures of poverty. The initial instance of Ma Joad’s attempts happens before migration, as an overheard comment from Jim Casy prompts her to reexamine her outward performance. He tells Tom Joad that he notices how fatigued she is: ““[r]eal tar’d like she’s sick-tar’d”” (112). These words startle her, as does their implication that she might soon have a physical or emotional collapse, which will render her a burden for the family. Determination soon replaces the fatigue that Ma Joad has been showing on her face and in her body language: as she searches her bedroom for

items missed during packing, “[s]lowly her relaxed face tightened, and the lines disappeared from the taut muscular face” (112). In this moment, she purposefully adopts a posture of resilience. The text’s narrator comments that upon a cursory glance, one notices only “broken” and “empty” items remaining in the room: “[n]othing was left in it except trash” (112). Ma Joad knows, though, that a much-valued container is still there—and she “[brings] out a stationary box” (112). It contains items of two kinds of value: monetary (“a pair of earrings, a little gold signet ring, and a watch chain braided of hair and tipped with gold swivels”) and sentimental (“letters, clippings, [and] photographs” [113]). In unspoken hypothesizing about the family’s financial needs during migration, she begins a process of regaining control over her paradoxical space. First, she avoids becoming emotionally paralyzed by the jewelry, saving “the trinkets in [an] envelope” for future needs (i.e., selling or bartering these items for food or fuel) (113).

To Ma Joad, her efforts also mean that she must eliminate any perceived source of emotional overwhelm. As for the paper keepsakes, she chooses to burn them—but first, she “[touches] them lightly, . . . and her fingers disturbed the letters and then lined them up again” (113). In her book entitled *On Reading The Grapes of Wrath*, Susan Shillinglaw notes the significance of burning “the physical objects that [bind Ma Joad] to place” before migrating (Shillinglaw 69). I argue, though, that with Ma Joad’s decision to destroy sentimental items, Steinbeck also illustrates the emotional complexity of his female protagonist. Her use of sensory information here not only emphasizes these items’ physical ephemerality, but via her touching and staring, Ma Joad also demonstrates that she can maintain her outward performance despite what she feels or

thinks. In other words, she incorporates the loss of these mementoes into a focus on memories that motivate the maintenance of her exterior and interior. Despite the pressures of poverty and itinerancy, she can remember without allowing sensory overwhelm to become part of her gender performance. Therefore, this moment exemplifies the maintaining of a paradoxical space split.

Transgression and the Family Unit

The Joads migrate because they hope to flee the Dust Bowl catastrophe and find security if not prosperity in California, but in practice, their migration leads them into situations that threaten both Ma Joad's control over herself as well as the solidarity of the family circle. As an outsider within her own family, Ma Joad has years of accumulated memories and experiential learning upon which to draw—and to her, the importance of maintaining an intact family unit dominates her value system. Her strong feelings about preserving the family, when combined with moving from the family's homestead, overwhelm her gender performance, transforming her into someone who contemplates transgressive behavior. An instance of such stress-derived transformation occurs as the Joads experience car trouble while *en route* to California. At an informally-called family meeting, the adult Joad men decide that the best way to optimize their several needs (fixing the car, ensuring the family can choose adequate campsites [e.g., having enough water and shade], consolidating and earning money, etc.) would involve separating. In this way, they can address the multiplicity of needs via division of labor. Ma Joad refuses this proposal and threatens Pa Joad.

Ma Joad's gender performance becomes verbally transgressive with the chance of becoming physically transgressive if she hits someone with the broken car's jack handle.⁴ One can sense through her linguistic changes how she struggles to regain control of the divide between her inner and outer spaces. Sensing that a structure of solidarity might be taken from her, she relinquishes the rhetorical authority that she has cultivated (despite the social mores and gender bias that have kept her from making decisions on the family unit-level). Instead, she adopts behavior that will call attention to the unity that the unthinking Joad men are about to destroy. The tension in Ma Joad's mouth and the anger in her eyes suggest how intensely she feels about keeping the family together, while her confident grasp of the jack handle suggests her willingness to become physically violent if the Joads reject her wishes. She directs promises of retributive violence toward Pa Joad, deeming him responsible for her loss of control: "'You made up your mind. Come on an' whup me. Just try it. But I ain't a-goin'; or if I do,... jus' the minute you take sleep in your eyes, I'll slap ya with a stick a stove wood'" (Steinbeck 177). Even though he does not devise the idea of family division, he does approve it, telling his wife that she must abide by the choice that the adult male Joads have made.⁵ In this way, Pa Joad is

⁴ Warren Motley downplays Ma Joad's actions, saying that this character "aggressively challenges" the decision to split up the Joads (Motley 403). However, this interpretation of her behavior does not acknowledge that she is actually challenging what she believes to be an error in judgment. In his book *In Place / Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression*, Tim Cresswell explains transgression is a way in which one can challenge ideas "that are considered correct and appropriate.... No hegemonic structure [like the archetypical family meeting circle] is ever complete" (Cresswell 21). Noting this, Ma Joad experiences more than sensory overwhelm; she also experiences logical overwhelm.

⁵ As Warren Motley points out, "final responsibility for choosing a course of action (during family meetings) lies with the older men—the 'nucleus' of the family government" (Motley 402).

trying to limit Ma Joad's influence by reminding her how power is distributed within the Joad family: through the performance of prescriptive gender roles.

With his initial refusal of her demands for the family to remain intact, Pa Joad initially attempts to restore order within the family circle meeting; however, with the realization that this is not going to happen, he attempts to "win" control of the Joad family by stopping Ma Joad's insurrection. His approach involves matching her transgressive behavior (threats of physical violence and speech that is unexpectedly rebellious) with his own verbal transgression. By repeatedly deeming her "sassy" and mocking her age, Pa Joad is using humor and loving familiarity to address Ma Joad (Steinbeck 177). He does not wish to erode her maternal power in front of other family members; however, like his wife, he also has taken a strong position about a serious matter, and he does not want to lose power with the family. So, Pa Joad demonstrates that a challenge to his authority as head of household will not go unnoticed. He realizes, though, that he is going to be unable to silence Ma Joad's protests; he "[looks] helplessly about the group," searching for any sign of support, but the only acknowledgement of the standoff is the sharp laughter of the younger Joad daughter, Ruthie (177). Considering Ma Joad's verbally transgressive behavior, others in the family recognize the loss of inner control that has led to her threats of physical violence. Her external self-expression unravels, and her words reflect how disordered she must feel because the family's unity might dissolve. (After all, the Joads have long relied on her emotional barometer: they "could not know hurt or fear unless she acknowledged hurt and fear.... [I]f she ever really deeply wavered or despaired the family would fall" [77]). The combination of Ma Joad's threats, the lack of support from family members (who only watch the

confrontation but do not join sides), and Pa Joad's failure to garner an emotional response with his derisive labels overwhelm his attempt to reestablish the parliamentary structure of the meeting circle. Even though the circle form still exists because the family remains intact, its make-up has changed: "And in a moment the group knew that Ma had won. And Ma knew it too" (177). Steinbeck emphasizes this power shift in his writing, with Pa Joad ceasing to speak or act for the remainder of Ma Joad's revolt.

For Ma Joad, transgression operates much like a trance—as soon as the decision to split up is reversed and Tom requests that she relinquish the jack handle, she "[looks] at astonishment at the bar of iron, [dropping] the weapon on the ground" (178). She regains control of her inner state, thus ending its manifestation in her outward performance, and she now has "taken control" of the family. Despite its prescriptive classification based on gender and age, the family circle has offered a reliable predictability that sustained her, especially during unexpected moments (Tom's return from prison) and uncertain times (migration to California). Even after her apparent rebellion from the family circle form, though, she retains the strength it has provided her.

Through animal allusions, Steinbeck emphasizes characteristics of individual and group behavior during this scene. For example, Tom Joad declares that through her threats of violence, his mother is going "johnrabbit" on the family—in other words, he compares Ma Joad's unpredictability to this creature's seemingly haphazard physical movements (177). Later, the idea of the Joads separating prompts her to pledge an attack in such a feral manner that she will brandish the jack handle with "cat-wild" ferocity (178). These two metaphors suggest that Ma Joad views the family as already disintegrated; therefore, she reacts out of fear and randomness (going "johnrabbit") and

envisions herself becoming predatory and solitary (“cat-wild”). She reclaims her rhetorical powers, however, through using another example of animal imagery, arguing for the family’s continued solidarity via her description of a bovine herd’s specific make-up. Ma Joad stresses the effectiveness of the family remaining intact by comparing it to how ““a bunch of cows... stick all together”” (178). The specificity of her animal choice—cows without steer (or “lobos”)—is significant, for although she has ceased her threats of physical violence, she employs verbal subterfuge through an indirect attack on the masculinity of the Joad decision-makers (178). I argue that when she obtains “the control” in the family with her “win,” she also believes that she has earned the right to use whatever verbal strategy (regardless of emotional harm) that enables her to maintain that control. For example, Ma Joad explains, ““The money we’d make [by dividing the Joad family] wouldn’t do no good.”” (178). To support her point, she emasculates the Joad men by comparing them to ““ranging”” steer, thus implying that these animals have abandoned their herd (178). Even though she still values familial archetypes, Ma Joad employs transgression and manipulation in her external self-performance whenever she suspects that no other Joad believes in the safety of family unity and the strength of personal agency.

Her resistance to division and inaction continues after the Joads reach California. In order to retain family control, Ma Joad combines more threats of physical violence with emasculating language to goad a resistant Pa Joad. Although the Joads are in a pleasant living situation as residents of the democratically-run Weedpatch camp, the family members must deal with low funds, Rose of Sharon’s impending birth, and each other’s malnutrition. Noting all this, Ma Joad insists that the adult men devise a solution:

although she has tabulated the remaining cooking supplies and wages, she orders Pa Joad to “figger.” In emphasizing “figger,” she demonstrates a rhetorical strategy of shaming: even before the Joads had left Oklahoma, Pa has been using the same word that institutions have also been using to emasculate (369). The adults decide to depart the next day, in agreement with Ma’s domestic report. In this way, Ma Joad’s behavior is similar to how Al acts when he makes his automotive report in the beginning of Steinbeck’s text. Pa interprets this, though, as a sign that his patriarchal household leadership has eroded: ““Seems like times is changed.... Time was when a man said what he’d do. Seems like women is tellin’ now. Seems like it’s perty near time to get out a stick”” (370). With his wistful description of gender-based decision-making, he attempts to regain control of the family through a verbal threat of physical violence. Confident that the Joads will not separate and that she has control over her inner and outer states, Ma Joad challenges Pa’s leadership claim.

In her response, Ma also eliminates the distinction between interior and exterior, as she presents a merit-based view of the family structure: ““Times when they’s food an’ a place to eat, then maybe you can use your stick.... But you ain’t a-doin’ your job, either a-thinkin’ or a-workin’. If you was, why, you could use your stick”” (370). With Ma’s “win” when other Joads considered family division, there was a shift in familial authority, and gender restrictions have disappeared: ““But you jus’ get you a stick now an’ you ain’t lickin’ no woman; you’re a-fightin’”” (370). Afterwards, Ma admits that she deliberately goaded Pa, assuring Tom that angering his father will provide motivation to act, thus reclaiming his power: ““Pa, he didn’t say nothing; but he’s mad now. He’ll show me now. He’s awright.”” (371). She overestimates Pa’s ability to adapt to changes

that migration has brought to his familial role, however. I argue that she believes that just because she has been able to reconcile her interior with how her familial role has changed during migration, she can help others to discover their changed roles, too. With her efforts to reconnect with an unemployed Pa Joad at a standstill, Ma Joad takes a different approach, focusing on her expansion of the family circle format to include non-Joads.

Extension of the Concept of “Family”

During migration, Ma Joad encounters many people who she classifies as outsiders because of their lack of belonging, whether it be to a family unit or to society in general. She also grapples with their view of her as a migrant as well as her own family’s view of her as an “outsider” because of her gender identity. Sometimes, Ma focuses so intensely on the Joads (and on social or institutional unfairness) that she initially does not see that *all migrants* are unified through experiencing poverty; in other words, the definition of “family” focuses on universal kinship—not solely a biologically-based grouping. As a result of this, the conscious separation of her paradoxical space threatens to erode, with her inner state almost manifesting itself in her outward performance. Steinbeck features this struggle as well as the trajectory of her rhetorical development during Ma Joad’s interaction with the Hooper camp’s store clerk.

Whereas Ma Joad can quickly understand the other Joads’s rhetorical style, she needs more time to ascertain the thought process of non-Joads. What she thinks will be a simple economic transaction (pay slip for groceries) becomes a verbal exchange driven by repetition, aggressive laughter, and commentary that the clerk uses to define himself as someone who has a higher social status than his customers have. As Ma Joad questions elevated prices, he repeats a stock explanation: that the increased cost also

reflects the fuel one would use to go elsewhere to shop. Ma Joad interprets this, though, as a reminder of the poverty that all migrants are experiencing, and the amusement in the clerk's voice implies that he is not in a similar situation. In other words, he seems to be finding humor in another's financial hardships. As she considers purchasing hamburger meat, he admits, "I ain't guaranteein' I'd eat her myself; but they's lots of stuff I wouldn't do" (393). Ma Joad interprets this as a personal slight, and her inner state almost shows in her outward performance: "Ma [looks] up at him fiercely for a moment" (393). However, "[she controls] her voice," which acknowledges that she must tolerate the clerk in order to purchase groceries (393). Also, she recognizes that such a task requires patience, endurance, and an even-keeled gender performance. Upon determining that the clerk's amused attitude actually masks his disdain for enforcing an opportunistic institutional more (the camp's price-gouging), satisfaction and sympathy inform Ma Joad's outward performance; she lowers her voice and smiles, knowing that she can now attempt to make an emotional connection with another outsider.

For her, though, emotional overwhelm complicates her attempts. Her struggle to maintain her paradoxical space difference returns, and she briefly considers transgressive behavior in order to articulate her frustration through violence. ("Ma moved menacingly toward him" [394].) Ma Joad's strength for analyzing a situation reemerges from the fog of her emotions and thoughts, though. Instead of being cornered by another's gaze, she questions the clerk in order to reflect the gazing, thus regaining control over her external self-expression. To learn the underlying truth in her current situation, Ma Joad uses Socratic questioning (starting with identification and ending with restating her

hypothesis) in order to ascertain the motivations behind the clerk's humor and repetitiveness:

“You own this here store?... Any reason you got to make fun? That help you any?.... Who owns this here store?.... An' they [the people who run Hooper Ranch] set the prices?.... Ever'body comes in talks like me, is mad?.... An' that's why you make fun?.... / Shames ya, don't it? Got to act flip, huh?” (394-395)

As she realizes through her systematic questioning that he did not develop the unfair institutional practice yet still must rigorously enforce it in order to maintain employment, her speaking becomes “gentle” (395). Ma Joad notes that one must tolerate this situation, declaring, “That's how it is” (395). In thanking her, the clerk communicates several emotions: gratitude that this particular financial transaction is complete without any physical violence, surprise that his employment was openly acknowledged, and curiosity about his customer—specifically, a person who society has labeled as an outsider (migrant) who is interested in a fellow outsider (whose poverty unites them).

Despite his initial rejection, the clerk finally accepts Ma Joad's curious pleasantness—and even though he opts to continue enforcing the company store's opportunistic price-gouging, she interprets a simple act of financial solidarity to constitute their shared membership in a larger community. Her accurate analysis of his conflicted working situation provokes him, and he becomes defensive; as the clerk continues to regard her with surprise, he rejects her efforts to bond with him. When asked how he started working in the company store, he answers with a maxim that he immediately modifies: “A fella got to eat.... A fella *got a right* to eat” (395, italics

mine). Ma Joad notices that the clerk couches his identification as a fellow economically disadvantaged person in his admission of universal rights (specifically, the right to avoid hunger). Although he has identified the universal right, he speaks in generalities about *who* has the right. She ignores his aggressive tone, choosing to focus on getting a clear self-identification of the clerk's outsider status; in turn, he ignores the attempt to have him declare himself as a "fella." Even though the financial transaction for groceries is completed, an appeal for comfort items begins, as Ma Joad notes that she needs sugar for the already-purchased coffee (a request that Tom has made [395]). In requesting it, though, she does not incorporate the subjunctive mood in her language. In this way, Steinbeck intimates how his main female protagonist is mindful of remaining in control of her outward performance. She is not wishing or demanding sugar, because she does not want to erode the goodwill and parity that she has achieved with the clerk: "[My family is] a-workin' out there. You let me have some sugar an' I'll bring the slip in later.... They got more'n a dime comin'. Gimme ten cents of sugar" [395]. However, he refuses to bend institutional regulations despite Ma Joad's use of logic and her implication of comradery. The clerk fears his employer's reprisal, and he returns to using repetition not only as a way of reinforcing the impossibility of Ma Joad's request but also admitting indirectly that he cannot commit to his self-definition as a social outsider. He says:

“I can’t do it.... That’s the rule. I can’t. I’d get in trouble. I’d get canned.... I can’t do it, ma’am. That’s the rule. No slip, no groceries. The manager, he talks about that all the time.⁶ No, I can’t do it. No, I can’t.” (Steinbeck 395)

His return to using repetitive, denying language also implies that he has stopped considering Ma Joad as a potential compatriot. I argue that he feels judged by someone who he (still) believes understands his predicament, even though his response might disappoint her. Therefore, this is the reason why he cannot look at her and occasionally gazes “pleadingly” (395).⁷

Despite achieving rhetorical power through her conversation with the company store clerk, at this moment in Steinbeck’s text, Ma Joad still values her individual family unit over the universal kinship that a shared poverty has created. The clerk realizes that by supplying the ten cents himself, he can satisfy Ma Joad’s needs for food and preservation of her family unit. At the same time, he can ensure his job security and avoid experiencing transgressive behavior (via physical violence or theft). Even though she declares the price inflation to be “the way it is,” she drops this philosophical approach

⁶ By mentioning how strictly the store’s manager enforces rules of financial transaction (along with referring earlier to those who inflate grocery prices), the clerk illustrates the intersection of spatiality and self-definition in *The Grapes of Wrath*. In “Geographies of Gender and Migration: Spatializing Social Difference,” Rachel Silvey notes that with each attempt to control migrant (or “outsider”) behavior, there is “... the question of who has the power to define a place as accessible to whom... and how the regulation of space reflects and reinforces the privileges and interests of some groups over others” (Silvey 70).

⁷ Daniel Worden is referring to a different character in *The Grapes of Wrath* with his observation that “[m]athematics allows the manager to ignore his compassion for the disenfranchised Okies” (Worden 132). However, I argue that Steinbeck uses the company clerk here to illustrate the same point: upon recognition of one’s outsider status, binary divisions can disappear, and analytical gatekeepers (such as the setting of prices) can be readjusted in consideration of human need.

once she remembers that her son has a specific preference for sugar in his coffee. Her desire to fulfill Tom's request is so overwhelming that she places the clerk in an awkward ethical position, not considering that he might refuse to act transgressively (by ignoring store regulations) just to satisfy her. This rhetorical imbalance shows that despite Ma Joad's experience and authority in crafting persuasive arguments, she does not provide a receptive audience for the clerk's financial sacrifice, failing to acknowledge it because she is so focused on providing for her biological family. The clerk's "relief" lies in his avoidance of job termination—not in his realization of belonging to a larger "family" (Steinbeck 396). Ma Joad does acknowledge this universal kinship, though, as she leaves the store with a parting declaration: "I'm learnin' one thing good.... If you're in trouble or hurt of need—go to poor people. They're the only ones that'll help—the only ones" (396). In mentioning poverty to the clerk, she recognizes their common belonging in a community identity. As her biological family disintegrates further, Ma Joad's definition of "family" will continue to morph into a structure based on universal kinship.

Morphing of the Structure of "Family"

Throughout Steinbeck's text, Ma Joad has harbored a strong belief in the format of "family," drawing upon it to shape her interactions with family members (as an outsider who advocates for wholeness) as well as non-Joads (as an advocate for their inclusion into a familial structure). This belief, though, has kept the Joads at the center of this iteration of family: the members were either staying together or including others. Ma Joad only starts to regard the family unit in an inversion of her understanding because of her final conversation with Tom Joad. Her son has gone into hiding after his revenge killing of the man responsible for Jim Casy's death. Knowing that he must become a

fugitive and leave his biological family to avoid creating trouble for them (e.g., police charges of harboring a criminal, camps evicting the Joads, and farms avoiding their employment as seasonal pickers), he tells Ma Joad of his decision to depart as well as his philosophical musings. While he has been hiding, his thoughts have turned to Casy's explanations of individual versus group identity. As he remembers, the preacher "'went out on the wilderness to find his own soul, an' he foun' he didn' have no soul that was his'n. Says he foun' he jus' got a little piece of a great big soul'" (440). Tom has realized that he agrees with what his friend discussed: the individual completeness that derives from group membership.

In particular, her son's newly realized belief mirrors how Ma Joad has valued an intact family unit: "'But I know now a fella ain't no good alone'" (440). Tom plans to advocate for fellow migrants who, through a prejudiced control by institutions such as the police and the farming industry, have become isolated from their group identity as members of a universal family. This worries his mother, who fears that representatives from those same institutions will silence him permanently—just like they did to Jim Casy. I argue, though, that despite her worries for his safety and her sorrow at another person leaving the Joad family, she exhibits a fully formed rhetorical ability to serve as a receptive audience for Tom because of her role as a maternal nurturer for the Joads. She admires Tom's decision to help fellow migrants realize that they already belong to an expanded concept of family created out of a widespread—yet unifying—poverty. The appeal of this view of a collective, egalitarian family is in its universality; although it is abstract in nature and still theoretical to Tom (who admits to Ma Joad that this

universality is “‘jus’ stuff [he’s] been thinkin’ about”), it represents an appealing self-maintenance that the Joads experienced in Weedpatch (442).⁸

In an effort to comfort his mother, he stresses how she will always be able to sense his presence in this expanded iteration of family, ending his description of universal kinship with a reassuring vision of the future:

“Then I’ll be all aroun’ in the dark. I’ll be ever’where—wherever you look.
Wherever they’s a fight so hungry people can eat, I’ll be there. Wherever they’s a
cop beatin’ up a guy, I’ll be there.... I’ll be in the way guys yell when they’re
mad an’—I’ll be in the way kids laugh when they’re hungry an’ they know
supper’s ready. An’ when our folks eat the stuff they raise an’ live in the houses
they build—why, I’ll be there.” (Steinbeck 442)

By asking “See?” when he finishes his explanation, Tom Joad is seeking dual confirmation. He wants to determine if Ma Joad has understood his explanation, and he also wants to find out if she has had similar visions of how familial structure eventually becomes inclusive and bountiful (442).

