Upkeep: Maintenance in American Representations of Work, 1945-Present

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This study investigates maintenance as an under-theorized component of social criticism in American novels, 1945 to the present. In this, it contributes a literary argument to growing interdisciplinary study of maintenance. “Upkeep” argues that authors of novels use maintenance, often unconsciously, to link representation of characters working in discreet settings to larger systemic and structural critique. At the same time, authors often elide forms of maintenance, for example the upkeep of domestic space. As such attention to representation of maintenance offers a critical reading tool which illuminates a text’s political and cultural commitments and literary agenda.

After establishing a range of questions articulated by maintenance studies, I employ “maintenance” as a reading device. First, I argue that Wright’s *Native Son* reimagines the Marxist base outside the traditional white productive sphere by setting Bigger Thomas in a basement job where he is responsible for heating the mansion of a rich white family. Second, I argue that white male-authored suburban novels depict a fantasy of (reversed) victimization by foregrounding the extent of upkeep responsibilities falling to white men. Third, I argue that *The Shining* depicts maintenance (of corporate property and practice) as a method by which white men are seduced by misogynistic, racist and patriarchal values. Fourth, I argue that US neoliberal rationality involves, unlike its Keynesian predecessor, a devaluation of maintenance visible in *Housekeeping* as well as in Marie Kondo’s celebrity. Last, I provide a coda that uses combined academic and creative styles to advance a series of arguments and concerns about maintenance,
such as its status as satisfying activity, its proliferation across different types of work, its embeddedness in social systems and liberal media (real estate leases) and its problematic overlap with the constant growth of consumerism.
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A Case for Maintenance

[I]t takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that.

-Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, the Red Queen to Alice.

This dissertation uses the term “maintenance” and the related term “upkeep” in a capacious fashion, as work that keeps up utility systems, homes, factories, bodies, machines, relationships, empires, corporations, democratic institutions, and bathrooms, public and private. Comprised of caretaking tasks—wiping and fueling, feeding and fixing—maintenance keeps these categories in place, against various entropic forces. In short, maintenance keeps the there there, and the happening happening. The wide definition of maintenance used and generated in this dissertation provides a reading and writing practice that addresses work at both the granular level and in the context of larger systems and structures. By expanding the site of production across time and space, and blurring lines between production, reproduction, and use, maintenance accesses the expanded definitions of productivity and re-productivity wrought by twentieth-century Marxism. At the same time, it offers new ways of thinking about economic activity, especially in terms of the value of stasis, while allowing close attention to the quality of individual work.

Before describing maintenance as a reading and writing practice, I will discuss it as a distinctly two-sided category of work, then offer an etymological note to lay out a bit of
theoretical groundwork. Following this I will describe maintenance as an emerging field of interdisciplinary study.

On one hand, in naming a broad category of work, aimed at keeping things in place and in operation, maintenance is universal. Cleaning a sinkful of dishes, painting a room, vacuuming a floor, sewing a button, fueling a car, updating software, fixing a broken appliance—in one way or another, everyone maintains. In this vein, American culture is currently “rediscovering” the value of maintenance, especially in individual ways, yielding books, websites and television series that celebrate and teach mundane upkeep. Not infrequently such work develops both physical skills and delivers personal fulfillment. Reality-television series about cooking, restoration (of furniture and cars), and home remodeling testify to this. So too does the fame of Marie Kondo, a tidying guru whom I discuss in Chapter 4 as celebrating housekeeping. Online platforms posit the social values of maintenance, linking people together, mitigating waste, and offering an avenue for non-commodified response to consumerism. For example, ifixit.com and fixerscollective.org offer free information about repairing broken technology, aimed at “increase[ing] material literacy in our community by fostering an ethic of creative caring toward the objects in our lives” (fixerscollective.org). More broadly, proliferation of discussion boards about repairing, cleaning, growing, and cooking just about anything and everything speaks to a popular groundswell of interest in various types of maintenance and upkeep.

On the other hand, maintenance also names a broad category of labor subject to exploitation along lines of race, sex and class. Janitors, taxi drivers, orderlies, back office staff, computer programmers, painters, roofers, fast-food workers, single mothers. In the twenty-first century the work of upkeep remains delegated to, and helps recreate, the most vulnerable populations. Amid demonizing responses to non-white immigration, American society depends
upon a sexualized and racialized maintenance class, well represented by the figures of the Latino gardener and the Latina cleaning woman. Indicative of intersectional modes of exploitation, a recent *Frontline* episode titled “Rape on the Night Shift” investigates sexual violence faced by recent immigrants who clean offices at night in typically underpaid, insecure, benefit-less jobs to which they often travel long distances from sub-standard housing.¹ Not all people who provide upkeep are so deeply exploited; many nurses and trades-people, for example, are quite well-paid and recognized as providing valuable labor. But, by and large, these industries are exceptions to a larger rule of systemic exploitation of those who provide the most basic, necessary, mundane work.

Whether waged or unwaged, maintenance and upkeep often name the most repetitive and least appealing forms of work. In her free-verse “Maintenance Art Manifesto, 1969,” Mierle Laderman Ukeles writes,

> Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the fucking time (lit.)
> The mind boggles and chafes at the boredom.
> The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs = minimum wages, housewives=no pay. (3)

These lines connect unpaid housework and low-paid maintenance jobs around shared economic devaluation and boring repetitiveness. In this she partly anticipates Maria Mies’s concept of housewifization, which describes the late-twentieth-century rise of “flexibilized” production in the global south. Mies uses the term because “people working in this so-called informal sector are like housewives…. their labour is invisible” (16). Mies is focused mostly on production, and Ukeles maintenance, but both turn to the work of housewives to name “lousy” and “invisible” work. Housekeeping, the maintenance of the home, is probably the most ubiquitous form of upkeep in the US, because the home is so central to American culture. This is to say nothing of the history that links the *hom/oikos* to the *economy/loikonomia* in general, in which the home
and its maintenance implies and entails a set of practices relating to the management, ordering, and distribution of resources in general as well as the management and disposal of waste arising therefrom.

This dissertation explores maintenance through this two-sided view: on one hand universal, interconnecting, potentially anti-capitalistic and deeply satisfying and on another compartmentalized by racial, sexual and class identities, characterized by exploitation, reproductive of the status quo, and as “a drag.” Less a bifurcation between positive and negative values, maintenance offers a constellation of different views of work, around waged and unwaged forms, satisfying and immiserating processes, alienated and non-alienated labor. Additionally, an open question here is the extent to which production itself intersects with (or even constitutes) maintenance. Certainly the globalized manufacture of products such as 3M stainless steel cleaner, Mobil 1 engine oil and Swiffer’s disposable mop pads push maintenance into the factory. At the same time, the products they are used upon, like refrigerators, cars, and prefinished hardwood flooring, produce maintenance requirements outside of the factory. Returning to the duality described above, such maintenance is frequently opened to capitalist accumulation, through, for example, the labor of the cleaning woman mentioned above (working perhaps though a corporate service such as Merry Maids or perhaps for herself—maintenance opens a number of self-employment and small business opportunities). Or, mopping the floor might be enjoyed as satisfying activity, performed on a Saturday afternoon, with some music playing. These possibilities are not mutually exclusive: paid forms of upkeep can offer satisfying work, while unpaid forms certainly often register as drudgery.

The etymology of “maintain” and “maintenance” warrant capacious use. Joining the Latin noun manus, for hand, with the verb tenēre, to hold, the words suggest a physical holding
in time and space (“Maintain”). They are relatively old. Most current uses, according to the OED, stem from the 1300s. For “Maintain,” these uses include, “to sustain (life) by nourishment”; “to keep up, preserve, cause to continue in being… to guard from loss or deterioration”; “to keep (a road, a building, etc.) in repair; to take action to preserve (a machine, etc.) in working order.” Whatever the broad, static aims of maintenance may be, the word points to action. The entry for “Maintenance” makes this more clear: “The action of keeping something in working order”; “The action of providing oneself, one's family, etc., with the means of subsistence” (“Maintenance”, emphasis added). In this, the term has correspondence with the medical concept of homeostasis, which “shift[ed] physiology’s focus on [mechanized] action to the maintenance of fixity” via a host of “conserving, self-correcting, decay-resisting forces that contend invisibly within us” (Mukherjee 8). Looking specifically at the work of nurses, as well as taxi-drivers in both Boston and New Delhi, Mukherjee, a doctor writing about his father’s hospitalization, memories of Indian partition, ties to local vendors, and dementia and death, extends the concept of maintenance as homeostasis from human bodies, to families, cities, nations and institutions.

The word maintenance, however, privileges the hand, and naturalized versions push the concept away from it, and into automatic upkeep. Herein, maintenance involves the hand, or, metonymically, the “hand” as a human worker—a usage roughly as old as “maintain” itself. In this sense, maintenance is relational, between people and people, and people and things. I mention wider uses to note that nature is a consideration of this project in ideological terms, and to underscore that maintenance does indeed address the upkeep of larger social structures such as cities and institutions, as well as ideological ones, also constructed and reproduced in handed ways.
Indeed one of the most well preserved bits of ideology about economic upkeep is that it comes automatically through market interactions. Too-perfectly described by Adam Smith as the “invisible hand,” this concept has the result of both hiding actual hands (and “hands”) as well as, more ironically yet, permitting a fantasy whereby those with the most power in free-market societies imagine themselves not as dependent upon others, but as maintainers in their own right. This describes a major line of critique in this dissertation, which positions the invisible hand concept as part of a broader reversal of upkeep in the liberal tradition, one displacing credit for upkeep from those who actually provide it, to those most supported. This reversal denotes a constant through modern history and throughout patriarchal forms, though one continually morphing as it is reproduced in different times and at different “levels” of hierarchy. This reversal ranges from father as breadwinner in the family, to the employer as a job creator, to the figure of the innovator-entrepreneur in neoliberal theory, to an idea, common on Wall Street, that “investment bank[ers] financed the very creation of the U.S. corporate system and have throughout history been the primary suppliers of fresh capital to maintain and expand it” (27). Such usurpation of upkeep serves to devalue labor, and, especially in the neoliberal era, stability of accumulation by undervaluing the actual work of upkeep done by subaltern and subordinate people, communities and nature.

By way of such reversal, the most supported and exploitative members of society take up the mantle of maintainer. For example, the Koch Industries “About Us” page explains: “Food. Shelter. Clothing. Transportation. Koch Industries creates life’s basic necessities, while innovating ways to make them even better.” Marx himself flags such reversal of upkeep, lampooning his figurative capitalist (in the capitalist’s voice) for imagining he has “rendered society an incalculable service by providing my instruments of production… have I not provided
[the worker] with the means of subsistence? Am I to be allowed nothing in return for all this service?" (299). As I argue below, “maintenance” offers an analytic framework that brings much of Marx’s critique to bear on sites of work, textual and otherwise. Cutting though this well-preserved reversal of upkeep—wherein the glories and positive value of upkeep is seized by those in power while the actual drudgery of upkeep and all of the negative associations such works has falls on the most vulnerable members of society—is one of the most important.

Maintenance has a number of possible antonyms, including decay and overgrowth, themselves opposites, which positions maintenance as a sort middle ground between too little and too much growth. But foremost for its value as an analytic reading practice are the concepts of independence and automatic-ness, which elide interdependencies. To invoke maintenance is to point at dependencies, which I believe encapsulates its value as an analytic term most succinctly.

**The Maintainers and Maintenance Studies**

Unknown to me when I began this project, maintenance is, ironically enough, a growing field of study, one well-suited for interdisciplinarity. Organized in 2016 at a *Maintainers* conference held at Steven’s University, academics from a variety of fields and disciplines (history, engineering, anthropology, philosophy, medicine, library science, theology, to name a few) were joined by people working in industries such as health care, mining and elevator maintenance, to discuss this capacious category of work. Also attending were activists such as those in the Fixer’s Collective as well as people in government agencies like NASA and the Department of Defense. While not the only academic community organized around maintenance, the *Maintainers*—established by historians of technology Lee Vinsel and Andrew Russell is the most prominent—garnering attention from *The New York Times* and other popular media, as well
as a Sloan Foundation grant. In the following section, I have identified a few of the major questions, concerns and nodes of interest percolating though this group (and the texts they draw upon), which I bring to bear on American literature in this dissertation. I use the italicized term *Maintainers* to describe this group, though my impression is that most members view themselves as studying maintenance rather than performing it.

*Technology and Innovation*

Technology is the central focus of the *Maintainers* group. As a whole they interrogate real and perceived lines between design, engineering, use and maintenance, and challenge a number of assumptions, including, perhaps most foundationally to the group, the value of the new. In toto, their work shows the sexual, racial, class and post-colonial implications of novelty and innovation in light of the devaluation of older technologies and the labor of maintaining them. Overall, they aim to make this work more visible.

Reacting to “innovation” as the cultural and technological value *par excellence*, Vinsel and Russell note that “regions of intense innovation [such as Silicon Valley] also have systemic problems with inequality,” and ask “is there a better way to characterize relationships between society and technology?” (“Hail”). Their answer: shift attention to the type of work that does, in fact, characterize the bulk of technological labor: maintenance. By focusing on maintenance the oft-hidden work supporting economies, institutions, cities and human lives comes into view. “What happens *after* innovation,” they argue “is more important. Maintenance and repair, the building of infrastructures [and] the mundane labor that goes into [them], simply has more impact on people’s daily lives than the vast majority of technological innovations” (“Hail”). This impact is felt not only in use, but in various types of work, including white-collar. They write,
“At its most extreme, innovation-speak actively devalues the work of most humans, including most college graduates… who end up in completely essential but non-innovative careers” (Making 2). The starting point of the Maintainers is that “most human effort around technology involves maintenance, repair, upkeep, and mundane labor” (Making 2).

In addition to grounding technological labor, the Maintainers rethink what “technology” means, and reimagine it, as well as the work of servicing it, in terms of the mundane. In this, Vinsel and Russell, like many Maintainers contributors, draw on David Edgerton’s “use-based” history of twentieth-century technology, The Shock of the Old (2007), which finds old, quotidian and less complex technologies to be the most significant. Edgerton argues, for example, that “the horse made a greater contribution to Nazi conquest than the V2” and that corrugated iron sheeting is “a truly global technology” (xii, 41). Even the newest technologies depend upon old ones. To this point, Nathan Ensmenger has detailed the high energy usage of both Bitcoin and “cloud storage,” noting that national maps of the computer centers used to “mine” crypto-currency and store data overlay with the US power grid which itself overlays with nineteenth-century railroad and telegraph maps (“Cloud”). As it turns out, the method I’m using to back up this dissertation follows paths of US imperialism.7 Drawing on Latour’s view of modern time as blended from different pasts, Edgerton describes this “jumbled up” mix of old and new as more realistic than the commonly imagined, and taught, progressive time-line of inventions (xii).

Attempting to “disturb our tidy timeless of progress,” Edgerton argues that conceptualizing technology in terms of invention and innovation over-emphasizes “the big, spectacular, masculine high technologies of the rich white world” and “evoke[s] what is often taken as an independent historical force” (Edgerton xiv, xvii). A more realistic image is gained “if we stop thinking about ‘technology,’ but instead think of ‘things’” (Edgerton xvii). Doing so “shift[s]
attention from the new to the old, the big to the small, the spectacular to the mundane, the
masculine to the feminine, the rich to the poor” (Edgerton xiv). This shift establishes
maintenance as the primary form of technological work. That the material world is full of
dependencies on quotidian “things,” and the people who care for them is, of course, obvious. It is
yet at odds with the very concept of “technology” as new and complex.

This shift provides the cohesive groundwork for the Maintainers group and, while
stemming from a number of traditions, second-wave feminism provides its main theoretical
foundation. I make this claim based not only on the frequent use of feminist theory in
Maintainers’ work, but because the basic impulse of the group is to reveal essential but
undervalued work at the base of various systems, work which occurs in, around, and far beyond
traditional sites of production. With few exceptions, the Maintainers research aims to reveal
otherwise invisible labor, and to explore work otherwise culturally and economically devalued.

From 1970, Sally Kempton writes “women are the true maintenance class. Society is
built on their acquiescence, and upon their small and necessary labors” (57). Linking this to the
history of household technology, Ruth Schwartz Cowen, who provided the keynote at the first
Maintainers conference, argues that waves of ostensibly labor-saving home technologies brought
not less but more work for women, much of it drudgery.\textsuperscript{8} Outside the home, Corinna Schlombs
explores the ways early computing also brought increased toil for women, specifically those
tasked with manually entering data. Drawing on US banking history, Schlombs “seeks to raise
from obscurity the work of the mostly women keypunch operators without whose labor the
introduction of computers would have been impossible” (1). She writes that “[t]heir work carried
the typical characteristics of routine clerical labor: Easily supervised for speed and accuracy, it
was often paid poorly. In addition, noisy machinery created unpleasant working conditions for
the operators” (2). These two examples of ostensibly “labor saving” technology both in and outside the home, point to the ways innovation and development increased maintenance work for women. This in turn shows how upkeep, as an analytic, builds upon Marx’s work, a claim I make in broader terms below. Marx, looking at factory machinery, makes clear that while it saves time by increasing efficiency, it also increases what he calls the “intensity of labour,” a combination of increased speed and regularity in work yielding decreased variation and control in a process, a “closer filling-up of the pores of the working day,” as he puts it (Volume I 534). Machines that save time simply bring more work. Marx doesn’t directly address the use of consumer machines (largely non-existent when he wrote), thus applying the concept of machine-driven intensification of labor in terms to consumer technology allows his theory more fully address twentieth and twenty-first century experience. This describes Cowen’s methodology, yielding her claims that household technology brought, as her title puts it, *More Work for Mother*.

That advancing technology brings increased labor in the form of upkeep is obvious and yet radically opposed to basic labor-saving ideas about technologies and the lifestyles which surround them. Of course more devices mean more upkeep, both the type they are meant to be used for (vacuuming carpets, washing clothes, checking emails) but also the maintenance such “things” require (to use Edgerton’s preferred phrase). This also provides a basic concept for the *Maintainers*, namely that maintenance has proliferated. Vinsel and Russell write that “Brief reflection demonstrates that the vast majority of human labour, from laundry and trash removal to janitorial work and food preparation, is of this type: upkeep” (3). The line about trash indicates yet a further irony based upon Cowen’s point that more technology, promising relief from labor, actually increased it. Disposability, as well as the related design feature of componentization (where repairs consist of replacing a preassembled part and tossing the old one) promises relief
A capacious use of upkeep shows this promise false. Maintenance is simply pushed into the sphere of production, and foisted on nature in the form of trash and pollution. Discussions of waste are a common focus of the group.

Rethinking innovation is part of a broader move by the Maintainers to undo conceptual separation between, on one hand, design, engineering, and production, and, on the other, use and maintenance. In this, maintenance registers as both endless and interactive. For example, Ensmenger describes software development as perpetual maintenance in terms of feedback between users and programmers. He explains, “the real work of [software] maintenance is not [only] finding and correcting bugs…. [but] involve[s] what are vaguely referred to in the literature as ‘enhancements,’” which is a catchall term for “responses to changes in the business environment” (5). Basically, people constantly use software beyond expectations: “[a]s users learn to exploit the capabilities of the system, they ‘discover or invent new ways of using it’ which encourages developers to modify or extend the system, which stimulates another round of user driven innovation or process change, which in turn generates demand for new features” (6). As with other types of maintenance, this involves a host of different types of work, including use, performed in different places.

In rethinking lines between maintenance, development and use, Maintainers often invoke race, class, sex and colonial concerns. For example, Marisa Cohn uses a multi-year Saturn orbiter project to discuss gender in science and engineering projects, where a “cultural divide” separates design and development from maintenance and operations (272). Because the time frame of the project was so long (it took the orbiter from 1997 to 2004 reach Saturn), many of the initial engineers, a mostly male group bound to a “done that” culture had moved on from the project for most of its operational phase, leaving such work to lower status, and often female, scientists.
As Cohn documents, the divide between these categories, only rarely bridged by a scientist such as her subject, “Julie W.” has negative impacts on people’s careers and the project itself by “prevent[ing] organizational learning, or obscure[ing] invisible forms of work that cross this boundary” (272). Deepak Malghan explores how the concept of efficiency overturns liberal ideals, and generates this very division between innovation and maintenance. Efficiency, which (with reference to Jeremy Bentham) Malghan views as a primary concept of modernity, both produces and elides the work and contributions of “subalterns.” Looking at this in Congolese colonial history, Arwen Mohun explores the fallacy that Europeans conquered the Congo, and Africa in general, due to more advanced technology, such as guns, steam-powered vessels and surveying devices. More of a factor was Congolese know-how about low-tech yet complex systems, such as porterage and caravans (Mohun 1). Looking at European technologies adapted in the global south, Edgerton describes “creole technology,” by which people “combine the products of large-scale industry—the car engine, the bicycle…— and the local and the small scale” yielding common and perpetually maintainable “hybrid” technologies such as rickshaws, motorized long boats, and, as mentioned above, diverse structures using corrugated iron panels.

Breaking away from monolithic views of technology, *Maintainers* frequently put specific technologies into juxtaposition around maintenance to explore social values and impacts. For example, farm and textile technology both generated maintenance, but in gendered ways, according to Amy Bix. Bix explores how land-grant universities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century “taught, investigated, and popularized maintenance knowledge for men in farm mechanization, and for women in textile care.” Similarly, Daniel Wilks describes a twentieth-century “war” between two types of transportation, elevators and automobiles. Wilks notes that while both create maintenance jobs, the former scores far higher in terms of positive social
values. Elevators, he argues, provide greater urban density, which itself creates social mobility and mitigates environmental damage. Cars bring the opposite. Elevators, responsible for one-one thousandth the number of deaths, also become local centers of community where people meet and interact in urban spaces (Wilks).

This points to a common theme, technologies serving the public are often considered in terms of social maintenance or upkeep. Many technologies are discussed in this light (such as roads and electrical grids) but especially those pertaining to information, such as libraries, archives and databases. *Maintainers* often bridge concerns about low status, invisible labor with concerns about increasingly-privatized compilation, storage, and access to information. In this vein, *Maintainers* discuss information and knowledge as maintained material, a framework often overlapping with broader ideas of maintenance as dynamic interaction among people and things. For example, Eira Tansey discusses storage of information as essential care work, as invisible labor, as embedded in larger systems, and as dynamic and perpetual activity (“Shot”). In “Archives without Archivists” she writes that most “archives have suffered from a multi-decade cycle of poverty that stunts their ability to provide adequate care for records and services for users. The role of... archivists is often overlooked and invisible to users and the general public” (1). At the same time “archives must contest the forces of commodification within their already limited means” (2). Tansey, with Hillel Arnold, also looks at regulatory record-keeping and makes a case that large projects with environmental impact should be subject to “speculative maintenance” which anticipates change and ensures the protection of vulnerable populations and the environment (“Shot”). She and Arnold point out that such speculative maintenance will be based on accessible, transparent and well-compensated record-keeping. They also argue that
using the term “red tape,” to describe such record-keeping and regulation, successfully devalues this work, like care work in general (“Shot”).

Exploited Labor Made Visible

Ultimately seeing potential for social justice in attention to maintenance, The Maintainers often approach this work as exploited and undervalued. Vinsel and Russell write that “the most underappreciated and undervalued forms of technological labor are also the most ordinary: those who repair and maintain technologies that already exist” (3). In terms of software maintenance, Ensmenger writes “[b]ecause maintenance does not involve design, it was (and is) generally considered a routine and low status activity…. assigned to students, newly hired employees, or poor-performing programmers” (3). Not surprisingly, this workforce experiences “low levels of job satisfaction, and high levels of employee turnover” (Ensmenger 9). Moreover, mobility is low: “[m]ost computer programmers begin their careers doing software maintenance, and many never do anything but” (3). This follows larger patterns of maintenance and production. Amy Slaton, looking specifically at factories, describes an “epistemic hierarchy” enabling mass production, with knowledge work at the top, production in the middle, and maintenance at the bottom (1). Slaton writes, “the stratified nature of industrial labor in the United States maps tidily onto ascribed differences of class, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability…. [T]oday as in preceding eras, persons of minority status are not proportionally represented in knowledge work. They are disproportionately present in the jobs we label as maintenance” (1). In such work “opportunities to exercise creativity and assert one’s autonomy are the most profoundly constrained, and the possibility of learning new or unpredictable things limited” (Slaton 4). Industrial maintenance jobs, like programming ones, disallow desirable qualities of work—
creativity, autonomy, novelty, learning—as well as constrict life opportunities such as living conditions and job mobility. Basically maintenance in American industry is neither rewarding nor rewarded. As such the question “who maintains?” provides “a sharp instrument with which to critique the social character of industrial labor in the United States” (Slaton 1). This question resides at the heart of the Maintainers group, and of this dissertation.

Maintenance offers an expansive analysis of work and workers. Since maintenance is everywhere, yet badly recognized and recompensed, attention to it serves to mitigate invisibilization and point at systemic dependencies. Cowan’s concept of a “work process” demonstrates this in terms of housework. She writes that “the concept of a work process reminds us that housework (indeed, all work) is a series not of definable tasks but of definable tasks that are necessarily linked to one another: you cannot cook without an energy source, you cannot launder without water” (12). This allows water supply and drainage pipes, and the work of both laying them and preserving them, to be directly linked—like the material itself—to the seemingly discreet work of daily laundry. As such paying attention to maintenance can lead to a holistic image of economic activity, offering a trail of bread crumbs through material culture in which the work of upkeep is often shrouded from view, trails which lead to those “who maintain.” Just as pipes are buried in walls and roadways, these interconnections are often invisible. As such, the main offering of maintenance as an analytic of work is visibility.

“Real” Work, Satisfying Labor, and Matthew Crawford’s Shop Class as Soulcraft

Amid discussions of maintenance as exploited drudgery, writers also claim it counteracts environmental damage, alleviates subjection to the market, and in fact offers an alternative to dissatisfying work, particularly white-collar types. For example, Julian Orr’s ethnography of
Xerox service technicians in the early 1990s, which inspired a number of *Maintainers*, find that the technicians are only tangentially integrated into the corporation itself. He writes that maintenance work “shares few cultural values with the corporation” because the repair-people (mostly men) “are focused on the work, not the organization” (77, 76). Addressing both “sides” of maintenance, Orr notes little career advancement, high turnover, and low job satisfaction. At the same time, the Xerox techs feel the average corporate job “entails losing touch with the real world of service, [and means] trading a real job for headaches” (67). References to maintenance as “real” work are not uncommon. Beyond the corporation, *Maintainers* contributors explore the social and environmental benefits of maintenance, especially repair work. Drawing on Alaimo’s concept of trans-corporeality, which describes mutually constitutive links between bodies, networks, objects, and ideological systems, Ellen Foster posits a fundamental ethics in “care of the object… since objects are seen to be inextricably linked with the self and community resilience” (2). She demonstrates this with a case study of the Fixers Collective, mentioned above, which sets up booths at tech fairs, usually the only ones not heralding something new. The Fixers’ will repair broken electronics, for free, and teach people how to do it themselves. The non-profit orientation of the group is fundamental; Apple will fix your stuff too, but for a price, and they won’t teach you how to do it. Indeed, they say that you invalidate your warranty if you attempt to do so. Linking service and education, the Fixers, by contrast, work at “imparting skills, making tools available, and giving others a sense of technological literacy…. [and] to fighting the increasing problem of planned obsolescence in the electronics industry” (Foster 4). In this sense “the work of the Fixers is well-aligned with Alaimo’s trans-corporeality concept, as caring for the objects becomes caring about oneself, caring for the environment and caring for the system to which material cultures are connected” (Foster 4). Encapsulating this view, the
following “Repair Manifesto” comes from ifixit.com an open-source website self described as “The free repair guide for everything, written by everyone.”

This document positions maintenance and repair as fulfilling work that counteracts negative effects of consumer and corporate culture.

These positive views of maintenance originally attracted me to its study. I first encountered them in Matthew Crawford’s 2009 *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work*, which I reference throughout this dissertation. In it, Crawford draws on his work as an electrician, a think-tank employee and a motorcycle repair shop owner. Indicating my own multi-sided, and still-developing positions on maintenance, I have become more critical of this text for its elision of other frames of upkeep beyond trades and vehicle-repair and, especially, for
focusing on repair of mass-produced motorcycles as an alternative to alienated labor. Still, the possibility that maintenance offers non-alienated labor (or, as I have begun to describe it, “partially non-alienated labor”) remains a major aspect of this dissertation. I will conclude this section by focusing on this text.

Crawford argues that maintenance offers an ideal stance toward work, the material world, and other people. *Shop Class*, re-released with the even worse title: *The Case for Working With Your Hands: Or, Why Office Work is Bad For You and Fixing Things Feels Good*, celebrates “work that is meaningful because it is genuinely useful. It also explores what we might call the ethics of maintenance and repair” (Crawford 6). “The Ethics of Maintenance and Repair” should have been the book’s title; throughout, the text makes a case for the individual and social values offered by this work. Like Vinsel and Russell, Crawford discusses maintenance in light of neoliberal shifts in how work is valued, conceptualized and practiced. But Vinsel and Russell argue that maintenance, while hidden, remains prolific throughout the material world. Crawford, on the other hand, focuses on the self-fulfilling and community-building aspects of such work as it ostensibly slipped away during a 1980s cultural shift away from hands-on work. In the face of such change, Crawford criticizes both the denigration of manual “trade” work against the rise of “knowledge work” performed in the offices of a globalized world and the increasingly passive, dependent relationships Americans have to ever-less-serviceable stuff. Both indicate an unrealistic “vision of the future in which we somehow take leave of material reality and glide about in a pure information economy”; against both, Crawford proselytizes “manual competence, and the stance it entails toward the built, material world” (4, 6).

Crawford’s case for the value of maintenance and repair includes paid work done for others as well as unpaid care of one’s own stuff. In both contexts, the argument for ethics hinges
on his conception of agency, which intersects individuality and self-reliance with interdependence and care (6). Agency, he writes:

is activity directed toward some end that is affirmed as good by the actor, but this affirmation is not something arbitrary and private. Rather, it flows from an apprehension of real features in the world. This may be something easy to grasp, as when a master plumber shows his apprentice that he has to vent a drain pipe a certain way so that sewage gases don’t seep up…. Or it may be something requiring discernment, as when a better motorcyclist than I explains, from a rider’s point of view, why it would be good to decrease the damping in the front end of his motorcycle. In activities that are directed toward some end (a well-vented drain, a balanced chassis), the goodness in question isn’t simply posited. There is a progressive revelation of why one ought to aim at just this, as well as how one can achieve it. (207, original emphasis)

Despite conflating plumbing and motorcycle repair in terms of usefulness, Crawford presents a nuanced conception of agency in a service environment. The opposite of autonomy, maintenance and repair deliver satisfaction in work, measured by using learned skills and by providing others an objective outcome. The process yields “progressive revelation,” to use his phrase, not only of how-to, but of why-to—revelations which “flow” upward in context both social and individual. The maintainer’s “individuality is… expressed in an activity that, in answering to a shared world, connects him with others” (Crawford 207). In these ways, this argument tracks with Marx’s concept of (non) alienated labor (discussed below). Moreover, Crawford’s “progressive revelation,” mirrors aspects of Cowen’s interconnected “work process” and Slaton’s question “who maintains?” In each case, maintenance work brings a holistic view of the works and workers which constitute a system, and which link systems together. Attending to maintenance brings understanding, revealing the hows and whys of work, which are often buried in plain sight.

At the same time, Crawford’s satisfying aspects are precisely those which Slaton finds absent from maintenance work: the ability to “exercise creativity and assert one’s autonomy… the possibility of learning new or unpredictable things.” This difference is in the contexts—
industrial upkeep vs. trade work—and the degree of ownership which each offers the maintainer.\(^\text{17}\) Crawford celebrates upkeep of personal possessions and the work of tradesmen who have a degree of autonomy in their work. The trades put people into direct relationships with others, with the material world, and with the self; but as Crawford puts it, again channeling alienation, “when the conception of work is removed from the scene of its execution [as in both manufacturing and office work] we are divided against one another, and each against himself” (208). Crawford discusses such “removal” in office-work, generally found to be “soul”-crushing, but not in mass production, which is a problem because that is where motorcycles, and pipes, come from (208).\(^\text{18}\) The “progressive revelation” of how things are done doesn't make it past maintenance of the immediate object, to its manufacture, let alone its supply chain. As such the work of a number of other people does not appear.

Moreover, Crawford takes for granted that maintenance has disappeared, which erases a lot of maintenance activity, such as janitorial services, and the work of the home—the very work to which the Maintainers draw attention. For example, he claims “the disappearance of tools from our common education is the first step toward a wider ignorance of the world of artifacts we inhabit” (1). Such a claim addresses something to which I generally subscribe, namely that a culture of disposability and easy relations with material things has replaced an older ethos of maintenance. And yet the point carries major assumptions not only about what maintenance is, but about what tools are. Education about tools hasn’t disappeared evenly from our common education—kitchens, and offices, are full of tools which people know how to use. While limited, Crawford’s text allows questions about the quality of different types of work to be put into the light of material interdependencies and systemic roles of such forms of work. For this reason I continue to employ it.
Maintenance: A Writing and Reading Practice

Drawing upon the material described above, this dissertation employs “maintenance” as a reading practice, and explores it as writing practice, that allows illumination of, on the one hand, social, economic and systemic dependencies and privileges, and on the other, phenomenological and experiential indications about work as satisfying or hurtful, knowledge-building or destructive, good or bad.

