

Excerpt from *Private (Space), (Public) Property*

“transmutation”



I am in a crate,
the crate that was ours,
full of white shirts and salad greens,
the icebox knocking at our delectable knocks,
and I wore movies in my eyes,
and you wore eggs in your tunnel,
and we played sheets, sheets, sheets
all day, even in the bathtub like lunatics.
But today I set the bed afire
And smoke is filling the room,
It is getting hot enough for the walls to melt,
And the icebox, a gluey white tooth.
Anne Sexton,
“Love Letter Written in a Burning Building”¹

The first fire introduced me to the rhetoric of homeland, of unity, of “We will never forget.” I internalized the vulnerability of the line between safe and hostile space, even as I began to recognize it as the uncanny replication of centuries of exclusionary speech: the brown-black smell of the city was also the smell of homefires and lynch-fires, the smoking firebreaks against the combustion of privilege. But the smoke cleared, and I forgot.

¹ Anne Sexton, “Love Letter Written in a Burning Building,” *The Complete Poems of Anne Sexton* (New York: Mariner, 1990), 613. This poem was written on September 27, 1974, seven days before Sexton died. It was the last poem she finished.

The second fire intensified my sense of vulnerability to patterns in space, but I also became more complicit in their reinscription. I consumed, I embellished, I replicated. I reacted. I submitted: "Decorative and Functional, Artistry from a Female Viewpoint."

With the third fire, the first met the second, sent racing towards each other by butterfly wings beating at opposite poles of this identity: white woman. Instead of cancelling each other out, they engendered a conflagration. Here is the third fire, the transmutation...

My daughter loves fire trucks. She could hear them coming around Grand Army Plaza, past the entrance to the Park, past the Library, waiting breathlessly for them to round the final turn and roar past our building. She shrieked, a delirious, joyful appreciation for speed and alarms and panicked lights. She couldn't consider the function; just, immediately, "More?!"

No less than eight fire trucks blocked the intersection, one short block from mine. It was that Havana-esque building, the limestone base washed blue, the cornice a faded algae, iron balconies hanging in weak beauty from the front facade. We dragged her down the street; we had to get to Ikea. She protested, pointing.

DOWNING: The love of country is inseparably connected with love of home. Whatever, therefore, leads men to assemble the comforts and elegancies of life around his habitations, tends to increase

local attachments, and render domestic life more delightful; thus not only augmenting his own enjoyment but strengthening his patriotism, and making him a better citizen.

An elderly woman, it turns out, had been immolated in the elevator as the door opened at her floor. She had been at the grocery store, and her former handyman was waiting at the stairwell window, watching for her return. She'd once sheltered him, and he'd helped her clear clutter from her apartment. She tried to help him, but suspected he was stealing from her. She let him go. Neighbors described him as "intelligent, well dressed and well spoken." He collected cans and bottles; he was called "the recycler."² If I'd seen him, I wouldn't have remembered.

NY1 played the security camera footage on a mute loop: the door opens, and a man, disguised as a hazmat-suited exterminator, sprays a liquid, later determined to be accelerant, into the elevator, then follows it with a champagne bottle molotov. A fire explodes in the bottom right corner of the screen. The camera angle spares us the exhibition of her body – she is directly below the camera, cut off from view. Of course, we kept watching the incessant spectacle because we knew she was there.

² Patrick McGeehan and Tim Stelloh, "Cornered by Attacker in Elevator, Fire Victim, 73, Had No Way Out", *The New York Times*, December 18, 2011 (http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/19/nyregion/woman-burned-alive-in-brooklyn-elevator-police-question-man.html?_r=0).

