The Invisible Home

Benjamin Hayes

December 10, 2019

AM 375 Honors Thesis

Acknowledgements:

Thank you to Professor Krefting and Professor Pfitzer, for your patience and guidance. Thank you to my family, for making my house a home.

Table of Contents

Abstract:

Domestic spaces reflect the culture which builds them. In this paper, I will be guiding the reader through a tour of my childhood home, explicating the cultural, and ideological themes which the built environment, its objects, and its uses embody. I focus on the role of *alienation* in the home, claiming that the domestic space embodies a human condition unique to the Neoliberal era in which a profound disconnection has precipitated problematic relations between humans, their environments, and each other across the world. I look at four rooms to accomplish this: the master bedroom, the bathroom, the kitchen, and the family room. In each I target a different aspect of modern alienation to paint a broad picture of the way in which contemporary forms of live inform our experience within and outside of the home. The perspective in this paper represents my pessimistic side; while this is not all I see in the world, it is something I see.

Welcome to my home. I live in Gardiner, New York, which is technically a hamlet, so I usually tell people I am from New Paltz, where I went to the nearest high school. I begrudgingly moved here when I was six years old: preferring life in Santa Cruz, California, I did not understand what my parents saw in the place. But this is where they grew up, and I think after decades away they were ready to return home. I have reluctantly come to identify with this house. It is big and old, sitting on a rural plot with a nice view and not much around it. The McKinstrys, after whom my street is named, were the first to live here: the gravestones of the whole family, including one infant, are in a clearing in the woods, about half a mile from our back yard. The family was buried where they lived.

I remember long winter nights when we would lose electricity, and the hum of electronics would die away, leaving the howl of the wind and the creaking of side boards while dunes of snow grew outside. On nights like that I wondered if the old house might be haunted. After all, I had read the gravestones myself on many a walk.

I think it is easy to see my house as haunted because the way it appears to me kind of is. The cultural logic which produced it is still on display, and its age reveals itself in its wear. The presence of the McKinstrys is still felt, because the effects of the family's actions are still present in their construction choices. Their will is anachronistically revived in modernity.

I do not, of course, believe in ghosts or aim to defend their existence in this paper, but I do want to entertain the idea of the house as 'haunted.' Specifically, I want to invert the haunting of ghosts, wherein a presence of something (or someone) absent is felt; I aim to explore the way in which the presence of forces truly extant in the home are *not* felt.

My home, and the modern American home generally, is haunted by forces real but invisible in a myriad of ways. In this paper, I will analyze this constellation of home dynamics in their relation to *alienation*. I claim that our modern globalized postindustrial socioeconomic paradigm is host to a contemporary human condition predicated on alienation, which becomes embodied in the home as material culture. This alienation emerges (but does not appear) in myriad forms, many of which I will be examining as I survey the various rooms of my home, their functions, and their interplay with human condition under globalized industrialism. Broadly, the alienation of this epoch can be conceived as falling into two categories: alienation of social forms, and alienation of material processes. I will also be examining conceptions of home privacy alongside my exploration of alienation. These home dynamics, I contend, implicate the home in a problematic relationship with the outside world.

The home today, by merit of its alienation, is entrenched in exploitative labor practices, environmental destruction, and problematic social relations. Its production relies on global supply chains which are opaque to the homeowner, and which, by merit of their globality and opaqueness, facilitate mass labor exploitation in developing nations and contribute to global environmental crises. The social relations of the home, mediated by cultural expectations and late capitalism communications technology, manifest in unjust ways between family members and conduce an alienated social culture. Modern home residents are directly implicated in the production and reproduction of these problematic social and material paradigms, but they are neutered in their ability to combat the ills by alienation between themselves and the problems. The modern home is haunted by that which is 'out of sight, out of mind.'

To enter discussion of these dynamics, and to begin the tour of my home, a few clarifications are necessary. In my paper, I am referring to the home as it is conceived in the

contemporary neoliberal era. Neoliberalism, the modern development of hyperconnected hyper-technologized globalized free trade,[1] came into development around the seventies and eighties, and has been the dominant global economic paradigm ever since. Under neoliberalism, labor specialization has been taken to the absolute extreme, and commercial objects are routinely crafted with supply chains spanning several continents. In my paper, I explore objects and their social functions in a human condition uniquely defined by neoliberalism.

The house I explore is my own. I chose my house as I consider it archetypical of a certain class of homes under neoliberalism. As an American, I occupy what Thorstein Veblen termed the 'leisure class.'[2] In short, the leisure class gets to ride the benefits of the production class's labor. Neoliberalism populations could be seen as split into those who toil to provide the labor to uphold society, and those who control and benefit from that labor. The latter class is freed to contribute to society in creative self-realizing fashion. As a leisure class home, my house serves as a collecting point for global production chains. All the pains and exploits of neoliberalism become embodied here.

In this paper, I draw frequently upon the ideas of 'two worlds apart' and the 'nuclear' family, with the understanding that these terms are typical within archetypical understandings of the American Neoliberal leisure class home. 'Two worlds apart' connotates an understanding of life inside the home as fundamentally separate from life outside. Another, closely related dichotomy, it that of 'private' versus 'public' life. These distinctions connotate that the home is sovereign and private space, with information about and control over life completely within the ownership of the residents. The 'two worlds' are the private world of the home, and the public

---

[1] Neoliberalism in this context could be characterized as the global libertarian extension of capitalism.
[2] Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (Singapore: Origami Books, 2019 [1899]).

world of the outside. Below, I push against the validity of this conception. The 'nuclear' family

is the social unit which traditionally occupies the private world of the home. It is the prevailing

American conception of family structure. In a nuclear family, two heterosexual parents and their

dependent (i.e. pre-college-aged) children live together in a single domicile, shared with no other

family members or families. This concept is also problematic, especially for its exclusion of non-

heteronormative families in its prescription of 'normal' family life. I engage with the ideas of the

nuclear family and two worlds apart as a method of exploring traditional conceptions of home

and family in relation to alienation, privacy, and the problematic implication of the domestic

resident with the world.

This paper, in a broad sense, is simply a tour of my home. I will take the reader through

four rooms: the master bedroom, the upstairs bathroom, the kitchen, and the family room. In

each room, I will explore a series of objects and activities which embody the intellectual themes

explicated above. I examine objects as they embody culture, as the results of labor processes, and

as catalysts for social forms. I aim to locate the alienation, false privacy, environmental damage,

and labor exploitation of the global postindustrial human condition through this analysis, though

I do not claim that this is the only possible 'reading' of my objects. There are also positive,

empowering, and de-alienating aspects which, while valid, are not my subject of exploration.

Pursuant to my analysis, I employ intellectual framework from a variety of thinkers. I

understand domestic objects here through a mix of postmodern, Marxist, ecological, and

historical thought. On the broadest level, I use Jean Baudrillard as a jumping-off point for

thinking about the human condition and the way in which objects embody greater cultural

narratives. As I engage alienation as a concept, I inevitably draw upon Marx, but I also employ

the writing of ecological agriculturalist Wendell Berry to entertain a more holistic view of the

concept. For historical conceptions of the home, I follow much of the thought laid out in Stephanie Coontz work. Throughout the paper I invoke a plethora of writers who's work I draw upon or who's ideas I hit upon, but the above authors constitute the core intellectual framework for the paper. Following is a literature review:

System of Objects

In *the System of Objects,* Jean Baudrillard posits a pessimistic framework for understanding home interiors. He assesses the metaphysical, arguing that architecture, interior design, and furnishing, are not prescribed by functional demands, but in fact reflect the dominant sociocultural attitudes of a given historical moment. He compares traditional furniture design, which reflected patriarchal human relations, and owes its logic to the natural evolution of human interaction, to modern design, which leaves traditional hierarchies and values behind; from a flawed but grounded organization of life to a free but baseless one. Modern furniture is stripped-down, not for appeal to functional purism, but to leave space for whatever meaning the user would like to apply, which might otherwise be determined by ornamentation.

Central to Baudrillard's claim is the idea that ideology prefigures designs of the built environment: "Beyond their practical function, therefore, objects – and specifically objects of furniture – have a primordial function as vessels, a function that belongs to the register of the imaginary . . . [Traditional furniture designs] are the reflection of a whole view of the world according to which each being is a 'vessel of inwardness' and relations between beings are transcendent correlations of substances; thus the house itself is the symbolic equivalent of the human body, whose potent organic schema is later generalized into an ideal design for the

integration of social structures."[3] Baudrillard is comparing an era in which cultural values, hierarchies, and consciousness grew organically out of Natural evolutionary conditions, manifesting in traditional interior design reflecting said consciousness and culture, to a modern era in which Nature has been left behind and interior design comes to reflect a kind of unhinged and reformulated consciousness.

In this paper, I apply a similar technique, and examine what might be called a 'postmodern human condition' but from an alternate angle. I embrace the claim that domestic design can be 'read' to decipher the ideologies and worldviews which manifest it, but my focus is on home design and consciousness in relation to global industrial development. I read the modern condition as developing similarly to the trajectory which Baudrillard identifies: the home today embodies a disconnected worldview, one which gradually materialized away from a vision of home which was deeply connected with the home's environment.

Capital[4]

In my investigation of home design, I explore the way in which home life is *alienated*, using the term, in part, in the classic Marxist sense. For Marx, a key critique of capitalism is the way in which it implicates the worker in partial decontextualized production methods, separating them from the conceptualization and finalization of production, and denying them of their *Gattungswesen* (species essence). Marx contends that humans possess the exceptional ability and inclination to realize their ideas as objects in the world, but doing that involves conceptualizing, initiating, and seeing a project through. Under capitalist production methods, workers are only involved with a small, repetitive, and mechanistic slice or production, denying them the ability to

---

[3] Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (New York: Verso, 1968), 27-28.
[4] Karl Marx, *Das Kapital* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1915 [1867])

realize their own vision and satisfy their human nature. Thus, they are alienated from their labor, separated from what should be a holistic experience. The modern home, I argue, embodies the alienation of the postmodern human condition.

The Unsettling of America

Alienation has been explored in many ways within and beyond Marxism and has come to describe subject-object relationships in all facets of life, not just labor. Marx himself explored alienation from many different angles, but the concept has been expanded and expounded upon significantly in the intervening period, making it useful to draw on modern thinkers who have evolved his concepts. In his book *the Unsettling of America*, Wendell Berry ruminates on human crises, searching the agricultural/industrial paradigm of the United States for answers. He identifies a consciousness of separation/alienation, as stemming from a historical progression of specialized socioeconomic practices, as responsible for eliciting crises. For Berry, this alienation goes beyond labor: it is encompassing modern human experience.