As a writing practice, maintenance provides authors with a tool for plotting and setting into their novels varying degrees of social criticism. Maintenance allows this through direct representation of individuals working in specific settings. I don’t claim maintenance is the sole way to do this, only a frequently used and relatively good one. For example, in Chapter 1, I argue that Richard Wright, addressing race in the working class, puts Bigger Thomas in a service job, making him responsible not only for chauffeuring the wealthy Daltons, but for firing their home’s coal furnace. This provides Wright a series of representational opportunities: displaying black labor as a systemic base, indicating the white-privilege outcome of his labor, showing Bigger’s integration in and reaction to the system which generates such privilege, and moving the site of accumulation beyond the factory line. All while keeping focus upon Bigger, the individual worker. For authors aiming to explore social questions with individual characters in specific settings, representation of maintenance offers a way, used unconsciously or otherwise, to reveal oft-hidden dependencies in systemic and personal ways. A more recent example can be seen in the HBO series Succession which, depicting a family-owned conservative media outlet similar to Fox News, begins by showing a maid scrubbing the aging founder’s urine from a rug after he mistakes a closet for a bathroom. Though focused, like so much mass-media, upon the
lives of the super-rich, the scene immediately establishes a critical perspective on wealth, even for viewers absorbing the show passively, as entertainment.\(^{19}\)

Attention to the way cultural producers (authors, film creators, etc) incorporate maintenance (or elide it), thus also makes a powerful reading tool for analyzing texts’ political, social, racial, sexual and economic commitments, as well as their elisions and critical potentials. This describes the basic methodology of this dissertation: attention to the presence of different types of maintenance in texts (or lack thereof). This approach facilitates detailed, intersectional readings based upon granular depictions of work, but perhaps the greatest value of maintenance as an analytic concept is its simplicity. In a direct and accessible fashion, representation of maintenance joins, often in one setting, two very simple questions: “who maintains?” and “what is maintained?” In this, looking at maintenance, offers a reading practice that performs a sort of Marxist shorthand, identifying the people, systems, structures, and materials (both natural and manufactured) supporting what is supported. Though I listed two questions above, this practice is better contrived as asking of a text (or any site of work) these following questions:

- **Who maintains?** (i.e.: nurses, janitors, computer programmers, coal miners)
- **What maintains?** (i.e.: coal, oil, meat, timber, information, commodities)
- **What is maintained?** (i.e.: roads, kitchens, libraries, empires, railroads, social networks)
- **Who is maintained?** (i.e.: husbands, the wealthy, the ostensibly independent)
- **The opposite of these questions, especially the last two: what and who is not maintained, or not well-maintained** (i.e.: Flint’s water pipes, the poor)

Attending to these questions allows access to a text’s critical commitments and opportunities in specifically Marxist terms, by illuminating the systemic, social, and personal outcomes of human labor. In this, it brings together a number of Marx’s interlocking concepts. To explain this, I will
discuss “maintenance” in terms of Marx’s critique of political economy before describing my dissertation’s time period and chapters.

**Marx, Systemic Upkeep, and “Maintenance”**

In this section I argue that Marx’s project in *Capital* already contains the expansive definition of maintenance described above, and that his critiques of both capitalism and political economy are shot through with various interlocking conceptions of upkeep. Moreover his critique often centers upon keeping things in stasis, in a number of ways. Marx, however, is focused upon “productivity” of labor—that which generates surplus value, in general, and for capitalism, profit at a later point of sale. Though he analyses management, bookkeeping, services, storage, and other forms of maintainive work, these tend to be scattered and under-theorized. Rethinking Marx’s critique in terms of upkeep, not meant to replace but rather complement the focus on productivity and growth, has, I think, particular value as an analytic tool in economies in which so much activity occurs outside traditional productive spheres.

*Capital* is about upkeep in the broadest terms, aiming to lay bare the mechanisms by which capitalist production is perpetuated. In it, Marx identifies two fields where such mechanisms can be sought, one economic and material, the other ideological. The first comprises a number of interrelated components, such as the concepts of surplus value and labor power, the reserve army and stock formation, the credit system and land rents. Each of these might be described as a mechanism of systemic upkeep: the reserve army, for example, keeps labor values low; credit keeps capital flowing in suitably large chunks. The second, ideological field is Marx’s main object of critique and offers the most formidable maintainive mechanism—political economy and bourgeois, liberal, rationality. Ridged separation of these fields would be reductive,
since the key to de-mystifying the economic landscape lies in seeing their relationships. Worth distinguishing, however, is that “independence” and “automatic” are central to the ideological side—the very notion of dependencies are precisely that which capitalism aims to free itself of and (since it never can) works to hide. Thus “independence,” rises to describe people, states, and firms, and “automatic” steps in to describe market functions. A system constructed of independent components and which moves by itself, which is independent and automatic, describes the basic utopianism of capitalism: no maintenance required.

**Anti-Upkeep**

Amid this upside-down ideology, capitalist practice, while rife with maintainive mechanisms, is also supremely antagonistic to upkeep. It ravages human bodies, communities, nature, and the very capitals driving it, the last of which decay if they don’t expand. Underscored with periodic reference to vampires, Marx sees depredation of nature, work and human life feeding privilege, profits, market share and growth. As eco-critics point out, Marx’s theory puts these into zero-sum relationships with the health of the planet, and the societies living upon it. Capitalist production means concomitant desiccations, ranging from “disturb[ing] the metabolic interaction between man and the earth…[and] undermining the sources of all wealth—the soil and the worker” to destroying “the intellectual potentialities of the labor process” (*Capital 1*, 799, 638). Despite such evisceration, these sources of wealth (nature, labor, community) need to be maintained, at least systemically, so that processes of accumulation can be perpetuated. The upkeep of capital, and capitalism, thus both requires and prohibits human and natural upkeep.

*The Commodity and Marx’s use of “Maintenance”*
Exhibit A in a case that Marxism hinges upon maintenance and upkeep (as the handed work of holding something in time and space) is the commodity. Marx begins by describing the commodity as a mechanism of stored value. As congealed quantities of value, commodities hold abstract labor—they are in fact the instruments by which human labor becomes abstract labor, something with value beyond use, with stored value, realized as profit at the point of sale. Making a commodity, then, is not only an act of creation, but an act of preservation, of both use value, ultimately consumed far from the producer, and of exchange value, loaded into it in the production process. The producers of commodities aim to contain value in the commodity, and to multiply it through cycles of production and sale. This dynamic process of capitalist production leads to its endlessness, its basis in constant growth, and hinges, perhaps counter-intuitively, on preserving value by disposing of it in the market. In this sense, capitalism answers the question, how can the value of money be perpetually maintained?

The answer depends on the primal ingredient, labor, which itself needs maintenance. Marx uses the term “maintenance” and its derivatives (nearly one hundred times in Volume 1 alone) to signal this basic requirement of capitalism, the physical “maintenance” of laboring human bodies. For example, he writes, “labour-power exists only as a capacity of the living individual…. Given the existence of th[is] individual, the production of labour-power consists in his reproduction of himself or his maintenance” (Capital 1 274). I will walk through his use of this term, for “maintenance,” like the commodity, is central to his analysis of value and exploitation, and ultimately indicates the role in his theory played by other types of maintenance and upkeep.

Capitalist production, according to Marx, extracts surplus value, an extraction dependent on a central “mystification,” namely, the occlusion of the value created by labor in a certain
amount of time by the value of labor-power, *the right to employ labor* for a certain amount of time. “Maintenance,” (as Marx uses it) performs to this occlusion, for labor-power is priced by the cost of its own upkeep. As Marx puts it “the value of labour-power is the value of the means of subsistence necessary for the maintenance of its owner” (*Capital I* 274). The “maintenance” of human lives, the reproduction of the worker, provides the standard by which labor-power is priced, and paid for with wages. An individual worker’s means of subsistence must “be sufficient to maintain him in a normal state as a working individual,” with “normal state” a historically conditioned, morally weighted element (*Capital I* 275). Consumer capitalism, rising in the twentieth-century to keep up production, has flourished by expanding what “sufficient” and “normal state” mean.

A basic component of Marx’s theory concerning the “maintenance” of workers is that given a choice, people will not opt for wage work, but instead support themselves outside of labor and consumer markets. Systemically, then, this non-commodified option must be limited (or, historically speaking, destroyed). Such limitation requires separation be created between people and the ability to produce; it requires that labor only encounter means of production as private property. This separation itself needs to be protected, for with the means of production in the hand of the worker, money in the hand of the capitalist counts for nil. To put it another way, to turn people into labor there needs to be a need, and this need must find fulfillment only through wages and commodities.²³

To summarize: the basic premise of productive labor, as surplus-value extraction, is a need to work, a need conditioned by separating people and communities from their ability to provide for themselves, a separation which itself needs to be perpetuated. A systemic balance
must be achieved in which wages just “maintain” bodies: too much, and people will simply
purchase means of production, too little and the labor force will be weakened and/or will revolt.

But, according to Marx, capitalists don’t knowingly aim for this balance between
“maintenance” of bodies and separation from means of self (community) subsistence, but rather
aim for another one, namely, efficiency. More specifically, capitalists aim to keep up a ratio
between means of production (factory capacity, raw materials, fuel) and labor-power, a ratio that
wastes as little time, productive capacity and material as possible. Efficient use of labor-power
means people, machines, facilities, and material sit idle as seldom as possible. Here,
“maintenance,” as basic upkeep of human bodies points to the importance of a host of activities
more recognizably defined as maintenance and upkeep.

Faux Frais

Toward this general end of efficient production, Marx notes the myriad work of what he
calls faux frais—usually translated as “overhead costs” but also, clearly, as “false” or
“unproductive” expenses (Capital II 209). This describes work that crosses all collar colors:
overseers, foremen, bookkeepers, purchasing agents, warehouse stockers, energy suppliers,
transport workers. With “faux frais,” systemic upkeep and bodily “maintenance” intersect with
infinite types of handed acts aimed at keeping and keeping up. Management organizes time and
disciplines the work force; bookkeeping records information pertaining to all aspects of the
process; storage and stocks provide the piles of materials needed for production; transportation
services circulate products into the market and from it into production; technicians repair broken
machines. Despite a few exceptions, Marx’s theory views these as wasteful expenditure of
energy. He writes, “the capitalist mode of production, while it enforces [efficiency] in each
individual business, also begets... the most outrageous squandering of labour-power... not to mention the creation of a vast number of functions at present indispensible, but in themselves superfluous” (Volume 1 667). Considering such work through productivity makes sense; it explains capital’s relation to these activities, which is, “in each individual business” to minimize expenses on them. The logic of productivity yields a salient critique of capitalism as promoting wasteful expenditures of energy in the form of non-productive work. But Marx takes this critique beyond capitalism, displaying positivist attitudes toward work in general. For example, imagining the social good, apart from capitalism, he writes that “from the point of view of society the productivity of labour… grows when economies [of efficiency] are made in its use. This implies… avoiding all useless labour” (Volume 1 667). Here, a critique of work as rendered inefficient by capitalism sits side-by-side a critique of capitalism as making work too efficient (as described above in terms of “intensification of labor”). I address the question of efficient work in greater detail in chapter 4, though I will add here that upkeep and maintenance straddles (and probably obviates) the line between socially useful and superfluous, inefficient work.

Stock and Alienated Labor

Such straddling can be seen in one particular form of faux frais, storage, deserving closer attention, not only for its use in scrambling the concept of productivity, but for its indication of the role of creating stasis in Marx’s theory. Efficient production, counterintuitively, means lots of stuff held still in space and time. Generating the ratios of materials and workers needed to produce commodities at a profit means that in the sphere of production, material must be kept in high volumes (i.e., tanks of fuel for machines, piles of raw material, etc). Similarly, the ability to market commodities requires stocks at various locations in the sphere of circulation (i.e.,
products in warehouses, such as Amazon’s, as well as in “stores”). Keeping things in stasis actually preconditions movements of both capital and commodities across the lines of production, circulation and consumption. At the same time, capitalist practice targets these stocks, like other forms of ancillary activity, in terms of efficiency, hounding out interruption in favor of “speed, regularity and certainty” (*Capital II* 219). In this, holding things in stocks is both worked for and against. In commodity production and sale, capitalism aims at no interruption, an aim which generates heaps of goods held in state. Such “efficiency” then breeds more *faux frais* in terms of invoicing, warding off decay, etc.

To his credit, Marx makes clear that holding things in stock is a basic human activity (storing food in case of famine, for example). Stocks are but one form (albeit a major one) of storage, and storage is universal, demanding receptacles of various size, along with means of production and labor “spent to ward off damaging influences” (*Capital II* 222). Yet Marx applies efficiency to both capitalist and non-capitalist stocks. Whatever the social form, Marx sees storage in terms of costs, as “necessary expenditures of social wealth… the costs of conserving the social product” and as “deductions from the social wealth, even though they are a condition of its existence” (*Capital II* 222, 225). Such efficiency, while logical in the metrics of capital, is problematic outside of it. Most societies are quite inefficient in their mitigation of decay, but rather put lots of excess energy into the process of keeping, storing and preserving. Warding off decay overlaps with, lacking a better word, civilization. Clothes, vessels, buildings, and technologies of record-keeping all incorporate into various physical forms the ongoing work of decay-mitigation. These “things,” to again use Edgerton’s term for technology, are covered with and comprised of the least efficient forms of human activities, namely the arts. The protective capacity of buildings twines with architecture; the preservative capacity of paint doubles as
artistic medium; ink preserves business records and records poetry. To put it another way, civilization is woven with the work of maintenance, and any re-imagination of society will need to address *faux frais* in broader terms than cost and efficiency allow. On one level, Marx knows this, yet he defaults to a work as “cost” standpoint that seems to follow the logic of capital.

A capacious definition of upkeep allows access to these strands: the exploitation of labor and the value of stasis, the problem of waste and of efficiency, and it does so by directly addressing the experience of work. It includes but transcends exploitation, which, though not Marx’s intention, lends to work almost necessarily negative implications. Marx’s analysis provides an extraordinary tool for addressing labor’s role in economic terms, thus its centrality to this project is unquestioned. Yet it is singularly awkward for addressing work as good or not, even as such questions hang over much of *Capital*. Doubtlessly, Marx views labor as exploited and as, ideally, deeply human, and humanizing experience. But, focused so tightly on production, the overall theory has trouble identifying and exploring, central to this dissertation, questions of good and bad work, and of the possibility of partially non-alienated labor within capitalist systems. Indeed, in such forms of labor we might be able to see one of the reasons why the revolution has been slow in coming.

Alienated labor, as I use it, presents a rubric of sorts for bad and good work. These include repetition versus variety, constancy versus interruption, as well as control over the work environment, permeation of a work process by other aspects of daily life, intellectual stimulation in the process, and ownership of the product. Marx distanced himself from this concept in his later work, viewing it as too idealistic. Still alienation remains one of the most commonly invoked Marxist concepts, and I think it is precisely because of its ability to describe work in these terms: as both systemically and personally problematic, or positive. Were there to be a
reorganization of society, and thus labor, around non-capitalistic relations, alienation is also, like inefficiency and *faux frais*, a key consideration.

Because maintenance is such a wide category, one which is familiar and ubiquitous, I see an opportunity in the current political landscape in the US for a big-tent platform around the work and language of upkeep, which could incorporate traditional production with the service sector, such as teaching, transportation, health care, the trades, and retail. I hope that this dissertation contributes to growing recognition of work considered in such terms.

**Maintenance and Upkeep, 1945-Present**

The period investigated by this dissertation marks two transitions, into the Keynesian era (roughly 1945-1975) and, from there, into neoliberalism (roughly 1975-present), which is the target of much critique herein. Both eras are hotbeds of maintenance and upkeep, in overlapping, but different ways. I describe the Keynesian era this way for two reasons. First, because Keynesian policy aims specifically at systemic equilibrium, and second because Keynesianism promotes consumerism, which means a lot of stuff, which in turn means a lot of maintenance.

In terms of systemic upkeep, Keynesian policy has two main goals. Aimed at both keeping up production and managing (or absorbing) earlier-twentieth century gains of working class power (aims that are both, by the way, preservative) Keynesian policy prescribed the “pump primer” of expanded consumerism. As Lizabeth Cohen writes, “in rejection of Say’s Law of Markets holding that supply and demand were naturally in balance…. government spending began to aim at expanding mass consumption to stabilize the American economy” (54). Rejecting laissez-faire economics in which equilibrium occurred automatically, Keynesianism
prescribed direct government intervention (such as government-backed mortgages) to keep up consumer demand, as well as policies that increased wages, and thus consumer power.

This brought gains in terms of democratic participation and economic security—another form of equilibrium. Based on promoting consumption through higher wages in order to boost demand, “Fueling ‘mass consumption’… enhance[ed] the ability of the mass of Americans to purchase goods [and] promised… a more democratic and egalitarian America for all its citizens” (Cohen 56). While giving up on earlier commitments such as control over the production process, and other alienation-related aspects of work, “Labor and others on the left were the most Keynesian in approach, seeking full employment at high wages…. A thriving mass consumption economy that workers fully participated in provided the essential key to national stability and mass influence” (116). Indeed, this era witnessed significantly lower levels of economic inequality (in terms of both ownership of wealth and wage-income) than the Progressive and neoliberal eras (Piketty 291, 348). Gains in economic equality were not evenly felt and hinged on racial and sexual exclusions. At the same time the Keynesian era brought, or at least corresponded with, major social movements led by non-whites and women.²⁶

Aiming toward stability by, ironically, increasing production and consumption, the Keynesian era is also one of mass maintenance. Consumer goods and services became the dominant fact of life in the US, much of them located around the suburban home. According to Cohen “at the center of American’s vision of postwar prosperity was the private home, fully equipped with consumer durables…. [the Keynesian era entailed] government and corporate commitment to new suburban home building as a pump primer for the post war economy” (Cohen 73). As discussed in Chapter 2, the home and its durable machines require and produce a lot of upkeep, and indeed this is an era rife with maintenance and upkeep in many forms.
Magazines catering to men, such as *Popular Mechanics*, were filled with home DIY projects, from window repairs to bedroom additions. These magazines were also punctuated with ads for correspondence classes in trades such as locksmithing and garage-door installation. Durable machines were linked with progress, and this was an era in which, as Crawford points out, new appliances would come with complex wiring diagrams—“it was simply taken for granted that such information would be demanded by the customer” (2). Mid-century America also witnessed a popular return to celebration of women’s domestic work through magazines such as *House Beautiful* and guides such as Pearl Cole Sherman’s *The Bride’s Primer*. Written to advise new wives about proper domestic drudgery, Sherman displays the relationship of mundane upkeep in the form of housework, to upkeep of ideological structures such as gendered roles. She explains that “home making should be a joy and never a burden” and provides extensive tips, such as “if there are difficult cracks in the baseboard, you may use a toothbrush to get dirt out of them” (2, 64). As discussed in Chapter 2 and 4, critics of conformity in American suburban culture often use domestic upkeep, preformed with a toothbrush or not, to mark confinement and lack of individuality.

Upkeep, in paid form, also permeated local economies. The 1950s and 60s saw sharp increases in, for example, television repair shops in the US (sharp because the technology was newly introduced) followed by decades of slow and steady decline (Vinsel “Repair shops”). This is but one example of the way in which Keynesian economics promoted maintenance, but the links between expanded production of consumer goods and upkeep, especially in terms of the service sector, are myriad. Expansion of infrastructure such as roads and electrical networks brought line-work, road crews and more trades—jobs filled mostly by men. The expanding communication networks that linked growing corporations, universities and government
bureaucracies, yielded other forms of upkeep: secretaries, operators, computer programmers, jobs filled largely by women. While more appliances in bigger kitchens supplied by car trips to the supermarket meant, as Cowen puts it, “More Work for Mother,” maids remained a part of the suburban landscape. Aimed at systemic equilibrium, auguring both increased democratic participation as well as a reinscription of racial and sexual status quo, the Keynesian era is one of mass maintenance.

The concept of a “shift” from Keynesianism to neoliberalism is problematic for a number of reasons, not least because consumerism as an economic “pump primer” has remained a constant. Masses of products and services remain a driver of the economy and a fact of daily life. Yet, neoliberalism can be rightly described as an affront to upkeep. The economic equilibrium established by Keynesianism, fledging as it was, has been eroded. While race and gender arguably mean less concrete exclusions in American society than at mid-century, gains in economic inequality have been rolled back to pre-Keynesian era levels, and disequilibria in terms of class continue to involve racial and sexual intersections. The home, still serviced by government-backed mortgages, becomes less a life-time asset than a liquid one, with major consequences in 2007-8. Disposability and ever-cheaper products delivered by global supply chains often make repair and upkeep a less-than-economic choice. Local repair shops, such as those for vacuums and sewing machines, are becoming a thing of the past. And yet, the neoliberal era has also brought greater cultural attention to maintenance and upkeep. As mentioned above, cultural attention to quotidian work is becoming a dominant aspect of American culture, a tradition in which this dissertation and the Maintainers group belong. The ways in which these eras of American history and culture generate, prohibit and reconstitute
various forms of upkeep, are central this project. Chapter 4, in particular explores upkeep, and its opposite amid the rise of neoliberal ideology.

**Upkeep and Novels**

More than other literary forms, novels represent individuals with complex life worlds acting within larger societies. I don’t suggest all novels necessarily provide social critique, nor even address relationships between individuals and societies in coherent ways. The fiction of Horatio Alger Jr., for example, presents young white men becoming leaders in society through hard work, even as very little representation of work makes it to the page.\(^\text{27}\) But, coherent or otherwise, novels address individual experience in societies, often in terms of work. Stephen King writes that “people love to read about work. God knows why, but they do” (161). Part of the reason must be that work is an essentially individual experience, yet a primary link between individuals and societies. Tightly focused on individuals amid landscapes of other people and lots of things, novels provide the perfect texture to explore work in social terms, as well as to access phenomenological questions about work—about, basically, what makes it satisfying or miserable, worthy or pointless, good or bad. And yet, as Michael Denning puts it “work itself resists representation; and the labor to render the repetitive tasks of shop and home can prove as boring as the tasks themselves not because of the writer’s failure but because of the reader’s resistance. Stories after all come from travels, adventures, romances… interruptions of the daily grind” (244). As Denning points out, rendering work, especially working class work, comes hard to the novel form. Maintenance provides a tool for its inclusion. Well-recognized as a *drag* that *takes all the time*, to paraphrase Ukeles, maintenance and upkeep allows work to be instantiated for readers, in ways that readily indicate “the grind.” Maintenance and upkeep allow work to be
located at specific places, addressed in terms of specific task and larger process, in terms of minute activity and the aim or product of such activity. This provides a method to address work phenomenologically, as experience.

Allowing portrayal of individual activity which is both social and local and which has clear outcomes, maintenance and upkeep are embedded in the DNA of novels, visible in virtually all of them. A concluding section of this dissertation looks at the phenomenological representation of work in terms of maintenance in one of the earliest novels, *Robinson Crusoe* and explores Defoe’s relevance to the current re-discovery of mundane upkeep. Like many twenty-first century Americans, Crusoe finds something deeply satisfying in maintenance, yet demonstrates a need to apply often-flimsy rationales to his acts of upkeep, as well as a penchant for viewing his work as disembodied from social contexts. In this section, I argue that Defoe makes Crusoe a maintenance machine, adept at storing and preserving, as way to perpetuate busy-ness for both the archetypal modern individual and the text itself, which is filled with representation of work. Maintenance, the type of work which goes on and on, provides a useful method, for author, character, and readers to keep working.

**The Chapters**

Chapters 1 and 2 together present an “upstairs downstairs” approach to maintenance in the late 1940s and early 1950s. As described above, “Basement Blueprinting: Aspiration, Descent, and Maintenance” looks at portrayal of black maintenance workers in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Anne Petry’s *The Street* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. I argue basement settings provide a way to locate African American labor at the base of various systems of accumulation, and represent intersectional modes of exploitation across class, race and gender.
Looking not at the base, but the privileged spaces of mid-century America, namely the suburb, “Masculinity and Mass Maintenance: Dystopia, the Suburbs, and Upkeep,” looks at the upkeep of the home as a factor in the lives of white suburbanites. The chapter argues that home upkeep and repair activity allows suburban privilege to register as weight and victimization even as it serves to maintain class and whiteness itself. At the same time the chapter takes seriously the critique of suburban and American culture, partial as it may be, issuing from privileged spaces. Looking across suburban and dystopian genres, the chapter explores the ways white masculine concerns about individuality and mass culture yield different valuation of the various types of upkeep produced by Keynesian consumerism, such as machine maintenance, road repair, and domestic work.

In Chapter 3 “When Caretaking Goes Wrong,” I argue Stephen King uses The Shining (1977) to critique corporate and consumer culture and the dangers of white masculinity. By making Jack Torrance the caretaker of an exclusive corporate hotel, King uses his maintenance job as the access point by which Jack is exposed to the seductions of racial and sexual privilege extended to middle class white men. Downwardly mobile yet bound to aspirational ideology, Jack Torrance is caught between Keynesian and neoliberal moments, and makes a prime target of such seductions. In this, I suggest care for corporate property works together with domestic patriarchy to turn Jack into a member of a late-twentieth century version of Theodore’s Allen’s “buffer class,” responsible for upholding a system of elite privilege which does not benefit him.

In Chapter 4, “Shedding Stuff,” I look at an impulse to detach from material possessions, and the work of maintaining, them in terms of neoliberal discourse. Using two texts that bookend the neoliberal era, Marilynnne Robinson’s 1980 novel Housekeeping and Marie Kondo’s 2014 self-help housekeeping guide The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up, I argue the impulse
to not maintain stems from second wave feminism’s concerns with the confinement of domesticity. Yet, in their demonstration of conservative usurpation of progressive valences, both texts posit a radically free self, unbound from the need to care for structure, both material and social.

Following these formal chapters, I offer a Coda, in two parts. Each aims at articulating, though combined academic and creative styles, different questions and experiences driving this project since its inception. “‘Very Well Contented’ The Maintenance of Work (And the Work of Maintenance) in Robinson Crusoe” poses the question of maintenance to a novel that is a crucial point of reference for political economists and writers interested in work since the eighteenth century. The second element in the Coda addresses my work as a commercial property manager and owner, work and privilege which directly inspired my interest in maintenance as an academic subject. To this ongoing experience I owe credit for my “capacious” definition of maintenance. In this work I began conceptualizing links between the various maintenance tasks at the plaza, such as picking up trash, plowing snow, and fixing furnaces as well as upkeep of larger and more abstract things, such as the commerce occurring at the plaza and the rent-based wealth it provides me. In “Flat Roofs and Long Leases: Technologies of Maintenance at The Great American Stripmall” I join academic and creative modes to explore the plaza, and more specifically, the commercial real estate lease, as “technologies of maintenance” linking landlords and tenants around stipulated acts of upkeep. This essay has itself a number of origins, including my encounter with “grey media,” a term which refers to user agreements, law documents and other thick, quotidian texts, which pushed me to consider the writing of leases themselves as both textual and maintainive activity.
The concluding section, offered as “Origins” of the project, is a short work of creative nonfiction which draws together two desperate histories each of which address perpetual home remodeling in the US. In “Sarah Winchester and Paris, in Connecticut” I link my first career as a carpenter in mid-2000s Southern Connecticut to the mythologized story of Sarah Winchester, the heir of the New Haven rifle manufacturer, who, in the late nineteenth century moved to California to remodel and expand a house for over forty years. Though I used the term “carpenter” above, I struggle to label a job that included tasks ranging from the necessary to the absurd, a struggle which the Winchester story allowed me to at least articulate, if in no way solve. “Remodeler”? “Builder”? “Repairman”? None quite fits, and “carpenter” suggests a finer level of woodwork than what I did. People paid me to repair to roofs, to fix decaying sill plates and leaking plumbing, to redo kitchens for open-plan living, to rip out perfectly fine trim boards in favor of more ornate styles, and, as I relate in the story, to hang a lot of flat-screen televisions, including, in one case, on a ceiling. The job included repair and renovation, maintenance and pointless demolition. It yielded dumpsters full of intact material, lots of packaging, and far too many trips to Home Depot, a store whose commodified orange-ness I continue to find repulsive. I encountered the tale of Sarah Winchester in these years, and her story of endless remodeling, aimed at warding off ghosts through perpetual activity, suggested that my own work, and feelings about it, had long historical trails. In this context I started articulating differences between maintenance, repair, remodeling and renovation, as well as the value-laden challenges of differentiating them. While these differences are less than fully addressed in the present work, much of it depends upon a concept of maintenance and upkeep developed from these histories, as perpetual activity that sutures the pathological to the sane, the pointless to the rational.
Chapter 1
Basement Blueprinting: Aspiration, Descent and Maintenance in

*Native Son, The Street, and Invisible Man.*

This chapter explores two mid-twentieth century novels’ use of a particular setting mapped out in Richard Wright’s “blueprint” for protest literature: the basement. Like *Native Son* (1940), both Anne Petry’s *The Street* (1946) and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952) use basement settings, and maintenance work therein, to explore the ways that race and gender complicate American ascent narratives. With the basement, these authors reveal systemic labor exploitation and locate the abject, while yet depicting potential agency within capitalist systems of accumulation. All three novelists locate characters attempting to rise up in basement spaces where they are instead dragged down. Wright’s Bigger Thomas tends the coal furnace in the basement of the Daltons’ mansion, and uses it, unsuccessfully, to dispose of Mary Dalton’s body after strangling her. Petry’s Lutie Johnson is almost raped in a basement by her building’s superintendent, Jones, who has gone “cellar crazy” (301). Ellison’s novel features two basements. One is the well-lit subterranean hole in which the invisible man’s narrative both begins and ends in an embrace of invisibility. The other is a basement in a paint factory where a younger invisible man, hoping to work his way up, meets Lucius Brockway, who boasts of his central role in a factory known for making “the purest white that can be found” (202). For all three authors, these settings allow for systemic critiques
of hidden labor, while yet allowing direct focus upon individual characters amid complex, dangerous and yet often satisfying and even partially empowering labor environments.

Basements help visualize the invisible. By linking “basement” work such as running a boiler or keeping drains open, to the outcome of upkeep, such as heating a mansion or allowing laundry to be done, basement settings—and a broader focus upon maintenance and service in general—allows these novelists to articulate interactions of race, class and gender, and thus anticipate components of later intersectional analysis. As a spatial metaphor, involving both domestic and institutional space, basements provide a way of linking otherwise compartmentalized environments and social relationships within them. Housing essential machinery that must be “run,” supporting structures of white privilege, and often located adjacent to kitchens and other spaces of service, basements, and the work of upkeep which occurs in them, allow plotting and mapping of complex racial, sexual and class interactions.

Part I: *Native Son* and The Basement as Realistic Allegory

*The Basement in American Fiction*

Basements have much currency in American literature, mostly as the realm of monsters. The gothic tradition frequently employs them as places where human deformity reaches a peak, as in Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Cask of Amontillado.” Such texts, often featuring not only basements, but cellars, crypts, chambers and passages found in the basement (i.e., basements within basements) set up trajectories that readers will follow, downward and inward, into the depths of the human psyche. The basement “is first and foremost the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces. When we dream there, we are in harmony with the irrationality of the depths” (Bachelard 18). Citing Poe, Bachelard writes “the
cellar… becomes buried madness, walled-in tragedy” (20). Comparing cellar spaces to attic ones, he “oppose[s] the rationality of the roof to the irrationality of the cellar. A roof tells its raison d’être right away” (18). Associated with shrouded rooms, branching corridors and dark passages, cellars hide their purposes. Yet, as Bachelard points out, this promises arrival at knowledge, for “associated with the labyrinths of the corridor, in which the air is ‘heavy,’ are rotundas and chapels that are the sanctuaries of the secret….The reader…at first he does not see very clearly the necessity for such a complicated geometry” (21). Corridors and maze-like imagery promise the potential for revelation, for arrival at a literal understanding. In basements, knowledge is buried, but accessible. Stories such as Poe’s virtually promise from the start an eventual unveiling in these dark spaces. In fact, heading down a staircase in any piece of fiction more or less guarantees close encounter with something otherwise hidden.

Both real and allegorical, both mundane and fantastical, basements cross literary movements and genres. Beyond nineteenth-century gothic writers, the late-nineteenth-century social realist tradition frequently uses basements to depict spaces of abject labor and larger systemic exploitation, in horrific ways. In Sister Carrie, for example, Dreiser makes a basement one of Hurstwood’s last stops in his decline into poverty and eventual suicide. He finds work in a hotel, but “was in no shape or mood to do the scrub work that exists about the foundation of every hotel….Porters, cooks, firemen, clerks—all were over him” (325). He falls ill, goes to Bellevue, and is discharged “thin and pale, his hands white, his body flabby” (326). Perhaps the sine qua non of horrific realism set in the basement is The Jungle. Sinclair depicts an entire impoverished geography comprised of basements: bars, brothels, saloons, apartments, escape routes, drunk tanks, sites of near rape. And, of course, horrific meat. In the meat plants, Sinclair explains that what eventually becomes sausage, a combination of “all the odds and ends of the
waste of the plant” and the water that workers used to wash and relieve themselves “would be dumped into old barrels in the cellar and left there” (132). Similarly, basements are used to display the worst labor conditions. Jurgis’s father, Antanas, works in “a dark, unheated cellar, where you could see your breath all day… So the old man’s cough grew everyday worse…. [Moreover] his feet were soaked in chemicals, and it was not long before…. sores began to break out on his feet” (77). He dies a toeless, blood-spitting “skeleton…. [with] so little flesh on him that the bones began to poke through” (77) Looking back from his own abjection, Jurgis thinks “he would have been alive and strong to-day if he had not had to work in Durham’s dark cellars to earn his share” (171). In short, basements, super-exploitation and horror/de-humanization are found in close proximity.

The authors discussed in this chapter draw from both of these traditions, as well as from twentieth-century mass culture to generate social critique which includes intersections of race and gender. In this, Wright, Petry and, to an extent, Ellison, draw on basement imagery to generate what Chris Vials calls mass-mediated realism. Vials argues that, despite the attention given to modernism, the 1930s and 40s witnessed a “revival of realism” which drew upon realist novels’ dedication to accessible forms and depiction of complex yet ordinary people in and affected by specific social settings (xv, xvi). This “mass-mediated realism,” however “was in actuality a hybrid genre permeated by mass-culture forms and tropes to a much greater extent than its nineteenth century incarnation—and in ways not always conscious to its creators” (Vials xvi). The use of the basement by Wright, Petry and Ellison follows this not-always-conscious incorporation of mass-media tropes. Attaching standard basement imagery of shadows, dark passages and unfamiliar objects less to Poe-like hidden crypts and murderous plotting, these authors instead apply the imagery of dark passages to places in which black characters work, and
apply “complicated geometry” to mundane materials and machinery, such as pipes and furnaces. As part of their trajectory downward and inward, these characters are led, pushed or otherwise compelled into the basement.