⁸ In “John Steinbeck on the Political Capabilities of Everyday Folk: Moms, Reds, and Ma Joad’s Revolt,” Cyrus Ernesto Zirakzadeh notes Weedpatch’s emphasis on equality and self-governing. He writes, “The camp is run democratically, with the families ruling themselves through a system of elections, committees, and assemblies” (Zirakzadeh 614). What prevents this place from being an idyllic destination for migrants, though, concerns its financial unfeasibility: it “owns neither fields nor farm machinery and therefore does not have the power to provide work and jobs for the rural poor” (614). Therefore, the Joad family does not stay.

With the final scene in *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck's portrayal of Ma Joad demonstrates that she understands Tom's visions about an expanded family unit.⁹ In this novel's conclusion, torrential rain has driven the remnants of the Joad family out of the boxcar camp; in looking for shelter, the Joads come upon a starving man who cannot keep down solid food. As Ma Joad considers the problem, she looks at her family members—with her gaze returning to Rose of Sharon, her elder daughter whose pregnancy, just days earlier, ended in stillbirth. Both women wordlessly recall that after the loss, Rose of Sharon began lactating. Although they never verbally articulate the plan to feed the starving man breast milk, the intensity of their shared eye contact intimates more than an acknowledgment of the very personal, physical act that the girl must perform to save a life: "Ma's eyes passed Rose of Sharon's eyes, and then came back to them. And the two women looked deep into each other" (Steinbeck 478). Ma Joad, now understanding Tom's hypothesis about how the concept of a unified family can extend to include everyone, hopes that others will recognize and support this iteration. So, staring suggests her hope that not only will Rose of Sharon agree to use her body to provide nourishment but also that her daughter is someone else who believes in the extension of the family unit. That Ma Joad's instruction is non-verbal as well as directed towards another woman suggests that Ma Joad's rhetorical strength extends to unspoken communication with another person who has shared experiences (e.g., pregnancy and

⁹ In "The Fully Matured Art: *The Grapes of Wrath*," Howard Levant notes how Ma Joad "acts out of love... that is not universalized until... the end of the novel (Levant 94). He argues, though, that her behavior derives from "love that is restricted to the family" (94). To me, she demonstrates love for non-Joads throughout Steinbeck's text (when she advocates for Jim Casy's inclusion in the family migration, with her interaction with the company store clerk, etc.). For most of the novel, her positive emotions follow a hierarchy—with her love for others being superseded by her love for her kinfolk.

lactation). When Rose of Sharon agrees to the unspoken question, Ma Joad praises her: “I knowed you would. I knowed!” (478). This approval is for her daughter’s selflessness as well as for the philosophical comfort that comes with a validation of Ma Joad’s belief in the principles behind the expanded construct of family.

Some interpret such validation as a failure on her part because of the disintegration of the biological family. For instance, in “Mutualism and Group Selection in *The Grapes of Wrath*,” Andy Smith likens Ma Joad’s belief system to a piece of weaving: as other Joad “desires... whittle away at her desire to knit [them] together,” she does not manage to keep the family intact, and her “efforts... unravel by the end of the novel” (Smith 44). However, to interpret the migrating biological family unit’s changes only through the lenses of poverty and itinerancy is restricting and negative. The ending of Steinbeck’s text shows how an inclusive union of family is actually positive. In other words, it shows how this figurative weaving (symbolizing family cohesion) continues with different thread (symbolizing the incorporation of people who are not biological relatives into the family unit). Literary characters such as Ma Joad demonstrate how in this transformation, the role of women focuses on demonstrating how to accept others’ differences while balancing one’s inner and outer states.

CHAPTER 3

HELGA CRANE'S STRUGGLES WITH THE DYNAMICS OF CONTROL IN *QUICKSAND*

Throughout *Quicksand* (1928), a novel with a title that implies sinking which only increases with movement, Helga Crane is always moving. From the novel's first scene, she rarely remains still—busying herself with fashion choices, interior design, interacting with others, and planning her next migration. Nella Larsen sets her text during the Great Migration, a historical period when black Americans left the rural South to live in urban areas of the Northeast, Midwest, and West.¹⁰ Helga's movement is not predicated solely on this specific migration, yet some literary criticism about *Quicksand* focuses on it. In "The Quicksands of the Self: Nella Larsen and Heinz Kohut," Barbara Johnson notes this emphasis, but she advocates for a different reading of Larsen's 1928 book:

[C]ritics often praise Larsen for her psychological sophistication but then go on to interpret the novel in social, economic, and political terms. Such readings illuminate many aspects of the novel but leave certain questions untouched. How,

¹⁰ In "The New Negro and the New South," Erin D. Chapman explains the appeal of urbanity: "The city provided the higher wages, community proximity, visibility, modern nightlife, and [a] plethora of political and social outlets through which African Americans became savvy, politically conscious, fashionable consumers" (Chapman 69). Pre-migration, Helga has been decorating her exterior space (her private room as well as her body), but the opportunity to participate in an expanded commodity culture becomes an unspoken advantage behind her multiple moves.

for example, can one account for the self-defeating or self-exhausting nature of Helga Crane's choices? (Johnson 254-255)

What Johnson regards as “self-defeating” and “self-exhausting,” I interpret as the protagonist's repeated attempts to reconcile her thoughts and feelings with her outward identity performance. In other words, despite her multiple migrations in search of belonging and happiness, Helga constantly experiences another kind of movement—between her inner and outer states. Johnson also notes this, stating that in *Quicksand*, “[t]he question of place thus intersects with a question of space, of personal space, of the inside and outside boundaries of the self” (253).

In the field of feminist geography, Gillian Rose has named and developed the theory of paradoxical space, the split that females experience between what they think and feel as opposed to what they show externally through their gender performances. She and others posit that regardless of geographical location or movement, *every* female constantly experiences that inner-outer difference. Rose writes, “The oscillation which [Ann] Snitow argues is inherent in feminism involves the occupation of two positions at once in its constant movement back and forth between them” (Rose 152). As all the female protagonists in my chosen texts migrate, there is also movement (be it tension, resolution, etc.) between their thoughts or feelings and their actions.

For Helga, paradoxical space determines her multiple migrations; she journeys from place to place in search of a balance to her inner-outer state relationship—specifically, so lasting happiness can exist, she wants exterior spaces to reflect her interior space. When this does not happen, she becomes a prisoner or an exile. Rose's theory predicts this outcome:

There is a desire for whatever is beyond the invisible but powerful limits to hegemonic imaginations. I imagine that this boundary between hegemonic subjectivity and what might lie beyond is what bruises many women, what many women batter themselves against in resistance. Women are not only imprisoned... as an object of knowledge, then, but also [they] exile themselves from the study.... (149-50)

I argue, though, that Helga fights back against imprisonment or exile through her attempts to control her outward performance via her fashion choices and interior design. To me, Jennifer Hyndman's terminology provides a more suitable description of Larsen's protagonist. In her analysis of Rose's work on paradoxical space, Hyndman writes: "Both prisoners and exiles are *individuals* and *outsiders*, highlighting the potentially *lonely* experience of paradoxical space" (Hyndman 202, italics mine). Even though her desire to belong to a place or a people persists throughout her multiple migrations, Helga's lack of control in attempting to make the exterior match her interior emphasizes the loneliness inherent in her paradoxical existence: she is a racialized, gendered woman who lives in a racist, sexist society. This situation, then, prompts her self-definition as an outsider, and she chooses to migrate.

In terms of Helga's individuality, the most visible markers are her racial identity (i.e., a biracial person who identifies as a black woman) as well as her desire for buying eye-catching household items and clothing. Through shopping, she attempts to shape her exterior state in a way that provides a peaceful template for her inner state to follow. At times, though, she achieves only momentary happiness through a purchase, and loneliness is the ultimate outcome. Regardless of her ever-changing geographical

location, she taps into the disparity between her inner and outer states in an attempt to form a lasting connection with someone (or a group of people). Her specific approach involves interacting with people as well as commodities: in order to gain value from others, she attempts to attach herself to them. In this way, this grasp provides Helga with enough momentary psychological strength to continue to function in environments that stereotype her gender and racial performances. When she fails to connect, though, her loneliness becomes solitude, as she starts isolating herself and considering migration.

Sensory information—particularly visual—shapes how Helga traverses the seemingly irreconcilable nature of paradoxical space. When she can approach an equilibrium between her inner and outer states via her choices in fashion and home accessories (i.e., participating in a commodity-based culture), she feels more in control of how she presents herself. In other words, Helga’s purchases allow her to shape the structure of her outer space (her living quarters as well as her physical body). In this way, she manages to control the divide between interior and exterior. So, despite the existence of social and institutional mores, she does not feel her outsider status as acutely because she retains control of her outward identity performance. However, maintaining this separation does not ultimately last, as the intensity of her senses lead to a loss of control over the inner-outer divide. When Helga cannot control the amount of sensory information she receives, this sometimes leads to sensory overwhelm. Because of this intensity, she becomes unable to process the sensations, leading to her feeling stereotyped.¹¹ Occasionally, the lack of control over her strong senses makes her feel so

¹¹ Among the topics that Shane Vogel explores in “The Sensuous Harlem Renaissance: Sexuality and Queer Culture” are types of racial stereotyping from that time period. One particular stereotype, primitivism, “associated African American culture with a fantasy

overwhelmed that she acts transgressively. Throughout *Quicksand*, Nella Larsen illustrates how her protagonist's relationship with paradoxical space changes due to sensory information differences—both in terms of perception (both of herself and by other people) and input (from the various spaces she inhabits and visits).

Maintaining Control

I argue that in *Quicksand*'s opening scene—an extended view of Helga alone in her private room at Naxos—exemplifies Jillian Rose's concept of paradoxical space. By encouraging her readers to begin an immediate character analysis, Larsen intimates that although a female character is at rest, a type of movement still exists due to the constant correlation of the character's inner thoughts and feelings with her external self-performance. In the privacy of her room, though, there is no audience to observe Helga as she plays identity roles. Here, she can focus on her inner state, relying on her senses to shape her environment and to bring her comfort and solitude. For example, Larsen stresses how Helga's room is "eerily quiet," but this lack of sound has not been haunting or isolating. Rather, the silence insulates, resulting in regeneration:

[T]hat was what [Helga] liked after her taxing day's work, after the hard classes, in which she gave willingly and unsparingly of herself with no apparent return. She loved this tranquility, this quiet, following the fret and strain of the long hours spent among fellow members of a carelessly unkind and gossiping faculty, following the strenuous rigidity of conduct required in this huge educational community of which she was an insignificant part. This was her rest, this

image of an Africa... [with an emphasis] not just on jungle imagery but on a panoply of sensation" (Vogel 275).

intentional isolation for a short while in the evening, this little time in her own attractive room with her own books. (Larsen 5)

To Helga, meaningless sound threatens to overwhelm her, so she retreats to her private room to recharge. Her initial eagerness to work at Naxos has become a tiresome routine of unrewarded instruction, unpleasant interactions with other teachers, and unenthusiastic participation in an educational system that “had grown into a machine... [that was a] refutation of the black man’s inefficiency” (8). She continues to think about the school’s shortcomings: “Ideas it rejected, and looked with open hostility on one and all who had the temerity to... ever so mildly express a disapproval. Enthusiasm, spontaneity, if not actually suppressed, were at least openly regretted as unladylike or ungentlemanly qualities” (8). Helga knows that she cannot completely withdraw from what many Naxos staff and supporters expect of her—not only as an educator but also as a black woman. Eventually she will have to emerge from her room, interacting with others once again. She finds this stressful, though, especially her spending time with colleagues who she regards as “unkind and gossiping” (5).

By isolating herself in her room at the end of the day, Helga is able to manufacture “a small oasis in a desert of darkness”—its soundlessness offers an opportunity to experience not only regeneration but also a representation of the natural world that she creates for herself, which Larsen emphasizes through her color-focused description of Helga’s material possessions (5). Although quiet and still, the oasis of the protagonist’s room also has an active quality to it. It is illuminated by “a single reading lamp” that stands in for the sun by “mak[ing] a pool of light” as it shines on “the blue Chinese carpet,” which is the room’s sea (5). Larsen foregrounds this portrayal by

recounting how Helga, before she sits down, has perused several books before choosing one to read. Moreover, “after her taxing day’s work,” Helga craves sustenance for her mind; her surroundings must be quiet and in her control in order for her to recharge successfully. Ingesting a book’s knowledge will provide her with energy for future thoughts and action (5).

As Larsen describes the room’s contents, she continues to incorporate visual imagery of the natural world. In this way, the author develops her portrayal of Helga as someone draws strength and regeneration from an environment that only *she* controls. The sun-like reading lamp shines on a nearby “brass bowl” of flowers as well as on her footstool, which is upholstered in “oriental silk” (5). Despite being two completely different materials—metal and fabric—both have the same visual effect of attracting one’s gaze. The brass bowl reflects the light cast upon it, and silk, while not as strictly reflective as glass or some metals, does have sheen. Therefore, in not being matte materials which absorb energy from the lamp in Helga’s room, the brass bowl and silk footstool seem practically to shine, similar to her choices in clothing.

Also, these two particular items transmit a specific energy for Helga that reflects not only her aesthetic sensibilities but her financial beliefs as well. In her introduction to *Quicksand*, Thadious Davis notes: “Distinctive furnishings and fabrics define...her values” (Davis xxiii). As proof, she cites how the narrator explains, “All her life Helga Crane had loved and longed for nice things” (Larsen 10). Davis believes that Helga’s desire for “[j]ewel colors, exotic patterns, rare fabrics, and antique objects all constitute her preference for beauty and comfort over utility and austerity and are markers...of her participation in a commodity culture” (Davis xxiii). Furthermore, the brass and silk

objects in Helga's room have the potential of energizing her every time that she looks at them.¹²

In particular, the brass bowl serves as a powerful visual image that foreshadows Helga's struggle with paradoxical space throughout *Quicksand*. The bowl's structure as well as its contents of "many-colored nasturtiums" reflect a dichotomy that also exists in her (Larsen 5). The contrast between a container made of solid material and the varied colors of its floral display represents the disparity between Helga's exterior (e.g., her confident self-performance) and her interior (specifically, the agitation of her thoughts and feelings). I argue, though, that she is able to find temporary comfort in materialism; through purchasing the nasturtium-filled brass bowl, she can possess a visual illusion of fertility and naturalness. With the item that symbolizes these two qualities occupying such a prominent space (on the table beside Helga's chair), one can contend that she has been purchased it with some thought given to its aesthetic allure. Like the flowers, Helga is beautiful—in both her physical features as well as the colorful "petals" of her clothes. However, like the floral display in her room, her outward performance is fabricated, for she continues to stay at Naxos despite her unsettled interior (e.g., antagonism towards

¹² In "Intimate Geography: The Body, Race, and Space in Larsen's *Quicksand*," Laura Tanner states that "Helga emerges representationally as a placeholder constituted by her physical surroundings and the garments she dons.... [W]ithout the furnishings she so carefully selects, she has no structure of solidity" (Tanner 187). I argue, however, that such an interpretation overlooks that she has a certain aesthetic sensibility that colorful objects satisfy. Also, its particular description (as Orientalist in style) underscores how the decor structures Helga's room, thus providing her with a suitable place to mediate and to revitalize herself. In the entry for Jean Toomer in the *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*, Aberjhani notes that in the mid-1920s, Nella Larsen studied Unitism (which "employed elements of yoga, Buddhism, Freudian psychoanalysis, and Hinduism") with him. This demonstrates that she was exposed to movements and practices that could have influenced her writing choices.

dissatisfied attitudes and those who deviate from the institutional interpretation of acceptable gender and racial performances). Her thinking about what annoys her at Naxos becomes an epiphany that she must leave this place: “The South. Naxos. Negro education. Suddenly she hated them all. Strange, too, for this was the thing which she had ardently desired to share in” (7). *Quicksand*’s protagonist appears thriving and vital to those who focus only on her external self-performance; she is intent on achieving an exterior-interior balance, though, and she believes that this will not be possible at Naxos.

When her protagonist migrates to Chicago, Nella Larsen explores another moment when Helga maintains control despite acutely feeling a difference in her paradoxical space. Once she reaches her rented room, Helga feels safe and self-assured again—Larsen emphasizes this change in her character’s state through the resumed use of natural imagery. The street below Helga’s room is “swarming with people”; like a colony of ants, these people are “merging into little eddies and disengaging themselves to pursue their own individual ways” (33). The height of her rented room mirrors the higher aesthetic level that she believes she has cultivated through her participation in a commodity-driven culture.

The latest instance of rejection by her biological family motivates Helga to consider other ways in which she can explore (and possibly establish) a connection with others. Though she sought the opportunity to isolate herself from others when she was at Naxos, she now finds herself “drawn by an uncontrollable desire to mingle with the crowd” (33). Instead of seeing individuals or distinct groups of people in the pedestrian masses, however, Helga views them as “dark molds of flesh” (33). With this description of the passersby as initially indeterminate, Larsen (via *Quicksand*’s narrator) removes the

potential for them to be harmful or disruptive—which, I argue, is a behavioral prerequisite for the protagonist whenever she considers attaching herself to a person or a group of people. She does not consider that some of these people might accost her—indeed, she has already experienced unwanted advances just hours after her arrival in Chicago.¹³ Noting this, one would understand if she regarded others with suspicion. However, she is eager to investigate: “Helga caught herself wondering who they were, what they did, and of what they thought... Did they really think at all?” (Larsen 33). Rejected by her biological family for her innate transgressive nature, Helga attempts to reconcile her paradoxical space difference, noting her individuality against the mass of the Chicago crowd. Instead of blending in with people, Helga questions their humanity, gaining self-confidence in creating her outward performance (via her colorful clothing).

In the final chapters of Larsen’s text, such an emphasis on Helga’s control over her external self-presentation changes, though, when she returns to the South. Once in Alabama, she realizes that by marrying Rev. Mr. Pleasant Green, she has unknowingly agreed to a gender-based definition of herself. Larsen writes that “as the wife of the preacher, [Helga] was a person of relative importance. Only relative” (119).

Quicksand’s protagonist is in a similar position as when she was last down South. In Naxos, there were social and institutional (education-based) expectations for her gender performance; back in the South again, the institution differs (religion-based), but the

¹³ *Quicksand*’s narrator notes, “Here a man, well groomed and pleasant-spoken, accosted her” (33). In her article entitled “‘My Picture of You Is, After All, the True Helga Crane’: Portraiture and Identity in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*,” Pamela Barnett makes a connection between this implied sexual proposition and Helga’s refusal of a marriage proposal (later in the novel): “She does not entertain indecent suggestions because she does not have to. She is not a slave; she is not an object. She can make her own sexual choices by choosing not to respond to certain sexual offers” (Barnett 589).

expectation is the same: Helga has to be the “right kind” of person—here, the wife of a preacher. Specifically, she has to perform her gender in an accepted manner.

With marriage and her move to Alabama, Helga acknowledges the opportunity to have a post-commodity-driven life: “Helga did not hate him, the town, or the people. No. Not for a long time. As always, at first the novelty of the thing, the change, fascinated her” (119). Because she is not living in a commodity-based culture anymore, “she had her religion, which in her new status as a preacher’s wife had of necessity become real to her” (119). To Helga, religion has a numbing effect that she welcomes: “[I]t has brought this other thing, this anesthetic satisfaction to her senses” (119). Also, through a quasi-religious structuring, she views her current existence as a reconsideration of the difference between her inner and outer states. She equates her past unsuccessful attempts in appealing to others as well as herself with failure, and she conflates compensation with penance. Helga thinks that “[s]he had compensated for all previous humiliations and disappointments” (119). I argue that she is attempting to revise her history; by deciding that she has to make up for a less-than-idyllic childhood, being viewed by family as innately transgressive because she is biracial, and not finding happiness in a commodity-based life, this will make her “glad” and able to “put the unwelcome memory from her with the thought: ‘This time I know I’m right. This time it will last’” (119). Out of habit, she still wants to maintain control—but now, she is fully immersed in a religious environment that stresses surrender.

Losing Control

Sometimes in *Quicksand*, Helga starts to have intense sensory perceptions, which causes her to lose control of the divide between her inner and outer states. This also

results in confrontation: she recognizes how her existence is at odds with society's racism and sexism. An early instance in Larsen's text of this loss of control involves Helga's migration to Chicago. During her first day there, she is reminded of the social expectations of her gender performance—and that for her, this is always going to be connected to her racial performance.¹⁴ In a brief conversation with *Quicksand's* protagonist, Mrs. Nilssen focuses on the social more of marriage: the union validates a person's existence and, therefore, socially sanctions a person's gender performance. To her, because Helga's mother was not married, Helga is illegitimate; therefore, because of the lack of marriage's sanctioning power, Mrs. Nilssen explains that she and Helga cannot be possibly related.