Berry outlines how, as industrialism progressed, human interdependence increased, and capitalist specialism became the dominant individual mode of participation in production. This necessarily gave rise to a human condition where individual implication in social production of life was both incomprehensible and inescapable. Berry explains: "A system of specialization requires the abdication to specialists of various competences and responsibilities that were once personal and universal." He's not just talking about work: In Berry's view, capitalist alienation infects our social lives, romance, recreation, and intellects. Everything we do is alienated. We cannot ever understand the scope or intricacies of the processes we are involved in, we cannot know the people to whom we are dependent or who depend on us, and we cannot extricate

ourselves from them or this system: Capitalism is all-encompassing, and short of radical primitivist alternative living, to refuse to participate is to die.

It is Berry's more encompassing view of alienation which I am engaging with most closely in this paper; this tour of my house will show how home life and the production of home are alienated, how home activities and processes implicate the home resident in global exploitation and violence, and how the alienation of home both obscures and produces that exploitation and violence.

The Way We Never Were[5]

In *the Way We Never Were,* Stephanie Coontz identifies and debunks a series of myths about American family life. For this paper, I will be drawing from her chapter *A Man's Home Is His Castle: The Family and Outside Intervention.* In this chapter, Coontz outlines a pervasive conception of home as 'castle,' by which the home is a sovereign and private space. The home as castle sees the life of individuals in school, at work, and in other public capacities as completely separate from the life of the family within the space of the home. Within the castle, the father holds ultimate decision making authority; no outside forces such as the state or employer can determine how a house is kept. Central to this view of the house is a sense that home is private; the family has complete ownership of who knows their business.

Coontz emphasizes that this is how the American home has been traditionally conceptualized, but rejects the notion that the home actually operates as 'castle.' She illustrates that privacy and sovereignty are recent developments in the conceptualization of home but that homes now considered private actually have more outside intervention than ever. She explores

---

[5] Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were* (New York: Basic Books, 2016).

Native American, Colonial, Jeffersonian, and Antebellum homes, and shows how, despite

disparate societal structures, homes throughout the majority of American history were

understood to be extensions of public space; neighbors, community leaders, and strangers were

expected to both enter the space of the home uninvited and to impose unsolicited advice

regarding the management of home life. But during this period, there was significant diversity

and individualization of home life: family forms, hierarchies, languages, home designs, and other

variables were open to individual home determination. After the end of the Civil War, the view

of the home as castle increasingly took hold, but individual determination (i.e. sovereignty) of

home life waned. The nuclear family increasingly became the only model for family, sexual

norms were universalized, disagreements became legislatively mediated (whereas something like

debt to a neighbor used to be settled between said neighbors, it would now be in the domain of

the court), gender norms ossified, and the home generally gravitated towards a single state-

condoned-and-enforced model of life. Outside power and ideological values were increasingly

lodged in the home, but family members saw their life as increasingly sovereign and private.[6]

The development of privacy was, counterintuitively, driven by the injection of outside

power into the shaping of home life. Previous, less impactful, intervention had appeared in the

form of other community members, people who could be, and whose influence could be, directly

considered, felt, and experienced. As outside intervention into home life centralized into

ideological and legal forms, it became more abstract, since the forces shaping the intervention in

home life were not directly experienced. This abstract intervention replaced the local

---

[6] In *"Postmodern" Home Life*, Tim Putnam outlines a very similar progression, but instead of the injection of centralized power into the home accompanying the shift towards the conceptualization of home as private, he identifies the development of privacy/sovereignty as including an expansion of the home's implication in outside material activities, such as gas, electric, and water utilities. I will be drawing from Putnam and Coontz in tandem in my paper.

intervention, alienating the resident from the forces which were shaping their home life. This way, with a home experience free of any direct confrontation of forces which intervened in their production of home life, *but with home life being insidiously shaped by outside forces more than ever before,* a myth of privacy and sovereignty was free to develop. Throughout this paper, I will employ Coontz's work to explore home privacy alongside my analysis of alienation.

Methods:

In my thesis, I attempt to contrast an examination of the production processes behind American domestic material culture with an analysis of American domestic cultural values to shed light on American alienation. Towards this end, I will be mainly employing two methodologies: Material Histories and Close Reading.

I will be following the material histories of household objects through engagement with reports on labor conditions implicated in their production. For example, I contend (using other methodologies to be touched upon) that use of battery-power electronics (phones, laptops) play a vital role in the cultural life of the modern archetypical American family. To follow the Material History of these batteries, I employ reports of labor conditions by producers such as Apple and Foxconn. In the case of phones and batteries, I find that the production of their batteries, I find that their production involves exploitative and violent labor practices which manifest themselves into objects found in the American home.

This is a strong method for the specific goals of my thesis. I'm trying to write about a cultural contradiction within the American home in a concrete manner. Rather than write about writers who write about writers, I want to use concrete evidence to bolster and exemplify a theoretical groundwork. In this case, I claim that the violence and exploitation implicated in the

production of these objects exists in glaring contradiction to proclaimed American domestic cultural values. I believe that by doing the work of following the material histories of the objects of the American home, my claim of contradiction takes on a significantly stronger character. Rather than claim that exploitation happens in the abstract, which all vaguely informed people are aware of but uncertain about, these material histories allow me to point *specifically* to the character of the exploitation taking place and construct a precise argument about the nature of the cultural contradiction taking place.

This method tells me what is happening in plain terms. It does *not* tell me what that means or why it is relevant to my thesis: it doesn't immediately offer a theory of cultural contradiction. It is also limited by the body of work available: I can't make claims about the material histories of objects that there are no reports about. For this thesis, I will need to develop a theoretical framework outlining the cultural contradiction I am aiming at; this will require other methods and the material histories of the paper will serve as concrete informational backing to that framework.

This theoretical framework will be constructed, for the most part, through close reading. I will draw a variety of fields, including anthropology, phenomenology, affect theory, and material culture, to construct an argument about American Domestic Values. This investigation will necessarily be multidisciplinary because I am attempting to make a point that doesn't fit well into a single established discipline. The various fields I draw upon are outlines in my literature review.

These texts, and the method of close reading, are incomplete in the sense that they do not drive home the concrete argument I wish to make. I contend that in some of the disciplines I engage with, such as critical theory and phenomenology, though the arguments made are

logically rigorous, the work exists in conceptual space abstracted to the point of guaranteed uncertainty. The only empirical tests available for these disciplines is logical coherence with, or superiority over, other related philosophical texts, and internal resonance with the reader ("Does this *feel* right?"). Close reading alone would relegate my work to this space as well.

I don't think there are major ethical considerations for either of these methods beyond normal constant diligence for attribution and misrepresentation. I'll be incorporating the stories and experiences of marginalized people in this thesis, so I will need to be faithful to their reality and avoid tokenization or otherwise problematic incorporation of their experiences. Overall though, since I won't be personally taking any action in the world for this outside of my research, I think the risk of unethical activity is limited.

I hope that combining close reading with material histories, I can push the intellectual content of my work closer to the realm of the concrete. I hope to achieve this in other ways, such as the inclusion of empirical behavioral psychology research in some sections regarding family behavior, but overall my goal is to drive my work closer to the realm of the concrete and empirical by incorporating that kind of work.

Preface: Entry Hallway

Nested in the middle of the sunshine-yellow front façade, the front door of my home has come to delineate the space of my upbringing. Outside is the world, where I am at risk, where I am under scrutiny, where I am never good enough. Inside is familiar, welcome, safe. My house is a mix between colonial and contemporary style. It is a bit of a Frankenstein's monster: the original foundation was built over 100 years ago by the McKinstrys, but portions have been added in various iterations by various homeowners since then.

When you step through the front door, you are confronted with a Victorian hallway: directly in front of you is a staircase, with a parallel hallway to the right leading into the living room. What lies inside is not self-contained. The home as object relies on a global production network of labor and transportation to come into being; the home as social structure is informed by local, regional, national, and global cultural influence. This is not a bad thing, but our understanding of this outside implication makes it so: We are denied recognition of these influences by our alienation from them.

There was a time when the home was not so alienated: Our water from the well; our meat from the pasture; our vegetables from the garden. The wastes from our bodies would return to the same land which grew them and eventually, the bodies too. The home is still important, still a locus of family life, but everything else it was, the producer of food, the connection between body and earth, the place of work, the center of ambition and sociality, has been outsourced. The assumption and necessity of the home as self-sufficient site of life has completely vanished; The understanding that the home is a node in an interconnected human support network gone with it. It is not easy to reckon with what this means.

As the Victorian hallway allows many possible paths, so the content of this paper allows for many possible interpretations. One might take away a primitivist advocacy for a return to earlier forms of life; one might accept alienation as an inherent vice of modernity and look to treatment of symptom rather than cause. I am hesitant to attempt any prediction or prescription for the future; I have neither to offer, even if I wanted to. What I understand this paper to be is an appeal to understanding. At the very least, the role of the object, the home, and the self should be sought to be understood, and that can perhaps serve as a jumping-off point for some correction.

As I argue that alienation is vital to the problems it enshrouds, awareness of connection might go a long way on its own. This paper is intended as a step in that direction.

Our first stop is up the stairs and to the left. Welcome to the master bedroom.

The Master Bedroom

Besides the bathrooms, this is the only door in the house that locks. Inside is a rather large room, with a soft king-sized bed taking up the central floor space, a dresser on each side, a full-length mirror on the wall across from the bed, a scale on the floor next to the mirror, two closets (one on each side of the wall behind the bed), and a wooden panel resting on a windowsill reading: "Home Is Where The Heart Is." Both dressers and both closets are filled with my Mom's stuff; My Dad does not live here anymore.

In the master bedroom, I explore the alienation of the home as it relates to intimacy, privacy, and sovereignty. The most salient object of this room is, of course, the bed, which I analyze as the site of sleep and sex; both of these are considered to be among the most private and sovereign activities of home life, however they are actually informed by forces in the outside world which are obscured by the alienation of modernity.

The bed is a minimalist half-tester bed.[7] The tester, or "four-poster" canopy bed, has its roots in early medieval Noble domestic culture. Joseph and Francis Gies, in their book *Life in a Medieval Castle*, detail this origin: "In the earliest castles the family slept at the extreme upper end of the hall, beyond the dais, from which the sleeping quarters were typically only separated

---

[7]A bed with a large, glorified headboard. A full tester bed is one with four large posts sticking up at each of its corners. These posts are connected at the top by a wooden frame (a 'canopy') from which curtains are hung. These curtains can be either tied to the posts, opening the bed up, or released, becoming walls of fabric surrounding the bed and dividing it from the rest of the room.

by only a curtain or screen."[8] This was an effort to delineate the Noble family's space from everyone else's; the entire castle community shared the hall as their sleeping quarters, and this wall of curtain gave the family privacy. Over time, castles were built with separate sleeping chambers for the nobility, who would sleep on mattresses, but they often had attendants, who would share the room, sleeping on the floor. To conserve heat and privacy, the subdividing curtain of the hall became the enclosing curtain of the tester bed.[9] As domestic arrangements evolved, sharing sleeping space became a less commonplace concern, but the aesthetic of the canopied bed survived and proliferated as a symbol of wealth and opulence throughout the world. The four-poster bed is now disassociated from its practical origins, but still bears symbolic meaning in its residence in many homes. It has also bore many offspring, including the streamlined half-tester found in my parents' bedroom.

