

# **V Solitude in the Twentieth Century: Space, Gender, and Ethnicity**



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## “Mind Is the Cabin”: Substance and Success in Post-Thoreauvian Second Homes

**Abstract:** This essay explores how the core story of solitary retreat – an instance of what Kenneth Burke terms “the paradox of substance” – is enacted in cabin books from three historical junctures, books that are ‘post-Thoreauvian’ in how they adhere to or thwart expectations as to the framing and success of the endeavor.

### 1. A Portent

Into a container of takeout Kung Pao tofu the slip from a fortune cookie has dropped. I pull it out oily and orange and read: “Now is a good time for a bit of solitude.”

This is fortune indeed. It’s always now when you read this “now,” isn’t it? And “now” is always a “bit,” succeeded by further bits when what is here is taken as now: we champ at such bits. As for “solitude”: isn’t that the essence of “now”? “Now is a good time for a bit of company”: is that even a fortune? What among others would seem incidental – this wayward paper slip – figures as a portent since I happen to be alone. Now is a good time to begin that piece about solitude.

Longing for solitude is a fortune-cookie nostrum: What is it that makes the urge to be alone the stuff of mass production? Chinese takeout means dishes to pass, but a fortune cookie is yours alone. You might look around you at family or associates in half-spoken pecking order, read your fortune and say, yes, a bit, now is a good time. And if not now (I’m busy now) then soon.

When you say this, what do you imagine? Perhaps your home, your quarters (you’re drawn in quarters) but with others evacuated. But don’t they still impinge? Your home is a midden-heap mob scene rolled into a ball that like a scarab you roll about. Sisyphus in a circus ring. It’s what Henry David Thoreau said you drag down the road. Your home won’t do. Neither will a walk, if your route is a yoyo’s ambit from home, from that kitchen where takeout awaits, those containers. Granted a taste, you want to feed. A bit makes you greedy for a bite, a helping, the whole dish. You may feel you could go into solitude and never come back, never, except to say, see? It was a good time! I was fine alone. Then tell the others just how fine you were.

What you imagine is a cabin.

## 2. Second Homes

The cabin scenario is perennial in appeal – perennial, not eternal, like a plant that speciates, propagates, and eventually goes extinct. From its taproot in Thoreau's *Walden* (1854), it swells and insinuates. These days, it's flourishing. We could say it's a big moment for cabins: note the tiny house movement, the Cabin Porn group with its web presence and picture book (Klein, Lessart, and Kalina), popular solo cabin books in the US (Axelrod) and Europe (Tesson) alike. Yet when since William Wordsworth has it not been a big moment for cabins? Their past shadows their present, their solo valence shades into social formations.

Post-Thoreau and through the turn of the nineteenth century, a rash of instantiations of the urge to retreat took shape, second-home cabins prominent among them. The flush subsided before World War I but never ebbed altogether: "the myth remained as a significant part of American culture" (Schmitt 188). "Besides a second bathroom, a second telephone, and a second car, many American families either own or are planning to acquire a second home away from home" (Walton 13). So opens a book on cabins I have, a how-to guide from the Sixties. It was the time of the A-frame, which this guide contains plans for. This stripped-down structure was all the rage, the most basic imaginable. Fortune indeed: first letter and first structure coinciding, such that making this frame spells going back to Go.

The cabin is Go, what you look back to – Thoreau, Arcadia, last weekend – back to point A. Back to a second presence felt in the second home, if you follow your fortune, go alone, and return to tell. Post-Thoreau, that's in the plans.

## 3. Post-Thoreauvian Cabins

I learned this, at least, by my experiment; that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life which he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. (Thoreau, *Walden* 323)

What might 'post-Thoreauvian' mean? Not that the *Walden* script, the second home in nature, is obsolete: it's going strong. It could mean that since *Walden*, cabin tales are self-evidently post-Thoreauvian, just because they come afterward. For genre, this ramifies. Each member of a genre is a study of conditions that give rise to it, yet Thoreau's account does not just study genre conditions, it doubles back to comprise them, part and parcel thereof. *Walden* sets terms for how we read these books, acknowledged or not. By post-Thoreauvian, in part I mean just this.

But if conditions shift, so genres do, by adaptation as it were, as finch beaks get selected for stoutness given nuts tough to crack. Some cabin books turn post-Thoreauvian in that the retreat scenario gets tougher to crack. Recipes for success

can't be followed, ingredients can't be found, the dish doesn't turn out like it did. What are these post-Thoreauvian concoctions, these latter-day tales of solo second homes? How are they made? What successes, unexpected or not, do they portend?

This essay will take up solo cabin books from three junctures over the twentieth century. First, there's Henry Beston's *The Outermost House: A Year of Life on the Great Beach of Cape Cod* (1928). From the post-WWI trough of the fin-de-siècle nature wave, it stands for that era in nature writing canons: post-Thoreauvian in adherence to type. Then there's *The Clam Lake Papers: A Winter in the North Woods* (1977) by Edward Lueders, coincident with the post-Earth Day back-to-nature movement, from which issued canonical nature-solitude books by Annie Dillard and Edward Abbey. Once touted for its Thoreauvian temper, the book has left print and turned obscure for reasons (I'd say) concerning its turns from Thoreauvian protocol. Finally, Charles Siebert's *Wickerby: An Urban Pastoral* (1996) postdates the ozone hole and anticipates the 'anthropocene' – dents in prospects for human-free nature retreat. All three depict solo figures in second homes, vacation places turned to other than leisure use – not unlike *Walden*, since the pond-side cabin was effectually a time-share, a hiatus from family home.

#### 4. Substance and Retreat

In any weather, at any hour of the day or night, I have been anxious to improve the nick of time, and notch it on my stick too; to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line. (Thoreau, *Walden* 17)

Here are premises I want to develop through these books – a bare scheme, like an A-frame.

“[T]o front only the essential facts of life” (90): this is *Walden's* statement of intent. “Front” is outside, “essential” is within. The core story of retreat in nature is this: “fronting the essential facts” of what's not you will expose what includes you and so disclose what is you. The story is perennial as an instance of what Kenneth Burke calls the “paradox of substance.” Says Burke, “the word ‘substance,’ used to designate what a thing *is*, derives from a word designating something that a thing is *not*.” What's “*intrinsic*” to something – its “*substance*” – is defined by what is “*extrinsic*”: its sub-stance, what it stands upon. Burke deems this “an inevitable paradox of definition, an antinomy that must endow the concept of substance with unresolvable ambiguity.” Trafficking across antinomies produces “a strategic moment, an alchemic moment, wherein momentous miracles of transformation can take place” (23–24). It is especially telling in discourse on ‘nature,’ senses of which encompass both ends of this antinomy: nature as great outdoors, nature as innate disposition.<sup>1</sup>

Transformation attending a strategic moment: “the nick of time,” followed by “notch.” This suggests plot, if only of one moment succeeding another. Like fractals, nick-to-notch micro-plots play out at macro-levels as well. Thoreau’s core plot is what I have called a “narrative of retreat,” its logic consonant with the paradox of substance. John Muir encapsulates it: “I only went out for a walk, and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in” (qtd. in Wolfe 439). Go out as far as you can, and transformation ensues, a “going in”: a recognition of such, something found. This recognition constitutes “success unexpected in common hours.” Thoreauvian retreat is a success story: you find what you left for.

The cabin scenario is key to narratives of retreat. Materially, the cabin enables solitude requisite to ‘fronting’: shelter and sustenance. Rhetorically, the cabin is synecdoche for the heightened interior, the ‘finding’ sought in retreat. Narratively, the cabin is the site of its staging, its performance. You follow the plot, the outcome. You see how you might do it yourself: make time for a bit of solitude.

The cabin is in practice rarely and in principle never a primary residence. It’s a second home, in fact and as synecdoche. Practically, the cabin orbits the family home: A-frames proliferate once the frontier closes and cabins are something to look back on. In principle, the cabin drama is necessarily punctuated, for it depends on the break from solitude – recognition, not cognition – enacted in verbal performance. The cabin as first home implies hermits, and hermits are bores. Those who don’t emerge don’t report. The second home is a scene of writing, its subject a second presence not found in common hours. The punctuated character, the secondness of solitude is crucial to the cabin scenario – permutation of a doubleness that Thoreau, in *Walden*’s chapter “Solitude,” remarks. How success at this works out in post-Thoreauvian cabins, we shall see.

## 5. Beston’s Success

Beston constructs his dream house, advances confidently in the direction of a builder, and has it made to his specifications. It’s the utmost, the outermost house, like Walden as Thoreau imagines it: “Solitary and elemental, unsullied and remote, ... the end or the beginning of a world” (1–2). It’s understood these qualities are ones this writer would acquire, this nick of time (end or beginning) one he’d stand on and notch with his pen.

His specifications bespeak his desire. He’s nuts about windows, crams ten into a two-room place. He gives the place a name: “the Focastle” (6). The name (which means site of a ship’s pilothouse) is suggestive: this cabin is trig like a yacht’s; the dune is a craft steered through trackless seas. The house tropes the occupant’s

presence, a head with windows as compound eyes. The cabin is synecdoche for heightened interior, 'substantiated' through outside prospects. For this, "fo'castle" is exact.

His personal history is incidental; this is fronting, not backing up. We don't learn how the writer finds leisure to frequent Cape Cod: "it came about that I found myself free to visit there, and so I built myself a house upon the beach" (6). "It came about": that's like "once upon a time." He vacations there, then stays put:

I lingered on, and as the year lengthened into autumn, the beauty and mystery of this earth and outer sea so possessed and held me that I could not go. The world to-day is sick to its thin blood for lack of elemental things ... The longer I stayed, the more eager I was to know this coast and to share its mysterious and elemental life; I found myself free to do so, I had no fear of being alone ... presently I made up my mind to remain and try living for a year on Eastham Beach. (10–11)

He only went out for vacation, and concluded to stay out all year. He is "possessed": an "outer sea" holds from within. His motive for staying is to "share" what's "elemental" with deprived moderns eager for A-frames. This is Thoreauvian, a gentler version of rousing desperate masses.