To reinforce her view that an acceptable gender performance must also be one that society permits, Mrs. Nilssen cites kinship definitions (including her own marriage credentials) in rejecting Helga as a family member. In an "agitated" voice, she implores, "And please remember that my husband is not your uncle. No indeed! Why, that, that would make me your aunt! He's not—" (31). Couched in Mrs. Nilssen's definitional explanation of familial ties are not only suggestions of a prejudiced attitude—but also the corresponding judgment that social recognition of this might bring.¹⁵ By quickly

¹⁴ In her explanation of intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw notes that because multiple characteristics inform identity, people cannot solely exist based on a single characteristic. So, one cannot deconstruct Helga Crane by selecting a single characteristic (her gender or her race) and defining her via that choice. She is not just female nor just a biracial person—she is a biracial female. However, she has no control of her encounter with her uncle's wife, Mrs. Nilssen.

¹⁵ In "The Gold Standard of Racial Identity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*," Anthony Dawahare emphasizes Helga's racial identity and the inherent social maneuverability it brings: "Indeed, passing for white, Larsen suggests, allows the light-skinned mulatta to circulate like money" (Dawahare 25). I argue, however, that as

declaring Helga's illegitimacy as well as having an "agitated" voice when she insists on the impossibility of Helga's kinship due to a lack of blood connection, Mrs. Nilssen is conflating the gender and race of *Quicksand's* protagonist in an effort to belong to an excluding, sanctioning social group: white people who are also married. Because of her biological family's distaste in having a family member who identifies as a black person, Helga's self-definition becomes negative, for she views herself someone as who is unacceptable to her family—and, therefore, to society.¹⁶

In attempting again to receive financial support in Chicago (with the hopes of regaining control over her inner and outer states), Helga shapes her gender performance to gain institutionally-based approval. Whereas her outward performance at Naxos is geared toward the institution of education, she performs in Chicago for the institution of religion. However, instead of exercising a religious concept of faith (in kindness, generosity, and humanitarianism), Helga uses economics and strategy in her approach to faith. She hopes that her visual representation (i.e., her colorful clothing and attractive physical appearance) will appeal to someone, who will "speak to her, invite her to return, or inquire kindly if she was a stranger in the city" (Larsen 37). She attends "the very fashionable, very high services" in a prominent AME church, which seems promising because of what she interprets as an emphasis on external attractiveness. So, this particular place enables Helga to enjoy giving a gender performance that is institutionally expected as well as personally comfortable. However, Helga's attempt to trust others

Larsen illustrates in Helga's encounter in Chicago with her aunt, racial identity does not equate to universal social acceptance.

¹⁶ Thadious Davis traces Helga's feelings of lack back to her youth; she has "a destructive nostalgia for a childhood she did not have" (Davis 262).

who happen to be religious does not work here—no one offers to help her. As a result, she winds up “distrusting religion more than ever” (37).

Although *Quicksand*'s protagonist uses honesty in examining the division between the inner and outer states of her paradoxical space, Larsen explores this tension through describing Helga's point of view as well as giving the reader insight into Helga's failure to fit in at the church. To churchgoers, Helga's inside state is evident through her fashion choices, but she is unaware of this: “She was herself unconscious of that faint hint of offishness which hung about her and repelled advances, an arrogance that stirred in people a peculiar imitation” (37). As a result, “[t]hey noticed her, admired her clothes, but that was all” (37). Larsen informs *Quicksand*'s readers, though, of the formative source of her protagonist's “arrogance”: it is a coping mechanism that Helga developed in her youth as a way of counteracting her “acute persistiveness” (37). I argue that the author provides this insight so one can see that her protagonist's yearning for control has always existed. Helga's lack of self-awareness does not excuse manipulative behavior, but it instead explains why she sometimes resorts to manipulation and other negative behaviors whenever she feels lonely or unable to control, especially when around people with whom she identifies.

As with other moments when her protagonist shows her awareness of her current environment or decides to leave it, Larsen uses sensory imagery in *Quicksand* to emphasize the recognition of maintaining control (or deciding to migrate in order to regain it). For instance, when Helga decides to migrate to Harlem, her sense of sight is emphasized—specifically, her notice of color and opalescence:

She felt reborn. She began happily to paint the future in vivid colors. The world had changed to silver, and life ceased to be a struggle and became a gay adventure. Even the advertisements in the shop windows seemed to shine with radiance. (39)

Despite her initial disappointments after arriving in Chicago, she had felt biologically compelled to claim this city as her home because it was her birthplace. Therefore, migrating to another place releases Helga from that object-based position of “being born” somewhere—now, she can figuratively give birth to herself, with the first part in this process being the choice of her “birthplace.” Larsen indicates this perspective shift through describing her character as an artist who “began happily to paint the future in vivid colors” (39). At this point in *Quicksand*, Helga is no longer solely relying on receiving and interpreting sensory information, and she momentarily creates herself—in other words, she shows a willingness to rewrite her history. To her, she has experienced rejection and judgment all during her time in Chicago, and by taking the opportunity to leave, she believes that “life [will cease] to be a struggle” for her (39).

Although Helga fails to find lasting happiness and belonging in Harlem (due to her inability to maintain control over her paradoxical space), she continues her quest by migrating to Copenhagen. I argue that she believes that her continued loss of control involves her living in a racist, sexist society that does not value how she performs her gender and race; therefore, she chooses to live in a place that does value her and where she can again pursue a struggle-free life. Once in Copenhagen, she finds herself in a familiar position—as a participant within a commodity culture. Indeed, her aunt and uncle encourage her penchant for fine clothes and social events, for Fru and Herr Dahl

have a plan for their niece: to use people's curiosity about their biracial relative as an opportunity to climb the Danish social ladder. The apex of this deceptive plan involves the orchestrated meeting of Helga and Axel Olsen, an artist who will paint her portrait and, hopefully, marry her. In plying Helga with increasingly more colorful and skimpy outfits, though, they (including Axel) are stereotyping her as a representative African woman who must find such clothing appealing. They are also expecting Helga to wear these clothes in order to perform her gender in a stereotypical way—and for the benefit of their advancement in Danish society.

Helga's entrancement ends, though, when she is awakened with a visual so intense in its racial stereotyping that she loses control of the separation of interior and exterior, forcing her to recognize that, despite leaving America, she still lives in a racist society. She figuratively awakens with a reminder that her inner and outer states are less reconciled than ever. She is part of a group attending a performance at a Danish vaudeville house, and as all are about to leave, two black performers start dancing exaggeratedly. The audience loves this routine, but "Helga Crane was not amused. Instead she was filled with a fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage. She felt shamed, betrayed as if these pale pink and white people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget" (85). In a sense, in looking at the two black people on stage, Helga is aware of being objectified—before seeing them, she has been willing to include stereotypes in her personal performances in Copenhagen. This sight breaks Helga out of her trance, enabling her to regard how readily those around her accepted and enjoyed the

performance of stereotype. (For example, “she was shocked at the avidity with which Olsen beside her drank it in” [85].)

In confronting her disillusionment, Helga analyzes how her lack of control over her paradoxical space provides others with a means to manipulate her. Through *Quicksand*'s narrator, Larsen delineates her protagonist's problem-solving:

But later, when [Helga] was alone, it became quite clear to her that all along they had divined its presence, had known that in her was something, some characteristic, different from any that they themselves possessed. Else why had they decked her out as they had? Why subtly indicated that she was different?
(85)

Here, Helga notes the loss of control that she has in Copenhagen over her external self-presentation, but she also acknowledges the primitivism from her aunt and uncle. She considers how even those in Copenhagen who have known her for years could support such stereotyping: “And [her aunt and uncle] hadn't despised it. No, they had admired it, rated it as a precious thing, a thing to be enhanced, preserved. Why? She, Helga Crane, didn't admire it” (85). To her, their insensitivity is surpassed by her realization that people to whom she wanted to attach herself) are seemingly oblivious to her pain. Although the outfits she wears in Copenhagen allow her to continue valuing them because of their color and expense, she now realizes how she has been objectified—she has worn what clothing was provided, not what she has chosen herself. This loss of control becomes more overwhelming when she realizes that instead of people considering her as someone who could belong, their concern is with her external performance. In other words, they consider her to be an *outsider* who entertains them.

The lack of reconciliation in Helga's paradoxical space continues throughout *Quicksand*, as she remains an outsider even after her final migration. Although much about her lifestyle has changed, and Helga has seemingly renounced objects, she resists distinguishing herself as having more than "relative importance" as a preacher's wife (120). Early in her migration to Alabama, she attempts "to do much good for her husband's parishioners," intending "to subdue the cleanly scrubbed ugliness of her own surroundings to soft inoffensive beauty, and to help the other women to do likewise" (120). Undergirding her attempts to beautify, though, is the attempt to retain control: her expected gender performance does not match what she still feels on the inside—an appreciation for aesthetic taste. Indeed, Helga's actions are transgressive to the parishioners, for they interpret her efforts as classist and judgmental. Because she is married to their religious leader, the churchwomen respond to her suggestions "with smiling agreement and good-natured promises" (120). Just as Helga was unaware in the Chicago AME church of how others viewed her gender performance, she finds herself in a similar position in her husband's Southern congregation. The churchwomen judge Helga for her domestic failures. Through their hypocritical responses, Larsen illustrates that paradoxical space differences happen for *all* women; they perform their gender as churchwomen who agree with the preacher's wife, but inside, they are amused and mad at "dat uppity meddlin' No'the'nah" (120).

Becoming Overwhelmed

After Helga decides to leave Naxos, Larsen emphasizes her protagonist's senses in order to stress her desire to reconcile the difference between her inner and outer spaces. Helga sits in her room after deciding to migrate:

Somewhere in the room a little clock ticked time away. Somewhere outside, a whippoorwill wailed. Evening died. A sweet smell of early Southern flowers rushed in on a newly-risen breeze which suddenly parted the thick silk curtains at the opened windows. A slender, frail glass vase fell from the sill with a tingling crash, but Helga Crane did not shift her position. And the night grew cooler, and older. (7)

All around Helga are signs marking the passage of time, the presence of the natural world, and the presence of elemental forces (such as gravity). They represent aspects that are everlasting by design and that she cannot control; therefore, they serve as sources of stability on which she can rely in her struggle to reconcile her paradoxical space imbalance. However, while observing her present environment, Helga is continually indulging her desire for colorful, shiny clothing and objects. Helga wants to belong to a community in which she can exist reconciled; whenever an excess of sensory information overwhelms her search for belonging, though, she becomes figuratively paralyzed, and her search comes to a temporary halt. Although the world around her is in motion, she remains still—thereby reflecting a momentary hiatus in her efforts to attach herself to a person or a group of people.

The sensory overwhelm that leads Helga to act transgressively (deciding to leave Naxos) also compels her to confront her discontentment not only with prescriptive institutional expectations of racial performance but also an expectation that her external self-performance will provide relief. For her colleagues, they need a distraction from the intense social-racial ideal that has been communicated at this school: that they must be the “right kind” of black people. For example, upon learning that she is leaving, her

closest friend at the school admits, ““We need a few decorations to brighten our sad lives”” (18). This comment indicates that others at Naxos objectify Helga, viewing her through the lenses of ornamentation and commodification. In a way, the role that she plays in the lives of others is similar to the description of the objects that fill her room: she is aesthetically pleasing. To her colleague’s “compliment,” Helga has a nonplussed reaction: “[She] was unmoved. She was no longer concerned with what anyone in Naxos might think of her, for she was now in love with the piquancy of leaving” (18). That she describes her migration in terms of its appetizing appeal shows how much she has been bombarded with sensory information; her description of that decision as “piquant” is fitting, as one notes that all of her senses were being activated in her private space.

In choosing to leave Naxos, Helga eschews social mores about marriage as well as the institutional mores of blacks-only education so that she can be more self-authentic in her gender and racial performances. Despite her engagement to James Vayle, she still plans to leave Naxos before she is trapped in a socially expected gender performance: as the wife of someone deemed to be an appropriate example of a black man. Similarly, even though she finds Naxos’s headmaster, Dr. Anderson, physically attractive, that emotional connection is not enough for her to stay. She decides to travel to Chicago to see her maternal uncle, who she believes will be “more likely to help her because her need would strengthen his oft-repeated conviction that because of her Negro blood she would never amount to anything, than from motives of affection or loving memory” (10). So, before even leaving the institutionally intense environment of Naxos, Larsen’s protagonist is knowingly entering the socially aggressive environment of Chicago where,

because others regard her racial identity as a prophesy of failure, her outside performances are going to be already prejudged.

Helga's first day in Chicago provides another example of how the intensity of her sensory perceptions, combined with her contemplation of how others have not acknowledged her paradoxical existence (as a racialized, gendered person in a racist, sexist society), result in a complete loss of control over her paradoxical space. Still in a vulnerable state, Helga's lack of sensory control grows, becoming sensory overwhelm when she rides the El. In shock from being renounced by her aunt, Helga sits "in the rushing swiftness of a roaring elevated train" (32). Much like her senses and emotions are in disarray, so too are Helga's thoughts:

It was as if all the bogies and goblins that had beset her unloved, unloving, and unhappy childhood had come to life with tenfold power to hurt and frighten. For the wound was deeper in that her long freedom from their presence had rendered her the more vulnerable. (32)

When she is speeding along, Helga is unable to shape this environment into a place like her private room in Naxos (one that soothes and is controllable). As a result, she becomes overwhelmed and haunted by all of the information she is getting from her senses. Larsen underscores how the El's uncontrollable motion combines with Helga's already negative mindset, thus creating an overwhelming pessimistic mood: *rushing, roaring, numb, unloved, unloving, unhappy, stinging, and obscene*. The contrast between this environment and the one created in Helga's room at Naxos explains the difference in Helga's emotional and mental state when she maintains control and when she is overwhelmed with sensory information. Because she identifies as a black person, she has

been *acted upon* by members of her biological family as well as by Naxos staff and supporters. Helga has a penchant to outfit her personal space (both living quarters and physical body) in colors, fabrics, and accessories which showcase her aesthetic style and allow her to participate in self-definition.

Upon her migration to Harlem, Helga notes the lack of expressed expectation in adhering to social mores, and she finds ample opportunity to exercise her aesthetic taste without feeling that she *must* use it to shape her outward performance (as she did in Naxos). So, she surrounds herself with antique furniture, beautiful clothes, and a busy social life. After about a couple of years, though, the materialism that had once enchanted her becomes lacking. Here, in “teeming” Harlem, her colorful aesthetic taste is part of a whole—she does not stand out anymore (50). Not even “the signs of spring”—the sights, sounds, and smells that she once found appealing—can faze her (50). *Quicksand*’s narrator details how Helga’s loss of pleasure in a commodity-based life directly impacts her gender performance:

She began to lose confidence in the fullness of her life, the glow began to fade from her conception of it. As the days multiplied, her need of something, something vaguely familiar, but which she could not put a name to and hold for definite examination, became almost intolerable.... She became a little frightened, and then shocked to discover that, for some unknown reason, it was of herself she was afraid. (50)

This passage illustrates the progressing disconnect in Helga’s paradoxical space. Upon her migration to Harlem, she feels in control of moving between her inner and outer states; she is comfortable with incoming sensory information because it is primarily

visually based (due to her commodity-based lifestyle). As Helga loses interest in maintaining her aesthetic taste, she also begins to become overwhelmed by other senses—particularly, sound and scent.

As this continues, Helga continues to disengage from the social wholeness that Harlem has provided and unconsciously retreat to a state of being that is familiar to her—being apart again. Larsen writes:

Without awareness on her part, Helga Crane began to draw away from those contacts which had so delighted her. More and more she made lonely excursions to places outside of Harlem.... A sensation of estrangement and isolation encompassed her. As the days became hotter and the streets more swarming, a kind of repulsion came upon her. She recoiled in aversion from the sight of the grinning faces and from the sound of the easy laughter of all these people who strolled, aimlessly now, it seemed, up and down the avenues. Not only did the crowds of nameless folk on the street annoy her, she began also actually to dislike her friends. (50)

Swarming people did not annoy her in Chicago; instead, she watched that specific movement with curiosity. Now, the swarming repulses Helga because it is a sustained movement that also increases in frequency. In other words, she is not in control of this motion, and it threatens to overwhelm her. With that increased knowledge of others via friendship comes an increased awareness of what they say and experience. Now, though, for Helga, that awareness has become annoyance, and she is surprised by this transformation. I argue, though, that her sensory overwhelm at the swarming Harlem crowds foreshadows this discomfort.

After she decides to migrate to Copenhagen, she experiences the most intense sensory overload thus far in her life. In joining others who are going out after a dinner party, she notes how her senses are starting to become overwhelmed: “The night was far from quiet, the streets far from empty.... [In the club,] [i]t was gay, grotesque, and a little weird” (60). Helga feels that she has already mentally left Harlem. Now that she has chosen to migrate, she is momentarily no longer focused on maintaining control. Instead, she becomes caught up in how the dancing is “like whirling leaves, to a sudden streaming rhythm” (61). This disorients her, and “[f]or a moment everything seemed to be spinning around, even she felt that she was circling aimlessly” (60). However, “[i]n a little moment she grew accustomed to the smoke and din” (61). An overabundance of sensory information turns Helga’s fascination with details into a numbness that she classifies as a sign of immaturity: “For a while Helga was oblivious of the reek of flesh, smoke, and alcohol, oblivious of the oblivion of other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all” (61). In her high-rise room in Chicago, when she observes a mass of people, she is initially apart from them. Here in a Harlem jazz club, though, Helga is immediately part of the “swirling mass,” and she starts becoming overwhelmed, fascinated by the dancers’ skin tones and movement: “For the hundredth time she marveled at the gradations within this oppressed race of hers. A dozen shades slid by” (61).¹⁷

As Helga’s sensory overwhelm continues, its intensity transforms her lack of control of her outward performance. Even though “[t]he essence of life seemed bodily

¹⁷ Thadious Davis writes, “Larsen’s consciousness of skin color, though never free from negative connotations, led her to become one of the more accurate recorders of the many different hues visible in African-American people” (Davis 62).

motion,” Helga’s critical regard turns to the threat of her complete loss of agency to incapacitating, violent sensations: “[s]he was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra” (Larsen 61). She finds that losing control is hypnotic and difficult to resist, but “when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effect” (61). Now that she was free, “[Helga] hardened her determination to get away” from the tempting racial sameness *and* variety that she has discovered (61). The sensory overwhelm that she has experienced in the Harlem jazz club reinforces her decision to migrate to Copenhagen.

Sensory overwhelm implies a loss of control, and in moments of transgression, Helga interprets this as an appealing freedom. For example, in Copenhagen, she considers the vaudeville house performance of a duo of black dancers. Although she identifies as a black person, she eschews a singular self-identification: “She didn’t, in spite of her racial markings, belong to those dark segregated people. She was different. She felt it. It wasn’t merely a matter of color. It was something broader, deeper, that made folk kin” (58). Helga has decided to return to Harlem, and as part of embracing her future destination, she rejects her current location— “And now she was free” (58). Her decision to move activates a resurgence of color imagery: “She had been only eight, yet she had enjoyed the interest and the admiration which her unfamiliar color and dark curly hair, strange to those pink, white, and gold people, had evoked” (58). Moreover, “[t]o Helga it seemed that [her remaining in Copenhagen] would have been the solution to all their problems, her mother’s, her stepfather’s, her own” (58). So, her thoughts from her

time in Chicago continue to persist: she still sees herself in a pathological way, viewing the unresolved difference in her paradoxical space as problematic.

I argue, however, that Helga ceases to regard the divide between interior and exterior as *her* problem; with others in Copenhagen viewing her through a lens of primitivism, she continues to experience (through sensory overwhelm) the loss of control over that divide. In his book entitled *Evolution and "The Sex Problem": American Narratives During the Eclipse of Darwinism*, Bert Bender describes how the specific sensory imagery that one finds in the Copenhagen section of *Quicksand*—specifically, the colorful variety of Helga's wardrobe—casts Helga in an identity role that is not of her choosing. Once again, this character loses control of her outward self-expression.

Bender writes:

She soon realizes that "her exact status in her new environment" is that of "a peacock," and Larsen underscores her Darwinian point by noting how Helga is overwhelmed with new clothes that had been selected by her artist suitor: garments "which mingled indigo, orange, green, vermillion...blood-red, sulphur-yellow, sea-green," some with ornamental "great scarlet and lemon flowers," including "a leopard-skin coat." (Bender 269)

This realization leads her to reject Axel Olsen's marriage proposal; Bender states that she does this "after sensing that her origin has aroused 'some impulse of racial antagonism' in him" (269). The suddenness of Helga's awareness of his prejudice stuns her: "...[W]here before she would have been pleased and proud at Olsen's proposal, she was now truly surprised.... She was too amazed to discover suddenly how intensely she disliked him. And for some inexplicable reason she was a little frightened and

embarrassed” (Larsen 85). While in Copenhagen, she has been stereotypically prejudged, and by rejecting the marriage proposal, she has reached her emotional tipping point and wants to end the stereotyping. Helga worries, though, about her refusal, which she recognizes is socially transgressive:

Abruptly she was aware that in the end, in some way, she would pay for this hour.

A quick brief fear ran through her, leaving in its wake a sense of impending calamity. She wondered if for this she would pay all that she’d had. (89)

In extracting herself from an unacceptable social situation and attempting to regain control over her life, she fears that negative ramifications will result.

Before Helga can regain complete control, though, she realizes why her inner and outer spaces are disconnected. This realization only happens due to her senses being overwhelmed through a particular musical performance. While in Copenhagen, she attends a concert that features Antonin Dvořák’s *New World Symphony*. Its first movement employs music from other cultures as motifs; indeed, it features entire passages of recognizable songs, such as “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” a black American spiritual. As the notes of Dvořák’s symphony resonate in the concert hall, she considers her black father, and her thoughts culminate with her recognition of his racial identity: “She understood his yearning, his intolerable need for the inexhaustible humor and the incessant hope of his own kind, his need for those things, not material” (94). She also declares that she, Helga Crane, who had once declared she had no home, is “homesick, not for America, but for Negroes” (94). With her aural sense being overstimulated by strains of spiritual music within the symphonic work, she experiences sensory overwhelm. As Helga’s thoughts turn to her father and other black people, she plans to

regain control of her inner state by migrating to Harlem—a place where she can again attempt to belong to someone or something. She behaves transgressively when she turns down Axel Olsen’s marriage proposal and leaves her Danish relatives; however, I argue that by the severing of existing (and future) ties to Copenhagen, this specific transgression allows her to restore control of her inner state via migration.