DEBORD: The spectacle is not a collection of images, rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images [...] It is the omnipresent affirmation of the choice already made in production and its corollary consumption. ³



The torched elevator door and hallway.
(Kirsten Luce for *The New York Times*)

From my bedroom window, Prospect Heights and Fort Greene ran together in an indiscriminate landscape of infinitely replicating brownstone roofs; then the bridges, and then the half-built new tower. If the crane on the skeletal top floor was factored in, it was just barely the tallest building in the city. This view was the headliner in the real estate ad; in the foreground, close enough to see spider plants and brackish overhead lights, the building where the woman was lit on fire. I'd seen her, sometime in the fall, having a sidewalk sale. Young mothers, like me, paraded up and down the street in daylight, feeling smug about being in a neighborhood, on a street, that still housed women like her, like her murderer. What I mean is, black. And poor. But I never say that. No one does – they use words like vibrant, instead. At night, I parked my car in a monthly garage and waited anxiously for my husband to get home, hoping he had sense enough to keep his iPhone hidden as he walked from the subway stop. People

³ Guy Debord, Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit: A Black and Red Translation, 1970), 1.4.

get punched in the face, bludgeoned from behind, for those. I only walked in one direction when I left my building, but at least I could tell people where I lived without seeming like a late arrival to the gentrification party.

NIETZSCHE: The heaviest burden: What if some day or night a demon were to steal after you into your loneliest loneliness and say to you: 'This life as you now live it and have lived it, you will have to live once more and innumerable times more...'

To be complicit is to knowingly help perpetuate a wrong. To be coerced is to do something wrong in response to a personal threat. But both imply acknowledgment of the wrong, whether the action is active or reactive. Spleen is uneasy ignorance of a system of wrongs – it neither identifies nor coerces action. It is separate from identity. It is unhomed.

DEBORD: [T] he more [s]he identifies with the dominant images of need, the less [s]he understands [her] own life and [her] own desires. The spectacle's estrangement from the acting subject is expressed by the fact that the individual's gestures are no longer [her] own; they are the gestures of someone else who represents them to [her]. The spectator does not feel at home anywhere, because the spectacle is everywhere.⁴

⁴ Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, 1:30. Pronoun adjustments are mine.

I cannot feel at home here because I am not here. I hate young mothers like me. I hate artists like me. I hate the insularity of artists in communities of artists, the young mothers pretending that procreation is art, artists claiming the spent fecundity of procreation. I hate the spectacle of craft and creativity, precisely because I identify with it. I hate Brooklyn, and the fact that I seem to fit here makes me hate it even more. I wouldn't mind if the whole place burned. Life is Elsewhere.

BAUDELAIRE: When earth is changed to a damp dungeon, / Where Hope, like a bat, / Flees beating the walls with its timorous wings, / And knocking its head on the rotting ceilings [.]⁵

His building was even closer to mine than hers, just across the back alley. I could have watched him: Putting on the hazmat suit, checking the nozzle of his sprayer, he stood in front of the mirror, projecting how he would appear when the elevator door opened. Would his face betray his hate, or would he maintain the untroubled mask of action? He straightened his stance, glancing at the clock reflected behind him. He noticed a woman standing in a window across the alley, watching—he hated being watched, his labor evaluated and belittled. He closed the shades.

WHITMAN: It is in some sense true that a man is not a whole and complete man unless he owns a house and the ground it stands on [...] however the modifications of civilized life have covered this truth, or changed the present phase of it, it is still indicated by the universal instinctive

⁵ Baudelaire, "Spleen."

desire for landed property, and by the fuller sense of independent manhood which comes from the possession of it.”⁶

If I looked out my bedroom window, at her building, at the lego-like swell of the tenements beyond it, and felt uneasy, it must have been because she was a familiar neighborhood fixture, and not because it suddenly felt like the waves of something unbargained-for, something unappeasably hopeless and obliterating, were seeping in under the elevator door.

LEFEBVRE: Differential space contains potentialities – of works and of reappropriation – existing to begin with in the artistic sphere but responding above all to the demands of a body ‘transported’ outside itself in space, a body which by putting up resistance inaugurates the project of a different space.⁷

He is a black man. National memory alienates him from claiming a “universal instinctive desire for landed property.” His claim is conditional. She is a black woman. She is doubly-alienated. The out-of-frame spectacle of her immolation, the blue flames just visible in the lower-right corner of the screen is also a double alienation, the spectator separated from the spectacle first by the camera angle and then by the image produced by the camera. It is memory bias obscured by repetition. But my assumption

⁶ Whitman, “New York Dissected.”