Like *Walden*, Beston's book observes the conceit of a year unfolding by seasons, crossed with topical discussions. It is episodic, not cumulative, and so has no climax as such, rather a concluding anthem in which themes are re-invoked and morals ascribed. Time's depth, expanse, and suspension are foremost, nick and notch of eternities: "*Creation is here and now.*" Alchemy of substance pervades retrospection: "And because I had known this outer and secret world ... reverence and gratitude greater and deeper than ever possessed me" (220).

It's a success story, like Thoreauvian retreat in general. *Walden* is retrospective – an account after the fact – and what's looked back upon, never in doubt, is the outcome. Success is heralded from the outset, the writer's purpose to answer neighbors clamoring with questions on his return. Just one episode bespeaks the least uncertainty: the moment from "Solitude" in which a tinge of loneliness is perceived "as a slight insanity in my mood" (131), arising just after he's missed visitors to his cabin. The crisis passes, and what follows is rapture and communion, "an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me" (132). It is "success unexpected," in the nick of time: the Thoreauvian script in fine.

Beston adheres to it. His book is introduced as an outcome, a success. He too has undergone a trial associated with visitors – coast guard patrols who drop in most days. He is more forthcoming about both solitude's difficulty ("It is not easy to live alone") and its degree ("I made no pretence of acting the conventional hermit") (95). But he does not dwell on this hardship, and in his account, too,

the mood is succeeded by rapture and communion: “I lived in the midst of an abundance of natural life ... and from being thus surrounded ... I drew a secret and sustaining energy” (95). The word “sustaining” occurs in both paeans, an image of substance: what’s outside supporting what’s vital within.

If success is predictable, how is it unexpected? For one thing, it comes all of a sudden. The nearest thing to a climax in *The Outermost House* comes in its best known chapter, “Night on the Great Beach,” with the writer reporting a literally exceptional sensation during a storm viewed through cabin windows:

[T]hat night there came over me, for the first and last time of all my solitary year, a sense of isolation and remoteness from my kind ... Under the violences of light the great dunes took on a kind of elemental passivity, the quiet of earth enchanted into stone ... I felt, as never before, a sense of the vast time, of the thousands of cyclic and uncounted years which had passed since these giants had risen from the dark ocean at their feet. (187)

If this is a climax, that’s because it’s a onetime event in a round of recognitions that are “cyclic,” habitual. Moreover, it’s climactic in that the logic of retreat attains closure – the expected outcome to a tale of unexpected success. Retreat to nature is a quest to lose the human, and in “remoteness from my kind,” that is fulfilled.

Further, while the script has precedent, the sentences surprise. He couldn’t have seen them coming. They are of a sort liable to happen to a person alone in a shack on a beach – a windowed scene of writing. We know they happened there because the author says so, in his foreword to their twentieth-anniversary reprinting: they are “set down in long hand on the kitchen table overlooking the North Atlantic and the dunes” (xxvii). The book met with success unexpected in hours of its composition. It proved key to preservation of that beach. Built on sand, the house was moved twice before it washed away in a storm. A reconstruction has been made, a tourist site and shrine, like the cabin replica at Walden Pond. Yet like the house, the book *The Outermost House* is a vulnerable landmark. Its sentences erode in collective estimation. They’re inscribed in what Siebert in *Wickerby* calls “ledgers of impermanence” (13). In the storm, apprehending deep time, their maker would have felt this coming. We see *Walden* headed there, too – try teaching it to freshmen. That too is foreseen and accepted by its maker: “One generation abandons the enterprises of another like stranded vessels” (Thoreau, *Walden* 11). Like wrecks at Cape Cod.

## 6. Lueders’s Doubleness

I am sensible of a certain doubleness by which I can stand as remote from myself as from another ... When the play – it may be the tragedy of life – is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction. (Thoreau, *Journal* 146)



Lueders quotes this passage from Thoreau's *The Journal* (a version of one in "Solitude") as an epigraph to the epilogue of *The Clam Lake Papers*. Its pertinence depends on knowing how the volume is framed. Epilogue is one support, a prologue another. A narrator, presumably Lueders, claims to be "the editor of this book," his intent "to blend into the landscape of the work ..., to disappear." A professor, he owns a cabin in Wisconsin which he flees to seasonally for Thoreauvian ends, "a retreat to the self." Here, he reports, "an author who needed to write got to do so because I provided him the place ... in which he could follow his concerns wherever they might lead" (3–4). Where they have led, he alleges, is to this book, written by someone else.

This is the conceit of discovered papers, used in some novels to establish persona – "a kind of fiction." "Disappear" indeed: this is clearly Lueders's own book. In this prologue he concocts a story about arriving at the cabin and finding that, like a scribbling Goldilocks, some unknown party has contrived to enter and winter there. Evidence is twofold: exhausted food stores and a table full of papers. A persona, then. But this persona does not declare itself, leaves no trace of personal identity in the papers or the three letters addressed to Lueders likewise deposited, placed at the volume's start, middle, and end: an A-frame.

The first letter declares the intruder's motive: "I have some business here or, rather, a need to be apart from business anywhere else – to balance out an account or two. If nothing else, I should have myself to myself for a spell, with insulation" (18). Thoreauvian strains prevail, in the trope of the solitary's "business" (a running gag in *Walden*) and in the suggestion of doubleness, a self having itself to itself, with ambiguity as to whether "insulation" envelops or intervenes in this relation. Yet there is also a departure attendant on this framing conceit. In Thoreau (and Beston) the cabin experience, reported in retrospect, is declared a success from the start. Success warrants the reporting: why report if it's failed? In the scenario of the *The Clam Lake Papers*, by contrast, there's suspense. The conceit of the intruder makes this writing a clue. It is remarkable the effect this has: you know this is a set-up by the professor, that it's his solitude, his sentences the *The Clam Lake Papers* contain, and still you read them as if they'd been left by a trespasser. As per another epigraph (from Wallace Stevens), we "know that it is a fiction and ... believe in it willingly" (2).

The book is composed in sections – most shorter than a page, some just moments or aphorisms – separated by snowflake characters like intricate asterisks. Outdoor incidents, topical observations, abstract inquiries: a scrapbook with through-lines. Sections seem composed consecutively, yet that effect is circumstantial, unbacked by chronology, human encounters, any regime besides writing

alternating with walks. The figure of the cabin as windowed scene of writing is distilled: it is a book not about but made of the moments of its making.

A prevailing through-line concerns metaphor (the metaphorical imperative) in contrast with analogy:

*Analogy:* My mind is like the cabin I am living in; my thoughts are like its furnishings.

*Metaphor:* My mind is the cabin I am living in, furnished by my thoughts. (38)

Analogy spells reason and “metrics,” metaphor relatedness and “rhythmics” (40), to speak broadly. In posing resemblances, there is such a thing as false analogy; a metaphor cannot be false, just better or worse, since it is a fiction from inception: “Metaphor trades in belief. In the middle of *belief* is *lie*” (47). Intruder is a lie for mind in solitude; mind is the cabin; cabin is locus of transformations of substance, rhythmics between interior and exterior, figured repeatedly in attention to states of awareness, which is acute:

The longer I go through my solitary rounds and days here, the more the focus of my activity blends with what seemed at the outset an inhospitable setting. My isolation in this winter fastness presses my consciousness back upon itself ... I become a society of one, but the isolation also turns my attention and sentimental attachments outward in new ways ... I am joined to the society of sounds that accompany all my movements ... the sharp consonants of the typewriter’s clacking response as I fix these very remarks on the page, alternating the open vowel silences between the words with the strokes of the keys. (52–53)

Under winter’s motive stillness, opposition of interior and exterior (“inhospitable setting”) gives way to relatedness and “society,” through turns at once “outward” and “back upon” self. There is a rhythm of typing sounds with “vowel silences” – outer and inner voice. “Society” is a figure of doubleness, the cabin’s sounds assuming speaking parts, making theater of sensation. Doubleness is solitude’s hallmark, what differentiates it from loneliness, as Thoreau insists: “I never found the companion so companionable as solitude” (*Walden* 135). It’s a paradox this writer confirms: “In solitude I become sociable and candid. I converse quite successfully” (23). The intruder persona – the second home’s second presence – dramatizes this doubleness.

Doubleness as alchemical, effecting transformation: at a certain level of generality, all narratives of retreat enact such moments. Still, the intensity with which it pursues consciousness “pressing back,” and the conceit of the second presence as metonymy for solitude, make *The Clam Lake Papers* an outlier: post-Thoreauvian. Dust jacket comparisons to *Walden* and Dillard mislead. The book has their earmarks but confounds expectations – as strange to readers as to itself.

Back to suspense: the other shoe dropping, another way *The Clam Lake Papers* is post-Thoreauvian. Its opening – papers on a table – conjures a mystery, inviting

return to (doubling back on) the scene of the crime. It's a scene of writing – a trespass bent on enacting some private (non)business, no word on what that might be: hence suspense. What transpires is not that riveting: the conceit contrives mystery from what is mainly a stack of papers. Yet there's suspense as to where, in its accumulation, this writing is headed. The writer feels it: "If I keep it up, where will it go? ... Along what paths will my wondering take me?" (23). The entries do not describe but rather constitute those paths, and there is lambent suspense in tracing their motion, their relatedness: what happens next.

Do they lead to success? Toward the book's end, that's still unsettled:

Am I really doing anything these days? I largely ignore the place, the shifts of weather, the snow-still woods, and the hidden life in it ... The more I move into abstract conjecture ... the less I am concerned with what pleased me most when I first arrived ... Am I occupied or merely preoccupied? Am I any closer to knowing what I came for, or am I somehow losing ground? (129)

There's creeping anomie, intellectualized cabin fever. Substance rides herd over sub-stance: he's losing touch. Are paths trailing into dead ends? Where is the way out?

As the book closes, a way opens – recovery of ground. The writer is "awakened by a mysterious confluence of sounds in the night and words in my mind," sounds coextensive with the place, its creatures and elements, the words a reverberating phrase: "*Common ground*." He rises with alacrity and writes "to follow that unbidden calling, the promise, the peculiar mandate" that roused him. It "is elusive and pulls back," but he retrieves what he can. Chiefly, he's possessed by "the compelling echo of wholeness in the phrase that held my mind," that "revelation" – occupied, not preoccupied thereby (138–39).

