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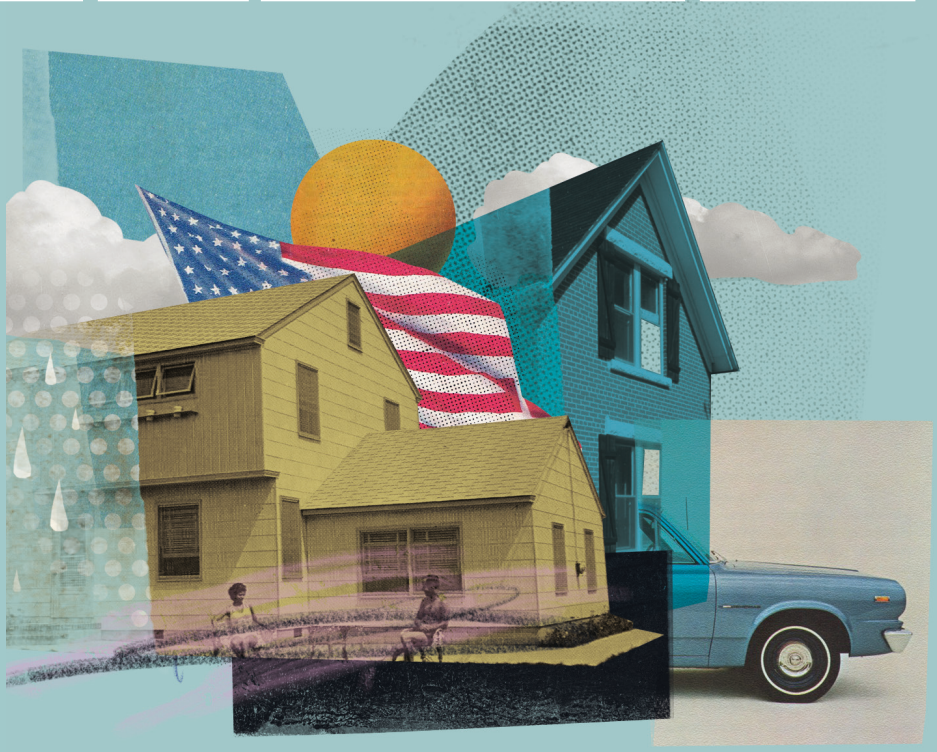

CHRISTINE FABER

The Unsettled State of America

Contemporary Narratives of Home and Mobility in Times of Crisis

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The Unsettled State of America

Contemporary Narratives of Home and Mobility in Times of Crisis

Inaugural Dissertation
Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München

submitted by
Christine Faber
2020

First Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Klaus Benesch
Second Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Gerd Hurm
Third Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Pierre-Héli Monot
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To Malou, Marc and Anne

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Luxembourg, March 2022 Christine Faber

Summary

This book explores how contemporary American novelists express the malaise and sense of contingency felt in the crisis-ridden historical present through two distinct tropes in their storytelling: home and mobility. I contend that the image of home—and related concepts such as domesticity, belonging and stability—as well as the notion of mobility—connected to the ideas of progress, the journey and dislocation—have been utilized by novelists to address and accentuate the anxious and uncertain post-9/11 esprit.

My discussion centers on works of fiction by five contemporary North-American novelists: Paul Auster's *Sunset Park*, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Dave Eggers's *A Hologram for the King*, Richard Ford's *The Lay of the Land* and *Let Me Be Frank with You* and Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*. What unites these novels is that they all give voice to the looming sense of contingency that marks the new normal. Crises can happen at any moment, without much warning—as the recent shock of the pandemic has made all too clear—and the works of fiction by these five authors all explore this underlying sense of threat and uncertainty through the double prism of home and mobility.

The opening chapter chronicles the centrality of the concepts of home and mobility in the American mindset by spotlighting a selection of formative periods, national policies and cultural phenomena in US history, starting with the nation's settlement period. Close readings of recent novels by Auster, McCarthy, Eggers, Ford and Mandel form the core of the following chapters of this book. In the second chapter, the physical space of home takes center stage. The disintegrating and precarious dwelling places in these stories set in anxious times take on symbolic significance, becoming emblems of an America in decline. The third chapter continues exploring these works of fiction by shifting the focus to the concept of (im)mobility and the journey motif to convey a sense of anxious disorientation and dwindling opportunities. The closing chapter builds on the two previous chapters to explore how these stories not only grapple with the fundamental impermanence of home, but also call for a reconceptualization of what it means to feel

at home in the midst of shifting and uncertain circumstances. Finally, the epilogue probes how the concepts of home and mobility, explored throughout this book, come to the forefront in the profoundly destabilizing Covid-19 outbreak.

This book includes excerpts from exclusive interviews that I conducted with four of the five authors that I analyze in my work: Paul Auster, Dave Eggers, Richard Ford and Emily St. John Mandel. These interviews offer unique and illuminating insights into the authors' novels.

My work aims to add to and enrich the existing and comprehensive body of research on home and mobility, offering a new angle by exploring how these concepts have permeated fiction written in the age of 'polycrisis'—the current phenomenon of there being several interconnected crises of widespread impact within a brief time span. The questions that this book explores have become all the more urgent in the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, which has upended the world as we knew it. What is home, and how can a stable sense of home be located in times of profound disorientation? How can the concept of mobility help us to navigate and interpret the constantly shifting and unstable reality that we are experiencing in our contemporary times of crisis? How can writers address and explore the complexities of our current historical moment? Never is there a greater need, or more potential, for writers to produce stories that cut to the very core of uncomfortable truths than in times of national upheaval. Such a moment of rupture can become a catalyst to question perceived certainties, to interrogate and reappraise the value and belief systems which always appeared reliable and stable, but which suddenly come undone—and fiction offers an ideal space for precisely such probing and questioning to occur.

Introduction

The New Normal: Polycrisis in America

Is America in the early twenty-first century an America in a state of crisis? While the nation has experienced numerous periods of instability since its founding, there is no denying that the first decade of the new millennium has been a time of extraordinary upheaval for the country as a whole. Indeed, the United States has in recent years faced a series of major crises—political, economic, social, environmental and ideological—that have left the nation in a state of prolonged shock. The burst of the 'dot-com bubble' in 2000 marked a first, significant blow to the financial sector, hinting at an underlying weakness and volatility of a financial system increasingly built on risk. The following year, America would be tested in ways no one could have foreseen; the events taking place on September 11 caused unprecedented trauma for the nation, scarring not only the skyline of New York City but America's sense of safety and its narrative of exceptionalism. As Ulrich Beck explains, the attacks "gave rise to a universal awareness of the vulnerability of the West, notwithstanding its economic and military superiority" (14). The years following 9/11 were marked by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, conflicts which have raised profound questions concerning America's core values and ideology as well as its place in the world. In 2008, the collapse of Wall Street investment bank Lehman Brothers, a giant deemed to be TBTF ("too big to fail"), triggered a financial crisis and recession of a magnitude unseen since the Great Depression. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment fell for an astounding twenty-five consecutive months starting in January 2008; the total job losses amounted to almost 8.8 million (Blinder 11). Millions of homeowners, many of whom fell victim to the subprime mortgage scheme, faced foreclosure and

eviction.[1] The first decade of the new millennium has also seen a growing sense of alarm concerning the calamitous impact of climate change and an increased awareness of the fragility of our planet. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf coast from central Florida to Texas, causing over 1300 casualties, making it "one of the deadliest natural disasters in the history of the United States" (FEMA). Besides the terrifying destruction on American soil, the storm also shattered the illusion that the United States would be able to deal with the consequences of a disaster of this scale in an efficient and dignified manner.

The second decade of the twenty-first century was equally turbulent. A series of terrorist attacks shell -shocked the Western world, which was additionally struggling to deal with a global refugee crisis. These past years have also seen a deeply troubling surge in racial tension in the United States, with a number of disturbing instances of police brutality against African Americans succeeded by waves of major protests and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement (protests which reached a peak in 2020, following the brutal killing of George Floyd). This tense and volatile climate was only amplified by the election of Donald Trump in 2016, whose presidency has given rise to unprecedented conflict and disapproval on a national and international level. In fact, it is difficult to recall a period in which the so-called "United" States have appeared more politically, ideologically and socio-economically divided than they do today. Finally, the recent coronavirus pandemic has triggered widespread and unhinged panic, highlighting the risks of a hypermobile world population as well as the human propensity towards irrational and xenophobic responses when faced with existential anxiety.

1 A dangerous proportion of the securities traded in the years before the crash were based on the now infamous subprime mortgages, high-interest rated loans that were given to people who clearly did not have the financial means to pay off their debt. The financial instruments that had emerged in the banking sector in the new millennium, derivatives such as credit default swaps (CDS) and collateral debt obligations (CDO), essentially enabled the banks that offered these ludicrous mortgages to spread and thereby—theoretically—reduce their risks. Consequently, the damage, when the value of these subprime mortgages eventually collapsed in 2008, was enormous and had an impact of previously unseen proportions.

The onset of the twenty-first century has thus been marked by a ubiquitous sense of calamity within America (and beyond). Former president of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker, uses the term "polycrisis" to refer to this current phenomenon of there being several interconnected crises of a widespread impact within a brief time span. These are crises that "have not only arrived at the same time", but "[t]hey also feed each other, creating a sense of doubt and uncertainty in the minds of our people" (Juncker). In his book *Criticism, Crisis and Contemporary Narrative* (2011), Paul Crosthwaite makes a similar observation when he writes that "it often seems that the horizons of everyday life are defined, today, by an overlapping series of crises" (3). Likewise, in 2005, James Howard Kunstler predicted that America will be struggling to deal with the "converging catastrophes of the twenty-first century"—"world-altering forces, events, and changes will interact synergistically, mutually amplifying each other to accelerate and exacerbate the emergence of meta-problems" (2).

It is crucial to stress just how profound the impact of this prolonged period of upheaval has been on the American psyche. Referring to the tragic events of that September morning in 2001, Wendell Berry remarks on "the unquestioning technological and economic optimism that ended that day" (qtd. in Gray 26). And indeed, I would argue that the trauma of this attack has prompted a more general decline of optimism and of a trust in progress—those quintessential qualities in which Americans have long prided themselves. The contemporary period has been marked by what Pico Iyer calls an "undercurrent of anxiety" (*Global Soul* 15), a nervousness that permeates American life and that keeps the nation on its toes. As much as we may have praised the processes of globalization that have so profoundly altered the way we live and interact with one another, there is also the awareness that "a small world is a precarious one; and in our closely linked planet, a fire in one place soon became a blaze in another" (Iyer, *Global Soul* 14). Ulrich Beck contends that the "risk society" that he famously identified and defined in 1986 has now evolved to a "world risk society" (9). "Each nation has become the next-door neighbor of every other", Beck writes, "and shocks in one part of the planet are transmitted with extraordinary speed to the whole population of the earth" (12). What is unique about

this historical moment, according to Beck, is that "[o]n the one hand, (unintentional) large-scale risks (climate change) are gaining prominence; on the other hand, the anticipation of the new kind of threats emanating from (deliberate) terrorist attacks represents a persistent public concern" (15). It is precisely this notion that catastrophe, in one form or another, can strike at any moment which causes us to feel an ongoing and at times paralyzing sense of fear. Furthermore, there is no denying that we are essentially defenseless to many of the threats that we are facing today. The constant and unpredictable terrorist threat, in particular, has led to an "endemic uncertainty" (4), as Zygmunt Bauman's terms it in *Liquid Times: Living in an Age of Uncertainty* (2007). As a result of this sustained feeling of precarity in our society, there is now "a population horrified by its own undefendability and obsessed with the tightness of its frontiers and the security of the individuals living inside them" (*Liquid Times* 7), Bauman notes. In this period of instability and disquietude, the longing for security has indeed manifested itself with renewed urgency—and at times in concerning forms, as the global resurgence of conservative and right-wing ideology suggests. Ulrich Beck even argues that "[s]ecurity is displacing freedom and equality from the highest position on the scale of values" (9).

That writers feel compelled to respond to this acute atmosphere of crisis should hardly come as a surprise. In fact, as Christopher J. Walsh succinctly puts it, "American writers have historically been charged with picking up the check when the nation finds itself in a crisis, and in these situations, succeeding generations of novelists attempt to get to the very root of the malaise affecting the national consciousness" (254). Of the multitude of crises the United States has faced since 2000, there are two particular crises that appear to have had the deepest impact on cultural production—the first one being 9/11.

Post-9/11 Crisis Narratives

In the months and years after the traumatic events of that September morning, a remarkable corpus of fiction and non-fiction narratives indeed developed, filled with stories that all try to come to terms with the trauma inflicted on America. In *After the Fall* (2011), Richard Gray

explains that the cataclysmic events of that day "are as much part of the soil, the deep structure lying beneath and shaping the literature of the American nation, not least because they have reshaped our consciousness; they are a defining element in our contemporary structure of feeling and they cannot help but impact profoundly on American writing" (24). The psychological impact of September 11 reverberated far beyond the borders of Manhattan and Arlington; America, as an entire nation, felt violated and hit at the heart of its identity. Don DeLillo, one of many writers who centered a plot around 9/11 (his 2007 novel *Falling Man*), memorably claimed in an essay that "for many people, the event has changed the grain of the most routine moment" ("In the Ruins of the Future"). In works of fiction such as *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close* (2005) by Jonathan Safran Foer, *The Good Life* (2006) by Jay McInerney, *The Zero* (2006) by Jess Walter and *Terrorist* (2006) by John Updike, the terrorist attacks of 2001 form a core element of the plot. The commercial success of these and other 9/11 novels clearly revealed that the nation was craving stories that addressed the traumatic events as well as the aftermath, and that could, perhaps, help make sense of senseless. Yet critics have highlighted the inherent difficulty of translating the horror of the attacks and the psychological repercussions into narrative form. *The Economist*'s R.B. distills three reasons why novels directly responding to the events of 9/11 are prone to disappoint or even fail.

> The first is that the attack on the World Trade Centre was such a huge and overpowering event that it often overshadows and dominates the fictional elements of a novel: literary novelists normally shy away from choosing such a big and unbelievable event as the backdrop to a story. … The second is that all fiction of every genre hinges around some kind of crisis, internal or external, that a book has to see its way through. This can take many forms. But 9/11 is in a sense a bigger crisis than many novels can contain or capture: it's a situation where truth is both bigger and stranger than fiction. … The third thing that makes it hard to write a successful novel about 9/11 is simply that it's too soon. … It is hard to relay an event that many people still remember so clearly—even if, by contrast, those vivid impressions are one reason why 9/11 books have such an audience.

And yet, despite these undeniable difficulties of narrativizing a culturally momentous event such as 9/11, many writers felt compelled to try.[2] As Kristiaan Versluys notes in *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (2009), "[i]n their ongoing missions to interpret the culture and to provide points of view from which to approach it, [novelists] have no choice but also to confront the signal event that reorients the culture and marks it in its deepest substratum" (12). It appears that those works of fiction that critics deemed to be most successful in representing the unspeakable trauma of that Tuesday morning were those that approached the events most cautiously and obliquely. As Versluys puts it,

> … the best 9/11 novels are diffident linguistically. On the whole, the narratives shy away from the brute facts, the stark "donnée" of thousands of lives lost. As an event, 9/11 is limned as a silhouette, expressible only through allegory and indirection. (14)

The memory of witnessing the event, of actually *seeing* the tragedy unfold—even if for most people this happened (luckily) only via their screens—meant that there was not only less need for storytelling relying on direct and explicit imagery of the event, but perhaps even a downright refusal to endure it, again. This may also explain why Oliver Stone's blockbuster movie *World Trade Center*, released less than five years after the cataclysmic events, had a hard time winning over both critics and the public. Not only did it force viewers to live through the attacks in painstaking detail through the perspective of first responders, but the storyline, oozing with patriotism and dramatic performances (first and foremost by leading actor Nicolas Cage), represented a Hollywood spin of an event that was still much too raw and vivid in people's minds. Compared with filmmaking, then, fiction writing had the advantage of allowing the "primal terror" (DeLillo, "Ruins") of that day to occupy a more liminal, nuanced space, that the public may be more receptive towards.

2 To gain more insights into post-9/11 fiction and other cultural productions, refer to Richard Gray's *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (2011), Kristiaan Versluys's *Out of the Blue: September 11 and the Novel* (2009) as well as *Representing 9/11: Trauma, Ideology and Nationalism in Literature, Film and Television* (2015), edited by Paul Petrovic.

Crunch Lit

Besides 9/11, the other national crises in the new millennium that prompted American writers to pen and paper to such a degree was the financial crisis of 2008 and the Great Recession that followed. Of all the crises that America has faced since the year 2000, the economic downturn that started in 2008 was one of those that had the most direct and tangible consequences for a vast number of American citizens.[3] And yet, despite this very palpable experience of the crisis in their everyday lives, most Americans felt utterly puzzled as to how a disaster of this scale could have developed. This inability to fully comprehend the catastrophic events that unfolded in 2008 and 2009 was due, on the one hand, to the complexity of the actual financial mechanisms at play, and on the other to a lack of transparency by the people in charge on Wall Street as much as on Capitol Hill. This explains why a new appetite for literature, both fiction and non-fiction, that elucidated the complex workings of the financial sector and that offered more relatable narratives of the credit crunch, emerged in the recession years. As Katy Shaw points out, one manifestation of this literary interest in finance was the popularity of financial confession narratives that provided an insider glimpse into the financial institutions where the crisis unfolded. These semi-autobiographical texts, such as Tetsuya Ishikawa's *How I Caused the Credit Crunch: An Insider's Story of the Financial Meltdown* (2009), were "concerned with explaining behaviour, justifying actions and repositioning prominent individuals as moral agents in the wake of the crisis" (Shaw 7). Documentaries like *Inside Job* (2010) and *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009) also grappled with the details of the crash, offering a critical reflection of the events and called out the culprits of the disaster. It did also not take long for fiction writers, particularly in the United States and the United Kingdom, to respond to the economic turmoil as well. The drama unfolding on Wall Street and quickly spreading to financial sectors abroad indeed offered fertile ground for fiction writers and cinematographers alike. In her study of the so-called

3 The other one being the coronavirus pandemic that hit in early 2020, the literary response to which will be interesting to observe in the coming years.

'Crunch Lit' genre, Katy Shaw argues that by "[s]tretching the crisis away from facts and figures onto a broader pictorial canvas that illustrates individual impacts, experiences and consequences, these new writings speak to a public desire for new narratives about this period" (13). Novels such as John Lanchester's *Capital* (2012), Sebastian Faulks's *A Week In December* (2009), Adam Haslett's *Union Atlantic* (2010) and Alex Preston's *The Bleeding City* (2010) personalized the credit crunch by telling the fictional stories of, on the one hand, individuals inside the financial institutions, who are often presented as either modern-day villains or ignorant bystanders, as well as of those tragically affected by the socio-economic aftermath of the meltdown. Filmmakers similarly recognized the dramatic potential of the housing bubble and the financial crisis, with films like *99 Homes* (2014) and *The Big Short* (2015) painting a perceptive and chilling picture of the subprime debacle and its consequences.

It should be noted that this new literary genre that developed post-2008, aiming to represent the financial crisis and the subsequent recession head-on, has in recent years received increased critical attention, with Katy Shaw's book *Crunch Lit*, published in 2015, being the most comprehensive study of the genre to date.[4] Kirk Boyle and Daniel Mrozowski's book *The Great Recession in Fiction, Film, and Television* (2013) widened the focus by examining the representation of the financial crisis in the arts in general. David Mattingly's contribution in this collection, "Crash Fiction: American Literary Novels of the Global Financial Crisis", presents an important overview of the emerging fiction of finance.

Engaging with the National "structure of feeling"[5]

When critics discuss the literary response to the crises and periods of upheaval that America has experienced in the twenty-first century, they

4 Other pertinent studies include Hamilton Caroll and Annie McClanahan's "Fictions of Speculation: Introduction" (2015) and Laura Finch's "The Un-real Deal: Financial Fiction, Fictional Finance, and the Financial Crisis" (2015).
5 Gray, *After the Fall* (24).

primarily turn their attention to exactly these two distinct categories that I have sketched out on the previous pages: on the one hand, the post-9/11 novels that gave voice to a nation derailed by the trauma of the terrorist attacks, and on the other, the "Crunch Lit" books that captured the gradual moral decline of the financial sector and the havoc of the market meltdown. Yet, in my opinion, what has been widely overlooked is the fact that many other novels written in recent years have engaged with the ongoing climate of crisis in a more nuanced and subtle manner. The novels discussed in this book engage with the atmosphere of uncertainty and the anxiety resulting from the multiple and often overlapping crises of the new millennium. What these novelists are focusing in on is less the cataclysmic event itself, than the lingering sense of malaise and disquietude left in its wake. These narratives offer a portrait of a fragmented and unsettled nation; they register and urge us to confront the cracks in our society's foundation. Christopher J. Walsh is right when he claims that "one of the highest accolades we could bestow upon a writer is that they produce something that makes us see the world differently, that makes us reconsider our relationship to our culture and our environment" (271). Never is there more of a need, and more potential, for writers to produce stories that cut to the very core of uncomfortable truths than in times of national upheaval. Naomi Klein argues that, following a crisis, a state of shock sets in and "we lose our narrative, we lose our story, we become disorientated" (qtd. in Shaw 14). Such a moment of rupture can become a catalyst for human beings to question perceived certainties, to interrogate and reappraise the value and belief systems which always appeared reliable and stable but which suddenly come undone—and fiction offers an ideal space for precisely such probing and questioning to occur. The question that imposes itself, however, is *how* novelists can convey the prolonged sense of insecurity and underlying feeling of disorientation that has marked the collective experience in millennial America.

The Ubiquity of the Home and Mobility Binary

This book takes as its central argument that contemporary novelists have managed to express the malaise and sense of contingency felt in the crisis-ridden historical present by exploring two distinct tropes in their storytelling: home and mobility. I contend that the image of home—and related concepts such as domesticity, belonging and stability—as well as the notion of mobility—connected to the ideas of progress, the journey and dislocation—have been utilized by novelists to address and accentuate the anxious and uncertain post-9/11 esprit. It is crucial to point out that these two opposing and yet also interrelated concepts occupy a central position in the American mindset and the nation's cultural history more broadly. Indeed, it could be argued that "the painful dilemma occasioned by these twin desires" (23), as Terri Witek puts it, can be traced throughout American history like a red thread, weaving its way all the way back to the country's colonial beginnings. Richard Ford, one of the authors whose fiction is examined in this book, has repeatedly pondered these contradictory impulses lying at the heart of the nation's mindset: "America is a country of more rationalized cognitive dissonance than almost any I know" (67), he writes in his essay "An Urge for Going". Ford also contends that this "dissonance" springs out of the nation's unique founding story: in my interview with the author, he referred to a "schismatic torque between a European past in which we stay in our village, and the way in which we look westward across this great continent. And the pull of those two things is where literature comes from" (Personal Interview). Ford here suggests that fiction writing is not only influenced by, but emerges out of, the friction of these ambiguous forces so deeply ingrained in American thinking. Through storytelling, writers can indeed explore and probe the tension between our innate longing for home and the need to remain on the move and progress. These antipodal tendencies, so intrinsic in the American spirit, are a favored subject in literature, as a glimpse at the American literary canon will easily reveal: from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) to *Huckleberry Finn* (1884) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), home and mobility permeate the stories that have shaped the

nation. Yet, I would argue that, in the years following 9/11, a period in which the nation has been confronted with an unprecedented accumulation of crises, the grand concepts of home and mobility have entered plots in imaginative and unique ways, allowing writers to give voice to a widespread feeling of uncertainty and disorientation.

That both home and mobility—two "ends of a continuum" (*On the Move* 26), as Tim Cresswell rightly notes—have in recent years emerged as especially relevant and urgent subjects to explore in fictional form should perhaps not come as a surprise. Upon closer look, the very ideas of home and mobility are closely connected to the key crises that the United States has experienced in the new millennium.

Home has, for instance, played a central role in the financial crisis of 2008 as well as the resulting Great Recession. The bursting of the house-price bubble and succeeding implosion of the derivative market largely based on toxic subprime mortgages constituted the chief triggers of the global financial meltdown. Furthermore, the recession brought about a wave of foreclosures throughout the country, quite literally creating a crisis of home for countless Americans. In his sociological study of the recent eviction epidemic, Matthew Desmond claims that the fact that "fewer and fewer families can afford a roof over their head" constitutes one of "the most urgent and pressing issues facing America today" (5). The national housing crisis is a social tragedy that threatens the fundamental principles upon which the United States relies. Indeed, homeownership has long been considered an almost sacred right in the national imagination, lying at the heart of the American Dream rhetoric. The impermanence and fragility of home has also been made brutally evident by natural calamities like Hurricane Katrina, Sandy and Harvey. Countless Americans have experienced the trauma of losing their homes and being dislocated as a result of the devastating storms. Another type of calamity—the current Covid-19 pandemic—has forced Americans and a vast majority of the global population to self-isolate in the confines of their domestic space, which thereby takes on an ambiguous aura of both protection and imprisonment. The public health emergency has, however, also amplified the vulnerability of the nation's countless homeless citizens, who are unable to obey the omnipresent "stay home" message spread by authorities. Whereas some crises

have thus highlighted the centrality of home as a material (and commodifiable) space, a moment of national upheaval can also engender a questioning of the meaning of home in more abstract and metaphorical ways. The 9/11 terrorists' atrocious acts managed to destabilize people's sense of safety and protection: for the first time in decades, Americans struggled to feel at home—safe, guarded, secure—within their own country, the 'homeland' which was infiltrated by a dangerous 'Other'.

(Im)mobility, likewise, emerges as a key conceptual leitmotif in many of the crises that hit the United States in the twenty-first century. The hijacking of the planes on September 11, and the unimaginable havoc that ensued, brought the nation (and, in some respects, the entire world) to an abrupt standstill. Indeed, a double immobilization occurred as a consequence of the attacks. There was, firstly, the literal stillness and stagnation on that day, with the immediate and widespread suspension of all air travel. Yet it is also crucial to note the more long-term psychological paralysis discernible in the American population, shell shocked by the horrific scenes that unfolded in Manhattan and in Arlington. That in the midst of a crisis, movement can suddenly be perceived as dangerous is perhaps most starkly perceptible in the recent coronavirus pandemic. In a desperate effort to slow down the spread of the virus, authorities in most countries drastically restricted physical movement. The sudden and complete inertia of the population also brought all economic activity to a halt—an unprecedented systemic standstill with consequences of, to date, unforeseeable scale. It appears likely, however, that the severity of the recession that will undoubtedly result from the Covid-19 disaster will exceed even that of the Great Recession. The economic downturn of the late aughts caused a rift in the American Dream of upward mobility—the belief that there is always the opportunity for socio-economic advancement. Indeed, for a vast number of Americans, the Great Recession marked an end of growth, an end of progress—those upward-tending values that are considered so vital in the American mindset.[6] On the other hand, other crises of

6 According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, employment fell for an astounding twenty-five consecutive months starting in January 2008; the total job loss amounted to almost 8.8 million (Blinder 11). The GDP decline in 2008–09 was the worst since the 1930s, which is why, as Alan Blinder explains, "the phrase 'Great Depression 2.0' crept into the lexicon" (14).

the recent past brought about a heightened sense of mobility: both the foreclosure crisis as well as natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina led to major displacements, propelling countless people into involuntary motion. And looking beyond the parameters of the United States, such "negative mobility",[7] to use Julia Leyda's term, takes on unimaginable proportions in the ongoing global refugee crisis—the UN Refugee Agency estimates that there are currently more than 25 million refugees worldwide ("Figures at a glance").

Looking at the crises of the new millennium through the dual prism of home and mobility thus opens up new ways of interpreting and connecting these formative periods in recent history. My aim in this book is to demonstrate that the interrelated concepts of home and mobility also permeate the works of fiction written in this "polycrisis" context, and function as useful tropes to give voice to the "undercurrent of anxiety" (Iyer, *Global Soul* 15) felt in the early twenty-first century.

Literary Focus

I have chosen to center my discussion on works of fiction by five contemporary North-American novelists: Paul Auster (*Sunset Park*,[8] 2010), Cormac McCarthy (*The Road*,[9] 2006), Dave Eggers (*A Hologram for the King*,[10] 2012), Richard Ford (*The Lay of the Land*,[11] 2006 and *Let Me Be Frank with You*,[12] 2014) and Emily St. John Mandel (*Station Eleven*,[13] 2014). There is no denying that these writers represent, at least at first glance, a somewhat heterogeneous group—regarding their literary standing, thematic approach and prose style—and this is in fact intentional. My analysis of this selection of novels is meant to highlight that the broad concepts of home and mobility permeate a wide range of literary production in the recent context of "converging catastrophes"

7 This concept, developed in Julia Leyda's incisive study *American Mobilities* (2016), is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3 of this book.
8 Abbreviated to *SP* in subsequent citations.
9 Abbreviated to *TR* in subsequent citations.
10 Abbreviated to *HK* in subsequent citations.
11 Abbreviated to *LL* in subsequent citations.
12 Abbreviated to *LMBF* in subsequent citations.
13 Abbreviated to *SE* in subsequent citations.

(Kunstler). What unites these novels is that they all give voice to the looming sense of contingency that marks the new normal. Crisis can happen at any moment, without much warning—as the recent shock of the pandemic has made all too clear—and the works of fiction by these five authors all explore this underlying sense of threat and uncertainty through the double prism of home and mobility. The nation's anxious spirit of decline and instability at the onset of the twenty-first century lies at the heart of all of these stories, even when the calamities themselves only marginally appear in the plots. With *Sunset Park,* published in 2010, Auster wrote a novel of and in the present moment—an uncharacteristic move for the author. Auster explained to me that, after the financial meltdown in 2008, he had an impulse

> … to be writing a book about the Now, with a capital N. And I had never done that, all my books are set in the past, sometimes the recent past. But I was writing about things that happened just three or four months before, I was writing about them in the book. And so it gave the book a different tonality for me, and that's why I think I naturally wrote it in the present tense. … I was very energized when writing this book, and it came rapidly, much more quickly than most of the novels I had written. (Telephone Interview)

The extraordinary wave of foreclosures in the United States and the resulting psychological trauma of displacement that so many Americans experienced in the months and years after the financial meltdown had a profound impact on Auster:

> I think one of the things that inspired me to write the book, is that I've been absolutely riveted by grief by what was going on in the United States at that time, when millions of people were being kicked out of their houses, in other words their homes. I think the final trigger that coalesced all this material for me was an article I read in *The New York Times* which was about this business of so-called "trashing out" ….I thought of it as really probably one of the most gruesome jobs in America; and in a world collapsing, one of the only jobs you could get, in places like Florida, which was rapidly disintegrating in just months—it was an

> avalanche of catastrophes for so many people. So once I knew that there was such a job, I put my main protagonist, Miles Heller, in that job and then the book somehow seemed to make sense to me, I seemed to know what I was doing. (Auster, Telephone Interview)

Whereas Auster thus clearly acknowledges that witnessing the impact of the Great Recession impelled him to write *Sunset Park*, Richard Ford claims that another catastrophe prompted him to write his compilation of four novellas, *Let Me Be Frank with You*: Hurricane Sandy.[14] The storm caused utter devastation on the East Coast of the United States in October 2012; New Jersey, where the four books featuring protagonist Frank Bascombe[15] are located, was severely afflicted. Ford pointed out to me that, even though he was "specifically talking about one kind of calamity", one could certainly deduce that "not only an economic calamity, but a whole downturn in American civilization, might be metaphorically associated" (Ford, Personal Interview). Ford's portrait of the ravaged Jersey Shore and of the deteriorating Garden State suburbs is indeed emblematic of an America in decline more generally. The previous novel, *The Lay of the Land*, similarly records a sense of looming danger and evinces a downward tendency for the nation: "I wrote *The Lay of the Land*", Ford told me, "in what I specifically imagined to be a pre-9/11 atmosphere". The novel is set in the autumn of 2000, during the infamous presidential election that ended with George W. Bush's contested win. Furthermore, the book, which was published in 2006, paints a realistic—and with hindsight, foreshadowing—picture of the housing boom and development frenzy in the pre-credit crunch years. *The Lay of the Land* is a unique and compelling text in that it allows the reader to reflect on the leadup to a crisis (9/11) as well as the favorable and risky circumstances allowing a calamity to occur (the financial crisis), without actually dealing with any crisis directly. Considering this

14 In my interview, Ford described the book as "separate stories with certain kinds of unifying elements" (Personal Interview).

15 *The Sportswriter* (1986), *Independence Day* (1995), *The Lay of the Land* (2006) and *Let Me Be Frank with You* (2014). Ford recently announced that he is currently working on another Bascombe novel, entitled *Be Mine* (see Ford's interview in *The Guardian*, "Richard Ford: 'I Didn't Finish a Book Until I Was 19'").

circumventing approach to crisis, Ford's novel could not diverge any further from Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, where an undefined catastrophe permeates each and every page. In his first televised interview, with Oprah Winfrey in 2007, McCarthy broke his usual silence to talk about his writing process and inspiration to write *The Road*. "I like to think it's just about the boy and the man on the road", the author explained, "but obviously you can draw conclusions about all sorts of things from reading the book, depending on your taste". Although he credits his experience of being a father as the main catalyst for the book ("It's a pretty simple, straightforward story, I think"), he also acknowledges that 9/11 was on his mind—and would be on every reader's mind when reading it. "I think it is, maybe since 9/11, [that] people's emotions are more concerned about apocalyptic issues. We're not used to that. … This country has been pretty lucky" (McCarthy, "Oprah"). Emily St. John Mandel told me in our interview that she considers *The Road* to be "the book that catapulted postapocalyptic stories from the genre world into mainstream literature" (Mandel, Email Interview). Her own postapocalyptic novel, *Station Eleven*, tells the haunting story a global virus outbreak—a plot line that reads decidedly less like science-fiction in 2020 than when it was published in 2014. Although she acknowledges that the particular crisis-ridden context of the new millennium may have informed her story ("of course we're all influenced by the world around us, and these are anxious times"), she adds an important caveat:

> We can point to obvious anxiety-producing elements in any given era – specific wars, climate change, etc.—but it seems to me that no one's particularly relaxed in the inbetween times, so to speak. In the Trump/Brexit era, I find myself looking back at the Obama years with deep nostalgia, but it's not like we weren't all freaked out back then too; I think it's only in retrospect that a given period in history seems tranquil.
>
> As an illustration, my mother once told me that she and her friends felt guilty about bringing children into the world. In the late seventies and early eighties, in British Columbia. It's hard to imagine a more tranquil time or place, but of course anxieties were running high, because it was

> the height of the Cold War. So perhaps the anxieties of this era permeate *Station Eleven*, but if I'd written it ten years earlier, perhaps it just would have been permeated by a different set of anxieties. (Email Interview)

What Mandel obviously could not have foreseen, is that her novel would never be read the same way after the global Covid-19 outbreak—a useful reminder that the public's reception and interpretation of literary texts is malleable and can shift according to the specific historical context. It is, perhaps, inevitable that as readers, we imprint the crises that shape our lives onto the stories we read. Contemporary readers of Dave Eggers's 2012 novel *A Hologram for the King* may also recognize their own experience in the story set in a context of economic hardship and increasingly competitive global markets. The novel traces the journey of dispirited IT salesman Alan Clay, who came to King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) in Saudi Arabia to pitch a hologram system to the King—a deal he desperately needs to close, given his demoralizing financial situation in the midst of the recession. In my interview with the author, he emphasized the impact that the economic downturn had on his writing of *A Hologram for the King*:

> The crisis was one of the main catalysts for the book. At the time, there was a malaise hanging over the US that had everyone thinking our best days were behind us. China was ascendant, we were involved in two unsuccessful wars, the economy had bottomed out. There was very little to look to for hope. (Eggers, Email Interview)

This ambition to capture the "malaise hanging over the US" is indeed, I would argue, the common denominator in the novels discussed in this book—and it is by using the motifs of home and mobility that they achieve to do this. It should be pointed out that other American novels published in the years after 9/11 and the financial crisis display similar thematic concerns and could have offered equally illuminating

and relevant examples in this discussion.[16] Yet it is clear that a larger literary selection would inevitably lead to a less thorough examination of the material at hand. I have thus narrowed my analysis down to the aforementioned novels by Auster, Eggers, Ford, Mandel and McCarthy, which I consider to be emblematic of this literary interest in the motifs of home and mobility in unsettled and precarious times. It is my hope, however, that my exploration of the home-mobility binary in these specific novels could sharpen the reader's eye for identifying the same motifs in other cultural texts written in periods of national upheaval and change.

A Roadmap

The opening chapter of this book lays the theoretical and historical groundwork for the inquiry into the place of home and mobility in American cultural history and thought. I thus pick up and expand on some of the ideas that I have touched upon on the previous pages, arguing that the dialectical relationship between home and mobility has engaged intellectuals and writers since the nation's very beginning, and never more intensely than in moments of national upheaval and change. The chapter chronicles the centrality of both of these concepts in the American mindset by spotlighting a selection of formative periods, national policies and cultural phenomena in US history, starting with the nation's settlement period. This contextual and theoretical chapter provides the necessary foundation to examine the fiction of home and mobility in millennial America. Indeed, my research owes a great deal to the rich and wide-ranging scholarship on the home–mobility (and place–space) binary, which is referenced all throughout this opening chapter. My hope is that this book will add to and enrich this existing and comprehensive body of research on home and mobility, offering a new angle by exploring how these concepts have permeated fiction

16 These novels include Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003), Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones* (2011), Angela Flournoy's *The Turner House* (2015) and Imbolo Mbue's *Behold the Dreamers* (2016).

written in the age of "polycrisis"—which is what the three remaining chapters are centered on.

Close readings of recent novels by Paul Auster (*Sunset Park*), Cormac McCarthy (*The Road*), Dave Eggers (*A Hologram for the King*), Richard Ford (*The Lay of the Land* and *Let Me Be Frank with You*) and Emily St. John Mandel (*Station Eleven*) form the core of the next chapters of this book. In the second chapter, the physical space of home takes center stage. Whereas, historically, the domestic space has often been imbued with an almost sacred aura of protection and safety, narratives written in the "Age of Uncertainty" (Bauman, *Liquid Times* 94) deconstruct this ideal by accentuating the instability and fragility of the places we call home. The disintegrating and precarious dwelling places in these stories set in anxious times take on symbolic significance, becoming emblems of an America in decline.

The third chapter continues exploring these contemporary works of fiction by shifting the focus to the concept of mobility and the journey motif. Lacking the comfort and security of a stable sense of home, the characters in these novels find themselves unsettled, in a state of flux—be it literally or metaphorically. Set in the present context of uncertainty, the stories analyzed in this book turn to the trope of mobility—and *im*mobility– to convey a sense of anxious disorientation and dwindling opportunities.

The closing chapter builds on the two previous chapters to explore how these stories not only grapple with the fundamental impermanence of home, but also call for a reconceptualization of what it means to feel at home. The five novelists thus evoke the possibility of a malleable, mobile experience of home to ground us in the midst of shifting and uncertain circumstances.

Finally, the epilogue probes how the concepts of home and mobility, explored throughout this book, have come to the forefront in the current, profoundly destabilizing Covid-19 outbreak. The question that arises is *if*, and *how*, novelists may respond to this unprecedented calamity, in the months and years to come. I thus choose to end my book by looking ahead, towards an unsettled and challenging future.

Chapter 1
The Sway of the Pendulum: The Home–Mobility Dialectic in American Thought and Literature

When J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur proclaimed in his *Letters from an American Farmer*, first published in 1781, that the New World has given birth to a "new man" (39), he was the first of many to recognize that there appears to be a distinctly American character, a set of traits unique to the American citizen. Indeed, from Tocqueville to Henry James and Wendell Berry, countless thinkers have attempted to identify the mysterious conglomeration of qualities that constitutes this "new man". In his essay "What's 'American' about America", John A. Kouwenhoven suggests that "most of the explorers seem to have found not one but two or more antipodal and irreconcilable Americas" (40). There indeed appear to be opposing and contradictory impulses lying at the heart of the American mindset. This chapter advances the argument that the dual forces that have had the strongest hold on American consciousness are the desire for home—stability, stasis and safety—and the urge for mobility—journey, progress and development. Whilst it could convincingly be argued that these are not only American impulses but could be viewed as human longings more generally,[17] I would posit that the particular cultural history of America and the foundational myths underlying the nation's development have led to a heightened manifestation of this dialectic within the American mindset. Henry James was right when he noted that it is "a complex fate, being an American" (qtd. in Clarke 150), and a major part of this complexity lies in the continuous navigation between the nation's yearning for settlement and stability and the incessant push forward driving American consciousness.

17 In *The City in History*, published in 1961, Lewis Mumford already asserted that "[h]uman life swings between two poles: movement and settlement" (5). Mumford went as far as tracing back these double impulses to animal species.

David Seamon succinctly addresses these powerful oppositional forces when he observes that "[the] whole of a person's, group's or society's existence can be viewed as a series of pendulum swings between the need for center, at-homeness and continuity on the one hand, and the need for change, variety and reach on the other" (228). This opening chapter will trace these swinging movements of the pendulum—ranging from the desire for a stable home and a sense of place to the urge for movement, progress (and back again)—throughout American history, literature and culture more generally. It should not go unnoticed that the particular trajectory of the pendulum is in fact a movement along a *spectrum*, or *continuum*. Whilst the pendulum momentarily swings decidedly and unmistakably towards one polarity, there are always liminal moments, gray areas of in betweenness, in which the pendulum is suspended between both forces. In other words, there may be times when the desire for home and stability clearly dominates, others when the appeal of movement is stronger; yet there are also phases when both polarities exert a perceptible pull, and we find ourselves striking a balance between these double desires. Tim Cresswell aptly formulates this point in *On the Move* (2006), his comprehensive study on the importance of mobility in American culture. He notes that, whilst these two oppositional "ways of thinking have permeated the world we live in to influence all manner of beliefs and practices, it is equally clear that they form ends of a continuum and rarely exist in pure form" (26). This is something to keep in mind during my exploration of the longings for home and movement throughout American cultural history. To underscore the interrelation and reciprocity between these binaries, the structure of my analysis will mirror this movement of the pendulum, swinging from one side of the continuum to the other and back again. My discussion will thus alternate between instances of American cultural history that emphasize the importance of place, domesticity and at-homeness, and examples that stress the centrality of mobility within American culture.

It should be noted that I do not purport to offer a comprehensive and definitive overview of the impact of these binaries within an American context. This endeavor, although tempting, would undoubtedly exceed the limits of this chapter. Rather, I chose to highlight specific elements

of American mythology as well as American cultural and literary history, which illustrate the profound significance of the home –mobility dialectic for this nation. The primary purpose of this chapter is to provide a guiding framework, a lens through which to interpret the explorations of home and mobility in recent works of fiction written in a context of crisis. It is only by understanding the historically and culturally laden nature of this dialectic, so deeply embedded within America's identity, that we will be able to suitably interpret the fiction of home and mobility emerging in the contemporary times of turmoil.

Dreams of Home, Always Receding

Exploring the origins of the nation's fascination with home leads us back to the very beginning of American history. Marilyn Chandler rightly notes that "the history of the United States is a story of settling, building homes, domesticating land, and defining space" (3). It was indeed a deep-seated longing to put down new roots, establish new homes and initiate a society based on purer principles which guided the early settlers to the shores of the new world. For both the Pilgrims, who founded Plymouth Colony in 1620, and the Puritans, who established the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629, America was nothing less than an earthly paradise, a place chosen by God to found a society free from the sins and corruption that they fled from in Europe.[18] The vast continent provided the blank slate (a convenient yet thoroughly mistaken way of looking at it) on which the early settlers could project their ideals of a new home. When, in 1630, John Winthrop declared the settlers' intention to "be as a Citty vpon a Hill, the Eies of all people are vppon vs" (qtd. in Freese, *'America'* 101), he gave voice to the deeply ingrained conviction that their newly founded home represented a morally higher and more advanced society. Yet, interestingly enough, this home-founding also involved a significant look backwards to their original homes. As Susan Matt elucidates in her book *Homesickness* (2011), the "homesick Puritans who remained in the colonies tried to make the new and

18 For further insight into the settlement period of the United States, see Freese, *'America', Dream or Nightmare?* (specifically 100–6).

unfamiliar landscape of Massachusetts more comforting and homelike" (19). The most notable effort to build a connection between the settlers' old and new homes is evident in the English town names allocated to the new settlements—Cambridge, Gloucester and Lancaster, for instance—which instilled a sense of 'home away from home'.

If this desire for home needs to be recognized as a major driving force for the colonists, the early settlement period is just as much embedded in a discourse of mobility and restlessness. Indeed, the very act of colonizing presupposes a willingness to 'move away' from an earlier site and to 'move towards' new shores. In George W. Pierson's words, "we began as migrants, that is, wishful thinkers, and each wave of immigration, each boatload from abroad, brought us fresh injections of this heart stimulant" (286). Each and every settler who accepted to undertake the arduous transatlantic passage and to overcome the countless obstacles that this migration entailed, was thus a carrier of this "heart stimulant". Pierson here identifies a positive disposition towards movement as the primary characteristic of the American mindset. Unlike Pierson, James Agee reads this relentless desire to keep moving not as connected to an optimistic and hopeful predisposition, but rather as a symptom of a deep-seated and uncontainable restlessness that propels us ever forward. According to Agee, the American spirit is inherently "restive" and the "hunger for movement" is "very probably the profoundest and most compelling of American racial hungers" (qtd. in Casey J. IX).

The hunger for movement that first pushed the settlers across the Atlantic was persistent indeed, and it clearly did not fade once they established the first colonies. In fact, this is when "the nation's formative years of mobility" (Moen 156) truly began. In *Restless Nation* (2000), James Jasper explains that "in late-seventeenth-century Virginia, fewer than half of those appearing on county tax lists in one decade were living in the same county ten years later. There was greater stability in New England, but even one-third of its inhabitants moved in a typical decade" (64). The direction of this movement, this migrating impulse, was decidedly towards the West. Up until the end of the nineteenth century, the lure of exploring the unknown and of conquering what appeared to be unlimited and endlessly bountiful land pushed hundreds of thousands of settlers towards the Pacific. Legend-

ary frontiersmen like Daniel Boone (who led the first crossing of the Appalachian Mountains in 1775), Meriwether Lewis and William Clark (who were the first to reach the Pacific coast in 1806) paved the way for this westward expansion. It was groundbreaking expeditions like these, in this pivotal early period of US history, that ignited the pioneer spirit so deeply entrenched in American mythology. No other literary character epitomizes this quintessential frontiersman, constantly on the move and embracing adventure in the Wild West, more forcefully than Natty Bumpo in James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. Written between 1823 and 1841, Cooper's four novels mark the beginning of the western genre, mythologizing the conquest of the untamed wilderness in the vast territory leading to the Pacific. The territorial expansion, particularly in the first half of the nineteenth century, was nothing short of spectacular. As a result of a series of annexations—most notably, the massive 1803 Louisiana Purchase, the 1819 treaty that secured the Florida region and the major annexation of the Mexican Cession in 1848—the territory of the United States had more than tripled by 1850. Horace Greeley called attention to the opportunity that this newly acquired land could present to ambitious Americans in the editorial of *The New Yorker* in 1836:

> If any young man is about to commence the world, with little in his circumstances to prepossess him in favor of one section more than another, we say to him, publicly and privately, Go to the West; there your capacities are sure to be appreciated, and your industry and energy rewarded. … The West is the land of promise and of hope: let all who are else hopeless, turn their eyes and, when able, their steps toward it. (qtd. in Freese, '*America*' 126)

Greeley's advice, summed up in the celebrated phrase "Go West, Young Man", has become a firmly established American slogan expressing the go-getter attitude that would come to dominate the American mindset for years to come. Greeley's contemporary, French historian and political writer Alexis de Tocqueville, who studied American society in-depth in the 1830s, also recognized the pull that the West exerted on the ambitious population of the continent: "Millions of men are

marching at once toward the same horizon: their language, their religion, their manners differ; their object is the same. Fortune has been promised to them somewhere in the West, and to the West they go to find it" (*Democracy Vol. 1* 374). The completion of the Pacific Railroad in 1869, which facilitated the movement to the western shore tremendously, was followed by the biggest wave of migration in the 1870s and 1880s (McVeigh 7). The fact that this expansion also brought about the violent removal of Native-American communities was either conveniently ignored or considered a necessary evil for the fulfillment of America's Manifest Destiny to territorialize the entire continent.