The tester bed of my parents' room aims to convince its residents of their sovereignty through privacy and the aesthetic of nobility. The bed is designed as a private room within the room, which itself is situated on the top floor, which is the private floor of the house. In the nuclear family, the parents are the boss, and their privacy is part and parcel of their dominion; the idea of privacy is that not everyone is allowed into a given space, and by situating themselves as owners of the most private space within the home (and as sleeping in an environment with noble heritage), the parents hold maximum access and control to different spaces of the home. The half-tester bed in my parents' bedroom is the most private space of the house. It conveys that the owner of that space has the most control over the home. Being the most private space of the home, it follows that the bed should be the most sovereign, as well. People certainly like to think

---

[8] Joseph Gies and Frances Gies, *Life in a Medieval Castle* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) 67.
[9] Gies, *Life in a Medieval Castle,* 68.

of it that way: the two main activities associated with the bed are sleep and sex, both of which are understood to be some of the most inalienably personal and vulnerable times in a person's life. But is the bedroom really private? Is it really sovereign?

Sleep feels personal, and we experience it as essential (which it biologically is, to a certain extent), but when we sleep and how much we sleep is largely socially determined. During sleep, one's consciousness recedes into the mind, and while social expectations, other people, and the individual's implication in the outside world may shape the subconscious reservoirs which manifest as dreams, people are for the most part left to themselves. *When* people sleep, though, and *how much* they sleep, is far from independently determined. Most adults working in the American professional world aim to sleep eight continuous hours per night. They do this, often, in a way that has them waking up early enough to make their 9-5 job. This was not always the case, and it is not a natural sleep schedule. Humans used to sleep in two distinct chunks, each about four hours long with a couple hours in between. Up until the late 17th century, medical texts would often reference the terms 'first' and 'second' sleep, referring to these ubiquitously practiced sleep segmentations. The terms gradually faded before completely dying out in the 1920's.[10] It is not just that sleep is a malleable practice: researchers have found that humans will fall into this two-part sleep schedule if they are given the freedom to. Thomas Wehr demonstrated this by confining volunteers to dark spaces for fourteen hours per day, over the course of a month, giving them the instruction to fall into whatever sleep schedule came most naturally within that timeframe. The participants inevitably fell into biphasic sleep schedules.[11] Researchers believe the shift from biphasic sleep to consolidated monophasic behavior was a

---

[10] A. Roger Ekirch, "Sleep We Have Lost: Pre-industrial Slumber in the British Isles," *The American Historical Review* 106 (2001): 343–386.

[11] Thomas A. Wehr "In Short Photoperiods, Human Sleep in Biphasic," *Journal of Sleep Research* 1 (1992): 103-7.

symptom of industrialization; domestic and public light fixtures sprang up around the same time as all-night coffee houses, making the night a time for activity. Vocational expectations complemented this shift: rather than an agrarian work schedule that followed natural rhythms, industrialized work can be completed at whatever time the employer demands, and thus a consolidated daytime work schedule complemented a consolidated nighttime sleep schedule. Sleep is experienced as a highly personal time, but the reality for most Americans is that time spent asleep is time spent behaving in an unnatural way as prescribed by social expectations predicated in industrial historical development.

Sex is even more intimate, and even less self-determined. Sexual intercourse, though experienced as a private and sovereign act, involves significant interference from cultural norms, and thus the experience of sex becomes an extension of public life. It is a time when we break pose; from the restrained standing, sitting, and talking of public life, to the release of uninhibited physicality, vocal expression, and pleasure. This action of naked vulnerability is shared, but between participants is understood to be deeply private: it is inappropriate in public discussion to bring up explicit details of intercourse with anyone but the most trusted friends and family. Participation in sex is arguably the most sovereign human right; the necessity of consent is beyond reproach. Sex, so society tells us, is for us and us alone. What happens in the bed stays in the bed. But does this privacy actually define sex in American culture?

Sex is a gendered institution. In her seminal book *The Second Sex*, existentialist philosopher Simone De Beauvoir details how experiences and cultural expectations of sex follow a strict gendered dichotomy: "[Sexuality] is profoundly different -biologically, socially, and

psychologically- for man and woman."[12] The points she makes about the gendered experiences of sexuality come down to a conception of sexuality and gender as social construction: she rejects the idea of 'the eternal feminine,' arguing that women as a group are defined not by natural characteristics, but by the constructed social roles they play.[13] This applies to the arena of sexuality, in which women have a patriarchally defined role to fulfill. Men and women have different expectations of agency within the experience of intercourse. For the man, sex is an act of conquest. He is the ruler of the world, and each woman He can convince to make love is an affirmation of His authority. Under this conception, His promiscuity is celebrated: "Because man is ruler in the world, he holds that the violence of his desires is a sign of his sovereignty; a man of great erotic capacity is said to be strong, potent." Women, however, are not afforded such agency. For Her, sex is an intrusion, a defilement of her feminine purity. Women are somehow expected both to deny their urges and to be available to suitable men: If they fail the first imperative, they are considered 'slutty,' and if they fail the second, 'frigid.' Women's sexuality becomes relegated to an experience of being acted upon, rather than enacting an agency. For Beauvoir, hetero sex dynamics manifest as existential inequality: The man participates in intercourse as subject, the woman as object.[14] These gender dynamics are in no way natural; hetero couples have bad sex along these lines as the result of cultural conceptions of sex: this is an injection of outside social constructions into the private sexual intimacy of the bedroom.

---

[12] Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage Classics, 2015 [1949]), 414.
[13] The gender categories Beauvoir employs are dated in the light of contemporary identity politics, (I touch briefly on gender-nonconforming experiences below) but I am engaging her thought for its value in discussing women as they have been historically defined.
[14] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex,* 415

Equally egregious is the social prescription of heteronormativity onto private sexual experiences.[15] One would think that with the understanding of the bedroom and of sex as private domains totally under the discretion of the consenting adults involved, that there would be no conditions on who could be included in that experience. Instead, American culture has continuously intervened in the bedroom, insinuating that between a man and a woman, sex is a beautiful thing, but between two men, two women, or two non-binary folk, sex is a disgusting and immoral act.[16] This cultural attitude has often translated into formal legislation and violence. Same sex marriage became legal in the United States first in Massachusetts in 2004, followed gradually by several other states, before the Supreme Court stuck down all same-sex marriage bans on June 26, 2015. One of the United States' most basic human rights is only four years old. Throughout U.S. history, though, and still today, LGBTQ+ people have not been afforded the right to live privately without outside assailment. One of the worst mass shootings in recent history was at the *Pulse* gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, where 49 people were killed and 53 more injured. It is not safe to be queer in the United States. If a person has a non-straight sexual preference which they enact with another person consensually in the privacy of their home, they are committing a political act for which they might be held violently accountable. Sex is entrenched in the attitudes of the outside world, and the bed is not a sovereign space.

There are far more intrusions of the outside world upon the life of the bed. Social expectations prescribe monogamy, alternately admonish and fetishize group sex, control access

---

[15] The last few decades have seen drastic strides in human rights progress for queer people in the U.S., but it is still a contested topic and American culture has by no means unconditionally accepted queer love as love.

[16] This attitude is often founded in Christian morals. The bible verse often cited for this is in Leviticus, chapter 18: "You shall not lie with a male as with a woman; it is an abomination." Chapter 18 verse 22. This translation is contested, however: some scholars indicate that the verse should read: "You shall not lie with a *boy* as with a woman; it is an abomination," (italics mine) indicating that this may be a condemnation of pedophilia rather than homosexuality. More specifically, it may have been a condemnation of pederasty, the Greco-Roman practice of older men inducting young boys into social life by taking them as lovers.

and use of contraception, and limit abortion rights. The intervention of the outside world in the bed reflects the attitudes of the outside world; we practice sex as a repressed, sexist, and confused activity because our culture carries those traits. The most intimate part of the bedroom is also one of the most active sites of outside influence.

Though sleep and sex appear to us as sovereign and private, they in fact embody and are heavily informed by cultural expectations. We *experience* these activities as private and sovereign though. This disconnect is constituted by the alienation between our behavior and our motivations. As children acculturating to a 'normal' sleep schedule, we are never confronted with the capitalist motivations behind the structure of the workday, or the historical reality that things were not always this way. In the case of sex, people are alienated from dominion over their own lives by oppressive power structures and are either forced into social roles or forced to enact their innate interiority as an act of rebellion.

The privacy and sovereignty of the bedroom is in large part unsubstantiated myth. Humans have adjusted our natural sleep rhythms to align with capitalism, and the sexism, heteronormativity, and repressiveness of American culture emerges in our most intimate moments. What happens in the bedroom does not stay there.

The Bathroom

Exiting the master bedroom, taking a right, at the end of the hallway, is the upstairs bathroom. The bathroom is the site of medical practices of the home. It is where we go to take care of our bodies and their needs. Medical privacy and physical sovereignty are deep-set American cultural values, and on the surface, they manifest in the bathroom. In reality though, the business of the bathroom does not stay in the bathroom.

The logic of the bathroom as medical space owes its beginnings to sense of community-based responsibility, and its design resembles this ethic, but its reality contradicts that sense. In the bathroom, humans interface with water, the global implication of which does not confront us. Pharmaceutical use is also housed in the bathroom, invisibly implicating people in an institution with deep ties to exploitation. Something is rotten here.

Besides my parents' bedroom, the bathrooms have the only doors which lock, and they are probably the only locks which are actually used. The functions most characteristic of bathrooms, namely defecation and urination, are even more taboo in the realm of public discourse than sex. The cultural aversion to acknowledging the reality of the bathroom is evident in its name, for the space is rarely referred to without euphemism: Bathroom, washroom, and water closet are all common, while toiletroom is nowhere to be seen. For Americans, what happens in the bathroom stays in the bathroom.

The architecture of the bathroom implies a responsibility of the bathroom user towards their community: for the sake of public health, certain bodily and medical activities need to be kept as far from the places where they could cause harm (like the kitchen) as possible. Cloistering bathrooms off from other living spaces makes superficial sense to this end, but the modern reality of the American bathroom does not fit well in this sense of public responsibility: the reality of bathroom objects and activities implicate the bathroom-goer in a system of processes which extend far beyond the locked door of the bathroom, often with harmful results.

The segmenting off of bathroom spaces from the rest of shared life began with early hygiene norms. Early medicinal traditions, before the discovery of microscopic life, considered diseases to be malignant spiritual possessions. Curative medical practices were discovered through trial and error, but the causation behind them was not clear to the practitioners: they saw

the success of medicine as a spiritual triumph. For example, the traditional Jewish laws of

Kashrut prescribe that an animal must be free of disease, and it must have its throat cut in such a

way that the (unclean) blood could be fully drained. These practices are still used in many non-

Kosher farms and abattoirs because they minimize the risk of the meat being infected by harmful

microbial life.