After abstraction and preoccupation, there's conversion after all, one that does not surpass but crystallizes around words – wolf-howl, wind-rise, coalescing about a phrase, like snowflake with dust mote. An apotheosis of ground, sub-stance to substance. An exterior recognition follows the interior, the writer walking outside and finding a bear – or rather, "a faint mist of steam" from the den where one hibernates (141). He's suspected and sought it all along, so its appearance is both portent and device, a sign of closure.

Success, then: post-Thoreauvian in deferment, arch-Thoreauvian in upshot. In his last letter, the intruder confirms, "I have about finished what I came for, that is I have found it cannot be finished" (143). But the editor claims the last word. Failing to locate the trespasser, who has "returned to his anonymity and oblivion," he muses that even were he to "meet him face to face," he could not say: "I should

not know him from Adam” (148). This recalls *Walden’s* first page, how it’s “always the first person that is speaking” (3) – first person, face to face in a second home.

## 7. Siebert’s Nature

In adapting to genre conditions, *The Clam Lake Papers* is not really the stout beak I promised, more a needle-nosed instrument extracting deep seeds. It’s endangered. The tough nut for nature retreat these days is ‘nature’ itself, its celebrated end, whether bemoaned (McKibben) or espoused (Morton). My last book takes a crack at that.

*Wickerby’s* provocation appears on its dust jacket, a selling point: “There is no such thing as nature ... There is just the earth and us, the name-callers, standing upon it, calling those places without us, nature.” A divide is imposed between terms of antinomy: interiorized “name-callers” and exterior earth, what we are “standing upon.” Warrant for nature’s nonexistence is found in identity between human and non-human creations, skyscrapers and trees both “habitable outgrowths of the same skyward longing” (80). This is *Wickerby’s* prevailing note.

It is skyscrapers inciting Siebert as he writes: that’s what he’s looking at, a view of Manhattan. Like Thoreau, Beston, and Lueders, Siebert frames his book retrospectively. But where the first two look back on entire success and the third contrives suspense before affirming success, *Wickerby* is different. The book is framed by an encompassing conceit, as if the whole thing were written in a single present-tense stretch: the evening of the writer’s return to Brooklyn after five months alone at *Wickerby*. In cabin sections there’s not a present-tense episode anywhere, even though all he did there (besides wander and get soused) is write. The device is as much a fiction as is Lueders’s double (no one writes two hundred pages in one evening) yet differently inflected, its effect to announce not success or suspense but essentially failure. Not *Walden’s* “Solitude” but “Contact!” (71) in *The Maine Woods’* “Ktaadn” is tutelary, and the bifurcations in an entry from *The Journal* from which Siebert draws his epigraph: “We soon get through with Nature. She excites an expectation which she cannot satisfy” (263). From an opening report of terror experienced not from tangible danger but from “too much time alone” (4), to a closing tour of “places where I got so roundly outwaited, so gently rebuked” in solitude (211), success is arrested in *Wickerby*; alienation and melancholy prevail.

This is one feature that makes *Wickerby* post-Thoreauvian: its upending of the script of solitude’s solace. Another concerns personal history, not effaced but foregrounded here. The cabin called *Wickerby* belongs to his fiancée, her family’s second home. Bex left for Africa and has been gone longer than expected. Missing her dreadfully, his Brooklyn street dug up and impassable, Siebert is anxious, resentful,

and desperate. He has no choice; he'll ditch the ditch and show her. It's revenge retreat, a Foreign Legion of one. His exterior, the cabin, proves decrepit. His interior, his consciousness, "begins to contract, harden, to form a protective shell around the altogether unnatural condition of loneliness" (5). His mind is the cabin: a carapace around vacancy. It's a thwarted doubling, consciousness hard-pressed on itself.

He soon gets through with Nature but not with Bex. His account of the cabin is addressed to her. The conceit is that it's handwritten in "the ledgers of impermanence" (13): the so-called Wickerby diary, found in the cabin and removed to the flat, where his time without her can be recounted to Bex before it evanesces, along with collapsing cabin and other castles in air. His sentences, incidentally, are a glory: though presented as post facto, they show virtues of having been entered on site by an eloquent solitary with time to kill, albeit time he finds trackless and estranging.

Impermanence, castles in air: these are leitmotifs of this book and its moment.<sup>2</sup> Thoreau says it's fine to build castles in air, just put foundations under them: enact them in practice (324). Yet nature's demise makes theatrical extremity or facile primitivism out of retreat: a tough nut. The cabin's foundation is crumbling, its ruin portended; it could be gone already as he writes, its phone ringing to an empty field. Interpenetration of country and city is figured in images of structures both built in and founded on air: longed for, imaginary, evanescent. One analog to the collapsing cabin is the man with the house of refuse – a homeless guy who has concocted a dwelling on the sidewalk below Siebert's flat, with furnishings, jury-rigged perimeters, a floor space he scrupulously sweeps. On rooftops above are pigeon mumblers, who build sheds next to the roosts, cabins of sorts, and spend hours releasing their flocks to points beyond telling, then awaiting their return, waving them in. Such portents abound.

Mumblers are isolates but comprise a community as well. They instantiate what Patrick Murphy takes as moral from *Wickerby*: that "the experience of retreat" need not be "a solitary discovery," might rather be "a family experience," attainable "in Brooklyn as well as anywhere else." Murphy adduces the book as corrective to Thoreau, whom he faults for neglecting "the fundamental physiological nature of human beings as interdependent social creatures" (21–22). There is something to this, of course. It is true that Siebert hopes to return to Wickerby with Bex, as family. And I have read of scientific research that deems loneliness physical pain, selected through evolution to chase singles back to the fold. Yet talk of what's "fundamental" should give pause. Thoreau himself is no fundamentalist on this score. Jane Bennett is defter on him, finding Thoreau's evoking of 'nature' to be "mobile, deceptive, and complex," his unilateral pronouncements (such as Siebert's epigraph, "We soon get through with Nature") undercut by insinuation with ethical import (22). "Through

with Nature” comes in the midst of *The Journal* – a watershed moment, not conclusion. Nature has more lives to live in his work.<sup>3</sup>

Antinomies of definition, Burke cautions, “will be discovered lurking beneath any vocabulary designed to treat of motivation by the deliberate outlawing of the word for substance” (24). So it is with ‘nature’: if it’s proscribed, equivalents crop up unbidden and circulate, working alchemy. They work as what Bennett calls “crossings,” spun off when plying “pure categories of nature and culture” produces “strange and mobile complexes of the given and the made” (96). *Wickerby* is rife with such crossings, generated by pure proscription of nature rather than pure Thoreauvian approbation. It is not anti- but post-Thoreauvian this way.

This goes for retreat as well: proscribed, solitude resurfaces in crossings, in transitory moments and figures. The ascetic imperative impelling retreat is not foreign but proper to culture. It “*raises the issue* of culture,” disclosing how “an integral part of cultural experience is a disquiet, an ambivalent yearning” for some extracultural state (Harpham xii), some sub-stance. It structures an opposition of temptation and resistance. When Siebert recoils from solitude – finding no purchase in its blank expanse, no nick to notch on his stick – its temptations surface as portents across the cityscape. They circulate through rhythmic, figurative ingenuities, verbal extravagance. “*Extra vagance!* It depends on how you are yarded” (Thoreau, *Walden* 324). What is “extra vagance” if not portent-making? Resistance to how you are yarded, gesturing toward the ulterior. Portents get formulated from happenstance in solitude – what distinguishes solitude from loneliness, that moments come to portend.

For solitude Siebert was ill-prepared, we might say; it wasn’t a good time and it was more than a bit. Yet he succeeds at last, on terms consistent with his premises. Going out, he finds what he went for, only he finds it back in Brooklyn: all there, but “all in the margins” (214). Only among others can he comprehend solitude, only in solitude apprehend the city. It’s a dilemma which alchemical crossings of substance both bear out and belie, in words that do not describe but comprise occasions. To Siebert, language and consciousness are a fall inscribed on our DNA, “that one catch, squiggle, snag” that spurs invention yet ropes us off from the rest of creation (143). He laments this incessantly. Yet snags work two ways: to trip you up or fix you to larger things. Purifying a rift between substance and sub-stance, Siebert spins crossings that belie the divide. Such portents are fortune indeed. “Belie” approaches “believe.” What you take out, you eat in.

## 8. Words About the House

“We soon get through with Nature.” The contention is echoed, not without irony, in expressions prevailing in environmental criticism these days: ‘post-nature,’ ‘ecology

without nature,' 'post-human,' 'Post-organism,' we might as well say. For the *pas de deux* of individuation in context, of container with thing contained, is perennial.

Take "ecology without nature" (Morton). However striking as a slogan and program for environmental action, it amounts to a strategic recasting of the paradox of substance. 'Ecology' comes from *oikos*, the Greek word for 'house': 'words about the house,' roughly speaking (Worster 192). Put everything into the house, all of creation, and up crops some *hors de oikos*, an outside-of-house, a sub-stance to reckon with. A second home, as it were, surpassing while turning back upon the first. Something like 'nature' is bound to entitle this dynamic, this shuttling between 'apart' and 'a part.' It's what stories of cabin solitude, early and late, enact. We don't soon get through with that.

## Notes

1. This holds true for 'wilderness' as well, see my "Antinomies of Participation in Literacy and Wilderness" (2007). The "narrative of retreat," in the following paragraph, is elaborated in my *Dramas of Solitude: Narratives of Retreat in American Nature Writing* (1998). The "cabin as windowed scene of writing," also below, is discussed there, too. I run a small herd of key terms which I am circling up here.

In language of nature, we crisscross poles of substance, featuring one or another by turns: language on or as exterior or interior:

on	exterior
as	interior

On exterior = natural history. On interior = phenomenology.

As exterior = amanuensis. As interior = idealism. Airtight.

2. Additionally, its moment – since designated the anthropocene – informs this book. Imperiled biodiversity, climate change, human-machine interrelations, genetics as entelechy and more, all crop up as topics while inflecting its temper.
3. It's worth noting that what Siebert adduces as epigraph leads, in Thoreau's entry, to reflection expressly on antinomies of definition with 'nature,' traffic between inside and out: "This earth which is spread out like a map around me is but the lining of my inmost soul exposed. In me is the sucker that I see" (Thoreau, *Journal* 264).