John Gast's famous painting *American Progress* (1872) perfectly captures this perception of America's heroic and inevitable move to the West. Floating at the center of the painting is an illuminated angelic figure in a flowing white gown, purposefully leaning towards the West. She is holding both a schoolbook and the remaining loops of telegraph wire that map her trajectory from the eastern shores, thus symbolically bringing enlightened knowledge and technological progress to the West. Advancing alongside her are settlers of various professions, making their westward progression by train, coach, horseback or on foot. The left-hand side of the painting represents the western territory, with Native-Americans and wild animals desperately fleeing the imminent invasion towards the looming darkness on the Pacific shore. The painting underpins what James Jasper calls "a central tenet in American's self-image" (125): "that the center of civilization moves westward" (124). One of the earlier advocates of this belief was the philosopher George Berkeley, who used the memorable line "Westward the Course of Empire takes its Way" in his poem "On the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America" (qtd. in Freese, '*America*' 97), following his stay in America in 1728–1731. John Gast's painting of the westward progression of the feminine figure wearing "the Star of Empire" on her forehead, guiding the civilizing forces to untamed territory, could be seen as a direct illustration of Berkeley's significant line written over a century earlier.

The site of confrontation between the oppositional forces at the heart of Gast's painting—East versus West, civilization versus wilderness—represents, in fact, the frontier borderline which historian Frederick

Jackson Turner would famously identify a decade afterwards as "the line of most rapid and effective Americanization" (201). In his influential paper "The Significance of the Frontier in American History", presented to the American Historical Association in 1893, Turner declares that "(t)he existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development" (119). He continues,

> Thus American development has exhibited not merely advance along a single line, but a return to primitive conditions along a continuously advancing frontier line, and a new development in that area. … This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character. The true point of view in the history of this nation is not the Atlantic coast, it is the Great West. (200)

According to Turner, the gradual westward movement of the settlers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the resulting restless, "fluid" existence in a constantly changing environment, have thus been the primary shaping forces in American development. Turner argues that some of the most idiosyncratic American traits—"that coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness", "that restless, nervous energy" (226)—can be directly traced back to the Frontier experience. For historians at the turn of the century, this thesis provided a much-yearned-for explanation for 'what makes Americans American', and it was widely heralded as one of the most significant historical texts produced in and about the young nation. In the course of the twentieth century, more critical voices regarding Turner's theory began to emerge, but his Frontier thesis has undeniably remained an enormously influential lens through which to read American development and character. "Turner's Frontier Thesis", Tim Cresswell rightly observes, "put movement at the centre of American history and identity" (*Tramp* 19).

Although the frontier was officially proclaimed as closed by the Census Bureau in 1890, its spirit continued to linger on long after the actual physical frontier had disappeared. The frontier would become a favored

and recurrent motif in American discourse, most notably in political rhetoric. For instance, John F. Kennedy declared in his inaugural speech that America was standing on the "edge of a new frontier—the frontier of the 1960s, a frontier of unknown opportunities and perils, a frontier of unfulfilled hopes and threats" (qtd. in Freese, '*America*' 136). Americans wholeheartedly embraced the mythology and ideology of the frontier, crafting themselves as frontiersmen, ever willing to face new challenges and embark upon the unknown. As I hope to demonstrate later on in this chapter, the restless urge for mobility, the longing for progress and innovation, which came into full bloom during this period of westward expansion, would prove to be a lasting and essential characteristic of the American mindset.

Hunger for Land

If American society was, as Robert H. Brinkmeyer Jr. put it, "a wagon train moving progressively west" (4), then the fuel driving the train engine in this early period of American history was clearly the desire for land. The settlers who ventured into the untamed, virgin territory were indeed propelled by a common dream: the dream of owning a piece of land. What for many settlers would have been unobtainable in the Old World was suddenly within everyone's reach; the spaciousness of the continent guaranteed an abundance of fertile land that every free man could profit from. America was envisioned as a utopian, pastoral society, with agriculture as its chief industry and the independent farmer forming the heart of its moral foundation. It was Thomas Jefferson who most forcefully advocated a society composed of yeoman farmers.[19] For Jefferson, the moral integrity of the new nation was intricately connected with an agrarian lifestyle. Writing to John Jay in 1785, he stated that the "[c]ultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, and they are tied to their country, and wedded to its liberty and interests by

19 However, Jefferson was certainly influenced by the writing of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, who similarly glorified the virtues of an agrarian lifestyle in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1781).

the most lasting bonds" (qtd. in Jager 12). In another letter addressed to Reverend James Madison the same year, he stressed that "as few as possible shall be without a little portion of land. The small landholders are the most precious part of a state" (qtd. in Berry 174). It is worth noting that Jefferson's firm belief in the value of individual property ownership has its roots in Enlightenment thought, first and foremost in the writings of John Locke. In his *Second Treatise of Government* from 1689, Locke argued that all men are born with certain natural rights, namely the right to life, liberty and property (a trinity which Jefferson appropriated for his draft of the Declaration of Independence, although notably substituting the term "property" with "the pursuit of happiness"[20]).

Following the Revolution, in order to help his dream of an agrarian society become reality, Jefferson devised a federal policy that would greatly facilitate the distribution of land, much of it for agricultural development. The Land Ordinance of 1785, which developed out of Jefferson's 1784 proposal to divide the Northwest territory into separate districts, organized the territory west of the Appalachian Mountains and east of the Mississippi River according to a strict rectilinear grid system. Each square section of the grid, having 6 miles in length, represented a township, which was in turn divided up into 36 individual sections of land measuring one square mile, or 640 acres. The grid was rigidly imposed on the landscape, regardless of geographic idiosyncrasies that the territory may present. In Derek R. Everett words, "[t]he Land Ordinance enforced geometry's primacy over geography in Americans' conceptions of controlling the land they claimed" (34). More tragically, geometry not only trumped geography, but also ancestral indigenous homeland: the grid system indeed entailed the violent expropriation of land for innumerable Native-American tribes. For the American government, the Land Ordinance could generate much-needed revenues following the costly Revolutionary War; for wealthy settlers, the surveying method provided the gateway to independent proprietorship. Yet the fact that, initially, buyers had to purchase an entire section of 640

20 It should not go unnoticed, that the term "pursuit" implies movement and progress, which were thus implicitly established as essential American qualities.

acres (at the cost of one dollar per acre) prevented many Americans from feeding their hunger for land.[21]

Whilst in this early period landownership was only a possibility for those who were able and willing to pay for it, the Homestead Act of 1862 suddenly made the dream of having a piece of land to call one's own a reality for the masses. According to this legislation, signed on May 20 by President Abraham Lincoln, every US citizen (or person in the process of becoming one), older than 21 or head of a family (including, it should be noted, free African Americans and single women) could receive a 160-acre parcel of land, free of charge (apart from a small fee).[22] The Homestead Act, which excluded anyone having been involved in military action against the United States, demanded that each homesteader was obliged to reside on the property for a minimum of 5 years, to improve the piece of land by growing crops and to build a 12-by-14 dwelling on the property. The legislation was devised in an effort to promote land development in the country's unsettled areas such as the Great Plains region, and indeed hundreds of thousands of Americans—including freed slaves eager to leave the South—answered the call from the West.

The impact that the Homestead Act had on Americans' understanding of home and ownership cannot be overstated. Landownership was now established as a fundamental right for every free American, and a prerequisite for the settlers to develop a sense of home in the vast and wild continent that stretched out to the Pacific. Richard Selcer rightly notes that "[t]he idea of home and a piece of land became inseparable to a nation of homeless immigrants" (54), and it was the Homestead Act which consolidated this connection. By offering Americans their own piece of land to live off and on, the Homestead Act promoted values of autonomy, independence and self-reliance—the ultimate American qualities. The legislation represented a firm step towards the attainment of Crèvecoeur and Jefferson's vision: the vision of a society composed of

21 For further details on the Land Ordinance of 1785, refer to the comprehensive article on American land distribution by Lee Ann Potter and Wynell Schamel, "The Homestead Act of 1862" (1997), and the useful overview "Northwest Ordinances" in *Encyclopædia Britannica*.
22 For more details, refer to the article about the "Homestead Act of 1862" on *Encyclopædia Britannica* (by Robert Fink).

independent yeoman farmers, "the cultivators of the earth", living the self-sufficient agrarian dream in the land of plenty.

Implicit in this ideology of the yeoman farmer is the romanticized perception of the meaningful connection that exists between man and his soil. In 1977, Wendell Berry ardently proclaimed in his ode to farming, *The Unsettling of America*, that if there is one idea "still full of promise" and "potent with healing and with health", it is "the idea that as many as possible should share in the ownership of the land and thus be bound to it by economic interest, by the investment of love and work, by family loyalty, by memory and tradition" (16). In order to overcome American (agri)culture's modern predicament, Berry believes that American society needs to adopt an attitude of *nurturing* (as opposed to *exploiting*) towards the land. For him, as for several towering figures before him (Crèvecoeur, Jefferson, Turner), the independent farmer represents the epitome of this nurturing figure. Only through private ownership of the land can an enduring, meaningful bond with the land truly arise. The moral resonance of land- or farm-ownership had previously already been eloquently addressed by philosopher William Ernest Hocking in his essay "A Philosophy of Life for the American Farmer (And Others)" (1940):

> … property in land—real estate—is far more personal than property in money or tokens of money which go by the name of personal. Property that one can handle, use, take care of, does a great deal to educate its possessor. … Tangible and durable property like a farm responds to treatment, and so carries on through the years a silent conversation with its owner, telling him what kind of man he is and what sort of head he has. Most men have much to learn from this quiet and unanswerable instruction … (1063–64)

Hocking here emphasizes the reciprocal relationship that exists between owner and his/her property: whilst the land or farm itself bears the stamp of its owners' effort and care—or lack thereof—every (wo)man also learns a great deal about him/herself by looking at the condition of the property. And not only is this mirroring instructive for the owner, but also for the people around him/her. "Property makes the man vis-

ible and accessible", writes Hocking. "I cannot see a man's mind or his character. But when I see what he has chosen and what he does with it, I know what he likes, and quite a good deal about his principles" (1064).

It is tempting to thus read Americans' longstanding veneration of landownership, reinforced through federal policies such as the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Homestead Act of 1862, as indicative of an inherent social tendency towards permanence and stasis. Yet as much as Americans were preoccupied with settlement in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, it cannot be denied how profoundly unsettled and mobile people remained. The "lasting bonds" that Thomas Jefferson predicted would develop between Americans and their land ended up, in most cases, to be decidedly short-lived. Although the Homestead Act demanded a commitment of at least five years of residence and occupation on the piece of land, many homesteaders stayed for far less time before they moved on. The occasionally challenging climatic and ecological conditions on the frontier—wind, blizzards and insect plagues—prompted a lot of farmers to move away before the five-year mark was reached. Moreover, homesteaders had the option to evade the stipulations of the Homestead Act by paying the government $1.25 per acre: they could thus claim the title to their piece of land already after a six-month residency and minor improvements to the land.[23] Once they officially owned the land, they were free to resell it to the highest bidder. The market for land that developed during this settlement period was bustling indeed. This can be explained by the fact that a large percentage of the surveyed land in the West was actually not allocated to American families and farmers, but was instead obtained by speculators (as well as railroad companies). In fact, speculators managed to get their hands on an astounding 521,000,000 acres of government land, in many cases by using dummy entrymen, whilst only 80,000,000 acres belonged to homesteaders (Billington 36). Buying and selling the parcels of land that stretched out all the way to California became more

23 For more details, refer to Lee Ann Potter and Wynell Schamel's article "The Homestead Act of 1862" (1997).

than a mere commercial activity, it became a frenzied mania.[24] While speculators were undoubtedly the key players in the market, James Jasper explains that individual homesteaders participated just as much in the land speculation that emerged in this period of territorial expansion. The faster the sale of a piece of land could be secured, the better, and by consequence nurturing and tending to the land was usually not a priority. "In many cases", Jasper writes, "none of the sequential owners desired to improve the land, much less work it thereafter, but only to sell it at a higher price as soon as possible" (108). Americans were increasingly demonstrating a veritable boomtown mentality, and thus regarded their surroundings as "a temporary opportunity for self-advancement, not a place to live" (101).

The colonists' transitory and utilitarian attitude towards their habitat is diametrically opposed to the Native-Americans' relation to the land. The Indian tribes may have also been nomadic peoples, regularly moving from one area of land to another according to the seasons, but this mobility had as its only purpose the care and preservation of the land. In order for their land to remain fertile, Native-Americans understood that they needed to migrate in deliberate intervals. "[The Indians'] relation to place", Wendell Berry argues, "was based upon old usage and association, upon inherited memory, tradition, veneration" (6). They were permanently committed to their homeland. Jasper points out the striking difference between Native-Americans and English-American settlers regarding the notion of landownership:

> [Native-Americans] had no conception that individuals rather than groups could own land, that one could own land itself rather than rights to use it for specific purposes, or that one could deprive one's descendants of the land by selling it. But the English settlers saw land as a spiritually neutral resource to be used in producing food and clothing, something to profit from, which could be bought and sold like any other commodity. (103)

24 The following account of the market for land and the colonists' attitude towards their habitat is based primarily on James Jasper's *Restless Nation* (2000), which should be consulted for further insights.

In fact, the colonists' temporary relation to the land also contrasted starkly with the dominant attitude towards land property in their British homeland. Whereas inheritance laws were designed to ensure generational hold of landed estates for the English aristocracy, who considered land to be a source of great pride and power, peasants were also "legally and emotionally" tied to their land (Jasper 103). This deep connection between a homesteader and his piece of land rarely developed in the Western settlements, and in many cases the colonists packed up and moved on as soon as the resources that the land could yield were exhausted.

When looked at more closely, the grid system actually inherently fostered this instinct to exploit and keep moving. The "pulverizing" and "fragmentation" of space, to use Henri Lefebvre's words (355), has instilled in the American mindset the notion that any section of land is as good as the next one (what Lefebvre refers to as the "homogeneity of space" (285)). The rationalistic and homogenizing system of the grid has created a "landscape of empty, interchangeable divisions like the squares in a checkerboard" (Jackson 154), which the settlers could move across without restraint. Lacking any meaningful emotional or historical connection to one particular square of the checkerboard that made up the Western territory, it is easy to see why many settlers were seduced by the easy money that the market could offer them. Rather than becoming a nation of "cultivators of the earth", as Jefferson envisioned it, America thus came to be largely populated with exploiters and speculators of the earth. The sheer abundance of land, with its seemingly endless resources and fertility, provided a convenient moral justification and rationalization for this exploitative attitude towards the land.

Moving Upwards

As endless as the vast continent may have appeared to the colonizers when they first started settling the land, limits inevitably had to be reached, and shortly before the turn of the twentieth century, the Census Bureau proclaimed the frontier to be officially closed. With no more virgin land left to appropriate, Americans were confronted with

an unfamiliar sense of standstill and arrival. Yet the frontier mentality, the ambitious longing for adventure, progress and discovery, which had shaped American consciousness profoundly, was difficult to shake off. And thus, as Peter Freese explains, an alternative frontier emerged:

> [T]he closed geographical frontier was soon resurrected as a newly opened social frontier, namely, the 'open frontier of opportunity'. Thus, the challenge implicit in crossing the rim of settlement and conquering an unknown territory was kept alive, and latent energies were rechannelled; and the pioneer moving westward across an open continent was replaced by the self-made man moving upward through the strata of an open society. ('*America*' 136)

This idea of lingering, intrinsic "energies" which, following the disappearance of the frontier, required rechanneling, is also invoked in Robert B. Heilman's essay on "The Dream Metaphor":

> When a constantly receding horizon at last becomes stationary, the dream energies that once pushed off into non-finite distance undergo drastic redirection (they do not simply disappear). … When horizontal mobility is cut off because there is only more of the same thing to move to, it becomes vertical mobility: instead of going to a new world of higher quality, one goes higher in the world as it is—"success". (10)

A new dimension was thus added to Americans' yearning for movement: the westward movement that used to be the propelling force for Americans was now replaced by the dream to move upward, the ambition to rise to a higher status within society. As the lure of conquering new land started to fade and eventually vanished, material success became the ultimate goal. Of course, one could argue that the yearning to improve one's economic standing has not suddenly emerged with the closing of the frontier, but has always been an aspiration for men and women. In 1776, social philosopher and political economist Adam Smith argued that, as human beings, we are all driven by "the desire of bettering our condition, a desire which comes with us from the womb, and never leaves us till we go into the grave" (qtd. in Van

Minnen, *Nation on the Move* 1). And yet, it was in the latter part of the nineteenth century, a period fittingly referred to as the Gilded Age, that the ideology of upward mobility truly came to life in the United States. It is crucial to point out that this was indeed a period of profound societal change, as the rural agrarian society gradually gave way to an urban industrial system, governed by capitalist principles. This shift to a more profit-based, capitalist society model allowed the dream of upward mobility to flourish.

It was also in this period that Social Darwinist theories were widely embraced. According to this school of thought, the same principle of natural selection that Charles Darwin diagnosed in regard to animals and plants also applies to society. Thus, a hierarchy inevitably develops amongst social groups and individuals, and only the best-adapted make their way to the top. The memorable phrase "survival of the fittest", often mistakenly credited to Charles Darwin, was in fact written by leading British Social Darwinist, Herbert Spencer in 1852, seven years prior to the publication of Darwin's seminal work *The Origin of Species* (Freese, '*America*' 112). The theory fostered 'laissez-faire' economic policies and justified an increasingly aggressive and competitive mindset to attain financial success and power. John D. Rockefeller, who became the world's first billionaire in 1916 (O'Donnell), once claimed in a Sunday-School speech that "the growth of large business is merely a survival of the fittest" (Freese, '*America*' 112). The Social-Darwinist mantra was whole-heartedly adopted by optimistic Americans, who adhered to the premise that enough effort and hard work would guarantee the material success they longed for.

If there is one literary figure who most successfully disseminated the rags-to-riches ethos in narrative form, it was undoubtedly Horatio Alger. With an estimated 400 million copies sold between 1870 and 1930, Alger's incredibly popular novels such as *Ragged Dick: Or, Street Life in New York with the Boot Blacks* (1868) were highly didactic in tone, preaching (Alger was a former minister) that leading a virtuous life and working diligently would be rewarded with wealth and fame. James Jasper points out that Alger's tales "retained a Puritan residue in the success-story tradition", emphasizing "softer virtues", and indeed his books offered a rather naive representation of the path to fortune (135).

Yet Americans were also eager to get more tangible, hands-on instructions on how to succeed, which explains the "new genre that emerged late in the century consisting of frank how-to guides to success" (Jasper 135). The American self-help genre, which came into full bloom in the twentieth century, is today still bursting with supposedly foolproof advice to financial bliss. Even the former President of the United States, Donald Trump, added his wisdom with his bestselling book *Trump: How to Get Rich* (2004). The lesson in all these texts is clear: every individual, no matter their background, has the opportunity of climbing the social ladder, if only he or she is sufficiently committed and motivated. Discourse of upward mobility thus relies on one very specific pillar of American thought: individualism. In a dog-eat-dog society, every person is responsible for his own trajectory in life, and the road to success is an entirely personal endeavor. The implication seems to be, then, that if a person loses the rat race, this needs to be seen as a personal failure. Factors such as an individual's socio-economic background or the current economic climate are conveniently left out of the equation.

Upward mobility is an integral part of what has come to be known as the 'American Dream', the grand concept that assembles a variety of elusive ideas and ideals that America stands for. Although notoriously tricky to pin down, it seems that any definition of the American Dream inevitably underscores the hope of socioeconomic advancement.[25] To this day, countless immigrants make their way to the United States driven by the promise of a better future, so deeply entrenched in the rhetoric of the American Dream. America, then and now, presents itself as the land of opportunity, in which dreams of the 'good life' can come true for anyone willing to work for it. The fact that for an increasing segment of the population, and those yearning to become US citizens, the dream remains just that—an unachievable reverie—appears not to diminish its powerful and persistent hold. Although the aspirational quality lying at the heart of the American Dream discourse may have been embedded in the American psyche since the beginning—notice-

25 Two of the most illuminating studies on the history of the American Dream, which have informed my discussion of the concept, are Jim Cullen's *American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped the Nation* (2003) and Peter Freese's *'America': Dream or Nightmare?* (1994).

ably evident in the phrase "pursuit of happiness" in the nation's founding text—the actual term 'American Dream' only entered the collective vocabulary in the 1930s. It was in 1931, in the midst of the Great Depression, that James Truslow Adams first defined the concept in *The Epic of America*:

> But there has been also the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement … a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position. (Italics in original) (415)

Adams's choice of words here to describe life according to the American Dream—"better", "richer", "fuller"—is revealing. Indeed, it seems that at the core of the American Dream is an intrinsic and insatiable longing for *more*, an incessant urge for progress and development. In their study on the American Revolution, Oscar and Lilian Handlin make a pertinent observation on the American character, that holds truth about Americans then as much as today: Americans, they write, "could not just be; they felt the unremitting pressure to become, to make of themselves something more than they had been at birth" (79). The obsessive focus on *becoming* may of course bring out the best in people: indeed, it pushes an individual to overcome obstacles and to strive for greatness. After all, is it not precisely this ambitious mindset which allowed America to develop a culture of innovation, most visible in the boundary-pushing Silicon Valley tech industry? In her study on *Homesickness*, Susan J. Matt rightly concludes that "American culture celebrates restlessness as a valuable national trait" (253). Yet there is an inherent danger in this constant push forward that must not be overlooked. By always craving more, one is prone to feeling not only a profound dissatisfaction with the status quo, but also a deep sense of anxiety triggered by this ever-growing pressure to achieve. The most astute and eloquent observer of this distinctively American restlessness was, of course, one particular Frenchman who visited America in the

1830s. Alexis de Tocqueville took advantage of his outsider perspective to sketch the most remarkable and eye-opening portrait of this national character trait in his seminal work *Democracy in America*, which is worth quoting at some length:

> In America I saw the freest and most enlightened men placed in the happiest circumstances which the world affords: it seemed to me as if a cloud habitually hung upon their brow, and I thought them serious, and almost sad, even in their pleasures.
>
> … It is strange to see with what feverish ardor the Americans pursue their own welfare; and to watch the vague dread that constantly torments them, lest they should not have chosen the shortest path which may lead to it.
>
> … At first sight there is something surprising in this strange unrest of so many happy men, restless in the midst of abundance. The spectacle itself is, however, as old as the world; the novelty is, to see a whole people furnish an exemplification of it. (*Democracy Vol. 2* 163–64)

The American search for upward mobility, the American Dream of becoming the best possible version of oneself: at the root of these national desires lies precisely the sense of restlessness that Tocqueville examined here. What Tocqueville immediately understood was that this constant search for more inevitably has a destructive power. He explicitly describes the detrimental effect of restlessness: Americans experience "dread" and "anxiety", "fear" and "trepidation" (*Democracy Vol. 2* 164) as a result of the ceaseless longing for a more fulfilled life and material wealth. Although discourse of the American Dream and upward mobility has always been noticeably dominated by positive language, Tocqueville was one of the first to draw attention to the darker undertones of American restlessness and ambition.

"A space filled with moving"

In *Restless Nation*, James Jasper rightly notes that "we can be restless without going anywhere" (5). It is certainly true that restlessness can take the form of a "secret inquietude" (*Democracy Vol. 2* 164), as Tocqueville put it, imperceptible yet constantly simmering under the still surface. Generally speaking, however, there is no denying that Americans are a nation of restless *movers*. Gertrude Stein famously defined America as "a space that is filled with moving" (qtd. in Brinkmeyer 14), and physical mobility indeed occupies an enormously significant role in the nation's history and psyche. As already discussed earlier on in this chapter, geographic mobility allowed the country to develop into what it is today: the persistent westward movement and the progressive advancement along a physical frontier line meant that the settlers, more often than not, were on the move. Yet even when the conquering of new territory came to an end, and the collective focus of the nation shifted, as we have seen, to upward socio-economic mobility, Americans remained remarkably mobile. In fact, in order to climb the social ladder, physical movement was frequently considered imperative and indispensable. In his essay on geographic and social mobility in the United Stated, Ole O. Moen explains that "[i]n the pulsating and unstable American labor market, where opportunities were ample but rapidly shifting by Old World standards, workers also soon became used to moving when the situation demanded it" (159). Indeed, the national economy experienced a profound transformation in the years following the Civil War, and workers had to adapt.[26] The cities' exponential growth in this period led to mass migrations away from rural, agricultural communities to urban, industrial environments. African Americans, in particular, migrated in astounding numbers to the Northern cities that lured them with industrial jobs, leaving the South and its

26 For more details on cultural representations of itinerant workers throughout history, and specifically in the 1930s, see Erin Battat's *Ain't Got No Home* (2014). Susan J. Matt's *Homesickness* (2011) provides valuable insights into the connection between America's mobile work force and the feeling of homesickness. In *Restless Nation* (2000), James Jasper offers an in-depth analysis of the connection between American upward mobility and geographic mobility.

ties to the institution of slavery behind. In Ralph Ellison's words, this northbound direction represented "the road to freedom, the movement upward" (qtd. in Freese, *Journey* 21); and indeed this "upward movement" needs to be read both geographically and socioeconomically. By 1930, half a million Southern African Americans relocated to New York, Chicago and Philadelphia and other northern cities (Matt 187). Furthermore, the industrialization that shaped the end of the century created a need for an unsettled, flexible and mobile workforce, willing to relocate with ease beyond state lines. As the economy was increasingly guided by a free-market, capitalist ideology, "society came to enshrine movement as necessary for an expanding, capitalist order", Susan J. Matt explains. To survive and thrive in a highly competitive and profit-driven labor market, it appears that Americans, then as much as today, need to be willing to go wherever the next opportunity presents itself. As Moen succinctly puts it: "Horizontal mobility is a requirement for vertical mobility; social mobility presupposes physical mobility" (167). It is a common perception that anyone who desires to *move up* professionally, also needs to accept that this might require *moving on*. This mindset has especially been noticeable in large, (multi)national corporations, and it is certainly quite telling that leading computer company IBM was jokingly dubbed "I've Been Moved" amongst its employees.[27] In his book, *Next Stop, Reloville: Life Inside America's Rootless Professional Class* (2009), Peter Kilborn examines the rise of "Relo culture"(as in "relocation"), a phenomenon affecting particularly middle class executives, whose ambition to climb the corporate ladder turned them into transient nomads. Of course, not all Americans choose this spatially unsettled lifestyle, and many do so reluctantly; yet a vast section of the population, James Jasper rightly argues, associates physical relocation with self-improvement, which for most Americans, means economic success (64). This axiom, after all, lies at the heart of the American Dream rhetoric: that there is a place where the grass is greener, "in which life should be better and richer and fuller" (415), as James Truslow

27 To learn more about the relocation of US citizens in the twenty-first century, see Joel Kotkin's article "There's No Place Like Home" (2009).

Adams phrased it. The quest for the American Dream, in the mind of many Americans, inevitably leads *somewhere else*, away from home.

Owning the Dream

In *Restless Nation*, James Jasper traces Americans' unfading willingness to pull up stakes and "move on to the next lucky strike" (100) back to the boomtown spirit of the settlement period. Like the boomtowners who came to (temporarily) settle and exploit the western territories in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, many modern Americans regard their environment as temporary places to set up camp at before the next opportunity may prompt them to pack their bags again. Compared with largely sedentary Europeans, who tend to feel lasting connections to the cities, towns and houses they call home, Americans indeed appear remarkably uncommitted and unfettered regarding their dwelling places. "Few Americans", Jasper remarks, "feel tied to their geographic location, and those who do often seem old-fashioned or misguided to the rest of us" (242). Considering this rather mobile, transient mode de vivre, it is all the more astounding how significant home-*ownership* is within American culture. Indeed, it may seem somewhat paradoxical that a population moving houses on such a regular basis places such value on the ownership of these houses. Of course, it was the aforementioned Land Ordinance of 1785 and, more crucially, the Homestead Act of 1862, which firmly embedded the notion of ownership within the American mindset. Americans have, in fact, never been a nation of renters. In the Preface to *The Unsettling of America* (1977), Wendell Berry recalls an agricultural economist claiming at a meeting that there is no fundamental difference between owning and renting a farm, to which a farmer bluntly responded: "Professor, I don't think our ancestors came to America in order to *rent* a farm" (italics in original, xii). The deep-seated valorization of property in general, and houses (or farms) in particular, has persisted throughout the years. In 2000, housing tenure in the United States reached 65 %, compared with a mere 39 % of homes owned in Germany (Blunt and Dowling 92). According to a study conducted by Hirschl and Rank in 2010, virtually all Americans—nine out of ten—will at some point during their adulthood become

a homeowner (Rank et al. 43). In fact, housing tenure has long been directly encouraged in the United States from a policy level. The "Own Your Own Home" campaign that then Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover implemented in the 1920s was the first government policy with the specific purpose of fostering homeownership, which had been low for decades—less than half of American households owned their houses (Von Hoffman 3). Since the 1930s, The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) has administered numerous programs with the same objective (Harvey and Chatterjee 25). Franklin D. Roosevelt's creation of Fannie Mae, the Federal National Mortgage Association, in 1938 was another crucial historical moment in America's path to becoming a nation of homeowners. In 1944, the G.I. Bill gave veterans of the Second World War access to low-interest mortgages, thus boosting homeownership rates in the postwar period. Starting in the 1960s, programs with social objectives were designed to offer minorities and lower-class Americans the opportunity to get a foot on the property ladder (Harvey and Chatterjee 25). During Jimmy Carter's presidency in the 1970s, ethnic minorities were granted specific affordable mortgages, and President Clinton's administration in the 1990s placed unprecedented emphasis on affordable housing policies aimed directly at low-income households.[28] Whilst these federal measures are lauded by some as socially responsible economic policies, a Marxist reading would urge for a more critical look at the government's stake in private homeownership. In their pivotal study on *Home* (2006), Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling explain that, following Marxist discourse, homeownership "plays a role in the ideological reproduction of capitalism", encouraging "commitment to, and identification with, capitalist values" (11). Whatever the rationale behind the long-standing federal incentives for homeownership, there is no doubt that Americans, across all classes, have leapt at the opportunity. When, in the early millennium, banks and mortgage companies began to target high-risk lenders who would previously have been firmly rejected from receiving any substantial home loan,

28 For a comprehensive overview of President Bill Clinton's affordable housing policies, refer to Rachel G. Bratt's report "Housing for Very Low-Income Households: The Record of President Clinton, 1993-2000" (2002).

national homeownership figures reached unprecedented heights (69% in 2004–2005[29]). The subprime-mortgage market in fact allowed the banking sector to exploit hopeful and naive Americans' yearning for homeownership, luring low-income and financially vulnerable citizens into taking on debts they would clearly never be able to repay. It was, of course, this predatory lending practice which directly led, in 2008, to the largest financial crisis since the Great Depression, with a global ripple effect hitherto unseen.

Interestingly, although the US government has implemented various measures to entice Americans to buy houses, these policies also implicitly nudge Americans to keep on moving. As James Jasper astutely observes:

> Policies of the Federal Housing Administration guarantee mortgages for buying a new home, not renovating an existing one. To derive full tax benefits from home ownership, an American needs to move before the mortgage is paid off. (243)

The purchase of a home thus does not necessarily imply a permanent or even prolonged commitment to a particular dwelling place. In fact, it rarely takes long for Americans to become restless again. According to the Census Bureau, it is estimated that a person in the United States moves on average 11.7 times in their lifetime, based on a survey from 2007 ("Calculating Migration").

Why is it then, one may wonder, that Americans nevertheless feel the need to *own* the houses they inhabit (however temporarily)? A primary reason why so many Americans take the step towards homeownership is that they regard a house as a sound financial investment. Prior to the devastating housing crisis in the early millennium, it was a widely held belief that, despite some occasional minor market slumps, housing prices would remain on their ascending trajectory. From 1990 to 2007, average house prices in the United States and in Great Britain increased by nearly 200 per cent (Shaw 51). Investing a major part of one's equity in bricks and mortar was deemed a rational and foolproof decision. In

29 See Blinder, *After the Music Stopped* (18).

Pinched: How The Great Recession Has Narrowed Our Futures And What We Can Do About It (2011), Don Peck argues that "[b]y the middle of the aughts, many Americans had come to view their house not just as a store of wealth, but as an engine of it, one that seemed to promise the upward mobility and increasing material comfort that flat salaries did not" (85). Homeowners, realizing the considerable profit that their houses could generate, indeed started getting greedy. The speculation with houses, seen as a commodity like any other, became common practice in the early millennium. By 2007, Peck explains, "more than 12 million homes (about one in six) had second or third mortgages on them; and another 2 million homeowners had refinanced their mortgage primarily to get cash back" (85). When the housing market eventually imploded, the consequences were disastrous. "With the crash, many families have seen their houses transformed in a blink from a sort of magical ATM to a heavy burden" (86), Peck notes.

Considering Americans' rapacious appetite for houses, it is not surprising that the housing business had morphed, in the second half of the twentieth century, into a major and highly lucrative industry. As Dolores Hayden remarks in her book *Redesigning the American Dream* (2002),

> The United States housing stock increased from 34.9 million occupied units in 1940 to 105.5 million occupied units in 2000 …. As Hoover had predicted, housing Americans was a big, big business. American banking, real estate, manufacturing, and transportation interests were intimately involved. (54)

The postwar period, in particular, was marked by a genuine "building binge" (4), as John S. Adams puts it in *Housing America in the 1980s* (1987), with an astounding 10 million new homes built between 1946 and 1953 (Hayden, *Building Suburbia* 132). This massive increase in housing development after the war was, in fact, desperately needed. Dolores Hayden notes that "[t]he year 1945 was the sixteenth in a row when new construction did not meet the demand for new housing" (*Building Suburbia* 131), and "the demand for shelter was expected to grow as waves of demobilized veterans, savings at the ready, married

and formed new households" (132). It is crucial to point out that this surge in construction coincided with an important demographic shift away from urban neighborhoods to suburban communities. Although the exodus from the city to suburbia had already been a noticeable trend since the 1870s (Hareven 270), it was really in the years following the Second World War that the suburbs grew exponentially and became the ultimate American habitat.[30] In *Building Suburbia* (2003), Dolores Hayden explains that, by 1970, the suburban population exceeded the number of people living in urban and rural areas combined (10). Housing construction in the peripheries of urban centers developed at great speed in the postwar years. Large-scale developers like Levitt and Sons, generously supported by federal subsidies, built thousands of tracts of identical houses. Standardized construction and mass production methods assured that housing was affordable—their Cape Cod houses were sold for $6,990. Hayden points out that the public response to the Levittowns was largely positive: in 1952, *Fortune* Magazine praised the developer as offering "The Most House for the Money", and would-be customers reportedly stood in line for days (much like contemporary consumers do for the release of hyped Apple products) (135). Besides the legendary Levittowns that sprouted in New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, other large-scale developments of so-called 'sitcom suburbs' included Lakewood in California and Park Forest in Illinois.[31] The 1950s, Julia Leyda explains in *American Mobilities* (2016), were characterized by "a strange national climate of consumerism, conservatism and conformity" (15), and nowhere is this climate more strongly epitomized than in the mass-produced, generic houses that filled the American suburban landscape.

Despite the general demographic trend towards smaller American households—in 2000, married-couple families with children under 18 represented less than a quarter of all households—the greatest bulk of

30 For a comprehensive analysis of the significance of suburbia in American culture, see Dolores Hayden's two superb books, *Redesigning the American Dream* (2002) and *Building Suburbia* (2003). Details referred to in this section are collected primarily from these sources.

31 Hayden offers detailed descriptions of both Lakewood and Park Forest in *Building Suburbia* (138-46).

the housing construction since the Second World War has been tailor-made for the nuclear family (Hayden, *Redesigning* 29). The single-family detached house, heavily promoted through the development of suburban communities, has gradually become the ultimate ideological symbol of the American Dream. Hayden holds that "the dream house replaced the ideal city as the spatial representation of American hopes for the good life" (*Redesigning* 55). It indeed appears that owning a single-family suburban dwelling, for many Americans, means having a tangible piece of the American Dream. Homeownership seems to fulfill a whole range of promises entrenched in the American Dream: besides the already mentioned perceived economic security, the house also provides an important sense of emotional and social stability. The step towards homeownership, Marilyn Chandler notes in her book *Dwelling in the Text* (1991), is read as a "completion of the rites of passage into maturity", just as the commitment to a mortgage is viewed "as a token of stability" (15–16). Having a nice, comfortable house to call one's own is not only deemed a personal accomplishment and source of pride for the owner; it is also considered an important symbol of an individual's participation and respectable standing within society. Above anything else, however, homeownership is venerated in American culture because it is closely wedded to the concept of independence, the most sacred of American virtues, which had previously been "idealized in the image of the settler" (Chandler 13). It should not go unnoticed, however, that this association between homeownership and independence ignores a crucial fact. "In practice, most of us own our homes through mortgages, which means that we don't own our home at all", British novelist John Lanchester reflects in *Whoops* (2010), his illuminating non-fiction book about the recent financial crisis. "Back in the days of my first flat, you didn't even hold the property deeds of your own property if you had a mortgage: the bank held the deeds. There was something brutal about that, but at least the point was stark: if you have a mortgage, you don't own your own home, and it's a good idea to remember that fact" (75). In stark opposition to popular perception, a vast majority of US homeowners are anything but independent; they are intricately tied to their banks (who are in turn depending on a complex financial apparatus). It was, of course, the financial crisis and resulting

foreclosure crisis of 2008, which harshly exposed homeowners' precarious and dependent state. The crisis forced Americans to question, reappraise and, in many cases, relinquish the alluring American Dream of homeownership, which had so fundamentally defined the second half of the twentieth century.

The Home as Haven

In order to understand Americans' enduring preoccupation and fascination with houses, it is vital to take a more in-depth look at the nineteenth century. Indeed, it was in the course of this pivotal century that the ideology of domesticity imbued the house—the mere physical structure—with a profound moral and social significance, an almost metaphysical aura: the concept of home entered the American imagination.[32] In "The Home and the Family in Historical Perspective" (1991), Tamara Hareven notes that mid-century Americans experienced a sense of "anxiety provoked by rapid urbanization, resulting in the transformation of old neighborhoods and the creation of new ones, the rapid influx of immigrants into urban areas, and the visible concentration of poverty in cities" (263). It was in this context of profound social change that the family home came to be viewed as a haven, offering protection and shelter from the world. Although the thriving urban centers provided welcome economic opportunities as well as convenient services and facilities, Americans also looked at the city as a potentially corrupting, bewildering and morally sinful place. In order to resist, escape and recover from this possible negative impact of the city, the home was cherished as an important refuge and sanctuary. In *The American Family Home* 1800-1960 (1986), Clifford Edward Clark Jr. remarks that "[t]he house at mid-century became perceived as an island of stability in an increasingly restless society" (24).

32 For more on the cult of domesticity, refer to Clifford Edward Clark Jr.'s *The American Family Home 1800-1960* (1986), Tamara Hareven's "The Home and the Family in Historical Perspective" (1991), Maria Kaika's "Interrogating the Geographies of the Familiar: Domesticating Nature and Constructing the Autonomy of the Modern Home" (2004) and Margaret Marsh's "From Separation to Togetherness: The Social Construction of Domestic Space in American Suburbs, 1840-1915" (1989).

The idea of the domestic realm and the outside world as diametrically opposed entities has its roots in biblical rhetoric, which posits the world as the "devil's domain" and the home as an "Edenic retreat" (Chandler 8). Within the hectic and confusing cityscape, the house could provide a protective barrier, a membrane segregating the personal space from society. Significantly, the domestic space was expressly constructed as an "antidote to urban life" (Marsh 508). "Since city dwellers could not return to live in the country, they enshrined the home as a rural retreat from the city *within* the city", writes Hareven. "Hence the garden with its hedges, gates, and walls was of great significance in sheltering the home from the outside world, as well as providing an illusion of serene pastoral settings" (263). Whereas the urban house and garden could keep up this pastoral illusion up to a certain point, the suburbs that emerged mid-century offered an especially appropriate setting to regenerate the Jeffersonian ethos of the rural, agrarian republic. As Margaret Marsh remarks, "[i]f a man could not be a farmer, he could at least be close to nature, on his own plot of ground, in his own house" (508). Suburbia indeed represented an ideal hybrid location for middle-class Americans: close enough to the city for the family men to commute to on weekdays and the housewives to do the shopping at, yet remote enough from negative urban influences to dwell in pastoral-like bliss.

The detached family home and yard with its white picket fence epitomized the American longing for privacy, which had come to play an increasingly important role in Victorian society. In his seminal work *Home* (1986), Witold Rybczynski traces back this "desire to define the home as a separate, special place" (66), a private and intimate bubble for the family unit, to seventeenth century Holland. Rybczynski refers to the famous paintings of domestic scenes by Dutch artists of the period, such as Emanuel de Witte, Pieter de Hooch and Jan Vermeer, as prime illustrations of the growing valorization of domesticity in society.[33] While the Dutch bourgeoisie excelled in this veneration of home, by the eighteenth century, the dwelling places in other northern

33 See Rybczynski, *Home* (66–71). For another examination of the 'home' motif in seventeenth-century Dutch domestic paintings, refer to Heidi De Mare's essay "Domesticity in Dispute: A Reconsideration of Sources" (1999).

European countries similarly accommodated notions of privacy and domesticity. As the bourgeois home was no longer a place of work, but solely a place of residence, the atmosphere surrounding the domestic space changed drastically: "It was now a place for personal, intimate behavior", Rybczynski explains (77). In the United States, this shift was noticeably delayed, and it was only in the course of the nineteenth century that housing reformers advocated the strict separation of the public and the private sphere, and celebrated the home as an intimate locus of spiritual and moral importance. Heidi de Mare points out that it was in this century that "domestic, bourgeois family life became a nucleus around which the nation was formed" (14). Whereas "the family in pre-industrial society was characterized by *sociability* rather than *privacy*" (Hareven 256), American households from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, although integrated in a wider social fabric, displayed a notable sense of isolation, autonomy and privacy. In his lecture "Of Queens' Gardens" in 1864, John Ruskin meditated on this exclusionary quality of the family home:

> This is the true nature of home—it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt, and division. In so far as it is not this, it is not home; so far as the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it, and the inconsistently-minded, unknown, unloved, or hostile society of the outer world is allowed by either husband or wife to cross the threshold, it ceases to be home; it is then only a part of that outer world which you have roofed over, and lighted fire in. But so far as it is a sacred place, a vestal temple, a temple of the hearth watched over by Household Gods … so far it vindicates the name, and fulfils the praise, of home. (20)

Ruskin here suggests that it is a husband and wife's duty to shield the purity of the domestic space from any kind of external element; only if a house is impenetrable can it function as a home. As Maria Kaika phrases it, "the modern house becomes the modern home (an autonomous protected utopia) through a dual practice of exclusion: through ostracizing the undesired social as well as the undesired natural elements and processes" (266). Ruskin emphasizes the almost religious,

sacred quality of home. This mythologizing of the domestic space was a dominant theme in nineteenth century cultural texts. A prime example would be the many 'home songs' of the period: John Howard Payne's immensely popular "Home Sweet Home" (1823), for instance, celebrates the virtues of domesticity, proclaiming that "there's no place like home" (a memorable line later echoed in *The Wizard of Oz*).[34] Stephen Foster's "Old Folks at Home" (1852) also sentimentalizes and idealizes the quaint rural home as offering a respite from the "sad and dreary" world. Yet, whereas the romanticizing and mythologizing of home in popular songs was simply intended to elevate the idea of home in the public imagination, the focus on the sacredness of home had a clear political function in abolitionist writing in the antebellum period. In her 1854 *House and Home Papers*, Harriet Beecher Stowe qualifies the home as "that which is the nearest image of heaven" (78). She writes: "Of so great dignity and worth is this holy and sacred thing, that the power to create a HOME ought to be ranked above all creative faculties" (56). As John Allen explains in *Homelessness in American Literature* (2004), Stowe was convinced that the "lack of homes for slaves was a sin that needed to be remedied" (24). By repeatedly highlighting slaves' homelessness in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), Stowe intended to create "empathy in readers and a corresponding distaste for slavery" (Allen 24). The sacred domestic space, and the loss or absence of it, was thus a key rhetorical trope in Stowe's important novel, as well as in other abolitionist novels in the nineteenth century.

It is crucial to stress that the nineteenth-century rhetoric of domesticity was notably gendered. "For the Victorians", Terri Witek explains, "the house was a moral edifice, a cornerstone of society which combined the careful display of beauty with the sanctuary aspects of church, both presided over by the house's guiding angel, Mother" (24). Indeed, the home was considered as very much a woman's domain. According to the 'separate spheres' ideology—closely intertwined with the cult of domesticity and the view of the home as haven—men and women occupy distinctly different realms: the public, masculine world lies in

34 See Chandler, *Dwelling in the Text* (9).

direct opposition to the private, feminine domestic space.[35] Under this model, a woman's place is in the family home, where she is expected to exert her selfless, moral influence as well as to construct a nurturing and redeeming "sanctuary of 'disinterested' love" (70), as Nancy Cott phrases it in *The Bonds of Womanhood* (1977). The female realm of domesticity should allow the husband to escape and recover from the harsh competitive environment fostered by industrial capitalist society. Cott argues that the writer who most forcefully contrasted the virtues of domestic life to the self-serving, pecuniary ethos of the workplace was Sarah Josepha Hale, novelist and editor of the *Ladies' Magazine* (from 1828 to 1836) and afterwards of *Godey's Lady's Book*. "She wished 'to remind the dwellers in this "bank-note world" that there are objects more elevated, more worthy of pursuit than wealth'", Cott writes. "'Time is money' was a maxim she rejected, and she urged mothers to teach their children the relative merits of money and of good works" (68). Another very prominent figure who similarly advocated the Victorian woman's moral duty of serving her husband and children was Catharine Beecher. While Beecher also highlighted the importance of maternal sacrifice and the redeeming quality of the family home, she gave special emphasis to the female work necessary to build a well functioning and ideal household. Indeed, she encouraged a clear division of labor, with the housewife being nothing less than a "minister of home" and a "true professional" within the domestic realm (qtd. in Hayden, Redesigning 39). Her 1841 *Treatise on Domestic Economy, For the Use of Young Ladies at Home and at School*, a manual widely used as a textbook in schools at that period, offered a clear how-to approach for women to become successful homemakers and educators. In 1869, Catherine Beecher published her opus magnum, *The American Woman's Home*, in collaboration with her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe. As daughters of Lyman

35 For more details on the 'separate spheres' ideology, see Nancy Cott's *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (1977). In *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (2002), Amy Kaplan proposes an intriguing interpretation of the ways in which the ideology of separate spheres has coincided and is intertwined with the expansionist political agenda of the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. Kaplan convincingly argues "that the concept of domesticity made the nation into home at a time when its geopolitical borders were expanding rapidly through violent confrontations with Mexicans and Native Americans" (26).