However, this causal relationship between sensory integration and migration is not long-lasting: once again in Harlem, Helga continues to experience sensory overwhelm. After attending the wedding of her old friend Anne Grey to Dr. Andersen, Helga’s former boss and the focus of her continued infatuation, she later encounters him—in a private room, he kisses her, but she slaps him in response. In the past, she would have welcomed such an amorous advance from him, but the breaking of social mores about marriage (namely, fidelity) is not the primary reason why Helga is upset. As someone who has been kissed, she is not in control of the possible consequences; her future social acceptance depends on Dr. Andersen’s silence (and, if she is aware of her husband’s transgression, Anne’s discretion). In slapping Dr. Andersen, not only does Helga act in a socially transgressive manner. She is also protesting her loss of control over her own body, showing how her senses have become overwhelmed by his touch as well as the purposeful lack of sight that is implied by taking her to a private room.

So powerful is this particular instance of sensory overwhelm that it figuratively entrances Helga; she wanders into a neighborhood revival, and the charisma in this church meeting further activates all of her senses. While in this state of psychic rawness, she experiences a religious conversion, which leaves her so physically and emotionally exhausted that someone attending the revival (Rev. Green) must help her walk back to

her apartment. Once there, she notes that the results of her outside performances follow a pattern: "...[H]appiness and serenity always faded just as they had shaped themselves. And slowly bitterness crept into her soul. Because, she thought, all I've ever had in life has been things.... Things, she realized, hadn't been, weren't, enough for her" (117). This loss of interest in a commodity-driven life does not mean Helga wants to stop her quest to obtain happiness. Her "lure" now is her sexuality and biracialism—this makes her exotic and attractive without colorful clothing. For now, though, Helga does not think that this alone will be successful: "She'd have to have something else besides." (117). She intimates that in order to become happy, she must adopt behavior that challenges her, but she is not completely certain that she can do this. Alone in her hotel room, she "questioned her ability to return, to bear, this happiness at such cost as she must pay for it. There was, she knew, no getting round that.... Was it worth the risk? Could she take it? Was she able? Though what did it matter—now?" (117). Because her slapping of Dr. Anderson makes it socially risky to remain by herself, Helga decides to marry. Although marriage is socially approved, it is personally transgressive for her.

Despite Helga's misgivings, she decides that becoming someone's wife is an identity change that she needs to pursue—not for its social acceptability but because of the possibility of reconciling her paradoxical space difference. By marrying Rev. Green, she will attach herself to someone else—and, in relation, to a group of people (his congregation). Helga hopes that achieving this belonging will lessen the divide between her emotions or thoughts and her actions. The narrator of *Quicksand* notes, "And all the while she knew in one small corner of her mind that such thinking was useless. She had made her decision. Her resolution. It was a chance at stability, at permanent happiness,

that she meant to take. She had let so many other things, other chances, escape her” (117). I argue that Helga’s frustration has guided her thought process, leading her to determine that the only route to fulfillment relies on her marriage. However, Helga still values visual appeal; for this latest attempt at belonging and happiness, she employs a combination of sexuality with an appeal that religion holds for her selected husband. In other words, Helga believes that incorporating God into her aesthetic taste will render her successful: “He [God] would perhaps make it come out all right.... [S]he clutched the hope, the desire to believe that now at last she had found some One, some Power, who was interested in her. Would help her” (118).

The self-imposed pressure to become a wife exacerbates her paradoxical space difference, as her inner state’s uncertainty threatens to overwhelm her gender performance. *Quicksand*’s narrator notes, “The need to hurry suddenly obsessed her.... And she meant, if she could arrange it, to be married today.... For the thought came to her that she might fail. Might not be able to confront the situation. That would be too dreadful. But she became calm again” (118). Helga becomes calm, though, as she decides to approach achieving her future relationship with strategy. As a final component of her visual approach, she incorporates emotional manipulation: “How could he, a naïve creature like that, hold out against her? If she pretended to distress? To fear? To remorse? He couldn’t. It would be useless for him even to try” (118). The combination of physical persuasion and religious connection evokes confidence in Helga that she will marry Rev. Green. With his migration back to his congregation in Alabama, Helga is now in a socially expected position to accompany him; she does not mind leaving, either:

“With him she willingly, even eagerly, left the sins and temptations of New York behind her” (119).

What she does mind, though, is a return to objectification—especially if it results in a loss of control for an indeterminate period of time. Bedridden after her latest childbirth, Helga is slowly recovering, and between moments of sleep, she rues her acceptance of religion. She becomes aware that she has been objectified by believers, who have created an overarching system of surrender. *Quicksand*'s narrator describes Helga's disgust:

The cruel, unrelieved suffering had beaten down her protective wall of artificial faith in the infinite wisdom, in the mercy, of God. For had she not called in her agony on Him? And He had not heard. Why? Because, she knew now. He wasn't there. Didn't exist.” (131)

To me, because she has been so accustomed to accessing financial assistance and to living in a commodity-based world (where the exchange of goods and services for money is a quick transaction), she has assumed that such rapid problem-solving will continue. When that rapidity does not happen, coupled with the physical pain that her expected gender performance is causing, she renounces Christianity. In an attempt to regain emotional and psychological strength, she asks her nurse if she can read one of the books in her room. In this way, Larsen bookends *Quicksand*—in the text's beginning, Helga is in her private room at Naxos, selecting reading material. In the text's ending, however, the nurse refuses, and Helga cries “rebellious tears” at wanting control over her own life (132). Because of the physical state of *Quicksand*'s protagonist, she is easily

overwhelmed, especially when she realizes that she has lost control of her inner *and* outer states.

By wanting a specific book, Helga acts transgressively: even though others might excuse her postpartum behavior as delusional, she is breaking institutional mores by being a preacher's wife who wants to hear words that denounce Christianity. Regardless of Helga's transgressive behavior during her convalescence, though, Larsen intimates through *Quicksand*'s final line that due to the life-shaping parameters of social and institutional mores, her protagonist's loss of control over her own body continues with her becoming pregnant soon after her postpartum recovery. Some critics view control in Larsen's text in terms of agency. For instance, Jeanne Scheper argues that *Quicksand*'s protagonist is able to resist others' expectations by being "neither here or there." In "The New Negro *Flâneuse* in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*," she states that "as a subject vacillating between different types of black and white society,... [Helga's movements] are primarily symbolized... through a series of geographic places" (Scheper 682). Helga's multiple migrations continue to provide the opportunity to explore different facets of her identity (social, political, etc.)—by extension, this represents a feminist victory of sorts.

To me, though, this hypothesis does not consider the perpetual spatial division that all females experience. Regarding females via agency (whether retaining, losing, or obtaining it) disregards the oscillation between their exterior and interior spaces that they must control in order to achieve a harmonious existence. Scheper's view that migration facilitates opportunity does not acknowledge the impossibility of this for Helga, whose racialized, gendered life in a racist, sexist world will not allow for such agency. Instead,

this paradox requires control over the inherent division, but when that control is permanently lost (as in the ending of *Quicksand*), so is Helga's attempt to have lasting happiness and belonging.

Caught in a cycle of expected gender performances, the difference between Helga Crane's inner and outer states remains, even after numerous geographical migrations. However, Barbara Johnson makes a cogent point about paradoxical space: "To see Helga purely from the inside or purely from the outside is to miss the genius of the text. It is the inside-outside opposition itself that needs to be questioned" (Johnson 262). In other words, via her protagonist in *Quicksand*, Nella Larsen explores a person's inner geography (psychology) while tracing the socioeconomic and political implications of outer geography (physical migration).

CHAPTER 4

BOUNDARIES IN *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD*

Compared to other female protagonists in many of my other chosen texts, the geographical trajectory of Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is rather compact in scope. Like Estrella in Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus*, she moves between work opportunities as a migrant farmer (the "muck" in the Everglades).¹⁸ Before that, however, Janie's migrations all happen in Florida; she moves from her grandmother's house to the farm of Logan Killicks, her first husband. From there, she moves to Eatonville, where the town leader is her second husband, Joe Starks. After his death, she leaves Eatonville for the muck with her true love and eventual third husband, Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods. After a mighty storm (based on the 1928 hurricane that hit the Everglades) and Tea Cake's death, Janie moves back to Eatonville. With each change in place, she retains a self-view that is shaped spatially—in other words, a split always exists between her inner and outer states.

¹⁸ In "The (Extended) South of Black Folk: Intramarginal and Transnational Migrant Labor in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," Martyn Bone emphasizes the participation of black people in migrant work: "Even during the Great Migration, vast numbers of black migrant workers continued to move... around the rural South (especially Florida)" (Bone 769). Indeed, he notes *Their Eyes* reflects "demographic movements *within* the South" which he believes "may be less well known than the *en masse* relocation of rural Southern blacks to Northern cities" (754, italics mine).

This usage of inside and outside throughout *Their Eyes* also reflects, I argue, the essential role that paradoxical space plays in all works of migration literature—specifically, in terms of gender performance. Gillian Rose, who developed the concept, describes it as “spaces that would be initially exclusive if charted on a two-dimensional map—centre and margin, inside and outside” (Rose 140). With this in mind, one notes that often in Hurston’s text, a division between Janie’s interior and exterior exists, regardless of her location. Throughout her migration, she seeks a paradoxical space balance via different romantic partners, but she only achieves that balance when she finds peace within herself—specifically, when she reaches the horizon.

I argue that by using the concept of horizon in structuring *Their Eyes*, Hurston is also emphasizing how movement, space, and gender can shape her text. In the novel’s opening paragraph, imagery is defined in binary terms: male/female, a-sea/moored, etc. The reader is presented with a third way of identifying, though, with the introduction of the horizon. Hurston writes:

Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board. For some they come in on the tide. *For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing* until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.” (Hurston 1, italics mine)

Here, the author establishes some of her novel’s themes: the relationship between aspiration and reality, a masculine proclivity towards obtaining and maintaining power, and an emotional relationship based on spatial proximity (e.g., distance from the horizon yielding lack of satisfaction).

Janie Crawford's story in *Their Eyes* begins with her teenaged years, when she is taught by her grandmother that material gain and social advancement—not reciprocal, enduring love—are the goals and expectations of marriage. Though she suspects the reliability of Nanny's mindset, Janie marries Logan Killicks. As a chore-laden wife, she plays a socially expected gender role. Janie's ego receives a boost, though, with Joe Starks's appreciation of her physical beauty, and she is intrigued by his description of Eatonville, a blacks-only community. With her decision to marry him and move there, Janie returns to her belief in having a romantic partner who can see far horizon. However, even though she now has an elevated social status as wife of Eatonville's mayor, he attempts to contain her. Janie loses control over her exterior as he criticizes her physical appearance, her housekeeping, and her work in the town general store; furthermore, he restricts her physical movement and her racial identity by forcing her to remain away from the store's front porch, where black vernacular wordplay (such as playing the dozens) happens. One of Joe's slaps figuratively awakens Janie, and she analyzes her exterior-interior separation. Realizing how he has restricted her identity, she regains control of her external self-performance via transgressive behavior (specifically, her use of wordplay—witnessed by Eatonville's male citizens—against Joe).¹⁹

When she meets and marries Tea Cake, Hurston's protagonist considers him to the proper recipient of her emotions. Although Janie had always known about the

¹⁹ SallyAnn Ferguson notes how this specific scene (Janie playing the dozens) indicates an ever-present risk that Hurston's protagonist faces throughout the text. In "Folkloric Men and Female Growth in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*," Ferguson writes, "[With] Janie's outtalking the best cultural man of words in the novel, Hurston clearly identifies a specific source of danger to the independent black woman—her ability to compete successfully with the black male" (Ferguson 190). To me, this also demonstrates the potential social intolerance towards females achieving a paradoxical space balance.

connection between the horizon and love, she wound up having unsuitable partners in her first two marriages. As a result, she has endured physical and psychological abuse, recalling that “she had been whipped like a cur dog” literally and figuratively (Hurston 89). I argue that the foundation for such unacceptable treatment, though, was laid years earlier by her grandmother; by trying to control Janie’s behavior (so that it becomes socially accepted—and also personally advantageous), Nanny attempted to steer her granddaughter *towards* material appreciation and *away* from the distractions of human love.²⁰ With Tea Cake, Janie recognizes that she is now in an intense relationship (a “self-crushing love”) with someone who reciprocates her admiration (Hurston 128).

When the couple moves to “the muck” of the Everglades, this also frees her external self-performance from being restricted by social mores or other people’s limiting definitions (128). Specifically, she discovers a fortifying aspect of migrant worker identity in the Everglades; in this environment, she can perform her gender and race without the threat of intolerance. With her previous husbands, Janie did domestic, agricultural, and business chores—playing a subservient gender role while performing them. However, during her time in the Everglades, *she* decides for herself that she wants to work, explaining to Tea Cake, “‘A laks it. It’s mo’ nicer than settin’ round.... Clerkin’ in dat store wuz hard, but heah, we ain’t got nothin’ tuh do but do our work and

²⁰ In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed discusses how hindsight can function as recognition of how one’s spatial orientation has changed direction. She writes that “often loss... generates a new direction.... [Hindsight] does allow these moments [of loss] to be revisited, to be reinhabited, as moments when we change course” (Ahmed 19). For Janie, her loss involves not just the death of a loved one (Nanny). Also, she feels anxious about losing time. By marrying Logan Killicks (thus, following Nanny’s prescriptive definition of marriage) and Joe Starks (who initially boosted her ego), she has been kept (and kept herself) from having a fulfilling romantic relationship.

come home and love” (133). Her racial identity can flourish here, too: after working in the fields, everyone goes to the couple’s house for entertainment (card games, music, and storytelling). In fact, Janie notes that she now can participate in once-forbidden wordplay: “Only here [in the muck], she could listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to. She got so she could tell big stories herself from listening to the rest” (134). I argue that this illustrates how Janie achieves a paradoxical space balance in the Everglades—in her life here, she can include her feelings and thoughts in her external self-performance.

Janie’s idyllic life in the Everglades ends, though, as a devastating hurricane brings physical and emotional destruction: wind and rain destroy farmland, and many people, including Tea Cake, lose their lives. (Growing increasingly paranoid because of rabies, he aims a rifle at Janie—and in self-defense, she fatally shoots him.) After his death, Janie endures a criminal trial in which she is found not guilty. Unwilling to continue living in the swamp without Tea Cake, she migrates back to Eatonville, where her return and external self-performance become gossip fodder. Though she is not concerned in clarifying the assumptions of those who witness her return, she does tell her story to her best friend, Phoeby. Afterwards, as she prepares for sleep, Janie has a metaphysical experience in which she reconnects with Tea Cake and acknowledges the peace that she has found within herself.

In part, the peace that Janie finds represents the peak of her relationship with the horizon—which is, I argue, the most significant geographical term in *Their Eyes*. Throughout her text, Hurston portrays the changes in her protagonist’s relationship with the horizon. Janie’s ability to sustain a balance between her interior and exterior

correlates directly with her ability to give an external self-performance that authentically represents herself. Also, in her search for the horizon, she spends most of the novel attempting to find personal balance and peace through migration (i.e., inhabiting new geographical spaces) or with romantic partners. By the end of *Their Eyes*, though, Janie has crossed boundaries of gender performance that are erected by those who want to control her, and through regaining a healthy relationship with the horizon, she is able to find a paradoxical space balance.

Losing the Horizon in Their Eyes

I argue that the factor that most directly shapes Janie's decision-making is the place or space which no one can ever reach. For instance, after Joe Starks's death, she grapples with how suppressing the horizon has shaped her external self-performance (especially in her romantic relationships). During this time, Janie's late-night thoughts turn to Nanny: she realizes that "[s]he hated her grandmother and had hidden it from herself all these years under a cloak of pity" (89). Now noting this elderly woman's impact, Janie traces the origins of how she has been misperforming her gender. She recognizes her victimization by her grandmother, but she also acknowledges that as an adult, she herself has remained "twisted... in the name of love" (89). Janie has always known the meaning of *horizon*: "the biggest thing God ever made,... for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you" (89). In her childhood, though, that definition was manipulated by Nanny, who occupied a position of unquestioned authority.

To Nanny, love represented an institutionalized power that she feared would dehumanize Janie—however, in an attempt to contain her granddaughter, the old woman

chose to tap into that very dehumanization. Through canine imagery, Hurston shows how the old woman shaped Janie's internal *and* external spaces (specifically, how the girl viewed gender and race). To control her granddaughter's gender performance, Nanny wielded love as a figurative leash—she repeatedly “pinch[ed] it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter's neck tight enough to choke her” (89). In this way, the old woman steered Janie into believing that gender roles are related to how romantic interests view women: not as peers but in terms of their biological capabilities (work, breeding, etc.). Nanny's manipulation became more urgent, though, when she saw Janie kissing a boy—she declared the girl to be wed as soon as possible. The old woman used animal imagery to explain the financial benefits of her granddaughter entering into a marriage that will provide social advancement—but not love. She viewed beasts of burden (“a work-ox and a brood-sow”) as terrestrial creatures who are instruments of work used by others and that cannot travel upwards to “take a stand on high ground” (16). By marrying for material gain (but not for love), Janie can avoid becoming bound to the land and instead remain a bird, soaring ever upwards. (Nanny explained, “Ah don't want yo' feathers always crumpled by folks throwin' up things in yo' face” [20].) However, although the grandmother declared the future husband's identity and appeal (his material wealth), she acknowledged that he is not a proper recipient of the girl's emotions: “Tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby” (15). What he offers, however, is “protection,” because “[d]e thought uh [Janie] bein' kicked around from pillar tuh post is un hurtin' thing” (15). In Nanny's opinion, the notion of her granddaughter being in an emotionally unfulfilling domestic relationship was better than the alternative: moving from one romantic prospect to

another (which, to the old woman, is a sign of destitution and vulnerability—which will never enable Janie to achieve an advantageous social position).

Remembering her grandmother's overemphasis of materialism and social standing, Janie acknowledges how this perspective limited Nanny's view of the horizon, thus hindering her ability to look past herself. Hurston's protagonist notes that the old woman "belonged to that other kind [of people] that loved to deal in scraps" that had monetary value but no emotional value (89). Nanny wanted financial security for Janie; so, in a misguided attempt to protect her granddaughter, the old woman talked often about the value of materialism. Janie looks back at her own value system, admitting that due to Nanny's influence, she had "run off down a back road after *things*" (89).²¹

These differing value systems do more than distract Janie—they also create a boundary that regulates her external self-performance. Regarding Janie's marriage to Logan Killicks, Pearlie Mae Peters writes, "Janie grows submissive in accepting [N]anny's wise folk talk as truth, thereby forsaking her personal desire to find love or experience marriage in her own self-designed way" (Peters 132). As a result, when she meets Joe Starks, Janie pays attention to his bragging about Eatonville, noting that he provides social and financial security. After his death, though, not only does she acknowledge that she was wrong, she also considers how she was misguided by following Nanny's value system. Unlike her grandmother, Janie has always been interested in figurative travelling: "[Janie] had been getting ready for her great journey to

²¹ This description of Janie's detour also demonstrates how Hurston uses spatial metaphors to show her protagonist's relationship to freedom. The author uses the idioms of place and direction to portray Janie's internal world and external possibilities.

the horizons in search of *people*; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her” (Hurstun 89). This would provide the paradoxical space balance that an adult Janie now realizes she has always sought. However, Nanny did not view the world in abstract terms; she admitted, ““Maybe it’s some place way off in the ocean where de black man is in power, but we don’t know nothin’ but what we see”” (14). These words reflect how the old woman’s knowledge was based on a very literal view of the world around her; since she did not see past the horizon, she assumed that no one can (or should), either.

Nanny’s fixed ideas about the horizon illustrate her inflexible mentality; she attempted to control Janie’s behavior with her fixed ideas about marriage and gender performance. As a result, the old woman’s prescriptive words influence her granddaughter so that the girl becomes able to be controlled by others—namely, Joe Starks. When they first meet, she is charmed by his dreams and plans, believing that “he spoke for far horizon” (29). After they marry, though, the two of them fight often, with Joe restricting her movements and interactions to within their house and inside his general store—but not on the porch where men from town would participate in storytelling and signifyin(g). One day, Janie atypically prepares an awful meal, and Joe reacts by physically and emotionally abusing her. Stunned, she stands still “until something fell off the shelf inside her” (72). Indeed, her archetype of an ideal romantic partner “[has] tumbled down and shattered” after she has been slapped and berated (72). Instead of dwelling upon this loss (and potentially slipping into a permanent state of pathologized being), Hurstun’s protagonist reacts in a detached way that resembles scientific curiosity. Janie thinks:

But looking at it [the shattered image of Joe Starks] she saw that it never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams. Just something she had grabbed up to drape her dreams over. In a way she turned her back upon the image where it lay and looked further. She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be. (72)

By viewing herself metaphorically as a flowering tree, not only is Janie switching her gaze from the individual (Mrs. Starks) to a group identity (those capable of fertility and reproduction—be they female plants or human females), but she also remembers that, as a teenager, she defined herself in this manner. Furthermore, rather than being a depressing memory, it reminds Janie that her inner space has become obscured by Joe Starks (and others) who have tried to contain her:

[Janie] found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. Things packed up and put away in parts of her heart where he could never find them. (72)

Janie develops a plan of action prompted by these interior changes. As a female who is aware of her emotional state, “[s]he was saving up feelings,” she notes, “for some man she had never seen” (72). For years after the slapping, Janie focuses on restricting her external self-performance: “No matter what Jody did, she said nothing. She had learned how to talk some and leave some.... She got nothing from Jody except what money could buy, and she was giving away what she didn’t value” (76). At this moment in the text, Janie can distinguish for the first time between her interior and exterior states: “She has an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them” (72). Also, with this understanding, she determines that in order to regain control of

herself, she should not reveal her thoughts or feelings in future external self-performances.