In basements, structure and systems merge, allowing a literary entry point into a space which is both “the belly of the beast,” and a piece of technology, a place to depict dehumanization of men who are “the machines inside the machine,” which is yet familiar and recognizable (Marable 2; Ellison 217). Both monstrous and mundane, basement secrets are well-known to anyone who spends time there. Indeed the appeal of figuring out a basement, of plumbing the depths, leads to understanding of the very features of the system being supported. Thus in both real and symbolic ways, to set a character in a basement and task him (and, for Petry, her) with upkeep allows representation of the workings of the system itself, at both macro and micro levels.

Basements thus present a perfect space—one familiar yet unmapped, real yet allegorical, monstrous yet mundane—for revealing the “base.” Basements are places of hidden labor where the black hands supporting the system can be seen. Because basements contain mechanical systems and the mundane activities of running them, and yet are the territory of monsters, they allow for realization of the monstrous as well as a “monsterization” of the real. In the attempt to make visible the roles of racialized and gendered hands in supporting structures and systems—i.e., to reveal what occurs at the base—Ellison and Petry, following Wright, employ these lowly settings, making them central to both plot and theme. In this they help describe the working class in ways that both remain committed to Marxist analysis yet, central to mid-century black politics and culture, in ways also that move away from the traditionally imagined, white, male proletariat. Because so much of the non-white-male labor force (then and now) is in the service
sector, they also end up revising ideas of labor away from traditional Marxist conceptions of productivity, and towards maintenance.

Before exploring the basement in terms of Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing” and *Native Son*, I will briefly discuss Adam Smith’s “invisible hand,” which I draw on throughout this chapter to illustrate relationships between hidden labor, hidden control of that labor, and white privilege/accumulation delinked from such control. Following this will be an also-brief discussion of Marx and service labor, which I argue lays the groundwork for Wright’s “Blueprint.”

*Smith, Marx and the Productivity of Labor*

Part of the power of the basement setting comes not only from being a site of invisible black labor, but from their spatial relationship to larger systems of accumulation. Basements, that is, not only hide black labor power, but systemic (white) dependence upon that power. Smith’s famous metaphor allows for such obfuscation of agency and dependence—in both directions, up and down. In *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in which he first deploys the “invisible hand” as an economic mechanism, Smith describes a “proud and unfeeling landlord” as well as “the labours of all the thousands whom [such individuals] employ” (184). He writes that while the latter support the luxurious lifestyle of the former, the pursuit of this lifestyle is what “keeps in continual motion the industry of mankind” (184). This job-bestowing and wealth-distributing formula he calls “the invisible hand” (184). In something of a historical irony, Smith, laying groundwork for the conception of an automatically functioning market, arguably the central mystifying tenet of classic economics, actually highlights labor, both productive and maintainive. Both manufacturing and upkeep factor in his schema, and indeed he tells a story about wealth in
which it is supported by “those who provide and keep in order all the different baubles and
trinkets…employed in the oeconomy of greatness” (184, my emphasis). But he also promotes the
invisibility of hands, making self-interested activity, and more precisely excessive accumulation
and consumption, the driver of a mechanistic, self-perpetuating, autonomous market. The work
of upkeep is reversed, and the people actually creating and maintaining society though handed
labor receive rather than provide.

As mentioned, a degree of invisibility goes upward as well: the management and
perpetuation of the ostensibly free market, as well as elite control of various institutions and
power centers within this free market, also gets hidden. As Karl Polanyi insists, “laissez faire
was planned,” and the ability to continue—now into the neoliberal era—the fiction of
spontaneous market-oriented order obscures active and continual management by the state and
those with power within it. At the same time, the invisible hand formula is confused about
agency—at the top. The metaphor, and its long afterlife, combines two scenarios for agency at
the top of the economic spectrum. One, described above, is automatic: those at the top “promote
an end which was no part of [their] intention (Wealth 351). But another scenario is agential: the
same figure, in the same passage, “endeavors as much as he can both to employ his capital in the
support of domestic industry, and so to direct that industry that its produce may be of the greatest
value” (Wealth 351). From this, the invisible hand is as likely to refer to real people, acting
powerfully and pointedly, behind the scenes. These scenarios of agency yield two different
versions of the invisible hand, one mechanistic and even religious in faith in an almost
supernatural, god-like hand ordering things via market interactions in ways beyond individual
human comprehension, the other very human, and actively manipulating events in a behind-the-
scenes-fashion. This confusion may itself be part of this invisible hand’s appeal: providing those at the top with credit for creating the benefits of capitalism and cover for any problems.

While confused about agency at the top, the invisible hand has no such confusion about agency at the bottom: there is none. The invisible hand formula thus provides invisibility in both directions, up and down.

Marx’s under-theorization of service work amid his emphasis on productive labor dovetails with this, and lays groundwork for the need to reimagine the working class for mid-twentieth century Americans. Concerned with service as either productive or unproductive labor, Marx defines service as commodities that can’t be separated from their producer, and which are consumed as they are produced, such as (in his examples) a singer’s song and a tailor’s stitches. He writes that services are “types of work that are consumed as services and not in products separable from the worker and hence not capable of existing as commodities independently of him, but which are yet capable of being directly exploited in capitalist terms” (1044). Since a line of inquiry in this dissertation raises questions about potentially non-alienated labor inside capitalism, it is worth pointing out that, exploitation aside, the inseparability of worker and product virtually cries out for consideration of service as partially non-alienated labor. But, focused upon productivity (the ability to generate surplus value), Marx dismisses the value of services, describing these types of work as “of microscopic significance when compared with the mass of capitalist production,” only worth dealing with as part of “wage-labour that is not at the same time productive labour” (1045). And yet he seems to recognize, even in a pre-consumerist industrial economy, how widespread and variegated these types of work are, mentioning in the space of two pages examples of a tailor, a schoolmaster, a doctor, a day-laborer and a singer. As part of a larger Marxist emphasis upon productive labor, this helps sets the stage for the very
updating of Marxism called for by Wright’s “Blueprint.” While perhaps less true of nineteenth-century Brittan, service work in the US, from Marx’s time through the mid-twentieth century and into today is highly racialized; thus, the exclusion of service work from direct Marxist analysis contributes to the very problem with Marxism which Wright broaches in “Blueprint,” namely, the focus upon a proletariat imagined only in traditionally-recognized productive spheres, from which African Africans were often excluded. Notably, Wright and Petry, responsible for the first and second “African American blockbuster” novels in American history focus almost entirely upon work in the service sector, using residential basements to display the work of upkeep (Vials 14). Ellison traces such upkeep back into a traditionally productive space, a factory.

**Expanding the Base in Wright’s Blueprint**

In “Blueprint for Negro Writing,” Wright, concerned about literary treatment of large social patterns, argues that protest novels must bridge two literary challenges. One is to avoid “a simple literary realism which seeks to depict the lives of people devoid of wider social connotations…[which] do a rank justice to the Negro people and alienate their possible allies in the struggle for freedom” (101). Such detachment of individual experience from social causes in literature models a larger problem for Wright in which he criticizes a “parasitic” “Negro bourgeoisie” for following “the illusion that they could escape through individual achievement the harsh lot of their race” (99). Black literature, for Wright, must have “a theory about the meaning, structure, and direction of modern society” (103). Marxism is the best such theory: “it is through a Marxist conception of reality and society that the maximum degree of freedom in thought and feeling can be gained for the Negro writer…. [providing] a sense of dignity which no other vision can give” (102). But, to avoid the other literary challenge, writing lifeless
“propaganda,” Wright argues that “Marxism is but the starting point. No theory of life can take the place of life. After Marxism has laid bare the skeleton of society, there remains the task of the writer to plant flesh upon those bones” (102). Basements, this chapter argues, make a perfect setting to plant flesh on bones.

The motivation for such “fleshing” must be addressed, since the way Wright’s “Blueprint” sets up these two literary errors can been seen as itself following an erroneous version of literary history. This version posits that party-line “agitprop” novels, lacking artistic virtue, were promoted by the 1930s literary left, especially the major outlets New Masses and Partisan Review. In the late thirties, the argument goes, new editors at the Partisan Review began critiquing “leftism” and “tendentiousness,” which together indicate “disregard for aesthetic values…. the stereotyped portrayal of workers and capitalists as heroes and villains… and the general distortion or coloring of reality for political ends” (Murphy 1).31 Ironically, Wright’s “Blueprint,” clearly argues for including Marxist theory in novels, yet is read as part of the ideological move away from Marxism in which the “debate” is positioned. This distancing first followed the liberal “popular front against fascism,” in which radical writers abandoned their “insistence on purely proletarian themes of immediate agitational import” though “[b]y the time the Cold War reached its peak in the mid-fifties, it had become an integral part of the general ideological assault on communism and the ‘red decade’” (Murphy 14, 2). In both cases, the “debate” over aesthetics and ideology became indicative of not only lack of artistic virtue on the left, but allowed tendentiousness, in terms of a facile and ultimately empty theory, to become part of the broader stance of hostility towards communism and Marxism (Murphy 185). This ushers in an era in which Marxist analysis and socialist planning are positioned as simplistic and naïve.
Wright obviously didn’t view Marxism as facile and empty, and Murphy deconstructs the idea that he was responding directly to this debate. Yet “Blueprint” does describe a divide between propaganda and something more life-like. This is frequently seen as a move away from social analysis towards individualism. Yet, as the following discussion of Cedric Robinson’s view of Wright makes clear, Wright wasn’t only trying to “flesh” out the individual experience of individual proletarians, but to add specifically black flesh to the otherwise skeletal image of the proletariat itself. Robinson explains that ahead of publishing *Native Son*, Wright had reached “the conclusion that the historic development of Black people in the United States constituted the most total contradiction to Western capitalist society…. [because] the alienation of Black workers from American Society was more total than that experienced by the ‘white’ working classes formed in Europe and Asia” (429). Less interested in individual experience than in a universalization which could include blackness (unlike orthodox Marxism), Wright, Robinson argues, was different from other contemporary black radical intellectuals, even C.L.R. James and W.E.B. Dubois, whom Robinson also casts as theoretically ahead of their times. Wright wanted to describe common experience, in terms of race and class. Thus, in *Native Son*, he “sought to display a more authentic, more historical, more precise image of the proletariat to which the Party had committed itself” (425). Seeking “an alternative penetration into the relationship between European radical thought and the historical configurations of the Black Movement” led Wright to discover “a psychological and intellectual locus unlike anything his experience of Western radicalism and activism could encompass” (Robinson 421). For Robinson this locus meant undoing the romanticized view of the proletariat, via Bigger’s lack of class consciousness. Putting Bigger into a space of degradation, Wright demonstrates that this alone will not develop into a positive radical reaction, only some reaction. Bigger, as Wright puts it in “How ‘Bigger’
was Born,” will not “become an ardent, or even luke-warm supporter of the status quo” (Robinson 426). Wright believed, following Marxism, that the desperation and degradation of living and working in abject spaces would lead to reaction, but not necessarily socialist reaction. Fascist reaction was just as likely. He wanted the radical left to “come to grips with the appeals of fascism, [so] that it could… begin to understand the immediate nature of the working class,” a project which meant engaging with, in his own words “the dark and hidden places of the human personality” (Robinson 427, 426, original emphasis). This brings us back to Poe and Bachelard, and the value of the basement in terms of providing a “locus” for such an engagement.

**Blueprinting with the Basement in Native Son**

Wright’s “Blueprint” is not only a map for creating lifelike characters and events in novels that yet toe the Party line; rather it is about how to make the Party line itself more realistic by accounting for race. As Wright explains, such a project depends upon “awareness… consciousness…perspective” (“Blueprint” 103). His own novel establishes this perspective, this animation of experience in Marxist terms, in part by placing his aspiring black character downstairs. In *Native Son*, the basement is an important setting, the place where Bigger burns Mary Dalton’s body after strangling her in her bedroom, as well as where he is exposed as her killer. It serves a number of plot, style and thematic functions in the text. First, showing Bigger at work *down* in the basement, where he is tasked with furnace-tending, allegorizes the result of the combined aspiration/desperation motives that bring Bigger to the Daltons seeking a job: racial exploitation. Bigger’s mother, on the cusp of losing her apartment, tells him, “If you get that job….I can fix up a nice place for you children” (10). Bigger himself doesn’t care too much about a nicer home, but he does aspire upward, in a few ways. For example, he is imbued by
Wright with the desire to be a pilot. As his friend Gus puts it to Bigger as the two spot a plane, “If you weren’t black and if you had some money and if they’d let you go to that aviation school, you could fly a plane” (16). Corresponding to his other role as a chauffeur, Bigger will not be working in the air, but on, and under the ground. But, unlike the purely exclusionary reference to the work of piloting, the basement provides Wright with an allegorical tool that more complexly captures the reality of black labor: not only exclusion from “higher” professions (and nicer homes), but a deep, and deeply debasing inclusion.

In this he anticipates Manning Marable’s concept of underdevelopment, in which African Americans “occupy the lowest socioeconomic rung in the ladder of American upward mobility precisely because they have been ‘integrated’ all too well into the system” (2). Exclusion is only part of the problem for Marable. He writes that “Afro-Americans have been on the other side of one of the most remarkable and rapid accumulations of capital… existing as a necessary yet circumscribed victim within the proverbial belly of the beast” (2). Symbolically invoking “lowest rung” as well as “integration” into the belly of a multifaceted system of accumulation, Wright’s basement and its position at/as the foundation of the Dalton’s mansion captures the concept of underdevelopment, in which Bigger’s inclusion puts him on the “other side” of the wealth and privilege he generates, through labor and (discussed below) rent. In this, the dark basement augers as a miniature colonial space at the very core of rich white society. It isn’t just any basement, but one supporting the mansion of a man with a real estate company, which might own the apartment that Bigger’s family rents. This allows Wright to literally and figuratively map Bigger’s work onto a larger system of accumulation, while yet focusing on the individual himself, at work, in what seems like a self-contained environment. He explains this intersectional move in “Blueprint” when he writes that “a Negro writer must create in his readers’ minds a
relationship between a Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South and the men who loll in swivel chairs in Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil” (104). Such an overlay lets Wright articulate deep inequalities wrought by race and class (though not, in this case, the sexualized ones indicated in the quote).

Wright shows that heat is one of these inequalities, and his treatment of it again indicates underdevelopment. Notably, Bigger exposes his crime by fumbling his essential job: having failed to clean the coal ashes, as well as Mary’s, from the furnace, he lets the house get cold—a major mistake. In short order, Peggy, the white housekeeper, tells him “there’s not enough heat upstairs. You’d better clean those ashes out and make a better fire” (147). This follows an earlier scene in which readers are told the white-owned apartments in which Bigger’s black community lives are cold. In passing conversation Bigger chats with Gus, saying “‘them old white landlords sure don’t give much heat.’ ‘And they always knocking at your door for money’” (16). This community not only lacks access to hierarchies of servants to keep the fires burning; it lacks heat itself. The rich white community meanwhile has a double privilege: not just the wealth accumulated through rent, but access to laborers such as Bigger, who needs the work in order to rise out of the very system of accumulation supporting the Daltons. Double privilege on one side (rent and service), double exploitation on the other (poverty and labor). Ironically, Bigger doesn't even know who is responsible for his (lack of) heat: “he had heard that Mr. Dalton owned the South Side Real Estate Company, but he was not sure” (55). Dalton is atop a system that puts Bigger into a “low” position where he is yet responsible for Dalton’s upkeep. His housekeeper can call down the stairs and the furnace tender will respond, yet Dalton himself has no direct responsibility for the people from whom he extracts rent. Responsibility for heating his own
home is in fact so far from his mind that he forgets to tell Bigger about this part of his job, also leaving that task to Peggy.

At the same time, part of the blueprinting shows that invisible, marginalized basement work provides Bigger with limited, provisional, yet substantial access to the home of a rich white man. Combining access and invisibility, the basement points to another aspect of maintenance work utilized by Wright, and extended by both Petry and Ellison: in being relatively “overlooked” as spaces of labor where black men are tasked with important, yet repetitive, menial tasks, they provide a degree of autonomy and agency even as they confine. The invisibility provides cover, as well as free space, and some degree of power. Bigger, for example, ends up with access to Mary’s bedroom via the basement, which is his entry point to the house. When he kills her, his panic leads him right back to this space, where he has enough invisibility to burn her body and hide evidence. As Bigger puts it “who would think of looking in the furnace for her? (218). And he’s right. As mentioned above, Mary’s remains are found, but Wright makes the catalyst not suspicion, but Bigger’s failure to keep the fire going. That he easily escapes from the basement after Mary’s body is discovered underscores the limited but substantial power and freedom a black worker might find there. In this vein, it is interesting that Wright makes the scene of his capture not a basement, but its spatial opposite: a water tower, on a roof top.

In addition to limited power and freedom, basements also allow some potential for engaging activity, in masculine terms. Male characters tend to like basements and Bigger is no exception. Paralleling his appreciation for Dalton’s Buick (untethered from his disdain for being a chauffeur), he finds the self-feeding coal furnace “admirable” and decides that the work “was easy; it would be fun, almost” (65). Directly linked to the basement is a bedroom for Bigger: “A
room all to himself” (66). This space of marginalized, exploited labor, a place in which Bigger eventually finds he “had his back to the wall” gives him at least the semblance of agency. Beyond the basement, Wright makes spaces of upkeep into sites of limited power, and not only in terms of free movement and enjoyable work, but of information and knowledge. For example, by going into a closet, a space of storage, Bigger is able to overhear conversations occurring elsewhere in the house. Overall, this is a somewhat clunky plot device, but that’s the point: in figuring out how to imbue his character with knowledge of conversations to which he would not be realistically privy, Wright puts him in the closet. In a nice bit of doubling on Wright’s part, Bigger overhears from this closet a conversation in which Peggy explains to the Daltons that she knows by the state of Mary’s bed that someone has laid on, but not slept in it. Maids are perhaps the most knowledgeable maintenance workers, but the point extends to basements as well: upkeep means access.

This access however comes with danger: exposure. Bigger’s role as a maintainer for the Daltons exposes him to a number of dangers posed by the white community. Not least of these reveals Wright’s intersectional aims: Bigger finds a real version of an object he has been exposed to via movie screens and advertisements: the young, rich, white woman. He finds that “on the screen she was not dangerous and his mind could do with her as it liked. But here in her home she walked over everything” (62). Mary’s playful realness only exacerbates his rage at a life of denied privilege. Mary dies, but being brought into this home is thus dangerous for Bigger too. Moreover, Bigger’s agency in the basement only occurs in a state of invisibility, a state which is highly provisional and over which he has no control. Wright underscores this by setting the scene of Bigger’s exposure in the basement. As he attempts to feed coal into the furnace in front of a host of white reporters milling about waiting for news to develop about Mary, he fumbles the job
and must open the furnace in front of the men. His invisibility interrupted, he must perform his work before a crowd of white men, men who know if he’s doing it correctly or not.

The basement as allegorical setting has such versatility in part because basements lend themselves well to genre bending. Almost by nature, basements are a realm of horror, yet are also both real and familiar. For a realist writer, such a space also allows portrayal of deformed and deforming labor. In *Native Son* this occurs most prominently in the scene in which Bigger burns Mary. In a series of matter-of-fact descriptions, Bigger pushes her body into the furnace, and, finding it won’t fit, tries to cut its head off with his pocket knife, and fails until he finds a hatchet. The section plays upon work in terms of both realism and horror. Bigger has a job to do, gathers the tools for it, struggles, improvises (finding, for example, a stack of newspapers to collect blood) and then gets the job done—the job being head removal, and human incineration. In the midst of it, Wright employs horror tropes: Mrs. Dalton’s white cat suddenly perches on the trunk and Bigger’s mouth “opened in a silent scream” (105). The basement allows things to register as real and as symbolic at the same time. For example, as Bigger’s lies spin outward, his freedom more tenuous, Wright frequently notes the “torrid cracks of the furnace gleam[ing] in the crimson darkness,” the “bright cracks of the furnace door…[showing] a red heap of seething coals” (218, 171). Much could be unpacked from these references to seething hot flame, but perhaps most importantly, Wright makes clear that something violent and dangerous burns ceaselessly in the bowels of the Dalton’s home, and that this thing is the object of Bigger’s labor. Since this furnace is a real, recognizable thing, Wright can link it to a mundane set of repetitive daily tasks, such as Bigger “pull[ing] the lever for more coal” (140). As such, the basement setting helps alleviate representational issues of proletarian fiction, the representation of work in both personal and systemic ways and the experience of work as a “grind.”
Part II: Basement Workers in *The Street* and *Invisible Man*

*Aspiring Workers in Petry and Ellison*

The remaining sections of this chapter focus on such literary employment of basement settings, and their relationship to what occurs upstairs, in two mid-twentieth-century novels, Ann Petry’s *The Street* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Each builds upon and updates Wright’s “Blueprint.” These authors were steeped in the radical left, but both ostensibly broke from the party line by satirizing (Ellison) and excluding (Petry) the organized Left as a potential solution to the racialized, gendered exclusions and exploitations their novels portray. Both novels were published as Cold War anticommunism absorbed the straightforward critique of capitalism, and as the Popular Front’s “moment of radical possibility” dissipated into a suburban ideal based on possessive individualism (Lubin 5). Often approached, then and now, as departures from radical critique, the novels can also be read as social criticism coded for a Cold War audience. Using methods described by Denning as “the politics of form,” in which each forged “a new literary aesthetic that maintained certain Popular Front commitments while also revising them,” these novels point to the difficulties and possibilities of systemic critique in an era of individualism (Lubin 4, 7).

Petry’s novel in particular has often been discussed in light of *Native Son* and Wright’s “Blueprint.” As Mullen puts it “*The Street*... derives from African-American women’s experiences of slavery and exploitation, recuperated and revised by Petry as an allegory or blueprint of black women’s historical relationship to capitalism” (42). In short, she updates Wright’s own update of the proletariat, to include black women. In addition to a number of shared plot elements—a black worker lacking class consciousness, pushed into a position of
violence and flight by racism, misogyny and economic exploitation—Petry also employs
“literary tropes outside the framework of social realism [such as] popular culture and film noir,”
in her attempt to code intersections of race, class and gender for cold war audiences (Lubin 4).
More than Wright, Petry (and Ellison) uses basements tropes to target the American aspiration
myth, to show not only the falsity of the Franklinian formula of rising via hard work, but to show
how the ideology itself operates in systemically maintainive ways.

In Petry’s novel such a rise entails trying to move from a daily grind of both waged and
unwaged labor in urban poverty, to the airy privacy and eased toil of suburbia. In the novel’s
1942 present, Lutie Johnson, a single mother who has worked her way through night school to be
a typist, wants to get her son out of Harlem and into the suburbs. She carries with her “the belief
that anybody could be rich if he wanted to and worked hard enough and figured it out carefully
enough” (43). This belief comes from the white family in Connecticut for whom she once
worked as a housekeeper. As in Sloan Wilson’s The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (1955),
suburban Connecticut looks degenerate—alcoholism, adultery, and consumer-age ennui factor
large. The Raths in Wilson’s novel are hemmed in by the upkeep of their suburban home. This
novel begins “By the time they had lived seven years in the little house on Greentree Avenue in
Westport, Connecticut, they both detested it” (1). The Raths “disliked ‘working around the place’
and couldn’t afford to pay someone else to do it” (1). The Chandlers for whom Lutie works in
Lyme, however, can afford the service the Raths yearn for. While Wilson’s Raths maintain their
own home; Petry’s Lutie maintains the Chandlers. While each family of white people display
suburban degeneracy, but the Raths double down on hard work and a family-oriented suburban
ideal, and the novel ends happily, with family bonds intact. The Street does not end happily in
these terms, though Lutie carries with her the same bundle of ideals. Moving into a decrepit
apartment house in which she faces exploitation and sexual danger, Lutie thinks, “now that she had this apartment, she was just one step farther up on the ladder of success” (26). The novel ends with her disappearing into the night after killing a would-be rapist, leaving her son in juvenile hall—a reverse image of escaping to the “airy, sunny” suburbs (311). The lesson about the Franklinian formula garnered from suburban whites? A wiser Lutie scolds herself that “you forgot you were black” (389).

Ellison’s novel also features a striver wizened-up over the course of the novel about rising. *Invisible Man* provides an Aeneas-like journey through various contexts of potential hard-work-based success (higher education, big business, Labor, community organizing of both the integrationist and Black Nationalist varieties) and ends with the unnamed narrator (hereafter: the Man) in a deep basement, stealing copious amounts of electricity and tinkering with invented gadgets like “Ford, Edison and Franklin” (7). Ahead of their disappearances, in both novels, each of these aspiring characters is “kept running” as the Man puts it, a term which invokes a state of active-stasis, as *running* in place. Both protagonists find themselves in the position described in the poisoned letter of recommendation the Man carries with him throughout *Invisible Man*. Addressed to “My dear Mr. Emerson,” it asks any potential employer, in “the best interests of the great work which we are dedicated to perform… [to please] help him continue in the direction of that promise which, like the horizon, recedes ever brightly and distantly beyond the hopeful traveler” (191). Like Lutie, the Man finds himself in a sort of horror-story version of the old cliché that “the journey is the destination.” This is summed up in dream after the famous “battle royale” sequence, in which the Man’s grandfather (a figure who points at the generational aspect of this active-stasis, this maintainive quality of aspiration) translates the letter as: “To Whom It May Concern…. Keep This Nigger Boy Running” (33).
If both novels show black worker-aspirers running in place, each character is doing so in a gendered way. Lutie becomes trapped in drudgery of both the waged and unwaged type—i.e. in the feminized tasks of daily upkeep, of being a mother and an office file clerk. Her goal is a gendered image of white success: a clean, modern, suburban kitchen. The Man’s running entails more masculine forms of white success: having a social impact and being a leader. To reveal the mechanical-rabbit aspect of the American aspiration narrative, each author uses a different symbol—stairs for Petry, clocks for Ellison. The Street focuses on steps and stairs to address the relationship between aspiration, work and exploitation. Moving to the apartment house, Lutie thinks “she was just one step farther up on the ladder of success” (26). When she first sees the “dark, high, narrow steps” she’ll be climbing everyday (and paying for every month), “she stared at the them fascinated. Going up stairs like those you ought to find a newer and more perfected kind of hell at the top” (6). The stairs are covered with “filthy” refuse—“butts…wrappings from packages of snuff, pink ticket stubs from the movie houses….empty gin and whisky bottles” (all, notably, the refuse of mass-culture vice and leisure)—and the “father up…the colder it got” (12). With the steps, Petry both models the work-rise myth, and inverts it. She’s going nowhere. Later, wizened, Lutie extends the climb to her community, thinking “vaguely of all the feet that had passed over them in order to wear the treads down like this—young feet and old feet; feet tired from work; feet that skipped up them because some dream made them less than nothing to climb” (312). Symbolizing aspiration, climbing also captures the physical nature of the daily cycles of domestic upkeep Lutie, and the other female tenants, enact. Lutie hopes for a not-too-distant future in suburbia, with Bub “growing up in some airy, sunny house and herself free from worry about money” (311). A sort of anti-suburbia, the building is both a staircase up, and a
downward dragging trap; it is technology by which her attempt will be exploited, her body reimagined as a sexual tool, her stair-climbing-like labor turned into perpetual rent.

To interrogate “running,” *Invisible Man* uses clocks, which suggest less a beast-of-burden type of repetition, and more of an anxiety around the human as mechanism, of dehumanization in a mechanical sense. Clocks factor in Trueblood’s incest story, often read as depicting the abasing effect of long-term racism and underdevelopment. Jim Trueblood, a black sharecropper living in a former slave cabin, describes impregnating his daughter to an enthusiastically-listening Mr. Norton, a rich white school trustee. Trueblood’s story starts in a dream: he is in a white mansion, confronted with a half-naked white woman who steps out of a striking grandfather clock. He says “I wants to run but the only door I see is the one in the clock she’s standin’ in—and anyway I can’t move and this here clock is keepin’ up a heapa racket” (58). Dreading that white men will find him there, Trueblood feels confined by both a mechanical sexuality and acute awareness of the stereotypes to which he is subject. This is mirrored by the Man, who, listening to Trueblood tell the story to Mr. Norton, is infuriated: “How can he tell this to white men… when he knows they’ll say that all Negroes do such things?” (58). In Trueblood’s story, he escapes into the clock, up “a dark tunnel, up near where the machinery is making all that noise and heat. It’s like the power plant they got up to the school. It’s burnin’ hot… and I starts runnin’…. I runs and runs till I should be tired” (58). Trueblood wakes up to find himself having sex with his daughter.

In Brockway’s basement, another scene in which a black character turns against a younger black character (though not sexually) heat, machines, confinement, running and clocks all factor. The scene is filled with pressure gauges which must be constantly checked “over the roar of the furnaces,” a task the Man describes as “like reading a clock” (208, 211). At one point,
Brockway “remove[s] a heavy engineer’s watch from his breast pocket and squint[s] at it importantly, then turn[s] to check it with an electric clock… on the wall” (211). Just as Trueblood enjoys his “running,” Brockway brags about being “the machines inside the machine” and about being close to the white founder of the company (217). Paralleling Petry’s use of stairs to represent black women’s incorporation into an exploitative domestic femininity in terms of exhausting, repetitive physical task, Ellison uses clock references to indicate black men’s degradation into mechanicality. In both cases, lots of movement leads to little progress.

The Basement as Block to Solidarity

Both novels block their protagonists’ rise not only with white racism, but with other African American characters. Each includes an antagonistic, self-centered young black man whose actions directly lead to the protagonists’ descents (Ras the Exhorter and Boots Smith in, respectively, Ellison and Petry). Encounters with them occur on the surface. Each novel also blocks their young protagonist’s journey up with an old black man—a building superintendent in Petry’s novel, a machine operator in Ellison’s—who works in a basement. These characters are less directly antagonistic, and suggest a tragedy of potential solidarity. Despite continued interest in these novels, little has been written about these characters, and none about them as maintainers. As the superintendent of an apartment house, Petry’s Jones is clearly a maintainer. Ellison’s Brockway, on the other hand, responsible for making the base of the paint, is a producer. Yet, working amid furnaces into which he shovels coal, checking gauges, keeping time, and making sure the factory upstairs stays supplied with the base also indicates a maintainer. With these characters, and with interactions between what’s going on on the surface
and what transpires the basement, Ellison and Petry interweave class, race and sex in their respective portrayals of industrial and domestic systems of accumulation.

In *The Street*, basements and basement workers do not come off well; they tend to represent both a downward dragging force for Lutie, and the dehumanizing integration of black workers, both men and women, into a system of white male privilege. At the center of Petry’s novel, Jones the superintendent attempts to pull Lutie into the cellar, where, after much lust, he will rape her. Evoking cinematic imagery, Jones lurks in the building’s hall, emerges from the shadows, and tells her “you’re so sweet…you young little thing” then begins “dragging her toward the cellar door” (235). To the rescue comes Mrs. Hedges, the madam of the building’s first floor whorehouse, and “a mountain of a woman… [with] the appearance of a creature that had strayed from some other planet” (237). She throws Jones against the cellar door and brings Lutie into her apartment, telling Jones as they leave, “you done lived in basements so long you ain’t human no more. You got mold growin’ on you” (237). Unfortunately for Lutie, Hedges has nothing of charity in her act—she too wants Lutie’s body, not for her own use, but for its retail value. And she, like Jones, was once a basement-dwelling superintendent, a “janitor and collector of rents” for the building’s white owner, Junto. The name “Junto” as Wald points out “is the same as that of a business club associated with Benjamin Franklin,” and the character, as Lubin puts it, “is literally the book’s invisible hand” (Wald 128; Lubin 45). Suggestive of the agent-version of the invisible hand, Junto owns almost every setting in the novel: the apartment house, the neighborhood bar, a nightclub, and two whorehouses. Similarly, the powerful white man in *Native Son*, Dalton, owns Bigger’s family’s home, which provides the link for his basement job. In Wright’s blueprint, the seemingly discreet spaces white and black people occupy are tied together in ways that render service labor available to whites.
Petry builds upon this blueprint in a number of related ways. First, each of the Junto-owned spaces is a site of sexualized, and often sexual labor. This extends the range of privilege Wright displays: While Dalton gets rent and service in the form of a chauffeur, boiler-tender, and housekeeper, Junto has access to these things as well as to black women’s bodies, for personal use and for profit. Second, Petry takes this a step further, or back, to black men. Suggestive of sexual entitlement foiling racial solidarity, one of Junto’s whorehouses is for black men, which provides tentative sexual privilege to men like Boots, who, though excluded from the whorehouse for white men, and while serving white clientele in nightclubs, Pullman cars, and other locations, have the privilege of access to black women’s bodies thus fragmenting any possible solidarity between the black men and women who are jointly victimized by the novel’s white men.

Petry doesn’t stop there in highlighting the disintegration of collective identities; she brings into her novel a black woman who exploits other black women. In yet a further permutation of class, race and sex, the brothel catering to black men, in the apartment house, is, as mentioned, headed by a black woman. Mrs. Hedges, in league with Junto, wants to push Lutie into a position from which prostitution will be her only option. To Hedges, “Lutie offered great possibilities for making money. Mr. Junto would be willing to pay very high for her…. When he got tired of her himself he could put her in one of those places he ran [for white men] on Sugar Hill” (256). In unpacking the role of race-traitor characters such as Jones and Mrs. Hedges in a novel with Marxist, or at least leftist, sympathies, their shared status as current (Jones) or former (Hedges) basement-dwelling superintendents is important. Just as Jones has “mold growing on him,” Hedges is literally scarred by her time in the basement. Her rise to cannibalistic economic security includes the following backstory: one night “she was asleep in the basement and she
woke to hear a fierce crackling”—a fire (243). By squeezing herself through a tiny window, Hedges has barely escaped the consuming basement; scarred there, her physical deformity parallels her exploitation of young women. Hedges, like Jones, has been scarred by the basement.