Beecher, a well-known Congregationalist minister,[36] the Beecher sisters promoted a notably pious and Christian view of domesticity in their advice book. Clark points out that Catharine Beecher firmly believed that, for women, "the ultimate reward for living this life of sacrifice and service would be salvation in the world to come" (36).

Whereas the gendered ideology of domesticity, promoted by Hale and the Beecher sisters, constructs the family home as a haven for men to unwind in after a long day's work, it is worth pointing out that for women the family home here represents the place of work, from which she can never fully escape.[37] Critics such as Dolores Hayden and Nancy Cott persuasively argue that the 'home as haven' paradigm with its reliance of separate spheres implicitly isolates and entraps women in their role of homemaker. The house, intended to provide a protective barrier from external threats and discomfort, could thus also be read as a place of confinement and oppression, a gilded cage that keeps women from gaining access to the outside world. Most of the feminist criticism regarding the gendered nature of domesticity emerged in the latter part of the twentieth century, following the resurgence of the separate spheres discourse in the postwar years. Indeed, the 1950s middle-class suburban ideal strongly reinforced and revived the vision of the domestic realm as feminine and maternal, first propagated in the United States by Beecher and other housing reformers. The American dream of suburban life that gained force after the Second World War was founded on the same clear division of labor and allocation of gender roles within the family home envisioned by Beecher and her contemporaries a century earlier. Within this paradigm, women are confined within the domestic domain, their role as housewives and mothers effectively isolating them from the community and society at large. Feminist critics from roughly the 1960s onwards have raised crucial awareness of the ways in which the concept of home is a cultural construct that reinforces patriarchal values and cements traditional notions of gender.[38] Most famously, Betty

36 Their seven brothers were also ministers.

37 See Cott (*The Bonds of Womanhood* 74), Hayden (*Building Suburbia* 7) and Blunt and Dowling (*Home* 15-16).

38 For a comprehensive overview of the significance of gender and patriarchy in the notion of 'home', see Bowlby ("Domestication") and Bowlby, Gregory and McKie ("Doing Home").

Friedan delineated in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) how the housewife's seclusion in the domestic realm, isolated from the public sphere, is the primary reason for the "sense of dissatisfaction" and "yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States" (44). The American cult of domesticity that emerged in the Victorian era and experienced a renaissance in the postwar sitcom suburbs, has thus been shown to be inextricably connected to ideas of gender, power and patriarchy. What these feminist readings of domesticity make clear, first and foremost, is that 'home' needs to be recognized "as an intensely political site" (33), as Blunt and Dowling observe.

The Cult of Mobility

The domestic space, and the special meaning and value we attach to it, has thus been a recurrent and significant focal point in American culture from the nineteenth century onwards. Yet as much as Americans have been preoccupied with ideas of home and domesticity—concepts that imply stability, fixity and permanence—it is important to keep in mind that there has, in tandem, existed a veritable *cult of mobility* in the American imagination. Indeed, movement has been celebrated as having an inherent and profound value for the individual and for society at large.

In 1835, German-born philosopher Francis Lieber, who immigrated to the United States in 1827, noted that movement has become "one of the 'historical tasks'" which America, as a "moving nation", "has to perform" (288). Other than stationary nations, which for Lieber appear to be primarily continental European countries, a "moving nation" like the United States needs to follow its own impetus to be innovative and progressive, to be in a constant state of development. In the same vein, Frederick Jackson Turner famously described the "fluidity of American life" (200) in his Frontier thesis (1893), suggesting that "[m]ovement has been its dominant fact" (227). Lieber and Turner, like many other writers and intellectuals after them, have recognized and articulated the centrality of mobility in American history, character and identity. Indeed, notions of progress, development and mobility have come to be regarded as an integral part of the American DNA. Yale historian

George W. Pierson coined the term "M-Factor" as an umbrella term to refer to what he perceives to be the three dominant factors in American history and development: "movement, migration, mobility" (288). When reviewing the long history of geographic mobility and the persistent desire for social mobility discussed earlier in this chapter, the significance of the "M-Factor" in the United States indeed becomes undeniable. In "What's 'American' about America?", John A. Kouwenhoven summarizes the importance of mobility in American history as follows:

> Our history is the process of motion into and out of cities; of westering and the counter-process of return; of motion up and down the social ladder—a long, complex, and sometimes terrifyingly rapid sequence of consecutive change. And it is this sequence, and the attitudes and habits and forms which it has bred, to which the term "America" really refers. (72)

In this same essay, Kouwenhoven proposes a list of twelve items, which he interprets to be "recognizably American" and "widely held to be indigenous to our culture" (42), including the skyscraper, Jazz, comic strips, assembly-line production and chewing gum. What unites all of these diverse yet distinctively American elements is a "concern with process rather than product" (66), where "the aesthetic effect is one of motion" (54). "America is process" Kouwenhoven concludes, and "in so far as Americans have been 'American' … the concern with process has been reflected in the work of their heads and hearts and hands" (73).

Americans' propensity towards process and motion is perhaps nowhere more discernible than in the nation's long-standing fascination with car culture. The twentieth century marked the rise of the automobile as the prime symbol of independence, individual mobility and adventure. Although Americans have always considered transportation technology to be fundamental to their sense of national identity—the development of both steamboat technology and the railroad in the course of the nineteenth century signaled and fostered Americans' inherent restlessness and pioneering spirit—the car occupies a special

place in the cultural narrative of the United States.[39] Indeed, James Jasper argues in *Restless Nation* that Americans embraced the technology of the automobile to an extent unlike any other nation, crafting "a way of life centered on this easy new form of movement" (67). Despite the consistent appeal of car culture ever since Ford's revolutionary Model T appeared on the market in the early twentieth century, the frenzy surrounding the automobile reached its definite peak in the postwar years. The mass movement towards the suburbs and the widespread consumerism that characterized the 1950s generated an unprecedented interest in the car.[40] It was also in this same period that the Beat Generation found in the car the perfect expression of their escapist, counter-cultural, freedom-loving ideology. For the Beats, James Jasper explains, "[t]here was no purpose or destination; the road itself was the point, a place to strip away nonessentials and find one's true self, or perhaps to forget oneself in the cosmic rhythm of the wheels" (69). "The Beat lifestyle", John Allen points out, "represents a rejection of domesticity and permanence" (9). The most iconic cultural artifact of the Beat movement was undoubtedly Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* (1957), which provided the manifesto for an entire generation yearning to break free from the constraints of society and live a life of freedom and adventure. Kerouac's novel has come to be seen as the poster child of the American Road Narrative genre, which first emerged in the 1910s but came into full bloom during the postwar enthusiasm for car culture.[41] Alexandra Ganser notes that Kerouac's novel "has arguably shaped the genre and its associative characteristics like no other text" and "it is also the work that appears most often as an explicit or implicit intertext in contemporary road narratives" (44). To this day, American culture excels at producing tales that use the road and the car not simply as a setting, but as a primary element of the story. According to Ronald Primeau, who

39 See Jasper (*Restless Nation* 66–67) for further details on the early development of transportation technology in the United States.

40 For more information on the significance of the car in American culture, refer to Primeau (*Romance of the Road*), Jasper (*Restless Nation*) and Moen ("Mobility, Geographic and Social: The American Dream and American Realities").

41 Some of the most comprehensive studies of the American Road Narrative include Primeau, Brigham and Dettelbach. For an analysis of female road narratives, see Ganser.

comprehensively examined the Road Narrative genre in his groundbreaking *Romance of the Road* (1996), "[t]he genre continues to appeal because it lets us recast our image of ourselves" (16). "[I]n the invigorating free-floating space of the temporary nomad", Primeau writes, "we can challenge what has been dominant and explore emergent values and dreams" (16). Some of the most celebrated road narratives include—apart from Kerouac's masterpiece—novels such as Sinclair Lewis's *Free Air* (1919), as well as films like *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991). In these stories, ceaseless movement has the potential to generate a spiritual and almost transcendental experience. (Auto)mobility is glorified and mythologized as having an intrinsic worth, while resting and standing still is presented as antithetical to progress and development. Yet as Ann Brigham points out, road narratives also hold the potential to "undo prevalent assumptions about mobility with enactments of different mobilities shaped by their time and place and expressive of rifts around class, race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, culture, geography and American identity" (4).

While the Road Narrative genre is probably the most obvious and popular cultural genre centered around the trope of mobility, Tim Cresswell maintains that "[f]ew modern nations are so thoroughly infused with stories of wandering, of heroic migrancy, and pilgrimage as are the Americans" (*Tramp* 20). It is certainly true that the national literary canon is replete with stories of escape, journeying and adventure, attesting to Americans' persistent fascination with mobility. Indeed, some of the most famous and iconic works of American fiction—from *Moby Dick* (1851) to *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) to *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951)—are very much rooted in rootlessness, the journey providing both structure and thematic motif. "Although journey narratives exist in all literatures", Peter Freese notes, "they are most prominent in American writing" (*The Journey of Life* 18). Freese offers a useful taxonomy of journey narratives, distinguishing three basic types: the journey as escape, as search and as an end in itself. "[T]he basic types often exist simultaneously and in various combinations" (18), Freese explains. And indeed, this "inventory of journey variants" (56) offers an illuminating lens through which to interpret a vast variety of American narratives across different historical periods.

What should be stressed, first and foremost, is that the journey plot has retained a persistent allure for American writers, as well as filmmakers. One could argue that this is hardly surprising when considering the paramount role that mobility—both geographical and social—has played in the nation's historiography and ideology. James Jasper is right when he states that "the story of America is a story about movement", and perhaps inevitably, many American stories are suffused with movement as well.

Postmodern Yearnings for Mobility and Place

It has been widely recognized that the latter part of the twentieth century was a period of profound and rapid change, an era in which the world morphed into "a cosmopolitan global framework of socio-cultural interaction" (Rapport and Dawson 23). In order to assess and interpret the significant shifts that have constituted this postmodern era, mobility has received unprecedented attention in cultural and sociological discourse. Zygmunt Bauman, for instance, argues that "'fluidity' or 'liquidity' are fitting metaphors when we wish to grasp the nature of the present, in many ways *novel*, phase in the history of modernity" (*Liquid Modernity* 2). Bauman posits that the shift from solid to liquid modernity means that "the era of unconditional superiority of sedentarism over nomadism and the domination of the settled over the mobile is on the whole grinding fast to a halt" (13). Marxist geographer David Harvey also highlights the centrality of movement and speed in shaping the postmodern world at the end of the twentieth century. According to Harvey, the extraordinary acceleration of information and communication technologies in the postmodern period has led to an intensified experience of what he famously calls "time-space compression" (*The Condition of Postmodernity* 284). In this new (neo-liberal) phase of capitalism, Harvey diagnoses a "general speed-up" (285) of production methods, labor processes, capital and consumption. The increased pace of life in an era of heightened time-space compression, Harvey explains, "has had a disorienting and disruptive impact upon political-economic practices, the balance of class power, as well as upon

cultural and social life" (284). One could argue that this disruption is discernible in the shifts in terminology in cultural discourse at this time: there is a conceptual movement away from place to space, from the local to the global and from the singular to the plural. In a similar vein, James Clifford famously calls for a rethinking of culture in terms of routes as opposed to roots,[42] and Michel Foucault insists that the postmodern self should prefer "difference over uniformity, flows over unities, mobile arrangements over systems" and believe "that what is productive is not sedentary but nomadic" (qtd. in Harvey, *Condition* 44). In this era of global, transnational and borderless movement of both people and information, the need for a fluid, nomadic lifestyle indeed receives new urgency and validation. Even though people have experienced various forms of territorial displacement long before the postmodern period, Liisa Malkki writes, "[t]here has emerged a new awareness of the global social fact that, now more than perhaps ever before, people are chronically mobile and routinely displaced" (24).

Confronted with this continuous sense of rootlessness and flux, one may, like Pico Iyer, choose to embrace one's "global soul", becoming a "full-time citizen of nowhere" (*Global Soul* 277). Yet the "maelstrom of change" (Harvey, *Condition* 13) that constitutes modern life can also have a destabilizing and unsettling effect, giving way to a profound sense of anxiety and disorientation. The increase of mobility in society, then, came to be seen as a double-edged sword. Indeed, the postmodern period not only saw a rise of socio-cultural discourse about the positive aspects regarding the amplified mobility in this period of time-space compression, but also a wave of cautionary reflections about the potential detrimental effects that this perpetual flux and change can have on society. As Tim Cresswell notes in *On the Move*, this "strand of thinking about mobility as a pathological threat to society became a consistent thread in American social commentary", particularly in the latter part of the twentieth century. Cresswell refers to *Future Shock* (1970), Alvin Toffler's significant sociological study of a world at risk of being shell-shocked due to an ever-increasing velocity and pace. Toffler talks

42 See Clifford's seminal book *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997).

about the "twin forces of acceleration and transience" that have radically altered "the texture of existence" (18). What seems to be most at stake in a society in constant and relentless motion is the stable and comforting notion of place, and with it related ideas of rootedness, home and fixity. In Toffler's words, "[n]ever have man's relationships with place been more numerous, fragile and temporary. … We are witnessing a historic decline in the significance of place to human life. We are breeding a new race of nomads, and few suspect quite how massive, widespread and significant their migrations are" (75). It is perhaps understandable, then, that in this period of intense change and mobility, a counterreaction appears to have taken place, a movement that attempts to undo or, at the very least, slow down the "accelerative thrust" (Toffler 2) that disconnects man from place. As Klaus Benesch points out in "Cultural Immobility: Thoreau, Heidegger and the Modern Politics of Place" (2012), "postmodernism seems to have ushered in a new sense of place" (405), prompting a wave of critical writing centered on the importance of place and rootedness—diametrically opposed to the mobility-centered discourse that nevertheless widely dominated the postmodern period. Edward Relph's *Place and Placelessness* (1976) and Yi-Fu Tuan's *Space and Place* (1977)—in the humanistic geography field—and philosopher Edward Casey's *The Fate of Place* (1997) are only some of the most significant contributions in the study of place emerging in the postmodern fin-de-siècle. And of course, preceding all of these important texts about place is the towering oeuvre of philosopher Martin Heidegger, whose works such as *Being and Time* (1953) have fundamentally shaped late twentieth century thinking about place from an ontological perspective. According to the place-centered paradigm, the flux and speed of modern life in an era of unprecedented technological progress prevents the individual from experiencing a sense of rootedness and connection to place that is fundamental to the human experience. Tim Cresswell points out that "[p]lace, in its ideal form, is seen as a moral world, as an insurer of authentic existence, and as a center of meaning for people" (*On the Move* 30). What this insinuates, then, is that "mobility and movement, insofar as they undermine attachment and commitment, are antithetical to moral worlds" (31). This positive valuation of place as moral center and suspicion of mobility amounts to what

anthropologist Liisa Malkki has referred to as "sedentarist metaphysics" (31)—a line of thinking about place that Malkki reveals to be highly problematic. In her important essay ("National Geographic", 1992) on the complex experience of refugees in the contemporary period, Malkki convincingly highlights the inadequacy and flaws of the sedentarist paradigm, which wrongly stigmatizes mobility and territorial displacement as threatening and pathological. In an age of chronic displacement and movement, Malkki suggests, the territorialization of identity, the idea that people are rooted in a particular soil from which they derive their sense of being and which forms their moral nucleus, needs to be critically reevaluated. While being careful "not to deny the importance of place in the construction of identities", Malkki believes that it would be wrong "to blind oneself to the multiplicity of attachments that people form to places through living in, remembering, and imagining them" (38). When thinking about identity construction in metaphorical terms, Malkki considers Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the "rhizome"[43]—which corresponds to a network or assemblage of plural sources—to be a more fitting image than the archaic notion of arborescent roots, and its connotation of territorial nativeness, single origin and authenticity. In the contemporary world of displacement and fluidity, Malkki appears to suggest, there is no single place that roots and grounds us, but rather, a rhizomatic structure of connected places that informs our sense of identity.

The M- and H-Factor

This brief insight into the dynamic debate surrounding place and mobility in the postmodern era indicates, yet again, how significant these "twin desires" (Witek 23) are in the American psyche. Indeed, there is no denying that there are ambivalent and conflicting tendencies lying at the very heart of the nation: a desire for mobility as well as rest, for change but also stability, a need for progress and journeys but at the same time a yearning for the comfort and reliability of home. Pierson is

43 Refer to Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980) for more details on the rhizome (specifically 3–25).

undoubtedly on point when he emphasizes the influence of the "M-Factor"—Movement, Migration and Mobility—in American history and culture. Yet this chapter hopefully demonstrated that opposing notions such as place, home and domesticity have been equally significant in the American story and mindset—a counter-tendency that I propose to call the H-Factor (Home, House and Heritage). Guided by both the M- and H-Factor, the nation oscillates between these opposing impulses, which, to come back to Tim Cresswell's observation, "form ends on a continuum and rarely exist in pure form" (*On the Move* 26).

The tension of these conflicting desires appears, however, to be amplified substantially in periods of intensified movement and dramatic transformation. This was clearly the case in the postmodern period, which, as previously elucidated, presented a manifest resurgence of place-centered discourse despite it being a phase of acute time-space compression. And indeed, similar patterns are discernible in other historical periods that were marked by great change and extraordinary levels of mobility. The nineteenth century is another case in point: indeed, the nation was torn between a fascination for, on the one hand, mobility and progress, and on the other, home and domesticity. As already sketched out earlier on in this chapter, the westward migration that dominated the first part of the century had a vast section of the population under its spell, yet the constant mobility and lack of a stable home was also a source of great unease. In her analysis of the widespread phenomenon of homesickness in this period, Susan Matt notes that "[c]ommentators fretted that migration carried a heavy price for society and for individuals. … Whether they were concerned about moral or social backsliding, the extraordinary mobility of the nineteenth century left many unsettled, in every sense of the word" (37). Wayne Franklin and Michael Steiner rightly point out that "American spaciousness engenders a counterdesire for placefulness; perpetually striking out for new territory, we are equally anxious to inhabit the land and make it home" (4). Reflecting on America's intense mobility in 1835, Francis Lieber argues that it is only natural that "[s]ometimes individuals long for a stationary country, where things remain in their place for some time, and where one does not feel all the time as if tied to the wing of a windmill" (287). The fast and determined march

towards an increasingly urbanized and industrial society in the course of the century only increased people's longing for a sense of stability. The widespread interest in the field of home economics and the ideology of domesticity in this century thus formed a notable counterweight to the "accelerative thrust" (Toffler 2) transforming the social, cultural and political landscape of the United States at this time. It is also quite striking that, as Susan Matt explains, nostalgia—the yearning for a lost home and an unrecoverable time—emerged as a recognizable phenomenon at the turn of the century, following a period of profound and fast-paced changes. Matt names the rise of new technologies such as the railroad, the trauma of the Civil War and the changing social patterns as the primary triggers for the nostalgic impulse at this point in history (130). Facing the dawn of modernity, "the longing for lost times was probably a more intense and poignant emotional state than it is today" (131).

It seems, then, that in periods when the pendulum is decidedly and forcefully leaning towards mobility and flux—times of rapid technological advances, of geographical expansion or socio-cultural shifts, for example—a counter-movement towards the opposing pole of the spectrum is often set in motion, that prompts an intensified exploration of ideas of home and place. In other words, whenever there is an overarching influence of the M-Factor (Movement, Migration and Mobility), the H-Factor (Home, House and Heritage) regains significance and acts as a balancing force.

The Home-Mobility Dialectic in Times of Crisis: A Look at the Great Depression

I would argue that the "accelerative thrust" (Toffler 2) and the M-Factor are never felt more intensely than in times of crisis. When a nation experiences a profound crisis of some kind, be it a socio-economic crisis, political upheaval or a natural disaster, there is an urgent feeling of instability, precarity and disorientation—in other words, a destabilizing force that alters our very reality. Mobility, then, underwrites the very idea of crisis. In this state of disruption, the world as we know it is coming undone: seemingly stable and fixed pillars in the very fabric of our lives begin to crumble. As perceived certainties are exposed to

be mere illusions, our sense of safety and protection is fading. Crises, then, cause the pendulum to reach a dangerous peak in mobility and change—which, consequently, can trigger a countermovement towards the diametrically opposed end of the spectrum. Indeed, it is also in these moments of unrest and mobility that an interest in or a yearning for home may resurface with increased intensity. In line with the 'haven' rhetoric of nineteenth-century domesticity, home may be idealized as providing a sense of stability and rootedness in the midst of a world felt to be spinning out of control. Yet as a crisis can also quite literally uproot and dislocate people from their homes, undermining their sense of belonging and orientation, a more critical and complex assessment of the concept of home can also emerge.

The literature, films and artworks produced during a crisis and its aftermath have the unique ability to capture these ambivalent and antipodal tendencies driving the nation. Indeed, mobility and home become potent tropes for writers and artists to address, represent and interpret the disorientation felt in hard times. A brief look at the cultural response to the most devastating socio-economic crisis in the United States in the past century—the Great Depression—will help elucidate this point. The decade following the biggest stock-market crash in American history (on October 29, 1929) was not only marked by unprecedented socio-economic hardship, it was also a period of extraordinarily rich and diverse artistic expression. Whether it was through fiction, painting, the moving image or photography, Depression-era artists reflected on the upheaval and turmoil that fundamentally transformed American society at this pivotal time. However disparate these cultural productions may be, when looked at more closely, ideas of mobility and home appear as red threads that connect many of the books, paintings or other cultural texts of this tumultuous decade.

The concept of mobility manifested itself in the cultural imagination of the thirties in a myriad of ways. The American nation experienced a remarkable sense of uprootedness and dislocation, triggered by the Dust Bowl calamity, soaring unemployment (peaking at an astounding 25 percent) and a wave of foreclosures that left a vast section of the population homeless. Not surprisingly, then, geographic mobility became an important thematic focal point in books, films and artworks

of this period. Perhaps the most memorable cultural representation of a nation (unwillingly) on the move is John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939). The story famously centers on the Joad family's harrowing journey from the devastated Oklahoma Plains to the (misguidedly hailed) Promised Land of California. Although the narrative is suffused with movement—with much of the plot unfolding on Route 66—the dark irony is that the uprooted Joads, like countless other homeless farmers, remain socially immobile, no matter how many miles they may travel. While proletarian novels such as *The Grapes of Wrath*, as well as the documentary photography of Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans and others, developed out of a sense of social responsibility to capture and address the socio-economic misery of the population, there was also a diametrically opposed trend in American culture, aimed at taking Americans' minds off their troubles. In his superb book about Great Depression culture, *Dancing in the Dark* (2009), Morris Dickstein uses the term "fantasy culture" to unite a panoply of artistic expression, including Screwball comedies, swing music by the likes of Duke Ellington and the perfectly choreographed musicals featuring Fred Astaire and Busby Berkeley, which "reacted to the sense of stasis, the feeling of being bogged down in the intractable, with a burst of energy, lightness, and motion" (361). As Dickstein continues: "The fantasy culture of the thirties … is all about movement, not the desperate simulation of movement we find in the road stories, but movement that suggests genuine freedom" (360). If there is one literary masterpiece of the Depression era, however, that employed movement, rhythm and speed in groundbreaking new ways, it is John Dos Passos's *U.S.A.* trilogy. The ambitious objective of this twelve-hundred-page narrative assembled in three volumes—The *42nd Parallel* (1929), 1919 (1931) and *The Big Money* (1936)—was to offer a portrait of the nation in the first three decades of the century. In line with experimental modernist writing, with its usage of multiple points of view and montage, Dos Passos shifts writing modes at a dizzying speed. The prose sections of the novel are constantly interrupted by newsreels, stream-of-consciousness accounts ("The Camera Eye"), mini-biographies of significant American figures as well as popular song lyrics. The reader is left with a mosaic of fragmented impressions of American life leading up to the 1929 crash. The breathless pace

of the narrative is especially effective in *The Big Money* (1936), evoking the rapid flow of capital, the stock market frenzy and euphoric chase for progress culminating in the Roaring Twenties. Written in the midst of the darkest years of the Depression, this final volume of the trilogy takes a look back at a country in restless and dangerous motion, spinning inevitably towards chaos.

Mobility is thus a recurrent motif, both in terms of content and form, weaving its way through Depression-era culture. Yet artists, writers and performers during the turbulent post-crisis years were equally interested in the concepts of home and place. A second look at Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, for instance, will reveal that home—the loss of it, the nostalgia and yearning for it—drives much of the narrative. The psychological ordeal of homelessness and dislocation comes through most powerfully in the interludes, in which Steinbeck comments more explicitly on the plight of migrants during the Dust Bowl calamity. It is also in these passages of the novel that Steinbeck identifies the 'Other' threatening home in this time of crisis: the system allowing farms and land to be in the hands of the "owner-men" (31) instead of the farmers who work the soil; the technology taking over the agricultural sector, alienating man from the land; and finally, the ruthless and destructive force of nature itself. In the absence of their original home—the Oklahoma farm and the red earth underneath—the Joad family finds a number of impermanent dwelling places, from their rickety truck and the makeshift tents on the road to the government camp in California. Yet according to Frank Eugene Cruz, the novel is first and foremost haunted by "the ghost of homes hoped for" (66): the idealized and imaginary home awaiting them in California. Before her family embarks on the road westward, Ma expresses her vision of their new home: "But I like to think how nice it's gonna be, maybe, in California. Never cold. An' fruit ever' place, an' people just bein' in the nicest places, little white houses in among the orange trees" (91). Cruz points out that this construct of the ideal home relies on both the myth of the Garden of the West—the dream of a land that is both fertile and abundant—and the myth of the American home (66–68). While this imagined home space helps the Joad family to sustain their long journey out west, their arrival in California, and particularly the gruesome experience in the camps,

destroys any hope they may have had. This profound longing for home, which Steinbeck captured so masterfully, is also an important thematic focal point in two immensely popular film adaptations released in 1939, *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind*. Yet other than in Steinbeck's novel, in the two movies this desperate yearning for home is fulfilled at the end. This was a sentimental, hopeful message that the audience living through the distressing years of the Depression was, of course, all too eager to hear. Indeed, the heroine's realization of the paramount importance of home marks the climax of the narrative structure in both *The Wizard of Oz* and *Gone with the Wind*. Whereas Dorothy's earnest chanting of the memorable line "There's no place like home" propels her back to her beloved Kansas farm, Scarlett's epiphany that it is indeed the "red earth of Tara" from which she gets her strength leads to her commitment to rebuild and thus reconnect with her lost home. In his astute analysis of these iconic films, Richard F. Selcer observes that "[t]he traditional elements in the American mythology about home are all present in both movies: the rural home as a source of strength and stability, cities as dens of iniquity, and the home as a woman's refuge from the world" (56). It should be noted that the glorification of the American pastoral home was a consistent element in many Great Depression works of art and literature. Regionalist painters like Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood offered a nostalgic and comforting vision of rural America, reminiscent of Thomas Jefferson's agrarian utopia. Benton's depiction of pre-industrial farming practices and Wood's lush, soft landscapes represent a stark and almost incongruous contrast to the harsh reality of an increasingly technology-driven agricultural sector and a land ravaged by the Dust Bowl disaster. Furthermore, as Annelise K. Madsen writes in her catalogue contribution to the 2016 exhibition *America after the Fall*, "the movement offered a salve for the economic turbulence and social hardships of the times with reassuring visions of familiar folks, enduring ways of life, and agrarian bounty" (90).[44]

44 The exhibition *America after the Fall: Painting in the 1930s* was first shown at the Art Institute in Chicago in 2016 before moving to the Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris and the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 2017.

This conservative impulse to rekindle the waning connection to a rural home and agrarian identity was not only detectable in the art of the period, but just as strongly in some literary circles of the 1930s. The work of the so-called Southern Agrarians, a collective of twelve writers and intellectuals based in Nashville, and more specifically their symposium *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), comes to mind here. What Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom and their fellow "agrarians" were most concerned about, was the preservation of what they perceived to be a morally superior Southern culture, which was at risk of being lost in a society increasingly succumbing to industrial and capitalist paradigms (a rhetoric now clearly understood to be reactionary). Much like the Regionalist painters of the Depression years, the Nashville Agrarians thus emphasized the significance of place, tradition and home in order to regain a sense of stability at a time of profound socio-economic uncertainty.

A Story, Unfinished

This brief overview of Depression culture displaying a heightened interest in the tropes of mobility and/or home can, of course, only offer a glimpse of the incredibly rich body of work concerned with this dialectic that was produced in the 1930s. The selection of artworks, novels, films and music referred to in this section is indeed the result of a subjective appraisal of what I deem to be some of the most relevant and evocative cultural productions for this discussion. Multiple scholars have already touched upon this thematic in Depression culture in the past, and their undoubtedly more comprehensive studies should thus be consulted for further insights.[45] The primary purpose of this case study of the Great Depression era was to demonstrate that the home–mobility binary can indeed provide a useful lens through which to read

45 Morris Dickstein's *Dancing in the Dark* (2009) offers the most impressive and complete analysis of Great Depression culture, yet other relevant studies about the 1930s include Julia Leyda's *American Mobilities* (2016) and Richard Selcer's essay "Home Sweet Movies" (1990). To learn more about the Southern Agrarians, refer to Louis D. Rubin's *The Writer in the South: Studies in a Literary Community* (1972) and Paul V. Murphy's *The Rebuke of History* (2001). While these studies do not focus exclusively on the mobility and home binary, they nevertheless present revealing ideas for this discussion.

cultural texts written in times of upheaval. Furthermore, my aim here was to draw attention to the fact that, even though the remaining chapters are only concerned with *fiction* about home and mobility produced during the tumultuous twenty-first century in the United States, the thematic could easily also be explored in the broader cultural sphere. Indeed, the haunting photographs by Joakim Eskildsen (*American Realities*), Chris Jordon (*In Katrina's Wake*), Robert Polidori (*New Orleans After the Flood*) and Kirk Crippens (*Foreclosure*, US*A*), art installations by Olga Koumoundouros (*Dream Home Resource Center*) and theatre productions such as *House/Divided* by The Builders Association deal with ideas of home and homelessness, belonging and dislocation during recent turbulent times in equally intriguing and original ways.

With this first chapter, I set myself the challenge to uncover the ways in which the concepts of home and mobility have been instrumental in the nation's cultural and social history since its very beginning. I also wanted to show how this binary continues to affect how Americans think of themselves and their country—and never more so than in times of crisis. As I dove in deeper into the surprisingly long and intricate history attached to the interconnected concepts of home/place and mobility/journey, it soon became clear that this task was perhaps destined to remain unfinished. In fact, countless other socio-cultural phenomena or works of art and literature could have been tied into this debate, yet were consciously left out as these were less central and relevant for the readings of contemporary novels that follow. What my chosen focal points in this chapter have, however, hopefully managed to reveal, is that "[a] complex interplay between space and place, the thrill of the open road and the certainty of home, westering and dwelling, migration and habitation, innovation and tradition, weaves its way throughout our collective and personal histories" (4), as Wayne Franklin and Michael Steiner phrase it in "Taking Place: Toward the Regrounding of American Studies". It is crucial to have a thorough understanding of this long history of the home–mobility dialectic in US thought and culture to successfully approach any contemporary text exploring these concepts. And indeed, it is this interpretative framework surrounding ideas of home and mobility that has informed my reading of literary texts produced in post-9/11 America, an era of chronic crisis that has profoundly destabilized the nation.

Chapter 2
The Home in Ruins: Unstable Constructs of Home and Unhomely Dwellings

This chapter explores the ways in which the materiality of home has been represented in novels written post-9/11, and how the dwelling places in these texts operate as key tropes to address the inherent instability of the contemporary period. As delineated in greater depth in the previous chapter, the domestic space has long been imbued with meaning and symbolic value. To quote Henri Lefebvre, "[t]he dwelling passes everywhere for a special, still sacred, quasi-religious and in fact almost absolute space" (121). The romanticization of the home space peaked, I explained, in two periods of American cultural history: in the mid-nineteenth century, with the emergence of a 'cult of domesticity', and in the post-war years, when large-scale suburbanization generated a revival of domestic ideals. In both periods, the house was regarded as a stabilizing force in American society, a center of moral values. By essentially shielding the sacred inside from the hostile outside, the house became closely tied to notions of safety, protection and comfort. In *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Gaston Bachelard argues that "[w]ithout [the house], man would be a dispersed being. It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul. It is the human being's first world" (7). Yet what happens when the house (quite literally, in some cases) cannot maintain man through the storms? What do we do when the physical structure of home becomes instead, to use Annie McClanahan's words, "a site of lived insecurity" (102)? This is what the novels, written in the contemporary "Age of Uncertainty" (Bauman *Liquid Times* 94) investigate. As J. Douglas Porteous and Sandra E. Smith note, "[t]he security of our home … is never completely inviolable" (3), and it is in moments of crisis that this becomes particularly apparent. The authors discussed in this book—Paul Auster, Richard Ford, Dave Eggers, Cormac McCarthy and Emily St. John Mandel—have placed precarious, fragile and

disintegrating houses and other architectural structures at the heart of their plots, thereby giving form to an underlying sense of anxiety and disquietude. An image that holds special importance in my analysis of the dwelling places in these novels is that of the ruin. I will therefore begin this chapter with an exploration of (domestic) ruin imagery and their significance in narratives of crisis, before taking a close look at the unstable homes in these texts through this particular prism.

Contemporary Ruins

When the 9/11 terrorists caused the unthinkable—the collapse of the iconic and seemingly indestructible Twin Towers at the heart of Manhattan—"the whole world population" was a "benumbed witness" (Borradori 28) as Jürgen Habermas rightly notes. What amplified the horror of seeing the "symbolically suffused capitalistic citadels" (Habermas in Borradori 26–27) fall was, of course, the fact that the collapse was replayed in a morbid loop on our screens for days, weeks and months to come, thus transformed into a perpetual spectacle of ruination.[46] "The memorialized footprints of the towers …", Dora Apel observes, "have become a kind of ur-ruin that casts its shadow forward over the new millennium" (1). In the shadow of this ur-ruin, a series of other haunting images of catastrophe and ruination have followed, which collectively form a visualization of the contemporary period. The utter wreckage left behind by Hurricanes Katrina (2005), Sandy (2012) and Harvey (2017): images of entire neighborhoods under water, houses violently ripped open and laid bare, or pulverized into fragments. The apocalyptic wastelands created through prolonged warfare in the Middle East. The Recession imagery following the economic collapse of 2008: the countless foreclosed houses, abandoned and derelict buildings in deindustrialized urban areas and housing developments left eerily incomplete. The burning power plant and nuclear meltdown in Fukushima in 2011. These and other calamities of the new millennium seem to confirm art critic Brian Dillon's assertion that "[w]e live … in a time

46 Dora Apel, Richard Gray and Jürgen Habermas (in Borradori), amongst others, have all emphasized the significance of the media coverage shaping the global experience of 9/11.

of ruination" (10). Dillon points out that the decay and catastrophe imagery is not only ubiquitous in the realm of global events, but has also flourished in popular culture and in the work of visual artists (10). This aesthetic interest in the contemporary ruin is especially apparent in the field of documentary photography, which has received significant critical attention. From Joel Meyerowitz and James Nachtwey's photo-reportages of September 11, Robert Polidori's pictures of the devastation left behind in the wake of Hurricane Katrina and the foreclosure photography by David H. Wells—photography has emerged as a preferred medium to visually represent the psychological and material ruination of the post-crisis moment. Furthermore, the proliferation of, and critical interest in, documentary photography centered on sites of ruination has magnified the eerie appeal of decay and disaster imagery. In *Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline* (2015), Dora Apel draws an important parallel between the contemporary fascination with ruin imagery and the tradition of the romantic sublime, theorized in the late eighteenth century by Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. "[T]he experience of the sublime depended upon distance and safety as conditions that were crucial for the enjoyment of a scene that would otherwise be too terrifying to endure" (17), writes Apel. This mental distance could be achieved by aestheticizing—and thereby "taming"—the "formless and unclassifiable excess of devastation" (12) of a particular event or experience, as Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle phrase it. Dora Apel thus suggests that contemporary viewers' attraction to aestheticized ruin imagery may have its roots in precisely this yearning to cope with a reality too disturbing to approach in any other way: "the terror of apocalyptic decline" (5). "Ruin images are meant to soothe and domesticate the sense of brokenness, fragmentation, and violence at the core of ruination" (Apel 100). The notion of the sublime thus helps to shed light on the intensified need for images of collapse and decay during times of crisis.

It should be pointed out, however, that the human fascination with ruins—collapsing architectural structures, neglected buildings gradually succumbing to the forces of nature—is a well-documented phe-

nomenon that dates back to the eighteenth century.[47] Apel explains that the 'ruin gazing' of this period "reinforced notions of cultural and political superiority in relation to the failed empires of past foreign cultures" (15–16). Ruins have long been a well of inspiration for writers and artists, who are particularly sensitive to the complex imaginative associations that sites of ruination can stimulate. Perhaps more than anything else, what draws creative minds to these decaying, crumbling structures is their unique ability to confront us with the "ravages of time" (qtd. in Dillon 22), as Denis Diderot put it in 1767. "When we contemplate ruins, we contemplate our future" (2) writes Christopher Woodward in his book *In Ruins* (2001). "To a poet, the decay of a monument represents the dissolution of the individual ego in the flow of Time" (2).

Although the ruin gazing tradition offers important insights into the inherent appeal of images of decay and collapse for the human psyche, it is important to distinguish, however, the interest in classical ruins from that in contemporary ruins produced through economic hardship, political crisis, warfare, natural disaster or deindustrialization. Apel rightly observes that the "dehistoricized classical ruins … more easily lend themselves … to subjective enobling and romanticizing" (12), offering "modernity a way of conceiving itself in relation to the remains of the ancient past" (13). Contemporary ruins, on the other hand, "function as a critique of our own social conditions" (Apel 16).

American novelists, too, have recognized the potential of ruin imagery to address the "contemporary state of ruinous affairs" (Dillon 10). Yet rather than write about the "ur-ruin" of our age—only hinted at cautiously by Paul Auster as "the missing buildings, the collapsed and burning buildings that no longer exist" (*SP* 307–8)—the authors that I discuss in this chapter have chosen to explore ideas of collapse and ruination on a domestic scale. This is not to say that the ruins of 9/11 are wholly absent in these stories: in fact, the trauma of the collapse witnessed that day inarguably informs and colors any subsequent description of architectural ruination. The image of the domestic ruin, however, has offered writers an exceptionally compelling trope to express

47 See Apel (2–16) and Hell and Schönle (1–2) for a helpful account of the history of 'ruin gazing'.

the profound uncertainty and instability felt in the United States in present times of crisis.

In "From Hoover to Bush Jr.—Home and Crisis Scripts in U.S. Social Cinema" (2013), Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla notes that "the fate of the family home is identified with the destiny of US society in a time of crisis". The domestic space indeed functions as an ideal metaphor for the nation, as a closer look at the word 'domestic' already suggests. As Amy Kaplan persuasively argues in "Homeland Insecurities: Reflections on Language and Space" (2003), "[d]omestic has a double meaning that links the space of the familial household to that of the nation by imagining both in opposition to everything outside the geographic and conceptual border of the home" (86). Both the home as intimate familial space and the home as nation, Kaplan suggests, thus stand in a dichotomous relationship to the idea of the 'foreign'. This binary thinking indeed lies at the very root of our understanding of the domestic space (on both a micro and macro level): the private, interior, safe realm of the domestic can only exist when contrasted with a public, exterior and threatening 'Other'. This clear and reliable division is, however, untenable during times of crisis. The image of the domestic ruin, then, explores what happens when the boundary (between private and public, inside and outside, safe and unsafe) is breached, both physically and conceptually. In our "age of ruination" (Dillon 10), the sanctity of the home(land) is penetrated by threatening forces, a transgression that can be caused by economic collapse, natural disaster, warfare or nuclear meltdown. In all of the works of fiction discussed on the following pages, sites of domestic ruination—images of unsteady, collapsing and unsafe dwelling places—operate as emblems of our precarious times.

2.1 Paul Auster's *Sunset Park*

My examination of *Sunset Park* (2010), Paul Auster's sixteenth novel, centers on two distinct sites of ruination: the foreclosed homes that dominate the opening of the novel, and the derelict house in Brooklyn's Sunset Park, illegally occupied by the four twenty-somethings. Through both images of domestic ruins in a time of economic collapse, Auster calls into question the fragile meaning of home and its relation to ideas of privacy and ownership.

"Orphaned structures": Sites of Foreclosure

Paul Auster wrote *Sunset Park* in the midst of the Great Recession, feeling "absolutely riveted by grief by what was going on in the United States at that time, when millions of people were being kicked out of their houses, in other words their homes" (Auster, Telephone Interview). It was an article in *The New York Times* about the so-called trashing out business that became "the final trigger" (Auster, Telephone Interview) for Auster to write the novel.[48] These trash-out companies, which grew exponentially in the post-2008 housing epidemic, are sent by the banks to clean out foreclosed upon properties. "I thought of it as probably one of the most gruesome jobs in America", Auster explained, "and in a world collapsing, one of the only jobs you could get, in places like Florida, which was rapidly disintegrating in just months. It was an avalanche of catastrophes for so many people" (Telephone Interview). The opening pages of the novel immerse the reader in precisely this setting and atmosphere of ruination. The protagonist, Miles Heller, a twenty-eight-year-old college dropout who fled his home and family in New York seven years ago after being involved in a traumatic incident that killed his stepbrother Bobby, has taken on a job of trashing out homes in the gloom of the recession-riddled Sunshine State. Carrying an unbearable sense of guilt about his responsibility for Bobby's tragic death, Miles feels the masochistic impulse to remain in the "hot nowhereland of ruined and empty houses" (*SP* 15). Although "unsure how long he can bear it" (*SP* 4), Miles continues vacating these "orphaned structures" (*SP* 4), sometimes up to six or seven a day. These spaces of muted trauma, which the "absent people have all fled in haste, in shame, in confusion" (*SP* 3), resonate with Miles's own tormented psyche and sense of exile. What distinguishes Miles's experience of dislocation and homelessness from that of the evicted people is, of course, that the former is self-imposed and conceptual, whereas the latter is the result of what Porteous and Smith have called "domicide": the "deliberate destruction of home against the will of the home dweller" (3). The trash-out crews operate

48 See Steve Kurutz's article "Foreclosure Trash-Out: Ill Fortunes and its Leavings" in *The New York Times*.

as visible agents of an imperceptible and opaque structure of power that has activated the destructive process of economic "domicide"—the mortgage brokers, banks, state regulators and global financial apparatus all implicated in the collapse of the housing market in the mid-2000s. Auster's graphic description of the "disarray and filth, the neglect" (*SP* 4) of these foreclosed properties records the "rage of the dispossessed, disgusting but understandable statements of despair" (*SP* 4) in the face of "domicide". Miles's contemplation of these sites of ruination mirrors the forensic reading of a crime scene, a *post-mortem* attempt of deciphering the trauma inscribed in the very materiality of place.

> Rare is the house he enters that has been left in pristine condition by its former owners. More often there will have been an eruption of violence and anger, a parting rampage of capricious vandalism—from the open taps of sinks and bathtubs overflowing with water to sledgehammered, smashed-in walls or walls covered with obscene graffiti or walls pocked with bullet holes, not to mention the ripped-out copper pipes, the bleach-stained carpets, the piles of shit deposited on the living room floor. (*SP* 4)

As "it is in the interest of the banks to resell [the properties] as quickly as possible", and for them "to be shown to prospective buyers" (*SP* 4), the former dwellers' deliberate displays of violence may be read as an attempt to disrupt the process of commodification. As Annie McClanahan observes in *Dead Pledges: Debt, Crisis, and Twenty-First-Century Culture* (2017): "As if to subvert the strange transfer of agency that defines every instance of commodity fetishism, these acts of sabotage reassert the resistant agency of the vandal" (186). McClanahan thus interprets such individual instances of vandalism following a foreclosure as ways "to upend—one flooded home at a time—the entire system of exploitation and profit that subtends capitalist exchange" (186). Yet I would suggest that this attack on the domestic space is not only a means to target and disturb the process of commodification; rather, it also signals a desire to overtly transform the sacred space of the home into an *unhomely* site. As a raw emotional reaction to their enforced dislocation, the evicted people mutilate the space of homely intimacy that has been taken from them. Emblems of domesticity—sinks,

bathtubs, carpets, living rooms—are here actively employed to violate the sanctity of the domestic space. Yet these desperate acts of vandalism can only visually reinforce the destruction of home (as sacred haven) already set in motion by the foreclosure proceedings. The demolition of the protective membrane of the domestic space (walls are "sledgehammered", "smashed-in", "pocked with bullet holes") is a physical expression of the metaphorical invasion of privacy experienced due to foreclosure. Writing from a postcolonial angle, Homi Bhabha posits that "[t]he unhomely is the shock of recognition of the world-in-the-home, the home-in-the-world", which occurs when "the private and the public become part of each other" ("World" 141). The moment of foreclosure, when the private space of home is repossessed by a public 'Other', thus coincides with the shift from homely into unhomely territory.

Miles, we are told, "never opens a door without a feeling of dread" (*SP* 4), the threshold between the outside and the domestic interior thus becoming a site of anxious anticipation. The fear concerning the havoc possibly awaiting him inside, more often than not, proves itself to be justified:

> Inevitably, the first thing to contend with is the smell, the onslaught of sour air rushing into his nostrils, the ubiquitous, commingled aromas of mildew, rancid milk, cat litter, crud-caked toilet bowls, and food rotting on the kitchen counter. Not even fresh air pouring in through open windows can wipe out the smells; not even the tidiest, most circumspect removal can erase the stench of defeat. (*SP* 4–5)

This passage reveals that the traditional binary thinking underlying the discourse of domesticity—the home being a place of safety and comfort, diametrically opposed to the threat and inhospitable environment outside—is here turned upside down. A distinct vocabulary of decay ("sour", "mildew", "rancid", "rotting") conveys the violent affront to the senses experienced in this unhomely space. One may also note a certain incongruity between the theoretically lifeless houses and the mold and rot defiantly continuing their progression inside, surviving. Paul Reyes, who writes about his personal experience of trashing out foreclosed homes in Florida in *Exiles in Eden* (2010), observes that "[i]n that rot,

in the inevitable, inexorable encroachment of the forces a house was designed to keep out, lies the slow, mute power of death, of time, of God" (39). With enough time, he writes "[a]n underworld will seep to the surface and thrive" (39). "In a foreclosure, nature breaks through like a quiet, patient predator" (38).