Through this trial-and-error logic, which prescribed effective public hygiene norms albeit

married to arbitrary spiritual beliefs, space-segmentation resembling bathrooms developed. From

Henry Seigerist's work on the history of hygiene: "Gonorrhea was known in the ancient orient

[dated term his]. The man who had a discharge from the urethra had to take his place outside the

camp. All his possessions were considered unclean, and he himself remained impure for seven

days after the discharge ceased… The man suspected of [leprosy]… was brought forth to the

priest, was examined and isolated."[17] In what may have been a confusion stemming from the

spiritualization of disease, Women's reproductive cycles were included in this conception of

uncleanliness: "The menstruating woman was considered unclean for seven days. The woman in

labour was unclean from the moment her pains began, and remained unclean for forty days after

delivery if her child were a boy, and eighty days if it were a girl."[18] A diagnosis of uncleanliness

in this case caries a prescription of quarantine. The blatant sexism of these practices

notwithstanding, there's a logic to this approach: isolating those with disease had been found

empirically to curtail harmful spread through the community.

The bathroom follows this logic: human waste can cause fatal disease if not disposed of

properly, so we isolate that activity to a portion of the house away from the rest. Other hygiene

---

[17] Henry Sigerist, "The Philosophy of Hygiene," *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 1 (1933): 325.
[18] Sigerist, "The Philosophy of Hygiene," 325.

and medical practices are similarly quarantined: our bathing, tooth-brushing, and home wound-treatment are all relegated to the bathroom to deter contamination with other spaces.

Part of the original logic surrounding hygiene, however, has been lost with time. With the trial-and-error quarantine system, the health of the community was placed first. Moving someone sick away from the population will not necessarily help them: it is a move to prevent further spread. Some pragmatism of this approach survives in the modern bathroom: but the overarching philosophy does not: early medicinal practices involved consideration that problems should be solved in a way that held community health and longevity as the highest priority. In the modern quarantine of hygienic practices to the bathroom, this ethic has been lost: the needs of the individual and of the nuclear family have been prioritized over any greater sense of community.

One of the most prominent fleeting features of the bathroom is its water. Within the economy of household needs, including keeping family members safe from infection, our water use practices make sense: we generally draw our water from municipal systems which are functionally unlimited, and we use it to keep ourselves clean and free from disease. Since this system fits so well into our economy of household priorities, and since our implication with water systems is neither within our realm of responsibility or our purview of understanding, we accept our implication in these systems as a good thing.

We use water for many things within the bathroom; bathing, showering, using the toilet, washing our hands, and sometimes drinking it. But the water is not part of the bathroom. Rather, the salient feature of bathrooms is their *access* to water: their *potential* water. The water in this bathroom, in all modern bathrooms, comes from somewhere else: in this case, a municipally connected water system drawing from the Ashokan reservoir. The Ashokan is rather unique: It

supplies water for the communities surrounding my house, but most of its water is actually diverted south, as it constitutes one of the main sources of potable water for New York City.

The Ashokan reservoir has a checkered history reminiscent of many large-scale infrastructural projects. It was constructed between 1907 and 1915, has a surface area of approximately 8,300 acres, and holds about 122.9 billion gallons of water. For a reservoir of this size to be built, some sacrifices had to be made. In the part of Ulster County designated for the reservoir, twelve communities had to be relocated[19], displacing hundreds of people (about 500 households) and submerging thousands of acres of farmland. The residents of the area, connected to their land and their homes, fought bitterly to remain, but were eventually forced out by eminent domain. The Reservoir was finished by 1915, but not everyone displaced was settled until 1940.[20] On the bright side, the geology of upstate New York is perfect for good-tasting water, so the Ashokan reservoir allows New Yorkers to enjoy tasty bagels and pizza. Turning on the tap in the bathroom taps into a local history which carried extreme grief for several local communities.[21] Where, in our use of water to clean ourselves, is the traditional ethic of hygiene as a community-health-driven act?

That said, upstate New York carries one of the country's most amicable histories of water stewardship; our liquid resources here are abundant, so we have never had to fight much over it. Other places were not so lucky. In his book *The Great Thirst*, Norris Hundley Jr. details the historical progression of water usage in California.[22] He outlines three major phases of water resource development: Native American use, Colonial use, and National use (phase names

---

[19] Which included burning the homes to the ground.
[20] "The Ashokan Reservoir," Last Modified August 2008, http://www.hvmag.com/Hudson-Valley-Magazine/August-2008/History-The-Ashokan-Reservoir/.

[22] Norris Hundley Jr, *The Great Thirst: Californians and Water* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

mine). Hundley Jr. argues that Californian water usage began, under Indigenous control, as a thoughtful relationship between human and water. This care was driven by a sense of collective responsibility; these cultures emphasized community-focused decision making as well as a mutualistic understanding of their interaction with nature, manifesting in careful water use. Colonial communities,[23] while they did not emphasize reciprocity in their relationship with nature, saw resource exploitation as a method of benefiting their communities, and also managed their water well as a common resource. With the gold rush and 'American' settlers, naturalism and collectivism were thrown out the window. The new residents of this era entered the state with an individualistic profit-maximizing attitude; everyone taking as much water for themselves, knowing everyone else holds that attitude, naturally manifested as a 'tragedy of the commons' scenario, and resources were maximally depleted. Today, California suffers from major drought issues, and is burning through its underground water resources much faster than they are recharging, and Norris Hundley Jr. ascribes the roots of this crisis to individualistic American cultural attitudes. This may be a history of just a single state, but Hundley Jr.'s analysis of the cultural attitudes which precipitate as ecological crisis rings true for many national issues. The phenomenological experience of water use limits our understanding of it to our interaction with it. To us, water begins at the tap and ends at the drain; nothing in our culture, ideology, or home design offers us ways or implores us to understand more about the water, and we therefore understand ourselves to be free to use water without concern for its environmental consequences. I can draw from my tap in the upstairs bathroom without worrying about those Ashokan communities. I contend that this is a consequence of the alienated individualistic cultural attitudes that prevail in America; we live as alienated individuals whose ideology tells us

---

[23] In this case Spanish and Mexican, mostly.

to maximize our success, that we are not accountable for each other, and that ensuing tragedy-of-the commons issues are deterministic consequences of our necessary quasi-religious adherence to the invisible hand[24]. Many economists begin with the assumption that all people act to maximize their self-interested gain, but, as histories of many communities have shown, this is not always the case. The tragic world embodied in the modern home is not the only possible world: it is a reflection of the toxicity we have built in our global interaction as alienated humans. Turning on the tap is not an innocent act.[25]

It is a failure of capitalistic specialized growth that this contradiction emerges. We employ a method of quarantine originated for the public good in such a way that exploits our natural and social environment. Early practitioners of these quarantining practices did not have to worry about externalities of a globalized supply chain because they did not have one; their community was in front of them, the effects of their actions were perceptible, and it was therefore immanently possible for them to hold themselves accountable for their actions. We construct our bathrooms with this same ideal in mind, but when our engagement with water begins in the tap and ends at the drain, the mechanism of quarantine can work against itself and become a site of public harm. Moving through the upstairs bathroom, many of the objects hold this quality.

---

[24] Most capitalism apologists do not know that the term 'invisible hand' has been co-opted. Adam Smith originally used the term in *Wealth of Nations* to describe sentimental values toward home countries he imagined capitalists would hold, which would keep them from outsourcing and race-to-the-bottom economics from developing as trade and industry became increasingly globalized. Modern history reveals that this original conception of the 'invisible hand' was, obviously, delusional.

[25] While I *do* aim to illuminate the relationship between the tap in an upstairs bathroom, individualistic cultural values, and environmental destruction, I do *not* mean to place the blame for water resource crises, or any ecological crises for that matter, solely at the feet of individual responsibility. As the meme goes: "100 corporations are responsible for 71% of global greenhouse gas emissions and presenting the crisis as a moral failing on the part of individuals without noting this fact is journalistic malpractice."

A mirrored medicine cabinet sits mounted to the wall above the sink. The contents of the upstairs cabinet subsume the contents of the downstairs cabinet: it has band-aids, cotton swabs, and hydrogen-peroxide, but it also includes laxatives, acne removal creams, and prescription medication. It is a markedly more intimate cabinet, its contents directly implicated in the private medical life of the home residents.

American culture tells us our medical life is sovereign and private business. Regarding medical treatment in hospitals and clinics, the laws are complex, but in general medical records are considered highly private, and cannot be legally shared with anyone without a given patient's informed consent.[26] Informally, it is considered rude to ask a stranger about the intimate details of their medical conditions. Implicit is a sense of sovereignty over one's medical condition: It is something that only concerns the individual, and which may be painful or embarrassing for them to share, so they are afforded complete ownership over it and are not expected to consider anyone else in their medical experience.

The idea that our medical lives begin and end with ourselves is false and predicated on alienation. Medication, the contents of the upstairs bathroom cabinet, owes its existence to a vast global supply chain of research, design, and production. Specific research and design happen as the result of specific cultural priorities occurring in the context of social and material conditions. With medicine, the things keeping you healthy might have very well ruined the lives of others.

For example, the pharmaceutical company *Pfitzer*[27] (most well-known for *Viagra)* is under fire because the State of Nigeria sued them for $7 billion in damages for alleged illegal

---

[26] "Health Information Privacy Law and Policy," Last Updated September 19 2018, https://www.healthit.gov/topic/health-information-privacy-law-and-policy
[27] No relation to the Skidmore professor, as far as I know.

pixie

1996 tests of the potential antibiotic Trovan on children, reportedly causing eleven deaths and

many more cases of brain damage and paralysis.[28] Think back to the last time you took

antibiotics. Do you know how they were tested?

Significant medical progress was famously made during the 1932-1972 Tuskegee

Syphilis Experiment, conducted by the U.S. public health service. In it, 600 Black men,

sharecroppers from Macon County, Alabama, suffering from syphilis, were told that they were

receiving free health care in return for their participation in a medical study. They were told the

study would continue for six months. None of the men were ever told they had syphilis, and none

were ever provided treatment. Even after penicillin was discovered to treat syphilis, The U.S.

Public Health Service declined to treat anyone, and actively prevented participants from

accessing syphilis treatments available through other means. The purpose of the experiment was

to study the long term effects of syphilis in the body, but this experiment ended up needlessly

victimizing scores of Black men and their families; in addition to the original 600 men, forty of

their wives and 19 of their children (via congenital syphilis) became infected as well. It has gone

down in history as one of the most unethical medical experiments ever recorded. Getting an STI

is a scary thing, but I am sure most people receiving treatment never stop to consider that

systematically racist experiments resulting in drawn-out avoidable deaths may be behind their

treatments.[29]

---

[28] "Health and Wellbeing," Last Modified June 2005,
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jun/05/health.healthandwellbeing1
[29] Black men have often been fetishized as possessing an otherworldly sexual prowess (hence the racist term
"Jungle Fever"). What does it say about American culture that white researchers forced Black men to suffer death
at the hands of a curable STI, a common source of sexual shame?