As in Wright’s novel, it isn’t just any basement, but one specifically plotted into a racialized system of accumulation based on rent. Such basements, in both novels (as well as Ellison’s) are dangerous places, where potentially-helpful fellow black residents transform into monsters, at once self-serving and patriarchy-girding. Independently of each other, Jones and Hedges each work to deliver Lutie to the novel’s dénouement, where she faces concubinage to Junto. With these characters, Petry alters Wright’s insistence on reaction. As Robinson explains, Wright believed that “the more total the degradation of the human being, the more total the reaction” (427). As discussed above, Wright contradicted orthodox Marxist belief that socialism would be the direction of the reaction; Wright made clear Bigger might opt for fascism. But either way, something will happen; as quoted above, whichever way he goes, “Bigger Thomas… will not become an ardent, or even luke-warm, supporter of the status quo” (Robinson 426). Petry adds the very eventuality Wright excises—supporting the status quo. She makes such support monstrous, a deforming effect of working in basements, and being exposed to the racial and economic degradation they symbolize. As such she both updates Wright’s insistence on movement and development, yet follows it too: supporting the status quo and exploiting other black people is, in Petry’s novel, itself a reaction. That it is a reaction which absorbs its own energy suggests a somewhat bleaker picture on Petry’s side.

Like Petry, Ellison makes a basement worker symbolic of racial non-solidarity and dehumanization. In *Invisible Man* this is Lucius Brockway, to whom the Man is sent as an
assistant in “a deep basement” at Liberty Paints, a factory in which he gets a job through the above-mentioned letter to “Mr. Emerson” (207). Brockway, at least in his own estimation, is central to the plant’s operation. Responsible for making “what they call the vee-hicle of the paint,” Brockway says that not “a single doggone drop of paint move[s] out of the factory lessen it comes through Lucius Brockway’s hands” (215). Brockway sees himself as not only operationally, but historically central, saying that he has “been here ever since there’s been a here—even helped build the first foundation” (209). Describing himself as “the boss,” as in control and responsible, Brockway yet idolizes the “Old Man” who hired him, and seems, in part, an Uncle Tom figure, happily plugging away in the pits, to the benefit of the white enterprise, literally and figuratively, above him. As the Man puts it, Brockway is someone who “bowed and scraped and feared and loved and imitated” white men with “power and authority” (255, italics removed). Like Petry, Ellison makes basement work symbolic of racial non-solidarity and dehumanization. With Brockway, Ellison caricatures the systemic dependence on such men’s labor, in operational ways (Brockway’s hidden labor keeps the paint flowing) and historical ones, as the foundation digger. While Brockway’s self-described importance in the industry is easy to dismiss, systemic dependence upon black labor is not. Looking at this in terms of maintenance helps flesh out aspects of such dependence, and its limits.

As a hand, Brockway embodies the formula for perfect white paint, which the Man learns about upstairs. To make “the purest white which can be found” a “paint that will cover just about anything”—including the “national monument” to which it will be delivered—the Man learns that you want “ten drops [of]… dead black” (200). Left to add the drops and told not to think, but just to do, the Man runs out of the black, and, told to get more from a set of tanks, finds there are two tanks each “contain[ing] something black…. So I had to make a choice” (202). It is, alas, the
wrong black, and the paint does not dry, but becomes “a sticky goo through which I could see the grain of the wood…. The paint was not as white and glossy as before; it had a grey tinge” (203). Brockway, responsible for the perfect white, is the right black. He takes keeping up the system’s production as his own success. Covering, rather than revealing the grain beneath, Brockway reveals the tragedy of denied solidarity. And yet, like Hedges and Jones, he turns against less powerful, younger aspirers under his care. Both novels suggest through such alternative possibility that, there might be an opportunity to “let’s stop running and respect and love one another” (560). But, all three maintainers, the Super, Mrs. Hedges, and Brockway end up as antagonists, as characters in a contest against, rather than with the protagonists of their respective narrative worlds.

**Building up Knowledge through Maintenance**

A major aspect of maintenance work is that it builds up knowledge about a system or structure. A number of maintenance studies touch on this, but perhaps most directly linking basic task to systemic upkeep is Dan Holbrook’s article “Discipline and Polish: On Wipers and Wiping,” which, as suggested by the clever title, explores, “how wiping plays a role in maintaining social as well as mechanical regularity and reliability” (3). The entirety of the Brockway scene involves wiping, of the pressure gauges, the one task the paranoid Brockway feels comfortable giving the Man. Still, wiping in this discussion should be understood as both a specific activity and as representative low-level maintenance tasks in general. Holbrook makes a case that wiping not only builds up familiarity and knowledge of complex object such as locomotives, but also plays a major role in structuring the hierarchical organizations that surround such objects. Looking at two prominent technologies of the eighteenth and nineteenth
Holbrook points to a similarity: the lowest ranking members of the hierarchical crews which operated both sailing vessels and railroads were tasked with wiping. Indeed, in both cases the jobs themselves were defined by this basic task: “wipers” (or “cleaners”) in the US and British railroad industry and “swabbies” in American shipping parlance (4). In both cases, the repetitive act of wiping maintained both the machine and the hierarchy operating it.

From the wiping of locomotives, Holbrook notes, come two elements involving “the connection between cleaning and discipline” (3). First, obeying the rules is materialized as the repetition of a basic task, one which can be objectively judged when train parts are either clean, or not (or well-greased: train-wiping involved not only cleanliness but lubrication, both of which keep up operability of machines). In short, one learns to obey through the activity, which serves as a frame for judgment, or “binary branding” as Foucault would put it, of both the work and worker. Clean piston? Good worker. At the same time, the activity of wiping generates an intimate connection with the machine, and works or acts to transmit knowledge of the machine’s parts and functions. Such “progressive revelation of knowledge,” to borrow Matthew Crawford’s term, is, as Holbrook puts it, “part of the crew’s initiation rituals” and the first step in a subsequent career higher on the ladder; once advanced, the intimate knowledge gained by wiping continues to be useful, as “[t]he familiarity with the machines gained while cleaning allows drivers [and other higher-ups] to spot potential trouble” (Crawford 7; Holbrook 3). Here we see the aspect of maintenance from which expansive knowledge stems: attending to it brings intimacy with components. This is a universal aspect of maintenance. But advancement within a hierarchy is not.
Problematic for a discussion framed by Foucault’s prison-based social theory, Holbrook appears to take job mobility as a given, and makes no accommodation for race in what is basically a meritocratic argument. He’s right about the wiping, but wrong about the advancement. From the standpoint of the hierarchy, this makes sense: the successful reproduction of the railroad labor force depended on worker advancement enabled by knowledge and skills garnered in wiping specifically and maintenance in general. In the discussion of railroads, this is based on higher-ranking drivers using rags to wipe gauges, on even higher ranking inspectors using cloths like proverbial white-gloves to check junior wipers’ work, and on industry teachers’ wiping of blackboards to clear space for the next lesson. Such examples certainly underscore the importance of wiping in many contexts and show how it generated discipline and kept up the system. But the conflation of the work of junior and senior types of wiping remains problematic. Advancement was not the universal experience, but limited to a relatively small number of individuals. Indeed, the importance of wiping itself suggests the industry depended on lack of mobility for populations upon whom less desirable work could be foisted (7). As Holbrook concludes “wiping is a rite of passage, a site of learning, an indicator of potential, a shared element of workplace culture, an instiller and reinforcer of the systems’ reliance on regularity, watchfulness and proper behaviors” (11). While fascinating in its focus on the most basic of mundane activities, the focus on wiping tends to follow “it-narratives” that imbue agency to, in this case, an activity, absent the class, race, gender and ability issues inherent in wiping. Holbrook shows that routes of advancement are paved with acts of maintenance, even as the systemic perpetuation of such work doesn’t appear.

Intersecting the immobile and racial nature of maintainers with Holbrooks’s point that maintenance creates familiarity with the components of a system yields an important claim. A lot
of systemic knowledge—mechanical, organizational, social—ends up stored in the minds of the most marginalized members of a hierarchy. Ellison appears privy to this. Not only is Brockway cast as a sort of forgotten repository of the plant’s history, Ellison associates him with another example of maintenance-accreted knowledge stored in marginalized workers. Trying to figure Brockway out, the Man remembers that “a janitor at the Water Works was the only one who knew the location of all the water mains. He had been employed at the beginning before any records were kept, and actually functioned as an engineer though he drew a janitor’s pay” (211). This scrambles the tidy view of hierarchies. Long-time members have the knowledge, but not the benefit of it.

Ellison’s attention to maintenance within industrial settings, and the lack of mobility it entails anticipates recent work on maintenance by Amy Slaton, who writes that the question “who maintains?” provides “a sharp instrument with which to critique the social character of industrial labor in the United States” (1). Mass production, she notes, is enabled by “a cultural commitment to co-producing kinds of work and kinds of people” stemming from a Taylorist ascription of ability and aptitude which less measured and detected strength and skill than ascribed and produced them (3). Such typology casts an “epistemic hierarchy” in, and beyond, industrial labor, with management at the top, production in the middle, and maintenance at the bottom (1). Of this hierarchy, Slaton writes, “the stratified nature of industrial labor in the United States maps tidily onto ascribed differences of class, race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, disability…. [T]oday as in preceding eras, persons of minority status are not proportionally represented in knowledge work. They are disproportionally present in the jobs we label as maintenance (1). Here Slaton insists that stratified labor “produces identity [and] produces the idea that there are different ‘kinds’ of people,”—a point which reverses the meritocratic idea that
the best and brightest rise to the top while the worst and dimmest sink. While all levels of labor hierarchies involve, as she puts it, “constricted conditions, opportunities and resources…. for those consigned to such [industrial] maintenance jobs [as cleaning, resupplying, repairing, and fueling], opportunities to exercise creativity and assert one’s autonomy are the most profoundly constrained, and the possibility of learning new or unpredictable things limited” (2,4). To paraphrase, industrial maintenance jobs disallow desirable qualities associated with work—creativity, autonomy, novelty, learning—as well as constrict life opportunities such as living condition and access to health care. Basically maintenance in American industry crosses race, class, sex and ability, and is neither rewarding nor rewarded.

Two important concepts emerge here. The first comes from the critical and revelatory power of the question “who maintains?”, which Slaton limits to her discussion of Fordist industry, highlighting that the traditional Marxist labor base—production—depends upon another layer of waged workers, at the actual site of production. This suggests the true critical power of this question, and of the category “maintenance” itself. The question “who maintains?” mitigates invisibilization as it holistically envisions economic endeavor and economic interconnection. By paying attention to maintenance one sees labor in factory basements and bathrooms without losing sight of the line itself, for the question “who maintains?” also draws attention to whatever process is being maintained, and to those working in that process. By asking “who maintains?” one follows material and human interaction up the supply chain, into power plants and Canadian forests, into Indian call centers and Iraqi oil fields. One looks into the cabs of semi-trucks and the kitchens of suburban homes. This is the key analytic offering of the term, as I discussed in the introduction to this dissertation. Because maintenance is ubiquitous and widespread, yet hidden and undervalued, attending to maintenance reveals the work needed
to keep up any given system. With their basement workers, Wright, Petry and Ellison are all asking this question: “who maintains?”

The second concept to take from in Slaton’s account is that maintenance jobs, at least in an industrial context, degrade work. Like many others who study the history of maintenance, she finds the work, in terms of industrial maintenance, devoid of reward, not only around recompense and advancement opportunities, but as noted above, in lack of autonomy, variation, creativity, etc. It is the most alienated of alienated labor. And yet Brockway likes his work, as does Bigger (though for a much shorter time). In this, the character articulates a problematic aspect for generating solidarity, not only performing work that keeps up the status quo, but enjoying that work.

The Base in the Basement

In his dual role as both a driver of the factory’s machine, and as its foundation digger, as the invisible hand at the operational and historical base of the system, Brockway compares well to Petry’s other superintendent, Mrs. Hedges. Hedges’s other backstory—ahead of escaping the basement and becoming a madam—is meeting young Junto one night as he picks through trash for scrap metal, and she looks for food. Like Brockway, she’s there at the beginning, the original worker of the enterprise. Junto employs her first to expand the metal-picking operation, then “when he bought his first piece of real estate, he gave her the job of janitor and collector of rents” (243). For their labors each gets a privileged position involving precarious economic security, at the cost of racial solidarity, exploitation of others, and constant vigilance over their positions. Brockway is paranoid about his job and sizes the man up as potential competition, she plants her self in her window, watching the street for prospective clients and employees, because
“looking out her window was good for business” (252). Both claim deep connection to the white man at the top of the hierarchy, but neither is actually seen with this figure, suggesting they’ve both been used.

In this tracing back of the base of American enterprise, both Ellison and Petry perhaps follow Faulkner, whose *Absalom, Absalom!* depicts an ostensibly self-made man, Thomas Sutpen, in terms of his wealth’s prehistory. When Sutpen first comes to Faulkner’s fictional county, “he wasn’t even a gentleman. He came here with a… name nobody ever heard before” (9). Then, with a “crew of imported slaves” from the Caribbean, he develops a tract of land into a fertile plantation, centered around a mansion. Well-aided by his layered and broken narrative, Faulkner traces the otherwise hidden sources of wealth, which include Native American land, as well as African American labor, showing Sutpen’s “mansion rise, carried plank by plank and brick by brick out of the swamp where the clay and timber waited” (28). Like Faulkner, Ellison and Petry show black labor not only at the operational base, as firing the furnaces, so to speak, but at the historical base, as building the original infrastructure.

Unlike Faulkner, and Wright, both Ellison and Petry also make their original employees the original brains. This updates Wright’s blueprint in terms of black alignment with and primacy in white enterprise. Brockway claims to have written the slogan that sells the paint which makes the company—‘‘If It’s Optic White, It’s the Right White’… ‘I got me a three-hundred-dollar-bonus for helping to think that up,’” (Ellison 217). Similarly, Hedges is the one who first “suggested that [Junto] divide the rooms in [his] building in half and thus… get a larger income from it” (Petry 243). For Wright, Bigger, exposed to idolization of white wealth from movies, aligns himself with the Daltons, albeit temporarily. In this major plot element, one indicative of Bigger’s lack of class, and race, consciousness, Wright depicts a problem of black
alignment with preexisting white wealth and power. Certainly, with the focus on rental real estate and, as mentioned above, heat, Wright shows that Bigger and Dalton are linked in a continual system of exploitation. But, as in his framing of Bigger as going one way or the other, to join socialism or fascism, Wright makes class consciousness a question of alignment with wealth. Ellison suggest a longer-term, deeper alignment, making the problem of class consciousness less focused on whether and what to join, than about extrication from a long and deep involvement. Bigger’s lack of class consciousness leads him to the basement; Brockway’s keeps him there. Petry again takes this into sexual territory: in her novel, the rich white man aligns himself with Hedges as much as she with him. In a doubling, if not dismantling, of the Franklinian myth which Petry weaves into her novel again and again, Junto and Hedges, like Brockway and the Old Man, rise together.

The Worst Work/The Best Work: Alienation and Masculinity in the Basement

Brockway captures the two-sidedness of maintenance. On the one hand, he performs the most alienated of labor—stuck in “a deep basement.... [behind] a heavy metal door marked ‘Danger’... [in] a noisy dimly lit room” (207). Subordinating life to work, he recommends eating lunch as quickly as possible, and even brags that “we the machines inside the machines” (217, italics removed). Brockway’s work, however, can be read at least partially in the opposite way, as it rehearses elements of non-alienated labor, particularly holistic knowledge, skilled work, and non-repetitive task, in a very individualized context. Building upon the point about self-importance and knowledge raised above, Brockway says of his work,

I know more about this basement than anybody, boilers and everything. I helped lay the pipes and everything, and what I mean is I knows the location of each and every pipe and switch and cable and wire and everything else—both in the floors and in the walls and
out in the yard. Yes, sir! And what’s more, I got it in my head so good I can trace it out on paper down to the last nut and bolt. (216)

That this translates to job security, as Brockway believes, is questionable; his extreme paranoia about losing it to “one of them so-called engineers” the Old Man keeps hiring suggests not (215). And he is, of course, in a basement, symbolically and literally invisible to the world above. Still, he likes his work—probably too much, in Ellison’s estimation. Lutie and Jones, mired in drudgery from which they only want escape, he is not.

A sense of fulfillment in work occurs in Brockway’s, and other, basements. In addition to a skill- and knowledge-based sense of dependence and responsibility, there are hints of the potential for work-based interconnection between Brockway and the Man, very unlike the satirized Union meeting going on upstairs with which Ellison interrupts the basement scene, and which he uses to indicate, Wright-like, a stratum of labor “below” the traditional Marxist proletariat. There, in a cafeteria, CIO Unionism gets caricatured as obsessed to the point of distraction with solidarity, while nobody does anything. Ellison seems to suggest solidary occurs, or might occur, in work rather than in meetings. Despite his sarcasm and disdain for both this meeting and for Brockway, Ellison’s Man finds himself drawn into the work in the basement, asking questions like “what is this material?” and detailing in precise ways the nuanced mechanisms in the basement, such as “a strange-looking machine consisting of a huge set of gears connecting a series of drum-like rollers” (213). Moreover, joining attention and knowledge, the Man applies what he knows from other learning environments (college and previous jobs) to the task of figuring out what is going on in this basement, saying “I looked around me. It was not just an engine room; I knew, for I had been in several…. It was something more. For one thing the flames that flared through the cracks of the fire chamber were too intense and too blue…. No, he was making something down here” (212 original emphasis). And
Brockway, against his own paranoia, starts to like the Man as company and as an apprentice, who allows Brockway to unfurl his long-buried knowledge through instruction.

The process of learning permeates the scene: in the Man’s attempt to figure out what Brockway is doing, in the oft-repeated point by Brockway that his knowledge didn’t come from “nobody’s engineering school…. [but because] I been round here so long,” and, ultimately, in the eventual explosion of the basement in which the man ends up “sprawling in an interval of clarity” (216, 230). Playing on superhero, industrial-accident tropes, the man gains new powers from the exploding basement which leave him “no longer afraid. Not of important men” (249). The last links knowledge to a painful, damaging exit from the basement, after the Man is tricked by Brockway into turning the wrong, white, pressure releasing handle. Ellison’s larger point is, of course, about a failure of solidarity generated by Brockway’s intense paranoia over protecting his job—the basis of his Uncle Tom status. Still, the apprentice/master relationship acted out by Brockway and the Man seems important. The older man clearly likes having someone to teach—so long as he is no threat to his own job—eventually priming the Man to be a student, with questions like “know what that’s going to be when it’s cooked?” (214). Undeniably, the Man resents and doesn’t like Brockway, but they seem to lose themselves in the work, and when the latter says “now come on back here, we got work to do” neither seems anything but content. This is not the case upstairs, among white workers, where the Man, told to mix paint and not ask questions, seethes that “So I wasn’t supposed to think!” (200).

Petry also use the basement to raise, and foreclose, a potentially transformative masculinity. Despite frequent reference to the “basement” and the “cellar,” Petry rarely brings us down the stairs, avoiding the basement almost as much as her protagonist. But one scene does take place there—one in which Bub, to his eventually bad end, delivers stolen letters to Jones
who has falsely befriended him in his mother’s absence. Unlike Lutie, who escapes being
dragged into the cellar, Bub, after getting beat up by a school bully, happily follows the super
down, and “when they reached the bottom step, he began to feel better” (349). Against the street,
and the empty apartment in the building’s upper reaches, the super and the basement has much to
offer.

The fire was warm and friendly. The pipes that ran overhead… the light bulbs in metal
cages, the piles of coal…even the dusty smell of the basement turned it into kind of
robbers’ den. It was a mysterious place and yet somehow friendly…. There was so much
space down here too…. This was real. The other was a bad dream. Going upstairs after
school to a silent, empty house wasn’t real either. This was the reality. This great, warm,
open space was where he really belonged. Supe was captain of the detectives and he,
Bub, was his most valued henchman. (350)

Bub wants company, space, warmth, excitement, fullness, purpose—the same bundle of
eminently understandable qualities that Jones wants from the super job. Bub wants a place away
from the street, from the daily grind of school and home—the same qualities Lutie seeks in the
suburban dream. Bub, as Petry makes clear, is mistaken. It’s not real: the cellar is where the trap
is laid, for him, as much as for Jones.

Yet there is more than a hint of potential for solidarity, community and good work in the
basement, and in maintenance work more generally. The ultimately deceptive warmth and
company of the cellar suggests a lost opportunity—the possibility of interdependence and mutual
support, through engaging work, upon which others depend, performed in a space of
interdependence where individual agency operates to provide work upon which others depend. In
a scene outside, Jones views his work as a possible ‘in’ with neighborhood men, thinking, as he
sees a group of men talking and laughing, how he might join them:

He started talking to himself… rehearsing what he would say. ‘Man, you ain’t
heard nothin’ yet,’ he said [to himself].
It sounded so good that he repeated it. ‘Man, you ain’t heard nothing’ yet. You
oughtta work in one of them houses”—he’d gesture toward this house. ‘You don’t never
know what a fool woman is goin’ to think of next. Why, one time one of ‘em come runnin’ down the stairs, hollerin’ there was a mouse in the dumb-waiter and what was I goin’ to do about it. Well, man, I told her—’” (381)

Modeling “cellar crazy,” as both exaggerated and foiled masculinity Jones—who feels the men would stop talking if he tried to join—ends up muttering to himself long enough to miss the opportunity. Jones is differentiated from the norm here: Petry makes him uniquely self-centered and insecure. In an earlier scene, Jones, taking out the trash, chats with the neighboring superintendent. They clearly have a rapport, and joke about the fresh snow fall in a double entendre based on race and maintenance: Jones says to his neighbor, “snow and coal, ‘got to shovel ‘em both. One time when white is just as evil as black. Snow and coal. Both bad. One white the other black’” (290). The man roars at Jones’s joke, and passersby even smile at the “infectious” laughter (290). But Jones “discovered with regret the hate and anger that still burned inside him was so great that he couldn’t…join in…. [T]he laughter died in the other man’s throat [and he]… went back to sweeping the sidewalk” (290). In this scene, Jones originally strikes up conversation because Hedges is, as always, watching out her window, and he feels enraged, disempowered, and “wasn’t going to let her drive him away” (289). As in the muttering scene above, the work of upkeep seems a potential bond between men, though one which both stems from and incorporates a need to have power over women. The basement in this sense links denied solidarity with a crisis of masculinity.

The link also plays out through maintenance in Ellison’s novel. Playing on superhero tropes, Ellison makes Brockway’s basement the scene of the industrial explosion which leaves the Man “in the grip of some alien personality lodged deep within me…. I was no longer afraid. Not of important men, not of trustees and such” (249). These new powers eventually lead him to another basement, one characterized not by industrial production, but excessive consumption,
stolen from “Monopolated Light and Power” (5). While Brockway’s, a basement of industrial production—is inhabited by a man more aligned with the top of the white power hierarchy at the plant. Brockway’s self-image rests on his contributory role to the larger factory—he’s the power at the base. Stealing power, rather than providing it, the Man’s self-image at the end involves detracting from the larger system. The accident comes after the Man unwittingly walks into a Union meeting, strategically placed by Ellison as the only setting break in the Brockway basement scene, to get his lunch. Knowing Brockway’s complicity with management, the Man becomes immediately suspect. Ellison makes a glaring parallel between the union men in the lunchroom and the Uncle Tom in the basement. The obsession of the union men with complete solidarity, and their immediate impulse to “throw the lousy bastard out” mirror’s Brockway’s immediate insistence that the Man “git out of my basement” once he’s learned that the Man was in the union meeting; “I know you belonged to that bunch of trouble making foreigners,” he illogically shouts (220, 224). Both sides come off as defensive, absurdly protective of their positions. “That damn union,” he shouts. “They after my job!.... for one of us to join one of them damn unions is like we was to bite the hand of the man who teached us to bathe” (228). Unwilling to listen to the Man’s reason, Brockway and the Man grapple—the Man gets bitten by Brockway’s false teeth—and, after the Man bests old Lucius, the latter tricks him into increasing to the point of explosion the pressure building up in the background of the entire Brockway-basement scene. The explosion ensues, and the Man “seemed to sprawl in an interval of clarity beneath a pile of broken machinery… my body splattered with a stinking goo” (230). Joining a breakdown of production with clarity and goo—the same element Ellison uses to describe what happens when the wrong black goes into the paint upstairs: a goo that allows the wood grain beneath to show through—Ellison suggests the system’s running depends on the right black. Just
as the faulty paint gets shipped out anyway, the breakdown of the machinery is but a momentary
problem for the factory, though a long-term one for the Man. In Brockway’s loud basement
beneath a paint factory, Ellison plots and symbolizes both industrial and national dependence on
black labor, and on blackness itself as invisibility.

Paint and Plumbing; National and Systemic Upkeep

In the hands of both Petry and Ellison, paint becomes a far-reaching symbol for
interrogating (in)visibility, for representing labor bridged across many spheres: production,
service, domestic and for addressing intersections of race, sex, and class. Both authors also use it
to address the “application” to black society of white ideology, such as the mythic Algerian rise.
Paint hides and covers, yet also makes visible. And it involves labor in terms of production and
application. In Invisible Man, the production and application of paint whitewashes the nation. As
the Man reflects on the series of events leading him to the paint factory, Ellison notes the
diffusion of the paint across the country. It will be used on a “national monument,” and might be
the same paint used on the Tuskegee-like school campus, a place where the Man absorbed “the
black rite of Horatio Alger,” and was expelled for bringing Norton to visit (202, 111). While
Petry makes white suburbia the source of the boot-strap myth, Ellison sources it to the black
academy, but one that has been whitewashed. Reflecting back on the school, the Man thinks “the
buildings always seemed more impressive because they were the only buildings to receive
regular paintings; usually the nearby houses and cabins were left untouched to become the dull
gained grey of weathered wood… [l]ike Trueblood’s cabin or the Golden Day” (201). Not
given the white liberty paint (with Brockway, the perfect black, at its base) these places are both
the site and sight of drunken fights, abject poverty and incest, people at their worst. As
Richardson puts it “the dilapidated house, which belongs to Jim Trueblood, is a visible sign of the moral depravity and physical degeneracy….bespeak[ing] his impoverished condition” (132). The Man is expelled for bringing one of the school’s white benefactors to Trueblood’s cabin and the Golden day was, as the school’s president puts it the “most serious defection from our strictest rules of deportment” (191). Ellison makes the lack of white sheen on such places a revelatory factor, a type of age and weather related transparency that reveals the true state of black people in the US. Like Petry’s apartment house, dilapidation shows the true grain. Not kept up, these places offer a counter-narrative to the official gloss of uprightness, industry, progress. While the cabin’s slave quarters legacy suggests preservation, the lack of paint indicates decay. In following paint from supply chain to places it is used, and not used, Ellison finds a symbol that helps register underdevelopment in terms of production, commodification, ideology, and multiple lived experiences.

The sheen of whiteness, as applied to the school indicates application of the American myth of hard work, aspiration and independence to a population for whom such schools produced the opposite. This is well symbolized by “the bronze statute of the college founder…. hands outstretched in the breathtaking gesture of lifting a veil… above the face of a kneeling slave; [in front of this the Man is] standing puzzled, unable to decide whether the veil is really being lifted, or lowered more firmly” (36). Underscored by allusions to Emerson, Booker T. Washington and Alger, the concept being criticized here is, as Hong puts it, that “possessive individualism is imbricated with the U.S. liberal humanist project of erasing the hierarchies of power on which it depends” (9). Norton, the rich white college trustee whom the Man chauffeurs captures this, telling the Man “You are bound to a great dream and to a beautiful monument. If you become a good farmer, a chef, a preacher, doctor, singer, mechanic—whatever you become,
and even if you fail, you are my fate” (45). Norton’s line, particularly the word “bound” can be read in a few different ways, but the take-away for the young, aspiring Man is that “You have yours, and you got it yourself, and we have to lift ourselves up the same way” (45). The universalization which the Man reads in Norton’s lines glosses over the relatively limited number of professions, all of them, save farmer, service-oriented jobs, and all of them quite “embedded” in social situations. About this, Hong writes that

U.S. narratives of development produce an abstract, ostensibly universally obtainable subject by narrating the transcendence of social constraints through the exercise of will. The subject of this narrative moves from his embeddedness in the particularity of his social situation to become a mature self-determining subject who is the master of his own fate. In this way, U.S. narratives of development suggest that anyone in any circumstances can transcend their material social relations and become the mature, self-possessed propertied subject. (8)

The narratives Hong indicates, fictional ones such as *Huck Finn* and *Daisy Miller*, as well as Booker T Washington’s *Up From Slavery*, both model and produce an ideal of self-ownership emerging from the mires of dependence, a process of (ostensible) dis-embedding. In such narratives, dependence disappears only from the activities and end result of self-possession; it serves, openly, as the thing to emerge from. Thinking about this in terms of maintenance and upkeep exposes the circular logic of American aspiration when applied to twentieth century African American experience, a circuit well represented by the requirement of regular whitewashing. In short, maintenance registers as that from which to rise, as well as the route of this rise.

This can be seen in Washington’s 1904 *Up From Slavery*. The text advises African Americans at the turn of the twentieth century to become maintainers in order to succeed individually, develop as a people, and because such work is itself satisfying. Using language
similar to Matthew Crawford’s at the turn of the twenty-first century, Washington writes of the Hampden school:

Before going there I had a good deal of the then rather prevalent idea among our people that to secure an education meant to have a good, easy, time, free from the necessity for manual labor. At Hampden I not only learned that it was not a disgrace to labour, but learned to love labour, not alone for its financial value, but for labour’s own sake and for the independence and self-reliance which the ability to do something which the world wants done brings. (54)

Celebrating the value of making oneself useful—of being a maintainer—apparently has a long shelf life. Like Crawford, Washington suggests the self-reliant aspect of such work stems from its objective, social usefulness. The fundamental difference between Washington and Crawford is that while Crawford writes to those feeling lost amid the alienations of office work and late consumer capitalism, Washington writes, ostensibly, to the demographic already responsible for a disproportionate amount of upkeep. Criticizing African-Americans’ stereotypical disinclination towards manual labor, as Washington does, thus rings rather hollow. So too does Washington’s promotion of various types of upkeep, such as personal grooming, which plays a major a role in the education Tuskegee provides, as does what would now be called vocational tech, or training for the work of upkeep. In one passage, Washington intersects the two, writing that,

We wanted to teach the students how to bathe; how to care for their teeth and clothing. We wanted to teach them what to eat… and how to care for their rooms. Aside from this, we wanted to give them such a practical knowledge of some one industry, together with the spirit of industry, thrift, and economy, that they would be sure of knowing how to make a living after they left us. (83)

Through the tasks of such bodily and vocational upkeep, Washington promotes the maintenance of a social system.36 At Tuskegee, he writes, “We wanted to give them such an education as would fit a large proportion of them to be teachers, and at the same time cause them to return to the plantation districts and show the people there how to put new energy and new ideas into farming, as well as into the into the intellectual and moral and religious life of the people” (83).
Tuskegee’s mission, then, is to teach and promote maintenance in terms of jobs, bodies and the status quo.

Cartooning Washington’s emphasis on bodily upkeep, Ellison’s fictional school emphasizes dress and hygiene as itself a whitewashing, a display for white visitors, indicating a contradiction Hong notes. She writes that Washington is both “articulating African American self-determination and assuaging white fear” (23). As his title suggests, this is done against the shadow of slavery, and indeed moving out of slavery offers to bridge the contradiction: freedom expressed as a choice to both serve and own. As Hong writes, the post-Emancipation system in which blacks labored in the South was share-cropping. Though similar to slavery in some respects, such work involved a fundamental difference: possessive individualism and the responsibility it bestowed upon the individual. In short, share-cropping whitewashed slavery. As Hong puts it, share-cropping “depended on a conception of African Americans as individuals who were supposed to internalize a sense of responsibility for their own economic well-being” (23, original emphasis). In *Invisible Man*, the whitewashed black school shows the application of this pro-work, clean-bodied aspirational logic in a systematic sense.

White paint similarly covers dilapidated wood in *The Street*—or at least it might. Touring the apartment, Lutie tells herself that “white paint would fix the inside of it up; not exactly fix it up, but keep it from being too gloomy, shove the darkness back a little” (19). Paint, answering both aesthetic and utilitarian ends, is used to both beautify and preserve, thus its symbolic value indicates both the attention to outward appearance Washington promotes, and preservation of a status quo. Petry makes the potential application of white paint a method by which the dark apartment might be made more appealing, and the problem of exploitation glossed over. The white paint also suggests a sheen of embourgeoisement that ‘fixes’ the problem of darkness.
Lutie, a suburban dreamer, yearns for light, airy space, and the paint brings to the surfaces of her rented apartment a superficial image of such qualities. The apartment house is itself a sort of technology which fuels the white male privilege enjoyed by Junto, thus applying white paint suggests a sort of entry point to what she calls “a dirty trap” for the women of color who undergird a system of white male privilege. (74).

Petry’s paint allows her to plot both Lutie and Jones (as well as Junto) into a cycle of accumulation which begins and begins anew with each tenant, and which depends upon Jones, as the painter. As Lutie knows, despite wishful thinking, “Layers and layers of paint won’t fix that apartment. It would always smell; finger marks and old stains would come through the paint; the smell of the old wood would eventually win out over the paint” (19). While this suggests that whitewashing has its limits and the old and worn reality of the apartment will bleed through, the preservation of this piece of technology, its ability to “trap” tenant after tenant, provides Jones with his steady job. It also turns him into a tool of such preservation. Jones is frequently described in terms of paint, though not white. He wears “faded blue [overalls] splashed with thick blobs of tan-colored paint and brown varnish;” when at the task “the smell of paint was in his nose, looked like it had even got in his skin (357, 373). He is a man of paint. In a scene which leaves him answering a slew of tenant needs, the act of painting sets up a situation which leaves him resentful of this tool-like role: turning the blame against both himself and the tenants, he thinks “he was so damn tired that even his feet hurt….and it was all because he’d been fool enough to stick a note in the bell ‘Super painting in 41’ and it looked like everybody in the house had immediately discovered something wrong that had to be fixed right away” (372). As a painter he becomes the tool by which preservation occurs.
Setting up a tragic irony involving black masculinity, Jones originally “got a job as a super in a building in Harlem because that way there would be people around him all the time” (86). Yet he finds, once installed as the super, that “he is surrounded by silence. For the tenants didn’t like him and the only time they had anything to do with him was when a roof leaked or a windowpane came out or something went wrong with the plumbing” (87). In this building, a place where people live on top of each other, hearing the gritty texture of each other’s lives, yet, busy and tired, have no supportive relationships, Jones acts as a link (313). All the tenants know him. They are dependent on his work, and he, in turn, depends on their tenancy, receiving from this system a place to live.