Reclaiming the Horizon

Janie's awareness of how some people have attempted to control her is predicated on the restriction of symbolic space; boundaries erected by others represent their attempts to restrict her external self-performance while, at the same time, bolstering their own identities. For instance, during their marriage, Joe Starks restricts how Janie plays her gender role through tricking her (as well as the Eatonville townspeople) with an idealized image of himself. With his intention to maintain an elevated social position and domestic authority, Joe expands his attempts to contain Janie by establishing spatial and psychological boundaries (e.g., criticizing her age, her physicality, and her work abilities). As a way of bonding with him, male citizens model this same behavior, occasionally mentioning (whether truthfully or not) that they too are verbally or physically violent with their female domestic partners. On the day that Janie behaves transgressively, she miscuts a piece of tobacco, and Joe uses her mistake as an opportunity to reenforce boundaries around his wife by shaming her publicly:

‘A woman stay round uh store till she get old as Methusalem and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don't stand dere rollin' yo' pop eyes at me wid yo' rump hangin' nearly to yo' knees!’ (78)

How the Eatonville men react to this verbal attack reveals that despite past peer pressure that demonstrates a tolerance of sexism, they actually recognize social boundaries in how one should publicly treat a female. Hurston writes:

A big laugh started off in the store but people got to thinking and stopped. It was funny if you looked at it right quick, but it got pitiful if you thought about it awhile. It was like somebody snatched off part of a woman's clothes while she wasn't looking and the streets were crowded. (78)

As this textual excerpt notes, these men recognize the vulnerability caused by figurative undressing of a female's external self-performance.

By coming to her own defense in the form of transgressive behavior and wordplay, Janie demonstrates that she indeed can balance her inner and outer states—as a result, she crosses these boundaries that Joe Starks has attempted to establish. She disrupts the accepted “normal” behavior that Eatonville females are expected to exhibit: “Janie took the middle of the floor to talk right into Jody's face, and that was something that hadn't been done before” (78). She also criticizes Jody's rhetorical choices, while not showing any emotional reaction to his disparaging words about her physicality. Janie tells Joe, ““Stop mixin' up mah doings wid mah looks, Jody. When you git through tellin' me how tuh cut uh plug uh tobacco, then you kin tell me whether mah behind is on straight or not.”” (78). In this way, Hurston shows how Janie's behavior transgresses social assumptions regarding gender performance—in particular, the connection between beauty and intelligence in females. Moreover, Janie's wordplay allows her to exhibit her own skills at signifyin(g); this enables her to release pent-up frustration about the boundaries that Joe Starks has erected in an effort to contain her.²²

²² Another reason why Joe has not allowed Janie to play the dozens involves his obsession about how others perceive him. Specifically, he believes that he must have an obedient wife who does not participate in “lower-class pursuits” such as signifyin[g]. However, black vernacular wordplay is not connected to socioeconomic standing. Also,

When she finally plays the dozens, this transgressive act devastates not only Joe's self-image but also his social authority with Eatonville's male citizens. Just as they have observed Joe's public criticism of Janie, they also witness her response:

'Haw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah recon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n *you* kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout *me* lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life.' (Hurstun 79)

Even though signifyin(g) has been rendered transgressive (because females have been socially prohibited from participating in it), Janie's use of this forbidden wordplay in public self-defense suggests that for her, there is an external component to restoring her paradoxical space balance. In other words, there is increased transgression at this point in *Their Eyes* because Janie has to overcome the psychological and social boundaries that surround her in order to reclaim control of her exterior-interior equilibrium.

While she is regaining control over these aspects of her identity through her transgressive acts, however, Janie's husband is losing the influence that his social status and gender has provided him. Indeed, as he "realize[s] all the meanings and his vanity bled like a flood, Joe Starks views himself as a victim: "Janie had *robbed* him of his illusion of irresistible maleness.... [S]he had cast down his empty armor before men and

in *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explains that even though "the dozens were structured to make one's subject feel bad," it is commonly recognized that signifyin[g]'s rhetorical aim is not gender based—therefore, it does not prohibit female participation (Gates 72).

they had laughed, / would keep on laughing” (79-80, italics mine). Upon his death, Janie initially wonders if she could have bolstered his interiority: “Maybe if she had known some other way to try, she might have made his face different” (87). She remembers her new way of being, though—she recognizes that because of her paradoxical space balance as well as the channeling of transgression, she can now access *all* parts of her identity. Hurston’s protagonist also recalls that “[y]ears ago, she had told her girl self to wait for her in the looking glass. It had been a long time since she had remembered. Perhaps she’d better look” (87).

Janie *does* look, and although she chooses to stop her transgressive behavior and adopt the socially accepted dress and manner of a grieving widow, this ends when she finishes wearing her mourning black clothing. Soon after her romantic relationship begins with Tea Cake, she becomes socially transgressive again—she is a middle-aged widow who moves to the Everglades with a younger man. Although Janie experiences psychological abuse in her youth based on socioeconomic bias (which affects how she performs her gender), these do not become permanent, pathological problems. This change of place through migration allows the protagonist of *Their Eyes* to be able to address what is “normal” (via transgression) and to choose the manner of geographical living that she desires. The full expression of this comes at the ending of Hurston’s book, when Janie calls her soul to come in and see what has always been contained in her horizon: “a jewel down inside herself” (90).

Maintaining a Relationship with the Horizon

With her novel's ending, Hurston suggests that geography involves more than directionality or changes in elevation: it also involves spatial dimensions, such as inside/outside. In "Metaphor and Metonymy in *Their Eyes*," Barbara Johnson explains the distinction between these two terms. She initially gives a general analysis: "This opposition between an inside and an outside is a standard way of describing the nature of a rhetorical figure" (Johnson 211). She becomes more specific, though, in her reading of the novel's ending: "The horizon, with all of life caught in its meshes, is here pulled into the self as a gesture of total recuperation and peace" (213). I argue that with this comment, Johnson is referring to Janie's discovery of how she can balance her paradoxical space.

Specifically, an equilibrium between Janie's interiority and exteriority provides a separation of space in which she does not feel pressured by social mores to stay within acceptable gender boundaries during her external self-performance. In her description of Janie's return to Eatonville, Hurston illustrates the importance that her protagonist places on achieving this paradoxical space balance.²³ Readers of *Their Eyes* notice that in the text, there are unspoken expectations about physical appearance—females should follow socially understood gender rules (e.g., only wearing dresses and restrained, upswept hairstyles suitable for those of Janie's age [early 40s] and socioeconomic class [as widow of the town founder and mayor]). However, by not responding directly to the Eatonville

²³ One should remember that the novel's chronology is nonlinear—the action in the beginning of the text takes place before Janie tells her story. So, one learns of Janie's widow status and her relationship with Tea Cake before they actually occur in *Their Eyes*.

women who witness her arrival and gossip among themselves about her physical appearance, Janie remains resolute in how she performs her gender. Even Phoeby, after hearing the comments made about her friend, later privately urges her to respond directly to those who gossiped about her. (““You better make haste and tell ‘em ‘bout you and Tea Cake gitten’ married,... and where at he is now and where at is all yo’ clothes dat you got to come back here in overalls”” [Hurstun 6].)

I argue, though, that this concern about Janie achieving social parity unintentionally erects boundaries in how she performs her gender. In other words, what Phoeby does not consider is the implied message that Janie would be sending if she chooses to explain her external self-performance to *anyone*; addressing those townswomen in person might unintentionally fuel their future rumormongering. Plus, Phoeby is assuming that her friend will be staying in town—but in the conversation between the two women, Janie does not announce her intentions. In “Sites of Resistance: The Subversive Spaces of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” Dale Pattison hypothesizes about this reticence:

More than merely an instrument for signifying race and gender, Janie’s body—separate from her interior self—functions as a performative space; her ability to navigate between her interior and exterior dimensions suggest[s] that the body, if understood in spatial terms, can present opportunities for mobility and thus resistance. (Pattison 18)

So, in refusing to respond to the Eatonville townswomen or giving any indication about her future plans, not only is Janie deliberately choosing to keep migration as an option—she is also opting to resist others.

Even more, as Sara Ahmed explains in “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness,” for “those who are already in place (such as parents, hosts, or *citizens*), then their happiness comes first” (Ahmed 578, italics mine). A state of inequality exists in *Their Eyes* in which many people seemingly rank before Janie—either in social importance or in their specific relationship with her. The townswomen of Eatonville exemplify this hierarchy. However, through her external self-performance, Janie is wordlessly communicating to them that her behavior is not predicated on anyone else—and her happiness is not conditional. With her return to Eatonville, she is crossing another gendered boundary—and the criticizing townswomen actually are controlled by the same social mores that they believe Janie should follow.

Specifically, Janie’s confident external self-performance around the Eatonville townswomen is an example of her rededication to reaching the horizon. Another part of this rededication involves the embracing of truth via experiential learning. For example, after Janie finishes telling her story to her friend, she emphasizes, “‘It’s uh known fact, Phoeby, you got tuh go there tuh know there.... Two things everybody’s got tuh do fuh theyselves.... They got tuh go tuh God and they got tuh find out about livin’ fuh theyselves’” (Hurston 192). As someone who has overcome social and psychological boundaries to achieve an equilibrium between her inner and outer states, Janie wants Phoeby to realize that through self-awareness during a lifetime of experiences, she can attain this balance, too. However, the ending of *Their Eyes* illustrates that Janie’s experiential learning is unfinished.

By emphasizing the transition of nature (day becoming night), Hurston foreshadows that her protagonist is about to make peace with her own actions and finally

reach the horizon. In the darkness of her bedroom, Janie's recollections of her self-defensive killing of Tea Cake as well as her endurance of the subsequent criminal trial personify, and they start "to sing a sobbing sigh" (192). These nightmarish memories vanish, though, as Janie concentrates on the concept of the horizon—at this point, she becomes able to transcend time as well as space. To her, remembering Tea Cake seemingly makes him alive again: "Then Tea Cake came prancing around her where she was and the song of the sigh flew out of the window" (193). Such a disruption of chronological time—soulmates reuniting despite death—is mirrored by the disruption of astronomical and spatial concepts, such as Tea Cake appearing at nighttime "with the sun for a shawl" (193). In describing the strength of their relationship (that he could not die "until she herself [Janie] had finished feeling and thinking"), Hurston is also suggesting that this is allowing her protagonist to inhabit the same space as the horizon (193).

That Janie maintains her connection to the horizon, reaching it at the end of *Their Eyes*, serves as a testament to her power in balancing her inner and outer spaces. Specifically, she is able to transform the horizon into a tool of comfort (a shawl) that she uses to soothe herself. In her past, the horizon was a tool of control that others used on her, like a leash controls and guides an animal. However, now that she has finally reached the horizon (after maintaining her relationship with it), Janie does not hesitate to interact with it in a metaphorical, metaphysical fashion. In a sign of her authorial mastery, Hurston uses a metaphorical concept of horizon to bookend her text. As she notes in the opening paragraphs of *Their Eyes*, the horizon is a geographical concept often observed in the water; moreover, the ships (be they arriving, departing, or residing

on the horizon) could be used for fishing.²⁴ The fishing symbolism occurs again at the novel's end. Finally occupying the same metaphysical space that she first recognized in her youth, the adult Janie "pull[s] in her horizon like a great fish-net. Pull[s] it from around the waist of the world and drape[s] it over her shoulder" (193). As Janie regards her catch, she remarks that her horizon—full of positive affect from caring relationships with others as well as with herself—is bountiful. ("So much of life in its meshes!" [193].) That she has reached the horizon—thought by others as undoable, not worthwhile, or even detrimental—is quite a personal accomplishment, and Janie "call[s] in her soul to come and see" (193).

²⁴ Another possibility is that these ships could be involved in the slave trade. However, the last known slave ship known to have left Africa to the United States was the *Clotilda* (which arrived around 1860), and *Their Eyes* is set during the early 1900s. The slave ship hypothesis is feasible, though, because there is no stated time period in the opening paragraphs of Hurston's novel. So, people could be looking toward the horizon in the twentieth century, during slavery, before slavery—or repeatedly, ever since the beginning of time.

CHAPTER 5

HOW GERTIE NEVELS CRAFTS IDENTITY IN *THE DOLLMAKER*

Many Appalachians (and other Southerners) left their rural environments for urban spaces during the 1940s. In *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America*, James N. Gregory describes this migration: during wartime, “more than 4 million [S]outherners move[d] north or west... / to build the planes, tanks, rifles, and ships that the nation needed” (Gregory 14 and 35). What these demographics do not reflect, though, are the individual stories, full of responsibility and expectation, that come out of this migration. In *The Dollmaker* (1954), Harriette Simpson Arnow offers such a narrative: she presents the story of a wife, mother, and tenant farmer named Gertie Nevels, living during the 1930s and 1940s in Western Kentucky. Through savings and a financial inheritance, she becomes capable of purchasing an idyllic piece of property. However, she abandons her plans upon learning that her husband Clovis wants her and their five children to migrate to Detroit—he has been relocated by the Army to a munitions factory there.²⁵

²⁵ Tom Frazier explains how World War II affected human migration routes in America. In “From Here to There and Back Again: Investigating Migratory Patterns in Fiction,” he writes, “The zenith of [the] northward migration came with the increased war effort during the first half of the 1940s. Jobs were plentiful [,] and service in the defense factories... was looked upon as almost equal to service on the battlefields of Europe, North Africa, and the Pacific” (Frazier 21). This serves as an opportunity for Clovis: instead of risking injury or death on a battlefield (like Gertie’s brother, Henley), he can serve his country while working and living in an urban area (which has also been a long-time wish).

Once in Detroit, Gertie finds life difficult because of Clovis's expectations of her external performance. He wants her to adopt a passive femininity that is focused on domesticity, but she struggles with this new role (e.g., her initial failures in using new household appliances). Also, Gertie experiences emotional overwhelm as the Nevels family shrinks: her eldest son runs away, returning to Kentucky, and her youngest daughter dies in a train yard accident. Upheaval continues when Clovis attacks a co-worker. Not only does he lose his factory job, but his injuries combined with the attack's ferocity (which leaves his victim dead) make him fearful of being identified and arrested, so he is unable to search for employment. This sudden financial emergency becomes more extreme when one considers that all of Gertie's savings (from when she attempted to buy land while in Kentucky) have been used for her daughter's funeral and burial.²⁶ Because of this, Gertie's external performance changes; she must resume the role of family economic breadwinner. Back in Kentucky, the results of her tenant farming provided money, but industrial Detroit's climate and lack of land makes such agricultural work unfeasible, though. Gertie decides that in order to raise money quickly, she will mass-produce wooden dolls: the source of material will be a large block of cherry wood, which is a long-term carving project that has accompanied her during migration. In the last scene in *The Dollmaker*, she splits the cherry wood into pieces.

Although her personal life did not serve as an exact inspiration for her characters, Harriette Simpson Arnow also experienced problems with migrating to an urban area as well as bias from gendered expectations of her artistic abilities. Born in Kentucky in

²⁶ Here, migration becomes a trap rather than an escape. This makes *The Dollmaker* in some ways the antithesis of *The Grapes of Wrath*: migration may lead the Joad family to economic failure, but it imbues Ma Joad with new power.

1908, she spent a third of her life there (childhood, college years, and her teaching career). She migrated to Cincinnati in order to she find specific employment (e.g., waitressing, typing, and other part-time jobs) that would allow her to have free time to concentrate on writing. In an early attempt to bolster her publication chances, Arnow used a *nom de plume* (H.L. Simpson) and a photograph of a man (her brother-in-law) when submitting short stories to *Esquire* and other national magazines. She used her real name when her first novel (*Mountain Path*) was published in 1936, but bias still impacted her literary efforts—she agreed to her publisher’s request to include exaggerated details of mountain life in order to increase readership. However, Arnow ceased incorporating other’s preferences in her writing and started drawing upon her own observations. In 1945, she migrated with her husband to Detroit for his new job (as a writer for a local newspaper); there, they lived in public housing and struck up relationships with their neighbors. Inspired, Arnow started hypothesizing about how a change of environment might affect rural females, and this imagining continued even after the couple moved to rural Michigan five years later. With *The Dollmaker*’s publication in 1954, book sales skyrocketed during that time period, but critical acclaim for this novel has continued over the decades. For instance, in a 1971 review (which later becomes the afterword) of Arnow’s text, Joyce Carol Oates praises “[t]his brutal, beautiful novel... / [which is] one of those excellent American works that have yet to be properly accessed” (Oates 601 and 608). To me, one of the praiseworthy aspects of Arnow’s text involves how the author explores migration and gender performance through her protagonist, Gertie Nevels.

How Gertie changes her exterior self-performance in *The Dollmaker* involves two concepts: her personal expression in Kentucky regardless of gender roles and the

adherence in Detroit to social mores that corroborate those same roles. Because of parental need for physical labor, she has done agricultural work since her youth. Those in Ballew understand and validate her duty to her parents—specifically, because the males in her hometown have left due to wartime demands, she adopts a masculine role by performing farm chores for those who remain in the community. During her adulthood, Gertie continues farming and saves money, with her expectation of a better quality of life for her family due to an anticipated land purchase. However, with her mother’s confrontation, Gertie realizes that social and institutional mores actually underscore expectations for her behavior—the entire Nevels family should join Clovis, the family patriarch, in Detroit, and Gertie should start incorporating spousal submission and an increased domesticity in her gender performance.

I argue, though, that the success of the gender role that she decides to play in Detroit necessitates that she does not express her inner state. Gertie’s gender performance fails to meet her husband’s expectations, as Clovis repeatedly criticizes her domestic efforts (failing to cook delicious meals even though she must use unfamiliar appliances, wasteful grocery purchasing, etc.). In order to maintain a paradoxical space division between her exterior and interior (so that she will not experience sensory overwhelm nor act in a socially unexpected [and, thus, transgressive] manner), Gertie holds two pursuits in importance. She focuses on her carving (which also proves therapeutic for her daily stress levels) and on what Sara Ahmed calls the promise of happiness.

In an article entitled “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness,” Ahmed’s explanation of the concept’s transformative power suggests why Gertie Nevels

finds it so appealing. Ahmed writes, “The family... might be happy not because [the promise] causes happiness, or even because it affects [its members] in a good way, but because of a shared orientation toward the family as being good, as being ‘what’ would promise happiness” (Ahmed 577). She adds, though, that “[t]he promise of happiness comes with certain conditions: to place your hope for happiness in the family might require that you approximate its form” (577). The change in Gertie’s external self-performance not only adheres to social mores but also illustrates this approximation of form. Ahmed describes the specifics of how people reorient themselves in pursuit of the promise of happiness in familial life: “We have to make and to keep the family, which directs how we spend our time, our energy, and our resources” (577). I argue that Gertie’s domestic focus in Detroit mirrors this, and she also supplements her inner state with the positivity she feels from sustaining happiness in the family. Ahmed explains, “To share such objects (or have a share in such objects) would simply mean you would share an orientation toward those objects as being good” (577). However, readers of *The Dollmaker* note that negative socioeconomic forces in Detroit threaten the realization of the promise of happiness in the Nevels family.

In terms of her paradoxical space, Gertie’s attempts to achieve an enduring promise of happiness are problematic, for she cannot reconcile her feelings with her external actions. Initially, rural life allows her to do this, but migration and the enforcement of gender roles restrict her exterior self-performance. As a result, Gertie winds up alienating her son; once an admirer of her moral strength, Reuben detests her transformation into a malleable, passive mother who does not defend their shared dream of idyllic landownership. Through the attention she pays to another promise of happiness

(woodworking), Arnow's protagonist is able to access an external outlet to express her individuality and unify her paradoxical space difference—but this reconciliation is temporary, as she is often interrupted by her husband's ideas of enhancing economic profit. By the end of *The Dollmaker*, Gertie's paradoxical space difference has become permanent, as her inner space seems to become as unmoving as a wooden doll. However, she momentarily becomes active again as she seemingly chooses between promises of happiness: her family or her art.

Gertie and the Case of Reuben's Vanishing Expectation

When the Nevels family leaves Kentucky for Detroit, Reuben holds Gertie directly responsible: in his eyes, with her seemingly instantaneous transformation into a passive and submissive woman, she betrays the mother-son relationship and becomes worthless.²⁷ As someone who has helped Gertie save money through expending physical labor, he watches as she “stand[s] stiff and dumb... under her mother's words” (Arnow 141). Witnessing his grandmother's verbal attacks, Reuben defends his mother's decision-making: ““She bought us a place a our own.... It's a good house”” (141). However, his eyes convey the “growing doubt” that he begins to feel about Gertie's regaining control; he stares at Gertie, “hopeful, unwilling to believe she would not speak

²⁷ Among the aspects of Arnow's text that Kathleen Walsh analyzes in “Free Will and Determinism in Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker*” is how it was indirectly shaped by the time period in which it was written. Walsh notes, “The subject of betrayal was timely in the 1950's when various prominent figures were publicly pressured to betray by speaking up and naming names. However, Arnow treats a type of betrayal not of commission but of omission, not of self-interest but of self-doubt” (Walsh 104). That Gertie excludes feelings and plans as she swiftly alters her external self-performance suggests a lack of confidence that she has for herself as well as her children. This also explains why Reuben feels so deceived.

up for their farm” (143). To him, her silence means acceptance of her mother’s attempts to shame Gertie into performing her gender according to social and religious mores. Gertie’s maternal authority with Reuben evaporates with her silence: “the hope in his eyes died,” replaced “with the contempt of the strong for the weak” (143). With her prompt submission to a prescriptive gender role, she is updating her expected external self-performance in order to “stand by her man”—while she suppresses her thoughts and feelings (as well as ignoring those of her children). Furthermore, I emphasize that Gertie’s transformation is not an example of transgressive behavior; instead, it reflects a lack of reconciliation in her paradoxical space.