The home, then, becomes "a site of forced entry" (McClanahan 116). This transgression of the domestic space is performed on multiple levels in these foreclosed properties—economically, organically and, of course, physically via the trash-out crew that Miles belongs to. The trashing out procedure may indeed represent the invasion of individual privacy in its most explicit form. Upon entering the intimate territory of the home-space, Miles and his crew are "confronted by the things, the innumerable cast-off things left behind by the departed families" (*SP* 3). Unlike his co-workers, "the three musketeers of doom" (*SP* 5), who use each trashing out job as an opportunity for stealing anything from "bottles of whiskey" and "archery equipment" to the "dirty magazines" (*SP* 6), Miles refuses to take any of the abandoned things, thereby adhering to his own ethical code of conduct. He does feel compelled, however, to photograph the debris. The abandoned objects, deemed worthless and dispensable by their former owners, thus signify a distinctly different kind of value for Miles than they do for his crew. Over time, Miles has assembled a "burgeoning archive" (*SP* 5) of photographs numbering in the thousands, including:

> pictures of books, shoes, and oil paintings, pianos and toasters, dolls, tea sets, and dirty socks, televisions and board games, party dresses and tennis racquets, sofas, silk lingerie, caulking guns, thumbtacks, plastic action figures, tubes of lipstick, rifles, discolored mattresses, knives and forks, poker chips, a stamp collection, and a dead canary lying at the bottom of its cage. (5)

Miles's photographic inventory of the objects left behind in the foreclosed homes reveal "an uncompromisingly egalitarian attitude" (61), to use Susan Sontag's words. Indeed, Miles takes an indiscriminative interest in every discarded object, making no aesthetic or value judg-

ment in his documentary impulse. The abandoned objects have a story to tell, and Miles is committed to record it:

> Each house is a story of failure—of bankruptcy and default, of debt and foreclosure—and he has taken it upon himself to document the last, lingering traces of those scattered lives in order to prove that the vanished families were once here, that the ghosts of people he will never see and never know are still present in the discarded things strewn about their empty houses. (*SP* 3)

By photographing these "lingering traces of scattered lives" Miles wants to acknowledge, and thereby honor, the existence of these absent, dispossessed people. As such, the pictures themselves function as "*memento mori*", as Susan Sontag phrased it: "[t]o take a photograph is to participate in another person's (or thing's) mortality, vulnerability, mutability" (11). The camera offers Miles a way of making these ghosts of people visible and legible. There is a yearning, in Paul Reyes's words, "to decipher who lived there and how they lost it, a life partially revealed by stuff marinating in fetid stillness" (4). The seemingly arbitrary items left behind act as signifiers of the individuals, with their unique pasts, routines and tastes, who used to inhabit these domestic spaces. "[T]o confront the junk", Reyes writes, "is to confront the individuality being purged from a place" (4). Through the photographic medium, Miles is able to preserve, if only on film, these remnants of individuality, which the trash-out crew is hired to erase.

The rational and methodic documentation of the items dispersed in these ruined homes also fosters a feeling of control and order in this otherwise chaotic and distressing environment. Indeed, Susan Sontag asserts that "[t]he very activity of taking pictures is soothing, and assuages general feelings of disorientation" (6). Photographs, she writes "help people to take possession of space in which they are insecure" (6). The camera thus acts as a distancing tool that allows Miles to approach and examine this unhomely site of domestic ruination. Walking into these foreclosed homes is indeed described as a somewhat unnerving experience. Miles "senses that the things are calling out to him, speaking to him in the voices of the people who are no longer there, asking

him to be looked at one last time before they are carted away" (*SP* 5). The foreclosed house, haunted by the ghosts of its former owners or renters, generates an *uncanny* experience.

In fact, Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny—*das Unheimliche*—deserves to be looked at in some more detail at this point, as it provides an instructive interpretative lens through which to read the ruined dwelling places in Auster's novel (as well as in the other works of fiction discussed in this chapter).[49] In his important essay written in 1919, Freud highlights the ambiguous etymology of the term *heimlich*: on the one hand, it refers to something that is "familiar", "tame", "intimate", "comfortable" (621), while also denoting that which is "concealed, kept from sight" (622). The term's opposite, *unheimlich*, is commonly understood to mean unfamiliar, eerie and frightening. Yet Freud points out that it also refers to something that "ought to have remained hidden and secret but has come to light" (623); when something becomes un-*heimlich*, it is no longer secretive or concealed. Freud is particularly interested in the overlapping meanings of the concepts *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. What is hidden from view and "inaccessible to knowledge" (624) (*heimlich*) coalesces with the idea of *unheimlich* in that it becomes a source of terror and unfamiliarity. There is hence a fluidity underlying these seemingly oppositional terms. As Ken Gelder and Jane Jacobs put it, "one seems always to inhabit the other" (2). What appears homely and intimate can easily merge into an uncanny experience.

In Auster, the home-space itself appears doubly *unheimlich*. The "lingering traces" of the "ghosts of people", "calling out" to Miles, clearly invest the house with an air of uncanny mystery, which echoes the 'haunted house' motif of the Gothic literary tradition (epitomized in Edgar Allan Poe's 1839 short story "The Fall of the House of Usher"). Yet the trash-out job in the abandoned homes also generates an uncanny

49 My reading of Freud's *The Uncanny* has been informed by several sources: Blunt and Dowling's *Home* (2006), Gelder and Jacobs's *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (1998), Kaika's article "Interrogating the Geographies of the Familiar: Domesticating Nature and Constructing the Autonomy of the Modern Home" (2004) and Vidler's *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992). See McClanahan's *Dead Pledges* (2017) (121–42) for an insightful reading of foreclosure photography using Freud's concept of the *uncanny* in conjunction with Marx's analysis of the alienated spectrality of private property.

experience because intimate objects, which are supposed to remain safely concealed within the private domestic space, are suddenly exposed to public view, thereby becoming *unheimlich*. There is a "violent exposure" (McClanahan 114) embedded in the trashing out procedure, which places Miles, as well as his co-workers, in the uncomfortable position of the voyeur. The unwilling desire to look at these domestic wastelands calls to mind more ancient forms of 'ruin gazing'. Although Miles prides himself on his non-materialistic interest in these sites of ruination, the act of photographing the personal items may in fact amplify the sense of invasion and exploitation. As Susan Sontag explains, "[t]here is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera" (4). Miles's photographic impulse therefore magnifies the uncanny experience in these foreclosed dwellings in Florida.

Seizing Home in Sunset Park

The landscape of ruination of these first pages infuses the novel with a sense of decline that is epitomized, however, in the image of the derelict house in Sunset Park. The house acts as more than mere setting, it actually functions as the structural backbone and leading metaphor of the story. When Miles's relationship with Pilar, an underage girl, places him in an untenable and dangerous situation (being blackmailed by Pilar's older sister), Miles unwillingly returns to New York. Incapable of reconciling with his estranged parents, Miles agrees to move in with his childhood friend and idealistic revolutionary, Bing Nathan, who initiated the makeshift and illegal cohabitation project in Brooklyn's Sunset Park neighborhood. All the inhabitants of the Sunset Park house are "in their late twenties, all poor and struggling, all with talent and intelligence" (*SP* 39). Besides Bing, there's Ellen, a mentally tormented artist, who is working as a real estate agent to get by; and Alice, a doctoral student employed part-time at the PEN American center. It was in fact Ellen who pointed out the abandoned house to Bing during their exploration of rental properties in the neighborhood, after which Bing "made up his mind to do the impossible, to risk everything on the chance to live in a rent-free house for as long as it took the city to notice him and give him the boot" (*SP* 81). Due to an (admittedly all-too-convenient)

"glitch in the system" (*SP* 38), the electricity and heating of the abandoned house were not cut off, thereby allowing for a relatively comfortable living environment for the squatters "flying under the municipal radar" (*SP* 38). With the omniscient narrator focusing in on each resident in separate sections of the novel, Auster is able to assemble their individual impressions of and feelings about the Sunset Park house. The result is an extensive and multidimensional portrait of the "dopey little two-story wooden house" (*SP* 80). The deserted property looked "for all the world like something that had been stolen from a farm on the Minnesota prairie and plunked down by accident in the middle of New York" (*SP* 81). Upon his arrival in Brooklyn, his new dwelling place strikes Miles as "neither suburban nor historic, it is merely a shack, a forlorn piece of architectural stupidity" (*SP* 125). The house's interior is in an equally shabby state when Bing and his friends move in:

> The place was in lamentable condition, every surface coated with dust and soot, water stains streaking the wall behind the kitchen sink, cracked linoleum, splintered floorboards, a team of mice and squirrels running relay races under the roof, a collapsed table, legless chairs, spiderwebs dangling from ceiling corners …. (*SP* 81–82)

The strange dwelling that Auster describes in such a vivid and detailed manner is in fact based on an actual house, which "looked like a bare skeleton" (Auster, Telephone Interview), that the author stumbled upon as he was walking down 34th Street in Brooklyn. "I took photographs of it", Auster explains, "and I had the photographs on my desk when I was writing about the house. I simply used, step by step, shingle by shingle, the house that I had seen". An unexpected turn of events occurred after the book's publication: as Auster wanted to show the house to a journalist, he was startled to find that "it had been demolished, there was nothing left, not even a splinter on the ground". "The photographs were all that remained of that place, which made me feel that I was inside the book", Auster continues. "I was doing Miles's photographs. … So there was an eerie doubling in that" (Telephone Interview).

The ruined house, a shameful blemish now neatly erased from the city's map (though not from Auster's photographic records), functions

as a symbol of urban degradation, starkly amplified by the economic downturn of the late aughts. Although the decline of postindustrial cities like Detroit received particular attention in recent years, Auster's portrait of this run-down section of Brooklyn leaves no doubt that the Great Recession has also left its marks on New York City. The narrator records Miles's negative impression of Sunset Park: "There is something dead about the place, he finds, the mournful emptiness of poverty and immigrant struggle" (*SP* 132). The house is engulfed in a landscape of ruins, standing "between a trash-filled vacant lot with a stripped-down car in it and the metal bones of a half-built mini-apartment building on which construction had stopped more than a year ago" (*SP* 81). In his review of the novel, Mark Lawson notes that the fittingly called Sunset Park "lends a useful metaphor of decline and fall to the story". There is indeed an ingrained pessimism and sense of general decline radiating from these pages. The fact that the house is situated right across from Green-Wood cemetery underpins the dark undertone even further. It is precisely here, with the graveyard directly visible from her desk by the window, that Alice writes her dissertation on the post-war movie incongruously entitled *The Best Days of Our Lives*—and one cannot help but suspect that Auster fears these days to be long gone for crisis-ridden America.[50] The cemetery exerts a "strange and haunting" fascination on Miles as well. Walking around the cemetery, "for the first time since coming to Sunset Park, he feels something stir inside him. There were the abandoned things down in Florida, and now he has stumbled upon the abandoned people of Brooklyn" (*SP* 133). Yet again, Miles feels pulled towards lifeless sites marked by ruination and absence—uncanny places that mirror Miles's angst and spiritual homelessness. The sense of belonging and connection that he experiences at Green-Wood cemetery, despite it being the essence of unhomeliness, stands in stark opposition to the alienation he feels more generally in his hometown. Miles's sense of not-being-at-home is clearly articulated: "this New York is not his New York, not the New York of his memory. For all the distance he has traveled, he might as well have come to a foreign city, a city any-

50 The reference to Samuel Beckett's play *Happy Days*, which Miles's mother performs in, has the same ironic tone.

where else in America" (*SP* 132). After years of being spatially removed from his home, Miles recognizes that this home is no longer accessible to him. Indeed, Roberta Rubenstein rightly observes that "one can never truly return to the original home of childhood, since it exists mostly as a place in the imagination" (qtd. in Blunt and Dowling 213). Miles's idea of home has been temporally displaced, residing in the past, forever confined to the elusive territory of memory.

By placing the illegally occupied house in Sunset Park at the center of the plot, Auster raises important questions concerning the notion of ownership in relation to our understanding of home. As delineated in Chapter 1, homeownership has held an incredibly significant position in American cultural discourse, being regarded as the primary indicator of status and symbol of the American dream. Set in the midst of the worst economic downturn since the 1930s, *Sunset Park* sketches out what happens when renting—let alone owning—a home in a city as expensive as New York City is rendered difficult, and in some cases impossible. Unlike his three friends, Miles could have reached out to his relatively wealthy parents for financial support, yet he stubbornly rejected this possibility. Alice's parents, on the other hand, "are barely getting by themselves, living on their Social Security checks and clipping coupons out of the newspaper in a perpetual hunt for bargains, sales, gimmicks, any chance to shave a few pennies from their monthly costs" (*SP* 89). The four young artists and intellectuals are thus left to fend for themselves, struggling to make ends meet. The prospect of living rent-free energizes the group. Alice, who had lost her apartment because she could no longer pay the rent, is described as experiencing a profound sense of liberation: "for the first time in a long while she can breathe without feeling her chest tighten up on her, without feeling that her lungs are about to explode" (*SP* 91). For Bing, the unlawful occupation of the abandoned house represents nothing less than a "communal action" against the system. Like the acts of vandalism in the foreclosed houses in Florida, the act of squatting needs to be seen as a refusal to be complicit in the circulation of capital, a way to "upend … the entire system of exploitation and profit that subtends capitalist exchange" (186), as Annie McClanahan phrased it. Bing, whose anti-capitalist impulse also underlies his repair shop, called the

"Hospital for Broken Things", decides to domesticate what Tim Edensor refers to as "unregulated, transgressive, disordered space" (qtd. in Apel 66). By appropriating public space[51] and proclaiming it to be private territory, conventional thinking about home—with its reliance on a neatly delimited public-private dichotomy—is turned on its head. Indeed, Neil Smith asserts that "[s]quatting reasserts rights to social privacy against the dictates of economic privacy protected in the real estate market" (105). Even though they are not legally owners of the property, the squatters consciously decide to act the part:

> No skulking around, [Bing] said. Acting as if they didn't belong there would only alert the neighborhood to the fact that they were trespassers. They had to operate in broad daylight, hold their heads high and pretend they were the legitimate owners of the house, which they had bought from the city for next to nothing, yes, yes, at a shockingly low price, because they had spared them the expense of having to demolish the place. Bing was right. It was a plausible story and people accepted it. (*SP* 90)

As moral justification, Bing also highlights that their occupation of the house can only benefit the community: "a crumbling wooden house standing empty in a neighborhood as ragged as this one is nothing if not an open invitation to vandals and arsonists, an eyesore begging to be broken into and pillaged" (*SP* 77). By doing "what they could to make the rooms habitable, diligently attacking all manner of blight and decay" (*SP* 90), Bing, Alice and Ellen gradually transform the derelict house, investing it an air of domesticity. Whereas the foreclosed homes in Florida morphed from homely space into the domestic uncanny, the house in Sunset Park follows a reversed trajectory. By the time Miles joins their cohabitation experiment, they have "turned their wretchedly inadequate pigsty into something that might, with some generosity, be classified as a hovel" (*SP* 90).

51 "The owners had died … and because their children had been delinquent in paying the property taxes for several years running, the house now belonged to the city" (*SP* 81).

Auster here calls into question what legitimizes one's sense of ownership, and what it takes to call a dwelling place 'home'. Does the fact that the group attentively looked after the property, preventing it from falling into ruin, and thereby "protecting the safety of the street" (*SP* 77) not qualify them to consider themselves rightful owners of this house—even if not in legal or economic terms? Over time, the four inhabitants, and first and foremost Bing, develop a sense of attachment towards the house. Bing proclaims to Miles: "This is our house. It belongs to us now, and I'd rather go to jail than give up my right to live here" (*SP* 252). Yet despite the group's emotional ownership of the house, the fact remains that the property legally belongs to the city. On the final pages of the novel, just as Ellen, Alice and Miles determined to bring their Sunset Park venture to an end in the near future, the inevitable happens, and the four squatters get evicted from the house. The dramatic finale unfolds early in the morning, when the police invade the property, and violence erupts: a cop brutally tackles and handcuffs Bing; Alice is pushed down the stairs, whereupon Miles punches the responsible cop in the face and flees the scene towards the cemetery. Whereas the chaos and rage of home eviction are only obliquely depicted in the trash-out scenes, they are here rendered in raw detail. The moment of eviction, in which the privacy of the domestic space is intruded by the public (law enforcement), coincides with the disintegration of the construct of home for the Sunset Park crew.

By structurally framing the story with sites of domestic ruination—the foreclosed homes at the outset of the story and the evicted house in Sunset Park marking the end—Paul Auster establishes the precarity and loss of home, on both a physical and metaphorical level, as central concerns in the novel.

2.2 Richard Ford's *The Lay of the Land* and *Let Me Be Frank with You*

The fragile and unstable quality of home also looms large in Richard Ford's recent works of fiction, *The Lay of the Land* and *Let Me Be Frank with You*. With Frank Bascombe, the witty, loquacious and

cynical narrative voice in *The Sportswriter* [52] (1986), *Independence Day* [53] (1995), *The Lay of the Land* (2006) and *Let Me Be Frank with You* (2014), Richard Ford has crafted one of the most memorable protagonists in recent American fiction. Each book is set during the brief and delimited period of a specific holiday: Easter, Independence Day, Thanksgiving and Christmas. The reader first encounters Frank as a sportswriter struggling to come to terms with the death of his eldest son and the subsequent breakup of his marriage. The novels trace the protagonist's trajectory through tumultuous as well as mundane episodes: his career change to the real estate business in upper-middle-class suburbia, the excitement and disappointment of various romantic entanglements, the challenging relationship with his two children and ex-wife and his general attempt at finding meaning and purpose in the confusion of modern life. While the spotlight is placed on Bascombe's inner journey through the various phases in life that lead Frank to, if not personal growth, at least some form of progress (life stages which he refers to as Dreaminess, the Existence Period, the Permanent Period, the Next Level and the Default Period), the narratives are also immersed within precise socio-economic and political periods of the recent past. The first volume of the series, *The Sportswriter*, uses middle-class suburbia during the Reagan era as a backdrop. In *Independence Day*, Frank takes his first steps as a realtor during the 1988 housing slump, when property values plummeted significantly. This second chapter of the Bascombe chronicle unfolds within the lead-up to the Bush–Dukakis presidential election. Yet, whereas the socio-economic and political context forms a relevant, albeit secondary, factor in the reading of *The Sportswriter* and *Independence Day*, the specific historical setting of the two latest Bascombe books is of the utmost significance for their interpretation.

"Millennial malaise"

Ford wrote his third volume featuring Frank Bascombe, *The Lay of the Land*, during the immediate post-9/11 period, more precisely between

52 Abbreviated to *TS* in subsequent citations.
53 Abbreviated to *ID* in subsequent citations.

2002 and 2006 (Ford, "Chance"). Significantly, however, the story is set in November 2000, in what Ford "specifically imagined to be a pre-9/11 atmosphere" (Ford, Personal Interview). The nation here found itself at a pivotal political crossroads: the now infamous election debacle between George W. Bush and Al Gore, which profoundly unsettled and divided the country in this millennial year, acts as the formative leitmotif throughout the novel. Kathy Knapp rightly observes in *American Unexceptionalism: The Everyman and the Suburban Novel after 9/11* (2014) that "[a] pre-9/11 vantage point also enables Ford to implicitly examine the conditions that precipitated that day's horrific events. Without doubt, Ford's focus on the 2000 election and Bascombe's repeated reminders to readers that he voted for Gore are meant to presage that the Bush presidency will prove disastrous" (15). The years in which Ford wrote *The Lay of the Land* were not only shaped by the aftermath of the most traumatic attack on American soil since Pearl Harbor; the nation was also reeling as a result of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the "great civic tragedy" (Ford, *Elegy*) of Hurricane Katrina, all overseen by a president who was widely considered unfit for the job. In 2004, Ford told *The Guardian* that Bush's re-election left him in a state of "bewilderment", realizing that "my country is not as good and as humane and as inclusive and as morally strong as I'd always thought it was … This is America, now—which is quite hard to stomach if you love your country and consider yourself a patriot, as I do" (Ford, "Tempting"). *The Lay of the Land* signals and captures the advent of this bleak new phase in the United States. The plot, which unfolds over the course of three days, is infused with a sense of calamity and danger. There is a palpable apprehension that something bad is bound to happen, at any moment, that "there is a new sense of a wild world being just beyond our perimeter" (*ID* 5), as Frank Bascombe already remarks in the previous novel, *Independence Day*. There are numerous examples of this feeling of tension and looming threat perceptible throughout the novel. The book opens with a newspaper article that Frank reads about a teacher shot to death by a college student in her classroom. "[I]t was the usual kind of news item we read every a.m., feel a deep, if not a wide, needle of shock, then horror about, stare off to the heavens for a long moment, until the eye shifts back to different matter—celebrity

birthdays, sports briefs, obits, new realty offerings—which tug us on to other concerns, and by mid-morning we've forgotten" (*LL* 1). A bomb explosion at the local hospital disrupts Frank's lunch plans at its cafeteria. Frank is diagnosed with prostate cancer, awaiting news about his treatment's success. Signs welcoming suicide survivors can be seen on New Jersey's suburban streets, and counseling for hate crime and rape victims is advertised on school announcement boards. While he is watching a hotel implosion, Frank's car gets broken into. The real estate bubble has reached dangerous dimensions, and Ford's descriptions of the housing boom and development frenzy registers a sense of imminent danger. "[N]obody knows what's happening next, only that something will" (*LL* 20) Ford writes, which from a post-credit-crunch perspective takes on an almost prophetic tone.[54] And in the novel's dramatic finale, Frank is injured and his neighbor dies in an armed carjacking by two Russian teenagers. There is "a pervasive sense of uncertainty", Kathy Knapp writes, "that hovers over *The Lay of the Land*" (xiv). She rightly observes that, with the final image of the novel, in which Frank sits in a descending airplane, Ford "invokes and personalizes the events of September 11" (15). "We are going down fast now", the final paragraph reads. "Our craft dips, shudders hard, and I feel myself afloat as the white earth rises to meet us" (*LL* 726). Knapp convincingly concludes that "*The Lay of the Land* may be pointedly set before the events of 9/11, but it evinces a decidedly post-9/11 sensibility in its emphatic assertion that the world as we once knew it is irrevocably lost: '*Before* is everlastingly gone. There is only everlastingly *after*'"[55] (Knapp 21).

What this *after* entails is explored more fully in Ford's latest part of the Bascombe chronicle, the four novellas assembled in *Let Me Be Frank with You* ("separate stories with certain kinds of unifying elements" (Personal Interview), as Ford put it). Whereas *The Lay of the Land* foregrounds the anticipation of calamity, the looming threat of a crisis, *Let Me Be Frank with You* plays out what happens once disaster has struck. Set only weeks after Hurricane Sandy devastated the New Jersey shore-

54 In my interview in 2016, Ford, however, pointed out that although "it may seem prophetic, it wasn't prophetic, it's just the misfortune of history that makes it seem that way. I was just dealing with what was true at that time" (Personal Interview).
55 Ford, *The Lay of the Land* (684).

line in 2012, the stories radiate a distinct "air of full-on disaster" (*LMBF* 3), as Ford phrases it on the opening page of the book. Although Ford explained in our interview that he was "specifically talking about one kind of calamity"—the hurricane—he recognizes that "not only an economic calamity, but a whole downturn in American civilization, might be metaphorically associated" (Personal Interview). In his four stories, Ford indeed portrays the more general sense of decline that America has experienced in the "post-lapsarian world" (*LMBF* 51) triggered by 9/11. Haddam, the prosperous New Jersey town that Ford's readers are already well familiar with from the first three Bascombe novels, may be unharmed by the storm but its appearance has also deteriorated as a result of the economic downturn and the austerity measures implemented during the Recession. As described in "The New Normal", prime storefronts are sitting empty, the budget gap is widening alarmingly and "a Dollar Store and Arby's are buying in where Laura Ashley and Anthropologie once thrived. 'The middle isn't holding' was *The Packet*'s Yeatsian assessment" (*LMBF* 119). Foreclosed homes on Frank's block are used by the police to stage mock hostage extractions. Beside the references to the economic troubles plaguing the nation, Ford also repeatedly mentions the contested American military involvement in the Middle East: Frank, retired from the real estate business, writes a column in the monthly *We Salute You* magazine, which is distributed "to our troops returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan, or wherever our country's waging secret wars and committing global wrongs in freedom's name—Syria, New Zealand, France" (*LMBF* 82–83). His column, "WHAT MAKES *THAT* NEWS?", consists of "oddball items" meant to "take a bit of the edge off by letting soldiers know we're not *all* as dumbass as newts back home, and in fact some of the idiotic stuff in the news can be actually hilarious, so that suicide can be postponed to a later date" (*LMBF* 83). Yet veterans are not the only Americans prone to feeling the doom and gloom of the current period, Ford's stories suggest. In the novella pointedly entitled "Everything Could Be Worse", Ms. Pines points out that America now ranks twenty-third place on the global happiness index. "Somebody said there's been a systematic extermination of joy in the United States" (*LMBF* 109), she exclaims. There is, then, throughout this last volume of the Bascombe series, a much more

explicit and urgent portrait of crisis and of a more broadly stroked sense of decline than in any of the previous novels.

The specific catastrophe that dominates throughout all four stories is, however, unquestionably Hurricane Sandy. In the final novella, "Deaths of Others", Frank notices that "a briny-sulfur tang now floats about as if the hurricane's insult has vaporized and come inland, two months on, leaving a new stinging *atmosphere*" (*LMBF* 206). It is indeed a lingering and pervasive atmosphere of calamity that Ford weaves masterfully into the stories tracing Frank's days leading up to Christmas. In this way, the killer storm operates as a metaphor of destruction more broadly: "as if calamity had left a hole in the world on the rim of which everything civilized and positive-tending teeters—spirits, efforts, hopes, dreams, memories…buildings, for sure—all in jeopardy of spiraling down and down" (*LMBF* 31).

Although Frank Bascombe's trademark tongue-in-cheek narrative voice guarantees plenty of chuckles that makes reading *The Lay of the Land* and *Let Me Be Frank with You* anything but a bleak experience, the two books, with their respective pre- and post-9/11 vantage points, *do* put forward an entropic vision of a country destabilized by a whirlwind of changes, and of a society marked by a sense of disorientation. In both works, Ford is able to construct this complex portrayal of a nation in crisis by specifically foregrounding images of architectural disintegration, especially of domestic spaces. Indeed, there is a distinct iconography of ruination that undergirds the built environment in Ford's two latest volumes of the Bascombe quartet. In the following close reading section, I analyze some of the most noteworthy examples of unstable and precarious dwelling places that figure in the plots of both books, and that metaphorically express a broader sense of instability in twenty-first century America.

"Foundation problems" in *The Lay of the Land*

Three distinct images of homely disintegration stand out in Ford's third Bascombe novel: the Doolittles' oceanfront house on Surf Road, that Frank attempts to sell to Clare Suddruth; the imploding Queen Regents Arms Hotel; and the house on Timbuktu Street, sold and put on trucks to be moved to a different location.

The beach house, owned by the Doolittles, a couple of plastic surgeons, was "built during the blue-sky development era of the late seventies before the laws got serious and curtailed construction, driving prices into deep space" (*LL* 404–5). Sixty-five-year-old, "senior-boomer" (*LL* 406) Clare Suddruth wants to buy a house for Estelle, his ex-wife, whom he returned to following a brief and unwise marriage with a young co-worker and after Estelle has been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. Frank is hoping for a quick sell on this Thanksgiving weekend, but Clare is proving to be a trickier case than expected. Upon Frank's arrival, Clare has already assessed the house's exterior in detail. As Clare leads Frank around the house, Frank realizes that the house is unmistakably "in need of upkeep" (*LL* 414):

> The side basement door is weathered and grayed, the veneer shredded at the bottom. A scimitar of glass has dropped out of a basement window and shattered on the concrete footing. Something metal is whapping in the wind above the soffits—a loose TV cable or a gutter strap—though I can't see anything. I wonder if the solar panels even work. (*LL* 414)

Hardly the condition in which a house listed at a million nine should be, Frank understands, but the pointedly named Doolittles appear to "have been spending their discretionary income elsewhere" (*LL* 414). The more serious issue, however, is pointed out to Frank on the ocean-facing side of the house: the piers, to which the house "is anchored and made fast so that at times of climatological stress the whole schmeer isn't washed or blown or seismically destabilized and propelled straight out to sea like an ark" (*LL* 415), are visibly cracked. The structural damage, Clare explains, is due to the fact that the piers are produced in early spring or high-humidity conditions.

> If your manufacturer isn't too scrupulous he doesn't notice … And if he's unscrupulous he notices but then has this silicone sealer painted on and sells it to you anyway. … Then your house gets built, and it stands up real well for about fifteen years. But because it's on the ocean, salt and moisture go to work on it. And suddenly—though it isn't sudden, of course—Hurricane Frank blows up, a high tide comes in, the force of the water turns savage and Bob's your uncle. (*LL* 416)

The house, Frank realizes, is built on "much worse than shifting sand. It's built on shitty pilings" (*LL* 416), a revelation which causes the realtor to feel "a brief stab of panic" (*LL* 417) (quickly substituted, in classic Bascombe fashion, by a feeling of "pure exhilaration and thrumming sense of well-being that this is not my house" (*LL* 417)). Yet as their discussion gradually shifts away from purely real estate talk, it becomes increasingly clear that Clare's concerns about the house's precarious standing is emblematic of a much more far-reaching anxiety. Indeed, Clare extrapolates the lurking danger underlying the beach house to a national scale, suggesting that America as a whole has lost its way—a fact rendered particularly evident in the midst of the disastrous presidential elections ("'You think these people here'—a toss of the Clare Suddruth head toward crumbling 61 Surf Road—'have foundation problems? *We've* got foundation problems'" (*LL* 421)). Clare wonders:

> Do you imagine, Frank, that anything could happen in this country to make *normal* just not be possible? … *I* actually tend to think nothing of that nature can really happen. Too many checks and balances. We've all of us manufactured reality so well, we're so solid in our views, that nothing can really change. You know? Drop a bomb, we bounce back. What hurts us makes stronger. D'you believe that? (*LL* 420)

When Frank responds that he doesn't, Clare admits that "No. Course not. Me, either" (*LL* 421). Clare's anxious musings regarding the country's safety and resilience obviously take on a foreboding tone to readers of Ford's novel, well aware that events *did* happen on American soil in the historic interval between the 2000 presidential elections and the book's publication in 2006, that abruptly upended any kind of normalcy within the nation—9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. Via Clare's persona, Ford here gives voice to an all-encompassing and debilitating fear that calamity awaits at any moment, which again "evinces a decidedly post-9/11 sensibility" (21), as Kathy Knapp phrased it.

> I think a house on the ocean's the right thing. Then I start thinking about New Jersey being a prime target for some nut with a dirty bomb or whatever. And, of course, I know death's a pretty simple business. I've seen

> it. I don't fear it. And I know Estelle's gonna probably see it before I do. So I go on looking at these houses as if a catastrophe—or death—*can't* really happen, right up until, like now, I recognize it *can*. And it shocks me. Really. Makes me feel paralyzed. (*LL* 422)

Knapp notes that *The Lay of the Land* "is predicated upon the assumption that life, no matter where it is lived, is full of contingency and discontinuity" (17). In a typical Fordian twist, however, Clare's dark and legitimate worries about the country's—and his personal—precarious existence (about "the circumstances of life going to hell. Boom-boom-boom" (*LL* 422)) then morph into unabashedly mercenary and grotesquely inappropriate concerns: "If something happens—you know, a bomb—can I ever sell my fucking house? And if I buy a new one, then what? Will property values even mean anything anymore? Where the hell are we then? Are we supposed to escape to some other place? Death's a snap compared to that" (*LL* 422). Frank, true to his name, responds to Clare matter of factly that "You couldn't put a contingency clause in a buy-sell agreement that says 'Sale contingent on there being no disaster rendering all real estate worthless as tits on a rain barrel'"(*LL* 422). While Ford here seems to present Clare's hyperbolic concern about real estate prices as an incongruous response vis-à-vis a hypothetical apocalyptic calamity, for post-credit-crunch readers of Ford's novel, it is hard not to see Clare's worries about the possible impact of a national catastrophe on the housing market as foreshadowing. Indeed, a figurative bomb *did* go off shortly after *The Lay of the Land* was published—the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008, and the near-collapse of global financial markets—sending property values into free fall and unleashing a national housing crisis of spectacular scale. This passage thus draws a parallel between the *physical* precarity of the beach house built on a brittle foundation, with the *financial* precarity of homes as commodity objects. Moreover, the very image of the house constructed on defective, decomposing piers offers an ideal metaphor for the fraudulent and risky market of (subprime) mortgage-backed securities, widely considered a main culprit for the financial crisis and housing debacle in 2008. Indeed, just as the house is built on shaky ground, with cracked piers forming its (concealed) unstable and

dangerous foundation, so were financial derivatives such as collateralized debt obligations (CDOs) based on so-called toxic assets routinely spread throughout a global financial sector, with investors widely unaware of the poor quality of the products they were buying. Similarly, just as the structural deficiencies of the house's roots remain imperceptible to the non-expert eye, so was the American public (and even many industry insiders) blind to the sickness afflicting the entire system—an ignorance that allowed the real estate bubble to expand to dangerous proportions. The image of the inconspicuously collapsing domestic space on 61 Surf Road hence allows the contemporary reader to deduce a more systemic sense of contingency and menace—pertaining to national security, the global financial network as well as to the housing market.

The notion of architectural collapse, and its implicit connection to a wider American decline, is evinced even more forcefully in the scene immediately succeeding this unsuccessful sales pitch to Clare Suddruth. Frank is meeting Wade Arsenault, the elderly father of his former girlfriend Vicki (whom the reader encountered in *The Sportswriter*) to witness the implosion of the Queen Regent hotel, an abandoned nine-story building by the ocean. Wade has for some time now developed "an interest in demolitions and in the terminus-tending aspects of things found in everyday life" (*LL* 457). Frank's drive to the scene of demolition takes him through streets marked by neglect and urban degradation: "windows out, mansions boarded, grass gone weedy, sidewalks crumbling" (*LL* 442)—Ford here unequivocally paints a landscape of decline. The "no-man's land" surrounding the hotel, we learn, is now a "progress zone" (*LL* 444) that will soon transform what Frank describes as a "dispirited seaside town" (*LL* 449) into a "luxury condo community" (*LL* 444). As he does on numerous other occasions throughout the novel, Ford here clearly captures the changing face of American suburbia, increasingly dominated by large-scale developments and commercial spaces (likely at the expense of local character and historical charm). Yet, before these high-end condos can arise, the derelict hotel, surrounded by a "dry, treeless urban-renewal savanna" (*LL* 444), needs to vanish once and for all. The hotel, "where felt-hatted drummers could take their girlfriends on the cheap" (*LL* 443) and "[o]ldster couples lived out their days within sounds of the sea and took their meals in the dim

coffered dining room" (*LL* 444), is one of the last emblems of a bygone era. The Queen Regent, "remnant of the stately elephants from the twenties" (*LL* 373), clearly has reached the end of her reign, and "even from a distance, she's hardly an edifice to rate a big send-off" (*LL* 443):

> Standing alone, the Queen Regent looks like one of those condemned men from a hundred revolutions who the camera catches standing in an empty field beside an open grave, looking placid, resigned, distracted—awaiting fate like a bus—when suddenly volleys from off-stage soundlessly pelt and spatter them, so they're changed in an instant from present to past. (*LL* 444)

Frank and Wade thus join the cheering crowd at the demolition site, who are eagerly awaiting the building's grand finale. There appears to be little doubt that, by choosing to include a collapsing architectural structure as a significant image in his novel, Ford explicitly evokes the events of September 11. How could any reference of a crumbling building, "black smoke" protruding from its interior space, *not* immediately awaken in each reader's mind those haunting and surreal images of the twin towers falling, one by one? The detailed description of the collapse is indeed bound to conjure up memories of those fateful moments:

> Her longitude lines, rows of square windows in previously perfect vertical alignment, all go wrinkled, as if the whole idea of the building had sustained, then sought to shrug off a profound insult, a killer wind off the ocean. And then rather simply, all the way down she comes, more like a brick curtain being lowered than like a proud old building being killed. Eighteen seconds is about it. (*LL* 455)

And yet, despite these noticeable overlaps, the contrasts between the *contexts* of the two collapses could also not be any starker: the predetermined, controlled spectacle of ruination of the lifeless and abandoned hotel stands in diametric opposition to the disorienting chaos and the utter shock of destruction (both material and human) witnessed on 9/11. Other than in downtown Manhattan, the falling building in Ford's novel is indeed met by the spectators' gasps of excitement, not of horror,

and followed by clapping, not panicked and terrified escape. To Ford's post-9/11 readers, the light-hearted, enthusiastic reception of seeing a building be turned to rubble thus brings home how drastically our collective perception of the world has changed since the attacks.

It is also worth pointing out that Ford, yet again, introduces an element of uncertainty into this specific scene. Indeed, in a quintessentially Fordian turn of events, the implosion is comically delayed, leaving the implosion team puzzled and the spectators hanging in mid-air. Although the first exploding sounds and puffs of smoke appeared to announce the imminent collapse of the grand building, "[t]he old dowager has yet to shudder lean or sway" (*LL* 454), to the amusement and ridicule of the impatient spectators ("She ain't fallin'. They fucked this all up" (*LL* 454)). I would posit that this passage can be read as another prime example of what Kathy Knapp refers to as Ford's "aesthetic of contingency" (21). There is a sense that, in this strange and perplexing historical moment, nothing is predictable and certain anymore, and this scene tacitly and humorously underscores this point. What is assumed to be a tightly controlled and precisely timed demolition is suddenly infused with uncertainty and doubt, suggesting that it is part of the human predicament to deal with "the continual irregularity of things" ("Accommodations" 38), as Ford put it in his 1988 essay "Accommodations". As the demolition eventually succeeds, and the spectators get the brief excitement that they came for, Frank observes that "[t]he Queen Regent's big finish has contributed little to Wade and me, only a bleak and barren humility, suggesting closure's easier to wish for than to locate" (*LL* 463).

The third and final image of homely disintegration that I want to highlight in *The Lay of the Land* is the house on 118 Timbuktu Street. Frank sold the property to a couple from Lebanon, the Stevicks, who in fact have no interest in the house itself, planning to "demolish it first thing next spring and bring in a new manufactured dwelling from Indiana that had a lifetime guarantee and all the best built-ins" (*LL* 541). Frank, always eager to make a good deal, made them an offer they could not refuse to buy and move the unwanted house to another location. Despite protests from the Timbuktu Neighbors Coalition, outraged that a house is simply being "torn off its foundation and trucked away"

(*LL* 603), the mass-produced, modest construction from the 1950s has thus been put up on steel girders, ready to be carted away. On Thanksgiving morning, Frank receives an unexpected call from his business partner Mike Mahoney claiming that he has found a family, the Bagoshs, willing to buy the house right away—welcome news, as this spares Frank considerable costs and energy. As he arrives at the Timbuktu property to finalize the deal, Frank is struck by the sight of the "mobilized" home:

> This is the first time I've seen 118 on its sleds, and I frankly can't blame the neighbors for feeling "violated", which is what the Coalition lady said before she started to cry and told me I was a gangster. It's not a very good thing to do to a street's sense of integrity—prices or no prices—to start switching houses like Monopoly pieces. I'm actually sorry I've done it now. (*LL* 605)

The deracination of the house from its rightful place is here presented as a violent and disruptive act. By isolating and dislocating the dwelling from its natural habitat, the house undergoes a radical transformation from symbol of domesticity to commodity. The striking image of the house placed on trucks, and thereby put in motion can thus be read as a literal representation of the home being mobilized to enter a circuit of capitalist exchange. As a realtor, Frank Bascombe has of course pledged full allegiance to the commercial doctrine, as he repeatedly emphasizes ("Commerce, after all, is basic to my belief system" (Ford, *LL* 23)). Yet even for Frank, seeing a house eerily placed "eight feet off the ground" appears to have an undeniably disorienting effect. Frank is about to find out that "if it's good to see the familiar world from a sudden new elevation, it may not be to see inside a house on girders, detached from the sacred ground that makes it what it is—a place of safety and assurance" (*LL* 616). Ignoring Mike's cautionary looks, Frank convinces the buyer, Mr. Bagosh, to join him for a final viewing of the property he is about to purchase—a decision he would soon regret. Indeed, in the four months since Frank last saw the house, it has drastically deteriorated:

> … inside here it's ten degrees colder, and still and dank as a coal scuttle and echoey and eerily lit. … The soggy-floored living room-dining room combo (you enter directly—no foyer, no nothing) is tiny but cavernous. The stained pink walls, old green shag and picture-frame ghosts make it feel not like a room but a shell waiting for a tornado to sweep it into the past. Leaking gas and backed-up toilets stiffen the cold internal air. (*LL* 617)

The kitchen has similarly lost all characteristics of domesticity:

> I walk through the kitchen door to a tiny room of brown-and-gold curling synthetic tiles, where there's no stove, no refrigerator, no dishwasher. All have been ripped out, leaving only their unpainted footprints, the rusted green sink and all the metal cabinets standing open and uncleaned inside. There's a strong cold scent in here of Pine-Sol, but nothing looks like it's been scrubbed in two hundred years. Police enter rooms like this every day and find cadavers liquefying into the linoleum. (*LL* 617)

Similar to the foreclosed houses we encountered in Paul Auster's *Sunset Park*, the abandoned house on Timbuktu Street is here imbued with a pronounced sense of decay. The house's amputation from the ground appears to have accelerated its decomposition, cutting it off from its life source and stripping away its veneer of domesticity. As if to amplify the outlandish nature of the "mobilized" house, a red fox suddenly emerges from the bedroom, causing Bagosh to flee from the unhomely abode. Mike's grave and cryptic statement as his distraught clients (and his commission) drift out of sight—"Wrong views result in a lack of protection, with no place to take refuge" (*LL* 623)—may speak to the more generalized sense of dislocation and uncertainty permeating the novel. Looked at collectively, the three images of unstable dwellings in *The Lay of the Land* that I have focused on—the Surf Road house on cracked piers, the imploding Queen Regent hotel and the mobilized and derelict home on Timbuktu Street—portray the American (national) home as a site of precarity and change.

Interestingly, Ford extends and projects this sensation of destabilization beyond architectural structures onto the human body. Indeed, in

two of these scenes of homely demise, Frank loses firm ground under his feet. First, Frank is overcome by a sudden episode of vertigo as he stares at the beach house's crumbling piers, realizing that "[f]or a man who hates to hope, my state of health is not as reliable as I'd hoped" (*LL* 418). Then, having left the degraded Timbuktu house, he notices that he ripped his jeans during the tumultuous episode inside. "My second fall of the day, third in two days. A general slippage" (*LL* 624), Frank concludes. Ford thus translates a broader sense of disorientation and collapse into bodily symptoms. It should be noted that Frank's physical instability is also registered in *Let Me Be Frank with You*: Frank is feeling "unsteady" (*LMBF* 54) and experiences a "partial tumble" (*LMBF* 57) on the site of the hurricane's devastation as well as a "sudden ghostly whoosh of vertigo" (*LMBF* 75) in his home during Ms. Pines's disconcerting visit. It is these two key scenes of domestic instability in Ford's latest Bascombe book that I will now turn my attention to.

Homely Alienation in *Let Me Be Frank with You*

Whereas calamity forms a tacit undertone in *The Lay of the Land* and its pre-9/11 setting, it takes center stage in *Let Me Be Frank with You*, a book of four novellas set in 2012 featuring Frank Bascombe at age sixty-eight. Indeed, a national catastrophe was the very catalyst for the book: "I wrote those stories slightly kicking and screaming insofar as I didn't really want to do it", Ford admitted in my interview, "but I got impelled to do it by the effect of seeing the hurricane" (Personal Interview). The first novella, "I'm Here", details Frank's return to the site of his former house by the beach in Sea-Clift, completely wrecked by Hurricane Sandy six weeks previously. Although he has been retired from the realty business for years, Frank agrees to meet with Arnie Urquhart, to whom he sold his oceanfront house during the "bonanza days of the now-popped realty bubble" (*LMBF* 9), to advise him on how to deal with the speculators and flip companies trying to make a profit off people's ruin. As he drives over to the site of destruction, Frank witnesses the havoc on the entire coastline:

> civic life has sustained a fierce whacking—house roofs sheared off, exterior walls stripped away, revealing living rooms full of furniture, pictures on bed tables, closets stuffed with clothes, stoves and refrigerators standing out *white* for all to see. Other houses are simply gone altogether. (*LMBF* 22–23)

Intimate, domestic items, intended to remain safely sheltered in the interior space of home, are here forcefully exposed to public view, "pole-axed and strewn around like hay-straw" (*LMBF* 30). The hurricane has eliminated any boundary between inside and outside, private and public, the domestic and the world—a separation which, as we have already seen in connection to Auster's *Sunset Park*, forms "a prerequisite for the construction of the familiar space of the home" (Kaika 272). The unsettling and disorienting effect that this merging of private interior and public exterior entails is conveyed most effectively in the passage describing Frank's former house on Poincinet Road now lying roofless and "topsy-turvy across the asphalt" (*LMBF* 32):

> Its back-side exterior wall where I once entered through a red door (gone) is stripped of its two-car garage and torn free of interior fittings (pipes, re-bar, electric), the dangling filaments of which along with whatever else ever connected it to the rest of the world, hanging limp from the house's exposed "bottom," which you used not to be able to see. … The panoramic deck, where I spent happy nights gazing at constellations I couldn't identify, is bent down and clinging to the broken superstructure by lug bolts I dutifully tightened each fall. What was then glass in now gaping. Studs show through the "open plan" where in years past, transpired sweet, murmurous late nights with Sally, or merry drinks' evenings with some old Michigan chum who'd shown up unexpected with a bottle of Pouilly-Fuissé…where life went on, in other words. (*LMBF* 32)

The familiar space of home "where life went on" (*LMBF* 32) is here turned into an unfamiliar, alienating space. Frank is indeed struggling to reconcile the material wreckage in front of him with the memory of home locked in his imagination. This incompatibility between the two versions of home, the shock of distortion underlying it, engen-

ders a distinctly uncanny experience. As Anthony Vidler explains, an uncanny moment, according to Freud, arises with "the transformation of something that once seemed homely into something decidedly not so, from the heimlich that is, into the unheimlich" (6). The house's familiar, characteristic features have become strangely unrecognizable to Frank. Yet as he is contemplating the uncanny ruin of his former dwelling place, he suddenly realizes "what little difference a house makes once it's gone. How effortlessly, almost sweetly, the world re-asserts its claim and becomes itself again" (*LMBF* 34). Although he has spent much of his career as a realtor, a profession decidedly grounded on the centrality of houses, the calamitous impact of Hurricane Sandy raises Frank's awareness of the inherent frailty and inconsequence of the man-made environment in the face of the magnitude of nature. If there is indeed, as Dora Apel puts it, "a 'timeless' struggle between nature and culture" (75), then Ford here suggests that the outcome is already clear. "There's something to be said for a good no-nonsense hurricane, to bully life back into perspective" (*LMBF* 34), he writes. In the current age of global climate change, accompanied by an unsettling rise of environmental disasters, there is indeed no more denying that we all live at the mercy of Mother Nature. When "you can't be certain the ground will be ground and not seawater in ten years" (*LMBF* 51), the very notion of home, predicated as it is on ideas of stability and permanence, appears increasingly flawed and at risk.