Yet Petry by no means celebrates the relationships of dependence formed through his job, nor tasks of the job itself. A telling detail comes in one of the tasks Petry shows Jones contemplating. Without showing him actually at the it, Petry has Jones open a stuck drain for an older female tenant. On the one hand, this constitutes a gap of representation: were she to show him, wrench, or even plunger, in hand, working against an objective problem, in someone else’s space, something of skill and agency would bleed through the abjection, a sense of at-handedness, and, presuming the drain opens, a little success for Jones and relief for the tenant. Instead, after he laments having to deal with “a stopped-up drain on the second floor” Petry makes him bitter, much like Ellison’s Man, about being “used as a tool” (Ellison 564). On the other hand, Petry of course has purpose (displaying the maintenance of a rent-accumulating machine used for exploiting reproductive labor, and displaying the tool-like relationships such a technology creates). Keeping the drain open so that clothes can be washed makes Jones responsible for maintaining the infrastructure by which women’s drudgery operates, making him a tool that links mutually exploited people into relationships characterized not by support but
mutual disdain. Reflecting on the drain task, “Jones mimicked the old woman who lived on the second floor, ‘clothes in the tub soakin’, soakin’, soakin’, and the water runnin’ out, and what am I going to do with them wet pieces that need rinsin’?’ On top of that he’d gone down in the basement to fire the furnace” (373). For Jones, like Lutie and the other black female tenants, it’s “nothing but work, work, work” (171).

Responsible for maintaining the apartment house, Jones becomes an antagonist. A dog-beating, would-be rapist who, out of revenge for being denied sex with Lutie, tricks Bub into a mail-stealing plot that lands him in juvenile hall, Jones’s bitter anger almost delivers Lutie to Junto, waiting with the cash she needs. Described by various other tenants of the novel as “cellar crazy,” and having “done lived in basements so long you ain’t human no more,” Petry points blame at his dehumanizing cellar work, into which he has been “pushed…away from light and air until he was being eaten up by some horrible obsession,” denied the qualities—light, cleanliness, ease—sought by Lutie (301, 237, 57). As an agent of the building, he embodies its qualities: filthy, mean and cold, dangerous to young mothers. In an omniscient voice, Petry explains:

He had fired furnaces and cleaned stairways and put washers in faucets and grown gaunter and lonelier as the years crept past him…. so much older he found it difficult to get a woman to stay with him [and]… the succession of drab, beaten, middle aged-women had started again. As a result he wanted this young one—this Lutie Johnson—worse than he had ever wanted anything in his life.” (87)

Of villainy and victimhood, cause and effect, Petry presents a complex image, which has white male privilege in the background (Junto), providing a wage-less job and a rent-free home for a black man. This cellar job disallows him the sexual and moral benefits of a long-term relationship, and leaves him with an overwhelming desire for sexualized youngness as he maintains the very technology—itself old, dilapidated, and filthy—which traps them both, and
feeds her to the white owner in the background. At the same time, the cellar offers a sort of lair for Jones. He finds refuge from his “cold, menacing” living room, inhabited by his girlfriend, Min, the only place in which the diminished woman has any agency; in “the cellar… there was warmth from the fire in the furnace. The glow from its open door would keep him company” (233). This, finally, is what Jones wants—company, though not from Min. Against Lutie’s desperation for money, Petry, as noted above, actually provides Jones with both a choice of occupation and a motive less economic than personal: “he thought he would see more people as super of a building” (87). Yet he ends up the catalyst for the novel’s tragedy: a mother separated from her son, the former fleeing into the night, the latter languishing with other black boys in juvenile hall. He, like Hedges, gets scarred from his basement job, turned into a monster.

In the “technology” which drags Lutie down while trying rise, Jones goes “up and down the stairs until he’d lost track of how many times” (372). Just like his rent-free yet still-exploited status, Jones’s maintenance job provides some privilege, but one that only links him to the building, establishing a crisis of masculinity, turning him against the people he helps support. Operating in relationships characterized only by use, Jones is responsible for keeping up the cycle of drudgery, and is engaged in such a cycle himself. That the woman whose drain Jones opens is old is important—his ire about being made a tool goes to her. Were she young—were she Lutie—Jones would be more than happy to show up with a plunger. Indeed, early in the novel we see him taking on a task of maintenance for her. Importantly it’s not drain opening, but painting her apartment.

Denied the youthful body which the decrepit building seems to make especially desirable, Jones’s sad ire helps Lutie toward her own concluding disappearance. He might have protected her from the Hedges-Junto plot (he despises them both) but instead turns his ire toward her.
When he first meets her, however, he willingly performs a gracious act of maintenance. After she signs her lease,

he tried to figure out something he could do for her. Something special that would make her like him. He decided to do a special paint job in her apartment—not just that plain white she had ordered. So he put green in the living room, yellow in the kitchen, deep rose color in the bedroom, and dark blue in the bathroom. When he was finished, he was very proud of it, for it was the best paint job he’d ever done. He did something else too. He scraped the paint from the windows… and then washed them. (100)

The paint job, like Jones himself, does not appeal to Lutie, who feels “the colors made the rooms look even smaller” (68). The cleaned windows, however, do appeal. After insulting him by saying “what awful colors!” Lutie praises the windows, “and when the Super heard the pleased note of appreciation in her voice, he looked like a hungry dog that had suddenly been given a bone” (69). Highlighting his position in a hierarchy of rent collection that puts him between the apartment’s tenants and owner, a later flashback shows Jones at work in her then-empty apartment, doing extra work, adding color where Lutie wishes for only whiteness and scraping the windows. This extra work, Petry adds, involves an element of subversion: “the agent nearly caught him at it” (100). The same “white agent who collected the rents from him,” a middleman between Junto and Jones, pounds on the door, calls out to the super, and then goes away (93). No further explanation is given about what Jones was almost caught at. Presumably the extra work involved in adding color and cleaning windows (the latter an act of both adding light, allowing visibility, and adding neat- or tidiness) is not a cost the white owners wish to shoulder, though Jones works for rent, so extra work wouldn’t cost much. More symbolically, of course, the twinned color-adding, light-allowing acts seem contrary to the wishes of patriarchal power, pounding on the door. Here, keeping up the dilapidation seems systemically important, possibly as the very component which leaves people searching for satisfaction in whorehouses, in leisure culture, and the suburbs. Jones’s non-economically-minded act—problematically aimed at
getting her into bed, but also into his life more generally—seems to have the potential to threaten such power.

*The Dark Apartment and the White Kitchen*

Like Wright and Ellison, Petry constructs an *Upstairs Downstairs* schematic in which upkeep of the larger system can be explored, and explored specifically as invisible labor, through setting itself. Like Ellison’s paint factory, an industrial setting, and Wright’s mansion, a white residential one, Petry’s profit-generating apartment house receives maintenance through black labor. At the same time, it appears constantly in need of upkeep. *The Street* begins with Lutie looking up at the apartment house, and reading a rooms-for-rent sign on the building—“Three rooms, steam heat, parquet floors, respectable tenants. Reasonable” (2). Lutie reads through the words:

> Parquet floors here meant that the wood was so old and discolored that no amount of shellac or varnish would conceal the scars and the old scraped places, the years of dragging furniture across floors, the hammer blows of time and children and drunks and dirty slovenly women…. Respectable tenants… included anyone who could pay the rent. (3).

Forced by necessity to take it, she nonetheless sees that these words—like the building’s many layers of varnish—cover over a dirty reality: the dilapidation of the apartment is apparent. This recognition however doesn’t come with the awareness she eventually gains from actually living in the apartment, that the very ideology of rising is part of the trap. In this sense, so too is the partial upkeep of the building: just enough preservation to be structurally sound, just enough dilapidation to perpetually produce and reproduce the aspiration for something better. Lutie, possessed of the Franklinian myth, takes the apartment, to get “just one step farther up the ladder of success. With the apartment [her son] Bub would be standing a better chance” (26). But
instead of a clean white apartment, Lutie finds “a dirty trap” (74). Once in, she wonders “would they just go on living here, year after year? With just enough money to pay the rent, just enough money to buy food and clothes and to see an occasional movie?” (74). From start to finish the novel laments the daily cycle of wage and home labor enacted by black working class women, particularly as the work separates mothers from children. As Alan Wald puts it, examining the novel’s limited incorporation of 1940s Harlem politics, “Lutie Johnson… is waging a war for daily survival; she shows no interest in the antifascist crusade” (125). Suggesting that the street represents “the domestic version of fascism,” Wald sees Lutie “in a war against the street, which symbolizes the poverty, the dirt, and the threat of violence surrounding the lives of Harlem poor. She also wages a war against other African Americans—predominantly men who seek to exploit her for sexual gratification” (125).

Despite the title, the primary setting—or, perhaps, primary battleground—is less the street, than the apartment house. Shifting attention from the street to the apartment house serves a few representational functions. First, the system represented by the apartment makes very clear that white men benefit in terms of economic support garnered through rent, which, unlike Lutie, does indeed “rise,” going from Jones, through a white agent, to Junto, each of whom is supported through her work. The war against the street leads right to this dirty trap. The apartment draws poverty and sexual exploitation together—the horror of Lutie’s situation is that she resides, so to speak, in the lion’s den—or, the lion-owned den, managed, and maintained, by subordinate beasts. The centrality to the novel of not just black exploitation, but the particular exploitation of black women becomes clear in this unnatural, unlit, dilapidated, stuffy, badly-painted, rent-gathering domestic space. That Lutie herself sees through the paint suggests something more than camouflage is behind its application. While the paint is clearly aimed at the new tenant,
actually seems to have a greater role in drawing Jones into the machinery by which he becomes an antagonist.

Aside from Jones, all of the tenants who Petry brings into the foreground are women. With them, she displays a fractured community of women in her apartment house, one comprised of people too busy with the upkeep demands of their own families to help with neighbors. Toward the end of the novel, Bub in juvenile detention, Lutie contemplates asking co-workers for the two hundred dollars needed for his release. But she knows they won't have it:

[T]hey had husbands and children and sick mothers and unemployed fathers and young sisters and brothers, so that going to an occasional movie was the only entertainment they could afford. They went home and listened to the radio and read part of a newspaper… then they cleaned their apartments and washed clothes and cooked food, and then it was time to go to bed because they had to get up early in the morning…. Perhaps living in a city the size of New York wasn’t good for people, because you had to spend all your time working to pay [your rent]… and it took all the rest of the hours in the day to keep the place clean and fix food and there was never any money left over. Certainly it wasn’t good for children. (395)

The foreground plot—Lutie needing money to save Bub—here meets the background cycle of upkeep. The fellow working mothers, people most likely to be sympathetic to and supportive of Lutie, are busy supporting others (both their own family and the families and firms they work for in service jobs: domestics, laundresses, secretaries, operators). To an image of empathetic solidarity in the tasks of home-keeping (that of Glaspell’s “Trifles” for example) Petry’s Harlem setting offers only exhaustion, and, if there is time and money, an occasional movie. Living in Harlem, and keeping the street at bay, registers as a grind of work, both paid and unpaid, in which keeping up with the upkeep (maintaining health and cleanliness, and tenancy) disallows supervision of children, supportive relationships with other women, and the full enjoyment of leisure culture, while exposing women to predation from a number of quarters. As a technology, the apartment both produces upkeep and denies it, which serves the purpose of harnessing a
black working woman such as Lutie, though rent. Her rent supports a racially divided system of accumulation—of both money and sex. As, to borrow Polanyi’s phrase, a sort of satanic treadmill producing white wealth (rent) and male privilege (prostitution), the apartment commodifies Lutie as both a worker and a body, threatening to turn her into a tool of Junto, like Jones, but a tool with both sexual and economic uses.

In this type of grind—that of daily repetitive task, both like and unlike the repetitive task of Tayloristic factory work—there is little to celebrate, at least through Petry’s novel. Still, Petry does suggest value in maintenance work, specifically that in domestic service, beyond the obvious wealth and privilege flowing up through rent. Looking at the role of such workers across Petry’s fiction and reportage, Rachel Peterson describes a particular tactic of the cold war coded-visibilization strategy. In journalistic accounts that issued from the insides of upper/upper-middle class homes (a reversal of Riisian class voyeurism), and in novels stemming from such accounts, Peterson writes that domestic figures “show how those most marginalized (within a text or society) can generate otherwise obscured insights into the most intimate dynamics of capitalism” (75). Peterson writes,

As producers of hygiene, food, health and child care, service workers’ labor is so quickly and unthinkingly consumed that it suffers an erasure that extends to the worker herself. However, while these characters work just below the surface, overshadowed by more socially and narratively prominent characters, their invisible hands sometimes determine the novels’ plots. Petry’s narratives probe the marginality of domestics who beneath the central conflicts of the novels create the conditions for some of the most climatic and revelatory scenes. It is through employees’ interactions with maids, and domestics’ attitudes toward their work and employers, that Petry enacts dialectic of invisibility and indispensability. (73)

This dialectic of invisibility and indispensability comes across in a number of ways, not least of them in the portrayal of Lutie in the Chandler’s home in Connecticut as the only person interested in the child; the other adults are drunk, sleeping around, and gossiping. She supports
the family to such an extent that, as Peterson points out, her resignation causes the family to fall apart, and Mrs. Chandler to come begging Lutie to resume her job. Ultimately, by showing “their employers’ vices, including alcoholism, infidelity, pedophilia, and attempted murder, they perform a sort of reportage through which they acquire agency,” showing black women’s labor at the center of white life (82, 77).

This coded-visibilization strategy actually combines a number of aspects of maintenance including attention to detail and knowledge built up through upkeep, as well as aspects of maintenance which are also part of Wright’s blueprint: access via invisibility and systemic dependence on black hands. Her argument bears a resemblance to Holbrook’s regarding the knowledge built up by wiping machines, for domestic workers themselves do a lot of wiping, which builds up knowledge of the system in which they work. Peterson writes that “An attention to detail which comes with being ‘the perfect maid,’ and the intimacy that comes from living with the Chandler yields numerous appalling insights into the family’s destructive habits, ultimately demystifying whiteness for Lutie, and by extension, the book’s contemporary reader” (82). Familiarity with the nuances of a system bred through the attentive maintenance of marginalized workers may result, ironically, in some empowerment for such workers, though not, as Holbrook suggests, through advancement within a hierarchy, but in the ability to transmit understanding of such hierarchies from their bases. The elements of empowerment come horizontally, by showing such work to the outside world, not by progressing upward through a hierarchy.

Despite the potential of representation of such work, Petry creates a fairly damning “trap” for her domestic worker. In this representation, Wald sees a strategy of “subtraction… of potential solutions” (127). Steeped as she was in the writing and social work of the Harlem Left,
Petry was familiar with the social, community, labor based solutions to exploitation and poverty to which the left adhered. This raises the question, why were both the Left and the black community so completely excluded as potential solutions to Lutie’s downfall? Tapping into the “debate” version of mid-century literary history, Wald suggests that “the distancing of social cause in Petry’s novel is used for the artistic purpose of accentuating her characters’ internal struggles. Thus the reader principally witnesses Lutie not as determined by particular societal agents but as psychologically ensnared by her unsuitable philosophy that was inspired by the writings of Benjamin Franklin.” (127) On the one hand, Wald is right to point out that “The Street’s characters are destined to proceed in the absence of such solutions” (127). The image of an impoverished, violent, misogynistic Harlem, and of the hard-working young woman within it, has no fix. Except that, for Lutie, it does. Her solution is the suburbs.

Conclusion: Into the Suburbs

Lutie’s dream of moving to the suburbs allows Petry again model and update Wright’s blueprint. Linking her labor as a domestic servant working for the Chandlers with exposure to mass culture, Petry shows Lutie riding the subway and seeing an advertisement with a smiling white family in a gleaming white kitchen with new fixtures, a sparkling floor and flowers by casement windows. She describes it as “a miracle of a kitchen. Completely different from the kitchen of the… apartment…. [b]ut almost exactly like the one she had worked in in Connecticut” (28). Spurring a Franklinian regime of self improvement through work and education (working for years in a laundry, saving and denying herself luxuries, going to night school to be a typist), Lutie’s exposure to “that kitchen in Connecticut had changed her whole life—that kitchen all tricks and white enamel like this one in the advertisement” (56). In this
moment Petry positions Lutie as both like and unlike Bigger Thomas. “Unlike” because a gleaming white kitchen is the last place Bigger would want to end up. “Like” because Petry uses this kitchen to demonstrate, as Wright with Bigger’s alignment with rich whites and movie masculinity, Lutie’s lack of class and race consciousness. As Mullen puts it, the contradiction between the ad’s promise and Lutie’s actual life “manifests itself as Lutie’s perennial pursuit of the gleaming kitchen simultaneous with and against recognition of the social processes of capital that produce it. The book, in other words, is about the production of a form of political consciousness” (44). This developing consciousness can be seen as Lutie, reflecting on the likelihood of arriving in such a kitchen as anything other than a maid realizes “you forgot you were black” (389). Mullen argues that reading through the advertisement’s false reality to the fantasy beneath comes hard for her because “Lutie is herself constantly rendered as the object of capital and is thus alienated from recognizing this self same process” (44, original emphasis). While the reading of Lutie’s commodification is sound, it, along with the pernicious exploitation she faces throughout the novel, seems more to lead to her recognition, rather than hamper it. If anything hampers her awareness of the contradiction she labors within it is mass culture. Discussing *Native Son*, Vials writes that “mass culture leads Bigger to his destruction. Lacking any mooring in folk culture, Bigger uncritically patterns his life and values from the movies, magazines, and newspapers. Thus causes him to evince a tough-guy masculinity… borrowed from detective and gangster pictures” (14). The parallel exposure to mass culture, for Petry, is the gleaming white kitchen, combined with aspirational mythology, leading Lutie to uncritically pattern her life and values after an idealized domesticity. This however has a feedback loop built in, because the fantasy of the suburbs actually assuages the very things which might lead Lutie to recognize her reality: the filth of the apartment and her exposure to sexual and economic
predation. In this, Petry again follows and updates Wright’s claim that Bigger “will not become an ardent, or even luke-warm, supporter of the status quo” (Robinson 426). Petry adds a third direction of reaction: towards the suburban individualism on the cusp of becoming a dominant American mode of life in the late 40s. Moreover, by plotting Lutie’s inchoate encounters with mainstream culture as both black labor (domestic service) and as aspirational fantasy (the ad), Petry makes the reaction itself a part of a reinscribed status quo. Escape from drudgery, imagined as flight to suburbs, drives her into increased drudgery.

As discussed at the opening of this chapter, both protagonists are “run.” Lutie sees release from running “in some airy, sunny house and herself free from the worry of money”—ie in the suburbs. Ellison’s Man finds some release from running in a place seemingly at first very different. Constructed retrospectively, Ellison’s narrative flows from underground, from “a section of basement that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century” in “a building rented strictly to whites” (6). Living “rent-free” in a “warm hole,” the Man is in “a state of hibernation” from “the routine process” of life above ground—a process emblazoned by the buying of electricity, which, now enlightened, he instead steals in copious quantities (5,6). Despite the obvious differences, Lutie’s suburban dream and the Man’s underground hibernation share a few elements: they are both places apart from the cyclical grind of daily reproduction; both are rent-free. And both are impossible: Petry’s realism-based denial of Lutie’s move from the city to her dreamed-of house parallel’s Ellison’s use of stylized modernism to land his journeyer in a comically well-lit hole. Ellison’s subterranean space—which, comprising the novel’s introduction and conclusion, brackets, or surrounds, the novel—has a number of suburban elements. Noting that “I couldn’t be still even in hibernation. Because, damn it there’s the mind,” the Man engages himself in “the great American tradition of tinkers,” in the work of
invention and problem-solving. Such grand words denote something closer to puttering. He has a number of projects going on in his warm hole—a plan to have five radio-phonographs, “a gadget to place my coffee pot on the fire while I lie in bed… [a] gadget to heat my bed… to warm [my] shoes (573, 7). His largest project—wiring “the entire ceiling, every inch of it” with “1,369 lights…. And not with fluorescent bulbs, but with the older, more-expensive-to-operate kind, the filament type”—suggests copious, and free, consumption (7).

Both *Invisible Man* and *The Street* each reveal systemic dependence on black labor—i.e. they show that black labor maintains the system at both the industrial and domestic levels. Moreover, they point to the national ethos of individual progress, of rising through work, as part of the social technology by which such maintainive labor is itself maintained. Set, and written, in a period of rising living standards and consumer expectations, both novels intervene into a moment when progress takes on and conflates terms of contentment with consumer power, glimpsed in advertisements, felt behind the wheels of employers cars, or in their kitchens, and yet carries older terms of hard work and self-reliance. To problematize this forward marching, up-lifting, rising, progressing, go-getter ethos of movement, each novel locates black workers in underground spaces, in basements where their productive activities keep the works going. While there may be hints of a non-alienated form of work in these basement spaces, an opportunity for contented interdependence below the rat-race churn occurring on the surface, both authors’ basement workers act against their protagonists, in the service of the white, male power hierarchies which exploit them both.
Chapter 2

Masculinity and Mass Maintenance: Dystopia, the Suburbs and Upkeep in *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *Player Piano*

The so-called American Dream of homeownership is a fantasy carefully constructed by special interest groups to trap generation after generation in a quiet lower middle class life and preserve the hierarchical status quo. But since you’re already here, you might as well know that you need to fully dry the bathtub before attempting to re-caulk it.


Suburban and dystopian fiction lack a comprehensive joint study, despite these two modes’ concurrent place in twentieth-century American literature and popular culture, and despite their many overlaps and intersections.\(^38\) This chapter will focus on the ways both genres employ maintenance to both articulate and assuage widely-held fears in the 1950s: the absorption of the individual into a conformist mass, threats to individuality and independence, posed by larger forces of conformity, domestic, technological, commercial or statist. It will also explore the questions both genres raise about what worlds, and what work, are worth perpetuating and what should be fled, abandoned, left behind. Each genre uses maintenance and upkeep to mark both conformity and loss of control, as well as individuality and a better life, rendering somewhat messy depictions of mundane forms of upkeep.\(^39\) Depictions of upkeep range from the DIY-ism jabbed at by *The Onion* quote above, to daily domestic labor, to the service sector, as well as to male corporate/civic leadership as a form of social upkeep, and to a larger concern about what keeps systems, often repressive, functioning. Attention to these strands of upkeep
offers some help untangling the political commitments these texts, which often wed social
critique with conservatism.

At first glance the dystopian brand of science fiction canonized by the British novels
*Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *Brave New World*, and the American novel *Fahrenheit 451*, appears
distant from suburban texts. Yet fictional dystopias, like suburban fiction fret the entrapment of
the individual by an undifferentiated mass. The dystopian novelists fear a bureaucratic,
technologically-enabled state full of brainwashed automatons; the suburban ones a drone-like
state of anonymous consumption and corporate drudgery, often depicted using white-collar
and/or domestic work. Both deal extensively with provision, and discontent. Orwell worries
about the telescreen, as does Updike the TV. Both worry about work within large organizations,
and both contrast images of good work with bad. Moreover, both genres explore leadership and
dependence, asking who and what keeps it all together? Corporate or political leaders? White
male breadwinners? Technology? Or is there simply no one in the driver’s seat?

The primary texts of this chapter, Kurt Vonnegut’s *Player Piano* (1952) and Sloan Wilson’s *The
Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955), each take up these questions in ways that shows the
contours of mid-century white masculinity. Both display an affect of discontentment amid order
and affluence and both create worlds from which their protagonists flee, as well as an image of a
better place, with better work. Maintenance and upkeep mark both sides, in expected and
unexpected ways. The “real” work of masculine upkeep registers as an escape from the crush of
typical feminine domesticity even as that domesticity offers an escape from the anonymous rat
race of white-collar work. Especially in the 1950s, as “suburb” shifted down class yet
increasingly marks whiteness, suburbs tend to register as places needing protection from
outsiders, as well as ones that threaten class status, and individuality.
As a science fiction critic who indicates this dominant affect in mid-century America, Raymond Williams is useful on two fronts. An early use of his “structure of feeling” concept comes from the 1956 article “Science Fiction.” Here he coins the term “putropian” fiction to describe that which converts the “secular paradise[s] of the future” depicted by late nineteenth-century utopian writers into the “secular hell[s]” of Brave New World, Nineteen Eighty-Four and Fahrenheit 451 (16). He writes, “the form of feeling which dominates this putropian thinking is, basically, that of the isolated intellectual, and of the ‘masses’ who are at best brutish, at worst brutal” (16). Such texts carry a basic myth: “the defense of culture, by a minority, against the new barbarians” (16). Summing up, he writes “I believe, for my own part, and against this central myth, that to think, feel, or even speak of people in terms of ‘masses’ is to make the burning of books and the destroying of cities just that much more possible” (17). In his essay “The Future Story as Social Formula Novel,” written five years later, he drops discussion of ‘putropia’ and explores how Brave New World, Nineteen Eighty-Four and Fahrenheit 451 “contain, fundamentally, a conception of the relation between individuals and society: ordinarily a virtuous individual, or a small personal group, against a vile society…. The experience of isolation, of alienation, and of self-exile is an important part of th[is] contemporary structure of feeling” (46).

The structure of feeling Williams describes also inspires science-fiction’s sibling genre, suburban lit. In the first major study of this sub-genre, 2001’s White Diaspora: The Suburb and the Twentieth-Century American Novel, Catherine Jurca explores how novels from Babbitt (1922) to Rabbit at Rest (1990) seethe with “a deeply fraught self-pity” stemming from “a fantasy of victimization that reinvents white flight as the persecution of those who flee, turns
material advantages into artifacts of spiritual and cultural oppression, and sympathetically treats affluent home owners as the emotionally dispossessed” (16, 9). Dipping into the language of science fiction, a review explains “White Diaspora is about the emotional and rhetorical maneuverings that allow prosperous suburbanites to fancy themselves ‘diasporic,’ displaced and dispossessed subjects in an alien land, away from their authentic homes” (Shamir 351). The protagonists of dystopian literature are threatened by technological and bureaucratic development; those of suburban literature by post-war housing developments and corporate jobs. The threat is the same: conformity, loss of individuality.

The individual besieged by the masses: for mid-twentieth century American, the centrality of this “myth” (a term used by both Williams and Jurca) cannot be overemphasized. That powerful masses threaten the (white male) individual, and thus society at large, which provided the basis for a new brand of political economy being theorized at this time, namely neoliberalism. F.A. Hayek, especially, demonstrates a fear that wealthy, powerful, creative “independents” are (and will continue to be) hamstrung by the mass. Hayek’s 1960 The Constitution of Liberty finds that “freedom is thus seriously threatened today by the tendency of the employed majority to impose upon the rest their standards and views of life” (186). What are such standards and views? Democratic control of institutions, as well as social security and the comfort of a consistent income with automatic raises, and a pension in old age (189). Growing more powerful in the context of Keynesianism, these “employed masses” are for Hayek “alien and often inimical to much that constitutes the driving force of a free society,” a driving force which comes down to “the man of independent means,” and to “the owner of substantial property” (186, 185, 190). This argument is based on a reversal of upkeep: Because independent
men have delivered, through history, all the benefits of civilization, the good of society depends upon their freedom.

In this, Hayek can be considered a dystopian writer. His conservatism, and the method in which he presents it, models the act of speculation which Williams notes as central to science fiction, the isolation and projection of “a pattern taken from contemporary society [which] is materialized, as a whole, in another time or place” (Williams 45). For Hayek that pattern is the dangerous growth in the power of the majority. He fears a classless society and couches these fears in concerns about losing humanistic values, much like the dystopian novelists, especially Bradbury, with his piles of burning books. Hayek writes that,

However important the independent owner of property may be for the economic order of a free society, his importance is perhaps even greater in the fields of thought and opinion, of tastes and beliefs. There is something seriously lacking in a society in which all the intellectual, moral, and artistic leaders belong to the employed class, especially if most of them are in the employment of the government. Yet we are moving everywhere toward such an opinion (193).

Hayek’s concern that a society of government workers will eviscerate America’s dynamism and higher tastes has a dystopian edge. He “offer[s] militant criticism of specific aberrations in [his] own, present social-political system by pointing out their potentially monstrous consequences in the future,” as Erika Gottlieb puts it, describing dystopian fiction (15). And, his warning is about the same monster: the mass, engaged in their soul-deadening labor. Hayek, like the texts discussed in this chapter address and bridge concerns of larger systemic upkeep with work at the individual level.

The structure of feeling which Williams describes, in which a “virtuous individual” experiences or wishes for “isolation…alienation… [and] self-exile” in the face of “a vile society,” also influences a massive growth industry in the post-war era: DIY. The widespread social affect which Williams describes lays the groundwork for a do-it-yourself masculinity,
catered to (and reproduced) by an array of consumer products, in which men escape mass society by exiling themselves to basement workshops, where they can reclaim creativity, individuality and direct connection to a finished product. Albert Roland’s 1958 “Do-It-Yourself: A Walden for the Millions” positions home repair and embellishment as “the No. 1 American hobby,” pointing out that “do-it-yourself is today an economic reality that runs into over $6 billion a year” (155). Roland positions this trend as described above, as an escape from “constant ‘interpersonalizing’” where men must “spend every hour of their time, at work and at play, practicing psychic ping-pong with people” (158). So, “in today’s huge, anonymous processes of production and distribution” after “a day spent at one’s desk, behind a counter, [or] at the assembly line,” men “can take satisfaction from the fine table, chair or cabinet taking shape under his own hands” (158). Roland’s list, which combines managerial, retail, and industrial jobs as dissatisfying work, positions DIY as “a reassertion of traditional direct male control of the physical environment through the use of heavy tools in a way that evoked pre-industrial manual competence” (Gelber 68). Paralleling William’s structure of feeling, Roland describes DIY as an “escape” and “respite” from society, into a “self-exile” of satisfying work, based on “a widespread craving for individuality” (163, 160, 158, 163).

Roland also points out that most DIY is far from skilled craft, and involves kits and power tools that make such work “ever-easier” (159). In this he not only describes, but critiques, DIY in terms of William’s structure of feeling, casting the “escape” aspect as sham creativity auguring more mass-consumerism, “a mechanism of distribution of goods and of ‘canned’ services in the home” (162). Drawing on terminology from David Riesman’s The Lonely Crowd, Roland argues that “a closer look at today’s craftsmen-hobbyists and handymen show that… do-it-yourself is essentially a means of taste-exchanging consumership” (163). DIY is both
“spurious and fake,” and “not so different from competitive sun-tanning at the beach” (Roland 163, 160). But, for a small group of men, DIY demonstrates true creativity and individuality: while “the great majority of today’s craftsmen-hobbyists” are content “putting bolt A through hole B and fastening with nut C, as per instructions” from the “real” craftsman who “would not dream of assembling a piece of furniture from a kit” (159, 156). In this, Roland suggests a two-tier version of masculine escape: a real one, where actual skills are deployed in a truly creative way, and a counterfeit version of ready-made kits which simply reinscribes men’s “outer directedness” turning hobby into “a means to taste competence as an asset to exploit in his relationships with other members of his group” (159). He employs concerns with mass-culture as an explanation of what DIY is about, then makes these concerns the basis of his critique, of both the real version and the spurious one.

Gender and emasculation play a role in this discussion. In a concluding section, Roland dials back his critique, writing that while much is “fake about do-it-yourself creativeness…. aren’t we rather snobbish if we spurn the pie baked from a mix… simply because the lady didn’t start from scratch as her grandmother used to do?” (163). Notably, in mitigating the damage to individuality and creativity, Roland switches genders. Women play a major role in this late-50s discussion of DIY, though, grandmother aside, not in terms of “real” craft, but on the other side. “Urged on by those most enthusiastic avocational councilors of do-it-yourself, the home service magazines” and adding “a less strictly utilitarian bent” (read: fruffy and non-economical), “wives play an active part” in DIY activity (161, emphasis added). DIY was popular in part because “household construction, repair, and maintenance were free from any hint of gender-role compromise” (68 Gelber). Roland’s period work, seeming to emasculate some DIY men, suggests this wasn’t entirely the case, however, he does note an important aspect of DIY, which
is that it is basically an extension of the mostly-female oriented popular explosion of interest in domesticity stemming from the late-nineteenth century. He writes that “In theory [DIY] overlapped with a widening female household sphere, but in practice it was sufficiently distinct” to provide a sense of masculinity within this sphere (67). In addition to the pride of direct production, “what men made or fixed around the house had some theoretical market value that gave do-it-yourself an aura of masculine legitimacy (68). In this light, and throughout the above discussion, DIY is a sort of masculine balm to the emasculations of the larger mid-century economy.

The structure of feeling Williams describes, it is multifaceted, but involves two interrelated concerns: not only the threat to individuality by mass culture, but the devaluation and alienation of work in such a context. Aside from Williams, all of the mid-century male authors discussed in this chapter, Hayek, Roland, Wilson and Vonnegut create a two-track, good/bad, view of work. Hayek more or less sums it up, writing that “While, for the employed, work is largely a matter of fitting himself into a given framework during a certain number of hours, for the independent it is a matter of shaping and reshaping a plan of life, of finding solutions for ever new problems” (188). The employed masses follow rules, which is just fine for them, since “to do the bidding of others is for the employed the condition of achieving his purpose” (186). “Independents,” meanwhile, make choices, accept responsibilities, and take risks; they “concern themselves constantly with new arrangements and combinations” (188).