We have also learned about hypothermia from horror.[30] It is well known that the Nazis performed horrific torturous medical experiments on some of their concentration camp prisoners. What is perhaps more obscure is that some of the ensuing research data has integrated into the body of mainstream Western medical knowledge. The Nazi hypothermia tests, in which prisoners were submerged in ice-water for prolonged periods of time before provided with one of several attempted re-warming methods (which often failed, resulting in the prisoner's death), have been cited in over 45 academic journals. These works, in turn, have likely generated published citations, and thus the work of Nazi torture has successfully diffused into the main body of medical academic material. Of course, Nazi hypothermia research does not likely influence the contents of a standard medicine cabinet, but it raises significant questions about the ethics of engaging with modern medicine. The research and design for any given medication draws from the same intellectual canon which these hypothermia tests contributed to. Should we be blindly placing our trust in the manifestations of the medical intellectual endowment which appear in our medicine cabinets?

The history of hygiene is ostensibly a history of community-interest action, but the reality of the modern bathroom does not reflect that. We are moved through our homes by forces invisible to us. We are alienated from the history, politics, and material processes which bring water into our home. We are alienated from the intellectual canon which prescribes us medicine. The bathroom has become a nexus for activities which harms the global community. Can we ever return to our roots?

The Kitchen

---

[30] Robert Berger "Nazi Science – The Dachau Hypothermia Experiments," *New England Journal of Medicine* (1990): 1435-40.

After washing our hands, unlocking the door, and leaving the bathroom, we can go downstairs. Down the hall, down the stairs, hidden away behind the living room, is the kitchen. In my childhood, it was a comforting place: it provided nourishment to body and mind as I would sit down after school, snacking and chatting with my mother about how the day had gone.

I always experienced the kitchen positively: I would just sit down at certain times of the day and receive hot food. My understanding of the kitchen experience was myopic though and denied the realities of the kitchen as it pertains to other members of the family as well as other people and the environment outside the house. As a male child, I had the privileged experience of avoiding the labor of the kitchen, which was a defining factor in my mother's relationship with the space. As a consumer with professional-class parents, I avoided the processes behind my food. When understanding of the kitchen is broadened to include these people and processes, the space takes on a different valence: the kitchen, as site of alienated labor, harbors and obscures problematic social relations, environmentally destructive practices, and exploitative labor.

The kitchen is a labor environment. It is where the work of cooking (and subsequently, cleaning), necessary for the nourishment of family, occurs. The distribution of labor here is severely gendered: adult women (i.e. 'housewives'), under traditional nuclear family gender roles, are expected to provide the bulk or entirety of the cooking. It is one of the responsibilities prescribed by the breadwinner/homemaker dichotomy of the nuclear family: the husband goes out and secures the financial needs of the family through vocation, while the housewife stays home, providing invisible labor to keep everything running smoothly. Housewives' kitchen experience is defined by a twofold alienation: alienation from private life and alienation from public life. Though housewives are not excluded from life outside the home in every capacity,

their engagement in the public world (of the two-worlds apart dichotomy) is limited compared to the rest of the family. In *'The More We are Together' Domestic Space, Gender, and Privacy,* sociologists Ruth Madigan and Moira Munro explore the housewife's relationship to home life: "[in our study,] many women said that privacy was not a problem for them because they had the house to themselves for long stretches of the day. This is of course a by-product of the fact that men and women work very different hours."[31] While men and children were away at work and school, women in this study would fill the time with reading, T.V., visits with friends, or other activities. In the traditional 'two worlds apart' conception of home, daytime public life is the other side of the coin to home life. While vocational or educational responsibilities enacted outside the home may be demanding, they are also privileges: they are opportunities for people to realize themselves, to measure up against others, and to participate in the grand project of society. For housewives, no such privilege is afforded: though they may engage in some quasi-public activity by interfacing with other housewives, women in homes are alienated from participating in the clique of public life.

Within the home, things are not much better. Once the husband and kids return from work and school, and the social experience of home recommences, women are relegated to a subservient role. Madigan and Munro explain: "Women still carry the major responsibility for maintaining the home in both the practical and the emotional sense . . . Their servicing role means that women within the domestic setting are still very commonly subordinating their needs to other household members."[32] Housewives are commonly expected to take on most (if not all) of the responsibilities of cooking, cleaning, and childrearing. For the rest of the family, time

---

[31] Ruth Madigan and Moira Munro, *The More We are Together' Domestic Space, Gender, and Privacy,* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1999), 68.
[32] Madigan and Munroe, *The More We are Together,* 68.

spent at home is the release from the tension of public life; for the housewife, the family experience *is* tension. The expectations on her labor are so high, the housewife might forget herself: "there is for most people a conflict between the demands of living in a communal household and the desire to pursue and preserve individual autonomy. This is particularly problematic for women who still take on the major responsibility for maintaining the home at both a practical and an emotional level and are often encouraged to subsume their own interests to the point where they cannot or do not distinguish between their own interests and those of the household."[33] In the shared experience of home life, the housewife is a ghost. She is not invited to the recreation shared by the rest of the family, because that experience requires upkeep which she must sacrifice her participation to provide. Thus, the housewife neither has her cake nor gets to eat it; she is alienated from public life by her disinvitation to join it, and she is alienated from private life by her relegation to subservient laborer within it. This is an instance where the alienation of the home is gendered: the other members of the family, while they might have unique nuances to their experiences, are not experiencing the detriments of alienation in the same way. The kitchen embodies the alienation of the housewife's experience, but that's not all: the production forces necessary to kitchen cultivation reveal dark disconnection.

The kitchen, in addition to its role as the site of alienated domestic labor, also serves to alienate the resident from their problematic implication in environmental crises and human exploitation. Through the modern separation between traditionally-linked activities of food production and food consumption, the production practices which have drifted away from the home have turned to exploitation.

---

[33] Madigan and Munroe, *The More We Are Together,* 66.

The modern kitchen is a nexus of food consumption. Not food cultivation, not involved food preparation, just cooking and eating. The ingredients which might eventually converge into a dish in the kitchen likely come from a global supply chain. Take toast: in order to make it, you need two things: a bread slice and a toaster. Assuming the most industrialized (i.e. most common) versions of these processes, the slice of bread comes from a factory-bakery, which sources its electricity and heat from national grids, its water from municipal systems, and its grain from a network of monocultured industrial farms. Those farms, in turn, employ migrant labor, use heavy machinery which comes with its own globalized supply chain, purchase their seed from a centralized agriculture company (likely Monsanto), and receive much of their funding from subsidies which spreads the cost of grain production out across the nation. The energy which the grain stores originates in the sun. The toaster was made in an industrial factory, tapped into power grids and municipal water supplies in *its* respective community, with a company of local factory workers as well as a wider network of management and potentially a global network of shareholders. The factory assembles the toaster from metals, likely sourced from China, Japan, or India[34], which had to be extracted from the earth using labor forces, machinery, and processes which *themselves* have global supply chains, and that metal was likely transported and processed at another factory before being assembled by the toaster company, and after assembly that toaster had to be transported to a store, where it was purchased and brought into a kitchen. Once the bread and toast are in the kitchen, the toaster needs to be powered with electricity from a local power grid, then toast can be eaten. A mother making toast, who is already interpersonally alienated by her role as provider and domestic laborer, is alienated from all the above processes: She is not, in this process, confronted with municipal water sources,

---

[34] "Top Largest Steel Producing Countries in the World," Last Updated August 2019 https://www.steel-technology.com/articles/top-largest-steel-producing-countries-in-the-world

treatment plants, electric conduits, fossil fuel extraction sites, refineries, ore mines, infrastructure networks, industrial farms, migrant labor systems, tractors, seed banks, factories, Monsanto, or the sun. And this is just to make toast. Every object and food item in the modern kitchen bare this globality. The home cook thus becomes enmeshed in a vast global network of production and supply, on which they depend and, by creating demand, contribute to. They are alienated from this network by their lack of confrontation or direct interaction with it, and that alienation obscures the reality that they are contributing to insidiously destructive processes.

Most adults today are, of course, vaguely aware that food and other commodities involve global supply chains. The issue is that nowhere in our use of objects do those supply chains confront us. It is not so much a physical alienation from these objects: we are, of course, still connected to them in a very concrete way. The issue is a phenomenological alienation. It is our lack of confrontation with processes which we *are very much* connected to which makes our implication problematic. Take, for example, America's contemporary agro-industrial complex. The way we grow our food is wreaking havoc on the environment, and, as Wendell Berry enumerates in *The Unsettling of America*, the damage is tied to the mass alienation between homes and farms. Berry, a lifelong farmer, writer, and leader of the sustainable farming movement, contends that humans once held a deeply connected and healthy relationship with food and the earth, but that the progression of capitalist specialization precipitated a division between people and their food, which created the conditions for modern agricultural crises.

Indigenous and early settler societies grew food where they lived; gardens and livestock were kept on the properties were their products would be consumed. Berry contends that for them, food cultivation was an integral part of the way 'home' was conceived: "Once, households were producers and processors of food, centers of their own maintenance, adornment, and repair,

places of instruction and amusement. People were born in these houses and lived and worked and died in them."[35] It was not that earlier homes *included* agricultural and vocational elements, it is that food production and work were an integral part of *what home was*. This facilitated a deep integration and interconnection of life, an empowerment that the individual could understand and determine their own life: an unalienated home.[36] This was not to last: "The history of our time has been to a considerable extent the movement of the center of consciousness away from home . . . [The modern home] has set itself increasingly aside from production and preparation and become more and more a place for the consumption of food produced elsewhere."

This fracturing of function and consciousness from home prefigures the environmental crises that agriculture is currently harboring, as well as the egregious human rights conditions found in many global food production supply chains. Traditional home-inclusionary agriculture paradigms were conducive to ecologically healthy practices, whereas contemporary agro-industrialized practices, embodying an alienated consciousness, are not. Consider Berry's description of a bygone Kentuckian homestead community: "The farms were generally small. They were farmed by families who lived not only upon them, but within and *from* them. These families grew gardens. They produced their own meat, milk, and eggs. The farms were highly diversified. The main money crop was tobacco. But the farmers also grew corn, wheat, barley, oats, hay, and sorghum. Cattle, hogs, and sheep were all characteristically raised on the same farms." This portrait is lovely in its own right, but it's meaning takes on weight when it is compared to the fundamentals of progressive sustainable agriculture: these traditional homesteading methods embody contemporary sustainable values.

---

[35] Berry, *The Unsettling of America,* 57.
[36] While I find Berry's claims regarding food and work compelling, I think he pastoralizes preindustrial home life; traditional family gender dynamics are fraught with problematic alienating characteristics.