The question about how to respond to the destruction and the loss of home, both materially and emotionally, forms the core of this novella. On the very first page, Frank immediately registers the "bouquet of large-scale home repair and re-hab" (*LMBF* 3) in the air. Amid the chaos and confusion of the hurricane's aftermath, there is indeed an understandable yearning in the community to press the rewind button, a "palpable, ghostly urge to 'put back' what was" (*LMBF* 24). Arnie is, however, hesitant about this route of domestic reconstruction, as well as about accepting the speculators' offers to buy the remains of his ruined abode. Reverting to his realtor perspective, Frank wonders if Arnie may not in fact feel relief that his house is, as he puts it, "an ass-over-teacups total loss" (*LMBF* 21), considering that "he now owns a hunk of prime, undeveloped oceanfront" (*LMBF* 21). By choosing to focus solely on the

commercial value of the property—the house and land viewed as little more than a commodity—Frank here displays his propensity of emotional detachment, which readers are by now well familiar with. Frank's apprehension about getting too close to other people is also comically obvious towards the end of their meeting, when he fears Arnie might want to hug him: "Emerson was right—as he was about everything: an infinite remoteness underlies us all. And what's wrong with that? Remoteness joins us as much as it separates us, but in a way that's truly mysterious yet completely adequate for the life ongoing" (*LMBF* 58). Similarly, when a cold ocean breeze makes Frank shiver, he is concerned that "Arnie may think I've shuddered, possibly even sobbed. Why would I? My house hasn't been ruined" (*LMBF* 59). Yet Frank's conscious efforts to keep his emotional distance, like so many other times throughout the novels, appear to fail in the face of this calamity that has quite literally hit home for him. Indeed, the extensive domestic devastation he has witnessed on the coast unsettles Frank more profoundly than he expected: "Whatever inland protections I've come armed with have worn away and rendered me—a target. Of loss. Of sadness. The thing I didn't want to be and explicitly why I haven't ventured down here in these last weeks, and shouldn't have now" (*LMBF* 40). The sight of his destroyed house, and of the entire Sea-Clift neighborhood that he called home for a significant part of his life, has eroded Frank's ability to disengage. In fact, the confrontation with the domestic ruins awakens a disconcerting anxiety in Frank:

> I have these sensations more than I like to admit, since they make me feel that something bad is closing in—like the advance of a shadow across a square of playground grass where I happen to be standing. When the shadow covers the last grass blade, the air goes suddenly chill and still, and all is up for me. Which will ultimately be only true. So who'd blame me for feeling it now, and here? (*LMBF* 40)

The loss of domicile thus becomes a catalyst for Frank to come to grips with his own vulnerability and mortality. The apocalyptic image of the shadow gradually approaching and the feeling of there being a delimited time left until "all is up" clearly disclose Frank's confrontation with

death, intensified by his age and the indiscriminate and total destruction of the hurricane.

Whereas the hurricane's aftermath brings Frank closer to a more personal "sense of an ending" (to use Frank Kermode's phrasing), for Arnie, the domestic ruin triggers an association with another instance of calamitous collapse, namely that of the Twin Towers. Indeed, it is certainly striking that Arnie's first words to Frank pertain to the 2001 attacks, as opposed to the immediate, and more personal, disaster of Hurricane Sandy.

> "It must've taken some real nuts to do that" … "That huge skyscraper just coming right at you, three hundred miles a fuckin' hour. Fascinating, really." … "We bring our disasters down to our own level, don't we, Frank," Arnie's saying. "But those poor people really couldn't. So we're lucky down here in a way. You know?" (*LMBF* 42)

As if struggling to find the vocabulary to address and process the domestic (as in *home*) disaster caused by the storm, Arnie's impulse is to focus on the domestic (as in *national*) disaster that has traumatized America at large. By weaving in a reference of 9/11 into this scene of environmental disaster and homely disintegration, Ford again colors the story with a broader sense of disaster and decline felt collectively in the tumultuous historic present.

The final image of home that I want to spotlight in *Let Me Be Frank with You* can be found in the second novella, "Everything Could Be Worse". Frank here receives a surprise visit from Ms. Pines, who, as he finds out, used to live in his current property on Wilson Lane in the sixties, and who cautiously asks if she could have a look at her former home. As if foreshadowing the disruptive impact her unannounced visit will have, she immediately proclaims "I'm making a terrible intrusion on you" (*LMBF* 71)—reassuringly countered by Frank ("I like intrusions" (*LMBF* 71)). To Frank, opening up his home to former inhabitants is "little enough to do for other humans—help them get their narrative straight. It's what we all long for, unless I'm mistaken" (*LMBF* 74). He notes that he also tries to visit his previous homes at least once a decade, and that "[i]t would do any of us good to contemplate the house we live

in being peopled by imperfect predecessors. It would encourage empathy and offer—when there's nothing left to want in life—perspective" (*LMBF* 103–4). As a realtor, Frank is perhaps more aware than most how frequently dwellings change hands and that we live at a time "where people sell and buy houses like Jeep Cherokees, and boom follows bust so relentlessly realtors often leave the FOR SALE sign in the garage" (*LMBF* 73). Homeownership, in Ford's universe, is noticeably stripped of its connotation of commitment and permanence. The houses we inhabit, for Frank, are but temporary shelters, bound to be replaced by others in the long, or more likely, short run. There is a clear emotional distance that Frank thus wants to maintain towards his dwelling places. When Ms. Pines is reluctant to reveal the entire story of what happened in the house when her family lived there, fearing that "[i]t could alienate you from your house", Frank matter-of-factly explains: "'I sold real estate for twenty years …. Houses aren't that sacred to me. I sold *this* one twice before I bought it myself. … Somebody else'll own it someday and tear it down.' (And build a shitty condo)" (*LMBF* 102). This refusal to imbue these material structures with any deeper meaning beyond its primary function of shelter can already be identified in *Independence Day*. When Frank's career as a residential specialist was still in its early stages, he already expressed this belief that "place means nothing" (*ID* 152), and that we must "cease sanctifying places …. We may feel they *ought* to, *should* confer something—sanction, again—because of events that transpired there once …. But they don't" (*ID* 151). Although he recognizes that "[a]ll houses have pasts" (*ID* 419), and that they "can have an almost authorial power over us" (*ID* 106), he believes that maintaining a certain independence from our abodes is crucial. His profession in the realty business has allowed him to avoid romanticizing and elevating the places we live in. Yet this distancing technique is about to be put to the test, when he finds out the gruesome events that transpired in the four walls he calls home several decades ago: Ms. Pines's father killed her mother and her brother in the house before killing himself in the house's basement (which Frank, unknowingly, joked to be "full of spooks" (*LMBF* 87)). Even before hearing about the family tragedy, Frank has a foreboding feeling that he "wasn't going to like what [he] was about to hear, but would then have to know forever" (*LMBF* 104).

And indeed, the revelation seems to leave Frank at a loss for words, uncertain about how to react and feel in this new reality: "I wasn't at all ready for her to leave" (*LMBF* 108), Frank notes. He realizes, however, that "[s]he'd performed and received what she came for, relegated as much of her burden as possible to the house. And to me" (*LMBF* 109). It is hard to shake the feeling throughout the novella that the house is subtly manifesting and reflecting this trauma in its very materiality. Ford refers to the "silent house's primordial self" and describes "a creaking noise of age and settlement" (*LMBF* 99) as well as "a distant murmur" emanating from the basement, where "the heat pump came smoothly to life" (*LMBF* 81). The Wilson Lane house appears to be cautiously invested with life-like qualities, that I read to be reminiscent of Edgar Allan Poe's portrayal of (personified and animated) architectural spaces.[56] The home in Ford's short story is anything but a sheltered and pure haven of domesticity, immune to destructive forces. In my interview with the author in 2016, he stated that "we fashion [the legal fiction of domicile] in such a way to be protective and impregnable, but in fact it is not impregnable. The hurricane makes you understand that, and Ms. Pines' much more profound existence there before Frank ever got there does that in another way" (Personal Interview). Just as a natural calamity is able to materially shatter a domicile, Ms. Pines's revelation destabilizes the construct of home in less a tangible but nevertheless significant way. The domestic space is indeed vulnerable to different kinds of infiltrations. Maria Kaika writes about the "porous membrane" (275) of the home, reminding us of Walter Benjamin's definition of porosity as "the lack of clear boundaries between phenomena, a permeation of one thing by another, a merger of, for example old and new, public and private, sacred and profane" (qtd. in Kaika 275). Ms. Pines's disruptive "intrusion" into Frank's home underscores the porosity of all domestic spaces. When Frank asks Ms. Pines whether her own house on the coast remains "intact" (*LMBF* 90) in the wake of Hurricane Sandy, and she tells him that it's "ruined" (*LMBF* 90), the reader cannot help but sense

56 See Marilyn Chandler's chapter on "The Fall of the House of Usher" in *Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction*.

that the shock of learning about the house's dark past has had a similar destructive impact on Frank's sense of home.

In his two post-9/11 books about Frank Bascombe, Ford explores domestic disintegration caused by a range of different agents of ruination—material defect, controlled implosion, commodification, natural catastrophe and emotional trauma. What all of these images of domestic ruination evoke is the sense that the stability of home is no longer assured. In both books, the home, robbed of its protective and sacred aura, loses its "authorial power" (Ford, *ID* 106), thereby becoming a terrain of fragility and contingency, resonant of the socio-economic and political context of the contemporary post-9/11-era.

2.3 Dave Eggers's *A Hologram for the King*

Set in Saudi Arabia, the plot of *A Hologram for the King* (2012) traces the journey of dispirited IT salesman Alan Clay, who comes to King Abdullah Economic City (KAEC) to pitch a teleconference system to the King with his team from Reliance. The IT contract would not only stabilize Alan's career which has taken a severe hit in the recession; the six-figure commission would allow him to pay for his daughter's tuition fees, keep the house he was forced to put on the market and thus salvage some sense of dignity and usefulness that Alan feels eroding on a daily basis. Yet Alan and his team end up spending their days in a tent in the middle of the desert, waiting for the King to make an appearance. Stuck in limbo, Alan is given ample time to reconsider what went wrong: in his life, his career and with the American Dream. The financial crisis of 2008 and the Great Recession that ensued lie at the very heart of the novel. In my interview with the author in 2017, he emphasized the impact that the economic downturn, and the more general atmosphere of decline of the present era, had on his writing:

> The crisis was one of the main catalysts for the book. At the time, there was a malaise hanging over the US that had everyone thinking our best days were behind us. China was ascendant, we were involved in two unsuccessful wars, the economy had bottomed out. There was very little to look to for hope. (Email Interview)

I would argue that this hopelessness and malaise is registered in the built landscape that Eggers created in the novel. Indeed, the vast majority of the architectural spaces that structure the story are, as my forthcoming analysis reveals, marked by a striking unhomeliness and disconcerting anonymity.

A Postmodern Landscape of Non-places and Anti-homes

During his business trip, Alan Clay is based in the Hilton Hotel in Jeddah, from which he ventures every day to KAEC hoping to pitch Reliant's hologram technology to the King. The "sterile hotel" (*HK* 251) forms the first of numerous unhomely dwellings that the reader encounters in the novel.

> They had built the hotel to bear no evidence of its existence within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The whole complex, fortressed from the road and sea, was free of content or context, devoid of even a pattern or two of Arabic origin. This place, all palm trees and adobe, could have been in Arizona, in Orlando, anywhere. (*HK* 21)

The neutral and culturally unspecific building that Eggers here describes is a prime example of what Marc Augé, in 1992, famously dubbed a "non-place". According to Augé, the world of supermodernity has given rise to a proliferation of these so-called non-places, "spaces of circulation, communication and consumption, where solitudes coexist without creating any social bond or even a social emotion" (Augé, *Paris* 178), which he contrasts with the notion of anthropological place (place defined as "relational, historical and concerned with identity" (Augé, *Non-Places* 63)). Globalization has amplified this phenomenon, Augé added in 2008:

> … the same hotel chains, the same television networks are cinched tightly round the globe, so that we feel constrained by uniformity, by universal sameness, and to cross international borders brings no more profound variety than is found walking between theatres on Broadway or rides at Disneyland. (*Non-Places* XII)

The homogeneity and standardization of place in the contemporary transnational world is indeed epitomized by a mega-corporation like Hilton, which aims to offer a consistent, predictable experience to customers irrelevant of the geographic location of its outlet. Geographer Edward Relph proposes the term "placelessness" to refer to "a weakening of the identity of places to the point where they not only look alike but feel alike and offer the same bland possibilities for experience" (90). It is precisely this cultural placelessness and lack of identity of the Hilton hotel that appeals to Alan: "The hotel was really without any character whatsoever. He loved it" (*HK* 134). Augé considers this a key "paradox of non-place: a foreigner lost in a country he does not know (a 'passing stranger') can feel at home there only in the anonymity of motorways, service stations, big stores or hotel chains" (*Non-Place* 86). Even though the hotel chain is characterized by artificiality and inauthenticity—with its "wall of fake rock" (*HK* 22) and the pervasive "smell of chlorine" (*HK* 23) in the lobby—it simultaneously provides a simulacrum of familiarity and, thereby, a strange illusion of home. Yet the sense of belonging generated by a non-place like the Hilton hotel is, by definition, ephemeral and transitory. As Zygmunt Bauman notes, non-places "discourage the thought of 'settling in', making colonization or domestication of the space all but impossible" (*Liquid Modernity* 102).

The polished and immaculate appearance of the Hilton in Jeddah exemplifies the "flatness", "depthlessness" and "superficiality" (9) that Fredric Jameson identified as a central feature of postmodern architecture. Yet an even more extreme and striking image of postmodern construction of space can be found in the utopian project of KAEC, King Abdullah's vision of "a city rising from dust" (*HK* 39). When he is first driven over to KAEC by Yousef, a comically Americanized Saudi Arabian student, Alan remarks: "It was as if someone had built a road through unrepentant desert, and then erected a gate somewhere in the

middle, to imply the end of one thing and the beginning of another. It was hopeful but unconvincing" (*HK* 40). The eerily empty landscape behind the gate resembles "a recently abandoned development on the moon" (*HK* 41–42). Eggers highlights the lifeless and cold aspect of the (barely mentionable) architecture in the desert city: "In the distance, the road ended a few hundred yards from the water, where a handful of buildings stood, looking like old gravestones" (*HK* 42). This image of a cemetery, and the implicit connection between urban space and death, is also picked up later in the novel, when Alan scarcely avoids falling into an enormous pit dug behind another building. "It was about fifty feet deep, and it had nearly become his grave" (*HK* 127). The foundation of a gleaming new building thus ironically almost turns into the site of Alan's demise.

The urban ghost town of KAEC that Eggers describes brings to mind artist Robert Smithson's observations about the construction along the Passaic River, New Jersey, in 1967. In his *Artforum* essay entitled "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic", Smithson focuses on the craters, pipes and highway construction on the banks of the river, which he describes as "*ruins in reverse*, that is—all the new construction that would eventually be built. This is the opposite of the "romantic ruin" because the buildings don't fall into ruin after they are built but rather rise as ruins before they are built" (qtd. in Dillon 49). KAEC indeed appears to have "risen as ruin" before it was ever fully built: to Alan's astonishment, Yousef tells him that "[t]here's nothing happening there. No building at all" (*HK* 37) and that "[i]t might have happened at one time, but there's no more money" (*HK* 39). The city is thus suspended in a precarious state of inbetweenness, a transitional space between being and not-being.

Although the city is intended to become a shining beacon in the Middle East, filled with mesmerizing skyscrapers and thousands of homes, at this stage the ambitious urban development essentially only consists of three buildings:

> There was a pastel-pink condominium, which was more or less finished but seemed empty. There was a two-story welcome center, vaguely Mediterranean in style, surrounded by fountains, most of which were dry. And there was a glass office building of about ten stories, squat and square and black. (*HK* 43)

It is striking that all three buildings are described as mimicking architectural styles distinctive of other geographic regions. The Mediterranean appearance of the welcome center, with its small domes and minarets, is juxtaposed with the sterile large office building, referred to as the "Black Box" by Alan and his team, the lobby looking "like a Scandinavian airport" (*HK* 69). The pink condominium "resembled something he'd seen a few hundred times along various Florida coasts. It was undistinguished, enormous; its wide flat face looked to the sea with dull resistance" (*HK* 72). The buildings occupy an architectural no man's land; they operate as ambiguous cultural signs that Alan struggles to decipher. By mimicking and appropriating the architectural aesthetic associated with the Mediterranean, Scandinavia and Florida, the buildings are a prime example of Fredric Jameson's notion of "pastiche": "in a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible", Jameson writes, "all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum" (7). As such, the (minimally) built landscape in KAEC needs to be read as a quintessentially postmodern space.

The passage in which Alan discovers the pink "Florida" condominium deserves closer attention, for the built environment is here shown to embody an element of instability and uncanniness. Sensing that Alan might be interested in buying a 'pied-à-terre' in the blossoming city, paying "a fraction of what people will pay a year or two from now" (*HK* 214), KAEC employee Mujaddid nudges Alan to join him on a tour of the condominium. As they walk into the foyer—described by Mujaddid as "grand and welcoming" but which Alan perceives to be "garish and daunting"—the former needs to leave unexpectedly and encourages Alan to go up to the fifth floor by himself, where one of the residents would show him the finished apartments. At the back of the empty ground floor, Alan finds a stairway, "dark and made of concrete"

(*HK* 206), which leads him up to the third floor. He is startled by what he finds:

> He was in a large raw space full of men, some in their underclothes, some in red jumpsuits, all yelling. It looked like pictures he'd seen of prison gyms converted to dormitories. There were fifty bunks, clothes hanging on lines between them. The beds were empty, though—all the men were gathered in the center of the room, barking, pushing. These were the workers Alan had seen around the site; Yousef had said they were Malaysian, Pakistani, Filipino. (*HK* 206–7)

After Alan naively tries to break up the fight (incidentally over a cellphone Alan's colleague Cayley discarded a few days before), "the mood of the room quickly darkened" (*HK* 209). With some of the angry workers chasing after him, Alan flees to the fourth floor, an eerily empty space in stark contrast with the densely populated floor below. "There was nothing there but columns—no walls, no framing, nothing" (*HK* 210). Finally reaching the fifth floor, he is stunned to find himself in what "seemed to be an entirely different building": "The fifth floor was finished, modern, no detail forgotten. … There were fixtures, outlets, polished teak tables, fire extinguishers, every last sign of civilized living" (*HK* 210). To Alan's relief, the threatening mob has miraculously vanished, seemingly unable to access this bright and immaculate parallel universe inside the building. As he is welcomed into one of the units on the floor—Hasan's elegant and expensively decorated apartment—the incongruity between the different parts of the building becomes blatantly obvious:

> Alan understood nothing in this country. … He had, moments before, been among an army of impoverished Malaysian laborers seeming to be squatting in an unfinished building and now he was two floors up and in the most sophisticated dwelling possible. And drinking with a man he had to assume was a Muslim of some influence. (*HK* 212)

Alan struggles to reconcile the oppositional and contradictory sides of the building, and of Saudi Arabia more broadly. The composition of the

building takes on a symbolic meaning: underlying the perfectly staged fifth floor, described as a heavenly space "bathed in amber light" (*HK* 211) with a panoramic view of the entire city, lies the intermediary, purgatory space of the fourth floor, a ghostly and lifeless void. Following this reading, the third floor thus represents the dark and hellish underworld. Alan here not only gets a glimpse of the shocking living conditions of the immigrant workforce, but also of the violence and anger simmering underneath the surface. The third floor thus operates as the uncanny 'Other' of the building in specific and of KAEC in general, the unsettling and destabilizing reality that is meant to be concealed (*heimlich*) and is inadvertently revealed to Alan (thereby becoming *unheimlich*). Continuing in Freudian terms, one may even see the third floor as the building's (and the city's) repressed unconscious, the brute darkness threatening to break through the veneer of "civilized living" (*HK* 210).

What the businessmen in KAEC are unaware of, is that Alan can only dream of affording a picture-perfect apartment like the one in the condominium. In fact, the very same moment that he pretends to look at prospective luxurious second homes in the desert city, realtors are likely showing his own suburban home in Boston to potential buyers. In recession-riddled America and following "a series of foolish decisions in his life" (*HK* 4), Alan found himself to be essentially out of options ("virtually broke, nearly unemployed, the proprietor of a one-man consulting firm run out of his home office" (*HK* 4)) and was forced to put his home on the market. In one of several flashback scenes, Eggers describes the unsettling experience of having one's home gradually transformed into a commodity. Before Alan's property could even be presented to viewers, a woman was hired to stage the house, to "brighten the darkness you have brought into it with your human mess" (*HK* 14). Alan thus had to "box up and remove ninety percent of all … he had accumulated in twenty years" (*HK* 15). "Then, until it's sold", Eggers writes, "you live in a version of your house, a better version. There is more yellow. There are flowers and tables made of reclaimed wood. Your own belongings are in storage" (*HK* 15). The strategic and systematic mise-en-scène of the *house* simultaneously entails the destruction of the *home*: it becomes, to use Yuri Lotman's vocabulary, an "anti-home" (or "pseudo-home") (Lotman 188). Alan is forced

to erase any signs of homely belonging, the house thus becoming an anonymous blank slate ready to be appropriated by someone else. The commercialization of place prohibits any sensation of domesticity. The house, regularly intruded and scrutinized by realtors and possible buyers, can no longer function as a protected, intimate shelter from the world. Stripped of a position of authority, belonging and ownership vis-à-vis his house, Alan is required to become invisible:

> He had been living in the house all the while, evacuating when the realtors wanted to show it. … Sometimes he stayed locked in his home office as the visitors walked through his home, commenting. Low ceilings, they would say. Small bedrooms. Are these the original floors? There's a musty smell. Are the occupants older people?
>
> Sometimes he watched the potential buyers come in, leave. He peeked through his office window like an imbecile. One couple stayed so long that Alan had to urinate in a coffee cup. One visitor, a professional woman in a long leather coat, saw him through the window as she was walking away, down the driveway. She turned to the realtor and said, I think I just saw a ghost. (*HK* 15–16)

There is a double voyeurism at work here, as both the potential buyers and Alan become transgressive actors within the house. What this scene exposes is "the recognition that the commodified house", as Annie McClanahan argues, "has always been a site of unhomely alienation" (103).

Building the Dream / The Dream of Building

As a likely response to the imminent loss of his own home (and the demise of his career) back in Boston, Alan is fascinated by the King's vision of KAEC, and the hopeful idea of "something rising from nothing" (*HK* 45). "He wanted to watch the city grow" (*HK* 198) Eggers writes. "There was nothing as good as this, being there at the beginning of something. When the city was another Abu Dhabi or Nairobi, he could say he'd walked the foundation of the buildings" (*HK* 129). The very

notion of a utopian city emerging in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by the inhospitable Saudi Arabian desert, reveals a frontier mentality and a hunger for innovation that Alan feels to be missing in the United States these days. Alan's reaction when seeing the widely undeveloped territory around the Red Sea ("How could so much coastline go so little exploited?" (*HK* 159)) echoes the settlers on the American continent during colonial times, who were similarly seduced by the vast territory expanding towards the West. More specifically, it brings to mind J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's words following his travels to the untouched river landscapes in Ohio in the 1760s: he writes that his imagination "involuntarily leaped into futurity. … I saw those beautiful shores ornamented with decent houses, covered with harvests and well cultivated fields" (qtd. in Clark 129). Eggers's novel suggests that America no longer inspires or encourages an impulse to imagine, envision and create—the nation's pioneering spirit has gradually eroded. At an expat party in Jeddah, Alan meets an American architect who explains why his business has taken him away from home to cities like Dubai, Singapore, Shanghai and now KAEC: "Not that it's about the biggest or tallest, but you know, in the U.S. now there's not that kind of dreaming happening. It's on hold. The dreaming's being done elsewhere for now" (*HK* 143). The rising cities in the Middle East and Asia have replaced the United States as hubs displaying bold architectural vision and ambitious urban development. The architect's reference to "dreaming" should not go unnoticed: after all, the notion of the American Dream, and its implicit connection to ideas of progress, innovation and prosperity, has long been a central tenet of the nation—yet this Dream has been drifting away from the United States to new horizons.

That the American Dream is increasingly out of reach is also suggested in the representation of homeownership in the novel. As explained in more detail in the previous chapter, private property is deemed an intrinsic part of the American Dream, and Americans have, ever since the settlement era, considered ownership of one's own house a fundamental right for every citizen. Yet with the economy in the gutter and his career in limbo, Alan Clay, like countless other Americans, finds himself unable to afford his suburban dwelling. There's a palpable sense of disillusionment, a disheartening realization that owning a

home, and with it a tangible cut of the American Dream, has become a privilege rather than a given in the United States. Eggers touched upon this subject in our interview:

> Think of the old saying "A man's home is his castle." That's in large part the meaning of the title of the book. Alan is supposed to be king of his castle, but instead he's selling his house and meanwhile, he's halfway around the world, operating out of a hotel and a tent in the desert. His home, and the American Dream, is a hologram — ephemeral and not quite real. (Email Interview)

In a comic twist, Eggers translates the idiom into literal terms: as Alan accompanies Yousef to his family home, he is struck to find that Yousef's father is quite literally king of his castle, having built an "enormous structure" (*HK* 228) in the Saudi Arabian mountains. The fact that a humble man from Jeddah, who makes a modest living selling sandals, was able to level a mountaintop and build "some kind of modern fortress" (*HK* 234) large enough to make the entire village fit in for celebrations, astounds Alan. He realizes that Yousef's father, a salesman much like himself, has achieved everything that Alan longs for in life:

> He decided he could live here. He decided he could be content this way, if he'd built a home like this. All he needed was some space, somewhere removed from anywhere, where the land was cheap and building was easy. He shared the dreams of Yousef's father, the need to return to one's origins, build something lasting, something open and strange like this fortress, something that could be shared by family and friends, everyone who helped nurture him. (*HK* 234)

The dream of putting down roots somewhere "where the land was cheap and building was easy" again recalls the American settlers who came to the continent with precisely these objectives. That the times in which building was easy are long gone in the United States becomes starkly evident in the scene in which Alan decides to build a small stone wall, about three feet high, in the garden of his home in Duxbury. "Building the wall gave Alan as much pleasure as he'd known in years, even

though he had virtually no idea what he was doing", Eggers writes. "In a few hours he'd made a wall that would take a jackhammer to dismantle. In a few days, he figured, he could probably build a home of some kind this way. He could build anything. He was elated" (*HK* 237). Alan's sense of pride and satisfaction when building the wall echoes Henry David Thoreau's words in *Walden*, praising the value of constructing a dwelling with one's own hands:

> There is some of the same fitness in a man's building his own house that there is in a bird's building its own nest. Who knows but if men constructed their dwellings with their own hands, and provided food for themselves and families simply and honestly enough, the poetic faculty would be universally developed, as birds universally sing when they are so engaged? But alas! we do like cowbirds and cuckoos, which lay their eggs in nests which other birds have built, and cheer no traveller with their chattering and unmusical notes. Shall we forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter? What does architecture amount to in the experience of the mass of men? I never in all my walks came across a man engaged in so simple and natural an occupation as building his house. (46)

Thoreau foregrounds the psychological rewards and the satisfaction that the act of building brings, the creativity and inspiration it can foster. Constructing one's own abode is here presented as the most natural and humbling activity that human beings can engage in. The act of homebuilding that Thoreau here advocates goes back to "ancient instinctive drives like rooting and nesting" (Chandler 37), innate impulses that connect human beings with other animal species. Yet, even in the mid-nineteenth century, when Thoreau embarked on his mythical experiment in Concord, fewer and fewer people were involved in the actual process of house construction, preferring to hire specialists. This divide between man and his habitat, between homeowner and home has of course increased exponentially since Thoreau's day, in which the impact of industrialization was only starting to reveal itself. Indeed, home construction has gradually fallen out from the hands of individuals and into the hands of large-scale developers and

construction enterprises, mass-producing standardized properties to cater to a home-hungry market. The tangible connection with one's home, the direct experience of building with one's own hands, has faded almost entirely. In Thoreau's writing, the reader can detect a nostalgic and romanticizing gaze towards manual labor and the tactile experience of creating something tangible and durable. It is this same longing for something permanent and real that we can gauge in Alan's experience of constructing the wall: "He pushed on it, and it did not budge. He stood on it, and it was as sturdy as any floor in his home. He was deeply moved by this" (*HK* 237).

Yet the physical stability of the wall cannot prevent its eventual disintegration: because Alan had not only failed to submit building plans and to apply for a permit, he "hadn't built the wall to the town's specifications, hadn't worked with a licensed contractor, and so the wall had to be destroyed" (*HK* 238). To make matters worse, he even has to pay to have his wall ruined. Alan is thus anything but "king of his castle": bureaucracy has fully undermined the privacy, sovereignty and independence that homeownership ideally encompasses. Eggers explained in our interview:

> Alan built a simple stone wall in his yard, and nothing could be more humble and yet more important to him. He conceived it, built it, and he could stand back and look upon this small but sturdy accomplishment. But it's torn down before his eyes, victimized by ludicrous and overzealous regulations and rules. To Alan this is a profound allegory for the state of the US, where building and dreaming had to some extent ceased, and had been replaced by a crippling sense of caution and self-doubt. (Email Interview)

There is a bitter incongruity between Alan's inability to build a simple wall in his own garden and Yousef's father being able to build a fortress on a mountaintop. As if to reclaim some of the power that has been taken from him—through the disgraceful wall incident, the demoralizing prospect of losing his home as well as the decline of his career—Alan responds in two distinct ways, one constructive and the other (nearly) destructive. First, Alan ends up helping some residents

in the village build a wall, a clear act of defiance after the failure of this endeavor back home. Yet in a darker turn of events, Alan almost shoots a shepherd boy during a hunting trip, hazily mistaking him for a wolf. Before the near-fatal shot, Alan feels a dangerous sense of certainty about what was going to happen:

> … he was sure he would pull the trigger that would send the bullet through the heart of the wolf. He was so sure that he felt a wonderful calm …. To shoot a wolf in the mountains of Saudi Arabia will be something. The man who pulls the trigger will have done something. (*HK* 260)

Later on, trying to process what happened, Alan realizes that "[b]ecause the efforts he'd made toward creating something like a legacy had failed, he had almost done this" (*HK* 262). The frustrated ambition to build—a permanent home, a career, or even a simple wall—has pushed Alan into dangerous territory.

All throughout *A Hologram for the King*, there is thus a marked absence of home. In its place, we find a landscape of anti-homes: a perfectly staged, commodified house; the 'placeless' Hilton hotel and the sterile plastic tent where Alan and his crew prepare their presentation for the King; the unfinished architectural wasteland in the desert, and KAEC's buildings of strangely dislocated aesthetic styles. The built environment that Eggers constructs is devoid of domesticity and permanence—a fitting setting for a story deeply rooted in an age of socio-economic instability and global uncertainty.

2.4 Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

The critical appraisal and general reception of Cormac McCarthy's tenth novel, *The Road* (2006), was overwhelmingly positive. The multitude of accolades that it received foreground its popularity amongst a mainstream audience as much as the literary elite, ranging from being selected for Oprah's Book Club to winning the prestigious Pulitzer Prize. McCarthy tells a quintessentially dystopian story that traces a father and son's harrowing journey across a ruined world in the aftermath of a mysterious calamity. Both nature and mankind are unrecognizable

in this post-apocalyptic hellscape: the earth is now covered in ash and dust, "[b]arren, silent, godless" (*TR* 4) and most of the few survivors have degraded into cannibals ("who would eat your children in front of your eyes" (*TR* 181)). What exactly happened to cause such total annihilation remains noticeably unsaid throughout the narrative. As Inger-Anne Søfting points out, this unspecificity regarding the nature of the calamity sets *The Road* apart from conventional dystopian novels, which usually have a didactic function by drawing readers' attention to potential roots of apocalyptic decline. "In *The Road* we cannot blame global warming, political despotism, chemical warfare or any other easily identifiable factor", writes Søfting. "Since the situation has no clear cause there is no one and nothing to blame for it, and also nothing to be done about it" (708). The disconcerting absence of information about the apocalyptic event "gives the text a universal quality and contributes to its atmosphere of timelessness and placelessness" (708), Søfting rightly notes. What we do learn, however, is that "[t]he clocks stopped at 1:17" and that there was a "long shear of light and then a series of low concussions" (*TR* 52). Based on this sparse but evocative description, critics often tend to interpret the calamity as a nuclear disaster, yet it has been pointed out that the absence of radiation sickness problematizes this reading (Gray 39 and Cant 186). As already mentioned in the introduction, McCarthy himself, in a rare interview with talkshow host Oprah Winfrey, suggested that, whilst he likes to think the story is "just about the boy and the man on the road, … obviously you can draw conclusions about all sorts of things from reading the book, depending on your taste". He also acknowledged the significance that 9/11 has had in the interpretation of the apocalyptic event in the novel. "I think it is, maybe since 9/11, [that] people's emotions are more concerned about apocalyptic issues", McCarthy explained in the televised interview. "We're not used to that. … This country has been pretty lucky" ("Oprah"). In *After the Fall*, Richard Gray asserts that "[i]t is surely right to see *The Road* as a post-9/11 novel, not just in the obvious, literal sense, but to the extent that it takes the measure of that sense of crisis that has seemed to haunt the West, and the United States in particular, ever since the destruction of the World Trade Center" (39–40). The book indeed taps into the nation's anxious spirit of decline and instability in

the post 9/11 period, and it is perhaps precisely this historical relevance that has generated the novel's extraordinary success and unique impact on contemporary American culture.

Houses of Horror

With *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy has arguably crafted the most haunting landscape of ruins in recent American fiction. The reader is immersed in a charred gray wasteland, in which the "soft black talc blew through the streets like squid ink uncoiling along a sea floor" (*TR* 181). As the unnamed man and boy trudge on along "the long black road" (*TR* 60), McCarthy offers a multitude of evocative images that paint a distinct portrait of collapse and decline: there are the crashing sounds of trees falling down, waking them up at night (*TR* 97); and the "cluster of tall buildings vaguely askew" because "the iron armatures had softened in the heat" and where "[t]he melted window glass hung frozen down the walls like icing on a cake" (*TR* 272). McCarthy's depiction of domestic spaces in this inhospitable, post-apocalyptic environment deserves to be looked at in closer detail. Several critics have already noted the significance that the concept of home and its material manifestations have in McCarthy's oeuvre, most notably Jay Ellis, Terry Witek and James Corby.[57] According to Witek, the dwelling places in McCarthy novels are marked by a distinct sense of impermanence: any houses in these stories "are subject to McCarthy's wrecking ball" (25). While it is true that unstable and impermanent abodes have been a recurrent motif in McCarthy's work, *The Road* undoubtedly represents the deconstruction of home in its most absolute form. In the aftermath of the unnamed calamity, there is no more reassuring place of rest and homely stability

57 For more insights into the significance of home (and lack thereof) in Cormac McCarthy's novels, refer to Jay Ellis's *No Place for Home: Spatial Constraint and Character Flight in the Novels of Cormac McCarthy* (2006), Christopher J. Walsh's *In the Wake of the Sun: Navigating the Southern Works of Cormac McCarthy* (2009), James Corby's "Domestic Spaces in Unhomely Places: Oikos and Ethics in McCarthy's *The Road*" (2011), David J. Alworth's *Site Reading: Fiction, Art and Social Form* (2016), Inger-Anne Søfting's "Between Dystopia and Utopia: The Post-Apocalyptic Discourse of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*" (2013) and Kenneth Lincoln's *Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles* (2009). All of these texts have substantially informed my analysis of domestic spaces in *The Road*.

for the two wandering protagonists, who were forced to abandon their home long ago in search of safety. In their desperate pilgrimage southbound to reach the sea, the man and his son pass mostly the "wreckage of buildings strewn over the landscape" (*TR* 274), material remnants of a lost civilization and culture. The abandoned houses that they stumble upon on their journey are approached with caution and reluctance, especially from the boy, who repeatedly expresses his fear and apprehension of entering these dwellings, filled with unknown dangers. Yet the possibility of finding anything edible—questionable tins and jars, or rotting fruit overlooked by previous looters—lures them inside these domestic ruins again and again, despite the obvious risks. When the starving and exhausted pair comes across a grand antebellum mansion, with "white doric columns across the front" (*TR* 105) and windows "oddly intact" (*TR* 105), the father decides to ignore the boy's foreboding feeling and explore the house for potentially life-saving food and shelter. Whereas the outside of the house is relatively unspoilt compared with most dwellings in this post-apocalyptic world, the house's inside proves to be utterly rotten, literally and figuratively. The wallpaper is "waterstained and sagging" (*TR* 107) and the trash-filled kitchen smells of "mold and excrement" (*TR* 108); yet the dwelling morphs into a genuine house of horror when the father and son discover an underground room containing a cluster of naked men and women kept as food, partly amputated and giving off "an ungodly stench" (*TR* 110). This is McCarthy at his most gruesome and traumatizing: the underground cave of depravity concealed within this "tall and stately" (*TR* 105) mansion manifests his vision of the ethical abyss of mankind. Jay Ellis rightly recognizes that the scene brings to mind post-Vietnam 70s horror films: "In movies such as *Dawn of the Dead* and *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Last House on the Left*, the American domestic is the site not of refuge from lawless terror, but the site of lawless terror" (32). The conventional dichotomy of the house as safe haven and the outside world as threatening territory is reversed in this instance. As they flee from the house of horror, the man and boy find momentary refuge in the wilderness, lying immersed in leaves before finally embarking in the "dark woods" (*TR* 115) again. Ellis rightly concludes that in McCarthy's fiction, the house

"is not to be trusted" (32), and nowhere is this more manifest than in the disturbing passage in the plantation house.

The Bunker: An Ambiguous "tiny paradise"

Whereas the father and son's macabre discovery down in the cellar of the antebellum mansion marks the novel's darkest moment, another underground space—the bunker hidden in the yard of an abandoned house—operates as the site of the story's most uplifting episode (at least at first glance).[58] In an otherwise suffocatingly gray and desolate tale, the bunker scene indeed seems to provide "a touch of color" and "a note of hope" (170), as Kenneth Lincoln phrases it. Barely escaping starvation, the man and boy suddenly find themselves surrounded by the "richness of a vanished world" (*TR* 139):

> Crate upon crate of canned goods. Tomatoes, peaches, beans, apricots. Canned hams. Corned beef. Hundreds of gallons of water in ten gallon plastic jerry jugs. Paper towels, toilet paper, paper plates. Plastic trash-bags stuffed with blankets. (*TR* 138)

For the reader, this mid-section of the novel provides a palpable sense of relief after witnessing the father and son's relentless suffering along the road. For the brief interlude of a few days, the two characters get to indulge in gestures of domesticity that are altogether absent in their post-apocalyptic reality: they have supper by candlelight, and spend their evenings playing boardgames "swaddled in the new blankets" (*TR* 148), before succumbing to a deep sleep. A mobile little stove allows them to take hot baths and to wash their clothes in the adjacent house ("Warm at last" (*TR* 147), as the boy exclaims). They have long-overdue haircuts, and the man shaves his beard. And yet, despite the momentary pleasure that the father and son experience during these domestic

58 As one of the novel's most evocative passages, the bunker scene has received ample critical attention. Several perceptive critical readings have informed and inspired my own analysis of the bunker scene, including those by David J. Alworth (*Site Reading*), Kenneth Lincoln (*Cormac McCarthy: American Canticles*) and James Corby ("Domestic Spaces in Unhomely Places: Oikos and Ethics in McCarthy's The Road").

scenes, the father realizes that "some part of him wished they'd never found this refuge. Some part of him always wished it to be over" (*TR* 154). There are several explanations for the man's melancholic response to the discovery of the bunker. First of all, as the father and son get to dwell in "this tiny paradise" (*TR* 150), the father's loss of home is painfully amplified. By reminding the man of all the domestic joys and comforts that he used to have in pre-apocalyptic times, the absolute and irretrievable absence of these in his life since the catastrophe becomes all the more obvious. As such, the bunker essentially repeats, and thereby prolongs, the destruction of home that the man already endured all those years ago. Secondly, the father also realizes that, for the boy, who was born after the calamity, none of the things found in the underground shelter (such as Coca-Cola cans, a coffee grinder and a can opener), as well as the domestic behaviors that they perform there, have any personal meaning. This experience fails to trigger any sense of recognition or sentimental joy in the young boy, who has only ever known the wasteland that the Earth has become. As mesmerized as the boy is about these discoveries in the bunker (his innocent "Wow" when being served "Coffee. Ham. Biscuits" (*TR* 144) by his father is perhaps the most heart-wrenching instant in the bunker), the father also senses that the boy "had probably not fully committed himself to any of this. You could wake in the dark woods at any time" (*TR* 141). In fact, the son's first reaction when entering the bunker—"Why is this here?" and "Is it real?"—discloses his caution and skepticism concerning this unfamiliar and dreamlike world, which so clearly resonates with his father. Confronted with these wonders of an unknown past, the boy appears both disoriented and overwhelmed. On several occasions, he is described as silently watching his father who effortlessly re-enacts these common acts of domesticity, and the latter notices that his son "looked drugged" (*TR* 145) and "he seemed lost" (*TR* 146). David J. Alworth writes in his incisive analysis of the scene in *Site Readings* (2016): "Even as the bunker facilitates their intimacy, then, it heightens their alterity by spatializing asymmetrical experiences of time travel" (150). Indeed, a rift between father and son seems to open up in this alternative reality in the underground shelter. The father "understood for the first time that to the boy he was himself an alien. A being from a planet that no

longer existed" (Alworth 153). Yet, whereas the father tries to explicate this unfamiliar world to the boy to the best of his abilities ("You put the butter on your biscuits. Like this" (*TR* 145)), he comes to the devastating realization that "he could not enkindle in the heart of the child what was ashes in his own" (*TR* 154). The episode in the bunker is thus in fact doubly destructive for the father: not only does it cement the permanent absence of home in their postapocalyptic present, it also unsettles the vital bond between him and his son, highlighting the unbridgeable differences in their vision and understanding of the world.

Fading Images of Home

The fact that McCarthy chose to use, of all places, a bunker as the site producing the only domestic interlude in the story confirms Terry Witek's theory about the *impermanent* quality of domestic spaces in McCarthy's fiction. Indeed, the bunker represents a finite, temporary home, for the father-son duo specifically, but also more generally, as a site designed for the short-term survival in a doomsday scenario. The fallout shelter allows the man and boy to "inhabit the fantasy of a preapocalyptic ordinary" (150) as Alworth phrases it, but they are both painfully aware that "this tiny paradise" (*TR* 150) has a clear expiration date for them. As it is only a matter of time until "the bad guys" (*TR* 92) would discover the now uncovered and visible bunker door, the father and son understand that their time in the underground domus cannot last. The bunker can only foster a brief illusion of home, a dreamlike taste of domesticity which is, in the end, unsustainable in a dystopian world where constant movement is a prerequisite for survival. Yet the bunker is also, intrinsically, not fit to provide a permanent dwelling to its inhabitants: the supplies can inevitably only last for a limited amount of time, and the lack of fresh air and light prevents any long-term accommodation in this claustrophobic and manifestly unhomely site.

The bunker is not the only abode that undergirds the impermanence of home in *The Road*. Early on in the novel, the father is taken aback to find his childhood home amongst the architectural debris along the road. With its "peeling wooden clapboards" (*TR* 25), "rotted screening from the back porch" (*TR* 25) and "dead lilac" (*TR* 26) in the yard,

the house he grew up in has deteriorated into a domestic ruin. Yet as they wander through the empty and lifeless rooms, the boy "[w]atched shapes claiming [his father] he could not see" (*TR* 26). With "[a]ll much as he'd remembered it" (*TR* 26), the father suddenly finds himself overcome with specific memories of home: Christmas celebrations, doing homework with his sisters, the place in his room where his bed used to stand. Laura Gruber Godfrey writes: "Although what is now visible at his old homesite … tells none of these old childhood stories, the father is able to weave together the old geography out of the ruins" (168). The imaginative reconstruction of the home-space that the father here enacts brings to mind Gaston Bachelard's writing in *The Poetics of Space* (1958): "[W]e are very surprised, when we return to the old house, after an odyssey of many years, to find that the most delicate gestures, the earliest gestures suddenly come alive, are still faultless" (15). Bachelard describes the childhood home as "the human being's first world" (7), which "is physically inscribed in us" (14). Memories of these past dwelling places "remain in us for all time" (6) and can be relived in our daydreams. He argues that "when memories of other places we have lived in come back to us, we travel to the land of Motionless Childhood, motionless the way all Immemorial things are" (5–6). Bachelard thus posits that memories of our past home are "faultless" and immemorial, permanently housed in our psyche. McCarthy, however, takes a rather different approach. Throughout the novel, he emphasizes the volatile nature of memory itself. The imaginative space of home—our memory of home—is prone to the same kind of erosion as the material structure of home. The more one conjures up specific memories, the hazier these memories become, gradually changing shape and eventually taking on a completely new form altogether. McCarthy writes: "He thought each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins. As in a party game. Say the word and pass it on. So be sparing. What you alter in the remembering has yet a reality, known or not" (*TR* 131). Like a simulacrum, our memories end up losing their vital connection with the original thing remembered, with the reality of our past. Each time the man dives into memories of his past—of his family home, of his wife crossing their lawn in the early morning, of "the perfect day of his childhood" (*TR* 13) with his uncle—he also loses a fraction of them,

until they will eventually have vanished completely. "He thought if he lived long enough the world at last would all be lost. Like the dying world the newly blind inhabit, all of it slowly fading from memory" (*TR* 18). In *The Road*, McCarthy thus portrays the imaginative space of home as just as fragile and impermanent, just as likely to disintegrate and vanish, as the physical dwelling places that we inhabit.

2.5 Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven*

Canadian author Emily St. John Mandel's *The Lola Quartet* (2012), published in the aftermath of the Great Recession, marked her first venture into crisis territory. In this literary thriller set in a time of economic collapse, a bankrupt and disgraced journalist returns to his hometown in Florida to sell foreclosed houses. Yet Mandel imagines catastrophe on a much wider scale in her critically acclaimed fourth novel, *Station Eleven* (2014). Unlike Cormac McCarthy, Mandel does not leave the fatal calamity unspecified: in her postapocalyptic tale, civilization is "brutally interrupted" (200) when a flu virus eradicates 99% of the world's population. To readers of her novel post-2020, her vision of a paralyzing pandemic now appears eerily prophetic, although the scale of the calamity described on the pages of *Station Eleven* luckily exceeds the (foreseeable) consequences of the Covid-19 outbreak. Although Mandel's representation of the influenza disaster—a terrifying swine-flu mutation that leads to global annihilation—may be scientifically flawed, her novel offers a haunting and thought-provoking exploration of life in the aftermath of crisis. As one of the characters points out early on in the story, "[y]ou never know when something disastrous might happen" (*SE* 25)—an awareness all too present in our current "Age of Uncertainty" (Bauman, *Liquid Times* 94), in which nuclear warfare, terrorist attacks, ecological disaster and, as most recently revealed, new virus outbreaks, are posing a real and imminent threat to the global population. The exact cause of the apocalypse is thus arguably insignificant for the novel's central concern, which lies in the meditation on the precarity of life, and all its wonders, in the face of crisis.