Like many post-war and mid-century novels by and largely about men and the professional middle class, Player Piano and Gray Suit each confront, and reify, a sense of alienation in white-collar work and suburban domesticity. Each also stakes out a better mode of work. Perhaps surprising in light of Wilson’s greater conservatism, it is Gray Suit which forsakes
(at least in part) the independent, creative and self-directed image work for something more pedestrian. While they take nearly opposite tracks toward better work, and the better life it denotes, both novels start out in firmly in dystopian territory, with white men trapped in eviscerating lives.

**Shining the Bars: Trapped in Upkeep in Wilson’s *Gray Suit***

To present Tom Rath as a man “trapped” by his society, Wilson uses disrepair and daily domestic upkeep. He has a ragged lawn, broken washing machine, dripping faucet, wrinkling linoleum and old Ford, always about to break down. When his wife, Betsy, falls ill, he takes on daily domestic chores, cleaning up the house and driving kids to school. He faces “accumulating small debts” and must pay wages for Mrs. Manter, a temporary nanny hired to take up his wife Betsy’s slack (50). Linking daily upkeep and the soul-deadening corporate job, Tom later works as a personal assistant in which he must “anticipate his [boss’s] needs,” which includes testing his mattresses at hotels, as well as perpetually rewriting a speech on mental health (235). And he has, in the novel’s central domestic conflict, a child in Italy who needs his financial support, and whose adulterous war-time conception threatens to destabilize his marriage. While service workers support Tom at every step—Mrs. Manter, taxi drivers, elevator operators, secretaries, waitresses—as well as Betsy, his (once well again) dynamo of a wife, Tom’s protagonist status comes through upkeep. Wilson puts him in a position of responsibility for a host of things to keep up, making a better job a necessity for Tom; at the novel’s opening, with a stalled career and a tract house, not keeping up threatens from many angles.

White authors, such as Arthur Miller and Margret Mitchell, frequently surround their protagonists with broken machines and structures. African American authors, such as Ralph
Ellison and Anne Petry, similarly use disrepair and disorder to characterize spaces of racial exploitation—such as Trueblood’s cabin and *The Street*’s apartment. Disrepair has narrative value for protagonism: it creates an underdog for whom to root, and presents oppositional forces against which to struggle. In worlds of too much order, such as Vonnegut’s, disrepair also differentiates the protagonist from the dominant, smoothly humming aesthetic. In *The Street*, however, disrepair (like the drag of daily upkeep) faces more than a single protagonist; in *Gray Suit*, only Tom’s house and car are falling apart around him, contrasting him from the crowd.

Wilson uses disrepair to show the Raths don’t belong in the new-construction suburban development. Both from upper class backgrounds, Tom and Betty fear the DIY-ism becoming, in the early ‘50s, a major wealth and “taste-exchanging” strategy (to borrow Riesman’s phrase) for the white lower middle class (Roland 159). So, the novel’s first line presents the “little house on Greentree Avenue in Westport, Connecticut” as something Tom and Betsy “both detested,” and roots such feelings in maintenance and upkeep: “the ragged lawn and weed-filled garden proclaimed to passers-by and the neighbors that Thomas R. Rath and his family disliked ‘working around the place’ and couldn’t afford to pay someone else to do it” (1). Intersecting disrepair and discontent is Wilson’s famous question mark-crack, the result of badly-repaired plaster damaged when, during a drunken fight, Tom flings at the wall an expensive vase Betsy bought amid mounting bills. The fight, which occurs just before the novel’s timeframe and serves to set in motion its better-life-seeking plot (as a kind of worst-case “bottom” for the Raths), leaves a question-mark-shaped crack which remains “a perpetual reminder of… their inability either to fix walls properly or pay to have them fixed.” (2). Like the crack, “a thousand petty shabbinesses bore witness to the negligence of the Raths”—a scratched door, a dripping faucet, lots of old furniture—“And besides that, the house was too small, ugly, and almost
precisely like the houses on all sides of it” (3). Wilson also uses the house’s disrepair and expense to justify careerism. The tract house was meant to be temporary, but the expense of raising three children was likely to increase at least as fast as Tom’s salary…. If Tom and Betty had been entirely reasonable, this might have caused them to start painting the place like crazy, but it had the opposite effect… [and] they both began to think of the house as a trap, and they no more enjoyed refurbishing it than a prisoner would delight in shining up the bars of his cell (3).

The “despised” house in Westport emblemizes social stalling as well all the work of just keeping in place. The crack links the two: the “house with the crack in the form of a question mark was probably the end of their personal road. It was impossible to believe. Something would happen” (3). As Jurca puts it, “The question that that the question mark in the living room raises is how can they reclaim (maintain) their social privilege” (138, her parentheses). The answer is simple: more money—“Money is the root of all order, [Tom] told himself” (164). Money offers the fix, not only to eroding social privilege, but to the carnival of upkeep described above. About his rich boss, Tom “wonder[s] what it’s like to have all that money. I wonder what it’s like to never have to worry about frayed shirt collars, and cracks in living-room walls, and holes in the kitchen linoleum, and how to pay a woman to take care of your children when your wife is sick?” (39). The disappearance of such problems as Tom’s fortunes rise, shows the lines to be in earnest. For Tom, who started out rich, and is sinking, maintaining social privilege is not based in actual upkeep of objects, or in daily domestic upkeep, as it would be for the lower middle class then gaining entry to the suburbs. Instead, privilege means release from such work, via service.

The first half of Wilson’s novel is widely recognized as better than the second; the first part raises salient concerns contentment in suburban domesticity, mass consumerism, and white-collar work and the second resolves those concerns by doubling down on all of them. The novel’s inclusion of upkeep and maintenance follows this pattern. The Westport house, and the
Rath’s lifestyle in it involves too much to keep, leaving Tom “confused… I don’t see how we can do everything we’re supposed to do” (55). Once the family moves Tom’s grandmother’s mansion in fictional South Bay, all these problems disappear. After inheriting it the novel solves the problem of “too much to do” not only by having Tom find his missing enthusiasm for life in domesticity, a nine-to-five routine, and, by the way, an eighty-house development project on the mansion’s twenty acre ground, a development which takes over the novel’s second half. Basically, Raths struggle to maintain a small house, but effortlessly keep up a big one, while turning the backyard into a neighborhood on quarter-acre lots. Wilson’s first presentation of mansion-ownership is more believable. A developer trying to cheaply buy the mansion uses a too-much-maintenance pitch in his bid: it “needs a lot of work…. is old fashioned, and far too big for most people. The taxes are about twenty-two hundred a year, and it would cost about twenty-four hundred to heat the place. And of course it couldn’t be run without servants” (58). Twenty-four hundred dollars for a season of heat remains a formidable, though not quite mansion-level, expense. Calculated against inflation the expense today would be $22,000 (officialdata.org). In terms of both the money and the need for hired labor, the developer is right—a fact which slips away at the end, even as Edward, the grandmother’s former butler and the novel’s lone villain, is let go. All of this on top of, for Tom, a full time career and a plan to spend more time with the family. Somehow a dilapidated Victorian mansion serves to fulfill Betsy’s desire for “a decent house… without everything coming apart” (62). Big old houses are virtually held together by things coming apart, but in Betsy’s estimation the tract house is the one falling apart, while the mansion offer, ironically, a fix. Overall, this suggests a state of disrepair and the work of daily upkeep are less a problem then the object of upkeep, the thing in disrepair.
and in need of upkeep. Upkeep of the tract house threatens to brand the Raths as middle class, or worse. Disrepair of the mansion marks them as part of an elite.

While the physical and emotional demands of home, family and career upkeep are raised by *Gray Suit*, the lesson of the novel is ultimately one of embracing an upper middle class suburban lifestyle. The conformity and ubiquity of middle management seemingly set up for critique by the novel actually become the salvation for Tom Rath, who eventually tells his boss “I’m just a nine-to-five guy, and I’m not interested in being much more, because life is short, and I don’t want to work nights and evenings forever” (240). Similarly, Betsy reverses her earlier position that Westport is “Dull,” deciding instead that “it’s not dull enough—it’s tense and frantic” (110). Unlike the general trend of white-collar and suburban novels in which “the American male” confronts “an obscure panic over dwindling independence,” *Gray Suit* goes in the opposite direction, “blithely showing how it wasn’t so bad after all,” (Saval 23). In one light this is admirable—Tom giving up on rat-race careerism, for example. But this release for Tom comes only after his inherited wealth is secure and his aspiration is demonstrated by the development (ends both brought by the mansion). For Wilson, conformity and loss of self-directed work aren’t the problem. Neither, ultimately, are home, family and career upkeep, despite the convincing suggestion that they are in the novel’s first half. What victimizes Tom and Betty is the deterioration of class privilege in the suburbs.

The real object of upkeep for the Raths is class, and class privilege, which explains why maintenance registers as a factor of discontent in Westport, but not South Bay. In Westport, the problem faced by the Raths (leading to the trap/prison-cell metaphor) is that maintaining the house only reinforces their slipping hold on upper/upper middle class-ness, which tracks with being freed from such work (3). Both from upper class backgrounds, Tom and Betsy’s prewar
dream is that Tom would “get a job which would soon lead to the vice presidency of J. H. Nottersby, Incorporated, or some firm with a name which would sound like that” and he and Betsy “would move into a house something like Mount Vernon, with nice old darky servants nodding and singing all the time… a mansion where they would of course be happy, real happy for the rest of their days” (173). The Raths aren’t criticized for this dream, suggesting a nostalgic wish for a more ordered world of service.44

Instead of getting the house like Mount Vernon, they had moved into the little house on Greentree Avenue in Westport, and Betsy had become pregnant, and he had thrown the vase against the wall, and the washing machine had broken down…. and instead of being made vice-president of J. H. Nottersby, Incorporated, [Tom] had finally arrived at a job where he tested mattresses… and lived in fear of an elevator operator. (174)

Here again conformity is not the source of victimization: it is downward mobility that characterizes the Raths’ self pity, the decay of which means the work previously done by “darky servants” will be performed by the Raths themselves, or by a new service economy staffed by increasingly empowered, often white-ethnic, service workers like the elevator operator, Caesar Gardella. With information he might use to blackmail Tom, Gardella has power over him, as does Mrs., who works “as a special favor… for sixty dollars a week, provided Tom would call for her in his car not earlier than nine… and take her home not later than six” (34). As the description of Mrs. Manter’s demands show, such workers themselves register as part of the bundle of things needing to be kept up, part of dragging-down routine.

At first, the sense of having too much to keep up only increases when Tom inherits his grandmother’s estate in South Bay. As mentioned, Wilson uses the property’s maintenance requirements to show Tom hemmed-in by upkeep. He also uses the house’s upkeep and dilapidation as a way of place older class privilege under threat of deterioration.45 Before her death, Tom’s grandmother tells him “I can’t afford to keep the lawns up, but the house itself is in
as good repair as ever…. I’m trying to keep it up for you. I don’t want you to mention it to a soul, but I had to take a small mortgage on the place to have the roof fixed and to have an oil furnace put in. Edward is getting old, and he can’t shovel coal anymore” (21). Once she dies, and before he actually takes possession of the house, Tom’s victimization via upkeep is increased: “Now the thought that there was a large house with an old man in it who had worked for his grandmother half his life and who now presumably expected a pension from him worried Tom” (50). This passage continues to list Tom’s worries, which include a stalled career, Mrs. Manter’s wages, taxi bills, and the “down payment on a new washing machine” (50). It is worth noting the noblesse-oblige-like position the grandmother takes toward Edward (emblematic of service in an old fashioned, upper-class sense). Edward, a butler and caretaker, is himself an object of her upkeep, and her care. Tom inherits the first part of this attitude toward Edward as well as toward representatives of a newer service sector, such as Mrs. Manter: they register as objects of upkeep. Financial care of such workers beyond their ability to labor, however, doesn’t cross the generational line. Conveniently, Edward has been stealing, and can be righteously dispatched at the end. Overall, Wilson positions the South Bay estate as no mere asset, but a birthright, the object of Tom’s prewar dream; when he visits it, he gets a sense of “home-coming” (16). The estate is one of many on the Connecticut shoreline, which “were not quite so well kept up as they had been when Tom had ridden his bicycle past them [as a boy], but they still seemed comfortable, solid, and much more permanent then the recently built [development houses] on the golf course, which looked as though they were quite capable of disappearing as quickly as they had come” (17). Tom’s ability to both own the mansion and develop it into a new neighborhood, allows this class privilege to survive into a new era.
The mid 1950s marks a turning point in American domesticity: the permeation of older, upper/upper-middle class suburbs by newer, lower-middle/upper-working class ones. Prior to the 1940s, the suburbs marked wealth; by the 1950s, as Jurca explains, “the suburb popularly signified the development,” which “unlike an earlier archetype such as Babbitt… [augured] the deterioration of status and privilege” (134, 136). The issue of permanency has far more to do with class, and the mass, than the actual buildings. As Jurca puts it “the very presence of the new development houses renders the decaying old mansions just as vulnerable and insubstantial as decaying new houses like the Raths” (143). The object of upkeep, as well as the agent, would seem to make the crucial difference: the South Bay mansion versus the Westport house. Upkeep of the latter means reinscribing (or self-inscribing) the massification of the middle class; upkeep of the former means keeping up a prior model of white privilege, itself put in terms of service, of being served (by “darky servants”), of not doing it yourself. Tom, with both a post-war work ethic and a desire to be served, finds himself in a messy place, between two versions of what makes for a good life.

This helps explain why Tom’s privilege and inheritance is also threatened by the impulse, embodied in the grandmother, to keep up an outdated model of class. He has “rage at his grandmother’s refusal to sell the place, and her calm willingness to pour into it what little was left of the money she inherited from her husband and father,” and is later told by her lawyer that “she always felt she was entitled to a certain standard of living, and that she would maintain it as long as she had a cent” (18, 53). Maintaining South Bay, it would seem, is also a problem, a negative drain on privilege. Unlike the grandmother, who “never cooked a meal, or made a bed, or washed a diaper, or done a damn thing for herself or anybody else,” the Raths, Betsy especially, work hard. Once installed in the mansion, upkeep no longer tracks with being
trapped, but with being different, freed from the mark of the masses and the elite. Prior to moving to South Bay, Betsy had been leaving “the house look[ing] like a herd of wild horses stampeded through it. Soiled laundry…. Dirty luncheon and dinner dishes” pile up, and “the beds were unmade, and… Pete was naked, and Barbara and Janey wore only underclothes” (30).

Directly after the grandmother dies, Betsy becomes “pretty well now. I don’t need Mrs. Manter anymore, and I’ll make all the arrangements about your grandmother’s house” (55). After the fancy-clothed developer stops by in his Jaguar to make the low-ball offer for the mansion, marking for readers and characters alike the actual value of the place as well as distaste for pomp, Betsy’s energy ratchets up, and Tom wakes to find her cooking breakfast, with the fully-clothed kids playing outside. She insists on going to church—“no more lying around Sunday mornings, drinking Martinis,”—has banned television and hotdogs for dinner, and tells Tom “no more homogenized milk… We’re going to save two cents a quart and shake the bottle itself” (66). She becomes, basically, a feminized Ben Franklin: hardworking, thrifty, oriented toward wealth. When they move into the mansion, her energy for domestic labor intensifies as does her calm resolve. Turning away from the sense “of being scared all the time,” she is found making “a list of all the things we have to do” (129, 127). The novel ends with her in this state, though a disturbing penultimate scene establishes her as firmly under Tom’s patriarchal thumb. During a fight precipitated by his confession about his Italian mistress and child, Tom “tear[s] open the shoulder of her blouse,” ignores her cries to “let me go” and then “kissed her hard,” at which point she “clung to him like a child” (268). Soon after, she apologizes for acting like a child, and bliss ensues. This scene reestablishes Tom’s dominance over a character often shown to be harder working, smarter, and more ambitious than her husband, allowing him to figure as
masculine even as he picks up laundry and shuns the big executive job. Here, too, Wilson imbues Tom with values that stem from different classes, and different eras.

This mixing is especially clear in the novel’s resolution to the too-expensive-mansion problem, a resolution resting on renovation, which allows both preservation and development, a way to both inhabit the space of the upper class while yet demonstrating a hard work ethic. In what becomes the novel’s main plot line, the Raths’ plan to build eighty homes and preserve the actual house for themselves. Here Wilson distinguishes them not only from the middle class mass by moving them out of the suburban development into a mansion on a hilltop, but also from the older elite by working hard, especially in the domestic arena, a major component of suburban culture. In Wilson’s novel, the Tom and Betsy escape the suburbs, and all of the upkeep it ladles onto them, by building a suburb.

It isn’t surprising Wilson’s novel ends this way. At the heart of suburban, and corporate, ideology lies a intersection of mobility and stasis, which Wilson symbolizes (perhaps consciously) with the development plot. He also captures it with Betsy’s reflection—importantly found in the novel’s first half, in Westport—that “on Greentree Avenue, contentment was an object of contempt,” even as contentment is exactly what the suburbanites, Raths included, chase (109). Most residents view it as “just a crossroads where families waited until they could afford to move on to something better” (109). Like the corporate ladder, that “something better” is more of the same: “the same kind of life on a bigger scale,” as the Raths see it, a concern which falls away when they achieve that bigger scale (109). Such interplay of mobility and stasis helps explain the waffling over the source of discontent: too much dullness? Or too little? Are conformity and routine the problem? Or anxiety and transience? The ideology of suburban culture involves a deeply non-maintainive aspect at the individual level—people should be
(upwardly) mobile; stasis is decay. Yet such mobility, and the contentment linked to it, sit uncomfortably with the suburban house, which is a real thing, taking effort to keep in place.

As mentioned, a common assessment of *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* is that it starts out poised to critique the conformity of the 1950s, yet ends up embracing it. Tom starts out cynical and critical, but ends complacent and self satisfied; we like our white male leads, apparently, served the former way. In *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit*, David Castronovo writes that the novel “collapses into a bundle of clichés about a brighter future and being at peace…. When he’s most out of step with the complacencies of the fifties, he’s a character worth remembering” (27). In the 2002 reprint introduction, Jonathan Franzen writes, “The Raths toy with irony and resistance in the book’s early pages, but by the last pages they’re happily getting rich. The smiling Tom Rath of chapter 41 would be an image of complacency, and object of fear and contempt, for the confused Tom Rath of chapter 1” (n.p.). While Franzen is skeptical of the “road of anomie and irony and entropy, the Beat road that Kerouac blazed and Pynchon followed,” Castronovo finds value and enduring relevance in the novel only when it models “the desire to free ourselves from constraints” (9). If only Tom were more like Kerouac’s Sal, or Updike’s Rabbit, would he be a relevant model. As Sarah Glazer puts it in a review of *Beyond the Gray Flannel Suit*, in Kerouac’s fiction “Castronovo sees inspiring rebellion [while Barbara] Ehrenreich sees bad news for women” (37). Using Ehrenreich, she points out that Kerouac himself, much like his male protagonists, abandoned women and denied children their support. Castronovo, and to a lesser extent, Franzen, take for granted that the suburban bundle is easy. The sheer extent of energy required by “conformity” and even “complacency” in consumer culture doesn’t usually factor in accounts that juxtapose a hard or heroic resistance to
consumerism against an easy acceptance. There is good reason for this, since conformity and complacency also denote what Franzen calls a rejection of “the notion that the malaise of the suburbs might have systemic causes” (n.p.). Yet the critique of Wilson’s characters as acquiescing to the typical consumer life-style and of the novel as ignoring systemic causes of discontent need not be linked too tightly, as I will discuss in the following paragraphs.

Victimized by Upkeep

As argued in the opening sections of this chapter, Wilson establishes Tom as a protagonist, in part, by facing him with a lot of upkeep (shoddy home with plaster crack, high lawn, messy house, mounting bills, demanding housekeeper). All indicate his provider status for numerous dependents. I will now discuss this in terms of white victimization, a central narrative of suburban literature. Like his protagonization, his victimization also comes through upkeep. Jurca documents the proliferation of the victim narrative in twentieth-century novels arguing that self pity for living in the suburbs, as well as working in its “analog,” the corporation, is a defining feature of the professional white middle class (136). She writes that through “ubiquitous complaints about mass production, standardization, dullness, and conformity,” white novelists “generate a twentieth-century model of white middle-classness based counterintuitively and, indeed, incredibly on the experience of victimization” (Jurca 6). Incredible because “places of the white middle class are houses filled with comforts and conveniences, in communities of their own making and choosing” (8). White suburban novelists, responsible for pushing the “Babbitts . . . to think of themselves as Biggers,” have been successful in perpetrating a victimhood narrative still in currency, one which ignores “current scholarship and opinion polls [that] discover both individual satisfaction and community ties in contemporary American suburbs”
(8). Of *Gray Suit*, Jurca writes, quoting a 1955 review, it “was thought successfully to impart the ‘panicky quality of the lives of so many of those commuters in gray flannel,’ even if one critic surmised that the difficulty of caring for a family on $7000 a year ‘must be less than heartbreaking to the average reader’ (138).

This line of criticism marks a pattern of (reversed) victimization prominent throughout American literature and culture. And yet, in terms of the suburb, it employs a pat definition of privilege, positions the suburbs as fine and good, casts life there as the result of a cogent choice for whites and aligns white privilege with affluence in too tight a fashion. This disallows a critique that might add some scare-quoting to the “privilege” of white-middle class experience and takes the satisfaction-bestowing logic of mid-century consumerism at face value. As discussed in Chapter 1, Anne Petry herself documents white discontent in the suburbs, in forms of alcoholism, adultery and suicide, from an insider perspective, while her protagonist, whom unlike Petry does not hail from suburban Connecticut, longs dangerously for a little home in the suburbs, based on a magazine ad. Attention to maintenance shows costs of material excess, costs that while certainly far from equivalent to those of poverty, are costs nonetheless. Attending to the ways this narrative of victimhood and resultant self-pity, as revealed in a text such a *Grey Suit* consists of excessive upkeep and maintenance as one source of victimization, the critique loses its reductive quality and allows some legitimacy to voices speaking from the center.

Inhabiting this center (not, like Lutie Johnson, the base) of a new consumerism responsible for perpetuating capitalism after its early-twentieth century crises through mass consumption, Tom and Betsy Rath actually do have a lot to keep up.

Tom’s wish that his grandmother just left him money, rather than property, factors here, as a cash inheritance would serve to free him from the responsibly for physical and financial
upkeep he registers as a trap, by hiring people like Lutie to do it for him. Property (at least of the non-income producing type in the 1950s) and affluence are not synonymous. It’s worth considering that Tom operates in a context of possessive individualism in which ideological valences such as breadwinner-masculinity, careerism, aspiration—what Franzen calls “the treadmill of consumerism”—put him into the service of far richer men, into the target of marketing, and into the hands of mortgage-sellers and other forms of debt (Gray Suit n.p.). Mid-century American consumerism, at its core about ladling out as much stuff as can be produced, can thus be criticized as exploiting a natural phenomenon: people caring for stuff. Service workers find themselves caring for objects that class relations put on the other side of legal ownership (as discussed in chapters 1 and 3). Leaders—of households and corporations, the breadwinners, and managers, and even executives atop the myriad hierarchal organizations which compose patriarchy—also find themselves at this confluence of care and exploitation. It is thus not surprising that the house-as-trap metaphor gets used so often, and in ways that cross boundaries of class, race and sex. Basically, there is a lot of upkeep going on. Mass consumerism is also mass property ownership, and since property leads to upkeep, twentieth-century America is an era of mass maintenance.

The narrative of victimization is, as Jurca documents, part of the mechanism by which African Americans were excluded from the wealth of the 1950s. As Jurca points out black-authored depictions of the suburbs, such as Anne Petry’s and Richard Wright’s, offer “a kind of reality check, to gauge… the real injuries inflicted on those who are denied the opportunity to become upwardly mobile in the suburbs” (8). At the same time, reducing white literary suburban discontent to “a fantasy of victimization” tends to take the logic of suburbanization, as a better life, at face value, and let the overall social and emotional cost of suburbanization fall through a
racial divide. Wilson’s novel indeed fantasizes victimization from affluence, presenting a white man bound by the need to maintain home, marriage, family, career, car, sense of masculinity, and the demanding schedule of an imperious housekeeper. Moreover, while depicting Tom as supported by the work of others, Wilson only barely registers the extent to which many Americans, particular those of color, were shut out from the middle-classdom he renders. Works like Petry’s reveal such dependence and immobility. But this critique doesn’t negate Wilson’s, it only shows it to be myopic. The suburban lifestyle isn’t proven worthy because people are shut out from it. Locating Tom’s discontent in the demands of keeping up his home, his marriage, his job, his career, his car, his appliances, and, of course, with his neighbors serves to draw question to the value of the whole middle-class, consumer-capitalism bundle—or, it would have, had Wilson not retreated into these values in the novel’s second half. The deterioration of the novel into embarrassingly earnest kitsch might best be considered a byproduct of Wilson’s cutting the knot he’s tied: having his character choose to love the very things he convinced were productive of ennui, entrapment and discontent.

By setting Petry and Wilson side by side, rather than at odds (an act I am admittedly only barely doing), the vast amount of maintainive labor required and generated by consumer capitalism begins to show. This era brims with material objects, the upkeep of which entail daily domestic upkeep, periodic repairs, regular maintenance, and perpetual payments—these don’t fall evenly across race, but they don’t miss Betsy nor Tom Rath entirely. The Raths find themselves responsible keeping a lot together. The plaster-crack episode shows this. Often unmentioned, the morning after the fight, the couple immediately fixes it. Wilson writes, “the next morning, Tom and Betsy worked together on their hands and knees to patch the plaster, and they repainted the whole wall, but when the paint dried, the big dent … in the shape of a question
mark was still clearly visible” (2). In addition to showing a 1950’s female do-it-yourselfer (Betsy can also lay linoleum), this moment puts the Raths into a maintenance relationship with everything the crack symbolizes—the “detested” little house, and its revelation to visiting Joneses that “both a[re] aspiring but failed ‘Do-It-Your selfers’ who lack financial as well as creative resources” (Jurca 133). In a sort of kneeling penance, the couple, implicated in damage born of suburban consumer competition, takes on the responsibility for fixing, or covering it up. And they fail. The latter half of the novel basically follows this script, and the South Bay development project becomes a successful, if unconvincing, fix to the crack. But at the novel’s opening, they try, and fail. Such a moment contains potential critique of consumerism, with neither the hypermasculinity nor the juvenile escapism associated with a Kerouac. It puts them into a care and responsibility-based relation, with a damaging thing, namely the suburban home and the ethos of consumer aspiration it represents. (This situation, care for something that can hurt, provides the basis of the discussion of The Shining in chapter 3).

One take on this is that these novels are an aberration, a “disavowal of the very real privileges that the suburb has offered those who live there” (Jurca 6). As mentioned above, this is balanced, for Jurca, against a more realistic portrayal of the suburbs as “a vehicle of Americanization and social mobility, a marker of stability, independence and respectability, a source of emotional as well as material shelter… [by] novelists [who] take pains to establish how difficult ownership and its outcomes are to achieve for the variously outcast” (10). The importance of this outsider critique coming from those trying to achieve the dream for which “the Rudkuses, the Joads, Geremio, and Lutie Johnson fight, and in some cases, die,” does not negate the critique coming from those inside, and also tasked, in different ways, with keeping it
all together. (Jurca 11). Worth heeding, the indeed self-piteous literature of suburbia depicts men perpetuating and caring for institutions which themselves subordinate care to competition.

By starting with the American dream fulfilled—the “end” which Lutie Johnson desperately wants—Wilson adds to the overall cultural image of the suburbs its failure to deliver individual contentment, at least if one looks past its absurd happily-ever-after ending. If “privilege” in the atomic age means even those least burdened with upkeep—white men of the upper classes—experience the job and the home, work and leisure, the whole culture really as laden with objects of upkeep, something is indeed rotten, and in need of repair.

Still, the novel fails to deliver this critique. Having struggled through the unmowed pits of suburban discontentment, Tom is unshackled, finally, from the maintenance requirements of a modest new-construction home, by a dilapidating Victorian mansion. Reference to disrepair and daily upkeep drop away once they move, and the novel concludes with a return a suburban utopia reminiscent of Edward Bellamy, H.G. Wells, and William Morris, smooth-running futures with zero maintenance and full privilege, landing Tom and Betsy in a mansion on a hill top, designing a new community and having plenty of time for the kids.48

**Fixing the Orange Soda Machine:**

**Maintenance as Useful and Useless Labor in Kurt Vonnegut’s *Player Piano***

As much a dystopian novel as early suburban novel one, Vonnegut sets *Player Piano* in the white collar half of fictional Illium, New York, where managers and engineers of the private, state-backed corporation live. It also takes place in the blue-collar half where the now-redundant population lives, and in Illium’s massive production facility, which employs about ten people, all with doctorates. Like Wilson, Vonnegut presents two suburbs, a new, post-war, mass-produced
version for the lower classes, and an older, bigger, bespoke version for the upper/upper middle class.\textsuperscript{49} Vonnegut’s future imagines the bifurcation of post-World War II suburbanization has continued, placing elites in late nineteenth century houses updated with modern amenities or new homes accented with rough-hewn beams and Victorian ginger-breading. The rest of the population, made redundant by automation of production and service, live miserable TV-swamped lives in pre-fab houses, which, with Jetson’s-like automation, have even alienated housewives from the dignity of domestic labor. Prescient about technology fueling greater class divides, Vonnegut yet takes the belief in “labor saving” benefits of automation and consumer machines at face value.

In this context, he laments the loss of “real” work. While Wilson uses upkeep and disrepair to symbolize the “trap” his protagonist struggles within (before erasing upkeep from sight), Vonnegut starts from an automated, labor-free dystopia, and laments the extinction of dignifying, “useful” work, which the novel positions repeated as “the foundation of self-respect” (\textit{Gray Suit 3, Player Piano} 156). The image of “useful work” comes via maintenance, particularly that of machines, even as its opposite is also presented with maintenance, particularly that of infrastructure. Maintenance, in short, both represents the loss of useful work, and the useless work it is replaced by in this dystopia. In it, Paul Proteus, head of Illium’s automated, computer controlled production facility has become deeply discontented. He only half-heartedly chases a major promotion at work, in a corporation that is private and profit-oriented yet has eliminated all competition, and most forms of labor. Overlapping with the national government, this corporation controls the economy; the redundant population is employed by the military or the “R&R,” the Reclamation and Reconstruction Corp, a national maintenance army whose inefficient make-work projects such as road repair are the butt of many
jokes. Hemmed in by boring work, a cold wife, and dissatisfying home, Paul finds solace in drinking, maintaining an old part of the factory originally built by Edison, and driving around in an obsolete, beat up car. Eventually falling in with the Ghost Shirt Society, an anti-machine rebellion named after the late-nineteenth-century Native American resistance movement, he participates, again half-heartedly, in leading a revolution against the machines. Unfortunately, the masses who join the revolution can’t distinguish good automation (a sewer treatment plant) from the bad (automated production lines) and go too far in the Luddite-direction, destroying everything. But it doesn’t matter, for the day after the destruction, the same men who rendered a landscape of broken machines, seeing an opportunity for useful work, can’t help but repair them. In characteristic satire, Vonnegut ends with men rediscovering useful work by fixing a wonderfully useless automated device, an orange soda machine.

In *Dystopia Fiction East and West*, Gottlieb writes that “dystopia contains… a ‘window on history,’ a strategic device through which the writer reveals the roots of the protagonist’s dystopian present in the society’s past” (15). This “past” is the actual present in which the novel is written and first read, thus it acts as a warning, presenting specific social phenomena which, if continued, will lead down the dystopian road. This itself depends on constructing “two time planes,” one fully fictional, and one in that fiction’s past which is familiar to readers as their present, and which provinces a cause-and-effect basis for the hypothetical future of the novels. As Gottlieb puts it, “it is only when we recognize the distinction between these two time planes as well as their cause-effect relationship that we can proceed to decode the specific targets of the dystopian satire” (17). For Bradbury, for example, “the monstrous regime… could only come about because of the negative trends rampant in the early 1950s: the acceptance of political censorship in the McCarthy era, and the shift from the reading of the classics in favor of reading
the Reader’s Digest or watching television” (16). In Player Piano, Vonnegut warns about similar, if not identical trends. For him, “it was the atrophy of the humanities and the worship of the machine, particularly the computer, in the early 1950s… that prepared the monster world of the Illium of the future” (16, emphasis added). Unlike recent critics who see the novel as more nuanced in its presentation of human/machine-related issues than the technology-skeptical Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four, Gottlieb writes that “Vonnegut’s Player Piano… is a technological dystopia, significantly indebted to Huxley’s Brave New World for its subject-matter and to Orwell’s Nineteen Eighty-Four for its structure, although it does not aspire to match either the scope or the philosophical breadth of these two novels” (95). While many critics argue the opposite, that Player Piano is actually more complex if not just better than its dystopian predecessors, Gottlieb is correct in pointing out that unlike Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four, “the atmosphere of Player Piano does not strike one as nightmarish…. Illium seems to be a society with which we are familiar, within the range of our normal, everyday experience” (95). Indeed, the novel’s dystopian future is quite familiar, and suburban.

To approach Vonnegut’s use of maintenance to signal both dystopian elements of his society as well as what they threaten, I will first explore the primary dystopian aspect of Illium: automation. Devaluation of work through automation is the central concern of Player Piano, drawn in part from Vonnegut’s late 1940’s work at General Electric, where he participated in the move to control production “by little boxes and punched cards” (Playboy 3). Describing the novel in a 1973 interview, he says “Player Piano was my response to the implications of having everything run by little boxes. The idea of doing that, you know, made sense, perfect sense. To have a little clicking box make all the decisions wasn’t a vicious thing to do. But it was too bad for the human beings who got their dignity from their jobs” (Playboy 3). Early in the novel we
learn that while “the First industrial Revolution devalued muscle work… the second one devalued routine mental work” (13). As explained by Paul, these lines stem from the (nonfictional) mathematician Norbert Weiner, who coined the term “cybernetics” in the 1940s, and has been called the father of automation (Bynum). Weiner writes “the first industrial revolution, the revolution of the ‘dark satanic mills,’ was the devaluation of the human arm by the competition of machinery. . . . The modern industrial revolution is similarly bound to devalue the human brain . . . . The answer, of course, is to have a society based on human values other than buying and selling” (Bynum). Vonnegut, whose leftism focuses mostly on alienated labor and the production of class, imagines this has taken place, minus that last part, and incorporates into his novel Weiner’s position on automation of both physical and mental work as a force with positives and negatives.