'Sustainable' is one synonym among many used by agriculturalists hoping to heal the earth; people who farm tend to be individualist and make up their own terms. Ecological, regenerative, organic, biodynamic, permaculture, and natural agriculture all fall under this umbrella, with permaculture and natural agriculture being the older and broader terms. In David Holmgren's book *Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability,* he outlines the core tenants of positive-impact-capable agriculture, which include: "Catch and Store Energy, Obtain a Yield . . .Integrate Rather Than Segregate, Use Small and Slow Solutions, [and] Use and Value Diversity."[37] It is clear that Berry's traditional Kentuckian community was embodying all these values. Traditional homestead agriculture was already sustainable, without intending to be; earth-healthy agriculture, Berry argues, is the natural outgrowth of unalienated home systems.

Modern farms have left the homestead behind. Food today is grown in huge swaths of monocultured (only growing one thing; nondiverse) lands, away from the residencies of its workers, and is unsustainable. Modern agriculture is facing a crisis of soil degradation; topsoil erodes more every year and the loss will eventually result in food access crises: increasing fertilizer use, which depends on fossil fuels, is being used to temporarily ameliorate the problem but cannot work forever. Modern agriculture is contributing to the global climate crisis; according to the EPA, agriculture accounts for about 24% of greenhouse emissions globally.[38] Despite being alienated from the home, these crises are not unimplicated: it is the demand and consumption that the home generates that drives this destruction. The progression of agriculture

---

[37] These are not the only tenants of permaculture, but I am not comparing it to Berry's only example of traditional agriculture. Throughout *the Unsettling of America*, Berry painstakingly enumerates the ways in which the tenants of contemporary sustainable agriculture were already present throughout the world in traditional agricultural systems; fleshing this list out is one of the main aims of the book.

[38] "Global Greenhouse Gas Emissions Data," Last Updated 2019, https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/global-greenhouse-gas-emissions-data#Sector

as an environmentally destructive force, Berry argues, is driven by the alienation of home and environment. Berry writes: "the modern household's direct destructiveness of the world bears a profound relation – as cause or effect or both – to the fundamental moral disconnections for which it also stands. It divorces us from the sources of our bodily life; as a people we no longer know the earth we come from, have no respect for it, keep no responsibilities to it." For Berry, direct confrontation with the effects of a person's implication is key to responsibility: "When people do not live where they work, they do not feel the effects of what they do. The people who make the wars do not fight them. The people responsible for strip mining, clear cutting of forests, and other ruinations do not live where their senses will be offended or their homes or livelihoods of lives immediately threatened by the consequences. The people responsible for the various depredations of "agribusiness" do not live on farms."[39] Alienation between food production and home creates distance by which negative farming externalities can flourish unchecked, but the harm of alienation and modern home design does not stop there; the phenomenological reality of a modern home not only obscures and abstracts the harm the home is implicated in from the resident, *it actively denies that the harm is occurring:* "[financially secure modern Americans] live in ghettos of their own kind in homes full of "conveniences" which signify that all is well. In an automated kitchen, in a gleaming, odorless bathroom, in year-round air-conditioning, in color TV, in an easy chair, the world is redeemed. If what God made can be made by humans into *this*, then what can be wrong?"[40]

This implication in environmental exploitation is accompanied by human exploitation. Both exploits are deeply tied to the neoliberal policies which are the modern extension of the

---

[39] Berry, *The Unsettling of America,* 56.
[40] Berry, *The Unsettling of America,* 56.

specialist logic which brings about the alienation of the kitchen. Consider a staple of the

American morning: Coffee. Coffee, the addiction of American productive life, which allows so

many people to thrive and be their best self, has ties to dark labor practices. Most coffee is grown

by small, family farmers in the developing world, which on the face sounds good, until you learn

that "just three companies roast 40% of the world's coffee and five companies control over half

the trade in coffee,"[41] meaning that no matter how diverse and home-grown the farmers are, the

market for raw beans is oligopolistic, leaving the farmers without choice in people to sell to. In

this non-competitive market, bean purchasing prices are driven down while processed coffee-

drink prices can be marked up significantly to the immense market in the United States and other

addicted countries. Across the board, coffee farmers today increasingly experience financial

insecurity as their payment deals are shifted to favor their multinational corporate bean buyers.[42]

In coffee production's worst permutations, people experience gross violence and exploitation:

Starbucks has come under fire in recent years as reports have been released that they source from

a Brazilian plantation predicated on slave exploitation.[43] This use of slaves is not a tragic

aberration: these exploitative practices manifested within an industry putting immense financial

pressures on some of the most already-marginalized people on earth. The system of financial

exploitation this coffee plantation was working in should not be absolved of responsibility for the

specific exploitation of its plantations; slave labor is emblematic of these neoliberal paradigms.

These farmers were, by and large, forced to compete with global markets by United States-driven

neoliberal trade policies, by which countries give up their right to nationalization of industries

(such as agriculture) in return for aid and international financial support. This is an exploitative

---

[41] "Low Prices and Exploitation: Recurring Themes in Coffee," Last Updated October 2018,
https://fairworldproject.org/low-prices-and-exploitation-recurring-themes-in-coffee/
[42] "Low Prices and Exploitation"
[43] "Low Prices and Exploitation"

economic system, and when Americans get caffeine-high every morning, they are implicating themselves in this exploitation. This is not meaningfully considered because nobody travels to Brazil before choosing a coffee brand to commit to. Alienated consumers are not confronted with the effects of their purchases. And coffee is far from the only problem: cashews, chocolate, soybeans, sunflowers, sugarcane, rice, palm oil, fish, shellfish, apples, and strawberries have all been recently shown to involve forced labor at some point in their global supply chains.[44] And beyond the worst-case-scenario of slavery, farmers and laborers across the world have seen their incomes diminish, traditional lifestyles erased, and working conditions deteriorate under the neoliberal economic paradigm which the American pantry owes its globality to.[45] We are unconfronted by, and alienated from the production forces of our food, and we can thus implicate ourselves in its system of exploitation with a vague or absent awareness of its problems and a clear conscience.

In the globalized postindustrial era, homes have been separated from the labor forces necessary to the life they foster. They have become more dependent on global supply chains and less able to extricate themselves from outside forces. They have fostered a phenomenological experience of alienation for the home resident, which obscures the resident's ability to understand their increased implication, and thus allows for the proliferation of profit-maximizing, environmentally-and-socially-destructive practices defining the production of home life. This alienation, to a large degree, defines the terms of interaction for home residents, manifesting in sexist social dynamics within the home. All these themes manifest in the labor relationships of the kitchen: the alienation of production processes within the kitchen implicates

---

[44] Ronald B. Davies and Vadlamannati Krishna Chaitanya, "A Race to the Bottom in Labor Standards," *Journal of Development Economics* 103 (2013): 1-14.

the resident in global environmental and labor exploitation, and the social alienation of the

housewife (as prescribed by the capitalism-condoned nuclear family structure) subordinates her

interests to all others while reinforcing sexist patriarchal social norms. For me growing up, I

loved the kitchen. But its very nature blinded me to its reality, and its reality is perverse.

The Family Room

The kitchen is nested behind the family room.[46] A guest could conceivably visit the

family room, be fed, entertained, and use the downstairs bathroom without ever seeing the

kitchen or upstairs spaces. The family room, home to the largest windows in the house, is

notably empty save for a couch, a rug, three chairs, and decorations. To an alien, it might appear

functionless: what can people do in here, other than exist? As it turns out, that is it; The family

room is a space for recreation. The lack of functional objects in the room allows for the space to

be filled with non-laborious human activity. This potentials for this activity are not endless,

though: the arrangement of furniture suggests certain social relations and styles of interactions by

which residents and guest can abide as prescribed by ideological norms. The design and use of

modern homes reflect an abiding alienation of social forms built into prevailing American

ideology.

In my home, the chairs are arranged opposite the couch, so that when people sit in them and

on the couch, they are facing each other. This set up is conducive to conversation and feels like

an anachronism in a modern home: most family rooms today have their furniture set up

encircling a television (TV), creating a space centered around shared consumption of video

media. As it turns out, my house is not a holdover from an earlier age: it is embodying an even

---

[46] Here I use 'family room,' one of many names for this type of space. It is also colloquially known as living room, sitting room, TV room, sun room, and other names.

newer set of social relations and ideology than the TV-containing family rooms. Historically, the living room has gone through several iterations as technology has transformed (and been transformed by) social forms; there was a time before electronic media, when the hearth and social interaction were the focal point of the living room, followed by the advent of television, which re-centered the family's attention to a never-ending dopamine drip of electronic entertainment, and we now have the personal computer/cell phone revolution. Each of these steps has shaped the design of living rooms and have increasingly alienated the social forms of the home.

Before the social relations of the family room were dominated by the television, the room was used mainly for entertaining guests, and while some family rooms had similar furniture arrangements to mine now, many were centered around the fireplace, or the 'hearth.' The hearth eventually became iconic as a symbol of nuclear family togetherness. As Cecilia Tichi explains in her book *Electronic Hearth*: "Since the mid-nineteenth century, the hearth has figured persistently in the major texts of canonical writers. The open hearth-fireplace elicits a cluster of meanings beginning with domesticity . . . the icon of the hearth embodies values extending to the founding of the nation and, since then, represented to be timeless and unassailable. [The hearth is] assigned meanings on patriotism, abundance, family cohesiveness, domesticity."[47]

With the advent of television, social forms and furniture design were redirected to center the dopamine-dripping television in the horizon of social attention. As Tichi puts it: "All the historically accumulated associations of the domestic hearth are reproduced in the television."[48] Soon, television became a pervasive feature of home. In *Fictional Figures and the*

---

[47] Cecelia Tichi, *Electronic Hearth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 53.
[48] Tichi, *Electronic Hearth,* 54.

Conspicuously Young (1988) David Foster Wallace explains the immanence of this innovation

for his generation: "Our parents regard the set rather as the Flapper did the automobile: a

curiosity turned great seduction. For us, their children, TV is as much a part of reality as Toyotas

and gridlock. We quite literally cannot "imagine" life without it."[49]

Survey data supports this. Americans, on average across demographics, watched 2.84 hours

of television per day in 2018, making it their most time-intensive leisure activity.[50] This trend

has been on the rise: The 2018 report is up by .22 hours (13.2 minutes) since 2007.[51] Television,

the injection of a whole network of media informed by the tastes and demands of the American

public, has become a core element of American domestic sociality: a defining feature of the life

of the living room. The integration of media into sociality did not end there. In the twenty first

century, the proliferation of personal computers, mobile phones, and globalized internet access

pervaded American life and social interaction. Platforms life Facebook, Instagram, and Youtube

(i.e. social media) are the core facilitators of this trend. A 2015 study by Pew research center

corroborates this, finding the 65% of American adults, and 75% of all American internet users

participate in social media use. In my home family room, it is not uncommon to see the entire

family seated in couches and chairs, immersed in their digital life, not talking to each other,

while the TV plays. Digital media has become a central part of the experience of the home and

the family room, and its effects have contributed to a widespread social alienation in American

Culture.