The plot follows a handful of central characters throughout time, seamlessly jumping from the world in the historic present to a post-

pandemic future, set twenty years after the collapse. In the aftermath of the so-called Georgia Flu, a conglomeration of musicians and actors that calls itself the Travelling Symphony wanders from settlement to settlement in the Michigan area to perform concerts and Shakespearean plays. The group of twenty-odd artists travels across the postapocalyptic wasteland, guided by their belief that "survival is insufficient", a Star Trek quote proclaimed loudly on the first of their three caravans. In the midst of catastrophe, art and creativity are revealed to hold special importance: "[Art] can remind us of what it means to be human, or at the very least it can remind us of civilization", Mandel told me in our interview. "As a species, we'll do things like put on plays in war zones and play musical instruments in refugee camps, and I don't think those are frivolous acts" (Email Interview).

The resilient yearning to find beauty and inspiration in a world scarred by disaster is a dominant theme in *Station Eleven*, and it is precisely this hopeful undertone that sets Mandel's novel decidedly apart from other postapocalyptic books like Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*.[59] Yet, despite this underlying optimistic message, *Station Eleven* also portrays a world unmistakably altered by catastrophe: "*There was a new heaven and a new earth*" (*SE* 308, italics in original), Mandel writes. The material spaces—domestic and otherwise—that structure the novel here deserve special attention, as they register the disruptive and transformative effect of the calamity, the "divide between a *before* and an *after*" (*SE* 20, italics in original).

Redefined Spaces in a Post-Crisis World: Morbid Houses

In Mandel's post-calamity world, traditional dwellings lose their domestic qualities almost entirely. This becomes most starkly obvious in the

59 In my interview with Mandel, she addressed the significance of McCarthy's towering work for post-apocalyptic fiction writers: "It seems to me that the book that catapulted post-apocalyptic stories from the genre world into mainstream literature was Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*. That book was exciting for literary writers. It was almost as if it gave permission to a generation of literary writers to work in a territory that had previously been reserved for genre fiction" (Email Interview).

scenes focusing on Jeevan, the paparazzo-turned-paramedic, who is in Toronto when the virus hits. As the severity of the disaster starts to dawn on him, Jeevan (armed with seven packed shopping carts) rushes to the apartment building of his brother Frank, a Reuters journalist who is in a wheelchair due to a spinal cord injury from a gunshot wound in Afghanistan. At the beginning, even though they are "stunned with horror" (*SE* 193) watching the world collapse on the news, the experience of being secluded brings back fond memories of a treehouse the brothers used to have in their childhood. While the "fabric was unravelling" (*SE* 239) in the outside world, the brothers are "at least momentarily secure" (*SE* 193); the apartment offers them a vital refuge, however temporary. Yet despite the "inexplicable moments of peace" (*SE* 179), the reader also cannot help but register the claustrophobic quality of this place: with the air ducts taped shut and the front door blocked with a dresser to protect them from attempted break ins by desperate outsiders, not to mention the missing electricity and tap water after a while, the apartment seems less like a dwelling place and more like a self-imposed cage for the two brothers, a prison from which they dare not escape. With Frank's decision that he will not (most likely because he physically *cannot*) face the brave new world awaiting them outside this building, his own home tragically moves from being his prison to becoming his grave. Mandel describes another domestic grave in her novel: as they are exploring a miraculously untouched dwelling place, Kirsten and August from the Travelling Symphony come across the bodies of a little boy and his parents lying in their beds. As they wander through the kid's room, where a framed photograph of the family still "beaming and resplendent with life" (*SE* 149) is hanging on the wall, one is inevitably led to imagine the family's gruesome last days, the suffering and the certainty of death awaiting them within the confines of their own home. The flu pandemic thus essentially transforms the house into a mausoleum, a permanent home for the dead rather than the living.

"Beauty in the decrepitude"

Twenty years following the collapse, much of the built environment is described as falling to pieces: as they travel through their delineated ter-

ritory, the Travelling Symphony is often startled by the "wreckage and disarray" (*SE* 129) that has emerged. Kirsten understands that "there isn't much time left, … all the roofs are collapsing now and soon none of the old buildings will be safe" (*SE* 130). What is striking is that Mandel's descriptions of disintegrating dwelling places and other architectural structures in this postapocalyptic world—unlike those in McCarthy's *The Road*—evince a distinctive *ruin aesthetic* reminiscent of the romantic vision of the ruin as "derelict architecture in the process of being reclaimed by animals and vegetation" (Apel 75). In his essay "The Ruin" (1911), sociologist Georg Simmel most eloquently articulates this conceptualization of the ruin, as being defined by an "antagonism … between nature and matter" (qtd. in Dillon 23). "Architecture is the only art in which the great struggle between the will of the spirit and the necessity of nature issues into real peace, in which the soul in its upward striving and nature in its gravity are held in balance" (qtd. in Dillon 13). It is this sense of equilibrium that explains the "metaphysical-aesthetic charm of the ruin" (qtd. in Dillon 23). There seems to be little doubt, however, that every ruin will inevitably succumb to the "brute, downward-dragging, corroding, crumbling power" (qtd. in Dillon 13) of nature. Throughout her novel, Mandel describes the resilience of nature, which finds a way to break through the collapse, thus allowing these sites of ruination to be taken over by living, growing organisms. In a "burnt-out resort town", which looked like "a meadow with black ruins standing", "[a] sea of pink flowers had risen between the shards of buildings" (*SE* 127). The Symphony could see "deer grazing on overgrown boulevards and rabbits burrowing in ashy shadows, and seagulls watching from lampposts" (*SE* 127). Elsewhere in the postapocalyptic wasteland, there are "the roots of maple trees disrupting the sidewalks" (*SE* 284) and "mossy front porches turned brilliant green" (*SE* 296). Upon closer look, then, "[t]here was beauty in the decrepitude" (*SE* 296), in this landscape of ruins left behind in the wake of the global collapse. By allowing nature to appropriate and transform the derelict structures of the old world, Mandel hints at a possibility of redemption, the notion that our world will continue, even if humanity "would simply flicker out" (*SE* 148): "So many species had appeared and later vanished from this earth; what was one more?" (*SE* 148).

Remembering, Mourning and Yearning for a Lost Home

With the world unmistakably altered by the pandemic and the collapse of seemingly stable structures and systems upholding civilization, the characters in the novel find themselves confronted with an overwhelming sense of loss. In reaction to this confusing new status quo, numerous characters appear to explore their own understanding of home, and to look for gestures and mementos of domesticity that can so easily be forgotten. Clark decides to turn the Skymiles Lounge at the airport into a Museum of Civilization: iPhones, red stiletto heels, a snow globe and other artifacts of the vanished world are neatly presented in display cases, preserved for posterity. Clark "found himself moved by every object he saw there" (*SE* 255), these strangely beautiful items that seemed so vital in a past life but that have completely lost their utility in this new reality. In the years and decades following the collapse, people come to the museum to marvel at and mourn for these emblems of their lost home. A similar nostalgic impulse can be discerned in Kirsten and August's scavenger hunts through abandoned houses, where they not only look for food and useful objects to take back to their group, but also for specific items that remind them of home—"always looking for the former world, before all the traces of the former world are gone" (*SE* 130). For Kirsten, this means looking for old tabloid newspapers, specifically any clippings about the actor Arthur Leander, who died on stage in a play that Kirsten performed in as an eight-year-old child, the night that the virus paralyzed Toronto. "There were countless things about the pre-collapse world Kirsten couldn't remember (....) but she did remember Arthur Leander" (*SE* 40), and especially the fact that he gave Kirsten her beloved *Dr. Eleven* comic. Arthur thus represents one of the very few sharp images of home for Kirsten, whose memories of the world prior to the collapse are upsettingly hazy and uncertain. As for August, he is drawn to televisions, remote controls and especially TV guides, as these have a special significance for him:

> As a boy he'd been quiet and a little shy, obsessed with classical music; he'd had no interest in sports and had never been especially adept at getting along with people, which meant long hours home alone after school in interchangeable U.S. Army-base houses while his brothers played baseball and made new friends. One nice thing about television shows was that they were everywhere, identical programming whether your parents had been posted to Maryland or California or Texas. He'd spent an enormous amount of time before the collapse watching television …. (*SE* 39)

The TV guides thus not only catapult August back to his childhood, they trigger a sense of constancy, familiarity and belonging in him. With a family repetitively on the move and an innate difficulty to fit in, the television shows were the only stable and reliable part of his childhood. The act of flipping through the TV guides that list all his favorite shows thus pulls August into an imaginative space of home.

In both Clark's museum and Kirsten and August's quests for "clues about the lost world" (*SE* 130), there are ambivalent impulses at play: on the one hand, there is a desperate attempt to sanctify and hold on to these items that bring back the taste of home; and on the other hand, there is the mournful realization that one needs to let go, that all of these material symbols are merely reminders of the permanent absence of home. This double-edged sensitivity is perhaps best expressed in the sci-fi *Dr. Eleven* comic, which runs through the entire narrative like a red thread. In one panel, the protagonist Dr. Eleven, who lives on a space station in exile from his home occupied by hostile forces, stands overlooking "an indigo sea at twilight" (*SE* 42), with the text underneath proclaiming: "*I stood looking over my damaged home and tried to forget the sweetness of life on Earth*" (*SE* 42, italics in original). Like Dr. Eleven, then, the characters in the novel struggle to reconcile this nostalgic longing for home with the lingering awareness that this home is irrevocably lost. In our interview, Mandel confirms that she aimed to "use the comic books as a kind of amplification device, to amplify that sense of alienation that the characters feel" (Email Interview).

The dwelling places in Emily St. John Mandel's post-calamity North America register the transformative impact that a crisis inherently represents. Houses turn into uncanny spaces of confinement and decline,

and nature proclaims its superiority over the fragile man-built environment. As a crisis-narrative, *Station Eleven* thus forces the reader to consider the frailty of the places we call home, and to interrogate what dwelling in the "Age of Uncertainty" (Bauman, *Liquid Times* 94) consists of.

The Home in Ruins

This chapter has focused on how writers in the present tumultuous era have explored a domestic iconography to give voice to an anxious feeling of instability. The material space of home is shown to be a fragile and vulnerable site, built on shaky foundations; in a time of crisis, the construct of home, both physical and metaphysical, risks to come undone. In *Sunset Park*, Paul Auster questions the divide between public and private space by using both foreclosed properties and an illegally occupied house as key settings in the story. His novel targets the American dream of homeownership, exposing its precarious meaning in time of socio-economic decline. In Richard Ford's two post-9/11 novels featuring Frank Bascombe, the house is unsettled or destroyed by a number of agents, ranging from environmental calamity and real-estate commodification to personal trauma. This physical instability of the built environment is here emblematic of a much more systemic sense of decline in American society of the twenty-first century. The protagonist in Dave Eggers's *A Hologram for the King* hovers in an architectural no-man's land, a landscape of postmodern non-places that heightens the sense of disorientation that looms large in the novel as a whole. In this time of economic hardship and globalized flux, home appears to be increasingly difficult to locate. In *The Road*, Cormac McCarthy places his father-son duo in a disconcertingly unhomely environment. In the all-pervading darkness of McCarthy's new world order, domestic spaces can offer no lasting relief, no permanent shelter. Finally, the built environment in Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven* records the dramatic shift from pre- to post-calamity. With the world as we know it abruptly ruined, the nostalgic impulse to preserve the material traces and memories of home is counterweighed with the realization that this home is irrevocably gone. All five authors have thus essentially

destabilized our understanding of home, in both its material manifestation and as an imaginative construct. Their narratives centered around unstable dwellings drive home the fact that, as German artist Anselm Kiefer phrased it, "we all know that one day everything will collapse" (qtd. in Hell and Schönle 3). The next chapter takes this absence of home as its conceptual starting point, to investigate how ideas of homelessness, mobility and the journey become driving forces in these novels.

Chapter 3
Tangled Trajectories: Tales of (Im)mobility in the "Age of Uncertainty"

An American Story of Movement (Away from and Towards Home)

The significance of what Pierson memorably called the "M-Factor" (288)—movement, migration and mobility—in American history and consciousness has already been extensively discussed in the opening chapter of this book. There is indeed little doubt about the fact that mobility has deeply shaped the geo-political development and the identity of a nation that emerged out of a distinct pioneering spirit, a restlessness that appears to be inscribed in the American DNA. The westward movement towards an ever-progressing Frontier led to a collective vision of movement as a positive, life-giving force, that continued to influence the American psyche long after the Frontier was proclaimed closed. Being physically mobile also came to be viewed as a crucial prerequisite to achieve upward social mobility and the all-too yearned for American Dream. Over time, a veritable mythology of mobility developed that has remained a central tenet in the nation's self-image.

It has been widely agreed upon that the storytelling tradition in the United States has echoed and deepened the nation's sustained fascination with mobility and migration.[60] Janis P. Stout, for instance, argues that "from its beginnings, the American literary tradition has been characterized to a remarkable and peculiar degree, by narratives and images of journeys" (qtd. in Freese, *Journey* 18). In his comprehensive opening chapter in *The Journey of Life in American Life and Literature* (2015), Peter Freese maintains that the journey motif fulfills one specific function in narratives, namely to "spatialize inner developments" (10): "[J]ourneys", he writes, "are concrete projections of interior changes"

60 Refer back to Chapter 1 for more details on the importance of the mobility motif in American cultural history.

(53). The most iconic American journey narratives—*Huckleberry Finn* (1884) or *Moby Dick* (1851) being perhaps the most obvious examples—indeed show mobility as the key for the protagonist's growth, the means of progressing from innocence to experience.

Although these narratives are suffused with movement, they are always intricately connected to the notion of home. Indeed, mobility-infused storytelling—the tales of adventure, quest, escape and pilgrimage that make up much of American literary production—overwhelmingly relies on the idea of home as the "centrifugal and centripetal force" (Papastergadis 2) within the narrative. Shelley Mallet explains that the construct of home acts as both a place of origin and destination: "[H]ome, be it defined as a dwelling, a homeland, or even a constellation of relationships, is represented as a spatial and relational realm from which people venture into the world and to which they generally hope to return" (77). As "the sacred place from which everything else is mapped" (Papastergadis 2), home thus becomes a pivotal marker in journey narratives, a compass that guides the characters' trajectories.

Disoriented Movement

What happens, then, when stories no longer depict home—both in its physical manifestation and as a metaphorical construct—as this secure point of origin and destination? When home, as a "stable, physical centre of one's universe—a safe and still place to leave and return to" (Rapport and Dawson 6) becomes difficult or impossible to locate? The previous chapter has explored recent texts by Auster, Ford, Eggers, McCarthy and Mandel in which home becomes destabilized, reflecting the context of national upheaval in contemporary America. I argued that the socio-economic, political and ecological uncertainty that has marked these first years of the twenty-first century has essentially undermined the collective faith in ideas of permanence and stability, a shift that these authors have expressed through the image of disintegrating, unsafe or entirely absent homes. In this third chapter, I aim to analyze how this uncertainty of home allows for mobility to emerge as a favored motif in these novels to represent the pronounced sense of *disorientation* felt in times of crisis. When there is no longer a home

that can offer a clear sense of orientation—as the reliable place of origin or the reassuring point of arrival—our understanding of what it means to be 'on the move' also evolves. Nowhere is this more palpable than in narratives written in times of profound upheaval. In her study of homeless transients during the Great Depression, Joan Crouse rightly argues that "[i]n times of economic scarcity, the concepts of pioneer and adventurer are luxuries that we cannot afford" (2), and indeed, the same can be said about moments of crisis more broadly. Mobility in troubled times takes on an undeniably different hue: one of despair and survival, escape and confusion. The romanticized conceptualization of mobility—the journey as a trajectory of growth and the traveler as a figure representing adventure and progress—here becomes untenable.

That the notion of mobility takes on a central role in phases of crisis should nevertheless be evident: the involuntary migration resulting from socio-economic hardship, systemic discrimination, ecological catastrophe or warfare turns the spotlight on physical mobility for obvious reasons. And indeed, some of the greatest books produced in moments of profound national upheaval—such as Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) or John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939)—are centered on characters who are on the move due to tragic exterior circumstances. Writing about post-Great Depression culture, Julia Leyda dubbed the term "negative mobility" to refer to the mass geographic migration "motivated by desperation: eviction, starvation and unemployment" (16). Leyda identifies the crash of 1929 as the trigger of a notable ideological shift in the national imagination regarding the concept of mobility. "The Depression forced Americans in subsequent decades to rethink the assumption that geographic mobility was the key to the class mobility and private security they desired", Leyda explains. "Americans realized that mobility—of capital and of labor—could have its disadvantages—instability, vulnerability …" (16). In the chapter entitled "Reading White Trash", Leyda offers an illuminating analysis of Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) and Le Sueur's *The Girl* (1939/1978), arguing that in both novels the representation of mobility is indicative of the socio-economic decline of Depression-era America. She explains that despite their attempts at geographic movement in both plots, the "white trash characters" (Leyda 36) in these

novels find themselves socially immobilized, unable to move upward: "The class status they are born into and the Depression economy in which they must survive ensure that they will be stuck, if not where they started out, then somewhere comparable or worse"(Leyda 58).

The mobility described in the contemporary novels I discuss in this book carries clear echoes of the negative mobility Julia Leyda identified in these 1930s cultural productions. This chapter thus uses Leyda's writings on negative mobility in Great Depression novels as a basis to explore in what way Auster, Ford, Eggers, McCarthy and Mandel employ the trope of mobility to capture the experience of living in the present period of profound change and uncertainty. Lacking the comfort and security of a stable sense of home, the characters in the novels by these five contemporary authors find themselves in a state of flux—be it literally or metaphorically. Times of upheaval thus cause the concept of mobility to be reconceptualized and reconfigured in fundamental ways; shifting away from being a symbol of "nation-building progress" (Leyda 12), mobility here becomes a symbol of disorientation—a lens through which to capture the anxiety felt in uncertain times.

3.1 Paul Auster's *Sunset Park*

Negatively Mobile: Homelessness in the Florida "nowhereland" and Beyond

The opening pages of Auster's *Sunset Park* (2010) immediately confront the reader with the negative mobility of the post-credit crunch era. As the novel's protagonist, Miles Heller, roams through foreclosed houses with his trashing-out crew, one is struck by the absence of the evicted, the countless victims of the housing crisis who have been forced into motion, "who have all fled in haste, in shame, in confusion" (*SP* 3). Auster obliquely alludes to the mobility of the displaced by shifting his focus on the haunting stillness of the shells that once housed these families, further immobilized and turned into *memento mori* by Miles's photographs. It appears as if the negative mobility of the evicted can only be captured through stills, the frozen images of objects left behind in the frenzied motion that preceded the eviction. The notable absence of the

mobile subject on these pages, then, suggests that the shameful mass displacement of the evicted in recent years is an almost ungraspable phenomenon. It is an appalling fact that in one of the most developed countries in the world, millions face the trauma of eviction every year;[61] and as Auster's deliberate omission of the displaced implies, it is a fact that too often remains invisible in society. This is not the first time that Auster comments on the fate of America's poor. In his essay "Reflections on a Cardboard Box" from 1999, Auster dwells on the disgraceful issue of homelessness in contemporary America. "These are difficult days for the poor", Auster writes. "We have entered a period of enormous prosperity, but as we rush down the highway of larger and larger profits, we forget that untold numbers of people are falling by the wayside" (Auster, "Reflections" 502). Auster also points out how quickly such a fall from grace can occur, to each and every one of us.

> Most of us are only one disaster away from genuine hardship. A series of disasters can ruin us. There are men and women wandering the streets of New York who were once in positions of apparent safety. They have college degrees. They held responsible jobs and supported their families. Now they have fallen on hard times, and who are we to think that such things couldn't happen to us? ("Reflections" 503)

By choosing to leave the displaced faceless and nameless on these opening pages of *Sunset Park*, Auster drives home the fact that every person could be forced into negative mobility—whether due to misguided personal decisions, or the misfortune of exterior circumstances. The anonymity of the evicted invites the reader to imagine the paths that could lead all of us into a similar situation.

Whereas Auster consciously omits the displaced Americans of the housing crisis, he nevertheless chooses a protagonist who is uprooted and directionless in other ways. Miles Heller is introduced to the reader as a lost soul restlessly on the move, the somewhat reluctant and suffer-

61 Refer to Matthew Desmond's remarkable book *Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City* (2016) for glimpses into the harrowing experience of eviction and an astute analysis of the contemporary housing crisis in the United States.

ing homo viator in the story. While "[o]ver the past seven-plus years he has settled in at any number of new addresses" (*SP* 30), it never takes long for him to "feel the need to move on again" (*SP* 6). The reason for his compulsive running and his apparent inability to find "an exit from the limbo that has encircled him for the past seven years" (*SP* 17) remains unspecified until much later in the novel. When Miles's trauma is finally disclosed, it becomes apparent that his relentless motion is indeed anything but Kerouacian in nature. Rather, it seems that the guilt he has felt since the accident that cost Bobby's life propelled him into perpetual movement, preventing him from standing still and thus dealing with his loss. As such, Miles could be viewed as a *negatively mobile* subject, although the despair that causes his mobility is not triggered by socio-economic conditions (as it is for the displaced Florida residents), but emotional and psychological distress. Auster's descriptions of Miles trashing out the foreclosed houses in "the hot nowhereland" (*SP* 15) of Florida show a young man simply 'going through the motions', desperately trying to remain afloat and to have "no longings or hopes, to live in the here and now and be satisfied with it" (*SP* 6). When Miles is forced to put an end to his self-imposed exile from his family and his hometown New York City because of his risky relationship with underaged Pilar, it is revealing that he finds a temporary respite with a set of people who feel, in one way or another, just as lost as he does. Indeed, the Sunset Park Four—Bing, Alice, Ellen and Miles—all display an anxious restlessness, that keeps them from achieving any sense of genuine arrival. It should be noted that the rootlessness of the four twenty-somethings is not entirely portrayed as negative, however. The act of squatting in an abandoned house allows them to steer clear of the weight of homeownership and to "live free and uncommitted", as Henry David Thoreau famously praised it in *Walden* (84). Yet it appears that, in the tragic finale, as the group is evicted from their makeshift home in Sunset Park and Miles flees from the police after assaulting an officer, Miles has a moment of profound epiphany concerning his personal and a collective experience of dislocation: "they are all homeless now … Alice and Bing are homeless, he is homeless, the people in Florida who lived in the houses he trashed out are homeless" (*SP* 305). Miles's contemplation of the sense of homelessness that ails not only him and

his friends but America more generally, brings to mind Martin Heidegger's statement about the fate of modern man in his "Letter on Humanism": "Homelessness is coming to be the destiny of the world" (qtd. in Rapport and Dawson 27). By ending the novel with a desperate and confused Miles, propelled into directionless motion yet again, looking at the New York skyline and thinking about "the missing buildings, the collapsed and burning buildings that no longer exist", Auster evokes a broader sense of alienation, an inability to find peace and stillness in a world of utter chaos.

Happy Days? Socio-Economic and Emotional Immobility

Auster's decision to weave in Samuel Beckett's play *Happy Days* (1961) into the plot of *Sunset Park* deserves closer attention. Although there are only a few succinct references to Beckett's critically acclaimed sixth play, I would argue that the highly allegorical text serves an important function in the novel as a whole. Miles's mother, Mary-Lee Swann, an emotionally turbulent actress who abandoned Miles and his father Morris when Miles was only a baby, is back in New York City to play Winnie, the challenging lead role in *Happy Days*. Although she remained a recurring, if elusive, figure in much of her son's life, Mary-Lee also had not seen or heard from Miles during his seven years of self-imposed exile. As Miles returns to his hometown for the Sunset Park living experiment, it is in fact Beckett's play that helps the fragmented family to reconnect. Both Miles and Morris watch Mary-Lee's impressive performance of the aging and rambling woman, who is incongruously buried up to her waist in a mound of earth in the first act, and up to her neck in the second act. It is striking that the *immobility* that lies at the heart of the play in fact echoes the situation that many of the novel's characters find themselves in. Winnie finds herself entrapped, slowly but surely engulfed by the earth—"an allegory of the human condition" (Taubman), as a *New York Times* review of the first production in 1961 described it. This sense of inescapable entombment, of being unable to move and thus progress, is felt, in one way or another, by virtually all

of the characters in Auster's novel. The stagnation that the individuals experience can be *economic* or *emotional* in nature.

The economic immobility is palpable in several characters throughout the plot. Ellen, Bing, Alice and Miles all agreed to commit to the illegal occupation of the abandoned house in Sunset Park because they were unable to withstand and felt suffocated by the financial pressures of modern American life. PhD student Alice could no longer afford her rent-controlled sublet in Morningside Heights; Bing struggled to make ends meet now that "the lease on the storefront that housed the Hospital for Broken Things was about to expire, and his landlord was demanding a twenty percent rent increase" (*SP* 79). As a part-time realtor, Ellen seems to have fully grasped the ludicrous housing situation in the city, and it is in fact her who first tells Bing about the deserted house in Sunset Park. As for Miles, he had been living hands to mouth for years, unwilling to ask for financial support from his parents, and his return to pricey NYC has left him more "worried about money" (*SP* 240) than ever before. For all of the twenty-something characters in the story, upward mobility appears to be definitively out of reach; an ambition that Americans may have been able to fulfill in the past but that is no longer possible to realize in this time of economic hardship and ever-growing living costs. Nor is this serious financial pressure felt solely by the younger generation: Mary-Lee's former and current husbands, Morris Heller and Simon Korngold, both struggle to keep their business afloat (publishing and independent film-making, respectively) in the brutal economic climate of the late aughts. Yet the play's stark image of an individual gradually becoming engulfed also carries echoes that exceed the boundaries of Auster's plot: indeed, one cannot help but read Beckett's portrayal of the helpless and immobilized woman, drowning in a mound of earth, as symbolic of the suffocating debts that forced so many Americans into foreclosure following the subprime market collapse. In fact, Winnie's predicament—her frustrating immobility, her inability to progress—may be indicative of the state of millennial America more generally. For Mary-Ann, Winnie seems to be trapped in "a world without darkness, a world of hot unending light, a sort of purgatory, perhaps, a post-human wilderness of ever-diminishing possibilities, ever-diminishing movement" (*SP* 188). The socio-economic

stagnation or decline that have marked the post-credit crunch period are thus astutely reflected in Beckett's surreal theatrical vision.

The immobility that Winnie experiences on a physical level could also be juxtaposed with the emotional and psychological entrapment of two key characters in Auster's novel. Sunset Park resident Ellen Brice is described as "traveling deeper and deeper into the netherworld of her own nothingness" (*SP* 215). It doesn't take Bing long to register "the sense of loneliness that enveloped her", wondering "if she wasn't mired in some sort of depression, living out her days in an underground room at the Hotel Melancholia" (*SP* 79). Indeed, she "projected an aura of anxiety and defeat" (*SP* 79), and appears to be powerless vis-a-vis the heavy emotional burden of her depression—psychologically as immobilizing as Winnie's encroaching mound of earth. As for Miles, he appears to be fully enveloped by his sense of guilt about his stepbrother's death. After hearing his son's confession about the fateful accident all those years ago, Morris can finally make sense of Miles's "savage withdrawal into himself, the escape from his own life, the punishing blue-collar jobs as a form of penance, more than a decade in hell because of one moment of anger" (*SP* 276–77). The trauma of having inadvertently caused Bobby's death led Miles into a state of emotional gridlock. He became inescapably stuck in the past, unable to forgive himself and thereby move on. His life since the tragic incident has been marked by an almost masochistic asceticism ("he has pared down his desires to what is now approaching a bare minimum" (*SP* 6)), likely as a way of punishing himself for his mistake. He considers his time in Sunset Park, away from Pilar, as a "prison sentence with no time off for good behavior … He mustn't dream of escape. No digging of tunnels in the middle of the night, no confrontations with the guards, no hacking through barbed wire" (*SP* 121). Much like Winnie, Miles thus experiences a sense of confinement, a mental straitjacket that he is unable to free himself from.

The references to Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* interspersed throughout the novel thus undergird a dominant motif in the story: indeed, Winnie's immobility mirrors the socio-economic or psychological inertia that shapes the majority of the novel's characters.

Bing Nathan's Nostalgia and the Yearning for Deceleration

As mentioned before, Paul Auster wrote *Sunset Park* in 2008–2009, a time when the nation found itself in a state of acute and profound upheaval: the financial crisis was bringing the housing market to its knees, with a national avalanche of foreclosures ensuing; credit was drying up on a global scale, causing an unprecedented shock to the banking system and arguably a loss of faith in neo-liberal economics. Considering that forward- and upward-tending mobility has been a formative element of America's self-image since its founding, the Great Recession's abrupt halt to progress had an immense impact on the nation's psyche. Indeed, if America is synonymous with the idea of development and growth—or "process" (73), to use Kouwenhoven's term—then the impact of the sudden crash and benumbed inertia that the nation was suddenly facing cannot be overestimated. For many, the financial crisis triggered a need to reappraise and question the values and principles of the system at large. Feeling "riveted by grief by what was going on in the United States at that time" (Auster, Telephone Interview), Auster noticeably infused the narrative of *Sunset Park* with a critical esprit regarding the path his country was on. If there is one character in the novel who embodies the ideological crisis of America most acutely, it is Bing Nathan. Auster describes Bing's fundamental loss of faith in America as follows:

> Since the war in Vietnam, which began nearly twenty years before he was born, he would argue that the concept of America has played itself out, that the country is no longer a workable proposition, but if anything continues to unite the fractured masses of this defunct nation, if American opinion is still unanimous about any one idea, it is a belief in the notion of progress. He contends that they are wrong, that the technological developments of the past decades have in fact only diminished the possibility of life. (72)

"[A] large, hulking presence, a sloppy bear of a man" (*SP* 75), Bing has made it his mission "to stand in opposition to things-as-they-are, to

resist the status quo on all fronts" (*SP* 71–72). He is convinced that the obsessive consumerism and the individualistic mindset of neo-liberal capitalism have led the nation into ruin: "In a throwaway culture spawned by the greed of profit-driven corporations, the landscape has grown ever more shabby, ever more alienating, ever more empty of meaning and consolidating purpose" (*SP* 72). His nostalgic desire to preserve the "spirit of the past" (*SP* 72), and his refusal of being implicated in consumerist society, pushed him to open the "Hospital for Broken Things", a tiny repair shop where people can bring any items from "an era that has all but vanished from the face of the earth" (73). As such, Bing's activism evinces a distinct anti-materialist, sustainable and anti-waste impulse, that appears to be distinctly un-American. Indeed, "we are what Denis Brogan calls a people "who go away and leave things" because we have enough and to spare" (221), writes Kouwenhoven in his essay "The Beer Can by the Highway" (1988). The trust in an infinite abundance of resources goes back to the settlement years, characterized by a quickly progressing territorial expansion; there was always the certainty that there was *enough*, and that there would be *more*. This (misguided) perception has become firmly ingrained in the national psyche, and it is perhaps this overly confident faith in abundance that has allowed the consumerist, capitalist system to develop at the rate that it did. The present historical moment, however, has raised our collective awareness of the inherent errors of this ideology. Bing Nathan thus chooses to consciously upend the system, one repair at a time: "every time he works on another battered artifact from the antique industries of half a century ago, he goes about it with the willfulness and passion of a general fighting a war" (*SP* 73). His personal and small actions are meant to resist the relentless flux of capitalist production, and could therefore be seen as deliberate attempts of *deceleration*. Given that the nation's insatiable craving for *more* has proven itself to be unsustainable in the current time of crisis, fundamental shifts regarding our ways of life indeed need to take place. "[T]he state of emergency is also always a state of *emergence*" ("Foreword", italics in original), writes Homi Bhabha. Like Bing, who "dreams of forging a new reality of the ruins of a failed world" (*SP* 71), Americans need to realize that moments of

unrest also hold the potential for reconceptualizing who we are as a society and finding new paths forward.

The concept of mobility has allowed Paul Auster to explore the nation's fragile mindset in a time of economic and ideological crisis. In his novel, physical movement no longer develops out of a life-giving impulse, a desire for progress and improvement; rather, it is motivated by despair, be it socio-economic (the migration of the evicted) or psychological (Miles's trauma). Many of the characters are also marked by a distinct *im*mobility, which Auster astutely mirrors in the interwoven reference to Beckett's Winnie in *Happy Days*. Finally, it is Bing Nathan who most profoundly embodies the shift away from the cult of mobility and obsessive consumerism that have for so long shaped American identity and culture.

3.2 Richard Ford's *The Lay of the Land* and *Let Me Be Frank with You*

Stuck on the Road to Nowhere: Frank Bascombe in Limbo

In the first chapter of this book, I have already established that the car culture that emerged since the launch of Ford's Model T in 1908 has fit the American myth of mobility to perfection.[62] American writers quickly recognized the potential that the car and the road hold for exploring the classic American subjects of mobility, progress and the journey in narrative form. As Ronald Primeau points out: "The automobile entered [the] long tradition of travel literature and added its own unique merging of the frontier spirit and the worship of the machine as a complex icon" (5). The road narrative, which developed into a quintessential American literary genre in the course of the twentieth century, most often follows a recognizable pattern, which Primeau succinctly describes as follows:

62 Refer back to Chapter 1 (55–56).

> American road narratives are fiction and nonfiction books by Americans who travel by car throughout the country either on a quest or simply to get away. The most common narrative structure follows the sequence of a journey from preparation to departure, routing, decisions about goals and modes of transport, the arrival, return and reentry, and finally, the recording or reconstructing of events in the telling of the story. (1)

According to Primeau, the Beat generation, and first and foremost Jack Kerouac, championed the genre by synthesizing "a wide range of themes and techniques in ways that no one else had yet managed" (26). Kerouac's iconic novel *On the Road* (1957) "has arguably shaped the genre and its associative characteristics like no other text" (44), Alexandra Ganser explains. The Beats present the car as offering a profoundly liberating experience, that allows the traveling subject to break free from the constraints of society. Whereas in other road narratives, the car functions primarily as the mode of transportation *away from* or *towards* a specific place, for Jack Kerouac and his fellow Beats, James Jasper rightly notes, "[t]here was no purpose or destination; the road itself was the point, a place to strip away nonessentials and find one's true self, or perhaps to forget oneself in the cosmic rhythm of the wheels" (69). In these road narratives, car travel provides an almost cathartic experience, a way of achieving a personal sense of progress and enlightenment.

It is tempting to read Richard Ford's Frank Bascombe novels, particularly the last three installments—*Independence Day* (1995), *The Lay of the Land* (2006) and *Let Me Be Frank with You* (2014)—as exemplars of the Road Narrative genre: indeed, much of the (non-)action and Frank's internal monologue in these three books unfold on the streets of New Jersey, within the intimate space of Bascombe's (perfectly named) Suburban and later Hyundai Sonata. And indeed, one could argue that *Independence Day* still adheres to the conventions of the genre by placing Frank Bascombe on a teleological car journey with his son Paul (to "visit as many sports halls of fame as humanly possible in one forty-eight-hour period" (*ID* 15)), that leads the pair on a path towards greater understanding and that allows their relationship to progress. The two last Bascombe books, however, diverge from the traditional Road Narrative structure in fundamental ways. In both *The Lay of the Land* and

Let Me Be Frank with You, there is neither an overarching recognizable goal that the car trip is meant to lead to, nor a distressing context or past that Frank attempts to flee from. Rather, he embarks on one seemingly mundane excursion after another. Frank is driving to meetings, making visits and running errands, yet his trajectory is repeatedly changed by a number of chance encounters and unforeseen obstacles. The result is a haphazard string of episodes that leads Frank across the Garden State and beyond—a dizzying itinerary that the reader gets to tag along to on Frank's passenger seat. In contrast to *Independence Day*, in which there is still an overriding goal guiding Frank's car trip—"a voyage meant to instruct" (*ID* 263), as Frank puts it, and to reconnect with his struggling son—the latest two Bascombe installments suggest a certain loss of purpose and meaning. The intricate New Jersey road system that Frank traverses ("Route 1 to 295 to NJ 33, skirt the Trenton mall tie-ups, then around to bee-line 195" (*LL* 275)), here appears as a bewildering labyrinth, cars being "everywhere, heading in every direction" (*LL* 22). The fragmentation and randomness that characterizes Frank's journey in both *The Lay of the Land* and *Let me Be Frank with You* mirrors a more systemic disorientation that American society has experienced in the post-9/11 cultural moment. Writing about Ford's earlier Bascombe novels, Guagliardo notes that "[t]hese texts depict a culture in which fragmentation and dislocation are pervasive states" (*Perspectives* 4), and indeed this appears to be even more applicable to the two latest parts in the Bascombe chronicle. Particularly in Ford's 700+ page magnus opus *The Lay of the Land*, it is at times difficult to keep track of Frank's tangled and fragmented pilgrimage across New Jersey, lacking the reassurance and orientation of a clear point of arrival. Indeed, it could be argued that Frank is in a perpetual sense of dislocation—constantly on the move, yet never really getting anywhere permanent. Frank's prolonged time on the road does not provide him with a sense of cathartic fulfillment, though, as the Beat writers would have it. Indeed, whereas (*On the Road*'s) Sal Paradise's experience on the road is one of rhythmic, liberating motion, Frank Bascombe's car travels are often marked by an almost comical immobility. Again and again, Frank gets caught up in infuriating traffic jams, that interfere with his daily schedule and thereby frustrate his ability to make progress. "Traffic

was deranging—spending thirty minutes to go less than a mile made everyone reappraise the entire concept of mobility and of how important it could ever be to get anywhere" (*LL* 128). The car is here presented less as a symbol of freedom, speed and progress (as the Road Narrative genre would propose) than of confinement, inertia and frustration. The automobile has become, it seems, the constant and inevitable frame of our daily experience: "Why do so many things happen in cars?", Frank muses on his way to yet another appointment, "Are they the only interior life left?" (*LL* 297). Day by day, Frank ventures onto the road again ("Up again, old heart" he tells himself in the morning, "[e]verything good is on the highway" (*LL* 395)), only to come to the sobering realization that "[w]hat it all comes down to, though, as with so many vital life issues and blood-boiling causes, is traffic and more traffic" (*LL* 71). Frank is repeatedly stuck in the in-between, forced to remain in transit and thereby unable to achieve a sense of arrival and rest. That this limbo state applies not only to Frank's car rides but also to his life more generally should be apparent: in *The Lay of the Land*, Frank is waiting for the prognosis following his prostate cancer treatment, and his marriage to Sally is also uncertain following the sudden reappearance of her long-absent ex-husband. Furthermore, Frank's perpetual limbo state could be read as an emblem of contemporary American experience more broadly: an expression of a period in which progress has become a questionable concept rather than an inherently American, unalienable right; in which uncertainty and "contingency" (Knapp 21) have replaced the confidence and stability that have previously marked the national spirit. In our "fluid and seamless" (*LL* 176) world in which people have lost "vital anchorage" (*LL* 181) (to use Frank's millennial daughter Clarissa's terminology), there is perhaps little choice but to remain afloat in the in-between state. By placing Frank in suspension on the densely packed New Jersey roads, Ford interrogates how valid the deep-seated faith in mobility and the belief in progress still is in modern America. Frank's fraught attempts of navigating across an increasingly alienating and precarious American terrain thus allow Ford to tap into the anxious cultural climate of millennial America.

"No one wants to stay any place": Mobile America

Ford's choice to turn his protagonist, of all possible career paths, into a real estate agent (after starting out as a sportswriter in the first volume of the Bascombe chronicle) needs to be discussed in more detail. In my interview, Ford suggested that this decision was motivated by several factors:

> After *The Sportswriter* I felt the urge, in order not to go over ground that I've already covered, to give Frank a new profession, and the profession that I knew the most about was real estate. … I also wanted it to be a vocation that a person could switch into mid-life, without it being a lot of ramping up. You could, in the United States, all but hang your shingle out and declare that you're a realtor and you are one. (Personal Interview)

Ford also noted that, even though real estate was "often denigrated because commerce was involved, it was fundamentally a good profession because it helped people find shelter for themselves". Finally, he also thought the real estate profession "was funny, and that willingness to think it was funny accommodated my need to have the book be both grave and mirthful at the same time" (Personal Interview). In *Perspectives on Richard Ford* (2000), Huey Guagliardo points out that "[b]eing a realtor also provides Frank with the perfect position from which to observe the 'dislocatedness' [*ID* 55] so prevalent in modern suburban life" (23). The real estate business indeed offers a unique lens through which to perceive Americans' striking propensity and yearning to move—an urge that seems to have gotten stronger in our fast-paced contemporary culture. For Frank, it is clear that "[n]ot many people feel they were born to live in a house forever" (*LL* 427), and "no one wants to stay any place" (*LMBF* 73). These days, "you're likely to drive to the Rite Aid for a bottle of Maalox and come home with earnest money put down on the Dutch Colonial you'd had your eye on and just happened to see your friend Bert the realtor stepping out the front door with the listing papers in hand" (*LMBF* 73). New Jersey suburbia is presented as the perfect setting for American restlessness to prosper. There are entire housing developments designed to "re-enforce sameness", "a housing

concept which permits no one ever to feel he was meant to be here, and so is happy to be, and happier yet to pack up and go when the spirit moves him or her" (*LL* 615)—a clear nod to the post-war Levittown model, which was also implemented in the Garden State. As already discussed in the previous chapter, houses in Ford's fiction are noticeably desanctified. As the sacred aura often attached to the concept of 'home' is absent, dwelling places become more impermanent and replaceable—in other words, the ideal milieu for the real estate business to bloom.

The quick turnover of residences is something that Richard Ford is more than familiar with in his private life. Richard and his wife Kristina Ford have lived in dozens of houses and apartments, taking them from Mississippi and Michigan to Montana and Maine. Over the years, the author's peripatetic lifestyle has received a lot of attention from journalists and literary critics, an interest that Ford considers "silly" (Personal Interview), "but the ethos, particularly in the eastern parts of the United States, the longest settled parts, is that people don't do that [move around so much]" (Personal Interview). Ford himself, however, may have ignited the scrutiny by publishing several essays that revolve around his mobile mode-de-vivre: in "An Urge for Going" (1992), published in *Harper's Magazine*, Ford probes the origins of his propensity for movement: both of his parents were, as he puts it, "movers, unschooled in the arts of staying" (62), and the normalcy of being on the move was thus instilled in Ford at a young age. His father's job as a traveling salesman obliged the family to remain mobile, and the days spent on the road have left a stark impression on Ford:

> My most enduring memories of childhood are mental snapshots not of my hometown streets or its summery lawns but of roads leading *out* of town. Highway 51 to New Orleans. Highway 49 to the Delta and the Coast. Highway 80 to Vicksburg and darkest Alabama. These were my father's customary routes, along which I was often his invited company—I and my mother together. ("An Urge for Going" 62)

"We *went*", Ford writes in another *Harper's Magazine* essay, "That was the motif of things" ("My Mother, In Memory" 49, italics in original). After his father's sudden death when Ford was only sixteen, this ten-

dency to seek out movement continued: he started working at the Missouri Pacific Railroad, riding the trains day in, day out. Ford now considers this job to be one of his "Ur-experiences, … which stamp us in a peculiar way and from which we never travel so far as to forget" ("Urge" 63). Another period in his young life which had a formative impact on the author was the time he spent living in his grandfather's hotel. This experience profoundly shaped Ford's understanding of the notion of home, which became suffused with a sense of impermanence and transience. "In the hotel there was no center to things, nor was I one" (43), writes Ford in "Accommodations". "It was the floating life, days erasing other days almost completely, as should be. The place was a hollow place, like any home, in which things went on, a setting where situations developed and ended" (43). The conjunction of these meaningful experiences in Ford's early life helps elucidate the author's lasting "urge for going" and skepticism towards a fixed idea of home, as well as his pronounced interest in ideas of mobility and transience in his writing.

Spending his days trying to find satisfactory dwelling places for his clients ("What more can you do for wayward strangers than to shelter them?" (*ID* 424)), Frank has ample time to consider the underlying reasons for people's desire to change houses. What is it that propels people into motion—willing to go through the ordeal of realty offices, house viewings and U-Haul trucks? He believes that "[r]eal estate might seem to be all about moving and picking up stakes and disruption but it's really about arriving and destinations, and all the prospects that await you or might await you in some place you never thought about" (*LL* 501). This is, Frank understands, the very same "positivist principle" that "all of America's literature, Cotton Mather to Steinbeck" was "forged by": "to leave, and then to arrive in a better state" (*LL* 501). What Ford touches upon here is, in its essence, the promise ingrained in the American Dream: the yearning for upward mobility, and consequently the faith that this progress will bring fulfillment and happiness. The decision to pack up and move on is symptomatic of a much deeper sense of longing, that the realty business ("the profession of possibility" (*LL* 45)) merely feeds off. As Ford writes in "An Urge for Going": "Longing's at the heart of it, I guess … a sense that life's short and profuse and mustn't be missed" (60). Frank realizes that "[m]any citizens

set out to buy a house because of an indistinct yearning, for which an actual house was never the right solution to begin with and may only be a quick and expensive fix that briefly anchors and stabilizes them, never touches their deeper need, but puts them in the poorhouse anyway" (*LL* 401). It is this "indistinct yearning" for *more* that, in *Independence Day*, has pushed the Markams to leave their comfortable life in Vermont behind to move to New Jersey, only to find out that the dwelling place they dream of finding has become impossible to afford. It is this same sense of longing that the Feensters, Frank's utterly unlikeable neighbors in *The Lay of the Land*, appear to be missing now that they have moved to the perfect residence on the Jersey coast.

> It seemed to me—and I feel implicated, since I sold them their house and made a fat 108K doing it—that the Feensters got rich, got restless, and adventuresome (like anybody else), bought ocean-front but somehow got detached from their sense of useful longing, though they couldn't have described it. They only know they paid enough to expect to feel right, but for some reason don't feel right, and so get mad as hell when they can't bring it all into line. (*LL* 311)

The Feensters, "like anybody else", followed their instinct to climb the social ladder, essentially chasing the American Dream. Yet what Frank realizes is that "[l]iving the dream can be a lot more complicated than it seems" (312). Indeed, the American Dream is all about goals and the possibility of upward movement; thus, the eventual achievement of these aspirations can end up feeling strangely anticlimactic and unsatisfactory. Frank concludes that the Feensters would have been happier putting "their new fecklessly gotten gain into something that would keep longing alive", like "adding a second storey or a greenhouse or an in-ground pool" (*LL* 311). Ford seems to suggest that the ability to feel a "useful longing" (*LL* 311) is a fundamental and inescapable human need—for Frank, it is "a way to register I'm still alive" (*LL* 312). Yet on numerous occasions in *The Lay of the Land*, in what appears to be a complete contradiction to this idea, Frank convinces himself that he is firmly anchored in the Permanent Period of his life, which has marked "an end to perpetual becoming" (*LL* 76). Frank proclaims that he has

stopped "thinking that life schemed wonderful changes for me, even if it didn't" (*LL* 76). However, towards the end of the novel, after experiencing life's reckless unpredictability and inevitable turbulences once more, he gradually acknowledges that "life can't be escaped and must be faced entire" (*LL* 698). Frank's self-proclaimed Permanent Period is, by definition, unsustainable, as it is all but impossible to "put an end to perpetual becoming" (73)—all one can do is "to live, to live, to live it out" (726). Mobility, then, is inscribed in our very existence, Frank realizes, even if the idea of "arrival is hopeful" in "a world of indeterminacy and doubt" (*LL* 291).