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Nassim Winnie Balestrini

## Socially Constructed Selfhood: Emily Dickinson in Full-Cast and Single-Actor Plays

**Abstract:** In plays on Emily Dickinson, dramatists depict how contrasting cultural imaginaries interpret the nineteenth-century poet's reclusiveness. These imaginaries range from justifying her transgressions against cultural norms to acknowledging problematic reading practices determined by theories of the socially constructed, relational self.

### 1. A Reclusive Poet's Theatrical Career

Emily Dickinson's withdrawal from society has been the source of numerous myths about her love life and her psychological well-being. Writers of biographical plays about the nineteenth-century New England poet necessarily confront the question as to how a dramatic work – to be put on stage to engage an audience – can convincingly depict reclusiveness. How, in other words, do playwrights dramatize and stage Dickinson's perceived social invisibility in plays with casts comprising more than one actor? Does the form of a one-actor play/performance solve the problem of addressing and/or depicting such a life on a stage peopled with the ostensible recluse's social circle? Even more poignantly, how can a one-woman show feature a poet reputed to be a shy loner, played by an actor who seemingly confides in an audience consisting of strangers?

The inconclusive knowledge about Dickinson's reasons for deciding to remain single and to restrict her social ambit to a few relatives and friends with whom she regularly interacted and corresponded has spawned a sizeable body of stage works in which snippets from her poems and letters merge with the respective writer's imagination, filling in numerous intriguing gaps and blanks in Dickinson's biography.<sup>1</sup> In spoken drama, Dickinson's inscrutable biography has inspired numerous playwrights over the past roughly ninety years. At least twenty plays have been published or staged since Susan Glaspell's *Alison's House* was first performed at the Civic Repertory Theatre, New York, on 1 December 1930 (Balestrini 226). William Luce's *The Belle of Amherst: A Play Based on the Life of Emily Dickinson* (Broadway premiere: 28 April 1976) is the earliest one-actor drama about Dickinson. More recently, K. D. Halpin and Kate Nugent produced *Emily Unplugged* (Sleeveless Theater, MA, premiere in 1995), and the British-American couple Edie Campbell and Jack Lynch published *Emily Dickinson & I: The Journey of a Portrayal: A One Woman Play about Writing, Acting, and Getting into Emily Dickinson's*

*Dress* (2005).<sup>2</sup> In 2014, the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst presented John Bechtold's "Before You Became Improbable<sup>3</sup>: An Immersive Theatrical Journey Inspired by Emily Dickinson's Poetry and Letters to T.W. Higginson," which is a dramatic rendering of the poet's communication with her editor.<sup>3</sup>

Broadly put, this essay will show that the two selected authors who opted for a cast including multiple actors dramatize, first, notions of why Dickinson came to lead a secluded life; second, the impact the solitary poet exerted on her contemporaries and on posterity; and, third, how the myths related to Dickinson's reclusiveness have affected her reception as a poet. By contrast, the three selected dramas that rely on a single female performer – that may impersonate more than one character – either present a highly agentic woman that metaphorically pokes out her tongue at people who consider(ed) her a curiosity and that, simultaneously, enlists the audience members as her allies in defying her critics. Or they foreground Dickinson's timeless relevance for contemporary artists and other readers who are engaged in self-finding processes and who invoke the nineteenth-century poet's relative social isolation as a naive shibboleth meant to convey and celebrate the notion of the secluded creative artist. As a result, such performances of single performers assume a high level of meta-poetic reflection. The solo act can thus portray a thought process focused on individual approaches to understanding Dickinson, her legacy, and her role in another artist's development. Paradoxically, staging this internal course of contemplation requires an immensely externalized and vocal form of communicating with audiences.

Before exploring this paradox, I will introduce selfhood theories developed in social psychology which will provide the basis of my analytical approach to the dramatic characters in plays with a multiple-actor cast and in plays with a solo performer. Establishing definitions of singular/independent versus social/interdependent selves is a crucial prerequisite of contemplating character development as well as diverging notions of singular/independent or social/interdependent selves because they frame selfhood as necessarily positioned within social relations. Long-standing assumptions that human beings are inherently socially oriented and that their self-understanding depends on social relations (Swann and Bosson 589–90, 594, 599–601) allow us to interpret implications regarding seclusion in a more nuanced light, as a matter of degree and as a phenomenon that must be discussed within a cultural-historical context that defines social roles and certain expectations regarding social interaction in a time-, place-, and culture-specific manner.

Juxtaposing early Dickinson plays that feature casts of roughly a dozen characters each with more recent plays for a solo performer reveals a marked shift in focus, even though overlap between earlier and later, full-cast and one-actor

biographical plays exists. The main difference lies in two contrasting tendencies: first, the seeming need to justify the poet's reclusiveness by highlighting her socially acceptable reasons and suggesting that her reclusiveness – either in itself or through the resulting poetic oeuvre – benefited others and thus actually reflected a deeper social concern; second, the interrogation of myths about Dickinson either with the result of depicting a proto-feminist poet or of foregrounding Dickinson as a figure of artistic identification that allows late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century characters to self-define. Metaphorically put, whoever dons the mantle of Dickinson's historicized solitude does so with the help of a garment designed and created in the wearer's own image.

## 2. Social and Relational Constructions of Selfhood

Numerous concepts of selfhood drawn from the field of social psychology stress “the fundamentally interpersonal” (Swann and Bosson 610) and, thus, the “socially constructed” (603) nature of the fluid and processual individual self. This so-called interactionist view of the self focuses on how human beings gain an understanding of who they are by constantly checking whether and how their idea of themselves coheres with their perceived social norms and with their ideas of how others see them (612). From this theoretical vantage point, extreme forms of solitude appear potentially pathological because any notion of selfhood requires a social context. Cultural psychology, a field that has gained influence since the 1990s and that contemplates the “cultural foundation of many psychological phenomena” (Heine 1423), reminds us, however, that the nature and extent to which self-construction depends on social interaction may, in fact, not be a clear-cut matter, as different cultures encourage individuals to position themselves in culture-specific ways within the spectrum between “independent” and “interdependent self-concepts” (1429; see also Plaut and Markus).

This cultural gray area between independent and interdependent selfhood helps us make sense of problems related to the reclusiveness with which the characters in Dickinson plays struggle. Can an individual self be truly independent and content? And at which point does a person's distance from others become discomfiting or a sign of imbalance or illness? Is a person's sense of isolation from society an essential, given trait, or is it a result of adapting to a specific socio-cultural environment or predicament? And how is a person's self-image related to or different from perceptions by others? In particular, two concepts apply to dramatic ways of presenting Dickinson and those trying to understand her. First, the idea of “relational value” (Leary 874) implies the process of assessing one's standing within a group by fathoming other group members' attitudes towards one's own

self; the resulting assessment will then affect one's self-esteem (874–75). In the dramatic works, the concept of 'relational value' allows us to understand how each play depicts Dickinson's view of herself within a social context. Second, the concept of "parasocial relationships" (884) facilitates discussion of how the plays deal with Dickinson's reception in literary criticism and in the cultural imaginary. While Mark R. Leary defines such a parasocial relationship between a fan and a famous person primarily for the era of television, the concept works well in the context of a canonized author who has become an iconic figure. The finding that parasocial relationships "may provide comfort and a sense of social connection even though the 'relationship' is distal and nonreciprocated" (884) also holds for dramatizations in which association with the secluded poet virtually enhances a dramatic character's sense of self-worth.

In light of these theories of socially constructed and relational selfhood, the analysis of selected plays will demonstrate that the relationship between the imagined Dickinson and the dramatis personae changes from a parasocial connection based on heightening one's own sense of self-worth through association with a specific version of the revered author to a reciprocal one, i.e., a relationship rooted in a sense of what I call 'dialogic selfhood,' according to which the poet and her seclusion can be neither unequivocally explained nor simply imitated.<sup>4</sup>

I use the terms 'reclusive' and 'solitary' interchangeably as designating the circumstance that Dickinson withdrew from social relations such as marriage and church membership that were deemed central to a woman's life in her social environment. The terms do not imply that Dickinson had no contact with others, as she obviously lived with her family and interacted with a small circle of friends and acquaintances, be it personally or by correspondence (Messmer; Wolff). How the poet felt about her lifestyle remains largely outside the purview of this essay. Instead, my analysis of selected dramatic works will focus on how myths and conceptualizations of Dickinson as a recluse participate in promoting various notions of selfhood.

### 3. Evoking Dickinson's Selfhood in Full-Cast Dramas

In Glaspell's *Alison's House*, for which Dickinson's family denied the dramatist the use of Dickinson's name and of her works (Guerra, "Dickinson Adaptations" 389), the titular character has been dead for 18 years when the play opens. The deceased poet is, naturally, physically absent but overwhelmingly present through memorabilia, her poems, and the conversing characters' recollections. While the poet's siblings, niece, and nephews share fond memories of Alison and disagree regarding how rumors about the reasons for Alison's reclusiveness affect the family's standing

within the local community, characters outside the family circle are split between curiosity regarding her unconventional biography and the value of her poetic oeuvre for posterity. The central conflict of the play is whether restricting access to Alison's biography and poems is tantamount to imprisoning the poet (Gaspell 25) and, by implication, making her reclusiveness permanent.

The concept of self-imprisonment in Gaspell's drama coheres with the mid-nineteenth-century gendered concepts of propriety upheld by the fictional poet's brother, John, and his daughter-in-law, Louise. According to John, Alison's self-imposed isolation expresses her acceptance of social norms that disallow the consummation of her love for a married man. While a person unaware of this reason may read the woman's spinsterhood as a psychological illness, the same person would possibly interpret male acts of self-isolation within a different tradition of thought. As Coby Dowdell argues, in post-revolutionary America the figure of the hermit became an emblem of individual liberty rebelling against oppressive majority rule (123). By the 1840s, the hermit was read not as an apolitical entity but rather as a particularly deep thinker that attempted to transcend party strife (143–44) and reconfirmed the nation's commitment to "deliberative democracy" (147). Yet the defenders of propriety in Gaspell's play do not promote such a philosophical reading of Alison's relative seclusion (rather than full-fledged hermitism), which they attribute solely to personal reasons. Analogously, Emily Dickinson's retreat not only from her studies at Mount Holyoke but also from her local church community and her avoidance of most interaction in public did not – for lack of extant records arguing otherwise – lead to a reputation as a female Thoreau in search of her Walden Pond. Rather, she came to be seen as an oddity precisely on account of her avoidance of normative social interaction.