Although Reuben is momentarily disoriented by the change in his mother’s external self-performance, he soon regards Gertie’s behavior towards land and family through a lens of infidelity. Arnow writes, “It seemed a long while that they looked at each other, mother and son” (143). The staring ends, though, with the grandmother’s bragging about life in Detroit, heralding that “their father would make them a good living and they wouldn’t have to be working themselves to death in some old cornfield” (144). His grandmother’s praises irk Reuben, however—to him, valuing what the Nevels can have once they migrate implies that what they *do* have in western Kentucky is insufficient. His reluctance to migrate stems from his belief that he is now the only person still defending the rural way of life that the Nevels family currently enjoys. This belief angers him, but he deems this anger as justifiable and righteous. Buying the Tipton Place was going to enable the family’s self-sufficiency; through saving, the Nevels would

finally become landowners, no longer having to devote a portion of their crops as payment for tenant farming.²⁸

Reuben's anger deepens with the move to Detroit—there, he witnesses how urbanity and industrialization can constrain daily life, and he observes how his mother reacts to this by continuing to play a passive, submissive gender role. The family now resides in a small tenement house; its dimensions force a tall person like Gertie to contort herself in order to work and live in the cramped space. No matter where she goes, she bumps into people and furniture as she examines the place's dimensions, with each hallway "scarce wider than her shoulders" (172). Much like her realization that she must compress her physical frame while in the tenement, she purposefully compresses her external self-performance in Detroit—specifically, how she is expected to run the family household. Unfamiliar with new household machinery, Gertie cannot give the expected gender performance that social mores (in particular, advertising campaigns) tout: as a result, milk in the new refrigerator is too cold, the Christmas turkey is cooked improperly, and the first loads of laundry teem with too much detergent. The passivity and submission that she has adopted in her outward behavior are reflected in her domestic struggles in Detroit. Furthermore, Reuben notices how these changes are a continuation of how his mother acted in Kentucky when confronted by his grandmother: Gertie still cedes control to others. An example of this involves her tolerance of a drunk neighbor

²⁸ In response to his grandmother's criticism of his family's agricultural work, Reuben defends the plan to own farmland: "'But 'twould ha been our own—all our own field'" (144). By having this character speak quietly but harshly, Arnow emphasizes how he is struggling to keep his emotions in check, especially in reaction to how Gertie's relinquishment of control in her external self-performance is going to impact all of the Nevels children.

yells at her. As Gertie realizes that Reuben has witnessed the verbal scuffle, her attempts to comfort are rebuffed as he accuses her of accepting everyone's ridicule: "'All a them a laughen, and you a standen a taken his—'" (316). With her focus on the current situation, she does not consider that her son's resentment has been accumulating ever since she relinquished the plan to purchase the Tipton Place. To Reuben, the confrontation between his mother and Mr. Daly confirms she lacks agency, and it also suggests that the boy must start to display his own agency. With his mother's admonition that he should temper his behavior while in an urban area, Reuben rejects her stoic approach: "'I've allus carried a knife. I ain't a quitten now. I ain't a / maken myself over for Detroit. I ain't a standen a taken nobody's lies—like you done'" (316-317).

Believing that she is establishing a practice of weakness, Reuben can no longer silently tolerate Gertie's lack of control—he views it as a *ceding* of control by someone who he had once deemed "strong," and this transformation has become impossible to tolerate. Furthermore, he is unwilling to remain in a geographical place he has never liked, because doing so would imply his rejection of the plan for the family to become landowners. In writing and addressing his departing note, Reuben clearly expresses his disillusionment with urban life, but Gertie can tell that he is also expressing his disillusionment with her. For example, he does not leave his note where Gertie can discover it (and potentially have enough time to stop him from departing). Instead, the note has been left in Clovis's wallet; in his message, the boy explains that he has left because he "'can't stay here no more'" and has borrowed money to finance his journey: "'I hope it don't make you run short. I don't steel. I will pay it back.'" (362). As she hangs her head and sits "lax-handed," Gertie's physicality illustrates how dejected she

feels about her son's departure (362). However, Reuben does not reveal any negative feelings that he might have—indeed, he dismisses his mother by announcing his arrival in Kentucky with a postcard “written to Clovis to deepen the hurt” (364). With these examples of her characters' behavior, Arnow highlights how migration has completed the erosion of the mother-son relationship.

Migration also worsens the disloyalty that Reuben feels—when Gertie chooses urbanity over purchasing land for the family, he views this decision-making as a betrayal of their shared love of rural life. (Gertie notes that he “likes farm work” [26].) Despite Gertie's struggles with urban life (e.g., her misuse of household appliances) and her changed external performance (becoming a passive wife), she does not express a desire to leave the city. By writing that he cannot remain in Detroit, Reuben implies that he can no longer be separated from rural life. Gertie suspects, though, that the collapse of their relationship is the primary, unwritten reason. Her son could no longer remain around her because she was so easily swayed from her landowning aspiration (which she shared with her children) and her pre-migration gender performance.

Gertie's Gender Role Imprisonment in Urbanity

Before moving to Detroit, Gertie has never felt deliberately compelled to perform her gender based on social mores. One reason for this involves the demographic make-up of Ballew, Kentucky during World War II: because of the need for soldiers and factory workers, most of the able-bodied men had left the region. As a result, agricultural work might have remained undone, but citizens who remained in Gertie's rural hometown considered her to be well-suited for this type of work. In particular, they took into account her physicality and gendered work ethic: specifically, she is a “big-boned,

big-muscled” woman who got “briar-scratched from the man’s work she did on [her parents’s] farm”) (69). For Gertie, this community actually becomes a free space where she can perform a masculine role without feeling obligated to follow publicly-held standards of gender performance. (For example, due to her daily agricultural labor, she prefers to wear overalls instead of dresses.) Although she occasionally behaves in a socially prescribed manner (e.g., getting married), she still feels free to give an external self-performance that is not defined by gender.²⁹ Indeed, because of the family’s poverty and her husband’s non-agricultural work, the Nevels must rely on tenant farming, with Gertie continuing to farm. Throughout this economic difficulty, though, Gertie does not sense that her gender identity presents an obstacle to her wishes—specifically, owning her own land.

With the confrontation by her mother, gender performance is redefined for Gertie. Her mother lectures about her obligation to follow socially prescriptive parameters as a wife and mother. In her admonishing, the old woman cites scripture, believing it contains social mores (in the form of patriarchal codes) that everyone should follow. In Gertie’s case, she must relinquish her plans to purchase land in order to rejoin Clovis.³⁰ For the Nevels children, though, Gertie’s mother realizes that shaming via gender stereotypes will not motivate them to embrace migration, so she describes the Detroit move in terms

²⁹ I argue that in this way, Gertie is not behaving transgressively: her actions (working on farms “like a man”) are mutually beneficial to her and the community.

³⁰ Arnow also uses this moment in her text to emphasize the unspoken, unconditional patriotic support that Gertie is expected to display (in her case, by migrating to Detroit because Clovis’s job in a munitions factory). Kristina K. Groover examines the imbalanced familial relationship that this moment highlights: “Clovis’[s] decision is made independently and secretly.... Despite the dramatic impact of his decision on his family, he faces neither judgment nor repercussion” (Groover 52).

of advantages—specifically, how it will make them happy. Per the old woman’s explanation, the “good” performance that Gertie and the children must adopt in order to achieve happiness necessitates rejoining Clovis, and the only way that this can happen is by leaving Kentucky. Through her criticism, Gertie’s mother is suggesting that patriarchy—here, the physical reassembly of the nuclear family around the husband and father—affords a higher standard of living; in other words, she thinks that increased materialism and paternal presence will “save” the Nevels children.³¹ This reasoning also implies that if the community of Ballew had been demographically diverse during Gertie’s childhood, social mores might have deemed her external self-expression unacceptable, and institutional mores (specifically, those of fundamentalist Christianity) would mandate masculine-led households, with wives deferring to their husbands.³² However, I argue that what began as a community-sanctioned gender performance in her youth—farming and performing “men’s work” to replace a lack of males—was in fact the earliest promise of happiness in Gertie’s life. That ends with the migration to Detroit: once there, Gertie becomes isolated in the nuclear family, and she is surveilled by Clovis. She is expected to give a socially acceptable gender performance that prioritizes

³¹ Gertie’s mother proclaims that Clovis’s absence has negatively affected the children: for example, by singing and dancing, Clytie behaves unacceptably, and “... [s]he wouldn’t ha gone to ruin if’n Clovis was home” (Arnow 142). The older woman declares that Gertie is actually the cause of “bad” behavior, saying that her daughter insisted on farming and “held him back all these years” from exploring other non-agricultural work (142). Readers note, however, that her criticism is one-sided. She fails to mention how Gertie became involved with farming in the first place as well as Clovis’s reputation as a tinkerer, with no one in the community taking his mechanical aspirations seriously.

³² Indeed, some literary critics view Gertie’s early years in western Kentucky as being pathologically harmful. For example, Betty Krasne suggests that Arnow “dramatizes how Gertie, functioning within these constraints, is seriously maimed” (Krasne 276).

domesticity and patriarchy. Because of this expectation, Gertie becomes passive, submissive, and stoic.

For this external self-performance, Gertie has to evaluate her paradoxical space constantly: she must not allow negative feelings to inform her outer state. In order to help create and sustain the ideal of a “happy” family, Gertie chooses to play an acceptable gender role based on the social concept of a “happy wife and mother.” Domesticity dominates her external self-performance after migration: with Clovis’s factory job, Gertie is no longer the primary economic provider, and she finds that she is expected to become a housewife. Her behavior mirrors Ahmed’s description of how people can reorient themselves in pursuit of the promise of happiness in familial life: “We have to make and to keep the family, which directs how we spend our time, our energy, and our resources” (Ahmed 577).

In industrial Detroit, domesticity and spousal supplication structure Gertie’s gender performance—with her failures to adhere to Clovis’s expectations resulting in denigration. For example, the first meal that the reunited Nevels family eats in Detroit is inadequate when compared to the delicious food that Gertie prepared in Kentucky. Her lack of preparation time and unfamiliarity with the apartment’s kitchen appliances result in inadequate cooking, but with Clovis’s expectations (“I’m starved for some a yer good cooken” [Arnow 187]) as well as the children’s praise for his material possessions, she interprets her initial domestic efforts to fail. In other words, she denigrates herself for this initial cooking failure, feeling “sorry that after he had bought so many things for them she didn’t have a better kind of supper” (187). In Kentucky, the spousal relationship was able to expand to include free expression of ideas as well as tolerance:

on occasion, she unintentionally struck a raw nerve (e.g., declaring Clovis's mechanical work to be "tinkerin"), but Gertie was still able to voice her opinions (85).³³ After migrating to Detroit, however, she hesitates saying anything to her husband that can be interpreted as criticism of his decision-making. Gertie's well-meaning comment about Clovis's purchases irks him, and he dismisses her naivety, explaining that he obtained these items (along with a car) through credit: "Law, woman, you shorely don't think I've paid for all this. Up here everybody buys everthing on time.... [B]ut, don't start a worryen. Jist git it into yer head that I'm a maken big money" (187)³⁴. Because her financial observations only result in his antagonistic defensiveness—not a self-reflection on his spending, she stops giving her opinion, "not wanting to darken the family joy" of reuniting (Arnow 188).

Gertie's silence underscores the submission that expected out of her performance of an idealized wife. Spousal dialogue is streamlined, morphing into a monologue. In other words, her initial loss of control that started with her relinquishment of land purchasing plans has multiplied into a reversal of how she performs her spousal identity, as Gertie learns that her self-expression now translates into her unacceptable questioning of her husband. Clovis considers her voicing concerns about the family living beyond its

³³ Clovis bristles at people's declaration of his work as "tinkeren"; whenever Gertie uses this term, for instance, he complains of the lack of personal recognition of his talents: "I wish to goodness you wouldn't call it tinkeren.... In lots a places people that can fix machines as good as I can makes big money for it—an I'd ought to ha gone off an got a job at it soon as times got good" (85).

³⁴In "Harriette Arnow's *The Dollmaker: A Teacher's Lament*," Elizabeth McMahan alludes to Clovis's sensitivity about his mechanical pursuits in her description of his increased economic power in Detroit. She writes that he "gains status because in this urban setting his tinkering is now rewarded with a paycheck" (McMahan 55).

economic means to be a personal assault. To emphasize that he is head of the Nevels household and (I argue) to gain support, he rebuffs Gertie in front of their children: “Gert, we ain’t hardly seen each other ‘fore you start a quarrelen about money an th place I got for ye. What was you expecten....? I was lucky, mighty lucky, to git this.... But I’ve already got me a car” (188). This retort has the desired effect, with “[t]he delighted squeals of the children” at the announcement of a major material possession, and Gertie is silenced (188). However, the clarification of financial terms (buy/own versus lease) never happens—and Gertie’s silence does not imply that she has missed this detail (188). I argue that instead, the combination of her realizing that Clovis has made poor financial decisions, her efforts at giving an outward performance of an ideal wife, and the beginnings of claustrophobia result in sensory overwhelm. In describing how the cramped tenement interior affects Gertie negatively, Stacy Morgan notes, “Adjusting to this new spatial configuration immediately impacts Gertie’s sentiments about the labors that she is accustomed to performing within the domestic sphere” (Morgan 732). Gertie does not respond to Clovis, instead busying herself with domestic chores “[s]omehow” (Arnold 189). She fights an urge to escape so that her senses could get some relief (“get away from the gas smell, the water smell, the steamy heat, the hard white light beating into her eyeballs” [189]). The successful performance of her exterior space requires that she endure the overwhelm of her interior space: in doing this, though, Gertie finds herself “[h]emmed in, shut down, by all this—and debts” (189).³⁵

³⁵ In “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness,” Sara Ahmed expresses this claustrophobic sentiment that Gertie feels upon arriving in Detroit: “Opening up the world, or expanding one’s horizons, can thus mean becoming more conscious of just how much there is to be unhappy about” (Ahmed 584). Although Gertie is now immersed in a world that others value (with its technological advancements and emphasis on

Throughout *The Dollmaker*, Gertie demonstrates this agile perception of others and her environment. For example, in the text's beginning, Gertie administers first aid to her choking son, Amos, with a couple of Army soldiers watching. During the car drive to a doctor's office for additional medical help, the older soldier "[tries] not to show his distaste for the big woman cluttering his speckless car, just as he tried not to look at the child" (Arnow 24). Arnow notes, "The woman sensed this and sat, trying to make herself as small as possible" (24). I argue that by including this information early in her text, Arnow is emphasizing that awareness of and consideration for others are inherent to her female protagonist's external self-performance.

Gertie's awareness of others extends toward her husband—particularly, what she perceives as his inability to accept the perception of his weaknesses. She believes that he is obsessed with his mechanical work and fixated on the non-rural as having a higher standard of living that he yearns to achieve. Stacy Morgan notes:

Gertie hardly seems unaware of or antithetically disposed toward technology and the selective acquisition of material culture commodities, but rather she merely seeks to avoid transformations in her domestic environment that would disrupt a sense of continuity in the cultural lifeways of her family. (Morgan 719-720)

I argue that Gertie's desire for household stability emphasizes how she deliberately draws upon the calming nature of woodworking in order to give a successful external self-performance, regardless of her troubled inner space.

materialism), she does not find happiness in this excess—but she feels obligated to withstand it.

Although Gertie uses woodworking as a momentary escape from her expected gender performance in Detroit, Clovis views his wife's artistic abilities only in terms of productivity and his financial gain. With his factory job influencing his opinions, he urges the incorporation of assembly-line methods into her whittling (e.g., using a jig-saw and producing simpler designs in order to increase productivity [as well as profitability]). For a long time, he has yearned for socioeconomic parity: for example, when the Nevels were in Kentucky, he would speak of his desire to "have it like th people in Town—the electric lights an bathrooms" (Arnow 84). Gertie would reject his hopes, though, with a reminder that he was neglecting to consider the need for daily necessities in his vision of "keeping up with the Joneses." ("Electric lights an runnen water won't make an empty belly full" [84].) After migration to Detroit, she discovers how Clovis's dreaming and family life have been transformed by urban regimentation. In order to accommodate the timing of work shifts, now there is a need for someone stay at home to care for children who are too young for school. Also, with his constant purchase of household appliances, toys, and other commodities, Clovis is focused on accumulating materialistic proof that his family is achieving a higher standard of living.

Indeed, this character in *The Dollmaker* craves a feeling of superiority in his spousal relationship as well—especially when he is able to reinforce his perception of gender roles. Arnow highlights this antagonism when describing Clovis's reaction to Reuben running away from home. When Reuben leaves Detroit, Clovis is proud of being the person who discovers his departure as well as the boy's confidante. Indeed, he marvels out loud to Gertie that their child has selected him instead of her: "I figgered if he took money he'd git it from you stid uv his old dad, and that if he wrote it ud be to

you” (362). His passive-aggressive emphasis on being Reuben’s chosen confidante exacerbates the rejection that Gertie must feel. With his ruminating about the source of her pain, stating how he thought that news of Reuben’s fate would bring her happiness, he casts himself as provider (here, of bad news) and problem-solver. In his ideal division of family duty, his wife should be caretaker of the children, but Clovis views Reuben’s departure as proof that Gertie has failed in her gender performance.

His willingness to find another way in which she is not succeeding suggests his belief in a masculine-driven momentum that also validates the “correctness” of his viewpoints. Clovis quickly becomes overconfident and oblivious, as he assumes that Gertie’s disturbed state reflects her frustration at woodworking, not at Reuben running away. (“She was silent, staring at the crucifix, and he for the first time noticed what she had done. ‘Aw, Gert, you’ve set up all night a-worken on that thing,’ he scolded, his voice disgusted, pitying.” [362]). Though her body language communicates her forlornness (with her stooped posture and unresponsiveness), she does not verbally object to her husband’s mistake; indeed, her outer state does not reveal what she feels inside at all. In other words, Gertie maintains her paradoxical space separation, despite Clovis’s passive-aggressive and erroneous assumptions.

Woodenness and Gertie: The Pursuit of Multiple Promises of Happiness

Gertie’s pursuit of the promise of happiness in *The Dollmaker* is not solely limited to her maternal, domestic performance; she is also an artist and craftswoman, with woodcarving facilitating her identity expansion as well as representing another promise of happiness. Before migration, Gertie applies her skills to how she performs her maternal role, strengthening it by creating objects of familial utility (buckets and

kitchenware), medical care (the tracheostomy tube for her choking son, Amos), and imaginative play (dolls for one of her daughters, Cassie). Woodcarving is integral to Gertie because it directs her creation of objects that, through their use and appearance, are happy. Gertie is not distributing happiness through her carvings (regardless if their purpose is utilitarian or solely aesthetic)—but through the *promise* of happiness. With Gertie’s focus on creating carvings that others would value by agreeing that they are good (i.e., that they promise happiness), one notes that she regards woodcarving in the same manner in which she regards the family unit. Indeed, similar to how she redirects her behavior upon migration to Detroit (as she focuses on a familial promise of happiness), her pursuit of the promise of happiness via woodcraft necessitates that she bring along a large piece of cherry wood, which she intends to use to for a major work of art: a carving of Jesus.³⁶ Pursuing this specific promise of happiness does not entail redirection of any “time” or “resources” from Gertie’s focus on her family, and it does not hinder her external self-performance (e.g., no domestic or maternal tasks forgotten because of thinking about carving or actual woodworking) (Ahmed 577).

Instead of becoming a happy object, though, the cherry wood becomes a medium of artistic, spousal, and economic frustration for Gertie, as she carves (and *does not* carve). Whenever she has free time to dedicate to carving, she is unable to complete it, for she cannot envision how the figure’s face should look. Also, even though Clovis has known throughout his marriage about his wife’s carving talents, after the family’s migration to Detroit, he repeatedly offers Gertie unsolicited advice about her art—

³⁶ This specific piece of wood also reminds Gertie of her pre-migration life—Kathleen Walsh observes that it is “a tactile remnant of Kentucky” (Walsh 102).

specifically, ways in which she could monetize her work. His money-focused mindset comes from his exposure to certain economic and labor elements of his factory job (e.g., emphasizing profit margins and using an assembly-line approach to complete tasks quickly). One example of this unsought input is when Gertie discovers Reuben's whereabouts; upon informing his wife that their son is returning to Kentucky, Clovis incorrectly assumes that her dismay is about her latest woodworking project—not at Reuben's departure. He finds her time-consuming, hand-crafted work to be wasteful and not profitable, and he suggests shortcuts for her carving of a crucifix:

“... [Y]ou could ha made th cross flat out a little boards in a third a th time.... You didn't haf to make [the Christ figure] out a hard maple—an a have him a bowen his head an a showen his back thisaway. You'd ought to ha left him flat and a glued him on....” (Arnow 362)

Although Clovis is brainstorming about a different woodworking project—not specifically about the cherry wood block—Gertie believes that he would comment similarly about *any* wooden item she creates. In order to give a successful exterior self-performance, though, she continues to emphasize domesticity while suppressing her inner state.

Stressed by Clovis's criticism, Gertie tries to find a way to avoid emotional overwhelm while still playing her expected gender role—thereby allowing her to pursue *two* promises of happiness (the family and her art). So, in order to avoid spousal frustration, she decides not to carve during times “when Clovis was awake to watch. He would quarrel as always about the deal of time she took, and start again the planning for a jig saw and patterns” (376). By avoiding confrontation, Gertie is not acting

transgressively but attempting instead to maintain artistic independence. Also, one could say that this strategy of seeking solitude actually enables Gertie to defuse, through unjudged woodworking, any emotional build-up that threatens to become overwhelming. However, I argue that through this time management (which allows her to avoid justifying her art to Clovis), there is more happening in *The Dollmaker* besides the ceding of rhetorical control and personal input. With her passivity and stoicism, Gertie becomes as wooden as the dolls she is urged to make.