While the digitization of social life is sometimes packaged as a move towards a more

connected society (with Facebook, you can now become 'friends' with everyone), it has actually

---

[49] David Foster Wallace, *Fictional Figures and the Conspicuously Young* (1989)*:* 3.
[50] "How Do We Spend Our Time? Evidence from the American Time Use Suvey," *Bureau of Labor Statistics,* 2012.
[51] "How Do We Spend Our Time? Evidence from the American Time Use Suvey," *Bureau of Labor Statistics,* 2008.

precipitated widespread alienation. Digital media aggregates communication into a one-sided

centralized affair and gamifies social interaction, resulting in a hyperreal network of social

relations which, while they may resemble widespread connectedness, isolate and alienate people

from each other. In *The Humanization of Media,* theorist Robert Picard details how digital media

alienates the individual from participation in public discussion: "these developments introduced

structures and formality into communication that limited who could speak and be heard. Not

everyone could participate because communication was unidirectional. Some were denied the

ability to use the systems, or be represented in them, because of elite control. Others were left out

because they lacked literacy, reception and playback equipment, and electricity necessary to

receive the communications required."[52] The proliferation of mass media entails a centralization

of communication infrastructure. When a handful of multimedia companies share oligopolistic

control of information, public discussion becomes a one-sided affair in which the narrative is set

from the top down. Picard continues: "Mass media made interaction impossible between those

expressing and those attending to the expression. It stole individual voices from the majority of

people and gave voice to only a select few . . . It created conditions through which individuals

could be directed, manipulated, and exploited by those with a voice. It became a means of elite

empowerment."[53] Whereas public opinion was once more democratized, albeit less

interconnected, mass media has claimed hegemony over a conglomerated consciousness.

Furthermore, mass media alienates individuals from others in their immediate social lives.

Platforms like Instagram facilitate gamified interaction in which identity is commodified and

---

[52] Robert Picard "The Humanization of Media? Social Media and the Reformation of
Communication," *Communication Research and Practice* 1, no. 1 (May 1, 2015): 32–41.
[53] Picard "The Humanization of Media," 38.

'sold' for attention in the form of 'likes,' fostering superficial social forms and hyperreal identities.

Social media is, to a large degree, centered around self-representation. Platforms like Facebook and Instagram allow users to post images and accounts of their lives for their 'friends' and 'followers' to see and, if they appreciate it, 'like.' This dynamic has become an economy of attention: accounts with more followers accrue more likes and thus more positive affect. As a means of accruing audience, either for the validation of attention or tangible benefits (social media presences can be monetized and digital connections can lead to employment) people resort to gaming these platforms; social media, supposedly an extension and expansion of meaningful social relations, becomes the catalyst for a mass commodification of identity and an emergence of hyperreal culture. Social media is meant to represent a 'real' self, but the ensuing representation is what garners likes and attention. Therefore, social media users resort to a construction of life around expectations of what, manifested as representation in the form of 'posts,' will maximize performance in the digital economy of attention. Mayanna Framroze, in her Ph.D. dissertation *Self-spectacle online*, details this phenomenon: "the self as ever-evolving project is now written into being, one rapid keystroke at a time . . . It is a self that generates via discursive routes, a dialectically produced self, a networked self – in conversation and re-mastered at every turn with the rest of what floats in its digital orbit."[54] The self in the age of digital media becomes alienated from intrinsic motivation, and instead is reverse engineered in service of representation. This comports with Jean Baudrillard's theory of 'hyperreality,' in which simulation, once a representation of something real, becomes the basis of human activity, and our notions of reality become predicated on simulation. For example, under hyperreality, a

---

[54] Mayanna Framroze, *Self-Spectacle Online* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2017), 57-58.

successful career might be predicated on media representations of successful people. One might assume that the logic on which people base their notions of success remains intact, as those media representations must be based in an actual experience in success, but they are not; under hyperreality, those representations were fabricated off expectations of what the media providers *assumed audiences wanted success to look like.* Those representations then spawn actual career trajectories, reifying the empty notion of success, justifying the representations, and generating a baseless cycle of careerism. Baudrillard's hyperreality is entrenched with alienation: herein lies a cultural paradigm where people have no meaningful connection to any original reality. Hyperreal digital representations alienate people from each other: rather than interfacing digitally with a friend, social media mediates interactions between empty representations. Any authentic connection which sociality should foster is lost in the interplay of facsimile. The centering of television and social media has fractured the notions of communication and reality, precipitating deep-set alienation within the sociality of the home.

To log on to Facebook, or to use any social media platform, a user needs an internet-enabled device, such as a personal computer or smartphone. Like toast, these electronics are highly complex industrialized commodities with globalized supply/production chains. The social media consumer, in their phone or computer use, is unconfronted by the processes behind the products: they are alienated from the labor involved. Unfortunately, the electronics industry harbors abhorrent working conditions which implicate the user in systems of exploitation. For example, the sourcing of cobalt necessary for batteries and the Chinese factory conditions where many of the products are made feature problematic labor relations. Cobalt, a rare-earth element vital to the construction of lithium-ion batteries which our mobile devices depend on, is only found in a few places on earth. One of the main global sources of cobalt is the Democratic

Republic of Congo, a nation struggling with political unrest and Ebola, and in which an unregulated mining industry thrives. Much of the country's cobalt, which *does* in fact end up in consumer products of multinational corporations, comes from independent 'artisanal' (though this term is essentially a euphemism) miners who mine on their own and sell their products to Chinese corporations. People in areas with artisanal mining have virtually no choice of employment, and with a monopolistic buying market for their product, they make barely enough to live. Artisanal miners often spend their day alone in dangerous, unstable, and unventilated mines, working with hand tools. The use of child labor is infamously pervasive in this region. The rate of injury and death, lack of oversight, child labor, working conditions, lack of alternatives (which makes a claim that this labor relationship is predicated on free association tenuous) and general misery make Congolese cobalt mining one of the worst labor conditions in the world, and it has been found that, though much of cobalt mining is also above board, *this* cobalt, via shady supply chain-unreporting Chinese metal corporations, does end up in consumer products like cell phones.

This is one of many abuses in electronics supply chains: Foxconn, a corporation responsible for assembling iPhones and several other blue-chip tech items, has their workers live in corporation-owned cities. The workers use their Foxconn pay to buy from Foxconn stores and rent Foxconn apartments. Their working conditions are as alienated as possible, as they take up a single role on an assembly line performing some monotonous task again and again, sometimes for up to 12 hours. Before the release of the initial iPhone, workers at Foxconn facilities were all roused from bed in the middle of the night given, tea and cookies, and told to get to work immediately because Steve Jobs had impulsively decided he wanted glass screens a few weeks

before release.[55] Things got so bad that in 2012, about 150 workers took to strike on the top of one of the tall manufacturing buildings, threatening to commit mass suicide if working conditions did not improve. Working conditions did not improve, but Foxconn did take the measure of installing safety nets around all of their tall buildings.[56] This story blew up at the time, and the company promised to do better, but even in the production of the most recent iPhones, Foxconn has been accused of breaking several labor laws. The electronic products which we use to aggrandize and alienate ourselves, which now occupy the core of sociality even within the home, are made using disgustingly exploitative labor practices. Again, most people harbor a vague awareness that this is the case, but we are not confronted with this reality anywhere in our experience of purchasing or using these objects.

This lack of confrontation, this alienation, contributes directly to the perpetuation of these abuses. Humans, in the construction of our personal worlds, base our decisions off what is directly in front of us. We navigate life and our implication in the world as a set of variables in a phenomenological horizon. If it does not appear to me, it does not exist. A lived experience as such is not conducive to meaningful contemplation of processes we are implicated in but alienated from. The field of affect theory tackles this phenomenological view of experience, and in her essay *Happy Objects,* theorist Sara Ahmed explores affect theory as it pertains to objects, family, and the home. Ahmed details how we navigate life through immediate experience, namely the family dynamics which loom so large in the experience of home life. Ahmed details

---

[55] "Apple's Deal With The Devil," Last Updated March 2016, https://www.thedailybeast.com/apples-deal-with-the-devil

[56] "Mass Suicide Protest at Apple Manufacturer Foxconn Factory," Last Updated January 11, 2012, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/9006988/Mass-suicide-protest-at-Apple-manufacturer-Foxconn-factory.html.

how our affective state is influenced by the interplay between orientation, objects, and family. For her, home activity is defined by the economy of social relations within the house.

When we encounter an object that makes us happy, we are attracted by it: we "turn toward" it. When we encounter objects which disrupt our happiness, we turn away. Thus, the landscape of our daily lives inevitably becomes populated with objects (both in the material "knick-knack" sense and in the 'object of our mental attention' sense) which reflect our preferences. Our set of preferences, the collection of directions we use to navigate towards objects and situations, constitutes our orientation.

Orientation is key to Ahmed's understanding of family life: "Take for instance the happy family. The family would be happy not because it causes happiness, and not even because it affects us in a good way, but because we share an orientation toward the family as being good, as being what promises happiness in return for loyalty. Such an orientation shapes what we do; you have to "make" and "keep" the family, which directs how you spend your time, energy, and resources."[57] In the context of a family, which serves as a higher-order happy object, family members can turn toward unhappy objects for the sake of each other: "Families may give one the sense of having "a place at the table" through the conversion of idiosyncratic difference into a happy object: loving "happily" means knowing the peculiarity of a loved other's likes and dislikes. Love becomes an intimacy with what the other likes and is given on the condition that such likes do not take us outside a shared horizon."[58] Objects in this shared horizon can be happy for all members of the family provided they are happy for at least one; they satisfy the unanimous orientation towards the cultivation of happy family life. So, if Jim likes vanilla and

---

[57] Sara Ahmed, *Happy Objects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 38.
[58] Ahmed, *Happy Objects,* 38.

Jane likes chocolate, the conflict in their orientations is mitigated by their alignment with the greater orientation toward the happy affect of family members.

The default family orientation is towards the maximization of positive affect for the family. This shared horizon doesn't stand up to conflict that threatens the collective happy affect, no matter the justification. If an individual's ethical orientation conflicts with the family's shared affect, then that ethical orientation must be subordinated within the family environment to the maintenance of collective happy affect (when the two conflict). So, if the family participates in behavior that defies a member's ethical values, that person must remain silent, because the suggestion that the family is behaving badly is upsetting. Unethical family practices which no individual family members support could conceivably be perpetuated endlessly this way; everyone might internally prefer that the family install low-energy LED lightbulbs, but to raise the suggestion is to illuminate that the family has been wasting energy, which is upsetting, and detrimental to the collective affect. Thus, as Ahmed puts it: "The exposure of violence becomes the origin of violence."[59]

Ahmed invokes the archetype of "the feminist kill-joy." She writes: "Does the feminist kill other people's joy by pointing out moments of sexism? Or does she expose the bad feelings that get hidden, displaced, or negated under public signs of joy?"[60] To combat sexism to engage with an ethical orientation in conflict with happy family affect. In essence, it is to consider a kind of universal affect: a humanization of all people, at the cost of temporary and superficial familial psychological discomfort (guilt). The exposure of violence becomes the source of violence when is considers events outside the family's shared phenomenological horizon. The family was not,

---

[59] Ahmed, *Happy Objects,* 39.
[60] Ahmed, *Happy Objects,* 38-39.

before, being confronted with negative affect because of sexism, but, now, the feminist kill-joy is making them uncomfortable. She must be the problem.