According to Gaspell's rendering of the poet, her seclusion does not imply an entirely independent self-concept in the sense that she completely broke with social norms regarding her choice of a partner, but the poet becomes independent to the extent that she rejects fulfilling mid-nineteenth-century notions of white middle-class womanhood. Alison's poetic works, however, transcend her personal practice in the sense that not her biography but her oeuvre determines her long-term significance. Gaspell thus distinguishes between various ways of relating to Alison: family members cherish memories that imply Alison's superior powers of empathy; on top of that, those who have experienced the desire for or actually indulged in socially unacceptable love relationships feel a secret bond with her both through knowledge of her life story and through encountering hitherto unknown poems that address her suffering. Furthermore, outsiders engage in a range of parasocial relationships: Alison's nephew Ted provides insight into the sensationalist tendencies

of his Harvard professor who supposedly promised Ted a passing grade if he were to provide previously unknown details about Alison's recondite personality. The journalist Knowles, who visits the family's house in order to see where Alison wrote her poems, argues that the poet's works – which metonymically stand for Alison herself and for her life story – are not family property but rather “belong ... to the world” (5; see also 19, 144–48). These perspectives merge when family members and others conclude that Alison's poems comfort those who experience pain and possibly ostracism as a consequence of feeling desires that were unfulfillable because they were incompatible with the social norms governing intimate love relationships (139, 141, 145, 147, 149–53). The fictional world of the play then extends the idea of comfort found through a parasocial relationship beyond earthly life, as the empathetic link to Alison transcends death, which is the most extreme form of physical separation. When family members who have only now understood Alison's suffering say, as if speaking to her, “Never mind, Alison. We have found you” and “You will never be alone again” (141; see also 154–55), they imply that their willingness to empathize may soothe the deceased's suffering. The belated act of consoling the poet's soul acknowledges an awareness of Alison's ordeal, but it is obviously only a figurative gesture. Although the conflict between propriety and fulfillment persists in *Alison's House*, the family patriarch's decision to make his sister's poems about this painful conflict available in print represents a step towards rapprochement between the contending parties.

Dorothy Gardner's *Eastward in Eden*, which premiered in Boston and New York in November 1947, casts posterity's parasocial link to Dickinson as being based on the poet's ability to suffer stoically and to affirm traditional family values. In this case, instead of having other characters verbalize their admiration for Dickinson, the play stages the poet's vision of emotional fulfillment. Gardner's strategy implies that Dickinson's emotional attachment to a married man was beyond reproach. The play repeatedly invokes the conventional metaphor of earthly life as a prison (32, 48, 72, 77) only to set a surreal dream sequence in a “cottage in eternity” (64) as the locus of an afterlife. In this scene (63–72), Dickinson experiences a marriage-like union of two minds and souls rather than bodies. Right after this scene of emotional fulfillment, the second act closes with the spectacular effect of Dickinson's return to reality and to the earth-shattering awareness of her loss. Gardner's Dickinson thus embodies the ideal of an interdependent female self within the alleged safety of middle-class domesticity, even though her life story as we know it contradicts this impression. As a result, Gardner's play explains and justifies rather than pathologizes the poet's loneliness. Even though the third act of Gardner's play is set twenty years after Dickinson's loss of her true love, it shows Dickinson's lively interaction



with family members and friends. She and her sister, Lavinia, also discuss their lives with a sense of resigned acceptance (94–96), which is confirmed by closing words that imply Dickinson's reliance on God. Observing the first stars in the night sky, she says: "The lamp is lighted. God is very punctual" (100).

Glaspell's and Gardner's plays suggest that the female poet's self-imposed seclusion bestowed upon her an aura of irreproachability as a socially aberrant, gifted poet. Both plays negotiate the poet's seclusion as a personal issue during her lifetime. Although Glaspell's *Alison* inspires her unconventional relatives and thus casts her as a potential reformer, the play goes beyond the personal only in hindsight, characterizing the poet's secluded self as socially constructed and as socially relevant because Alison's works are potentially therapeutic for posterity.

#### 4. Dialogic Selfhood in One-Actor Plays

While traditional biographical plays – works that showcase the biographed individual through the depiction of momentous events, steps in personal development, tell-all revelations, artistic output, and responses by contemporaries – continue to be written, a growing number of playwrights have responded to postmodernist and new historicist critiques of historiography that foregrounds great personages and their ostensible achievements as objectively accessible. Playwrights instead spotlight the biographer's function as a lens, that is, as a person contemplating another person's life – possibly through reflection on her/his own life, by depicting the process of engaging with the biographed individual's life, personality, and legacy, and by commenting on metadramatic features related to producing the very play one is watching.<sup>5</sup>

Selecting the one-actor format to represent a historical personage known for her secluded lifestyle raises questions regarding the dramatic possibilities inherent in using the theatrical form of an extended monologue as a *mise-en-abîme* for interpreting the solitary protagonist. In the plays discussed in this section, the solo actor breaks through the fourth-wall illusion and communicates with her audience. In the earliest play, Luce's *The Belle of Amherst*, this results primarily in undermining long-standing myths about Dickinson as a secluded and extremely shy individual. The focus on the multiple Dickinsons constructed by recipients in different historical contexts, as depicted in two later plays, namely in Halpin and Nugent's *Emily Unplugged* and Campbell and Lynch's *Emily Dickinson & I*, rather indicates that any attempt at revealing what could be regarded as the poet's essential selfhood is doomed as each recipient has an agenda and can do no more than enter into a dialogue regarding perspectives on the nineteenth-century poet.

The first one-woman play on Dickinson, Luce's *The Belle of Amherst*, claims to be – as the subtitle says – *A Play Based on the Life of Emily Dickinson*. Its central concern is to revise the Dickinson cultural imaginary, replacing the cliché of a psychologically disturbed spinster with that of an agentic female artist who plays the role of the proverbial madwoman in the attic with relish (Luce 6) on account of her superior literary competencies. The monologue destroys the fourth-wall illusion by recruiting audience members as confidants. Luce's Dickinson asks "Oh, you agree with me?" as if the audience had indicated agreement, and she repeats "How do you spend your evenings [?]," as if someone had asked her a question (32). The character's verbal prowess, wit, and irony notwithstanding, Luce's Dickinson fails to transform into a clearly determined agent of her retreat from society. She inconclusively claims: "I don't regret my aloneness. I accept the pattern of life as it came to me – or as I caused it to be" (53). This dialectical relation between fate and agency relativizes the protagonist's defiant self-assertiveness throughout most of the play.

As the allusion to *MTV Unplugged* in the title of Halpin and Nugent's *Emily Unplugged* already implies, the play transfers the nineteenth-century poet into the present and chooses a format that supposedly allows access to what a recipient may consider the poet's authentic artistry and, possibly, self rather than presenting an engineered and polished version. More importantly, this one-woman show illustrates how processes of reception can be characterized by construing other people's motivations according to one's own wishes. Thus, the protagonist claims that people who feel "weird" (Halpin and Nugent) project their own social isolation onto Dickinson. As William B. Swann, Jr. and Jennifer K. Bosson point out, "[a]pparently, when people sense that they and others perceive the world through the same psychological 'lens,' their confidence in the validity of their own visions of reality is reinforced. Such 'I-sharing' may constitute a powerful antidote to the problem of existential isolation" (603). Eclectic scenes envision Dickinson in roles that undermine the cliché of the silently suffering solitary spinster – as in renderings of Dickinson as a rebellious teenager (with Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" as the soundtrack) and of Dickinson as a spoken word poet named Emmi D who recites the poem beginning with the verse "Wild Nights, Wild Nights," one of Dickinson's poems that has been read as depicting a woman's erotic fantasy (Reynolds 188–89). These ahistorical appropriations of Dickinson turn the poet into an icon that responds to contemporary versions of popularity and psychological compatibility.

The main title of Campbell and Lynch's *Emily Dickinson & I* introduces a drama that depicts the relationship between the single performer and her subject matter. The play's first subtitle, *The Journey of a Portrayal*, alludes to the topos of a travel

narrative and applies its extension in time and space to the process of artistic representation. The second subtitle, *A One Woman Play about Writing, Acting, and Getting into Emily Dickinson's Dress*, confirms the meta-dramatic dimension and closes with what will be revealed to be the crux of the protagonist's hybrid approach to auto/biographical drama and performance. As the play's main title indicates, Edie, the single performer, ponders the potentially significant similarities between Dickinson's and her own life. In tune with the subtitles, Edie narrates and acts out her fourteen-year-long attempt to write a Dickinson play that reveals the poet's essence rather than one person's perspective. When both projects come to naught in the sense that Edie rejects notions such as identifying with Dickinson and revealing her essence, the play uncovers expectations and reading practices that gain significance when considering Dickinson's reclusiveness.

The central motif that conveys Edie's journey towards distinguishing between the illusion of capturing another person's presumably stable self and the experience of creative process is Dickinson's emblematic dress. Edie questions not only the ways readers have been appropriating Dickinson, but also her own attempt at accessing the poet's psyche. At the opening of the play, the actor contrasts a bust of Dickinson by an unknown artist with a prototypical dress Dickinson may have worn (30).<sup>6</sup> Whereas the definitively shaped bust represents the poet as a monolithic icon to be admired in a pantheon, the malleable dress breathes softness, a domestic or at least everyday context, and the symbolism of a garment fitted to a specific human body. The idea of sharing the author's apparel becomes constitutive of merging the writer's experience, point of view, and sensibilities with the reader's. Similar to the situation in *Emily Unplugged*, "[s]uch 'I-sharing' may constitute a powerful antidote to the problem of existential isolation" (Swann and Bosson 603). As Campbell's play demonstrates, this sense of overcoming isolation is linked to understanding how artistic processes may include acts of projecting and constructing a psychological bond based on false premises.