However, this striving for privacy through avoidance stops, as the Nevels's economic need forces Gertie to act in a public manner. Arnow shows that her protagonist has to choose between two promises of happiness: family or art. What must prove especially frustrating to Gertie concerns what she interprets as the failure of her external self-performance—because she has focused on playing a maternal, domestic-focused role in Detroit, she has ceased being the family's main economic force (as she was back in Kentucky). When she receives an order for several dozen wooden dolls, she realizes that with Clovis incapacitated, she needs to revert to how she performed her gender before migrating: because the family dynamics have changed, so must her form change, too.³⁷ Once again, Gertie assumes the responsibility of being the family's principal money earner. When she considers Clovis's current unemployable status as well as the higher cost of living in Detroit, she decides that in order to make money quickly, she will split

³⁷ In "Reassessing the American Migration Experience: *The Dollmaker*'s Gertie Nevels as an American Working Class Heroine," Laurie Cella notes the economic facts that shape Gertie's decision-making. Cella writes, "The block of wood is worth hundreds of dollars, and she can sell precut dolls quickly and efficiently. So in this sense, she is contributing her skills to the family welfare" (Cella 39). Gertie realizes that she must stop performing the role of a stay-at-home housewife in order to rescue her family from financial ruin.

the large piece of cherry wood and use the resulting pieces to fill the wooden doll order. So, in rejecting the promise of happiness that her art provided, Gertie becomes stoic and (artistically) passive once again—and with her decision to make dolls, she symbolically becomes one herself.³⁸

When the cherry wood is split, Gertie's stoicism enables her to maintain the divide between her exterior and interior states, even though the emotional overwhelm of this scene affects all others who witness it. For example, though the woodshop worker has to have upper-body strength in order to perform his job, he gives his axe to Gertie. Because he admires the unfinished artistry that is about to be destroyed, he decides that he cannot wield the axe himself: "He reached for an axe, lifted it, hesitated, looking at the wood" (Arnow 598). Also, the neighborhood children, who have followed Gertie to see what will happen, spontaneously cheer: "A great shout went up from the children" (599). By doing this, they are not showing that they have desire for destruction, which has been sated by the axe's blow. Rather, the combination of the wood's size, its in-progress carving, and Gertie's physical strength proves so remarkable that the boys and girls become overwhelmed; they impulsively express themselves with a cheer, celebrating their neighbor's feat of physical and emotional power. By including this outburst, Arnow shows that although some people might not be able to put Gertie's

³⁸ Some literary critics view Gertie's decision-making at this point in the text to be personally destructive. For instance, in her article entitled "In Memory of Cassie: Child Death and Religious Vision in American Women's Novels," Ann-Janine Morey believes that Gertie "concludes her own self-betrayal by sacrificing the one remaining emblem of her own individuality" (Morey 96). I argue, however, that Gertie's choices about how the promise of happiness shapes her life does not equate to being disloyal to herself. Her splitting of the cherry wood is not an absolute move that means that she will completely stop being artistic, and motherhood does not necessarily preclude individuality.

paradoxical space division into words, they can acknowledge it through their exclamations. In this way, they verify that Gertie's exterior and interior states matter.

Having made her decision about what familial role she now must play and the specific promise of happiness that she will pursue, Gertie has become completely stoic—and metaphorically wooden in the final scene of Arnow's text. Earlier, during her final carving session with the cherry wood, she considers how her ceding of control back in Kentucky has resulted in the erosion of the family (i.e., departure of family members via migration and death) as well as her expectation of achieving multiple promises of happiness. Gertie's recollection of this leads to emotional overwhelm, and she proclaims, "I stood still fer it—I kept shut—I could ha spoke up" (584). Her focus on gendered responsibility has transformed her long-held expectation of eventually owning her own property into an unlikely scenario. Laurie Cella interprets this solitary outburst as Gertie's acknowledgment of her passiveness: "Gertie has the self-awareness to know that she hasn't used her voice and because of that cowardice, she has lost all that she loves" (Cella 39). However, I believe *The Dollmaker's* conclusion demonstrates that even though Gertie no longer expects the fulfillment of multiple promises of happiness in her life, she still loves both her family and her art. Her determination and improvisation demonstrated throughout the text suggest that even in moments of sacrifice, aesthetic ideas and inspiration still run through her mind. Although they might take different forms, woodworking *and* her family will still be fundamental parts of Gertie Nevels's life.

CHAPTER 6

CIRCULAR SHAPING IN *UNDER THE FEET OF JESUS*

With *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1996), Helena María Viramontes does not just simply offer an updated version of *The Grapes of Wrath*. Instead, its distinctive contribution to American migration literature involves the crafting of a contemporary story that, via its female protagonist, addresses issues shaping Chicana daily life (influence of folklore, *machismo* attitudes, etc.) as well as social justice for all people.³⁹ In her book review, Valerie Miner notes that unlike the prophesied utopia to which the Joads travel in Steinbeck's narrative, "[t]his California is not the legendary destination of blissful contemplation, but rather a landscape one drives over, hikes across, to the next job" (Miner 19). John Hassett writes in another book review that Viramontes's subject matter along with her illustrative writing style result in "an extraordinarily memorable and vivid tale of migrant worker life and demonstrates, once again, why recent Chicano fiction can be considered one of the most impressive literatures currently being produced in the Americas" (Hassett 147).

In her novel, Viramontes tells the story of Estrella, a bilingual Chicana teenager who migrates among Californian farms with her mother (Petra), her mother's boyfriend

³⁹ In *Feminism on the Border: Chicana Gender Politics and Literature*, Sonia Saldívar-Hull argues that this author is a major contributor to Chicana studies. For example, she notes that Viramontes "illumina[tes] the complications and intersections of the multiple systems of exploitation: capitalism, patriarchy, . . . and White supremacy" (Saldívar-Hull 36).

(Perfecto Flores), and her siblings. This protagonist demonstrates the complexity of performing multiple roles at the same time. In addition to picking crops, Estrella tends to the physical and emotional health of her family members, assisting with childcare, meal preparation, healthcare, and other household chores. She also finds herself occasionally serving as an interpreter for her family. During one summer, Estrella meets and falls in love with another teenager, Alejo. One day, a crop duster pilot unknowingly sprays him with pesticide. Growing sicker, Alejo is taken in by Estrella's family, but when his health does not improve, the family risks its finances and its mode of transportation to take him to a medical clinic for migrant farmers. Upon arrival, he is examined by a nurse who, repeatedly insisting for payment, states that she cannot properly diagnose him there.

Outraged, Estrella becomes violent, destroying property until the nurse refunds the meager sum of money that Perfecto Flores surrendered. Now, he is able to refuel the family car and travel to the nearest hospital, where Estrella drops off Alejo in the emergency room. Upon returning home, Perfecto, Petra, and Estrella go their separate ways, each with preoccupied thoughts. (Perfecto worries about his desire to return to Mexico and fearfully anticipates an announcement by Petra. At the same time, Petra anxiously obsesses about her daughter's maturing and her own unrevealed pregnancy. Estrella recalls her last moments with Alejo, recognizing his probable fate, and wants to experience freedom). Viramontes's novel ends with the protagonist's attempts at achieving this—her standing on top of a barn roof.

In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the author explores Estrella's daily reality as a bilingual, teenaged Chicana migrant farm worker who finds herself in situations that are institutional in structure, non-Spanish speaking in setting. For example, in the

institutional space of the clinic, Estrella represents how migrant bodies are disciplined and organized through practices of health and hygiene. Throughout Viramontes's text, the protagonist remains allegiant to her identity roles (i.e., daughter and Chicana community representative) in her exterior performances. Also, whenever she is in non-Chicana institutional settings (such as school and the medical clinic), her migrant and Chicana identities predetermine how representatives of those institutions interact with her. In other words, these white institutional spaces steer teachers and the clinic's nurse to interact with Estrella in particular ways that question her value as a human being.

As a result, Estrella becomes increasingly rebellious—she learns the English language, not through formal, institutional means but via daily interactions with Maxine (another migrant child) and as Perfecto's assistant. Out of frustration, she gives her most rebellious—and violent—external self-performance at the medical clinic. There, she encounters a nurse whose interactions with Chicana migrants seem perfunctory; in reaction to this, Estrella chooses to give an external self-performance that persuades while, at the same time, allows her to express negative emotions. Estrella's rebelliousness ends, however, at the emergency room. Although it is another institutional space, the emergency room also produces a social context that is universal: everyone, regardless of identity, dies.

Estrella also represents how migrant bodies are disciplined and organized through practices of health and hygiene as well as concepts of space. The trope of circles and circular patterns appears throughout *Under the Feet of Jesus* to mark such ordering. The usage of this specific trope not only emphasizes how this character plays multiple roles simultaneously while surrounded by others' expectations and stereotypes—regardless if

she is at home (a private space), at school, at a medical clinic, or at the hospital (all public, institutional spaces). It also highlights how the multiple, intersecting identities of Estrella and other migrants goes unacknowledged by some people in these same spaces.⁴⁰

Circular Space at Home

In the opening pages of *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Estrella's family arrives at a small, vacant bungalow used by migrant farmers as a temporary residence. Petra and Perfecto start the process of establishing a household (determining the purpose of each room, repairing any damaged or unsafe areas, etc.). For Estrella's part, she initially spends time exploring (all the while minding her younger brothers and sisters), but she soon returns to her new home to help the adults. She never refuses to fulfill Petra's requests, such as appeasing her mother's deeply-held beliefs in folklore, or *creencias*.⁴¹ An example of this involves the girl encircling the house with a traced line in the dirt. Viramontes writes that Petra "believed scorpions instinctively scurried away from lines which had no opening or closing" (Viramontes 42). Estrella's response to her mother's news (that Perfecto had earlier killed a scorpion) is immediate: as Petra points out where the pest was found, her daughter takes the stick from her hand, verifies the correct

⁴⁰ I argue that these differing shapes (the angular image of an intersection and the circular metaphor) coexist in *Under the Feet of Jesus*—each character is composed of distinct identities that traverse each other (e.g., Estrella is a female *and* a Chicana *and* a teenager *and* bilingual), and each identity navigates an overlay of obligatory ordering that it must enter and exit, like stepping into and out of a circle.

⁴¹ In *Chicano Folklore: A Guide to the Folktales, Traditions, Rituals and Religious Practices of Mexican Americans*, Rafaela G. Castro explains their significance: "Creencias often dictate behavior and oral expressions, and they reflect a worldview that is based on spiritual and religious ideas.... Some beliefs exist as folk knowledge integrated into the behavior of an individual and will be reflected in the way that individual lives his / her life" (Castro 71).

location, and wordlessly “[begins] the demarcation around the house” (41). This moment in the text highlights the mother-child connection as well as Estrella’s incorporation of a caretaker role in her external self-performance.

Both of these females in *Under the Feet of Jesus* express their gender connection through wielding a transforming domestic power in the domestic roles they play. A principal example of this involves how they alter wherever the family settles upon finding employment. Janet Fiskio explains that the bungalow (where the family stops in Viramontes’s text) “is not a home by virtue of long-term inhabitation and ownership, but rather because the mother and Estrella hold a set of skills that make possible the continual creation and recreation of place out of space” (Fiskio 315). Besides articulating a difference between *place* and *space*, she also alludes to inherited cultural beliefs regarding Chicana gender roles in the household. In the traditional Chicana belief system, people learn from childhood that their exterior selves are shaped by social mores; for females, such behaviors include domesticity and maternity. In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Petra embodies these expectations, but being the mother in a migrating family enhances her “set of skills” (315). Not only does she create life *literally* through giving birth, but she also creates life *figuratively* through establishing “a source of stability” and “extracting a center from chaos” (315). For example, because Petra believes (and has shared this belief) in the protective power of the circle drawn around the bungalow, this creates a daily task for her family members to perform. In comparison, Estrella reinforces pre-existing needs and expectations (being a second mother, a *sous chef*, a handyman’s assistant, etc.). I believe that her greatest caretaking “skill,” then, is not

creative but *recreative*. Much like the line that she traces around the bungalow, she has long followed the lines of culture and family.

Throughout *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the traced circle represents a zone of protection. By drawing a loop around her house, Estrella comforts and reassures her mother. Plus, the author notes that her protagonist “never questioned whether this was true or not” (Viramontes 42). In this way, Viramontes emphasizes that Estrella, despite any questions she might have concerning this ritual, is considerate of her mother’s beliefs. However, this enclosing, unbroken line mirrors a sense of certainty and rootedness which Estrella does not have—but for which she yearns.

In an interview, Viramontes explains how migrants can gain such reassurance from a circular, inclusive concept of space and place:

When [you migrate from one area to another] you realize these are the components that make you feel very secure in a place, that makes you feel that this place is a certainty of yours. When there is that certainty, it is home. The aspect of not having a home, for example, in terms of the migrant life is another aspect because when you are moving so much it is almost like grating against your soul. Your soul is in migration and in *Under the Feet of Jesus* that was one of the things that I was concerned with. (Kevane 234)

She also speaks about the importance of family to migrants, explaining how the lack of a peer group or circle of friends can cause psychological harm, especially in youth like Estrella. The author ponders, “Could you imagine migrant life where you just never have a chance to know a person long enough to bond with..., where you can no longer bond

with another person other than your immediate circle?” (235). Estrella and other young characters speak occasionally about staying in place—one benefit of which would be to establish relationships.⁴² For them, schools might seem to provide a way in which they could learn and make friends. Estrella discovers, though, that educational institutions have boundaries which do not include opportunities for this. Instead, the boundaries form organized, protective circles not *for* herself and other migrant children...but *in reaction to* them.

Circular Space in School

In an article entitled “Reimagining Citizenship through Bilingualism: The Migrant Bilingual Child in Helena María Viramontes’[s] *Under the Feet of Jesus*,” Jeehyun Lim analyzes the protagonist of *Under the Feet of Jesus* through the lenses of literacy and citizenship. Using this approach, she emphasizes how schools are partially responsible for another of Estrella’s roles—interpreter. Lim writes:

Excluded from the public schools and responsible for a Spanish-speaking family dependent on her for her labor and proficiency in English, Estrella is largely immune to the institutional instructions of becoming a citizen-subject. Instead of being prepared by institutional education to later assume the full rights of a citizen, Estrella learns to become a member of a community through attending to

⁴² At one point in the text, Estrella and Alejo take a break from picking crops, and they lie underneath a work truck that is leaking oil. When she notices this, she starts thinking about how a lack of it would mean an end to migration. (Alejo: “If we don’t have oil, we don’t have gasoline.” Estrella: “Good. We’d stay put then” [Viramontes 86].) Alejo, however, views the end result negatively: “Stuck, more like it. Stuck” (86).

the relations of affection and the duties of caretaking in her circle of family and friends. (Lim 222)

I argue that this suggestion of institutional separation in Viramontes's text actually serves as an overt establishment of a zone of protection. Not only does it separate those *included* in full societal participation (children who are native English speakers) from those *excluded* (children who are native English speakers), but it also affects the external self-performance given by members of both groups.

Viramontes recounts her protagonist's scholastic experiences as following this same pattern. Estrella remembers:

[She] would ask over and over, So what is this, and point to the diagonal lines written in chalk on the blackboard with a dirty fingernail.... But some of the teachers were more concerned about the dirt under her fingernails.... / They said good luck to her when the *pisca* [harvest] was over, reserving the desks in the back of the classroom for the next batch of migrant children. (Viramontes 24-25, italics mine)

By ignoring the girl's questions about academic matters, her teachers instead demonstrate how the institution of education regulates migrant bodies. For example, the portion of teaching places that are set aside for migrant children is the back of classrooms; in a traditional classroom layout, this would hinder access to the chalkboards and the teacher's desk. One might say that such restriction underscores the true, unspoken priority of some adults in schools: they might believe that physical servitude is actually the purpose as well as the destiny of migrant children who are also non-native English

speakers. Moreover, such a positioning serves as an isolation of native English speakers from non-native English speakers. So, like the literal circle that Estrella draws around her house for protection, a similar zone is demarcated figuratively in the classroom. Though “Estrella hated when things were kept from her [.]” she begins to realize the extent to which she is held outside the zone of rootedness and acceptance by societal institutions such as schools (24).

Also, an urgent desire for hygiene take precedence over learning or an institutional recognition of ethnicity in Viramontes’s text. Estrella recalls how teachers “inspected her head for lice, parting her long hair with ice cream sticks. They scrubbed her fingers with a toothbrush until they were so sore she couldn’t hold a pencil / properly” (25-26). Another particular memory highlights how this emphasis on hygiene could potentially lead to a stereotype-based definition of an entire ethnic group.

Viramontes writes:

She [Estrella] remembered how one teacher... asked how come her mama never gave her a bath. Until then, it had never occurred to Estrella that she was dirty, that the wet towel wiped on her resistant face each morning, the vigorous brushing and tight braids her mother neatly weaved were not enough.... And for the first time, Estrella realized words could become as excruciating as rusted nails piercing the heels of her bare feet. (25)

With this passage, the author foreshadows the prejudiced slights of Chicana culture that her protagonist will continue to face as the novel progresses. Also, Estrella’s epiphany about language’s power to harm does not dissuade her from learning English. In fact, her learning is so complete that she is able to perform the expected role of interpreter for

those communities which are outside of the zone of protection in a non-migrant society. Her boyfriend Alejo's worsening health exemplifies Estrella's still-persistent struggle for that which is being "kept from her"—namely, unfettered institutional acceptance of *all* parts of her identity.

Circular Space at the Clinic

Before Estrella enters the clinic, she finds that she must consider multiple expectations in her external self-performance. Migrant farmers—regardless of any financial or transportation difficulties—are expected to utilize a pre-determined health care center. In addition, she implicitly understands that her family and Alejo expect her to obtain medical help by means of her bilingualism. To secure healthcare for Alejo by making this trip to the clinic, Petra and Perfecto risk the family's only mode of transportation and migration (e.g., putting extra miles on the family station wagon, which keeps getting mired in mud). Also, Viramontes's protagonist notices how the drive to this clinic has almost emptied the fuel tank: "Estrella leaned forward from the backseat, her head between the mother and Perfecto Flores to see the gas gauge bury the E, and Perfecto flicked a fingernail a few times to make sure the gauge wasn't stuck" (133). When Estrella sees that "the gas gauge [has buried] the E," she hopes that this measurement of emptiness does not foreshadow a potential diagnosis: that Alejo will continue getting sicker until he "buries the E" with his death (133).

In order to get medical care for Alejo, she must perform successfully as an interpreter—and in doing this, Estrella realizes that her external self-performance will be judged. Viramontes describes Estrella's self-consciousness and physical discomfort: "She became aware of her own appearance. Dirty face, fingernails lined with mud, her

tennis shoes soiled, brown smears like coffee stains on her dress where she had cleaned her hands” (137). Building upon this description, the author makes a striking distinction about the different types of day that Estrella and the nurse have each had—and the performance that each one is about to give. While the teenager is covered in a *mélange* of earth and sweat, the nurse presents an appearance of unity with her “white uniform and red lipstick” (137). Even her scent is singular—and overwhelming (like a “flood of carnations” [137]). In pointing out the two females’ sensory-based differences, Viramontes shows that from the beginning, Estrella is already struggling not to become overwhelmed. Remembering that Alejo’s health is at stake, she feels the pressure to persuade with her performance as interpreter: “It amazed Estrella that some people never seemed to perspire while others like herself sweated gallons” (137).

From the beginning of the clinic visit, though, Estrella realizes that strategic language use represents another difference between herself and the nurse. In providing biographical information about Alejo, the teenager lies in order to give the nurse the data she requires. This woman is the gatekeeper to medical care: so, when Estrella pretends that the boy is a relative, he becomes eligible to use the clinic. Here, Viramontes intimates that her protagonist, aware of how institutions organize migrant bodies, manipulates this ordering through wordplay. In other words, Estrella tells the nurse what she expects to hear. One notes that her lying does not detract from her translating, though. In fact, it enriches it, for now her performance as interpreter concerns linguistic form *and* function. The “correct” words matter, but Estrella understands that the goal—to help her sick boyfriend—supersedes these notions of “correctness.” In this way, she values strategic knowledge over official protocol.

In comparison, the nurse is linguistically rigid, unable to conceal her apathetic attitude. One assumes she must have taken a pledge to uphold ethical standards, but her words and actions do not reflect this.⁴³ For example, despite Estrella correctly pronouncing Alejo's name, the nurse incorrectly pronounces his name as "Alex-hoes" (Viramontes 138). Also, in attempting to weigh her patient, she depersonalizes him. After asking him to step on the scale, the nurse immediately asks Estrella to make sure that he does this. Estrella falsely testifies to his linguistic capabilities, touting that he is so proficient in English that he was "the spelling bee champ in Hidalgo County" (139). However, this explanation does not alter the nurse's bedside manner towards her patient. Even though Alejo later demonstrates that he is proficient in English (when he answers a question asked of Estrella), the nurse neither apologizes for her past behavior nor alters her current actions. By continuing to address only Estrella, the woman shows that she is unable to hide how removed she has made herself from the ailing human being in the clinic. I argue that this disinterest also intimates the nurse's self-absorption in her after-work plans and an insensitivity to other ethnic groups.