Ford's vision of contemporary suburban life places ideas of mobility, transience and change front and center. His novels explore a society experiencing a "loss of vital anchorage" (*LL* 181), that reinforces a continuous sense of limbo. Ford's characters float in an enduring 'in-between' zone: between residences, between an endless series of appointments and social commitments, suspended in the midst of traffic jams and facing uncertain life crossroads. Yet, most of all, what Ford has captured masterfully in his fiction is the unshakeable sense of longing that drives people to seek out the unknown and, for better or worse, leads them to remain unsettled. Genuine permanence, Ford seems to suggest, is unattainable in the fluid and turbulent world we inhabit, and perhaps we should embrace this volatile and nomadic existence. And indeed, with this view, one cannot help but hear distant echoes of Ralph Waldo Emerson—a favored and recurrent reference in Ford's fiction—who stated that "becoming somewhat else is the perpetual game of nature" and that "not in his goals but in his transitions, man is great" (qtd. in Kouwenhoven 66).

3.3 Dave Eggers's *A Hologram for the King*

Moving Capital, Moving Bodies

As mentioned in the opening chapter of this book, Americans' faith in the merit of mobility can be discerned since the nation's very founding, yet it came to full fruition with the advent of capitalism, built on the ideology of individualism. In the latter part of the nineteenth century,

the free circulation of labor came to be viewed as a fundamental characteristic of a thriving capitalist economy, and Americans embraced, although at times reluctantly (see Matt 37), the mobile lifestyle that the capitalist system demanded. As Susan Matt writes in *Homesickness*, "society came to enshrine movement as necessary for an expanding, capitalist order" (7). The urbanization and the development of transcontinental transportation, that marked the end of the nineteenth century, fueled Americans' restlessness: as the unfettered movement across state lines became easier, it was often socially expected. It is important to stress that the willingness to move horizontally, to a new city or a new state, was always driven by a yearning to move vertically—in other words, to climb the social ladder. In the twentieth century, Matt remarks, this "imperative to move became greater, the need to accept dislocations more pressing" (6). Anyone aiming to advance in one's career and social status would have to be ready to pack up and move on when need be. "The ability to sever ties", writes Susan Matt, "was often considered a prerequisite for success" (121).

That in the twenty-first century, this circulation of labor has long ceased to be restricted to national perimeters, unfolding instead on a global stage, becomes apparent in Dave Eggers's *A Hologram for the King* (2012). Whereas, historically, the American trajectory of ambition usually consisted of a determined movement towards the West,[63] Eggers reverses the direction and prolongs the trajectory to the Middle East, which here becomes the new frontier for Americans to conquer. Indeed, in the depressing economic context of the post-credit crunch era, the quest for the American Dream of upward mobility (or, in Alan's case, at least financial survival) appears to lead decidedly outside of the American territory. Alan has ventured out to Saudi Arabia because he hopes that King Abdullah's dream of a city rising from nothing will help him find the financial security he so desperately needs. The commission he would receive for scoring the IT contract would not only allow him to cover his debts, pay for his daughter's tuition fees and keep his house, it would also mean the possibility of fulfilling his professional

63 See Chapter 1 (24–27) for more details on the westward movement in America's settlement period.

ambitions—he dreams of opening "a small factory, start with a thousand bikes a year, then ramp up from there" (*HK* 16). In the present age of economic decline, achieving these dreams of upward mobility in an American context seems to have become virtually impossible. We may recall the laden words of the globetrotting American architect, whom Alan encounters at an expat party at an embassy in Jeddah: "[I]n the U.S. now there's not that kind of dreaming happening. It's on hold. The dreaming's being done elsewhere for now" (*HK* 143). This vision of America as stagnant ("on hold") and inadequate in the context of an increasingly competitive, forward-pushing global market appears recurrently in Eggers's novel. As a drunk American businessman bemoans on a flight to London, "We've become a nation of indoor cats. … A nation of doubters, worriers, overthinkers. Thank God these weren't the kind of Americans who settled this country. They were a different breed!" (*HK* 13). There is repeated reference to the waning of the American manufacturing business, which has succumbed to the highly competitive production conditions in the Asian market, in particular. Alan worked for decades for the Chicago-based bike manufacturer Schwinn before the company went under, "sold to Trek for next to nothing" (*HK* 50). "People were done manufacturing on American soil", writes Eggers. "How could he or anyone argue for spending five to ten times what it cost in Asia? … Jack Welch said manufacturing should be on a perpetual barge, circling the globe for the cheapest conditions possible, and it seemed the world had taken him at his word" (13). The fact that Alan contributed to Schwinn's decision to offshore production has not only left him deeply embittered, it has also caused a severe rift between Alan and his father Ron, a union man who is outraged about the decline of the American manufacturing sector and the general shift of economic power away from the United States. After losing his job at Schwinn, Alan had "bounced around between a dozen or so stints" (*HK* 13) before ending up as an independent consultant. "And yet year by year, there was less work for a guy like him" (*HK* 13). Like countless other Americans, Alan is at risk of ending up as collateral damage of a reckless capitalist system designed to maximize profit and minimize production costs—regardless of the human costs. Given that in the States, "no one was spending" (*HK* 11), leaving him with "dwindling

revenue" (*HK* 11), Alan is left no choice but to enter the global labor circuit—even if it leads into as unlikely a locality as the Middle Eastern desert. The negative mobility that Leyda identifies in Great Depression literature, forcing Americans onto to the nation's roads for a better life in another city or state, is thus, in the current era, extrapolated to a transnational stage.

Fluid Identities and Holograms

To Alan's surprise, Jeddah presents itself as a hub for what Pico Iyer has called "Global Souls"—"full-time citizen[s] of nowhere" (*Global Soul* 277). The mobility, openness and flexibility that this community of expats stands for seems diametrically opposed to the nostalgia and rigidity that Alan's father Ron represents. Not only have they been able to adapt to the demands of a unified global capitalist market, but they have also embraced a more general sense of fluidity and plurality, that are essential qualities to possess in an increasingly interconnected, complex world. Most notable, perhaps, are Alan's two love interests: there is Hanne, the Danish McKinsey employee who, after job placements in Seoul and Arusha, has ended up working in KAEC and living in a flat that looked as if she had just moved in. And there is Zahra, the Swiss-trained surgeon who seems puzzled and taken aback by Alan's deceptively simple question: "Where are you from?": "You mean, where are my parents from? … They're from everywhere, really. Here, Lebanon. Some Arab blood, but my grandmother was Swiss. One great-grandfather was Greek. There's some Dutch in there, and of course I have lots of family in the U.K. I've got everything in me" (*HK* 291). In response to Alan's bemusement about the incongruity of having a painting depicting the Swiss Alps in her beach house kitchen, Zahra remarks, "[e]veryone wants to be somewhere else" (*HK* 292). And indeed, Zahra, Hanne and the expat community that Alan encounters during his business trip all embody the flexible, fluid identities of a hyper-mobile, transnational world, in which 'stagnant' concepts such as nationalities and borders, or a fixed notion of home, appear to be redundant artifacts of a bygone era. As Rapport and Dawson observe, "being rootless, displaced between worlds, living between a lost past and a fluid present, are perhaps the

most fitting metaphors for the journeying, modern consciousness" (23). It is with the idea of the *hologram* that Eggers found the most fitting metaphor for this "journeying, modern consciousness" in our "fluid present". Indeed, mirroring the wider paradigm shifts perceptible in modern society, Alan's career shifted away from the manufacturing business—a tangible, place-bound industry, that is deeply rooted in past traditions—to marketing holographic teleconferencing systems—a technology of the future, that allows for fluid, seamless communication unrestricted by geographic location. And yet, Eggers also presents the hologram as an ambiguous symbol of progress and hypermobility. After all, this technology is also based on the very notion of immobility: one can be anywhere in the world without the need of physical displacement. Edward S. Casey uses the term "virtual coimplacement" to refer to the emergence of this "new sense of place …, a virtual place" (xvi) that allows people to remain in remote locations and yet to somehow, through technology, to inhabit the same space. Ironically, however, Alan needs to fly halfway around the world to sell this groundbreaking technology that will make movement redundant. The hologram thus becomes an emblem of both mobility and immobility, representing simultaneously the unprecedented speed of communication in a hyperconnected world and the physical inertia that this technological progress paradoxically engenders.

Drifting in Nomadic Space

This tension between stasis and mobility—epitomized by the hologram—is palpable all throughout the novel. Indeed, there is a comic and at times almost unbearable sense of inertia in the novel as Alan and his crew are waiting for King Abdullah, the Saudi-Arabian Godot figure, to finally make an appearance. Whereas his millennial co-workers have no problem sitting still, waiting it out in the tent by distracting themselves online or with each other, Alan is unable to slow down. Eggers places Alan in a continual state of motion: in airplanes, in Yousef's taxi, fleeing the presentation tent by walking aimlessly through KAEC and, most acutely, burdened by perpetually spinning thoughts. Yet as the novel progresses, it becomes apparent that all of this moving around

is leading nowhere—there is neither a sense of genuine progress nor a point of arrival (exemplified most acutely by the novel's end, which keeps Alan hanging in limbo, unable to return home). In her discussion of Joshua Ferris's novel *The Unnamed* (2010), Kathy Knapp's astutely observes that this kind of ceaseless, frantic movement "parodies the ethos of upward mobility" which, it has become increasingly clear, is built on "a false premise" (XXIX). Alan's career, connected as it may be to emblems of mobility and speed (bikes and holograms), finds itself in a state of paralysis. Similarly, Hanne notes that Alan is emotionally "frozen in stasis" (*HK* 178), unable to move on following the collapse of his marriage. Perhaps in response to this professional and emotional gridlock, Alan keeps on moving, as if running on an idle engine—but running, nevertheless. As if commenting on the pointlessness of this relentless motion, Alan drunkenly writes to his daughter Kit that "with adults, though there is continual development, there is not always improvement. There is change, but not necessarily growth" (*HK* 161). Eggers makes it clear that this urge to keep moving (however obsolete this movement may be) is an unmistakably American characteristic: "Americans are born moving forward, quickly, or thinking they are" (*HK* 126). And this imperative to move appears to be inscribed in the nation's identity, its history—and even in one of its most iconic monuments. "The Statue of Liberty is moving, man!" exclaims a fellow traveler on a business flight, "[e]veryone thinks that statue is standing still, but she's in mid-stride! … I shit you not, she's walking forward, the gown swishing along, her sandals all bent and everything, like she's about to cross the ocean, go back to France. Blew my mind" (*HK* 126). However, much like Alan's frantic yet obsolete motion, the movement inscribed in the statue is but an illusion: Lady Liberty is destined to remain inert, her hopeful stride forever unfulfilled.

Though Alan appears to be in constant motion, it is also very obvious that Alan's trajectories lack both purpose and direction. At one point, he imagines "some future legend among the workers at KAEC, the strange story of the American man, dressed for business, but wandering aimlessly around the beach, hiding behind mounds of dirt and in the empty foundations of buildings" (*HK* 165). Having lost his sense of stability and rootedness—his family has fallen apart, his home is

about to be sold and his intrinsically American confidence in progress has faded—Alan is drifting in an undefined space, both psychologically and physically. Thousands of miles away from Alan's home-country, Saudi Arabia presents itself as an alienating and unsettling territory. As John Berger notes, "[t]o emigrate is always to dismantle the center of the world and to move into a lost, disoriented one of fragments" (57). Eggers amplifies this aimlessness and fragmentation by choosing the "unrelenting flat" (*HK* 30) of the Saudi-Arabian desert as a key setting of the novel. According to Deleuze and Guattari, the "smooth space" of the desert can be seen as the milieu that the nomad "occupies, inhabits, holds" (381). It is, to use Cresswell's words, the "metaphorical space of the nomad", a "flat, smooth and curiously isotropic" (*On the Move* 49) territory that requires the subject to drift horizontally across a plane without any reassuring sense of direction (there is, rather, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, a "polyvocality of directions" (382)). As such, the "flat and blank" (*HK* 34) landscape of the desert undergirds a more general sense of disorientation that looms large in Eggers's novel. It could even be argued that the openness and airiness of the "unrelenting flat" of the desert finds an echo in the formal structure of Eggers's novel. As Pico Iyer notes in his *New York Times* review of the novel, "*Hologram* flashes past in an appropriately quick series of brief, displacing passages with plenty of space around them for us to feel the vacancy and nowhereness" ("Desert Pitch"). The scarcity and fluidity of Eggers's prose thus mimics the formal features of the disorienting desert, through which the reader must navigate, or rather accept drifting aimlessly along.

Eggers's novel highlights the complex status that mobility occupies in the American spirit. Alan's fascination with KAEC, the possibility of pure creation and of conquering "uncharted territory" (*HK* 57) speaks to the persistent allure and power of the pioneer spirit in the American mindset. Eggers leaves little doubt about the fact that these days, this deep-seated hunger for socio-economic progress is all too often left unsatisfied due to crippling economic conditions, be it in the United States or abroad. Oscillating between tragedy and comedy, Eggers's novel portrays the enduring, stubborn and to some extent foolish American belief in mobility, an ideology that appears increasingly untenable in the present cultural moment. Alan's geographic disloca-

tion, stranded in the Middle Eastern desert, here comes to stand for a larger sense of homelessness ailing not only him specifically, but modern man in general. By centering his story around an aimless drifter desperately looking for the shore, Eggers gives form to a more systemic sense of disorientation of the post-crisis period.

3.4 Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

Entropic Mobility in a World of Stillness

The previous chapter explored the unhomely spaces and the absence of a permanent domestic refuge for the father-son duo in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006). "The failure of domesticity", writes Jay Ellis, "spurs characters to the road in McCarthy's novels" (17), and indeed the boy and the man in *The Road* have come to epitomize McCarthy's homeless, nomadic figures. The novel traces the pair's breathless and dizzying journey through the post-apocalyptic wasteland. In contrast to the conventional road narrative, so deeply entwined with automobile culture, McCarthy's novel reduces movement to its most basic, premodern form: in a world devoid of electricity and natural resources, the boy and his father are left no choice but to traverse the ashen desert on foot. Their walking motion provides the constant rhythmic impulse of the narrative. It should be noted that McCarthy's depiction of the two characters' unending pilgrimage, so thoroughly infused with a sense of despair and panic, diverges starkly from more conventional cultural representations of the walking subject. In his essay on "Modern(s) Walking", Klaus Benesch observes that walking was commonly seen as "a motor for progress, a relentless force of change and transformation" (67). "[W]alking somehow captures the experience of being modern" (67), Benesch writes. One may indeed recall Baudelaire's *The Painter of Modern Life*, in which he praises the quintessentially modern flâneur, drifting aimlessly through urban terrain, at home "in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement" (qtd. in Seigel 513). Benesch goes on by drawing an important parallel between two key thinkers, Thoreau and Heidegger, who both "experienced walking as a way to connect to [particular places and regions] and to evoke a

sense of rootedness that defied the shallowness of modern capitalist society" ("Modern(s) Walking" 71). This vision of walking as an inherently modern, progressive motion and as a means of engaging more deeply with the natural or urban environment is nowhere to be found in McCarthy's "slow, brutally calculating, micro-sighted blood-soaked narrative" (Lincoln 168). Here, the boy and his father walk purely to ensure survival, as any moment of stillness represents potential danger and thus death. McCarthy pushes the two characters beyond the brink of exhaustion as they are relentlessly moving south towards their elusive goal, the sea. As such, *The Road* adheres to a classic format of the journey plot: the journey as a search (see Freese, *Journey* 26–38). Indeed, much like the Joad family tirelessly crossed the country to reach their rosy-hued vision of California in Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the man and his son continue walking, day after day, in the hope of escaping "the pitiless dark" (*TR* 187) and to experience a sense of relief, of arrival. Yet it is important to note that it is painfully clear to the father that none of this continuous moving about can save them: "He said that everything depended on reaching the coast, yet waking in the night he knew that all of this was empty and no substance to it" (29). Stopping is not an option, however, and so "[t]hey went on", McCarthy writes, "[t]reading the dead world under like rats on a wheel" (*TR* 273). Several critics[64] have pointed out that any movement in the novel is essentially entropic, "running down to inertia and oblivion" (35), as Richard Gray puts it. Entropy—the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which purports that "all energy will in time disperse and fizzle out" (Graulund 60)—has indeed offered a useful lens through which to read the characters' relentless advancement towards nothingness. When the father and son finally reach their goal, they are disillusioned to find "one vast salt sepulchre" beyond which there is only a "bleak sea"—"Cold. Desolate. Birdless" (*TR* 215). To his son's almost metaphorical question about "What's on the other side?", the father is briefly unable to uphold

64 For a reading of McCarthy's oeuvre in connection with entropy, refer to Markus Wierschem's "The Other End of *The Road*: Re-reading McCarthy in Light of Thermodynamics and Information Theory" (2013), Rune Graulund's "Fulcrums and Borderlands: A Desert Reading of Cormac Mc Carthy's *The Road*" (2010) and Richard Gray's *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (2011) (specifically 35).

the hopeful demeanor he usually adopts for his son's sake, noting that there is "Nothing" (*TR* 216). The entropic trajectory has here reached its sobering, nihilistic finale: nowhere to go but down.

The relentless mobility of the father-son duo throughout the story is juxtaposed by the eerie stillness that characterizes the post-apocalyptic world they inhabit ("Barren, silent, godless" (*TR* 4)). McCarthy points out the absence of migratory birds, the clocks that have come abruptly to a halt at 1:17 on the fateful day, the rusted cars and melted tires—all of which undergird the total cessation of mobility in the post-apocalypse. Inger-Anne Søfting reads the ashen wasteland that surrounds them as "reminiscent of the desert", "aesthetically stylized and immovable" (707). "It is like a still life", she writes, "which in Italian is called *natura morta*, dead nature" (707). Within this cold and lifeless habitat, the boy's youthful vitality here strikes one as all the more incongruous. For the father, who feels his son's heartbeat ("[w]armth and movement" (*TR* 116)) in the long dark night, the boy represents nothing other than his lifeline, the only reason for him to keep moving.

Mapping the Void

The exhausting and confusing journey that the father and son embark on is mirrored in the reader's, at-times challenging, experience of following a monotonous, slowly progressing narrative marked by a complete absence of formal structuring devices. "There are no chapter reliefs, no plot line or story arc of character development, just two shrouded figures walking the road and running for their lives" (165), Kenneth Lincoln explains. "The single survival motive tests the reader's stomach for endurance, as our resilience is matched with that of the two travelers" (Lincoln 168–69). Through this particular storytelling technique, McCarthy manages to instill a sense of disorientation in the reader that mimics the characters' struggle to navigate the ashen "feverland" (*TR* 28). As they progress on their south-bound teleological journey, the father desperately tries to locate himself. Indeed, it is striking how he is drawn to objects that can provide a sense of orientation, be it on land—the "tattered oilcompany roadmap" (*TR* 42), that

has received ample critical attention[65]—or on water—the sextant that the father discovers in an abandoned boat. The decomposing roadmap indeed plays a vital role in the plot, as it allows McCarthy to highlight the father's struggle to find direction in the post-apocalyptic wasteland. This relic from the lost world symbolizes the possibility of arrival and suggests that the world is readable and knowable—a reassurance that the father clearly craves. The "limp and rotting pages" (196) of the map are an invaluable possession for the father, who recalls the comfort and safety that maps have always meant for him:

"[h]e'd pored over maps as a child, keeping one finger on the town where he lived. Just as he would look up his family in the phone directory. Themselves among others, everything in its place. Justified in the world" (*TR* 182). And yet, this sense of order, that a cartographic document seems to promise, is inevitably illusory in the disorienting world in the aftermath of the apocalypse. According to Christopher J. Walsh, McCarthy

> reveals [maps] to be nothing more than an example of Enlightenment hubris, another of our vain attempts to order and neatly represent the world when there is a violence and volatility to it that we will never be able to chart or control. The tattered oil company roadmap is no longer of any use to them as the landscape it once charted, the landmarks it once pointed out, have either been destroyed or changed forever. (269)

Similarly, Andrew Keller Estes observes that "[t]he problem with the map is that it no longer "answer[s] to their location" at all; it is not a reliable or up-to-date guide to the current situation" (215). Despite the obsoleteness of maps, the father repeatedly attempts to instill the same sense of location in his son, showing him their approximate location and trajectory on the makeshift reassembled chunks of the map. Yet it becomes obvious that these referents are meaningless for the boy. On one occasion, when the father points at the map explaining "This is us … Right here" (*TR* 86), his son refuses to look; another time, the boy expresses his confusion about the concept of "state roads" ("But there's

65 See Cant (192–93), Estes (213-17), Kunsa (62–63, 68), Walsh (269) and Weiss.

not any more states? … What happened to them?" (*TR* 43)). Born into a world of utter chaos, the child is unable to decipher these outdated signs, which the father still desperately clings to in order to make sense of the world. In one scene, the father is "studying the twisted matrix of routes in red and black with his finger at the junction where he thought that they might be. As if he'd see their small selves crouching there" (*TR* 86). This passage clearly shows how the man turns to the map not only to help guide him in his quest towards the sea, but to provide him with a reassuring sense of anchorage and fixity in a time of profound disorientation. At this point, it is crucial to recognize the significance of the post-9/11 context, that McCarthy's novel was produced in: in her astute analysis of *American Road Narratives* (2015), Ann Brigham observes that "[i]n the post-9/11 era, the particular danger is that mobile subjects are untraceable, moving from place to place within and outside the United States, slipping across borders at will" (198). One may argue that the father's impulse to visualize himself and his son on the map, thereby becoming *traceable* subjects, thus "evinces a decidedly post-9/11 sensibility" (21), to use Kathy Knapp's words. Brigham suggests that *The Road* and other texts written after 2001 "emphasize mobility as a method of placement" (198). "In these cases", she writes, mobility "directly opposes nomadism or migrancy, versions of mobility emblematic of a rootlessness dangerous to social order" (198). Brigham thus purports that 9/11 road novels such as *The Road* have a clear tendency to advocate "goal-directed mobility" (198). It is first and foremost the image of the map, I believe, which discloses a yearning to have a clear, chartable position in a post-crisis world in which a drifting subject represents uncertainty and danger.

With his terrifying tale of the father and son journey through a land shattered by catastrophe, McCarthy shows how movement can be a potent trope to explore the unique sense of disorientation felt in a post-crisis context. In *The Road*, mobility is a complex and ambiguous concept, representing both an innate and uncrushable human survival instinct, as well as an entropic impulse that inevitably leads toward stillness and oblivion. The formal structure of McCarthy's narrative—the continuously flowing succession of paragraphs, devoid of any lasting and reassuring resting points—assures that the reading experience is

one of breathless motion that perfectly echoes the father and son's trying path forward in the story. The man's desire to find a clearly delineated placement by relying on a map discloses a stubborn, yet eventually futile, longing to find order, clarity and purpose in the midst of crisis.

3.5 Emily St John Mandel's *Station Eleven*

Post-Calamity (Im)mobility

Some of the most unsettling pages of Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven* (2014) are undoubtedly those tracing the confusion, panic and shock following the outbreak of the Georgia Flu. As the unfathomable severity of the virus gradually starts to reveal itself ("It's the fastest incubation period I've ever seen" (*SE* 20) exclaims Jeevan's friend Hua, a doctor at a Toronto hospital), the frenzied and panicked motion begins: people are desperately trying to escape the city, to reach their loved ones, to find shelter. When Jeevan finally ventures out of his brother's apartment, and "[t]he road was all travellers walking with shell-shocked expressions" (*SE* 193), he whispers "the same two words over and over: 'Keep walking. Keep walking. Keep walking'" (*SE* 194). Yet this initial upsurge of mobility is quickly followed by a complete standstill—"the entire operation grinds to a halt" (*SE* 178). Mandel carefully depicts how emblems of modern mobility (airplanes, cars, trains, telecommunication systems) abruptly lose their power and purpose through the process of crisis: "the perpetual hum of the city [was] fading away" (*SE* 177) as transportation systems collapse within days following the outbreak (airplanes not taking off anymore, "the slow-moving exodus clogging every road" (*SE* 234) and "[n]o more trains running under the surface of cities on the dazzling power of the electric third rail" (*SE* 31)). Eventually, electricity and gasoline run out propelling the world into a pre-modern reality. The passages describing the complete standstill at airports following the outbreak are, in fact, based on the unprecedented paralysis that occurred after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. "I have a friend who left New York on a London-bound plane on the morning of the 9/11 attacks", Mandel explains in our interview. "Her flight was diverted to Newfoundland, and when I wrote the airport scenes, I was

thinking about her stories about all the international jets parked end to end on the tarmac and an airport full of stranded passengers" (Email Interview). There is also the eerie inertia resulting from economic crisis (mere hours before the flu outbreak): Miranda, an executive at a shipping company, witnesses how "12 percent of the world's shipping fleet lay at anchor off the coast of Malaysia, container ships laid dormant by an economic collapse" (*SE* 28). Crisis, then, puts an end to progress, to flux, to mobility—a shift that Mandel powerfully represents by immobilizing these emblems of mobility in the post-endemic world (a motif already seen in McCarthy's *The Road*[66]). Thus, immobilized airplanes become repurposed as sites of domesticity (and in the winter for food storage) at Severn International Airport, or they appear as static memorabilia in snow globes, turned into nothing but ghost memories of a by-gone time celebrating speed and motion. Car tires, obsolete artifacts in a post-gasoline age, are used to make soles of sandals. Pickup trucks are transformed into caravans pulled by horses. As the world as we know it has come to an end, symbols of mobility—these shining beacons of modern civilization and all its potential—are thus noticeably decelerated or brought entirely to a stop.

Transgressing Borders, Transcending Fear

In the context of the catastrophic flu outbreak, movement itself becomes a threat. Indeed, it is the ease of international travel that has made it possible for the virus to spread all over the world within days. The new strain of swine flu was seamlessly transported from Moscow across continents through air travel, thus causing a pandemic of unimaginable proportions. By presenting the fluidity and openness of global mobility

66 One may recall McCarthy's descriptions of the "[c]ars in the street caked with ash" (*TR* 12) or the evocative scene of the father and son coming across an immobilized train in the woods: "Rust and scaling paint. They pushed into the cab and he blew away the ash from the engineer's seat and put the boy at the controls. The controls were very simple. Little to do but push the throttle lever forward. He made train noises and diesel horn noises but he wasnt sure what these might mean to the boy. After a while they just looked out through the silted glass to where the track curved away in the waste of weeds. If they saw different worlds what they knew was the same. That the train would there slowly decomposing for all eternity and that no train would ever run again" (*TR* 180).

as an inherent danger, Mandel's *Station Eleven* could be read as a quintessential novel of the post-9/11 era. As Ann Brigham notes in her book *American Road Narratives* (2015), "the 9/11 attacks defined mobility as an unlawful and unspeakable intrusion on American soil" (190) and they "create an anxiety about the penetration of borders" (191). Similarly, in her important essay "Homeland Insecurities: reflections on language and space" (2003), Amy Kaplan points out that "[m]any commentators have claimed that the attack on the WTC radically exposed the permeability of the national borders eroded by the forces of globalization" (85). The Georgia flu virus in *Station Eleven*, which was able to imperceptibly infiltrate airplanes and cross national borders, thus offers a pointed metaphor for the terrorists' "transgressive mobility" (Brigham 191). Emanating from these pages describing the outbreak in Toronto is a sense of vulnerability and threat that carries clear echoes of the post-9/11 esprit. The safe and intact space of the homeland (a favored and heavily laden term in the political rhetoric of the post-9/11 era, as Kaplan points out[67]) is here breached by a dangerous 'Other'—the virus, as lethal and ruthless as terrorism.

According to Brigham, the anxious response to this "transgressive mobility that defined the attacks" has been "focused on the reestablishment of borders that emphasize containment, antifluidity, rigidity—in other words, immobility" (191). In *Station Eleven*, it is indeed noticeable that, although *national* borders soon become redundant in the post-endemic world,[68] there is a need for other, clearly demarcated limits, which provide a sense of structure and security amidst the post-crisis chaos. After "the first unspeakable years when everyone was travelling", Mandel writes, most people "settled wherever they could, clustered close together for safety in truck stops and former restaurants and motels" (*SE* 37). "The world's become so local, hasn't it?", a journalist remarks fifteen years after the Georgia Flu outbreak. "We hear stories from traders, of course, but most people don't leave their towns anymore"

67 See Amy Kaplan's "Homeland Insecurities: reflections on language and space", 84–90.
68 Echoing, perhaps, McCarthy's description of the boy's difficulty of grasping cartographic markers in *The Road*, Mandel writes: "The children understood dots on maps—*here*—but even the teenagers were confused by the lines. There had been countries, and borders. It was hard to explain" (*SE* 262, italics in original).

(*SE* 108). Even the members of the Travelling Symphony who, unlike the rest of the survivors, continue moving about, only do so within clearly delineated borders ("travelling back and forth along the shores of Lakes Huron and Michigan, west as far as Traverse City, east and north over the 49th parallel to Kincardine" (*SE* 37)). The decision to travel and perform only in towns located within known territory was made following a "failed experiment" of wanting "to expand the territory" (*SE* 114) by heading further south than they usually did—an expedition that has put the theatre crew into harm's way. It is striking that in this borderless, post-national world that Mandel imagines in the aftermath of crisis, movement is thus either completely absent or rigidly planned and restricted. Venturing out of one's safe territory can mean illness, violence and death.

And yet, towards the end of the novel, Mandel also appears to suggest that life requires transgression of such borders, and that confining oneself to a restricted territory is in the end unsustainable. On the final pages of *Station Eleven*, Kirsten is "beside herself with impatience" (*SE* 331) about traveling outside of the Symphony's usual territory for the first time in years. The Travelling Symphony intends to explore the far southern town mysteriously lit up with electricity, which Clark had discovered with his telescope. Clark's musings in the book's closing equally convey a sense of hope and potential:

> If there are again towns with streetlights, if there are symphonies and newspapers, then what else might this awakening world contain? Perhaps vessels are setting out even now, travelling towards or away from him, steered by sailors armed with maps and knowledge of the stars, driven by need or perhaps simply by curiosity; whatever became of the countries on the other side? If nothing else, it's pleasant to consider the possibility. He likes the thought of ships moving over the water, towards another world just out of sight. (*SE* 332–33)

Clark's vision of vessels "steered by sailors armed with maps and knowledge", "ships moving over the water, towards another world just out of sight" clearly carries echoes of America's settling period and the frontier mentality that shaped early American history. What this daydream

suggests, then, is the possibility of new beginnings, a resurrection of a pioneer spirit that had all but disappeared in the benumbed inertia of the crisis years. "I wanted to end the book with an image of expansion" (Email Interview), Mandel confirmed in our interview. The longing to forge new trajectories and explore unknown spaces speaks of the human need for mobility and progress, a need perhaps all the more pronounced in the aftermath of crisis. The fact that Mandel ends her novel with this image of the explorer bravely venturing out into new territory falls in line with one of Ann Brigham's arguments regarding post-9/11 road narratives: she suggests that these stories "[perform] the reassertion of the American as a mobile subject" (190) and that this renewed focus on mobility needs to be seen as "an affirmation of American vigor and spirit. The mobile American is one of agency, in active pursuit of individual dreams and goals" (192). The Symphony's decision to dare heading outside of their safe terrain at the end of the novel in order to find out more about the illuminated town on the horizon similarly evinces a new sense of empowerment and anticipation that has been decidedly absent in the group's previous journeys across the post-apocalyptic landscape. The conglomeration of actors and musicians have remained in motion all those years, trudging along a predetermined route within a clearly delineated territory, simply because it is the only way they know how to live: this peripatetic lifestyle has allowed them to experience and share the joy of art, a mission they cling to out of conviction that "survival is insufficient", as their motto proclaims. Yet there are times when

> it seemed a difficult and dangerous way to survive and hardly worth it, especially at times when they had to camp between towns, when they were turned away at gunpoint from hostile places, when they were travelling in snow or rain though dangerous territory, actors and musicians carrying guns and crossbows, the horses exhaling great clouds of steam, times when they were cold and afraid and their feet were wet. (*SE* 119)

Even though their expedition to the mysteriously illuminated settlement in the south may also present unknown dangers, there is a sense of invigoration and hope in this final trajectory—following quite literally a

light at the end of the tunnel. On these last pages of her novel, Mandel thus highlights the restorative potential of mobility, suggesting that it is possible to move past the shock-shelled inertia of crisis.

The concept of mobility is all-pervading in Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven*: the despair inscribed in it in a time of total chaos; the transgressive nature of it that threatens our sense of safety and protection; the absence of it in the debilitating post-crisis inertia; but finally, also the enduring faith in its potential, the awareness that venturing towards new frontiers is a longing that even catastrophe and trauma cannot undo.

Mobility in a Time of Uncertainty

This chapter has explored the myriad ways in which the concept of (im)mobility has been woven into fictions by Auster, Ford, Eggers, McCarthy and Mandel to explore the disorientation and precarity felt in a time of turmoil and uncertainty. Set in the aftermath of the 2008 credit crunch and resulting foreclosure crisis, Paul Auster's *Sunset Park* offers a portrait of a nation unable to uphold its long-held faith in forward- and upward-tending mobility. The set of characters we encounter in the story are marked by a sense of restlessness and lack of direction that reflects the instability and disorientation of millennial America. Richard Ford's two latest chronicles of the Frank Bascombe series are both structured as confounded and fragmented journeys through suburban territory that subvert the conventions of the road narrative tradition. Frank's mundane and often frustrating experience on the road lacks direction and a genuine sense of arrival—a limbo state that also applies to Frank's life more generally. By keeping Frank in an uncertain state of "perpetual becoming" (*LL* 73), Ford seems to suggest that we need to find ways to adjust to the unsettledness that characterizes modern existence. Dave Eggers's *A Hologram for the King* records a general sense of disorientation felt in a hyper-mobile, transnational world. Drifting in an undefined space, both psychologically and physically, Alan Clay misses a sense of direction. Alan's struggle to navigate his way through the "curiously isotropic" (Cresswell, *On the Move* 49) space of the desert and the perplexing postmodern architecture of

KAEC indeed echoes his sense of loss on an existential level. Any movement in Cormac McCarthy's dark tale The Road is decidedly entropic in nature. The father and son's harrowing pilgrimage across a postapocalyptic wasteland towards an elusive and eventually disillusioning goal (the sea) powerfully conveys the despair and disorienting effect of crisis. Finally, Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven* addresses the anxiety triggered by "transgressive" mobility in the aftermath of catastrophe. By immobilizing emblems of modern mobility, Mandel evokes the sense of paralysis and stagnation that follows the shock of crisis. The final pages of *Station Eleven* offer a hopeful vision, however, of a reawakened faith in mobility and new beginnings.

As elucidated in the opening chapter of this book, the valorization of mobility has been a central tenet in the American mindset and literary tradition since the nation's very beginnings. Perhaps most crucially, it is the American Dream of upward social mobility, as well as the boundless faith in an ever-progressing Frontier which need to be recognized as vital building blocks in America's self-image. Yet as my analysis of recent works of fiction written in the "Age of Uncertainty" (Bauman, *Liquid Times* 94) has revealed, the idea of mobility takes on more complex and ambiguous meanings in a time of upheaval. Indeed, when perceived certainties are destabilized through the process of crisis, the concept of mobility emerges as a potent trope to give voice to a growing sense of disorientation and confusion. The following chapter explores how the "spiritual homelessness" of the contemporary period calls for a reconceptualization of what it means to feel settled, to have a sense of home.

Chapter 4
Unsettled Dwelling: Looking for Home in Times of Crisis

The Impermanence and Mobility of Home

The previous chapter has foregrounded the central role that ideas of disorientation and dislocation (both physical and metaphorical) have played in recent works of fiction by Auster, Ford, Eggers, McCarthy and Mandel. The "destabilizing flux" (Morley 3) felt in these volatile years marked by a rapid succession of political, socio-economic and ecological crises permeates their stories. The characters we encounter attempt to navigate across a "floating territory" (Maffesoli qtd. in Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* 209), a world unsettled by a whirlwind of changes. As we have seen, different crises—real or imagined—provide the backdrop of these plots: there is the total and all-encompassing calamity paralyzing the world in McCarthy and Mandel's postapocalyptic tales *The Road* (2006) and *Station Eleven* (2014). The pre-9/11 context of economic and political uncertainty dominates in Ford's *The Lay of the Land* (2006), whereas the havoc caused by Hurricane Sandy infuses the novellas in *Let Me Be Frank with You* (2014). The plot of Paul Auster's *Sunset Park* (2010) is anchored in the housing crisis and economic downturn of the post-credit-crunch period. Eggers's *A Hologram for the King* (2012) explores America's dwindling economic power in the context of an increasingly competitive and ruthless global market. Each story, then, reveals how the contemporary "Age of Uncertainty" (Bauman, *Liquid Times* 94) has propelled the nation into a state of flux. These are new realities that we have to accommodate ourselves to, and that trigger a shift in the very structure of our existence. In the first chapter, I have explored how in any period of upheaval and turmoil, in which the metaphorical pendulum swings resolutely towards the mobility side of the spectrum, a counter-reaction is inevitably set in motion that seeks

stability and fixity.[69] As David Harvey rightly observes in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), human beings are inevitably prone to look "for some sense of coherence" (12) in "the maelstrom of change" (13). If crisis inherently represents chaos and confusion, there is an instinctual drive to seek order and safety as a response. Susan Fraiman reinforces this view when she writes that "a sense of precariousness often (and logically enough) goes hand in hand with a longing for stability" (20).

As elucidated in the opening chapter, in the past this yearning for reassuring order and stability in the midst of uncertainty has often engendered a desire for home—representing a fixed and lasting place of safety and rest. The latter part of the nineteenth century is a case in point: the family home came to be construed as a haven, an almost sacred refuge, in a society fundamentally altered by processes of urbanization and industrialization. Similarly, the cultural response to the trauma of the Great Depression has been to a large part centered on an idealized vision of home. Indeed, the manifesto *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) produced by the Southern Agrarians (Twelve Southerners), the pastoral bliss evoked by Regionalist painters such as Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, and works of popular culture like *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) have all positioned home, place and tradition as crucial antidotes to the unsettling reality of the Depression years. A similar impulse could be discerned after the turmoil and trauma of the Second World War: the suburban family home here became the very emblem of American values and stability.[70]

We must ask, then, how this yearning for stability has manifested itself in the current era of uncertainty and upheaval. If Simone Weil is right in her bold statement that "to be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul" (40), then the question arises as to what it is that can generate a feeling of safety and rootedness in a world in which "the center cannot hold" (Yeats 189). In

69 This argument is based on David Seamon's succinct statement that "[t]he whole of a person, group, or society's existence can be viewed as a series of pendulum swings between the need for center, at-homeness and continuity on the one hand, and the need for change, variety and reach on the other" (228). See Chapter 1 (21–22).

70 Refer to Chapter 1 for more insights into the cult of domesticity and the significance of home in American cultural history.

this time of intense mobility, migration and movement (a period starkly defined by the "M-Factor" (288), to use George W. Pierson's expression), to what extent has what I have called the "H-Factor" (House, Home and Heritage) again emerged as a significant balancing force?

In the second chapter of this book, we have seen that in the present period permeated by an array of crises, the physical space of home fails to provide any kind of lasting and reliable safety. I argue that in fiction written in the post-9/11 period, the domestic space is revealed to be a site of precarity, vulnerable to be transgressed and infiltrated by outside forces. No longer presented as a safe haven offering protection from the world, the home is stripped of its impermeable aura. In the books by Auster, Ford, Eggers, McCarthy and Mandel, the intimate space of home is susceptible to being breached or even destroyed through environmental calamity and personal trauma as well as processes of commodification and foreclosure. By focusing on the fragility of the domestic space (in the context of crisis), these authors divest home of any notion of permanence and fixity, infusing it with a distinct air of "contingency" (Knapp 21).

The "porosity" (Kaika 273) and vulnerability of the domestic space on both a micro (*house*) and macro (*nation*) level have thus become starkly apparent in the post-9/11 era. In the current time of upheaval, it is no longer possible to see home as "[t]he stable physical centre of one's universe—a safe and still place to leave and return to (whether house, village, region or nation)" (Rapport and Dawson 6). What this implies, then, is that there needs to be a drastic shift in our perception of what constitutes home. And indeed, such calls for a revised understanding of home already started to emerge with increased urgency in the latter part of the twentieth century. There has been a growing awareness, particularly in scholarship focused on issues of migration and postmodern transnationalism, that we need to move away from rigid and strictly place-bound understandings of home. Indeed, traditional views of home as a fixed and impermeable sacred space came to be regarded as not only unsustainable, but thoroughly flawed in an era of heightened mobility and "fluidity" (Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* 2). As David Ralph and Lynn A. Staeheli explain, in recent years, "many commentators [have challenged] the way home is often imagined as bounded,

and instead offer a conceptualisation of home as messy, mobile, blurred and confused" (519). In their groundbreaking publication, *Migrants of Identity* (1998), Nigel Rapport and Andrew Dawson contend that

> [a] broader understanding [of home] is possible and necessary, one concerned less with the routinization of space and time than with their fluidity and with individuals' continuous movement through them …. In essence, a far more mobile conception of home should come to the fore, as something 'plurilocal' (Rouse 1991) something to be taken along whenever one decamps. (7)

To infuse home with this sense of mobility, several commentators have argued that home needs to be seen as an act, or more precisely a series of acts, performed by individuals over time, rather than a fixed and permanent physical place. For instance, John Berger posits that one can "improvise a shelter" built of "habits …, the raw material of repetition" (64). He contends that "home is represented, not by a house, but by a practice or set of practices. … These practices, chosen and not imposed, offer in their repetition, transient as they may be in themselves, more permanence, more shelter than any lodging" (64). Similarly, in their introduction to the compilation of essays entitled *Uprootings/Regroundings* (2003), Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne-Marie Fortier and Mimi Sheller write that "the work of making home, affective and physical, is an ongoing process" (10). In her contribution to the aforementioned publication, Irene Gedalof asserts that "[h]ome might be refigured, not as a fixed ground of identity from which to act, but as itself a continuous act of production and reproduction that is never fully complete" (106). There appears to be a growing consensus, then, about "the importance of unsettling the home as a fixed and stable location" (33), as Blunt and Dowling put it.

To attain a more mobile sense of home, there has to be a shift away from the perception of home as a purely material, physical place: instead, our understanding of home needs to take into account the more dynamic, *human* factor in its formation. The one scholar who has most explicitly made the case for such a radical reconceptualization of home and place (in an era of time-space compression) is geographer

Doreen Massey. In "A Global Sense of Place" (1991), she defines place as being "constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus" (28). She develops this argument further in her subsequent essay "A Place Called Home" (1992), where she states that a home-place needs to be understood as a "complex product of the ever-shifting geography of social relations present and past" (15). Considering that a (home-) place is formed out of social relations and their fluid interrelations, it is always and necessarily "unfixed" ("A Place Called Home" 13) and in flux. By turning the focus on people and their active role in shaping 'home', Massey thus manages to mobilize our conception of home.

In our present time of dislocation and volatility, the desire to feel rooted, which Simone Weil posits is deeply ingrained in the human psyche (Weil 40), *can* be satisfied if we accept this more mobile conception of home—this view of home as inherently impermanent, ever-changing and as essentially dependent on social bonds and individual gestures of domesticity. And in fact, the novels discussed in this book by Auster, Ford, Eggers, McCarthy and Mandel all put forth visions of such a malleable idea of home. Having explored the (physical and metaphorical) *deconstruction* of the domestic space in the mobility-infused tales of disorientation and change in the previous two chapters, this final chapter thus spotlights how these texts cautiously propose to *reconstruct* a (mobile) sense of home in a time of uncertainty and change. This concluding discussion will not only be founded on the works of fiction by these five contemporary authors, but will also include references to the rich theoretical canon exploring the complexity of home, which has developed in the latter part of the twentieth century. Key thinkers in fields as diverse as humanistic geography, sociology, philosophy and cultural studies have explored what it means to feel at home in the modern world. Their writings will provide the necessary framework to read and interpret the subtle yet persistent yearning for a sense of home in the crisis-infused stories by Auster, Ford, Eggers, McCarthy and Mandel.

Glimpses of Home: Places of Temporary Belonging

Despite the awareness that the physical space of a permanent home is no longer reliable construct (see Chapter 2), there is, nevertheless, a clear longing discernible in these novels to find some form of spatial belonging, however temporary. Indeed, what unites all of these novels is the sense of acceptance that the characters eventually reach concerning the *illusion* of permanence (so embedded in the idea of home), the fact that lasting stability is not a viable option anymore and that one needs to find a way to accommodate to life's intrinsic uncertainty. Yet "[b]etween the inner sanctum of homely order and the outer territories of chaos lies a continuum of intermediate spaces" (6), Paperstergiadis rightly notes in *Dialogues in the Diasporas* (1998), and indeed such ephemeral, in-between spaces often take center stage in these narratives set in our "placeless times" (Robins qtd. in Rapport and Dawson 7). Although a permanent home may be illusory, it is possible to find momentary peace in transitory dwellings, to appreciate these glimpses of homely belonging in the present time of disorientation. After all, "any place of arrival is but a temporary station" (*Modernity and Ambivalence* 10–11), as Zygmunt Bauman puts it, and the novels discussed in this book recognize and accept the inherently fleeting feeling of rootedness that physical places can provide.