When Dickinson's solitude within the ostensible world of protected spinsterhood is projected onto the solitary artist who emulates her, their shared psychological and artistic predicament reinforces the comforting effect of the time- and space-transcending parasocial relationship between the adored poet and the contemporary dramatist-actor. However, the dress becomes a treacherous object that ultimately leads Edie from being obsessed with Dickinson's life to focusing on her poetry. If we regard the dress as a nineteenth-century equivalent of today's mass-distributed images of celebrities, which Leary describes as constitutive of a parasocial relationship (884), it makes all the more sense that the dress has assumed such an iconic function among those who construct their selfhood through referencing their relation to a mysterious recluse.

In *Emily Dickinson & I*, Edie goes through various phases in her engagement with Dickinson's dress. In the first phase, she assumes that changing the dress will alter perceptions of the poet's character, but she rejects such an act as "putting words in Emily's mouth" (54). In the second phase, Edie reflects on her approach to acting as not "being" but rather "portraying" (59) a person (see also 60, 65). In the third phase, the dress as a work in progress gradually merges with Edie's coming to terms with Dickinson's writings as well as with her own verbal and dramatic creative process. In the fourth phase, Edie complicates the being-vs.-portraying idea by arguing that Dickinson's texts represent acts of posing and performing that must not be read as factual or unmediated (102–03).<sup>7</sup> As the dramatist-actor, thus, cannot access Dickinson, Edie tries on the dress, only to confirm that this, in fact, does not transform her into the poet (113). In the fifth and final phase, Edie imitates Dickinson's act of organizing and sewing sets of poems into fascicles (117). Edie thus completes her journey from seeking identification with Dickinson's elusive individual self to finding a satisfactory and, to her mind, non-falsifying method of acting in an auto/biographical drama.

On its meta-dramatic level, *Emily Dickinson & I* visualizes some of the dilemmas Campbell encounters, both as an individual with specific inner struggles and as an actor. The play's concern with the predicament of an early twenty-first-century artist simultaneously provides a perspective on Dickinson that offers an alternative to earlier readings of the poet's selfhood as primarily non-normative (41–42, 44, 48). Such readings imply that Dickinson's reclusiveness expresses something problematic. Edie's extensive counterarguments, by contrast, stress Dickinson's independence from society along with her interdependence with art, wondering whether "she withdrew from the world because of the richness of her inner life? Among her contemporaries Emily could find no one to match her intellectually" (49). By subsequently citing contemporary authors who desire solitude in order to think and work (51–52), Campbell implies that Dickinson assumed a right that artists are granted more readily today and that was accorded to male rather than female authors, as writers ever since Virginia Woolf have pointed out.

Finally, Edie explains that, whereas she finds comfort in assuming that Dickinson may also have suffered from panic attacks and that this could explain her inclination toward solitude (69), emulating the poet does not solve Edie's dilemma as an agoraphobic woman who wants to have a career as an actor. A poet may fulfill her task of writing poetry by retreating into the privacy of her personal space, but an actor like Edie needs a theater audience (69). Realizing this difference supports the play's move away from mere biography-based identification and towards the contemplation of artistic processes.

## 5. The Liberating Potential of Dialogic Selfhood

The plays discussed in this essay address contrasting attitudes toward reclusiveness along a continuum of interpretations ranging from reclusiveness as a tragically limiting condition that hampers emotional fulfillment to reclusiveness as a pathway towards liberation from prescriptive social relations and towards creative freedom. Historicizing dramas such as Glaspell's, Gardner's, and, to some extent, Luce's depict how Dickinson herself may have felt about being unconventional through remaining single, avoiding the full range of expected social relations, and writing equally unconventional poems. Dramatic characters that consider the domestic ideal as the *sine qua non* of a woman's happiness necessarily assume that the poet's seclusion primarily imposed limits on living a satisfactory life. Thus, these characters read Dickinson's poetic output as resulting from tragic circumstances whose origins must be explored because completely voluntary reclusiveness for the sake of artistic creativity would imply a non-prescriptive, independent selfhood not granted to a woman of Dickinson's cultural context. Whenever Dickinson is dramatically represented as a proto-feminist, either her lifestyle or her poetic output is understood as liberation from convention. In both variants, the plays imply that fathoming the poet's seclusion remains the central element in the endeavor to define her essential self.

By contrast, the more recent plays by Halpin and Nugent as well as by Campbell and Lynch demonstrate the impossibility of accessing anything that could be considered the monolithically real Dickinson. Rather, numerous versions of the poet reside in different cultural-historical contexts. Those characters who engage in a parasocial relationship with Dickinson use the perceived empathy between themselves and their object of admiration to enhance their self-worth. As *Emily Dickinson & I* illustrates, the transition from a parasocial interlinkage with a rigidly idolized personage to a dialogic relationship yields two insights: first, Dickinson fans and scholars will never conclusively know whether or to which extent the poet experienced her reclusiveness as limiting or liberating. Second, using Dickinson as a foil is only liberating for recipients of her works who are willing to grapple with differences between their own selfhood and the constructed selfhood that they project onto Dickinson. In the latter case, they enter a dialogic relationship that turns dependence into independence.

The plays about Dickinson discussed in this essay shed light on how concepts of socially constructed selfhood affect perceptions of the poet and her oeuvre as much as each perceiver's view of her/himself. Depending on their own cultural values and individual experiences, perceivers potentially construe Dickinson's solitariness in diametrically opposed ways. Whether the actual meaning of her reclusiveness

matters then depends on whether the perceiver sees her as an inflexibly contoured figure of identification or as a sounding board for her/his fluid, processual self.

## Notes

1. Only one play, David Starkey's *How Red the Fire* (premiere: 22 February 2007; as yet unpublished), combines Dickinson's texts with scenes imagining an alternate history in which she loses her poems and her sister in a fire. For the author's account of the genesis of his drama, see his "Adapting the Unreal: Composing an Alternate History for Emily Dickinson."
2. An earlier version of this play premiered in 1999.
3. For an overview of Dickinson-inspired plays, see the two essays by Jonnie Guerra listed in the Works Cited section of this paper. Information on Bechtold's "Before You Became Improbable" can be found online.
4. This coinage includes, of course, a nod to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogic discourse (1214, 1218).
5. A signature example of this method is Doug Wright's *I Am My Own Wife: Studies for a Play about the Life of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf* (Off-Broadway premiere: 27 May 2003). The play follows the journey of the playwright whose plan of producing a biographical play is thwarted by unexpected revelations, so that he eventually concludes that the biographed personage will remain inconclusive. The process of grappling with the biography is depicted through an actor who embodies the biographed person as well as about three dozen other characters.
6. The curators of the Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst acknowledge the following: "As Emily Dickinson's writings have grown in popularity since her death, certain objects associated with the poet have become icons. Chief among them is the white dress thought to have been Dickinson's. The dress is a typical house garment of the late 1870s and early 1880s, worn when Dickinson was in her late 40s and early 50s. But the posthumous fame of the dress's owner has given the garment an extraordinary life of its own. For many of Dickinson's fans, the white dress embodies the essence of their beloved writer. The dress, made of a cotton fabric with mother-of-pearl buttons, is a style known as a wrapper or a house dress, worn by women as everyday clothing for doing chores and other activities inside the house. It was not a particularly unusual or expensive dress for its time" ("Emily Dickinson's White Dress"). Thus, the house dress neither implies the poet's virginity nor a misguided attempt at wearing bridal white as a spinster – or any of the other implications that may have been interpreted into this everyday item of clothing.

7. Diana Fuss argues that “Dickinson always had a finely tuned sense of the theatrical” (11) and that her posing invoked specific iconographic traditions (11–12).

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Jochen Achilles

## Changing Cultures of Solitude: Reclusiveness in Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street*

**Abstract:** In *The House on Mango Street*, hermitism can be both a form of repression and the precondition for the battle against it. Esperanza fights female incarceration mentally by a retreat into the imagination and performatively by seclusion in the monkey garden. This may in turn support and strengthen her search for both an identity and a home of her own.

### 1. The Liminal Quality of Solitude in *The House on Mango Street*

Like Denise Chavez's *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986), Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984) can be considered a collection of initiation stories, a short story cycle, a *Bildungsroman*, "a portrait of the artist as a young woman," that is, a *Künstlerroman*" (Eysturoy 90), or "a modified autobiographical structure" (Madsen 107).<sup>1</sup> In a series of episodes without closure, vignettes rather than stories, it describes the emancipation of Esperanza Cordero, its protagonist, narrator, and initiate.<sup>2</sup> Reminiscent of George Willard's intermediate position in Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919), Cisneros develops a narrative structure which positions Esperanza as both protagonist and observer of Hispanic society in the Mexican American *barrio* of Chicago where Mango Street is situated.<sup>3</sup> First and foremost, *The House on Mango Street* is a contemporary version of what Ina Bergmann has analyzed as forms of negative initiation in *And Then the Child Becomes a Woman: Weibliche Initiation in der amerikanischen Kurzgeschichte 1865–1970* (2003). Esperanza is what Bergmann characterizes as "a personality actively rebelling against the restrictions of the traditional woman's role, culminating in her emancipation" ("Stories" 310).

On the one hand, the houses on Mango Street, where Esperanza and her peers grow up, appear as so many prisons. On the other hand, a new and different home of her own is both Esperanza's and Cisneros's manifestation of ultimate independence. Cisneros's introduction to the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *The House on Mango Street* is titled "A House of My Own," like the penultimate vignette in which Esperanza claims "a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem" (108), suggesting a connection between the acquisition of a house and the production of poetry. In 2008, the real-life equivalent of the house on Mango Street has long been a thing of the past for Cisneros. On the strength of the success of her stories and poems she is meanwhile living independently in

a home of her own in San Antonio, Texas, which she describes with satisfaction (Cisneros xi-xxvii). But in her memories and the writing fed by them, Mango Street will probably always be present. Cisneros shares such dialogic liminalities not only with her protagonist Esperanza, but also with her readers, who have to negotiate past and present, too: the Mango Streets they come from and the San Antonios they want to live in, the memories of the lives they have lived and the hopes they aspire to.