⁷ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 349.

of his carefully enacted preparation, his guilt, is a retrieval that acknowledges memory's inaccessibility, no matter the subjectivity.

At night, when I laid awake in the silent borough, the blue building glowed phosphorescent and, through my open window, I inhaled that brownblack, obdurate smell until it was painted into the crevices of my lungs. Is this what the moment before emergence is – violence, simultaneously hibernant and metamorphic? My hair was on fire.



Here I am, with torn shreds of snakeskin slicked to my tongue. This is the moment when I either see the arc of the decapitated head, see its distance from the bereft body, or fill in the space between. This is the arc I see: when I think about home, I slip into the space between privacy and property, between the oppression of privacy and the privilege of property. These fires are the moments of fissure, the moments of ideological weakness. They are the moments when the path has been burned clear, and safe passage between them is possible. But this passage requires a transportation of the body “outside itself in space,” a becoming unfamiliar – a disassociation of identity. In this passage, I become another. Let me try:

Her building was even closer to mine than the old woman's, just across the back alley. I could have watched her: Putting on her shoes, checking the contents of her purse, she stood in front of

the mirror, projecting how she would appear when the elevator door opened. Would her face betray her hate, or would she maintain the untroubled mask of action? She straightened her stance, glancing at the clock reflected behind her. She noticed a man standing in a window across the alley, watching – she hated being watched, her labor evaluated and belittled. She closed the shades.

I am in his body, I am in her body; I am the multiple manifestations of private property, of a particular relationship to its compulsions. But in passing, the ideology is exposed as vacant, what's left of its primordial structure just traces of rhetoric, nostalgia. This is both appalling and promising. She is held hostage by abstract paeans to private choices; he is excluded, then broken, by abstract encomiums to individual election – yes, this is appalling. But the emptiness, the total vacancy, of these rhetorical structures is indeed differential. *A body 'transported' outside itself in space, a body which by putting up resistance inaugurates the project of a different space.*⁸ Alexander says we need better patterns. I think we need to disassociate the pattern from the person, to proliferate the patterns' subjectivities.

Fanny Howe understands this as a dimensional conflict. In an early version of her essay "Bewilderment," she dramatizes the impossibility of simultaneity existing within teleological – that is, linear – narrative:

⁸ Le Febvre, *Production*.

There is literally no way to express actions occurring simultaneously.

If, I for instance, want to tell you that a man I loved, who died, said he loved me on a curbstone in the snow, but this occurred in time after he dies, and before he died, and will occur again in the future, I can't say it grammatically.

You would think I was talking about a ghost, or a hallucination, or a dream, when in fact, I was trying to convey the experience of a certain event as scattered and non-sequential.⁹

Instead of submitting to linearity, Howe characterizes her creative process as being spiralic:

A dream breaks into parts and contradicts its own will, even as it travels around and around.

For me, bewilderment is like a dream: one continually returning pause on a gyre and in both my stories and my poems it could be the shape of the spiral that imprints itself in my interior before anything emerges on paper.

⁹ Fanny Howe, "Bewilderment" in *A Translation of Spaces* (HOW2, Vol.1, No. 1: March, 1999); https://www.asu.edu/pipercwcenter/how2journal/archive/online_archive/v1_1_1999/index.html (accessed December 30, 2015).

For to the spiral-walker there is no plain path, no up and down, no inside or outside. But there are strange returns and recognitions and never a conclusion.¹⁰

A line is the ever-selfsame. A circle is recollection. The spiral is a geometric way of tracking movement, both vertically and horizontally. Viewed from the side, the form appears vertical – linear; viewed from the top, it is horizontal – concentric and flat. In the spiral, Howe has identified a spacial form that is capable of encompassing both recurrence and emergence: it is the architectural form that admits both Alexander and Nietzsche, Baudelaire and Howe herself.