Of the five authors discussed in this book, Richard Ford is undoubtedly the one who has most explicitly expressed this imperative to come to terms with and embrace the impermanence of home. In interviews and in his non-fiction writing, Ford has repeatedly emphasized his skepticism towards the grand narrative of 'place'—a towering concept that has been particularly significant in the Southern literary tradition (most notably, perhaps, in the writing of Eudora Welty).[71] He expressed his caution regarding 'place' to Eleanor Walker: "my view is that any-

71 See Brinkmeyer's illuminating discussion of the significance of place (as opposed to movement) in the Southern literary tradition in *Remapping Southern Literature* (2000): "Even when pointing out the dangers sometimes found in uncritically accepting place and tradition, writers of the renaissance never stray too far from celebrating the healing and wondrous power of a settled life, of a life 'in place'. Place counts in the Southern literary imagination; there is no getting free of it, or at least, there is no getting free of it and remaining healthy and whole" (24).

thing you feel about a place, anything that you think about place at all, you have authored and ascribed to some piece of geography" (Walker, "Interview" 142). Walker explains that "[t]o Ford, a literal place harbors no power; whatever force a place provides is created simply by the person who brings with him or her certain expectations, certain memories, certain ideas of what that particular place means" (*Richard Ford* 163). This becomes especially meaningful when we think about the notion of home, which after all, usually represents the place that a person deems to be the most significant and sacred. In his essay "An Urge for Going", the author states that "home just seems a provisional claim, a designation you make upon a place, not one it makes on you" (3). Looked at from this perspective, home thus necessarily requires agency: it needs to be understood as a special quality and set of feelings you *choose* to allocate to a physical place at a specific time in your life. "Home, then, is whatever I say it is, even if it's just for today and I change my mind tomorrow", he writes in the Smithsonian ("At Home for Now"). Our notion of home is fundamentally unfixed—it can shift and reattach, being essentially dependent on the location we happen to find ourselves at. And indeed, this flexible and transferable definition of home is perhaps best encapsulated in one of Ford's favored terms—*locatedness*, which he has previously described as "not a science of the ground but of some quality within us" ("Urge" 67). In my interview, Ford confirmed that whereas 'place' and 'home' are concepts that he "didn't find … to be holding up very well", he feels more comfortable with the notion of "locatedness" because he thinks of it as "just being something rather practical". He explained:

> So to be located means, to me, "I happen to be here now and to be, more or less, feeling a certain equability about it." … It's a word that comes out of real estate. People will say to you that there are three considerations in the value of a house: location, location, location. That's all it needs. And in that sense, what that means is, where it happens to be at the time you found it. (Personal Interview)

The concept of 'locatedness' thus allows Ford to address the inevitably temporary and often random attachments that people develop

towards specific places. Divesting houses of any sense of permanence is of course a red thread running through all of the Bascombe novels. As already mentioned in Chapter 2, as a residential specialist, Frank is perhaps more acutely aware than others of people's oftentimes arbitrary choice of a place to call home and the short-lived duration of these dwelling arrangements ("one house is as good as another" (*ID* 108)). In the course of the novels, Frank gradually accommodates himself to the temporariness of the places that he often randomly ends up in—"a constellation of stars among which I smoothly orbit, traffic and glide" (*ID* 285). In *The Lay of the Land* (2006), middle-aged Bascombe may still dedicate much of his time to finding a fitting dwelling places for his hard-to-please clients, but he himself has long realized that "[o]ur sense of belonging and fitting in, of making a claim and settling down is at best ephemeral" (*LL* 310). And indeed, at the beginning of the novel, Frank muses on the fragile and elusive meaning of home:

> What is home then, you might wonder? The place you first see daylight, or the place you choose for yourself? Or is it the someplace you just can't keep from going back to, though the air there's grown less breathable, the future's over, where they really don't want you back, and where you left on a breeze without a rearward glance? Home? Home's a musable concept if you're born to one place, as I was (the syrup-aired southern coast), educated to another (the glaciated mid-continent), come full stop at a third—then spend years finding suitable "homes" for others. Home may only be where you've memorized the grid pattern, where you can pay with a check, where someone you've already met takes your blood pressure, palpates your liver, slips a digit here and there, measures the angstroms gone off your molars bit by bit—in other words, where your primary caregivers await, their pale gloves already pulled on and snugged. (*LL* 15–16)

Home is here no longer construed as a single, permanent site of meaning and stability, but rather as "plurilocal" (Rouse qtd. in Rapport and Dawson 7), a label that can be attached to multiple sites, simultaneously as well as consecutively. The human being seems bound to look for such

spaces of belonging and comfort, however fleeting this attachment to place may end up being.

That Ford himself sees "home [as] a variable concept" ("Accommodations" x) should of course come as no surprise when one considers the author's aforementioned peripatetic lifestyle, which has its origins in his childhood (spent partly in his grandfather's hotel) and that has remained a constant leitmotif in his life.[72] And yet it is striking that, even though the author is fully aware of the ephemerality and arbitrariness of the home-places in our lives, the longing for home never fully disappears. He most explicitly ponders over his persistent and somewhat puzzling yearning for homely belonging in an essay in Smithsonian Magazine, entitled "At Home for Now". He writes:

> Though in the course of all these many moves, and in the many residences that have resulted, I've almost always had my feelers out for some certifiable sense of home-ness. You could say, in spite of all, that I've been "home-hungry" all my life—nosing around, sampling the genie spirit or the townscape of some new burg or county where I've somehow landed, determining where this or that road leads, musing about what family lives in this or that house, or used to live there, and for how long and how all that worked out for them. I've pictured my history or my future in whatever place it was—Missoula, Montana; Greenwood, Mississippi; Ann Arbor—always hoping, expecting to feel something *enfolding*, something protectively familiar, some sensation of belonging. (Italics in original)

He continues to note that "once in a while that homey-enfolding feeling has actually welled up in me, its rich ethers filling my nose, my heart surging, my brain spangling with all the lavish yet humble possibilities of belonging"—and yet, "these ethers and heart-swellings" have always been "as fleeting as a dream. But a good dream". The hunger for home, then, is perhaps meant to remain unsatisfied, or at least only briefly appeased. Ford concludes that "[i]t's enough for me that, after all these years, I still can even think about home, still imagine it as a sweet

72 For more details on Ford's pronounced "urge for going", see Chapter 3 (153–54)

notion—ever offshore, ever out of my reach, a place locked in a dream" ("At Home"). It is precisely this complex and ambivalent approach to home—the awareness that it remains forever enticing and yet inherently ephemeral—that is wonderfully captured in the Bascombe novels.

In Dave Eggers's *A Hologram for the King* (2012), a permanent sense of home appears equally out of reach: throughout the novel, home remains an elusive, almost holographic concept which, in our time of transnationalism and economic decline, has proven itself to be increasingly difficult to materialize. Alan Clay is the novel's tragic homo viator whose spiritual homelessness—and imminent literal homelessness (Alan being in the process of selling his home in Boston)—lead him to dwell on imaginary home-spaces in the unbuilt KAEC cityscape and castles in the Saudi mountains. Alan's lingering desire to find a permanent and reliable place to call home is here clearly represented as inadequate and unachievable. As already mentioned in the second chapter, Alan is forced to make himself at home in the sterile "non-places" (Augé) that offer him brief sensations of shelter, be it an airplane, a Hilton hotel or the ghostly buildings in KAEC. In his seminal work *Liquid Modernity* (2000), Zygmunt Bauman asserts that in the present liquid times, "the trick is to be home in many homes" (207). Referring to the work by fellow sociologist Jacques Attali, Bauman writes about the imperative for nomads "to grow used to the state of continuous disorientation, to the travelling along roads of unknown direction and duration, seldom looking beyond the next turn or crossing; they need to concentrate all their attention on that small stretch of road which they need to negotiate before dusk" (209). In Eggers's novel, it is undoubtedly the expat community in Jeddah who best embodies this vision of a flexible modern existence, and who might offer a blueprint as to how some sense of home could be found in our contemporary "placeless" times (Robins qtd. in Rapport and Dawson 7). Heralding from all corners of the world, the people in the expat workforce in Jeddah indeed appear to focus only on the small stretch of road ahead. Alan's Danish love-interest, Hanne, may live in a house that "looked as if she'd moved in hours before" with what "couldn't have been more than five pieces of furniture" (*HK* 172), but she appears completely comfortable and at-ease in this intermediary home-space ("it's so quiet that most of the time I love it" (*HK* 173)).

Uncertain where their career paths may next lead them to, Hanne and the other international nomads find a way to construct a temporary feeling of belonging in Jeddah, just as they would in any other city. They symbolize most urgently what a flexible, mobile sense of home could look like. Theirs is, to use Kimberly Dovey's words, "a way of relating to the environment that can be transposed from place to place" (38–39). The sedentarist urge to elevate and attach to a single home-place has given way to what Agnes Heller has termed "geographic promiscuity" (1)—a malleable, adaptable and most of all plural approach to dwelling, perhaps more appropriate and useful in the current "Age of Uncertainty" (Bauman, *Liquid Times* 94).

The necessity to shift our perception of home from being fixed and permanent to being transposable, mobile and inherently ephemeral takes on even more urgency in the two post-apocalyptic novels discussed in this book—McCarthy's *The Road* (2006) and Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014). In both of these texts, the irrevocable loss of a stable and protective home-site leads the characters to look for temporary dwellings to comfort and shelter them in the aftermath of crisis. For the two desperate wanderers in McCarthy's *The Road*, a comforting and enduring home is indeed nowhere to be found.[73] The father and son have to make do with a series of intermediary rest stops, which offer a brief and fragile respite from the arduous journey towards the sea. As Terry Witek remarks, McCarthy's fiction posits that "no place in the world is home, that everywhere is a potential campsite" (29). Time and time again, the father and son construct such temporary campsites in abandoned houses and forlorn vehicles, or they huddle together in the ashen wilderness outside, using pieces of plastic as a tarp. Whilst this chronic displacement prohibits any feeling of stability and settlement to emerge, it is nevertheless striking how these daily acts of setting up camp disclose what Avtar Brah has termed a "homing desire" (194), subtle and faint as it may be in this unhomely territory. The ritual of gathering wood and making fire, the food preparation by the fire, the desire to create a "nesting place" (*TR* 212), the momentary comfort under the

73 Refer to Chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of the unhomely spaces encountered in *The Road*.

weight of clothes and blankets: these moments speak of the persistent longing for home, as brief as this sensation may turn out to be. As he sits drying his son's hair by the fire, the father reflects: "All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" (*TR* 74). These lines beautifully convey the sense of ephemerality that underlies any sensation of home experienced in McCarthy's novel. Of all the transitory dwelling places, the bunker undoubtedly offers the most convincing illusion of home to the homeless wanderers in the novel. As more thoroughly discussed in Chapter 2, the father takes pleasure in the simple and almost forgotten acts of domesticity—taking a warm bath, preparing breakfast, shaving—which take on an almost sacred quality. Although home is permanently gone for the father and son, there are these brief glimpses, however illusory and painful, of domesticity—these reminders of what it feels like to have a home.

In Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014), the world as we know it has been forever altered by the all-encompassing destruction of the Georgia Flu. People have for the most part regrouped into small settlements, "an archipelago of small towns" (*SE* 48), which function according to their own individual governing principles (in some cases, led by self-proclaimed, autocratic prophets of religious cults). In the process of this resettlement, many non-places—places devoid of domestic or intimate qualities—are repurposed into sites of domesticity, however tentatively. Gas stations, schools or fast-food restaurants like IHOP, Wendy's and McDonalds are turned into makeshift homes, offering a sense of shelter and privacy to surviving families and individuals. The Wendy's in St. Deborah by the Water, a small town now under the control of a delusional prophet and his followers, is described in more detail. Although "the low square building with the look of having been slapped together from a kit in an architecturally careless era" (*SE* 50) qualifies as a manifestly unhomely space, there is a conscious attempt to imbue the fast-food restaurant with an air of domesticity and aesthetic sensibility: the front door has been replaced with a wooden one delicately embellished with flower carvings. This simple intervention evinces a yearning to appropriate the space and to create a home out of an otherwise resolutely sterile place. Yet the most striking transformation of a non-

place into a place in the novel is Severn City Airport, a vast settlement sheltering 320 people, twenty years after the collapse. When the pandemic "exploded like neutron bomb over the surface of the earth" (*SE* 37), air travel was brought abruptly to a halt, and airplanes got redirected to close-by airports; such was the case with the New York flight to Toronto, which landed at the small Michigan airport instead. The sections describing the passengers' initial inability to grasp what is happening, to fathom the magnitude and *permanence* of the disaster, are some of the most haunting passages in the novel. On this doomsday, the airport—this place of transit, this temporary station—thus suddenly becomes a final destination, the unexpected endpoint. As readers, we get to witness the gradual shifting of functions of the various spaces in the settlement: over the course of the months and years following the global standstill, the airport is slowly domesticated by the travelers who decide to stay put rather than venture out onto the road. This "two-storey monolith of concrete and glass" (*SE* 305) may represent the antithesis of domesticity, yet residents of the airport find ways of creating an illusion of homely privacy by inhabiting smaller, more intimate locations: some people set up camp in the restricted interior of the stranded airplanes; others dwell in tents that were constructed out of branches and sheets collected from a close-by hotel, installed in rows within the large terminals. The airport inhabitants come up with more ways to repurpose the site: the stationary airplanes, for instance, become a playground for the children, who play hide and seek between the wheels. Gardens are set up behind the runway, and a 737 wing is used to hang and skin the hunters' prey—deer, boars, rabbits—later to be cooked on a bonfire nearby on the tarmac. The gradual transformation and appropriation of the airport discloses the human ability, in times of crisis, to mold one's physical environment to fulfill the human need for shelter. And indeed, the airport comes to *feel* like home for the inhabitants. After a scouting expedition for food and other supplies, Dolores is "surprised by the emotion that had overtaken her on the return … up the airport road, and then the airport had come into view between the trees. *Home*, she'd thought, and she'd felt such relief" (*SE* 256). People's astounding capacity to find a sense of homely belonging, even in the most unlikely context brings to mind Gaston Bachelard's

memorable writing in *The Poetics of Space*, in which he proclaims that "whenever the human being has found the slightest shelter … we shall see the imagination build 'walls' of impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection" (5). Reading the postapocalyptic tales *Station Eleven* and *The Road*, one cannot help but feel that this innate human desire to *construct* home materializes most forcefully in the midst of crisis. These two novels could thus be read in light of Susan Fraiman's concept of "shelter writing", which she uses to refer to texts "in which domestic shelter is lost, longed for, and finally recreated" (25). In such stories, "the smallest domestic endeavors have become urgent and precious in the wake of dislocation" (25). Both texts define home as mobile—something that is *performed* and *made*, as opposed to something that simply *is* and *remains*.

This vision of home as being constructed out of deliberate acts of domesticity also emerges in the plot of Paul Auster's *Sunset Park* (2010). When Bing and Ellen come across the abandoned house in "lamentable condition" (*SP* 81–82), they decide that "all it was going to take" to turn the shack into a dwelling is "elbow grease" (*SP* 82): "A week or two of scrubbing and painting and they would be in business" (*SP* 82). The residents thus carefully transform the derelict dwelling into a space that allows them to feel a sense of homely belonging. To settle in, the group rapidly begins to perform various domestic gestures, in both the communal spaces of the house as well as in within the intimate nests of their private rooms. As he joins the cohabitation experiment, Miles is told about the "various routines and protocols that have been established since they moved in" (*SP* 126). "Each person has a job to perform": Bing is "the handyman-janitor, Ellen is the cleaning woman, and Alice does the shopping and most of the cooking" (*SP* 126). To "[pool] their resources", they "generally eat breakfast and dinner together" (126), and Miles is welcomed to the house with a dinner party. It is, in fact, each one of these humble, individual actions in the domestic space, small as they may be, that become the building blocks of the construct of home. As Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling put it in their seminal book *Home* (2006), "Home is lived; what home means and how it is materially manifest are continually created and re-created through everyday practices" (23). The derelict house takes on characteristics of home only because the four twenty-somethings actively decide to imbue the place

with meaning. Considering that the young New York City residents have been largely divested of any feeling of power and control in the stifling economic context resulting from the 2008 financial crash and the bust of the housing bubble, the group's purposeful and methodical home-building practice appears almost cathartic. Prior to the Sunset Park experiment, Miles, Bing, Ellen and Alice have all had their own disillusioning experience of the housing crisis—be it witnessing the tragedy of foreclosure in Florida, feeling firsthand the frustration and humiliation of not being able to afford rent any longer, or recognizing the increasingly grim housing market conditions when working as a realtor. By claiming home in Sunset Park and thus creating a domestic experience through deliberate actions and behaviors, the four characters regain a sense of agency and control. Yet the fact that the plot ends with an eviction suggests that Auster—much like the other novelists discussed in this book—considers such a feeling of homely belonging found in a physical dwelling to be elusive and ultimately ephemeral.

As we have seen, the precarity and uncertainty of the post-crisis moment looms large in all of the novels discussed here. In this context, the desire for a space to call home emerges with renewed urgency. While the romanticized idea of home as a fixed place of protection and permanence can no longer be upheld in the current era of instability (see Chapter 2), alternative constructions of home materialize in the plots by Auster, Ford, Eggers, McCarthy and Mandel. Home is here presented to be primarily a practice, an ongoing process that requires agency and purpose. The novels suggest that a domestic experience, even if it is bound to be a temporary fix, can be created in the most unlikely and unhomely environments—from "non-places" (Augé) to decomposing, abandoned houses and sterile bunkers. What becomes clear in these crisis-ridden stories, above all else, is that the yearning to find shelter, to find a steadying point where one can rest and feel safe, is never more acute than in the midst of unsettling change and disorienting flux. Yet, if this longing for homely stability can be briefly satisfied in physical dwelling places, the stories all imply that a true feeling of at-homeness ultimately requires something quite different than material shelter: it requires human connections and the experience of community.

Dwelling in Others: Finding a Sense of Home in Community

That in the midst of chaos and anxious instability human relationships can become fixtures impossible to find in the material realm indeed becomes evident when reading the texts by Auster, Ford, Eggers, McCarthy and Mandel. With their environment appearing increasingly volatile and unknowable, the characters in the novels by all five authors turn to other people—at times family, at others a chosen family—to provide a sense of homely stability that they are unable to locate in the world. As Klaus Benesch notes in "Space, Place, Narrative: Critical Regionalism and the Idea of Home in a Global Age", "[i]n times of crises, it is this experience of community and bonding, the creation of a shared lifeworld inhabited by human beings that matters" (106). This is perhaps most starkly apparent in the post-apocalyptic reality described in *Station Eleven*: with the world unrecognizably altered following the Georgia Flu outbreak, the survivors huddle together in settlements that offer protection and comfort. As previously discussed, Severn International Airport becomes a domestic microcosm for the stranded travelers. Here, as in other settlements, the shock and trauma of having witnessed the all-encompassing destruction of the virus has caused strangers to unite into new social structures—more resilient and safe than life on one's own. For Kirsten, who lost her brother, her only remaining family, shortly after the outbreak, having been taken in by the Symphony at age fourteen meant that the amalgamation of musicians and artists quickly became her substitute family, whom she loved "desperately" (*SE* 301). For her, as for her fellow nomads, "the truth was that the Symphony was their only home" (*SE* 48)—and as such, home is mobilized, taken with them wherever the road leads them. There is, then, to use Deleuze and Guattari's terminology, a "deterritorialization" (3) of home at work here; home no longer resides in a unique place that is imbued with special meaning, but rather in the connection felt with other human beings. Philosopher Kuang-Ming Wu succinctly encapsulates this idea: "Home is being-with-other(s)", he writes. "Home is where I both was born and am being continually born, within that womb called other people, in their being *not* me" (qtd. in Mallet 83).

The Sunset Park experiment in Paul Auster's eponymous novel equally reveals how a feeling of at-homeness has less to do with the actual physical space—in this case, a rather sloppily renovated shack—than with the sense of community that develops among its inhabitants. Although born out of desperate circumstances, the cohabitation project comes to provide an unexpected feeling of home to each of the four wandering souls, who all struggle to find stability and direction in the increasingly anxious terrain of millennial America. As Eric Hobsbawm notes, "[m]en and women look for groups to which they can belong, certainly and forever, in a world in which all else is moving and shifting, in which nothing else is certain" (qtd. in Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* 171). This impulse to form a cluster with like-minded individuals, opposed to the perceived phoniness and inadequacies of society at large, brings to mind utopian communities such as the Transcendentalists' Brook Farm experiment in the mid-nineteenth century. Like the Sunset Park quartet, the Brook Farm residents found in their community a sense of belonging, "a day dream, and yet a fact" (qtd. in Chandler 14) as Nathaniel Hawthorne memorably phrased it.

Yet whereas the friendships with Bing, Alice and Ellen become an unforeseen fixture in protagonist Miles Heller's life as he returns to New York City after his seven-year self-imposed exile, it should be pointed out that these are not the only relationships that ground Miles. There is, first of all, his girlfriend Pilar, who becomes the epicenter of his existence and the reason why he first stays in Florida and then agrees to flee to New York. Although he is also taken by her sharp intellect, her being wise beyond her years, "in the end, it is [their] sexual complicity that binds him fast to her and holds him in the hot nowhereland of ruined and empty houses. He is bewitched by her skin. He is at home in her body, and if he ever finds the courage to leave, he knows he will regret it to the end of his days" (*SP* 15). Besides Miles's (arguably rather unsettling) devotion to underaged Pilar, it is his relationship with his father Morris which represents the feeling of homely belonging most strongly in Auster's novel. Little does Miles know that his father has kept his eyes and ears out for his estranged son over all of those years when Miles chose to disappear. Via Bing, who has kept in touch with Miles, Morris is able to follow his son's trajectory, at times even traveling to his

locations to get a glimpse of him. While Miles struggles to cope with the guilt that has engulfed him after his stepbrother's tragic death, Morris patiently waits for his son to find a way out of the trauma and solitude and back into his life. It is this unwavering fatherly love that perhaps comes to represent the feeling of home and belonging in its purest form in Auster's novel. It may be Miles's youthful shortsightedness that makes him unable to recognize, at the end of the novel, that the home he has been searching for has been there all along—in the community around him. Discussing the dramatic finale following the eviction, where Miles grandly proclaims that there is "no future" and "no hope", that "they are all homeless now" (*SP* 307), Paul Auster explained in our interview that

> [h]e's at his lowest moment at the end of the book, but my feeling is that things are not as bleak as he thinks they are, at least not for him, but he can't see his way beyond it. He's got a lot of support around him and I think a lot of the book has shown how much his parents care about him, for example. And in the end things are not going to end up as badly as he thought. But he is depressed, their building did get smashed up and they did get booted out, so at least the four of them are homeless right now, and that's what he was thinking about. (Telephone Interview)

In *A Hologram for the King*, there is a similar sense that the parameters of home may have to be redefined in our placeless times. It is, paradoxically, only as he is thousands of miles away from Boston, living out of a Hilton hotel and continuously drifting in the disorienting desert of Saudi Arabia, that Alan comes closer to understanding the true meaning of home and belonging. Indeed, his trip to KAEC allows him to get a new sense of clarity and insight about his relationships and his life that has gone adrift—as Dave Eggers remarked in our interview, "[i]t's always easier to see a landscape from a distance" (Email Interview). It is from the sterile stillness of his hotel room, and loosened up by a bottle of obscure, home-brewed moonshine that he received from Hanne, that Alan gets to reflect on his strained relationship to his father and his own failings as a father to his daughter Kit. In a number of candid letters to Kit, that remain unsent, he dares to be more vulnerable and fragile than ever before, exploring the trials of parenthood and his regrets about his

failed marriage. Spiraling down the rabbit hole of unresolved emotions, Alan appears to mourn the home he has lost, and thus finally process the demise of his family unit.

Perhaps due to his current raw emotional state, Alan is able to form new ties to two somewhat unlikely individuals: his driver Yousef and his doctor Zahra. It appears to be in their presence that Alan comes closest to feeling a moment of peace and a sense of belonging, which he has been unable to find for so long. Sitting in Zahra's kitchen, Alan tells her a story to pass on to her son, a story that seems to hold a lesson about the elusive meaning of shelter and home. He recalls an episode from his childhood of going hiking with his father in the snowy woods and, unable to make it back home in time before dusk, they ended up having to build a makeshift shelter out of logs and a sleeping bag out of taped-together clothes:

> –You shared the sleeping bag.
> –Yes we did. And I have to say, when we were all settled in there, it was very warm.
> –You didn't have a fire.
> –No fire, just each other.
> –And in the morning?
> –We taped the jackets back together, went home.
> –So you saved yourselves by building something. I get it. But he almost killed you both in the process.
> –I guess, Alan said, and laughed. (*HK* 306–7)

The conclusion that Alan appears to reach on these final pages of the novel, encapsulated in the camping story, is that it is impossible to survive in this world, and to feel a sense of homely belonging, if one chooses to isolate oneself from other human beings. As we shall see, it is, in fact, this same realization that comes through strongly all throughout Richard Ford's writing.

As much as Richard Ford's fiction centers on the dwelling places we like to call home, he has repeatedly voiced his belief that it is, in the end, only the connection felt with other human beings that can truly ground and stabilize us. In "An Urge for Going", Ford asserts that "[h]ome—real

home—the important place that holds you, always meant that: affection, love. *There* was fixity and a different sort of inward quality that could hold sway anywhere, even on the move" (3). This idea most explicitly finds expression in fictional form towards the end of *Independence Day*, when Frank Bascombe muses:

> [I]t's worth asking again: is there any cause to think a place—any place—within its plaster and joists, its trees and plantings, in its putative essence *ever* shelters some spirit ghost of us as proof of its significance and ours?
>
> No! Not one bit! Only other humans do that, and then only under special circumstances, which is a lesson of the Existence Period worth holding onto. We just have to be smart enough to quit asking places for what they can't provide, and begin to invent other options …. (*ID* 442)

This gradual move away from physical manifestations of home and the acknowledgement of the centrality of human bonds is also picked up by Huey Guagliardo: "While Frank may seem as resigned to his fate as any Hemingway hero, at the same time he discovers that a 'homey connectedness' [*ID* 93] with others might be available even on the wildest margins, and that whatever permanence is possible in this impermanent world derives more from that sense of connectedness than from any sense of place" (*Perspectives* 31). The first two Bascombe novels, in fact, track Frank's journey towards reaching this realization, after years of struggling to connect with and to regain trust in other people following his divorce and his son's death. In the two post-9/11 installments of the series, we get to encounter a Frank Bascombe who, despite his unshakable cynicism and contempt of the limitations of the human condition, learns to accept his inescapable dependence on and need for other human beings. Although the relationships described in these novels still hold their challenges—for instance, Frank's estrangement from Sally and the ongoing difficulty of dealing with his son Paul in *The Lay of the Land*—there is also a sense of connection and openness towards other people palpable in these novels that was arguably lacking the novels focused on Frank's earlier life. In *The Lay of the Land*, 55-year-old Frank explains that this shift occurred because "given how I was conducting life—staying offshore, waiting for the extra beat—I realized I

could die and no one would remember me for anything" (*LL* 75). Frank comes to understand that it is unsustainable to continue shutting himself off, and it is only by allowing himself to be vulnerable that a sense of belonging and "homey connectedness" (*ID* 93) can develop. In the latest book of the Bascombe saga, the relationship with Sally, so sparsely described on the pages of the stories, nevertheless evinces a solidness and permanence that Frank has been unable to experience up to then. Likewise, in the novella "The New Normal", one gets the sense that the relationship with his ex-wife Ann, complicated and tense as it may have remained since their divorce thirty years ago, represents an integral piece of Frank's lifeworld. As he departs from the care facility, where Ann has been living since her Parkinson diagnosis, Frank notes: "There is no urge to touch, to kiss, to embrace. But I do it just the same. It is our last charm. Love isn't a thing, after all, but an endless series of single acts" (*LMBF* 174). It is, in the end, the accumulation of these humble acts of affection, these human relationships, as frustrating and entangled as they may be at times, that form the only reliable building blocks of home in Ford's fiction. Yet it should be pointed out that Frank is also sharply aware of the fragility of human relationships—what Zygmunt Bauman has termed "the brittleness and transience of bonds" (*Liquid Modernity* 170). In *Independence Day*, Frank reflects:

> We want to feel our community as a fixed, continuous entity, the way Irv said, as being anchored into the rock of permanence; but we know it's not, that in fact beneath the surface (or rankly all over the surface) it's anything but. We and it are anchored only to contingency like a bottle on a wave, seeking a quiet eddy. The very effort of maintenance can pull you under. (*ID* 439)

Similarly, in *The Lay of the Land*, he concludes that

> All marriages—all everythings—tote around contingencies whether we acknowledge them or don't. … There's a back door *somewhere* to every deal, and there a draft can enter. All promises to be in love and "true to you forever" are premised on the iron contingency (unlikely or otherwise) that says, Unless, of course, I fall in love "forever" with someone else. (*LL* 343).

And yet, as Martyn Bone rightly understands, Ford "eventually reaffirms that human relations, however contingent, are more important than finding the 'fixed point' of a fetishized '*place*'"(129, italics in original). Given the precarity and impermanence of the places we call home, one's best bet, Ford seems to suggest, is to find a sense of steadiness and homely belonging within one's community.

In Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, the father and son breathlessly take refuge in one intermediary space after another, yet as previously discussed, a lasting sense of shelter is impossible to find within the ruthless post-apocalyptic territory. Given the hostile and threatening environment that they are exposed to on a daily basis, the father and the boy come to form a nucleus of security and homely belonging. As the reader gets to accompany the father and son's agonizing pilgrimage towards the southern sea, it is continuously highlighted that the father and son are "each the other's world entire" (*TR* 6). Eric Hage rightly points out, "(t)he very first lines of the novel let us know that this relationship is the novel's center and that all of the themes radiate outward from the bond between father and boy: 'When he woke in the woods in the dark and the cold of the night he'd reach out to touch the child sleeping beside him', McCarthy writes as *The Road* opens. 'His hand rose and fell softly with each precious breath' [*TR* 3]" (141). That the boy's well-being is the father's sole raison-d'être is indeed emphasized repeatedly throughout the narrative. "My job is to take care of you", he tells his son after yet another dangerous encounter on the road. "I was appointed to do that by God. I will kill anyone who touches you" (*TR* 77). Arielle Zibrak contends that it is specifically "in the wake of 9/11 and the period of violence and xenophobia that followed" that children have become "the center of our cultural vision of domesticity and innocence" (109). Given that the father's only priority is guiding his boy—the carrier of the "fire"—towards safer shores and keeping him alive, he encounters any strangers on the road with acute apprehension and distrust. On the road, hell is indeed other people, as the two nomads repeatedly come face to face with evil (most hauntingly in the gruesome basement of the antebellum mansion). The man thus constructs a condensed and exclusive home-world consisting of only him and his son, rejecting any possible connection with a human being outside of their nucleus. The father's insistence on sealing themselves off stands, however, in stark

opposition to the boy's increasingly urgent longing for a sense of community, that can be discerned all throughout the story. In one particularly revealing scene, the boy is seen peacefully playing in the sand: "He had a spatula made from a flattened foodtin and with it he built a small village. He dredged a grid of streets" (*TR* 244). In another instance, the child claims to have seen a boy his own age in a house across the street, who was looking at him but then abruptly vanished:

> Come back, he called. I wont hurt you. He was standing there crying when his father came sprinting across the road and seized him by the arm.
>
> What are you doing? he hissed. What are you doing?
>
> There's a little boy, Papa. There's a little boy.
>
> There's no little boy. What are you doing?
>
> Yes there is. I saw him.
>
> I told you to stay put. Didnt I tell you? Now we've got to go. Come on.
>
> I just wanted to see him, Papa. I just wanted to see him.
>
> The man took him by the arm and they went back up through the yard. The boy would not stop crying and he would not stop looking back. Come on, the man said. We've got to go.
>
> I want to see him, Papa.
>
> There's no one to see. Do you want to die? Is that what you want?
>
> I dont care, the boy said, sobbing. I dont care.
>
> The man stopped. He stopped and squatted and held him. I'm sorry, he said. Dont say that. You mustnt say that. (*TR* 84–85)

This scene conveys most forcefully that, as Lincoln has remarked, the boy is "socially desperate for others in his life" (172). This hunger to connect with someone other than his father is, perhaps, fueled by the growing awareness that his father, whose health has been continuously deteriorating, may not be there for much longer. And indeed, as the father

is forced to accept his imminent demise following an arrow injury, he urges his son to "find the good guys" (*TR* 278). The novel's finale, in which the boy is miraculously picked up by a couple and their two children shortly after his father's death, could arguably be read as an all-too convenient and, for McCarthy, unconventionally positive ending. Echoing his father's constant skepticism and caution, the boy implores: "How do I know you're one of the good guys?", to which the unnamed father responds "You dont. You'll have to take a shot" (*TR* 283). After being reassured by him that they don't eat people (the bar for what qualifies someone as a "good guy" being set decidedly rather low in McCarthy's nightmarish vision of the post-apocalypse), the boy agrees to join the family of four. It is certainly significant that on the final page of a heavily male-driven narrative, the boy is being welcomed into the womb of the new family by a maternal figure ("The woman when she saw him put her arms around him and held him. Oh, she said, I am so glad to see you" (*TR* 286)). This closing scene reads almost like a homecoming, the comforting sense that the boy's trials have come to an (albeit temporary) end as he is enveloped by the protective cocoon of community, and perhaps more importantly, motherly love. The experience of homely belonging is hence noticeably identified as female, a notion that harks back to nineteenth century homemaking ideals.[74]

McCarthy's decision to focus on the redemptive potential of community, a positive endnote that sets *The Road* markedly apart from his previous books, has generated starkly conflicting reactions from McCarthy scholars. Some critics, like Ashley Kunsa, applaud McCarthy's willingness to "[write] possibility into the ending of *The Road* by giving the child a fighting chance" (67)—a "radically optimistic shift" (68) that is "far more difficult" (68) to achieve "than merely reveling in the horror" (68). Yet the boy's reintegration into a comforting family structure has also been heavily criticized, most notably perhaps by Richard Gray, who reads this plot development as "deeply unconvincing" (47). In *After the Fall* (2011), Gray laments that "McCarthy has withdrawn into the sheltering confines of American myth: a myth that is, in this case, a curious but not uncommon mix of the heroic and domestic" (47). Gray aligns

74 For more details about the gendered ideology of domesticity, refer to the "Home as Haven" section in Chapter 1 of this book (48–53).

The Road with other post-9/11 novels that display a similar impulse to "retreat into the old sureties" (16), the "seductive pieties of home, hearth and family" (17).[75] Novelists including Don DeLillo (with *Falling Man*) or Lynne Sharon Schwartz (with *The Writing on the Wall*) have all, according to Gray, fallen into the trap of "domesticating" the crisis. By embracing "the familiar", Gray argues, these post-9/11 stories "dissolve public crisis in the comforts of the personal" (17).

Yet, by simply labelling the post-crisis impulse of novelists to explore ideas of home, community and family as regressive and inadequate, Gray fails to see that addressing these concepts in narrative form, with all their inherent complexities, can open up a crucial path towards coping with the disorienting experience of crisis. We should not forget that moments of unrest have the power to engender, as John Steinbeck memorably phrased it in *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), a shift from "I" to "we" (152)—a change from an individualistic to a communal mindset. Indeed, crisis often dissolves the perceived boundaries separating individuals, forcing us to recognize the ways in which we are all in many ways the same rather than different. In her insightful analysis of the socio-political aftermath of 9/11 in *Precarious Life* (2004), Judith Butler boldly calls for an acknowledgement of our "'common" corporal vulnerability' (42) in response to crisis. She asserts that recognizing the vulnerability that binds us all is a precondition for any "ethical encounter" (43). It is indeed crucial to realize that the experience of a crisis of such a vast and transcendent scale such as 9/11, a national housing crisis, ecological disaster or a pandemic is a *collective* experience—it represents trauma that affects many, that highlights our common fears and shared vulnerability. As such, I believe that it should come as no surprise that many stories written in the aftermath of crisis also mirror this increased awareness of our "common vulnerability"—and they do so by shifting the focus on the grand concepts of family and community. Unlike Gray, I thus read the literary interest in community and in the domestic experience in a time of crisis—a motif that, as we have seen,

75 It should be noted, however, that Gray praises McCarthy's enigmatic final paragraph, which he believes "returns us to the central narrative thrust of the novel, its richly mediated account of the harsh facts of the human condition and the humble shelters human beings try to construct to help them deal with or at least tolerate those facts" (47).

looms large in all of the novels discussed in this book—as a logical and, ultimately, necessary response to the experience of shared, collective trauma and uncertainty.

Locating Home in Times of Crisis

This chapter has allowed me to probe and expand on a premise that I first explored in the opening chapter of this book, namely that there will always be an undeniable longing to find a stabilizing element in the midst of chaos—the need, as David Harvey put it, to look "for some sense of coherence" (12) in the "maelstrom of change" (13). The historical chapter revealed that in the past, this yearning for coherence, order and stability often led to an idealized vision of the H-Factor—Home, House and Heritage. In the second chapter of this book, I argued that this idea of home as a permanent and fixed place of belonging can no longer be upheld in our "Age of Uncertainty" (Bauman, *Liquid Times* 94). Home is revealed to be a place of precarity and contingency, a place marked by permeability and vulnerability, and never more so than in times of crisis. Taking this loss of home as its starting point, the third chapter allowed me to dive more deeply into the motif of mobility, which functions as a potent trope to address the disorientation and lack of anchorage in a time of displacement and fragmentation. This final chapter has now highlighted that in the midst of this uncertain context, human beings nevertheless feel compelled to look for an illusion of home, however temporary and elusive this mirage of homely belonging may be. The stories by Auster, Eggers, McCarthy, Ford and Mandel are permeated by impermanent spaces of home and intermediary resting points, that provide glimpses of domesticity to the wandering souls in these plots; the feeling of home becomes unfixed, and hence mobilized. Yet whereas physical spaces can only ground us for so long, the novels all suggest "that bonds of humanity and fellowship are all we have to help us along in the ever-darkening world" (50) as Robert H. Brinkmeyer Jr. succinctly phrases it. To reconstruct a sense of home in the midst of chaos and fragmentation, the writers all underscore the need for community, for connection with others. When a crisis hits, home can only be located here, in the relationships and ties that stabilize and fasten us in troubled waters.

Epilogue

"And, just as it's supposed to, everything changes. *Before* is everlastingly gone. There is only everlastingly *after*" (*LL* 684). Richard Ford's words in *The Lay of the Land* ring eerily true to any reader after March 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic upended the world as we knew it. Arguably, the last time that one specific event, one historical moment, was felt to be so pivotal that our experience would forever be divided into a *before* and an *after*, was 9/11. Yet, whereas the terror attacks were, essentially, a local event that sent shockwaves throughout the world, the Covid-19 outbreak is unique in that its repercussions—domestic lockdown, social isolation, fear of contagion and professional challenges or disruption, to name but a few—are felt directly by each and every person in all of the countries affected by the crisis. According to Euronews, at the beginning of April, "[m]ore than 3.9 billion people, or half of the world's population, have now been asked or ordered to stay at home by their governments to prevent the spread of the deadly COVID-19 virus" (Sandford). And thus, for the first time in our lifetime, a single crisis has paralyzed virtually the entire world simultaneously, highlighting our "'common' corporal vulnerability" (42) as Judith Butler once wrote about 9/11. Indeed, cultural and socio-economic differences become essentially obsolete in the face of a virus that indiscriminately seeks to multiply and survive—even though, it should be noted, these factors do determine one's (in)ability to protect oneself from the virus or receive adequate treatment in case of infection. In the United States, where the pandemic is currently[76] raging with worrying force, recent weeks have revealed a heightened vulnerability of the nation's homeless as well as its minorities, with African American populations in large cities and in Southern states particularly exposed. As much as the virus represents a universal threat, the crisis thus also brutally emphasizes socio-economic disparities: deep-rooted, systemic inequalities that have been simmering underneath the surface now become starkly visible. As Jamelle Bouie writes in *The New York Times*,

76 This epilogue was written in April 2020.

> If there was anything you could predict about this pandemic — anything you could be certain about once it reached America's shores — it was that some communities would weather the storm while others would sink under the waves, and that the distribution of this suffering would have everything to do with patterns inscribed by the past.

Alongside the widespread panic about this unprecedented public health crisis, there is also a growing apprehension about the economic aftermath of the pandemic, with countless businesses already now unable to carry the financial weight caused by the prolonged commercial standstill. By the end of April 2020, an astounding 30 million Americans claimed unemployment benefits since the beginning of the Covid-19 crisis, the United States thus being "on course to reach levels unseen since the Great Depression of the 1930s" (Rushe). Although we may only find ourselves at the very beginning of the calamity unleashed by the coronavirus outbreak, there appears to be little doubt, then, that this crisis represents a decisive marker in world history, an incision in our trajectory that will perhaps forever alter and inform our reality.

When I started dwelling on the centrality of the home and mobility binary in times of crisis, and more specifically in the novels written during tumultuous times, I could never have anticipated how much these ideas would come to the forefront of my own (and our global collective) experience. Indeed, the concepts of home and mobility lie at the very heart of the present crisis, and how we experience it on a personal level. For obvious reasons, the lockdown meant that 'home' suddenly became the epicenter of everyone's life. If we accept that, under normal circumstances, home would be the "sacred place from which everything else is mapped" (Papastergadis 2), the place from where we feel compelled to explore the world—representing a centrifugal motion—then the outbreak of the virus engendered a centripetal motion, a consequence of the panicked and urgent call from authorities across the world to "stay home and stay safe". The first weeks of the virus outbreak amplified the positive attributes that the domestic space has been traditionally imbued with, and that I have explored in the historical chapter of this book. Indeed, as I sat in my home, watching the unsettling and surreal news about the seemingly unstoppable progression of the outbreak, John Ruskin's famous lines reappeared in my mind, praising

home as "the place of peace: the shelter not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division", this protective cocoon that should never allow "the anxieties of the outer life penetrate into it" (20). Yet as days turned into weeks, the experience within this domestic space also underwent a palpable metamorphosis: for many, the aura of protection and safety provided by our dwelling places soon appeared more like a gilded cage, an increasingly suffocating place of confinement and isolation. To others, this sensation of having had the pause button pressed for the duration of several weeks or months by suddenly being forced to stay put in one's home, may be felt as somewhat of a relief. Indeed, sociologist Harmut Rosa has noted that in the context of a constantly accelerating society, characterized by "high 'kinetic energy' or notorious unrest" (*Social Acceleration* 306), the current standstill represents an unprecedented moment: "The world is coming to a halt. At least in the non-digital sphere, movement has almost ceased to exist" ("Wir Können die Welt Verändern", my own translation[77]). Rosa contends that the coronavirus serves as "the most radical decelerator that we have experienced in the past 200 years" ("Das Virus", my own translation[78]). It is true that a widespread and almost surreal sense of inertia has taken over the world in these first weeks of the pandemic: a vast majority of people no longer goes to work; most air travel has been suspended; even in 'the city that never sleeps', hit particularly hard by the virus, the streets are ghostly vacant and silent. But not only physical movement has stopped—Rosa rightly observes that "the wheels and engine of acceleration and growth" ("Wir Können", my own translation[79]), of an ever-forward pushing capitalist economy, have likewise suddenly been brought to an abrupt standstill. Although there is thus a pervading sense of immobility as a result of the pandemic and lockdown policies imposed by governments all over the world, the velocity in the digital

77 "Nun aber ereignet sich nie Dagewesenes: Die Welt hält an. Die Bewegung kommt, im nichtdigitalen Bereich jedenfalls, beinahe zum Erliegen" ("Wir Können").

78 "Das Virus ist der radikalste Entschleuniger, den wir in den letzten 200 Jahren erlebt haben" ("Das Virus").

79 "Die Räder und Motoren der Beschleunigung und des Wachstums schienen immun gegen jede Art von Wachstums- und Beschleunigungskritik, und die auf die Klimakrise reagierenden Beschlüsse und Erklärungen prallten ab an der stahlharten Steigerungslogik moderner Gesellschaft und kapitalistischer Wirtschaft. Doch im April 2020 stehen jene Räder plötzlich still, weitgehend still" ("Wir Können").

realm appears to have reached new heights. Confined in their homes, people across the globe have increasingly made use of videoconferencing technology to uphold communication for both professional and personal purposes, and social media platforms have gained even more popularity and dominion in their everyday lives. It seems, then, that the high-paced lifestyle and dizzying motion that has come to characterize modern existence has now simply shifted into the digital sphere.

A recent article in *Business Insider* sketched out how more and more companies are now turning to VR (virtual reality) systems and other extended reality tools to better adapt to the changed work environments due to the coronavirus pandemic ("Five Ways"). It is impossible for me to read such reports without picturing Dave Eggers's protagonist Alan Clay, waiting to pitch his holographic conferencing system to King Abdullah in the Saudi Arabian desert. That such technological tools allowing "virtual coimplacement" (Casey E. xvi), which Dave Eggers referenced in *A Hologram for the King*, would so quickly and resolutely establish themselves in corporate structures and in our lives, was perhaps still difficult to envision prior to the Age of Covid-19. And, actually, this is not the only instance that fact and fiction have strangely started merge for me in recent weeks. Indeed, another novel analyzed in this book—*Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel—holds startling and indisputable parallels with the current calamitous situation. Asked by *The Guardian*'s Hannah Beckerman whether "the novel now seems worryingly prescient", she responds:

> It doesn't, but only because I read so much about pandemics when I was writing it. This is not to make light of pandemics at all—it's a terrible situation—but this is just something that happens from time to time in human history. There have been pandemics before and there will be again. I think the unfortunate reality is that every few years *Station Eleven* will seem horribly relevant. (Beckerman)[80]

80 Mandel made a similar statement to Carolyn Kellogg of the *Los Angeles Times*—"I don't see anything particularly prescient in *Station Eleven*"—but she also noted that she "would not recommend reading *Station Eleven* in the middle of a pandemic" (Kellogg).

That many readers have turned to her dystopian novel in this bleak time is indeed suggested by a recent surge in book sales as well as a renewed interest in *Station Eleven* by the press.[81] Following her recent conversation with the author, *Time's* Annabel Gutterman points out that Mandel is presently "avoiding the discourse, mitigating any risk that people might see her as capitalizing on the moment to sell her book". There is no denying, however, that Mandel's descriptions of the panic and subsequent standstill caused by the outbreak of a deadly swine-flu virus—bulk-buying at supermarkets, cities falling silent, planes standing vacant at airports—now touch a nerve and trigger a new form of recognition that was unimaginable prior to the Covid-19 catastrophe. Our firsthand experience of the pandemic is reminding us of a fact that Mandel forcefully drives home in *Station Eleven*, and that she also touched upon in the *Time* interview: "'All of this, we take for granted,' Mandel says, gesturing to our surroundings. 'It's unsettling to realize how quickly this falls apart'" (Gutterman).

A central argument in this book is that, in times when "[t]hings fall apart; the center cannot hold" (189), as Yeats phrased it, fiction has the unique potential of capturing the disorientated and unsettled Zeitgeist of the post-crisis moment. Just how long will it take for the first novels to emerge, that convey the unprecedented anxiety felt during the coronavirus pandemic? One could certainly imagine that, in these weeks in which the world has seemingly come to a halt, the imagination of novelists has been set in motion, and that stories reflecting this eerie experience may be starting to take form, in their minds or on paper. Whether the tropes of home and mobility will, yet again, emerge as red threads in these stories, remains to be seen—a likely possibility, perhaps, given the aforementioned centrality of both concepts during the pandemic. What is clear, however, is that such post-Covid novels *will* materialize, because people need them to process, interpret and grapple with this new normal.

81 It should be noted, however, that this increased presence of Mandel in the press is also due to the release of her new novel, *The Glass Hotel*, at the end of March 2020.

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This book explores how contemporary American novelists express the malaise and sense of contingency felt in the crisis-ridden historical present through two distinct tropes in their storytelling: home and mobility.

As the American nation has been confronted with an unprecedented accumulation of crises in the years since 9/11, the interrelated concepts of home and mobility have entered plots in imaginative and unique ways. This study focuses on recent novels by Paul Auster *(Sunset Park)*, Cormac McCarthy *(The Road)*, Dave Eggers *(A Hologram for the King)*, Richard Ford *(The Lay of the Land* and *Let Me Be Frank with You)* and Emily St. John Mandel *(Station Eleven)*. Crises can happen at any moment, without much warning—as the recent shock of the pandemic has made all too clear—and the works of fiction by these five authors all explore this underlying sense of threat and uncertainty through the double prism of home and mobility. The book includes excerpts from exclusive interviews with four of these authors.

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