As writing is a process of renewed identification and simultaneous distancing, leaving home and changing one's life converge with preserving the past. In "The House on Mango Street" and "Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes," the opening and closing vignettes of *The House on Mango Street*, these dialectics of home and a house of one's own, familiarity and otherness, repression and emancipation, stasis and movement, retention and protention, Spanish and English, living and imagining, lead to oxymoronic statements such as "the house I belong but do not belong to" (110) and "I have gone away to come back" (110). The dialectics of familiarity and otherness as well as the motif of the search for a house of one's own pervade *The House on Mango Street* (Bolaki 106–07, 121–22, 128–29; Eysturoy 90–98, 106–109; Madsen 127; Nagel 124; Veauthier 74–78, 162–72, 187–89.) The house is both humiliating presence and liberating agent (Bolaki 119; Jacobs 116; Madsen 127–28; Saldívar-Hull 93). In such processes of transition third spaces of isolated existence turn into sites of reflection and the articulation of alternative subject positions. These liminal spaces transform Cisneros's captivity tales into peripheral border texts, opening up perspectives of transgression and lasting change (Bolaki 94–102; Madsen 105; Saldívar-Hull 91, 87).

Like the identities of both Cisneros and Esperanza, the functions of solitude and the tendencies of reclusiveness in *The House on Mango Street* oscillate in liminal fashion. In *The House on Mango Street* solitude is, on the one hand, a result of either isolation on account of otherness or repression on account of paternalism. On the other hand, solitude can also become a catalyst for change. Forms of enforced hermitism can lead to a retreat into the imagination or temporarily open up heterotopic settings which enable the anticipation of further change and improvement. It is not least the treatment of reclusiveness and solitude that turns *The House on Mango Street* into an arena for questioning existential, cultural, national, and aesthetic certainties.

## 2. Solitude as a Result of Repression: The Fear of Men

In the universe of *The House on Mango Street*, the fear of otherness is frequently not only an interethnic but also a highly gendered element in the narrow confines

of the Hispanic family circle. A sequence of vignettes highlights the cyclical pattern of male violence and coercion breeding more male violence and coercion. Husbands represent domination and repression like fathers before them. The enforced hermitism of girls in their parental homes invariably continues once they are married. Concerning Esperanza's friend Sally, the vignettes "What Sally Said," "Sally," and "Linoleum Roses" depict stages of this vicious circle. Traditional *machismo* turns wives and daughters involuntarily into reclusive characters, imprisoned in the domestic sphere. Patriarchal Latino communities dominated by the ideology of *machismo* can be understood as what Gilles Deleuze has called "societies of control." Transforming the enforced hermitism of women into a sphere of independent reflection can be considered one of the few defense mechanisms against the pervasiveness of control that is being internalized in such communities.<sup>4</sup>

"What Sally Said" gives an impression of paternal mistrust, rage, and vigilance in Hispanic families. The vignette delineates the cycle of violence *machismo* brings about. It also indicates the submissiveness of girls and women who seem to consider habitual repression by fathers or husbands normal because it is so ubiquitous and universal. "He never hits me hard" (Cisneros 92), Sally's opening statement, which is repeated a few lines later, encapsulates both male violence and female acquiescence in a nutshell. Sally admits that she is routinely beaten by her father but also tones down her accusation by the suggestion that the beatings are not severe, although "her skin is always scarred" (92). Sally's mother assists in alleviating the consequences of the beatings by rubbing "lard on all the places where it hurts" (92). The father is afraid that, like his own sisters, Sally will bring disgrace on the family. Therefore, he hits her "like a dog," "like if I was an animal" (92).

When Sally visits Esperanza to stay for a couple of days with the Cordero family, her father appears and begs her to come back home with tears in his eyes, promising "this is the last time" (93). Sally follows her father home, thereby performing the same gesture of acquiescence which she verbally expresses in the statement that she is occasionally hit, but never hard. After a while Sally does not appear in school for several days, as her father saw her talking to a boy and again "forgot he was her father between the buckle and the belt" (93). The cycle of alleged female misconduct outside the home, the return home and imprisonment there, male violence, female acquiescence and, finally, regret on all sides goes into another round. The brutal male rage, evoked by any gesture within the family circle construable as female transgression, is a measure of the men's own desire for such transgression outside the family circle – maybe also inside the family circle as well. The father's merciless beatings can be considered a deferred realization of his own sexual interest in his daughter, a rationalization of "his own incestuous

desire” as Elizabeth Jacobs explains: “This psycho-social complex is fundamental to machismo and is used as a justification for sexism within the Chicano community” (115; see also Bolaki 109; Eysturoy 103; Nagel 121; Saldívar-Hull 98–100; Veauthier 90–92, 119–24, 180). The result is the hermitism of women in the domestic sphere, which is protected by physical force.

“Linoleum Roses” continues Sally’s story. To flee from domestic torture and paternal incarceration, Sally marries a marshmallow salesman while still in eighth grade. “She says she is in love, but I think she did it to escape” (Cisneros 101), Esperanza comments. Sally claims to be happy as she can go shopping “when her husband gives her money” (101). Not only is she financially dependent on her husband, he also has bouts of sudden rage and “once he broke the door where his foot went through, though most days he is okay” (101). He does not regularly beat her like her father but sentences her to solitary confinement. She can neither use the telephone, nor look out the window, nor receive visitors (102).

As other vignettes such as “The Monkey Garden” and “Red Clowns” show, Sally clandestinely explores sexuality early. She then tries to flee from paternal repression and violence by marriage but finds herself in the same cycle of repression she has known from childhood, condemned to even more complete domestic inertia: “She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission. She looks at all the things they own: the towels and the toaster, the alarm clock and the drapes. She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake” (102). Reduced to appreciating the rose pattern in the linoleum, Sally ends up in a situation reminiscent of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). What turns Sally into an involuntarily contemplative hermit figure is not only her father and her husband but obviously the whole male-dominated, familial moral system that pervades her culture (Bolaki 117; Eysturoy 103–04; Madsen 113; Nagel 122–23; Veauthier 181–83).

### 3. Solitude as a Catalyst for Change

#### 3.1 The Return of the Repressed as a Writing Cure

Esperanza’s vignettes negotiate between a Mango Street neighborhood “filled with women imprisoned in the domestic space by patriarchal and economic constraints” (Saldívar-Hull 94) and Gilman’s and Virginia Woolf’s demand for a room of one’s own (Jacobs 116; Saldívar-Hull 93). In this context, the solitude generated by forms of imprisonment can become a catalyst for change. Understanding Esperanza as a Latina hermit explains such unlikely liberation in adversity. In an insightful essay

about the American hermit and the British castaway, Coby Dowdell claims that the hermit's situation consists in a temporary or permanent distancing from the cultural, political, or moral demands of the world (122; 127–28). As a liminal stage of independent deliberation, hermitism allows for a rethinking and reinterpreting of positions. It can therefore be considered a deliberate suspension of taking sides (139, 148). The essay brilliantly analyzes the paradigmatic relevance of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) with regard to the comprehension of both the function of text production in hermits' tales and the transformation of enforced isolation into voluntary reclusion. In Dowdell's view, the hermit's tale is "a highly formulaic genre" (130), in which the writing process itself is constitutive as well as often thematic. Thereby it links the reclusion of the hermit with his or her social relevance, with the "claim to exemplarity" (136). Robinson and many of his American successors consider themselves exemplary for others, a status that is tied to the fact that they lay their liminal reflections down in writing (138). Esperanza also sees herself as a model for her equally oppressed friends, who prove largely incapable, however, of emulating her method of publicizing dissent, namely, of writing themselves out of patriarchy and into a house of their own.

In *The House on Mango Street* Esperanza is marginalized but also temporarily marginalizes herself in order to adopt a distanced position of fundamental criticism with regard to the basic coordinates of the *barrio* community she lives in. If one somewhat inappropriately considers Esperanza's friends from the neighborhood Fridays, she can pass as what Elizabeth Cady Stanton in "The Solitude of Self" (1892) suggests all women are, "an imaginary Robinson Crusoe, with her woman Friday on a solitary island" (2). Like the creative writing of Cisneros herself, Esperanza's cure is a writing cure in the sense that her writing about her situation may render her independent in a house of her own. Like many hermits before her, Esperanza also manages to reinterpret enforced hermitism as intentional self-distancing, "the transformation of his or her forced exile into voluntary retirement" (Dowdell 135). Fulfilling this pattern, Esperanza turns outer-directed patriarchal imprisonment into a precondition for self-propelled emancipatory reflection, as some of the vignettes in *The House on Mango Street* demonstrate.

### 3.2 The Retreat into the Imagination

Some vignettes anticipate the house of her own that Esperanza dreams of and imagines Sally to dream of, too. These vignettes provide images which point in the direction of independent self-definition but do not share the concreteness of the house metaphor. The very haziness of these images indicates a desire which is unformed as yet. Friendless and isolated, Esperanza feels homeless at home in

“Boys & Girls” and sees herself as “a red balloon, a balloon tied to an anchor” (9). The balloon tied to an anchor may represent her desire for a different home but also the fear of drifting away without direction once one lets loose. This image adequately signals the ambivalence of being confined to the unsatisfactory status quo of Mango Street and the grounding this provides for an all-too formless and hazy desire for change. Reminiscent of Donald Barthelme’s story “The Balloon” (1968), Esperanza’s identification with a red balloon is a bid for reorientation. Like wishes, the balloon is both flexible and fragile. It may soar but also sag. In any case it is a counter-image to the fixity and stagnation represented by the linoleum roses Esperanza’s friend Sally stares at, locked as she is in her premature marriage.

As in the independent home Esperanza imagines in “Sally” “all the sky” (83) would come in through the open windows, in “Darius & the Clouds” the sky also represents the ultimate counter-world to the restrictive and sad realities of Mango Street (33). There may be a childlike arbitrariness and playfulness about the desire to overstep the boundaries of what is real. Nevertheless, both the red balloon and Darius’s fascination with the clouds are powerful signals of a dynamics of change which may liberate the involuntary recluses of Mango Street and cut to pieces the linoleum and its rose pattern.