The negatives tend to involve threats to masculinity. A mid-century aspect of those little black boxes which criticism of Player Piano tends to miss: when Vonnegut was writing, computers and computing, rooted in the clerical sphere, were the purview of women’s labor, and only just emerging from such a disreputable state. As Hicks explains, “The field of computing was feminized up until the 1940s and 50s. There was this huge fear from the people at the top of government and industry that they didn’t have the ‘right sort of people’ in charge of these machines which were now being seen as newly important.” Vonnegut’s novel comes from a moment when views of computers were changing. In capturing their growing importance, he also forwards the concern with important stuff done in a non-masculine spirit—his protagonist is hemmed in by both machines and women, thus the “novel deserves Leslie Fiedler’s elegant complaint that it is excessively committed to ‘proving (once more) that machines deball and
dehumanize men” (Merrill and Scholl 56). Such threat to masculinity comes across in “slavery” to, or “worship” of, machines (Vonnegut).52

*Slaves, Gods, and Maintenance*

What does it mean to worship machines or a machine? Vonnegut’s novel intersects two distinct versions. On one hand, technological determinism, the belief that technology (usually imagined as both new and relatively complex) dictates the unfolding of history, registers as a form of machine worship. In this sense, “worship” makes machines into gods, positioning technology (as well as more general technological development) as an unquestionable, higher force, which can’t really be understood and must be followed blindly. This tends to apply to use of technology. On the other hand, worship invokes a service and servitude relationship. In this sense worship involves perpetual service to a higher force, but one that is also visible and everywhere-active. In this sense, maintenance and repair (as well as the design) of machines factors as worship, one with the potential to make “slaves” out of human beings, as the novel puts it, but one which also puts machines into the hands of their servants.53

The orange soda machine episode with which Vonnegut ends the novel brings these together. In the rubbly, part-strewn landscape the morning after an anti-machine revolution has swept the nation, an unnamed man, introduced earlier in the novel when he fixes Paul’s car, starts to repair a broken orange soda machine. The man, once “desperately unhappy…. was proud and smiling because his hands were doing what they liked best” (303). With his ironic emblem of (non)utility, a soda machine, stocked only with Orange-O, which no one, save the brain-dead TV-star president, actually likes, Vonnegut both questions the idea of useful labor and celebrates the value of repair. He also forwards a sense of a mass Other, bowing down
before technology. The people, a pretty fickle bunch in Vonnegut’s estimation, line up for the nasty soda, and cheer, not only when the machine dispenses, but when the man fires up its backlight, “as though a great wonder were in their midst” (302). In other scenes, Vonnegut is even more explicit about (white male) Americans becoming slaves of machines. Vonnegut writes, in the following barroom exchange between Harrison, a disillusioned engineer, and Buck, the novel’s consummate tinkerer,

“What have you got against machines?” said Buck.
“They’re slaves.”
“Well, what the heck,” said Buck. “I mean, they aren’t people. They don’t suffer. They don’t mind working.”
“No but they compete with people.”
“That’s a pretty good thing, isn’t it—considering what a sloppy job most people do of anything?”
“Anybody who competes with slaves becomes a slave,” said Harrison thickly, and he left. (252)

Throughout, *Player Piano* carries concern that white men become “slaves” when their labor becomes redundant, mired in alienated white collar careers, or in service jobs constantly being lost to machines. The only direct discussion of race and slavery excises African-Americas. Vonnegut writes, in the voice of Lasher, leader of the revolution, explaining the name of the “Ghost Shirt Society” resistance to Paul. “Don’t you see Doctor…. The machines are to practically everybody what the white men were to the Indians. People are finding that, because of the way the machines are changing the world, more and more of their old values don’t apply any more. People have no choice but to become second-rate machines themselves or wards of the machines” (260). Relegating Indians to an idealized and highly masculine past, Vonnegut uses the idealized image to express what has been lost: “all the things they used to take pride in doing, all the things that had made them feel important…. Great hunters had nothing to hunt. Great fighters did not come back from charging into repeating-arms fire. Great leaders could lead the
people nowhere” (259). Usefulness in these senses—hunting, fighting, leading—is both masculine and “great.” It is “great hunters… fighters… leaders” that have been lost (259). All of this longing for masculine greatness occurs in a distinctly suburban context, where Proteus is, like Tom, trapped in home and work routines leaving little room for creativity and independence. As discussed below, the escape Paul takes is an anachronistic, non-automated farm, when he can, he believes, live out an extended version of DIY-ism, a sort of self-upkeep, discussed above as an escape from the emasculations of the Keynesian economy. 

In Vonnegut’s dystopia, good work for a small group, engineers for the most part, comes by stripping production of its masculine essence via automation. This is made clear in Paul’s musing on Rudy Hertz, a former “master machinist” at Illium whose physical movements Paul, early in his career, in pre-automation days, had recorded onto tapes that now run the machines which replaced him (6). As Paul checks the malfunctioning “lathe group three,” he muses that on “the tape was the distilled essence from the small, polite man with the big hands and black fingernails…. Now Paul could make the essence of Rudy Hertz produce one, ten, a hundred, of a thousand of the shafts” through the recording’s operation of the lathes (10). At the same essence-stealing moment, however, the novel offers a two-sided stance toward advanced technology, based on class. For Paul the engineering of such machines, now in the past, was deeply satisfying: “Happiest I ever was… so damn engrossed” says Paul’s friend about designing the lathe-controls, to which Paul responds “Most fascinating game there is, keeping things from staying the way they are” (298). Even beyond the work itself, Paul finds that “the machines themselves were entertaining and delightful” (8). Listening to them, he imagines a symphony playing the “Building 58 suite…. The lathe group, the tenors…. The welders, the baritones” (10, italics removed). Watching them he also sees dance, “delight[ed] to watch a cluster of miniature
maypoles braid bright cloth insulation about a black snake of cable. A thousand little dancers whirled about” (10). From a 1952 review of the novel: “Vonnegut demonstrate[es] that ‘man’s penchant for using tools is both his doom and his most engaging quality’” (Burnett and Rollins 23). Summing up Vonnegut’s position, Burnett and Rollins write, “we love the very machines which trap us in techno-loneliness, and here is where Vonnegut’s novel surpasses other dystopian literature,” in presenting a “genuine ambivalence about work, leisure and machines” (23). This ambivalence adheres to production, maintenance white-collar, and (discussed below) domestic work. With the Orange-O machine, the novel ends still caught in two-sidedness regarding the appeal of machines. Such two-sidedness frequently leaves critics describing the novel as “messy” (Burnett and Rollins 23). But by looking at the its ambivalence toward work and technology through maintenance and upkeep, the messiness makes more sense, even as it reveals a conservative strand in Vonnegut’s concern with work.

This can be seen in one of Player Piano’s departures from early 1950s everyday experience, once which reveals Vonnegut’s problems with “useful” work and the fallacy that labor is “saved” by technology. In Illium, only a few people travel in cars. One of those is the Shah of Bratpuhr who, in a side plot used to both describe and comment on the dystopia, is touring the country with an American official attempting to sell him both the American way and its products, which includes cars. The other is Paul. Automobiles are an important American product, but there is almost no use of roads. People seem to travel, but roads are not used. One might spare reference to such a minor detail, except it indicates a larger issue, with continual importance concerning the problem of useful, as well as good, work. Road work is Vonnegut’s go-to example for useless labor, performed by his go-to example of useless laborers, the ironically named “R&R” or, suggestive of the effects of redundant labor on men, the “Reeks and
Wrecks,” as inhabitants of the novel call them. Through the R&R, Vonnegut creates “a new version of the Wellsian utopia as a combination of a high-tech slum and the welfare state. To give the people an illusion of being useful, the elite presses them into lengthy service in a weaponless army and into an equally useless industrial army, the Reeks and Recks, engaged in make-work repairs” (Gottlieb 95, emphasis added). I’m going to return to this “useless reserve army” in a moment, but I want to emphasize here the object of the work.

Watching an R&R work crew paint the bridge which divides the elite and the masses in Illium, Paul reflects that “the four lane bridge had, before the war, been jammed with the cars of workers going to and from the Illium works” (154). With the automation of the plant, no more workers, and no more driving—and not just on the symbolically important bridge, but in Vonnegut’s future in general. Writing just ahead the era of Interstates, Vonnegut missed by a mile: increasingly automated production in the US and rising culture of consumer machines came, thanks to Keynesianism, with an increase in service and leisure-related activities, many of them highly auto-centric. Roads became busier. The purpose of this bridge scene is clear: generating a moment for Paul to demonstrate to his skeptical wife their complicity as elites in degrading men’s work, a point which requires (for both Vonnegut and Paul) an example of degraded work, one provided by road repair. Watching the men, Paul explains “to get what we’ve got, Anita, we have, in effect, traded these people out of what was the most important thing… the feeling of being needed and useful, the foundation of self-respect” (156). In a novel well populated with cars and deeply concerned about useful work, fixing the roads is cast as the opposite. Again, this is more than a detail. Vonnegut has little interest in the road as a piece of infrastructure, and certainly not as a compelling piece of technology or object of useful labor. This remains true. That American roads and other basic infrastructure—much of it built in
1950s—is currently in a state of massive disrepair, even as Elon Musk gathers interest and funding for underground vacuum trains, shows that Vonnegut isn’t alone in seeing basic infrastructure in such devalued terms.

In this, the two views of maintenance I discussed in the introduction inhabit Vonnegut’s novel, though in different ways. Concern with useful work is a major aspect of many discussions of maintenance and repair, forming, in many cases, a starting point for one of two critical trajectories. One is the loss of “real” work, and with it usefulness, in the face of automation, disposability, and white-collar careerism, a bundle displayed in Crawford’s Shop Class, which, like Paul Proteus, asks, “what tangible good was I doing?” in my work. The second is the proliferation and importance, yet invisibilization and exploitation of maintenance work, hidden everywhere in plain sight. The latter is well represented by Vinsel and Russell’s “Hail the Maintainers,” (as well as most of the Maintainer’s group) which, in positing the overvaluation of “innovation,” and the fetish of the new, points out that “focusing on infrastructure or on old, existing things rather than novel ones reminds us of the absolute centrality of the work that goes into keeping the entire world going” (n.p.).

For the most part, Vonnegut’s novel follows the Crawford track, and models the Vinsel and Russell one. In his future, both maintenance and usefulness have been banished, except where maintenance is positioned as useless labor, as indicative of the indignity foisted on the work of human beings by the automated economy. The main plot development, a revolution against automated machines, is meant to return men to usefulness. The manifesto of the revolutionaries argues against an “intemperate faith in… technological progress” and finds that “Men, by their nature, seemingly, cannot be happy unless engaged in enterprises that make them feel useful. They must, therefore, be returned to participation in such enterprises” (271).
Machines have not only made men redundant and useless, but also have stripped work, of various types, of satisfaction, in the most masculine of terms. For example, an automatically-run train, explains a former conductor, can’t “help an old lady down the steps,” nor “watch out for a little girl three years old all the way from St. Louis to Poughkeepsie,” as the male conductor had (227). Like automatic doors which provide no opportunity for chivalry, the mechanisms threaten patriarchal relationships. Vonnegut weaves into his narrative a number of glimpses at male workers who have been displaced by machines, or whose work has been degraded by them, including this conductor, a barber, a machinist, a soldier, and a bartender. With the “Reeks and Wrecks,” Vonnegut presents such men in mass form.

The Reeks and Wrecks, the novel’s national public works maintenance crew, provide its foremost image of degraded work. Paul, for example, overhears an old soldier glorifying a military leader who “was great, and nobody’d argue about that, but do you think he could have been great today, in this modern day and age…. You know what he would be today? A Reek and Wreck, that’s all” (184). Similar lines occur throughout the novel: Paul’s secretary Catherine cries when she finds out her fiancé Buck, having invented a machine to replace himself, is “going to be a project supervisor for the—’ her voice caught—‘for the Reeks and Wrecks’” (142, 126). In the first of many interjected Shah of Bratpuhr scenes, the official, Halyard, explains “any man who cannot support himself by doing a job better than a machine is employed by the government, either in the Army or the Reconstruction and Reclamation Corp” (18). As they drive past “a large work crew filling a small chuckhole,” the Shah, the novel’s voice of reason, asks “who owns these slaves?” (18).

Such degradation intersects with “useless” labor, allowing the maintenance and repair of basic technologies—roads, sewers, water pipes—and those who do it to become the butt of a 300
Following the stereotype of public works projects as inefficient, it takes forty Reeks and Wrecks, “leaning on crowbars, picks, and shovels, block[ing] the way, smoking, talking, milling about…. As though there were nothing but time in the world…. [to fix] a small chuckhole perhaps two feet in diameter” (22). John Updike has a similar line in his 1962 “A&P,” in which the narrator, describing his north-of-Boston town, says “if you stand at our front doors you can see… about twenty-seven old free-loaders tearing up Central Street because the sewer broke again. It’s not as if we’re on the Cape” (2). Displaying a similar perspective on public works projects, Vonnegut has Paul watch a road-stripping job, and gripe that “three men were painting, twelve were directing traffic, and another twelve were resting” (154). Along with the idleness and excessive number of workers, the work itself is presented as useless: filling a two-foot hole; painting unnecessary lines on a mostly unused road. Earlier, Paul complains that “flushing out the storm sewers with an open fire hydrant…. [is] a favorite undertaking,” of the R&R (22, 18). The line suggests they choose objects of upkeep willy-nilly, which is unintentionally ironic since men losing control of their work is part of what degrades work.

While celebrating the draw of fixing something earnestly useful, like a fuel pump, or ironically useful like a soda machine, basic infrastructural upkeep is presented, comically but not critically, as pointless and degrading. The possibility that maintaining roads and water systems might itself be useful, let alone compelling work isn’t considered; rather such work is used as the touchstone against which compelling work can be outlined.

As mentioned, this models wider, trans-historic American views of much maintenance and repair. Vinsel and Russell, for example, write that “the most underappreciated and undervalued forms of technological labor are also the most ordinary: those who repair and maintain technologies that already exist” (3). To attend to the ordinary, mundane work of
upkeep, let alone to celebrate such work, rubs against a number of long term trends in the ways Americans discuss and enact work, of which innovation is but one. Pointing to the value of the ordinary threatens an ethos of aspiration that doesn’t sit easily with a revaluation of maintenance. It also makes difficult the embodiment of exceptionality, an ideal at the heart of white, masculine American identity. And yet, some interesting things happen regarding work both useful and ordinary when Vonnegut brings us into the home of “Edgar R. B. Hagstrom… 58th Maintenance Regiment, 110th Building and Grounds Division” and “his fat wife, Wanda,” both of whose lives have been degraded to suburban drones by Vonnegut’s automated economy (143).

**Dystopia and Domestic Upkeep**

Vonnegut adds domestic upkeep to his concerns about work, automation, and the suburbs in a Shah/Halyard scene set in Edgar and Wanda’s home. They live in “the M-17 house. Radiant heating in the floor. The furniture was designed after an exhaustive national survey of likes and dislikes. The house, the furniture, and the lot are sold as a package. Simplified planning and production all the way around” (145). This line comes from Halyard, showing off the benefits of American mass production and consumption to a never-impressed Shah of Bratpuhr—a moment anticipatory of Nixon’s 1959 “Kitchen Debate” display of household appliances to Khrushchev as an indication of American, and capitalist market, superiority. Vonnegut spares little to degrade the lives of this couple. Edgar’s affair with a friend’s wife was “like a bright, fat cherry on the Gray mush of their lives” and Wanda, freed of household chores by automatic home appliances answers the Shah’s question “what does the woman do” with all her free time by muttering, eyes cast down, “‘Oh, television,’… ‘Watch that a lot, don’t we, Ed?’” (146). The Shah, puncturing Halyard’s glossy claim that mass produced, automatic appliances allow her to “Live! Get a little
fun out of life,” produces his consistent summation of the American lower middle class, as “Takaru” or slave (146). Overall, the novel leans toward supporting the Shah’s skepticism about automated housework.

In doing so, however, Vonnegut adds to his “useful” labor category, performed by women. Like production and machine repair, but not maintenance of roads and infrastructure, domestic upkeep has been degraded by automation. As lost “real” work, this puts domestic upkeep on the same plane of usefulness, for women, as production, for men, a position with both conservative and progressive valences. Asking if they can see “the ultrasonic washer work,” Halyard is told that “the transducer’s shot again… so Wanda’s been doing the washing in a tub for a month now,” to which she replies “Oh, I don’t mind… Really, I like doin’ ‘em that way. It’s kind of a relief. A body needs a change. I don’t mind. Gives me something to do” (147). Here, suburban mass consumer culture is a threat to the lower middle class/upper working class, to which Wanda and Edgar belong. This threat, in a reversal of Wilson’s image of too-much upkeep as confining the Raths, comes via a stripping away of domestic daily upkeep. Tom and Betsy are discontent because they have too much to keep up; Edgar and Wanda, too little. After placing four frozen meals in “the radar range” and calling to the kids, “supper will be ready in twenty-eight seconds,” Wanda says, “Nobody needs me. You or even little old Delores could run the house and all, it’s so easy” (149). Here, a familiar strand of critique meets a less familiar one. The familiar part indicates that the dullness of mass culture, the standardization of taste, best reflected by the television, as well as the M-17 house, complete with furniture, have degraded experience. The novelty lies in this casting this degradation as prohibiting useful, maintainive, activity; Vonnegut has taken typically masculine concerns about control over the process of work and applied them to female domestic labor. Still, in Wilson’s suburbs, men do housework
and childcare. This possibility isn’t even on the radar In Vonnegut’s future. As the one of the revolutionaries puts it, “We [must] get back to basic values, basic virtues!.... Men doing men’s work, women doing women’s work” (268). Household technology has stripped the domicile of useful work, for women.

The critique of automated household appliances as stripping away useful work rests on another assumption about technology, one with extremely widespread currency. Vonnegut follows the narrative that household “technology” has in fact lightened the domestic load. Reimaging the center of Keynesianism, the suburban home and its many appliances, as productive of maintenance provides the reverse view. This is the central claim of Ruth Schwartz Cowen’s 1983 history of home technology, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to The Microwave*. Cowen finds that the industrialization of the home brought not less, but more work for women. Cowen traces the pattern of technology-driven increases in housework for American women across two centuries, from agrarian homes with open hearths to late-twentieth-century suburbs. She finds that each new technology brought increased work, in terms of both time spent and range of tasks performed. This stems from rising expectations (of cleanliness, of multi-dish meals), from cleaning and servicing of more and more material objects in the home (oil lamps, toilets, refrigerators) and from replacement of work done by men with that by women (home delivery vs driving out for goods). The move from the open hearth to the cast iron stove, for example, meant less wood-chopping for men, and much more cooking for women as meals were no longer one-dish affairs, made in a single pot. Daily cleaning and monthly polishing of stoves and cookware fell to women (63). Manufactured cloth meant more time sewing, while the sewing machine, accompanied by a widespread move away from employed seamstresses, meant more clothes, more sewing, more washing. As Cowen points
out, “prior to industrialization, much of the clothing people wore was virtually unwashable: the woven woolen goods, the alpacas and felts and leathers… were cleaned by brushing” (65). While she doesn’t dismiss the value of rising standards of cleanliness, she finds “there is no question that [they] altered the pattern of women’s household labor for the worse” (65). Even the impact on health is less clear than expected: as Cowen points out, nineteenth-century American women were not noted for their health. By the mid-twentieth century, increasing diagnoses of depression accompanied daily use of laundry machines, constant shopping, and an ad-based image of the house as sparkling clean.

Women’s home upkeep also increased through a twentieth-century technology not necessarily considered part of house’s tool kit—the automobile. As Cowen puts it “you cannot consume frozen T.V. dinners or acrylic knit sweaters or aspirin or a pediatrician’s services unless you can get to them, or unless someone is willing to deliver them to your door” (79). Before the car, in both rural and urban places, delivery was the norm, and was provided mostly by men, whether they were doctors making house calls, husbands taking the buggy to town, parcel-laden store delivery boys, or those employed in mail-order catalog supply chains. Cars, and the post-WWII suburbanization they enabled, put most of this work into the hands of women. Of the two male novelists discussed in this chapter, Wilson actually scores better at showing this, as Betsy, just as much as Tom, finds herself “dragging from day to day.” Meanwhile Vonnegut’s housewives—Wanda, as well as Paul’s upper class wife, Anita—sit idly next to washing machines, watching soaps. 56

At the heart of Cowen’s claim is a wider one, fully subversive to labor-saving ideas about technologies and the lifestyles which surround them, and yet one which is obvious: more technology means more work, often in the form maintenance. And not just repair: it is when they
are working that the washing machine and the car produce the most amount of upkeep. *Player Piano* does not anticipate this.

**“Real Work” and the Maintenance Hero**

For Vonnegut deprivation, not proliferation, of “useful” work in the face of automation forms the novel’s primary dystopian aspect—the “pattern taken from contemporary society [which] is materialized, as a whole, in another time or place” by the speculative fiction writer, as Williams puts it (45). Vonnegut’s novel, like Wilson’s, begins with ennui and discontent, but views it coming from the exact opposite direction; from being freed from what Vonnegut calls “useful work,” a category composed by industrial production jobs, male-dominated services such as barbering and bartending, by repair of machines, and by female domestic labor. In longing for these forms of maintenance, he anticipates Matthew Crawford’s concerns about a world without need for hands. Vonnegut’s future has significant differences from the globalized, information economy against which Crawford writes in 2009 (most notably that production stays in the Northeast US, and generates a robust welfare state). Yet he criticizes the same thing as Crawford, namely that automation and high-technology have relieved people of good work. The novel asks the same question: “What are the attractions of being disburdened of involvement with our own stuff” (Crawford 7). As such the novel presents maintenance in a positive light, though one imbued with nostalgia.

This can be seen in the way Paul make a hobby of upkeep. He has saved from redevelopment a part of the Illium works which was “the original machine shop set up by Edison in 1886” (7). The building “was a vote of confidence from the past… where the past admitted how humble and shoddy it had been, where one could look from the old to the new and see that
mankind had really come a long way” (6). That the march of progress can be visualized in the building is important, since Paul, and Vonnegut, have doubts about the value of the whole industrialization/automation project. This is clear in other part of the building’s appeal, nostalgic escapism, which registers in terms of “small” maintenance. Paul, dreaming of a simpler era, gazes into a photo of the factory from the late nineteenth century, in which “the pride in strength and important mystery showed no less in the eyes of the sweepers than in those of the machinists and inspectors, and in those of the foreman, who was alone without a lunchbox” (7). While the automation of mental work appears, at first, as Player Piano’s foremost speculative plot element and as the novel’s object of concern, Vonnegut’s critique of eviscerated work often focuses on basic maintenance jobs and tasks, including those around production, as the quote above shows. Immediately after the line above about pride in the “eyes of the sweepers,” Paul’s nostalgic daydream is interrupted “as the sweeping machine rattled by on its rails, whooshing up a cloud of dust with spinning brooms” (7). The proud sweeper of the past is directly juxtaposed with his “snatching, flashing, crashing, shrieking” automated replacement; clearly neither the pride of the workers nor the quiet dignity of “participation in important and moving rites” make the switch to automation (11).

Throughout, maintenance tracks with good, real, useful work. This becomes especially clear with a un-named Reek and Wreck (the one who repairs the Orange-O machine at the novel’s end) who fixes the fuel pump on Paul’s car, “a cheap and old Plymouth” to which Paul is devoted for reasons neither he nor his wife understand (the manifesto of revolutionaries explains the appeal: “there must be virtue in imperfection, for Man is imperfect…. [T]here must be virtue in inefficiency, for Man is inefficient”) (21, 271). When the car breaks down next to “a squad from the Reclamation and Reconstruction Corps, putting in a spruce windbreak to the north of
the [manager’ and engineers’] clubhouse,” the devalued men of Vonnegut’s future respond like Pavlov’s dogs: “Tools being laid against the side of the car made a clattering noise, and a half dozen Reeks and Wrecks stuck their heads under the hood with [Paul]” (62). They assess: “‘It’s his plugs’ said a small, bright-eyed, Italian looking man. ‘Aaaaaaaah, in a pig’s ass it’s his plugs,’ said a tall, ruddy-faced man, the oldest of the group…. He went to work on the fuel pump, soon had the top off of it…. ‘there’s your trouble. Sucking air” (62).57 “[W]ith an expression of satisfaction,” he cuts a gasket for the fuel pump from the sweatband of his hat, while “the others watched eagerly, handed him tools, or offered to hand him tools, and tried to get into the operation wherever they could. One man scraped the green and white crystals from a battery connection. Another one went around tightening the valve caps on the tires” (63). The motor fires up again, and when Paul offers ten dollars to the tall man, he takes only five, saying “First money I’ve earned in years,” the implication being that fixing a fuel pump is real work, while planting a wind break, like other tasks of the R & R are not (63).

Julian Orr, studying Xerox repair technicians in the 1990s, addresses this two-sidedness of maintenance, positioning it as “real” work, like Crawford, even as he presents the alienated labor version I earlier associated with Vinsel and Russell—in fact, he neatly bridges the two. Like Crawford, he finds that the techs viewed their work as real, unlike that of the corporate drones they work around. As Orr notes, also setting maintenance against office work, the techs are only tangentially integrated into the corporation itself.58 He writes that maintenance work “shares few cultural values with the corporation” because maintainers “are focused on the work, not the organization” (77, 76). They feel the average corporate job “entails losing touch with the real world of service, [and means] trading a real job for headaches” (67). But, due to the nature of repair, “technicians have a certain autonomy in scheduling…. [and] have to think for
themselves in solving some problems” (160). While partial, and problematized by the “existential dilemma at the heart of service: the technicians are responsible in a world in which they have very little control,” the Xerox repairmen, performing their “real” work, would “rather remain a technician-hero than become an organization manager” (76, 77). This technician hero is a maintenance worker who can fix machines.

Displaying the same values Vonnegut views in the repair of machines, Orr outlines this maintenance hero. At least partially marginalized, this figure’s heroism involves a specific form of maintenance: repair. Orr writes that

the real benefit of this situation for the technician is that they are needed. Their errand is one of rescue, and this uncertain, perilous world [of unpredictable service] affords the opportunity for heroism of a sort. In this context, the ‘technician’ is defined as someone who fixes the world and makes it right, and the technicians …. [v]alue their job both for the challenge of the work and for the identity as hero” (160).

Repair lies at the intersection of the exceptional and the mundane, the creative and the quotidian, combining response to out-of-the-ordinary (if not entirely unexpected) breakdown with mundane and predictable tasks. If designing a machine is exceptional work, and putting gas in its tank is mundane service, repairing the fuel pump lies between the two. The concept of a service or maintenance “hero” is a fascinating one, seeming to combine ethics of care and attention to the mundane, with masculine aspects of competition, greatness, and success.

There is however a fundamental difference between Vonnegut’s dystopia and Orr’s ethnography regarding this figure, and machine maintenance more generally: Vonnegut’s America is plagued by automatic machines that have made competent men, like the ruddy faced man, anachronistic and useless, barring a chance encounter with Paul’s equally anachronistic car. Like Cowen, Orr shows that the exact opposite has, or at least had, into the 1990s, occurred. The proliferation of automatic copying machines created the need for the technicians, rather than
eliminated it, just as the proliferation of cars gave rise to an automotive service sector. This forms the basis of Crawford’s claim that service (of machines and mechanical systems) is good work, and relatively safe from outsourcing. For him, leisure objects such as motorcycles (a product of Illium which Vonnegut explicitly mentions) as well as plumbing, electrical and other systems seemingly more rooted in the “useful” realm, require, and create, decent jobs, less subject to the degradations and alienation of mass production. Why? Because, even in a globalized economy where production has been off-shored, “if you need a deck built or your car fixed, the Chinese are of no help. Because they are in China” (3). This is not completely true, as a good deal of both car repair and deck construction indeed come from a global labor force (i.e.: power and hand tools, nails and screws, lumber itself, not to mention the exploitation of immigrant labor in the US); still, he has a point—these things create and recreate decent, on-site work. In any case, maintenance is very much with us. Vonnegut is somewhat unclear about this question of maintenance and repair as anachronistic: while the technology proliferating in the background of Illium’s larger society seems not to require much service (yielding bars full of competent men with nothing to do), he creates a number of moments, such as the one above, in which a maintenance hero might step forward.

It is this person for whom Vonnegut’s bell tolls. As mentioned above, the novel ends with the same ruddy-faced man repairing an “Orange-O” soda machine, broken during the revolution. Vonnegut writes, “the man had been desperately unhappy then [with the Reeks and Wrecks]. Now he was proud and smiling because his hands were busy doing what they like to do best, Paul supposed—replacing men like himself with machines. He hooked up the lamp behind the Orange-O sign…. The people applauded and lined up” (303). In assuming that the man is replacing himself, Vonnegut follows the conflation of mass production and
service/repair/maintenance, well displayed by the use of the term ‘blue collar’ to describe both. Fantasies of robots aside, a complex assembly of parts like a vending machine is unlikely to be repaired by yet another machine, nor likely to never need service. The novel begins with the replacement of factory machinists by automatic lathes, indicative of the replacement of skilled manufacture with automated production. That this frees people from work, an idea upon which the plot depends, is historically inaccurate: automation of production is linked not with less labor, but more labor; machines in the productive sphere deskill the work force, and by increasing its relative productivity, lead to greater exploitation, on a global scale, though this certainly creates redundant populations as well. In addition to this fallacy, Vonnegut’s dystopia also links—and doesn’t differentiate—the use of automation in production with automation in service. What destroys service jobs aren’t machines per se, but global production—the Xerox repair men, for example, were not replaced by machines that could repair copiers, but by the cheapening of copiers enabled by globalization, often intersecting with a combination of componentization and self-service, allowing repairs to consist of swapping pre-packaged parts, as well as more basic moves toward disposability.

_Utopia, Dystopia and Social Maintenance_

By drawing dystopian and suburban literature together, I want to make use of, an expanded definition of maintenance and upkeep; I want to speak of “social maintenance.” In the remaining pages, I will explore this in two ways: through a reversal of upkeep which positions elites as maintainers of society as a whole, and in terms of concerns about complex systems of provision (such as markets) beyond individual control. I’m going to address the latter first,
though ultimately they are related: a vision of a complex order beyond individual comprehension provides a space for men to act.

The ways these come together can be seen a number of episodes of Star Trek, as well as other mid-century Sci-Fi, which feature a god-like computer, or other intelligence, which must be destroyed. Gerry Canavan notes the prevalence of “god-computers” in twentieth century Sci-Fi, found Asimov and Dick, *The Terminator* films, and Vonnegut’s *Player Piano* (700). He suggests this indicates anxieties toward two forms of large economic systems beyond individual control, free-market liberalism and soviet-style planned economies. He writes “Taken all together we find these systems of information exchange (both ‘planned’/built/Soviet and ‘unplanned’/emergent/ Hayekian) overwhelmingly allegorized as deeply threatening superintelligences” (700). Both manifest an image of a massively complex order which structures human life yet cannot be controlled, or even understood, by human beings. He explains that both of “these visions of autonomous, agential economies,” each posit an intelligence—one threatening, one distinctly less so—which emerge from myriad complex interactions (700). To demonstrate the way US popular culture reacts to the concern with communism, Caravan provides a reading a 1967 episode of *Star Trek* in which Kirk and the Enterprise encounter an Eden-like alien society in which people neither age nor die, and in which all needs and wants are fulfilled by a god-like computer. Kirk, of course, heroically “destroys the planetary god-computer that has organized all aspects of this society” (Canavan 687). The god-machine narrative provides criticism of central planning, allowing an exceptional man to destroy the (feminized) computer for the sake of freedom and creativity. As Canavan puts it, “Hayek could well have quoted from [the episode] when he warns, in his own 1967 *Studies in Philosophy, Politics and Economics*, that “If the human intellect is allowed to impose a
preconceived pattern on society. . . . than we must not be surprised if society, as such, ceases to function as a creative force” (688). In this, as mentioned earlier, Hayek reveals himself a dystopian writer, one who also imagines the erosion of a world in which men are free to act. He writes that “the preferred position of the majority of the population” is to be employed in a childlike way—no big responsibilities, no risk—and that this group “wish[es] to have some higher tutelary power watch over the directing activities which they do not understand but on which their livelihood depends” In this, worlds of too much order serve as a backdrop for messianic men. The move is a double one: cast the masses as dependent, incapable of seeing from whence their freedom comes in order to justify the role of men with power and wealth, upon whom the well being of society depends (188). That this is an issue of upkeep is clear in this redirection of dependence. (189).

Ironically enough, in taking the idea that machines will replace labor seriously, Vonnegut actually follows a line of thinking he critiques, being theorized contemporaneously with these novels, that “big” men not only lead the way, but are doing everyone else a service. Of “the employed,” Hayek, for example, writes that “it is often not easy for them to see that their freedom depends on others being able to make decisions which are not immediately relevant to their whole manner of life” (Liberty 185). The creation of dependency, as the countermove of creating independence, allows those most dependent on the work of others to be reimagined as themselves maintainers.