Even benign personal moral choices, without any imposition on those around us, can elicit unhappy affects from those in our shared horizon. In their journal article *Do-Gooder Derogation: Disparaging Morally Motivated Minorities to Defuse Anticipated Reproach,* Social Psychologists Julia A. Minson and Benoit Monin detail how someone else's silent and unimposing decisions can be interpreted with anticipated moral reproach by those around them. Minson and Monin offer the example of a vegetarian, undertaking empirical psychological evaluations to gauge common perceptions of people who don't eat meat. They found that vegetarians were often regarded as "Annoying, arrogant, conceited, sadistic, judgmental, posers, pretentious,"[61] and other deriding adjectives. This can come across as confounding: why would a vitriolic cultural bias spring up against a completely personal ethical choice? Monin and Minson also measured self-reported anticipated moral reproach (i.e. how much judgement meat eaters expected from vegetarians) and drew correlation between that anticipation and the intensity of the derogation. The results suggest that when people encounter vegetarians, regardless of the vegetarians' behavior, they anticipate judgement (moral reproach) from the non-meat eaters, and resort to derogation as a defensive tactic. The crucial detail is that it is not judgement that elicits the derogation: it is the fear of judgement.[62] There are two potential explanations for this: On one hand, meat-eaters might fear judgement because they suspect vegetarians of being generally judgmental people. On the other hand, perhaps some meat eaters fear judgement because they know vegetarians are people who have asked themselves difficult ethical questions, and come

---

[61] Julia A. Minson and Benoit Monin, "Do-Gooder Derogation: Disparaging Morally Motivated Minorities to Diffuse Anticipated Reproach," *Social Psychology and Personality Science* 3 (2011): 200-207.
[62] Most vegetarians are probably not moving through the world in a state of universal spite.

out on the other side with an answer different to their own. Maybe, if the meat-eater were to honestly ask themselves the same questions, they would come to the same conclusion. So, when the meat-eater encounters the vegetarian, that is an affront to their identity, not necessarily because the vegetarian is actually judgmental, but because their very existence suggests a possibility that the meat-eater is doing something wrong.

Participating in morally virtuous behavior can elicit a negative affect in the people around us without any expectation that anyone else participate or any judgement cast on non-participants. Thus, morally virtuous behavior can conflict with a family's affective orientation if it diverges from their customs. Happy family orientation discourages the democrat in the republican family, the fitness enthusiast in the fast-food home, and the fair-trade tea drinker among the Starbucks fans.

Under the progression of globalized industrialism, the processes behind the objects we use have been brought further and further outside our horizon of experience. We are alienated from these practices, and in the absence of that direct confrontation, cannot act in defiance of exploitative processes (even when we hold vague awareness of them) without disturbing our family's collective affect. The alienation between producer and consumer under globalized industrialism directly exacerbates industrial exploitation by removing the consumer's ability to directly interact with the processes they are implicated in. Social forms in American homes have become digitized, centered around TV and social media use. These devices are socially alienating in their own right, but the intersection between their role in producing positive family affect and the alienated way their produced is conducive to the exploitative labor conditions they foster. Thus, the American family room is entrenched in a system of human exploitation.

We experience the family room as a fun, relaxing place, but maybe we should not: the production practices it embodies are alienating us, and the act of uncritically enjoying the family room is keeping problems from being solved. The prohibition of progressive action that positive affect maximization prescribes extends well outside the realm of the family room: the sexism and sleep-determination of the bedroom, the water politics and pharmaceutical abuses of the bathroom, the ecological travesty and unfair labor relations of the kitchen, and the global exploitative working conditions that every room and object of the house implicate ourselves in owe their propagation to our inability to anchor our affect to processes we are alienated from. The family room, like the nuclear family, like the home as castle, like our conceptions of privacy and sovereignty, and like the modern human condition, is not what it seems; the family room is haunted.

Leaving Home Behind

In the light of truth, the home assumes an aura of horror. I might run from room to room, looking for somewhere to hide, but respite from invisible darkness is nowhere to be found. I try to imagine solutions, future worlds in which policy and sociality have changed such that my domicile can be free from guilt, but such paths, too, are absent from my horizon. Perhaps, then, the home is a lost cause. If absolution is what I need, then it might be a matter of walking back down the hallway, opening the door, and stepping outside. In my front yard, things might look fine. Walking down the road a bit, I might feel some relief; it is farmland around here, and surely these people are connected to the land. Surely, they are connected to themselves. But the respite only appears from far away: if I look closely enough, into the windows of other houses, into the type of crops and how they are grown, into the road, how it is built and maintained, I will find this haunting. If I go into the town, into the shops and restaurants and apartments, or into the city,

in its skyscrapers and airports and underground transportation, I will find this haunting. "Moloch!" I might want to howl, but that will do nothing. The horror is pervasive: the alienation and exploitation of the home is embedded in the modern human condition.

The unstoppable progression of Neoliberal policies has affected the human condition globally. The production of life, once an affair that literally took place within the home, has become dependent on a hyper-specialized global infrastructure. We cannot use objects without enlisting labor from developing countries. We cannot relate socially without overarching cultural intervention. The alienation of modern life, as precipitated by the separation of people, objects, and processes by Neoliberal policies, has obscured the effects of our actions from vision. The more interdependent and exploitative our relationship with the world becomes, the more difficult it becomes to understand and act upon. We are not as atomized as we are made to feel.

Its tempting to avert my eyes. The more I see, the less I can accept my place in the world. Many people look to institutions like charities for easy relief, but that only exacerbates the problem; donating to an organization while changing nothing about your relationship with the world only assuages guilt, and actually enables this condition's proliferation by mitigating its symptoms. I try to live holistically. I try to be present in my sociality. I try to buy fair-trade products. I try to know where my food comes from. I participate in activism. I'm attempting to holistically marry personal experience and sentiment to abstract theory in this paper. I have hope; personally, I think I can carve out a place in the world if I find some like-minded people, and globally I think leftist sociopolitical and economic change could improve things. I even think many of the objects mentioned in this paper, like social media, have the capacity to serve as conduits for the change we need. But right now, to me, things look bad. And unless people fundamentally rethink their implication in the world, its not getting better any time soon.

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. "Happy Objects." *The Affect Theory Reader*, 2010, 29–51. https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822393047-001.

BAUDRILLARD, JEAN. *SYSTEM OF OBJECTS*. S.l.: VERSO BOOKS, 1968.

Berger, Robert L. "Nazi Science — The Dachau Hypothermia Experiments." *New England Journal of Medicine* 322, no. 20 (1990): 1435–40. https://doi.org/10.1056/nejm199005173222006.

Berry, Wendell. *The Unsettling of America*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1986.

Canning, Anna. "Low Prices and Exploitation: Recurring Themes in Coffee." Fair World Project, October 11, 2018. https://fairworldproject.org/low-prices-and-exploitation-recurring-themes-in-coffee/.

Coontz, Stephanie. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. New York: Basic Books, a member of the Perseus Book Group, 2016.

Davies, Ronald B., and Krishna Chaitanya Vadlamannati. "A Race to the Bottom in Labor Standards? An Empirical Investigation." *Journal of Development Economics* 103 (2013): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2013.01.003.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Erscheinungsort nicht ermittelbar: Vintage Classics, 2015.

Framroze, Mayanna. "Self-Spectacle Online." Dissertation, UCLA, 2017.

Gies, Joseph, and Frances Gies. *Life in a Medieval Castle*. New York: Harper & Row, 1979.

"Global Greenhouse Gas Emissions Data." EPA. Environmental Protection Agency, September 13, 2019. https://www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/global-greenhouse-gas-emissions-data#Sector.

"Health Information Privacy Law and Policy." HealthIT.gov, September 19, 2018. https://www.healthit.gov/topic/health-information-privacy-law-and-policy.

Hegarty, Stephanie. "The Myth of the Eight-Hour Sleep." BBC News. BBC, February 22, 2012. https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-16964783.

"How Do We Spend Our Time? Evidence from the American Time Use Survey." *Bureau of Labor Statistics*, 2008. https://doi.org/10.17848/9781435667426.

Hundley, Norris. *The Great Thirst: Californians and Water: a History*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2002.

Loftin, A.J. "The Ashokan Reservoir." Hudson Valley Magazine, August 2008. http://www.hvmag.com/Hudson-Valley-Magazine/August-2008/History-The-Ashokan-Reservoir/.

Lyons, Dan. "Apple's Deal With the Devil." The Daily Beast. The Daily Beast Company, March 16, 2012. https://www.thedailybeast.com/apples-deal-with-the-devil.

Madigan, Ruth, and Moira Munro. *The More We Are Together: Domestic Space, Gender and Privacy*. Psychology Press, 2005.

Marx, Karl, Ernest Untermann, Friedrich Engels, Samuel Moore, Edward Aveling, and Rafael Isunza Bernal José. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1915.

McGreal, Chris. "Nigeria Sues Pfizer for $7bn over 'Illegal' Tests on Children." The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, June 5, 2007. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/jun/05/health.healthandwellbeing1.

Minson, Julia A., and Benoît Monin. "Do-Gooder Derogation." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 3, no. 2 (2011): 200–207. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550611415695.

Moore, Malcolm. "'Mass Suicide' Protest at Apple Manufacturer Foxconn Factory." The Telegraph. Telegraph Media Group, January 11, 2012. https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/9006988/Mass-suicide-protest-at-Apple-manufacturer-Foxconn-factory.html.

Picard, Robert. "The Humanization of Media? Social Media and the Reformation of Communication." *Communication Research and Practice* 1, no. 1 (May 1, 2015): 32–41.

Sigerist, Henry. "The Philosophy of Hygiene." *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine.*, October 1933, 323–31. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44437765.

Tichi, Cecelia. *Electronic Hearth: Creating an American Television Culture*. New York, NY: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991.

Top 10 largest Steel Producing Countries in the World, August 28, 2019. https://www.steel-technology.com/articles/top-largest-steel-producing-countries-in-the-world.

Veblen, Thorstein. *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Singapore: Origami Books Pte. Ltd., 2019.

Wallace, David Foster. "Neugierig." neugierig, March 2004. http://neugierig.org/content/dfw/ffacy.pdf.

Wehr, Thomas A. "In Short Photoperiods, Human Sleep Is Biphasic." *Journal of Sleep Research* 1, no. 2 (1992): 103–7. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2869.1992.tb00019.x.