The vignette “Four Skinny Trees” provides yet another counter-image to “Linoleum Roses.” While Sally watches a simulacral nature in the floor pattern of her marital abode, Esperanza regards the real trees outside her window as doubles. When she, too, feels as a “tiny thing against so many bricks” (75), Esperanza turns to the trees, whose striving for a more beneficial environment she shares (Nagel 118–19; Veauthier 96–97). While Esperanza’s loneliness and isolation are a passing mood in her room at night, Sally and her sadly sterile environment of linoleum roses demonstrate that it can become a permanent state, if one does not continue the fight. If linoleum is largely made from dead trees, the skinny but vital trees outside remind Esperanza of this fighting spirit: “Four who reach and do not forget to reach” (Cisneros 75). The four skinny trees provide Esperanza with a mirror image, an ecological objective correlative of her own position between restriction and transgression. As the trees are hemmed in and rendered skinny by urban traffic, Esperanza falls short of her potential on account of moral and social strictures. Like the skinny trees, Esperanza is resilient and determined to reach out for change and transformation. The balloon in “Boys & Girls,” the clouds and sky in “Darius & the Clouds,” and the four skinny trees are indistinct images of, and projection screens for, alternative visions of freedom and independence. Juggling these images in the enclave of her own imagination, Esperanza begins an initiation process as opaque as the significance of balloon, sky, clouds, and trees.

### 3.3 The Retreat into a Heterotopia

This spirit of change finds its most concrete manifestation in “The Monkey Garden.” This garden turns into a playground when it ceases to be a monkey garden. The adolescents from Mango Street take the garden over from an aggressive monkey, after the monkey moved to Kentucky and “took his people with him” (94). Even before Esperanza and her friends dare appropriate it, the garden is not just part of the neighborhood. It is an exterritorial realm, an uncivilized jungle, dominated by the monkey’s “wild screaming at night, and the twangy yakkety-yak of the people who owned him” (94). For Esperanza, the monkey garden allows for a reclusive detachment from the moral values that dominate her life, which enables novel ways of both reorientation and self-organization. In “Of Other Spaces” (1986), Michel Foucault singles out the garden as “the smallest parcel of the world and then ... the totality of the world ... a sort of happy, universalizing heterotopia since the beginnings of antiquity” (26). Esperanza’s visits to the monkey garden feature elements of both the separation from one’s group and the ambiguous experimentalism of the liminal period Victor Turner recognizes in very different contexts (Turner 94; Achilles and Bergmann).

In complex ways the monkey garden turns into a crisis heterotopia that mediates between tradition and rebellion, nature and civilization. It is a mixture of lush jungle and sewage disposal site:

This was a garden, a wonderful thing to look at in the spring. But bit by bit, after the monkey left, the garden began to take over itself. Flowers stopped obeying the little bricks that kept them from growing beyond their paths. Weeds mixed in. Dead cars appeared overnight like mushrooms. First one and then another and then a pale blue pickup with the front windshield missing. Before you knew it, the monkey garden became filled with sleepy cars. (Cisneros 95)

The pubescent children of Mango Street do not distinguish between, on the one hand, natural phenomena such as mushrooms or the aggressive monkey that disappeared and, on the other, civilizational phenomena such as the dilapidated cars. They do not see the monkey garden as a car cemetery or dumping ground, for example. For them, the natural and the civilizational sphere inextricably melt into each other. Their imagination is stimulated by, and feeds on, this wondrous terrain which seems to invalidate accepted norms. The adolescent acceptance of heterogeneity as natural converges with advanced ecological concepts such as Emma Marris’s rambunctious garden: “The rambunctious garden is everywhere. Conservation can happen in parks, on farms, in the strips of land attached to rest stops and fast-food joints, in your backyard, on your roof, even in city traffic circles” (2). Much earlier, the naturalist Leonard Dubkin explored the rambunctious



gardens of Chicago, especially in his last book, *My Secret Places: One Man's Love Affair with Nature in the City* (1972).<sup>5</sup>

The children turn the garden into a heterotopic zone which remains untouched and uninfluenced by their repressive parents. As Rip Van Winkle flees from his family to the Catskill Mountains, the children flee to their magic monkey garden. One of the children, Eddie Vargas, is almost forgotten by the other children when he falls asleep underneath a hibiscus tree, "like a Rip Van Winkle" (Cisneros 95). Like Eddie Vargas, all the children want to be forgotten by their parents and appropriate the garden like the monkey before them. In the monkey garden Esperanza and her friends feel immune to the pressures of their domestic environment. They enter a hermitage as it were:

This, I suppose, was the reason why we went there. Far away from where our mothers would find us. We and a few old dogs who lived inside the empty cars. We made a clubhouse once on the back of that old blue pickup. And besides, we liked to jump from the roof of one car to another and pretend they were giant mushrooms. (95–96)

For the children of Mango Street the monkey garden both distances and defamiliarizes pedestrian realities. It is an actual playground but, like the family closets in Chavez's *The Last of the Menu Girls* (17–35), also assumes importance as a magical container of past history both real and imaginary, a storehouse of half-remembered lore: "Somebody started the lie that the monkey garden had been there before anything. We liked to think the garden could hide things for a thousand years. There beneath the roots of soggy flowers were the bones of murdered pirates and dinosaurs, the eye of a unicorn turned to coal" (Cisneros 96). In the adolescent imagination of Esperanza and her friends, the hermit's den of the monkey garden fuses early stages of history and myth with the debris of contemporary society. Reality and its temporal dimensions seem miraculously suspended and magically transformed. In a fantasy version of Marris's notion of the rambunctious garden, which allows us "to see the sublime in our own backyards, if we try" (3), cars may become giant mushrooms, pirates' corpses may leave their graves, eyes of unicorns may stare from the underbrush. For the adolescent girls around Esperanza, such fairy-tale suspension of reality and its rules holds the equally magical promise of future transformations of Cinderellas into princesses, frogs into princes. The irresistible charm of the monkey garden derives from its Edenic suggestiveness. However, Esperanza and her friend Sally have different dreams, different ideas about the transformability of frogs into princes and, consequently, about what paradise looks like. While Esperanza wants to remain in the magical fairy tale-world of childhood, although she "may be getting too old to play the games" (96), Sally does not play "with the kids" (96) anymore, as she is afraid of soiling her



stockings in the monkey garden. She plays and jokes with the boys in eroticized ways Esperanza disapproves of (96). At a fair in “Red Clowns,” the conflict between Esperanza and Sally in “Monkey Garden” repeats itself: while Sally is interested in erotic adventures with boys, Esperanza feels assaulted and is violated. In “Sally,” Esperanza in vain suggests to Sally to go down her own road of setting up an independent household first (Bolaki 124–25; Eysturoy 99–101; Madsen 114–15, 116–17; Nagel 121–22; Saldívar-Hull 101; Veauthier 92–93, 146–50).

Alienated, not only from the grown-up world but also from her peers and her best friend, Esperanza flees to the other end of the garden: “And then I don’t know why but I had to run away. I had to hide myself at the other end of the garden, in the jungle part, under a tree that wouldn’t mind if I lay down and cried a long time” (97). There, in total isolation and reclusion, she believes she can maintain a quasi-Emersonian spiritual exchange with nature that will give her strength in her battle against male molestation and the world at large. Like Sylvia in Sarah Orne Jewett’s “A White Heron” (1886), Esperanza rejects the advances of young hunters and chooses the regressive path, clinging to childhood and to nature. She even wants to die and thereby to melt into nature, to become a part of it: “I wanted to be dead, to turn into the rain, my eyes melt into the ground like two black snails. I wished and wished. I closed my eyes and willed it, but when I got up my dress was green and I had a headache” (97–98; see also Bergmann, “Stories”).

As the white heron may not return Sylvia’s sympathies in Jewett’s late nineteenth-century story, the monkey garden declines Esperanza’s attempt to become part of it. Esperanza has to learn that there is no immediate leap into a less oppressive otherness, that identification with the garden cannot literally be a solution: “And the garden that had been such a good place to play didn’t seem mine either” (98), she observes. The jungle part of the garden as natural habitat is perhaps rather the domain of the monkey that, nevertheless, left for Kentucky. For Esperanza it is a transitional and liminal space, not the solution of her problems. But Esperanza’s utter isolation from adolescents and adults alike, the total reclusion which the garden affords her for a moment of crisis severe enough to lead to her wish of self-extinction, may have been the trigger for the search of more viable forms of identity.

The utter solitude resulting from the insight that “not even the monkey garden would have me” (96) may have shocked Esperanza into the less immature and more realistic search for a new home of her own. The experience that she cannot give herself up to nature in isolation may be the beginning of Esperanza’s resolution to fight *machismo* and male oppression openly and relentlessly. In “Beautiful & Cruel” she decides to rebel against what she perceives as universal oppression by men: “I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks

on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain ... I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate" (88–89).

#### 4. The Dialectics of Solitude in *The House on Mango Street*

In the world of *The House on Mango Street*, reclusiveness and hermitism can be both the result of *machismo* or, transformed into a willed stance, the precondition for the battle against it. The transitional images of balloon, clouds, sky, and skinny trees may mentally pave the way for Esperanza's performative interaction with the monkey garden. This may in turn either trigger or support and strengthen her search for a home of her own.

#### Notes

1. See also Eysturoy 85–88; Madsen 39; Nagel 107, 112, 115, 126; and Veauthier 88–94. For an extensive research report on *The House on Mango Street*, see Veauthier 17–58.
2. Cisneros xvi–xvii. On the historical and cultural background of Cisneros's fiction, see Jacobs 111; Madsen 6–13, 25–29, 34; and Saldívar-Hull 89.
3. On Cisneros's own intercultural biography, see Madsen 105–06, and Nagel 104–05.
4. See Deleuze. On Chicana feminism as a reaction to repressive family structures, see Madsen 10, 25–29.
5. I am grateful to Scott Slovic for informing me on this forgotten explorer of ecotopia. See also Bryson. For a history of the relationship between gardens and hermitism, see Campbell.

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