*BAUDELAIRE: This transitory, fugitive element, whose metamorphoses are so rapid, must on no account be despised or dispensed with.*¹¹

I have a recurring dream about the house. That is, I have dreams in which the house recurs as an entity. It is where I am, or where I have been, or where I will be. It is always there. Sometimes it has never burned, but my daughter is there. This is disorienting, because I know it burned before she was born – but there it is, the original, and there she is. Sometimes I live there with someone else, and Chris lives across the street, but

¹⁰ Fanny Howe, “Bewilderment,” in *The Wedding Dress* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 9.

¹¹ Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life.”

we both know that he also lives in my house, sometimes. I've also dreamed that it belonged to someone else, which it now does. But in the dream, I don't remember selling it, and the new person has painted the front door the wrong color blue. Which they actually have. Or it is in a different city – it is in a bedroom suburb of New York City, and we've moved there to escape self-conscious Brooklyn. And I don't miss Brooklyn, but I miss the apartment that I'd arranged as a simulacra of the house. Some dreams have me still in the house, but trapped in the domesticated, desperate self who watched the immolater's ablutions. I see him from the kitchen window instead, and he is in the bungalow next door. In others, I sit in the newly remodeled family room and watch the woman in the pink sweater shriek as the towers fall, but when I walk outside I am on 3rd Avenue and the brown-black smell is there. It is as fluid as me. I never dream of the fire – I just know it happened, will happen.

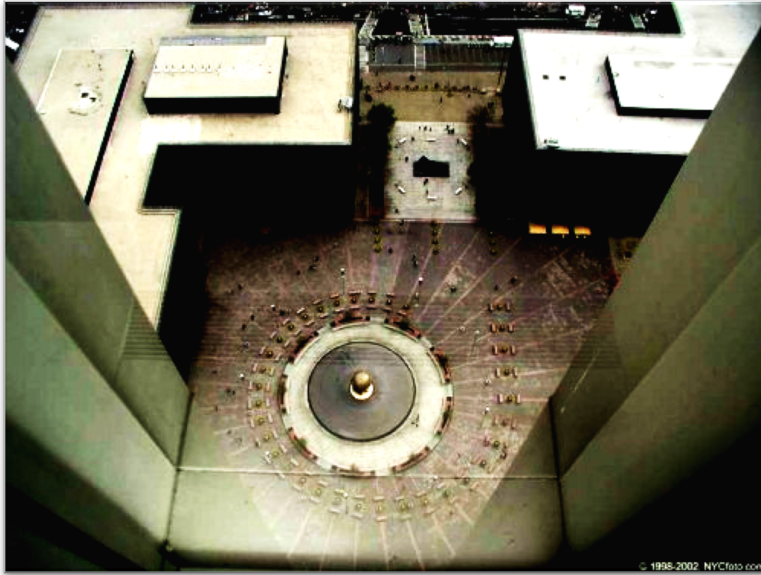
*LEFEBVRE: An existing space may outlive its original purpose and the raison d'être which determines its forms, functions, and structures; it may thus in a sense become vacant, and susceptible of being diverted, reappropriated and put to a purpose quite different from its initial use.*¹²

¹² Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 167. In a later article, Lefebvre gives as an example of differential space the alterations made by inhabitants of LeCorbusier's Pessac development, which was designed as "experimental worker's housing": "Instead of installing themselves in their containers, instead of adapting to them and living in them 'passively,' they decided that as far as possible they were going to live 'actively.' In doing so they showed what living in a house really is: an activity. They took what had been offered to them and worked it, converted it, added to it. What did they add? Their needs. They created distinctions . . . They introduced personal qualities. They built a differentiated social cluster." (Henri Lefebvre, preface to Phillippe Boudon, *Lived-in*