Viramontes allows the reader access to her protagonist's developing despair, illustrating how Estrella's spiraling thoughts affect her external self-performance. Initially, her role is presented very simply: "Estrella helped Alejo" (139). The inherent sentiments, though, indicate that she is feeling and contemplating more than words can express. Busy in her familial, romantic, and linguistic roles, she recognizes that "[t]here

⁴³ During their graduation ceremonies, newly minted nurses recite an oath called the Nightingale Pledge. In it, they promise to "abstain from whatever is deleterious" and to focus on "the welfare of those committed to [their] care." A revised version of this pledge emphasizes "devoted service for human welfare."

was something unsettling about this whole affair..., but she couldn't stop long enough to figure out what it was" (139). She is working so hard in the stifling trailer to be persuasive linguistically and strong physically, even though her boyfriend's body is resisting her. (At one point, he even tells the nurse that he does not want Estrella to watch his examination.) As a cumulative effect of all this pressure, Estrella now sees herself in a scenario of rejection: "God was mean and did not care and she was alone to fend for herself" (139). This statement reflects how frustrated and abandoned that Estrella feels upon realizing she must perform yet another role—that of potential martyr.

This newly realized role metamorphoses quickly, though, with the nurse's guess that Alejo has developed dysentery and her suggestion that only a hospital can provide a more accurate diagnosis. Her words are at odds, though, with instructions for migrant workers to seek medical treatment at the clinic. In an attempt to adhere to institutional rules, Estrella and her family have followed the only directive they know: most of the day (time that could have been used to earn money) has been spent struggling with a mired-down car and using almost all of its available fuel. Now, they learn that their efforts were in vain. The nurse's attitude and behavior become more perfunctory, rushed, and tone-deaf. Estrella can only stare as the woman insists on charging a fee for Alejo's visit. With this, the teenager's hope to give a successful external self-performance diminishes, as the nurse signals her readiness to end the medical consultation by "remov[ing] her black patent leather purse from the bottom drawer and plac[ing] it on the desk beside the phone" (144).

At this point in the text, Estrella is no longer acting solely for Alejo or for herself: she has become a representative for the marginalized migrant population. This external

performance starts internally, as she scoffs at the nurse's words and considers what the woman is really doing: "How easily she put herself in a position to judge" (144). Estrella notices that Perfecto does not have enough money to pay, and she begins to translate for him as he attempts to barter his handyman services. The nurse refuses, stating that she "just work[s] here," takes all of the money he has, and gives him a receipt for medical services rendered (144). Estrella keeps trying, though, to strike a deal with the woman so that the family could reclaim the money: "They would all work, including the boys if they had to, to pay for the visit, to pay for gas. Alejo was sick and the nine dollars was gas money" (148). Unlike the nurse, Estrella can (or is willing to) conceive the interconnectedness of all peoples—and all creatures. By featuring Estrella's free-associative thinking, Viramontes shows the reader how this character is exploring the boundaries of a particular circle—the circle of life:

She remembered the tar pits. Energy money, the fossilized bones of energy matter. How bones made oil and oil made gasoline. The oil was made from their bones, and it was their bones that kept the nurse's car from not halting on some highway, kept her on her way to Daisyfield to pick up her boys at six. It was their bones that kept the air conditioning in the cars humming, that kept them moving on the long dotted line on the map. Their bones. Why couldn't the nurse see that? Estrella had figured it out: the nurse owed *them* as much as they owed her. (148)

So, to Estrella, the nurse should give back the money, both in deference to prehistoric creatures' sacrifice and as a sign of acknowledgement and respect for those who also need gasoline yet struggle to obtain it. Moreover, Estrella's thoughts show that she does

not view herself as excluded or regulated. Instead, the natural world has incontrovertible evidence that she—and all migrants—are *within* the circle of life.

Although these thoughts show Estrella's confidence in her philosophical foundation (i.e., how she views people's interrelatedness), this assurance is missing from the current situation: as she leaves the trailer, she is unsure of how she should perform her exterior self. "She didn't know what she was about to do," writes Viramontes, "but had to do something to get the money for the gas for the hospital for Alejo" (148). Circling back, she reenters the clinic—but not before retrieving a crowbar from the station wagon. Before the nurse notices her return, Estrella commits to her upcoming performance: "There was no turning back" (149). When she initially entered the clinic, she tried persuasion and was mentally flexible enough to free-associate her thoughts. Now, Estrella's external self-performance consists of threatened violence (via the wielding of the crowbar) and verbal repetition: "Give us back our money" (149). She never hits the nurse, but she warns of physical destruction: "I'll smash these windows first, then all these glass jars if you don't give us back our money" (149).

The nurse's reply ("You listen here!") illustrates her incredulity at this situation and also suggests that Estrella's changed performance is initially unbelievable. Only when Estrella smashes the crowbar onto the desktop does the nurse start believing the protagonist's threats, yet it takes a little more ransacking of paperwork until the money is finally retrieved. Breathless from the adrenaline rush of her external performance, Estrella notes her duality: "She felt like two Estrellas. One was a silent phantom who obediently marked a circle with a stick around the bungalow as the mother has requested, while the other held the crowbar and the money" (150). Estrella views her past through

the lenses of familial and cultural obedience; now, though, she also sees the results that transgressive behavior has yielded: through her voice, she has gained agency.

Although her external self-performance ends with her reclaiming the clinic fee, the aftereffects of acting transgressively linger in her as well as in Alejo. Even though he did not watch her performance, he questions her actions, wanting to know if physical assault has happened. Estrella is “[trying] to understand what happened herself;” despite this uncertainty, though, she speaks with “resignation,” “anger,” and “sarcasm” (151-2). I believe that in justifying her changed behavior, Estrella conflates her dealings with the nurse by explaining how white institutional representatives practice ethnic othering until they are confronted. She tells Alejo, “They make you that way.... You talk and talk and talk to them and they ignore you. But you pick up a crowbar and break the pictures of their children, and all of a sudden they listen real fast” (151). Viramontes uses this moment to demonstrate her protagonist’s feelings of marginalization and alienation when she initially tries to communicate with the nurse. Estrella’s reduction of the nurse (and other institutional representatives) to “they” directly corresponds to her perception that migrants have been subordinated—labeled by those institutions as “others.” I argue that Viramontes uses the trope of circles at this point in her text to illustrate how the migrant-institutional relationship has dissolved. Although healthcare for migrant workers is regulated, Estrella believes that there is a place for everyone within the circle of maintaining one’s own wellness. The nurse refuses to understand this viewpoint, however; because of this obliviousness, Estrella then incorporates transgression into her external self-performance.

What begins in *Under the Feet of Jesus* as a generalization of “they” becomes a wary analysis of non-Chicanx people as Estrella and Alejo, for different reasons, tell each other not to “make it so easy for them” (152). He speaks out of awareness of his own poor health, not out of outrage at how fellow migrant workers and Chicane people are treated by others. For Estrella’s part, she is “not able to disguise the tone of disappointment” at Alejo’s point of view, believing that his sickness must have altered his thinking: “She forgave him because he was sick” (153).⁴⁴

By illustrating her protagonist’s transgressive behavior in how she reclaims the clinic fee—through repetition and threats of violence—Viramontes designates it as a turning point for how Estrella performs herself externally. The author also shows, in the words of Tim Cresswell, that “[i]t is hard to tell what is considered normal without the example of something abnormal” (Cresswell 21). Place and the performance of certain behavior (such as ideas of normality and abnormality) are inextricably linked. In other words, place provides the framework for the development and understanding of “right” and “wrong”—with transgression marking the margins of where “wrong” behavior begins. I argue, though, that Estrella’s transgressive actions—her crossing into the figurative circle of “wrong” behavior—illustrate how continued institutional pressure can negatively shape self-expression.

In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, the protagonist’s approach for retrieving her family’s gas money emphasizes how a single-minded focus on an institution’s rules by its

⁴⁴ Estrella also interprets her violent behavior as an attempt to protect Chicane bodies from institutional representatives: as Alejo falls asleep, she whispers her justification that “they want to take your heart” (153).

representative (here, the clinic nurse) can potentially result in violence. That the nurse is so oblivious serves as a justification for Estrella's behavior: neither the fragility of Alejo's health nor the financial hardships of her family is "being noticed." Furthermore, the clinic scene as well as the protagonist's conversation with Alejo afterwards illustrate the extent of the nurse's lack. She cannot (or does not) recognize the multiple identity roles of Estrella: a bilingual, teenaged Chicana migrant. As a result, this thoughtlessness prompts the girl to pick up a crowbar and demand a refund of the clinic fee.

Circular Space at the Hospital

Throughout *Under the Feet of Jesus*, Estrella performs different identity roles, based—among other criteria—on the spaces she inhabits, and her outward performances are also subject to how those spaces organize her. She and other migrants (especially those who are Chicana) feel the full weight of such categorization when they inhabit white institutional spaces (such as schools and medical clinics). Tired of being institutionally viewed (and therefore disciplined) as being abnormal, Estrella has become transgressive in her behavior and language. However, once she and Alejo walk through the emergency room doors of Corazon Community Hospital, her transgression stops. She realizes that they have entered a particular circle in which her external self-performance (especially if it incorporates transgression) will not be persuasive. For instance, the element of group representation does not exist in the medical clinic the same way it does in the hospital. In the former, healthcare workers serve the migrant farming community *exclusively*. Even though the latter also has specific operating procedures and forms, the emergency room does not admit patients based on their communities or ethnicities. Also,

despite Alejo's lack of insurance (or paperwork of any kind), there is an implicit trust that the hospital will not turn him away.

In Viramontes's text, one notes how the "disciplined space" of the hospital represents an enclosure that helps ailing people while, at the same time, intensifies Estrella's paradoxical space division.⁴⁵ Although she displays assurance in her external self-performance, her thoughts and feelings teem with insecurity. While sitting beside Alejo, she knows that she must soon leave him in the hospital's care and rejoin her waiting family. Estrella's anxiousness also comes from an unspoken recognition of the hospital's overwhelming disciplinary and organizational power, which is visually reflected through its cleanliness, hygiene, and automation. Estrella does not attempt to barter with representatives of *this* healthcare institution as she does with the clinic nurse. The hospital's visual appearance encourages both an acceptance of its authority as well as a fear of violating regulations through unacceptable behavior.

Although Estrella acts quickly so that there is no violation of the hospital's rules, what motivates her speediness even more is her anxiety at being in this "disciplined

⁴⁵ James A. Tyner explains how places (like the hospital) are created. In his monograph entitled *Space, Place, and Violence: Violence and the Embodied Geographies of Race, Sex, and Gender*, he details the process:

Spaces are produced through social relations and interactions; we are socialized into an understanding of these spaces which, in turn, become natural and normal. These spaces, however, are coded by dominant embodied conceptions of 'race,' sex, gender, and so on. In short, these socially produced spaces become disciplined; they become, through discipline, places. Stated differently, *places are disciplined spaces*. Consequently, we recognize that both acts of resistance and perceived transgressions may constitute a threat to the construction and maintenance of a *place*." (Tyner 20)

In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, migrant status is another identity construct that regulates human behavior in an institutional space.

space” with terminally ill people. I argue that in this section of Viramontes’s text, the author explores how dying people are interpreted through her protagonist’s behavior, and she also provides a contextual setting that suggests how institutions can define migrant bodies. Scholars such as Michel de Certeau have long studied the societal implications of dying. In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, he suggests that there is a connection between death and difference: “The dying are outcasts because they are deviants in an institution [a hospital] organized by and for the conservation of life” (Certeau 190). To me, this means that those dying are no longer protected by being *inside* an inclusive circle. In *Under the Feet of Jesus*, part of Estrella’s motivation to leave Alejo rests in her familial loyalty (i.e., wanting to return those who await her), but another part of her desire to leave him is also associated with the boy’s growing sickness (or “deviantness”). As he has become sicker and could potentially die, he “*falls* outside the *thinkable*, which is identified with what one can *do*” (190). In doing so, he risks becoming “an object that no longer even makes itself available [,] ... intolerable in a society in which the disappearance of / subjects is everywhere compensated for” (190-191). To me, Certeau’s interpretation implies how the institution-migrant relationship eventually ends. In Viramontes’s text, Alejo is objectified by the agricultural institution; when he can no longer fulfill his defined function as a field worker, he will be replaced.

The educational system’s treatment of migrant children in *Under the Feet of Jesus* demonstrates a similar reduction of individuals into replaceable parts of a whole. Estrella recalls how teachers wish “her good luck when the *pisca* is over,” expecting her family to migrate to another farming job and, therefore, out of the school district (Viramontes 25). In the meantime, they would expect another “batch” to replace Estrella and other migrant

children (25). To these teachers, part of their focus as representatives of educational institutions is to organize, through ideas of discipline and hygiene, the numbers of bodies that they must supervise. Such an approach suggests objectifying migrant children—regardless of whether it simplifies classroom management or articulates deliberate stereotyping.

While in the hospital with her boyfriend, Estrella struggles with maintaining a deliberate division in her paradoxical space—she feels pressure to give an external self-performance that satisfies the conflicting circumstances while, at the same time, not allowing her interior to show. On one hand, Alejo recognizes the hospital’s institutional ordering and fears that its circle of protection could potentially separate him from his girlfriend, someone who has demonstrated her willingness to confront institutional power. On the other hand, though, Estrella knows that her family waits outside, and her discomfort at his “embarrassingly graceless” pleading prompts her to give a non-emotional reply that also protects her from those who are dying (190). So, she manages to extricate herself from this awkward situation by telling Alejo (thus, also convincing herself) that he is going to get better: “‘Everything’s gonna turn out all right. Just tell the doctors’” (169). Although she does care about Alejo, she is “frightened beyond her capacity to comfort him” (169). In this way, her placating words and quick departure “[assure] that communication will not occur” (Certeau 190). In hindsight, Estrella notes how she did believe that Alejo would get better, return to farming, and eventually reunite with her. This lack of communication also creates a delay in her own thoughts—hours after she has removed herself from the ultra-hygienic, disciplined enclosure of the hospital, Estrella acknowledges the consequences of her departure: “It only now

occurred to her that perhaps she would never see him alive again, that perhaps he would die” (Viramontes 170). She originally had thought that avoiding any institutional notice (by hospital workers or police) would prove that she had not been disciplined or shaped. However, I argue that what ultimately shapes Estrella’s outward performance is her unexpressed fear of the hospital’s organizational philosophy (the living versus the dead) *combined* with her expectations of institutional discipline.

In another interview, Viramontes directly addresses her protagonist’s future external self-performances, implying that Estrella is no longer encumbered by being organized by any institutional circle of exclusion. She believes that the girl’s fate is rather open-ended, and the way she ends her novel (with Estrella standing, unafraid, on the edge of the barn’s roof) emphasizes this viewpoint. Viramontes admits:

I kept re-writing it and re-writing it [the ending of her novel]. It wasn’t working until I finally accepted the fact that maybe it was just not the right ending. The fact of the matter is that Estrella was just too powerful. By that time [the end of her narrative], she was just an incredibly powerful figure to me and my endings were inappropriate. That’s why I sort of left it open [the ending image of Estrella] in a celebration of having a capacity, the empowerment to know. She can just about do anything she wants to do. (Flys-Junquera 238)

Although this statement is an optimistic, hopeful view of Estrella’s future, I find that it is also somewhat naïve. Potentially, her linguistic abilities as interpreter would provide Estrella with a way to escape the seasonal pattern of intra-farm migration (e.g., her providing linguistic services [interpretation and/or translation] to healthcare institutions). However, there is a textual foreshadowing that Estrella will be soon needed

for her caretaker abilities; while she stands on the barn roof, her mother, resting alone in the house, contemplates her pregnancy. As soon as Petra reveals this news, the teenaged girl will be expected (by her family as well as by the migrant Chicanx community) to continue performing her gender in stereotypical, sacrificial ways: assisting in housekeeping and childrearing, to be specific. In other words, regardless of her linguistic abilities, Estrella might not be able to avoid being organized and regulated. Ironically, it would be by her mother—the same person for whom Estrella traced a protective circle around their home.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, the chosen novels of migration literature all have indeterminate conclusions, with the fates of their female protagonists not being fully expressed. The situation in which each female finds herself at text's end, however, strongly implies a negative fate. Ma Joad is surrounded by poverty, starvation, sickness, and environmental upheaval. Most likely, Helga Crane will die in childbirth, never leaving the small Alabama town that is home to her husband's congregation. Although Janie Crawford has her own house, it is located in a community that will continue to judge her by her past experiences and current external self-performance. Gertie Nevels will probably never see Kentucky again—with the cost of living in Detroit continuing to require all her earnings, she will not be able to save enough money. Estrella still lives and works in danger of being exposed to the same agricultural chemicals that probably killed her first love. Although these female protagonists have differing ages, ethnic backgrounds, and are from different time periods in twentieth-century America, what they all share concerns their limited ability to make choices due to economics and/or race.

One example of a female protagonist in migration literature who does not experience such economic or racial limitations is Taylor Greer in Barbara Kingsolver's *The Bean Trees* (1988). The chief motivating factor for her migration is her wish to

escape a gendered future in Pittman, Kentucky that she believes will imprison her.⁴⁶ Although poor, she manages to obtain and keep employment at the town hospital, which she had deemed to be a suitable workplace because it “was one of the most important and cleanest places for about a hundred miles” (4). By the time that Taylor is in her mid-20s, she has saved enough money, after helping her mother with monthly living expenses, to purchase a used car (“a ’55 Volkswagen bug with no windows to speak of, and no back seat and no starter” [10]). She plans to migrate in this car—intending “to drive out of Pittman County and never look back” (10). As for destination, Taylor has no pre-determined spot in mind, and she admits, “I had no way of knowing why or how any particular place might be preferable to any other”; so, she decides “that [she] would drive west until [her] car stopped running” (12).⁴⁷ Her promise to herself is soon forgotten, though, as car troubles are repaired, but she continues migrating until she needs for shelter for her discovery, an abandoned Native American child who she nicknames Turtle. This causes Taylor to stop—and remain—in Tucson.

Kingsolver’s protagonist *does* experience economic lack as well as social pressure from fellow young people in Pittman due to the gender performance that she has chosen to give (not married, not pregnant, and graduating high school). Nevertheless, she has resources that the female protagonists of my chosen texts can never obtain. That Taylor

⁴⁶ A teenaged Taylor declares that no romantic encounters or relationships “had so far inspired [her] to get hogtied to a future as a tobacco farmer’s wife” (Kingsolver 3).

⁴⁷ In *The Return of the Vanishing American*, Leslie Fiedler posits that one defining factor about westward migration in American literature is rooted in a masculine mindset: escape from a dominating femininity by moving to an area where such domination does not exist (because women do not tend to migrate to the American West). To me, that Taylor is determined—but not dominating—and that her arrival in the West does not bring gendered destruction shows the inaccuracy of Fiedler’s conjecture.

manages to find long-lasting work cannot happen for Ma Joad and Estrella, whose migrant farm work will always be temporary due to its connection to growing seasons. Therefore, their families can never have a permanent home because of the sporadic nature of their particular migration—they have to move where the agricultural work is. That Taylor has the ability to save cannot happen for Gertie Nevels; the money that she been saving before migration in order to purchase land winds up going to funeral and burial expenses. After migration, she does not initially enter the Detroit workforce, but she later realizes that she must reestablish herself as the family breadwinner due to her husband's unemployment. All of her earnings—as well as her artistic talents—are needed so that her family can eke out an existence. That Taylor has the economic freedom to make such a relatively high-priced purchase like an automobile as well as the racial freedom to travel anywhere—even if she has no particular destination in mind—is not universally possible for women of color (such as Helga Crane and Janie Crawford) in early twentieth-century America. Because these literary characters identify as black women, their gender and racial roles are limited in places like the American South: to purchase their own cars, drive them, or travel without destination might result in severe physical harm or even death.

Although some of my chosen texts (e.g., *The Grapes of Wrath* and *Under the Feet of Jesus*) explore family makeup, I argue that *The Bean Trees* ventures beyond this, for it features a protagonist who has an enhanced ability to define her own family because of the contemporary time period of her migration. In other words, Taylor benefits from living in a historical moment (the 1980s) when geographical movement has the capacity to improve her social standing—and not indict how she chooses to shape her identity.

Kingsolver's novel concludes with her protagonist returning to Tucson, having travelled to Oklahoma City in order to adopt Turtle. In a phone call to her roommate, Taylor shares the adoption news and informs her that she will soon be coming *home*; her roommate, in reply, expresses how glad that this return makes her. Such reciprocal happiness does not occur in most of the texts that I discuss in this dissertation, because their female protagonists do not experience freedoms (economic, social, or gender) that they hope migration will grant them. Furthermore, even though these novels' conclusions are somewhat open-ended, what their female protagonists experience (due to the gender roles that they play as well as how paradoxical space shapes their performances) informs readers that these particular lives have been negatively affected by migration: instead of liberation, it almost always leads to greater pressures and restrictions.

The texts that I examine here represent only the starting point of a needed extended study of gender in American migration literature. Further exploration of this topic necessitates the continued inclusion of female protagonists who represent different ethnic backgrounds. Other protagonist subsets include females of an advanced age (such as Pilate Dead in *Song of Solomon* [1977]) as well as those with disabilities (such as Eva Peace in *Sula* [1973])—such literary characters would face specific external self-performance issues, like changing (or retaining) gender roles over an extended period of time and navigating migration with physical, mental, or emotional difficulties. Another important distinction to note concerns gender politics. The study of gender in migration literature should not adhere to a male/female binary but should instead regard gender in terms of a spectrum; such a viewpoint would include those who identify as female. Also,

those interested in migration literature should note that America is a mobile society, with Census Bureau statistics showing that one moves at least eleven times during a lifetime. To me, one possible implication of this statistic is that such frequency in movement could be attributed partially to attempts at escaping gendered, socioeconomic, or institutional stressors. Through my findings in this dissertation, literary works reflect such real-life behavior. For females migrating in America during the twentieth century, they experience oppression through an increased enforcement of those norms. However, negotiations of one's interior and exterior spaces (such as through rhetorical performance) offer ways of breaking free from societal and institutional restriction.

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