Other nights, I dream that we lived in a new house, which we do. It was a pinkish brick, which it is, and Italianate, which it isn't. It needed a lot of remodeling, which it does. We were standing in a butler's pantry, and Chris told me that he had bought back the old house. "But where will Sebastian sleep?" I ask. "He hasn't been born yet," Chris answered. "Oh." I walk out the back door, following a long boardwalk that bifurcates the yards of the neighbors on either side. Our yard is down at the end of the dock, ballooning out fifty-ish yards from the house. He follows. "But I don't want to move. This house has room for everyone. It proliferates. It is pink. It makes me feel like Edith Wharton's Halo in *Hudson River Bracketed*." He suggests that we let our art live in the old house – that way we can have both. I think this sounds reasonable, and walk back into a chandeliered foyer, where Scarlett and Sebastian are putting on their winter coats. I see the old house, gray with a spring green door, across the street. I can still smell the wet blackness under the green. I feel relieved. Everything, all at once. The same and never the same. The man is both there and not there. The house is both the ever-same and never the same. From a certain fractal vantage, it is all simultaneous.

Architecture: Le Corbusier's Pessac Revisited, trans. G. Onn (London: Lund Humphries, 1979 [1969]). Quoted in Richard Milgrom, "Design, Difference, and Everyday Life," *Space, Difference, Everyday Life: Reading Henri LeFebvre*, eds. Kanishka Goonewardena, Stefan Kipfer, Richard Milgrom, Christian Schmid (New York: Routledge, 2008), 275.)

This is how I mean to write these foundational stories. I will keep circling around privacy, property, exclusion, election. I round a turn, and the boundaries marking the idealism of Puritan colonies morph into maps of George Zimmerman's neighborhood



Fritz Koenig's "Sphere for Plaza Fountain"
World Trade Center Plaza

patrols, the outline drawn around Trayvon Martin's body. Another, and romantic choice in the newly "free" spaces of the American sentimental novel becomes the so-called progressive "natural" parenting movement's invocation of

choice to re-tether us to gendered spaces. Election is the difference between a home-sweet-home and a burned house, but it is also what keeps me from being immolated in an elevator, enables the endless parade of expensive strollers and gentrifying anti-gentrification. Privacy is the difference between pregnancy termination and lactation failure, the distance between a good neighborhood and a bad future. The shapes shift, but the rhetorical patterns persist. I am not writing this way as a challenge to the existence of critique, but to the experience of it. I can't critique the persistence of rhetorical patterns if I use persistent rhetorical patterns to describe their persistence. The experience of this would be ouroboric, not emergent. It would merely formally, textually, enact the patterns of privilege and exclusion that haunt the experience of

American space. The critical text must also acknowledge its own moments of aporia¹³, of unresolvability, or else it is itself just an ideologically closed form. So the formal enactment of these critical fissures, the moments when personal complicity bumps up against a deconstruction of ideology, are as necessary to the critique as the content that is more easily distanced. It is as uncomfortable to write as it is to read, and it isn't always formally successful – I feel its disjunctions, perhaps more acutely than a reader might. But, as with private property, so it is with criticism: if we continue to invoke rhetoric of linearity and resolveability – obliquely, defensively, or apologetically, it's all the same – then we shouldn't be surprised that critical content continues to be suffocated by the ideological weight of its form. Or that, as ever, simultaneity continues to be excluded from this "City on a Hill."

¹³ Aporia is a logical disjunction, a place that prevents passage. Of particular relevance to a discussion of domestic (personal and national) space is Derrida's consideration of the aporia of hospitality. He understands hospitality to be a "possible-impossible aporia": in "Of Hospitality" (Stanford University Press, 2000), he contends that hospitality requires one to be the 'master' of the house, country or nation – to be hospitable, one must have the power to host. That is, be the *property* owner. Hospitality further requires the host to have some kind of control over the people who are being hosted – if the host does not control the space, then he can't be hospitable. From a nationalist perspective, this justifies the closing of boundaries and the exclusion of particular groups or ethnicities who might challenge the "host's" ability to be properly hospitable (151-5). Even more relevant is the fact that the form of this text enacts its subject: consisting of consists of two texts on facing pages, "Invitation", by Anne Dufourmantelle, appears on the left, and Derrida's "response" on the right; the interaction between them textually enacts the "hospitality" under discussion.