This idea is one of Vonnegut’s foremost targets, interrogated repeatedly in the novel with the mantra of the managers and engineers, as “open[ing] doors at the head of the procession of civilization” (114). Vonnegut uses this critical trope, elite workers as “doormen,” throughout Player Piano. With this, Vonnegut critiques neoliberalism even as it is first being theorized, and
does so specifically in terms of upkeep and maintenance. This can be seen not only in the repeated doorman language, but in the novel’s text-in-a-text, a play put on at a corporate retreat. In this maintenance is made a central trope. The play starts with “The Sky Manager” sitting “atop a an extraordinarily high ladder…. Look[ing] wise, just, and tired by responsibility. In one hand he holds a large dust cloth” (188). The play begins with him dusting a line of stars hung on “a loop of wire, passing like a clothsline” over him: the stars, which he both dusts and then drops, are labeled “Rugged Individualism, Socialism, Free Enterprise, Communism, Fascism [and Labor Unionism]” most of which have fallen to the floor (189). In the process of dusting a star “with the image of the oak, the symbol of the organization,” the star of corporatization, a Young Engineer and a Radical enter. A trial of elite-driven technological/bureaucratic progress ensues, allowing the concept of technological process and innovation to be judged against leftism. A corporate propaganda event, the trial is decided (against the Radical), when another character, John Averageman is found to have a much better life—full of radar ranges and leisure time—since labor unionism was dropped in favor of the corporation (193). Fireworks go off, and the audience of drunken, boyish white collar men cheer. In the voice of Paul, Vonnegut satirizes this suggesting the technology-progress bundle is really “Slamming doors in everybody’s face” (251). He calls the doorman ideology a “snow job,” linking it to marketing that makes it seem like “managers and engineers had given America everything: forests, rivers, minerals, mountains, oil—the works (251, 81). Vonnegut’s play, as well as the doorman language, skewers this basic economic myth.

Yet, like Wilson, he introduces his protagonist, Paul Proteus, as a man upon whom much depends, a man amid many objects of upkeep—many more in fact than hem-in Tom Rath. As manager of an automatic production facility in upstate New York, Paul is “The most important,
brilliant person in Illium,” responsible for the production of “parts for baby carriages and bottle caps, motorcycles and refrigerators, television sets and tricycles—the fruits of peace” (3). As such he is responsible for both the products themselves and, through them, the peace and progress brought by consumer capitalism, a combination which was becoming very familiar to an audience in the early 1950s. This idea can also be seen in *Gray Suit*. At the end, Tom decides “I don’t think I’m the kind of guy who should try to be a big executive,” a realization which would seem at odds with corporate advancement, as well as the perpetual aspiration it entails (251). His boss accepts the decision, but also has an outburst of anger which retreats into a hallmark of conservatism, the idea that big men are actually the base of the system:

> “*Somebody has to do the big jobs!*” [the boss, Hopkins] said passionately. “The world was built by men like me! To really do a job, you have to live it, body and soul! You people who just give half your mind to your work are *riding on our backs!*”
> “I know it,” Tom said.
> Almost immediately Hopkins regained control of himself…. “I think you’ve made a good decision. You don’t have to worry about being stuck with a foundation job all your life. I’ll be starting other projects. We need men like you—I guess we need a few men who keep a sense of proportion.”
> “Thanks,” Tom said. (252, original italics in the first instance, mine in the second)

So, while the novel supports Tom’s decision to turn away from aspiration and greatness toward domesticity and “proportion,” it yet perpetuates reversal of upkeep. Hopkins, like the judge Saul Bernstein, is at the base, and are actually the most used, and even victimized of all. Hopkins is a beast of burden, ridden by lesser men, and has sacrificed his family in the process; Bernstein, who doles out justice is made physically ill by giving up his life to such leadership. Both operate in the novel as helpers for Tom’s personal journey to contentment, delivering to the universalized man in the gray suit the contentment he has been seeking.

David Edgerton, and the *Maintainers* who draw on his work, navigate through this, reminding reader that “technology” is really just “things.” He does, however, address the fear of
too-complex technology. “The history of maintenance,” he writes, “provides some important insights into the question of discipline and order in relation to modern technology” (77).

Referencing the “great dystopian novels of the twentieth century” to introduce his “Maintenance” chapter, Edgerton writes that texts like *Nineteen Eighty-Four, Brave New World* and Zamyatin’s *We*, present “worlds of order without change, which have to be kept going” (75). Such fictional worlds are born from “one of the most enduring ideas about technology in the twentieth century… that the essentially human has been taken over by the artificial. Nightmares about the breakdown of the complex world of artifice that makes modern life possible propel deep concerns about the need for discipline, order and stability to keep the system going” (75).

Despite their tendency to excise the social for the individual, similar concerns inspire suburban novels: a breakdown of order, the “essentially human” taken over by the “artificial,” whether that artificialness adheres to corporate, suburban or commercial constructions, or all three.

On the one hand, Edgerton details the extent of maintenance required by complex technologies, such as airplanes and nuclear reactors, linking the need to not only maintain such things, but protect and enclose this maintenance, to authoritarianism, as well as professionalization. On the other hand, Edgerton’s primary angle into technology requires the use of scare-quotes: most forms, especially those most widely used, are actually very mundane.

He suggests much is to be gained if we consider constructed objects not as “technology” but as things. “Thinking about the use of things,” he writes, “rather than of technology, connects us directly with the world we know rather than the strange world in which ‘technology’ lives” (xvii). This position—the basic technologies keeping the social whole together—occupies a sort of middle ground between two utopic visions, one the perfectly ordered society, the other of
nostalgic escapism. Both have a central role Vonnegut’s novel; he is critical of both, but his assumptions about useful work hinder the vision Edgerton lays out.

Vonnegut’s dystopian future is not simply one of “technology,” but of automation, of technology which does stuff for you. Against this model, Vonnegut raises, and ultimately shuts down, the prospect of escaping to a simpler life, characterized by rugged individualism and direct upkeep of the family and the home, reimagined as both a cabin in the woods and a farm. As Leonard Mustazza writes, quoting Katherine Hume, “Vonnegut’s characters are continually in search of meaning in a shifting and bewildering universe. ‘They want stability and escape,’” which leads them to one of two versions of utopia (106). He writes that “the novel is… an exploration of the romantic urge to envision and create utopias—whether through technology or in dreams based in part on outdated models” (112) Finding the technology version damaging to people, “What Paul decides to do is make himself a little Eden,” by buying an anachronistic, non-automated farm, on which he can escape his ennui, a place “outside of society… a place for a man—a man and wife—to live heartily and blamelessly, naturally, by hands and wits” (106, 130 original emphasis). This purchase is an attempt to materialize an escapist dream, characterized by an idealization of basic, and highly sexualized work. In Paul’s fantasy, which leads to the farm purchase, his wife “was making soap, candles, and thick wool clothes for a hard winter ahead, and he, if they weren’t to starve, had to mold bullets and go shoot a bear” (98).

While heavily focused on immediate production, the idealized work is that of basic physical and home upkeep. Wilson’s novel also registers this impulse to escape to a simpler time or place, one characterized by direct upkeep of bodies and buildings. At Westport cocktail parties, Wilson describes drunk white-collar men “divulging dreams of escaping to an entirely different sort of life—to a dairy farm in Vermont, or to the management of a hotel in Florida” (109). These
utopias come together in suburbia—the utopia of perfect, technologically derived fulfillment: automatic, smooth-humming and maintenance-free. The other utopia is nostalgic, technology-free and simple, a retreat into a better past, often registered through the image of the independent farmer.

Perhaps because of the vegetation associated with the farm, as well as its location in the past, the naturalized setting of this latter, usually agrarian, utopia frequently registers as “Edenic,” which seems to me precisely the wrong word. The tech-free utopia of the farm (or the woods, mountains, desert island, etc) involves independence, individuals doing everything for themselves. People fulfilling their own needs, with their own two hands, is inherent to the image. The biblical Eden is free of such labor, as well as such need. An Eden in which God is the ultimate maintainer, delivering ripe fruit and free time to his subjects, might be closer, in terms of direct upkeep, to the technologically-enabled vision, in which people are freed of basic labor.

Freedom from labor via innovation and technology is the fallacy for which Vonnegut falls. While he need not have worried that basic hands-on labor would disappear in the face of new appliances, amid the rising living standards of Keynesianism, he might be forgiven for this belief.
Chapter 3

When Caretaking Goes Wrong:

Maintenance and the Horrific Corporation

in *The Shining*

This chapter argues that relationships between maintenance and aspiration play a key role in transforming the white, middle-class Jack Torrance from a progressive-minded family man to a monstrous corporate “agent.” This figure, both agent and caretaker models the mid-to-late twentieth-century version of the buffer-class, working against his own interests for the benefit of an American elite which combines aspects of late-nineteenth century proprietary entrepreneurship with the diffused responsibility of corporatization. Over the course of *The Shining*, responsibility for his family’s upkeep transforms, amid seductive exposure to racial and sexual privileges, to responsibility for the upkeep of a profit-seeking, misogynistic, racist American corporate enterprise. In this, King shows maintenance playing a historical role in the development of what Theodore Allen calls the buffer class, which, based on the same exposure to the seductions of racial and sexual privileges around the concept of whiteness, forgoes alliance with the rest of the working class, and become instead the caretakers of capitalist power. While Allen focuses upon early American history, the historical formations and re-formations of this layer to which whiteness is extended, highly relevant to the Trump-era in which I write, is tied to maintenance of property, from yeomanry, to family farms, to the starter home to that of corporate enterprise, and indeed, to the property of whiteness itself. 59
Upkeep and Whiteness in Allen’s Buffer Class

Theodore Allen’s *The Invention of the White Race Volume II* looks at the historical development of the white lower-middle class as protective “buffer” between upper classes and working classes. In tracing the origin of this buffer class in the history of capitalism, Allen’s preliminary question, ahead of looking at the particularly American formation of this class, is how was a laboring class constructed in the wake of English feudalism, and how was it kept up in the face of peasants fighting to keep “their place on the land, and in it” (15). Victory came to the elite, Allen writes, “by deliberately fostering a lower-middle-class stratum which would be of sufficient number to stand steadfast between the gentry and the peasants and laborers” (17). This project is tied up with ownership and care of property in a number of ways. Of the legal procedures which developed this buffer stratum, Francis Bacon writes in 1625:

> Another statute was made for the . . . soldiery and militar[y] forces of the realm . . . That all houses of husbandry, that were used with twenty acres of ground and upwards, should be maintained and kept up for ever…. This did wonderfully concern the might and mannerhood of the kingdom, to have farms of a standard, sufficient to maintain an able body out of penury, and did in effect amortise a great part of the lands of the kingdom unto the hold and occupation of the yeomanry or middle people, of a condition between gentlemen and cottagers or peasants. (Allen 18)

As the feudal order melted into air, an elite was able to control the landless population by titling “a middle people” with land. The buffer class is not, Allen finds, “an economic necessity but rather a first derivative of the economic necessities: a political necessity for the maintenance of bourgeois social control” (18). This group, extended the privilege of remaining self-sufficient and owning property, was organized to administer control of the laboring population, now freed from both.60
The second question Allen asks of this, is, what happens when English capitalism goes to Virginia? While noting that racially-based chattel-slavery only came after (Nathanial) Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676, Allen argues that the first twenty years of English colonization of Virginia laid groundwork the eventual categorization of race, once high tobacco brought privatized plantations. In this period a hierarchical class system developed, a system which divided workers into two groups, hinging on maintenance: one group was skilled workers who “maintayne themselves” while the other is general laborers “fed and clothed out of the [common] store” (Rolfe qtd by Allen 55). After an early, more racially-egalitarian period, Bacon’s Rebellion generated new fear of racial class alliance, as “in their solidarity with the African-American bond-laborers… the laboring-class European-American bond-laborers had demonstrated their understanding of their interests,” which did not lie with the monoculture system (248). What, Allen asks, “would exorcize the ghost of Bacon’s Rebellion? How was laboring-class solidarity to be undone?” (248). While there was little opportunity in this system for white laborers to reach the status of yeoman, who held title to property, the solution was yet aspirational, following Francis Bacon’s suggestion that it is a “sign of wise government… [to] hold men’s hearts by hopes, when it cannot by satisfaction” (248). Ultimately generating a host of “white-skin privilege laws,” laboring whites were extended the property of whiteness (248). Whiteness provided larger systemic upkeep, joining aspiration towards yeomanry with the fomentation of racial animosity. Allen writes the “stability of a system of capitalist agriculture… depended on the ability of the ruling elite to induce the non “yeoman” European-Americans to settle for this counterfeit of social mobility. The solution was to establish a new birthright not only for Anglos but for every Euro-American, the ‘white’ identify that ‘set them at a distance’” from African
Americans (248). The success of this strategy cannot be overstated, perpetuated as it has been well beyond slavery.

Written as a new conservatism was forming in the wake of the progressive gains of the 1960s and early 1970s, King’s novel, aimed at critiquing the rise of a new version of “monoculture,” namely corporatization, displays the late-twentieth century permutation of this bundle of counterfeit mobility, aspiration, property and race. With the Overlook hotel, a structure both corporate and domestic, set on a mountaintop and filled with misogynist and racists ghosts of various American histories, King constructs an extraordinary symbol of late 70s US culture. And he makes Jack Torrance, downwardly mobile family man and aspiring writer, its caretaker.

Race, the Corporation and the Monster in The Shining

At the end of the 1977 bestseller, Jack smashes away his face to reveal, in fine Stephen King fashion, a monster. The scene is wonderful for its gore: “Blood splattered across the wallpaper. Shards of bone leaped into the air like broken piano keys” (634). Watching, Jack’s son Danny sees “his father was gone forever. What remained of the face became a strange, shifting composite, many faces mixed imperfectly into one” (634). Jack’s humanity shatters away, completing a transition in progress throughout the novel: like previous caretaker and brother-in-familicide, Delbert Grady, Jack becomes an “agent” of the hotel—one seduced with the possibility of rising “in the Overlook’s organizational structure. Perhaps… to the very top” (520). Calling it “it,” and “the thing,” King reveals at the novel’s climax the real name of the inhuman creature that has replaced Jack: he’s become “the manager” (634, 639).

In King’s novel, a top-level position in an “organizational structure” such as the Overlook brings loss of family, morality and humanity—the manager and the good father cannot coexist.
Jack’s original caretaker job, however, entails no such dehumanization. In fact, King puts maintenance and management into opposition, using the former to show the latter as both evil and inept. At the moment of Jack’s final transformation (or promotion), the monster-manager forgets the most important task for which Torrance was hired: releasing pressure from the hotel’s decrepit boiler. No longer a “caretaker,” such carelessness for maintenance characterizes management throughout King’s novel. His other, non-supernatural executive, Stewart Ullman, makes clear in the novel’s opening interview scene “that as manager he did not concern himself with such mundane aspects of the Overlook’s operation as the boiler and plumbing” (6). Instead, he writes a note and drops it authoritatively into an out-basket on his desk—a move Jack likens to “a magician’s trick” (6). His own hands will not be touching the boiler, but the hotel’s “hands” will. Similarly, when Danny reminds the monster-manager of the boiler, a combined “manager/caretaker” responds, but in the actual task it puts only “its Jack Torrance hands on the valve, unmindful of the burning smell which arose, or the searing of the flesh as the red-hot wheel sank in” (639). The act comes too late; unmaintained, the boiler explodes, destroying both the hotel and it’s employee while allowing the good guys, Danny, Wendy and hotel cook Dick Hallorann, to escape. In both “real” and supernatural guise, the hotel’s managing powers appear inhuman (and incompetent) through their disregard for maintenance. Conversely, as I will discuss below, the work of maintenance tracks with humanization: the good side of Jack registers via his role as a caretaker. This role, however, puts him into a position of responsibility to the Overlook, which is where the trouble lies, for workers in both the office and the basement.

Written at a post-60s, pre-Reagan moment, *The Shining* captures the anxieties of the white middle class amid the transition from Keynesianism to neoliberalism. It follows Jack on an economically downward course. Fired from his teaching job and struggling with his writing
career, he takes part-time work, the disgrace of which is mitigated by the sexual, racial and (ostensible) economic entitlements offered by the Overlook hotel. As such, the novel centers on regression to a set of patriarchal ideals, stored in the Overlook’s corporate-capitalist history, represented by its population of ghosts. This is well displayed by Jack’s already-seduced double, Grady, who, dressed as a butler at an upper-class, 1920-era party, tells him: “A man who cannot control his family holds very little interest for our manager. A man who cannot guide the courses of his own wife and son can hardly be expected to guide himself, let alone assume a position of responsibility in an operation of this magnitude” (521). The admonishment comes because Danny “is attempting to bring an outside party [to the Overlook for help]…. a nigger cook” (519). Voiced by Grady, the Overlook is both misogynistic and racist; by locating such tenancies in an organization, King captures the structural function of patriarchal ideology, through which a previously broad-minded figure such as Jack becomes an agent of corporate power. As critic John Lutz puts it, “Jack is offered admission to the ranks of the ruling class if he adopts the managerial/paternalistic standpoint intended to keep women, nonwhites, and unruly children in their place” (172). Hired to maintain a building—a job taken to support his family—Jack ends up, as he is drawn toward management, maintaining a set of values which privilege power over others. The cost, as King makes clear in the face-smashing scene, is his humanity.

The role of the family—and its relationship to the “admission” Lutz notes—is two-sided. On one hand, “the novel establishes continuity between the private world of domestic abuse and the public world of corporate power,” thus making the family a microcosmic arena for dominance (Lutz 167). On the other hand, corporate Overlook is literally anti-family: Jack must destroy them to gain his admission. As critic Burton Hatlen puts it, “while The Shining presents the nuclear family as fatally flawed, the novel also, paradoxically, sees the family as the focus of
all human hope. In effect the novel destroys and then recreates the family, as a new “redeemed,” non-patriarchal family emerges out of the fire. The key to this process is, of course, Hallorann” (96). King bestows upon his black hero some unfortunate tropes: for no obvious reason Hallorann is constructed as too old for the widowed Wendy at the novel’s close, one in a long line of wise, old black characters guiding young white ones. He gives off what Hatlen calls “more than a slight whiff of Uncle Tomism. (97). For King his race is symbolic: “Simply because he is black, he is….f]ree of any requirement to assume the patriarchal role, to have a ‘manly’ occupation, to become masterful and responsible, he is free to become the universal, androgenous nurturer” (97). As such, Hallorann inverts Jack’s relationship between work and family. While for Jack power over the family goes hand-in-hand with corporate aspiration, Hallorann’s nurturing quality tracks to a non-aspirational stance toward his job. Like Jack, he’s an employee of the hotel, but avoids complicity with authority. King characterizes him as an employee who “didn’t conform to Wendy’s idea of the typical resort kitchen personage at all. To begin with, such a personage was called a chef, nothing so mundane as a cook” (100). Lacking pretensions, associated with the mundane, Halloran is yet the head of the kitchen, and makes sure Wendy knows to “keep it clean, that’s all I ask” (102). Importantly, his role as head of the kitchen involves providing for others, displayed in both novel and film as he walks the Torrances through stocks of winter provisions meant to mitigate the dangers brought by the Overlook’s hubristic location. Notably, Hallorann and Danny first connect telepathically during this scene in the kitchen, the former showing himself to be someone Danny can trust for help. He has authority, but neither identifies with it, nor exaggerates it, a position from which he can care for the family in a way Jack cannot.
Jack and the Work of Maintenance

As King’s caretaker increasingly associates with the power structure of hotel, he becomes—in the novel’s central irony—distinctly less careful, for both the physical building and his family. He rages about responsibilities to the hotel as a reason for not bringing Danny down for medical care. He hangs out in the gold plated bar with the lingering ghosts of the rich and powerful. He becomes obsessed with writing a great book, sourced from records found in the basement—a type of insider access provided by the hotel. And, as the hotel lures him with such greatness, entitlement and authority, he forgets to check the boiler.

Apparently, forgetting the boiler is as endemic as murder at the Overlook hotel. “This is an old baby,” Watson, the maintenance man, tells Jack at the beginning of the novel, guiding him through the dark, cobwebby, and distinctly non-gold-plated basement, a setting which very much follows the allegorical uses described in chapter 1. It has “more patches on her than a pair of welfare overalls” (26). “Is there an automatic shutdown?” Jack asks. “No, there ain’t,” Watson tells him, “This was built before such things were required” (28). Why is it not updated? Because “you tell that fat little peckerwood Ullman, he drags out the account books and spends three hours showing how we can’t afford a new one until 1982” (27). At the Overlook, maintenance gets deferred against other priorities. The elevator, for example, described as “ornately scribed in copper and brass” inside, has on its underside a “grease clogged motor” and is, according to Watson, “a bitch to keep running… I know Ullman’s buying the state elevator inspector a few fancy dinners to keep the repairman away from that fucker” (131). Throughout this scene, upkeep of the corporation—indicated by references to both its distant past and its future in far-away 1982—involves prioritization of profit against lack of attention to the mechanicals. So, while the hotel has been recently refurbished, the boiler gets patched. Plot-wise, this results in
danger for maintenance workers. Watson tells the new caretaker, “You got to check the press. If you forget, it’ll just creep and creep and like as not you an your fambly’ll wake up on the fuckin moon” (28). Thematically, the result is a critique of management based in its discounting of, yet dependence on, maintainive work. Much the way Kubrick uses the famous “all work and no play,” line, King uses “creeping pressure” throughout the novel to signal the dangers posed by responsibility to the mundane, the domestic, the repetitive. But, by repeatedly balancing Jack’s aspirations against the mundane job of checking the boiler, King makes the work of maintenance not the problem, but the solution—dumping the pressure is Jack’s main quotidian task, and the act that keeps everyone, himself included, from blowing up. Here, King’s novel laments the devaluation of maintenance—of a building, of a family, of a care-oriented self, able to deal with mundane pressure—and points to the grand pretensions of the hotel as the source of such danger.

At the same time, the Overlook has been maintained, opening season after season. This perpetuality is a major theme. In King’s novel Jack wants to join the party of the rich and powerful, he wants, “to be one of them and live forever” (482). Kubrick’s revision displays this by closing with Jack immortalized in the photographic image of an endless party, while his body stays frozen outside in ice. While King, unlike Kubrick, destroys his hotel at the end, he lays the groundwork for Kubrick’s revision by setting an epilogue at a similar hotel, “buried in the Maine mountains” (653). Also indicative of perpetualization of the hotel’s horror, both versions frequently reference its progressive-era origins. In this focus on a larger structural upkeep, the story of a caretaker drawn into complicity with such an enterprise shows a different type of maintenance, one which both depends on the first and conditions its devaluation: the maintenance, in the mid-1970s, of a leisure-peddling, profit-oriented, American corporation, and
with it the upkeep of a number of older ideological structures—aspirational, patriarchal, individualistic.

Counter-posing the mundane work of maintaining actual buildings and family relationships with maintenance with corporatism, King’s novel represents work in a particular historic and economic context, namely the dawning era of neoliberalism from which the novel comes. While he fits lots of work and workers into his novel, the list—including bar-tenders, chambermaids, clerks, cooks, doctors, flight attendants, nurses, teachers and tow-truck drivers—is service-sector oriented. Set in this context, The Shining captures a post-industrial labor-scape, where the self-directed work of writing and the seasonal caretaking job suggest a level of informality and free-agency. Hierarchical organizations, however, loom over these workers: at his former prep-school teaching job, Jack faces a board of directors which may or may not rehire him. And at the Overlook, he joins a corporation with connections to the military, congress, presidents, organized crime, and a number of consumer enterprises. By making Jack’s alignment with such a structure the crux of his horror story, King’s novel examines the rationality that continues to bind individuals to large organizations in the era of neoliberalism.

In addition to The Shining, 1977 saw publication of Alfred Chandler’s The Visible Hand: The Managerial Revolution in American Business, which examines the development of the modern corporation. The same year also brought to English audiences Foucault’s Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison, which examines the “fabrication” of mass power through the arrangement of individuals by centralized institutional apparatuses, and is famous for provoking the disgust of college students at the prospect that we all live in an identity-forming prison. Both texts look at the way individuals are “incorporated” into a larger enterprise through the work they do. Chandler focuses on “the existence of a managerial hierarchy [a]s a defining
characteristic of the modern business enterprise,” one composed of top, middle, and lower managers, followed by “supervisors, foremen, and so forth” and, ultimately, laborers (7,3). And Foucault is concerned with “the training of useful forces” out of individual bodies, with the way “the individual is carefully fabricated” into larger organizations (217). In the context of a corporation, this “fabrication” involves work: working bodies compose the larger one—literally incorporating it. At the same time, work brings exposure to “binary division and branding,” a context of judgments such as failure/success, productive/unproductive, and—in Jack’s words—being either “top managerial timber” or a “custodial engineer—swamping out greyhound buses” (Foucault 199; King 565, 395). Such exposure pushes workers to assume responsibility for the corporate purpose, as ironically displayed in both film and novel by an increasingly homicidal Jack raging about “my responsibilities to the Overlook hotel.” These responsibilities manifest as an absurdly immoral reason for not leaving the hotel to care for his son and bind Jack to the organization that will ultimately kill him. In Foucault’s famous words, he “assumes responsibilities for the constraints of power… he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principal of his own subjection,” proving his worth through responsibility to his job (203).

By the end of the 1970s, Foucault’s own work shifted from industrial society to neoliberalism and focused less on centralized hierarchies than on decentralized modes of power in which the neoliberal economic man becomes an “entrepreneur of himself” (Biopolitics 226). A fundamental concern yet motivates these focuses: the way people are managed, are made subjects of and put to work for larger organizations. So, just as Foucault’s prison inmate “assumes responsibility for the constraints of power,” his neoliberal subject is a “worker [who] appears as a sort of enterprise for himself” but is yet “someone manageable…. Someone who is
eminently governable” (*Discipline* 203, *Biopolitics* 225, 270). The major difference between these models for Foucault lies in the reason people self-subject to management. In the panoptic model “continuous supervision… took into account the activity of the men, their skill, the way they set about their tasks, their promptness, their zeal, their behavior” (*Discipline* 174). In the neoliberal model, the worker-enterprise views work as a capital from which returns can be had, when it is put to use.

With Jack, King captures the neoliberal subject, one invested with human capital and who figures in the novel as “a sort of enterprise for himself” by proving value to a larger hierarchy. In addition to the way his friendship with hotel board member Al Shockley brings returns in the form of a job, Jack uses his education as a rationale for his suitability. After hearing that his predecessor happens to have gone crazy and killed his family with an ax, Jack asks “was he a high school graduate?” (12). He was not, Jack learns. He then explains that his own education provided “imaginative”-ness which will make him, unlike Grady, “less susceptible to the rigors, the loneliness” of the job (13). This pitch involves no claim to actual skill, just the ability to deal with the repetition and boredom of a job which, being low level and manual, will not occupy his mind. The humanities’ version of education factors here as a competitive advantage for boring work. King figures this job—its caricatures (or perhaps, monsterization) of both a typical industrial job (repetitive, boring work within a clear hierarchy) and a typical post-industrial one (self-directed, partially autonomous, blending of work and home)—as something that might inflict pain on and even destroy the human being who performs it. Totalizing, yet mindless, Jack's job requires a person capable of handling the pressure, everyday.
The problem King raises here hinges on responsibility. Looking at the erosion of both self-determination and collective responsibility in the face of neoliberalism, Wendy Brown’s recent *Undoing the Demos*, provides a useful way of looking at relationships between individuals and corporate organizations. Considering the Foucauldian term “governance” she writes:

Almost all scholars and definitions converge on the idea that governance signifies a transformation from governing through hierarchically organized command and control—in corporations, states, and nonprofit agencies alike—to governing that is networked, integrated, cooperative, partnered, disseminated, and at least partly self-organized…. [to] “governing without Government” (123)

As “governing without government” this plank of neoliberal rationality suggests that individual responsibility—in the context of hierarchical organization—involves slight of hand. As a method of governance, responsibility doesn’t come with the agency and autonomy that the word suggests. Indeed, “the administered condition of being responsibilized…departs from the domain of agency…. [and] signals a regime in which the singular capacity for responsibility is deployed to constitute and govern subjects and through which their conduct is organized and measured” (133, original emphasis). As the words ‘regime’ and ‘organize’ signal, a power structure still operates here, but, for Brown, “the powers orchestrating this process are nowhere in discursive sight, a disappearing act that is both generic to neoliberalism and particular to responsibilization” (133). Individuals, meanwhile, “appear as morally burdened agents. Through this bundling of agency and blame, the individual is doubly responsibilized”—for both itself and the larger organization (134). King problematizes responsibility to the corporation by plotting a double-bind: responsibility for the family brings Jack to seek work at the Overlook, while responsibility to the Overlook entails destruction of the family. Yet King also preforms the very bundling of agency and blame Brown describes, placing responsibility for navigating this problem on the individual. As critic Jonathan Davis points out, “a majority of King’s books place the central
protagonists in positions to follow their moral or immoral impulses” (42). This boils morality down to responsible choice on part of the individual. As Davis puts it, “In tune with capitalist ideology, Jack is willing to sacrifice it all in his pursuit to better himself” (82). Davis’s language reflects King’s shifting locus of fault: is capitalist ideology to blame, or Jack, playing to its tune?

Jack arrives at the site of horror with a number of responsibilities: the family breadwinner, he is a year or more sober, and plans to use the isolated job to continue to dry out; he wants to get his upwardly mobile life back, continue working on his writing, and return to teaching—all of which the text uses as the moral high-ground from which Jack falls. That this fall also involves responsibility suggests that Jack is responsible to the wrong structure: the corporation rather than the family. But the two are, of course, related—the need to support the latter leads to complicity with the former. Looking at the film, critic Frank Manchel picks up on this bind and rejects blaming Jack, arguing he is “the one person conditioned to believe that the best way to end chaos is by ‘legitimate’ force…. The one member of the nuclear family destroyed by the ghosts of the past and their insistence on maintaining traditional sex roles” (71). More victim than perpetrator, his “precarious economic situation, his troubled home life, and his ‘honorable’ responsibilities position him to be exploited by corporate interests” (72). For Manchel, Kubrick’s iteration of the family has much to do with this situation: he notes Wendy’s accusations, lack of support, and unforgiving nature, and asks “why couldn’t the family have shown more love and understanding of each other instead of such suspicion and disdain” (76). King’s Torrances, however, are close and his Wendy is supportive, yet Jack is still “seduced.” Blaming the family is less tenable for the novel, but Manchel’s focus on Jack’s “seduc[ion] by corporate interests” via “honorable responsibilities” is spot on. He writes, “by failing to scrutinize why Jack is seduced by false myths of success and patriarchal authoritarianism, we
ignore the appeal of such seductions and focus only on the symptoms” (70). In looking for blame, I suggest, first, the obvious choice: the hotel itself, which feeds on myths of success in both supernatural and operational ways. Such myths, in combination with Jack’s seemingly praise-worthy responsibilities—his need to support his family—generate the responsibilization Brown describes. But so too does the very status of bread-winner, which describes a smaller version of the same patriarchal order, male leadership over dependent women and children. In combination these make him an eminently viable candidate for the winter caretaker position.

 Nested Hierarchies and Maintenance at the Overlook

This job places Jack near the bottom of the hierarchy and at the same time, as the sole employee on site, near the top. His transformation to “manager/caretaker” in the novel’s climax is thus prefigured in its introductory interview scene. As Ullman tells Jack after bragging that his stewardship has brought black-ink to Overlook legers for the first time in years, “one reason the Overlook lost so much money [under past administrations] lies in the depreciation that occurs each winter. It shortens the profit margin a great deal” (9). From this rationale for Jack’s job, comes its description: “In order to cope with the problem, I’ve installed a full time winter-caretaker to run the boiler and to heat the different parts of the hotel on a daily rotating basis. To repair breakage as it occurs... so the elements can’t get a foothold. To be constantly alert to any and every contingency” (9). Jack’s job is maintenance—the maintenance of a luxury hotel, set on a mountainside. Such a setting bestows a degree of stature which makes the caretaker job far more appealing than what he sees as his alternatives: “shoveling out driveways… washing dishes…. pumping gas” (395). The tasks he’ll perform at the Overlook aren’t so distant from these, but, lacking the grandeur of the Overlook gig, register (for both Jack and readers) as
beneath him. The managerial side of this job, however, poses far more danger to the Torrances than manual, low-status work, which the novel generally displays positively.

While Kubrick’s version of Jack performs no maintenance work whatsoever, preferring to lie in bed, bang his ball against the wall, and type the same sentence again and again, in King’s novel, Jack does indeed work on the hotel. He runs the heat. He checks the boiler. He re-shingles the roof, and finds that “the work itself was soothing” (150). King shows him ripping up rotted shingles, and enjoying it, “yelling ‘Bombs away’ as he dropped them over the side” and “fe[eling] no real urge to hurry…. On the roof he felt at peace” (150). Much of this peace involves the view—but this is the point. The vantage, accessed only as a low-level care-taker, brings something deeply human. King shows his hands in the rotted top of the edifice, and shows him finding contentment, engaging work, and even, as he begins thinking about his writing during the work, intellectual stimulation.

This is not an isolated event: Jack not only works a lot, but thinks a lot about work. Trimming the animal-shaped topiary, he considers his work in a number of ways. King writes that as “Jack touched up the rabbit’s face” he was “working quickly, knowing that to stop and think when you were at this kind of a task usually meant making a mistake” (300). Not stopping to think means not getting too concerned about the shape of the rabbit’s head; Jack is thinking about the work he’s doing. And while a lot of it is characteristically negative, the substance of such work-inspired thoughts display traits readers are meant to view positively. For example, he finds the hedge-clipper hums in a “rather disgustingly metallic way that all battery-powered appliances seem to have,” a feeling I associate with memories of a flannel-clad grandfather (300). He considers the act of shaping the hedges, thinking “it had always seemed slightly perverted to him to clip and torture a plain old hedge into something that it wasn’t…. it was
grotesque” and then tells himself “you weren’t hired to philosophize, Torrance” (300, original italics). By showing the engaging processes of work, these moments contribute to an oft noted difference between King’s and Kubrick’s Jack Torrance: the former is a “complex character… going bad through temptation” while the latter is, in King’s words, “crazy as a shithouse rat… with the result that there’s no moral struggle” (Smith 187). The actual tasks of his work contribute to making him a recognizably human character, as does the content of these thoughts about work, which—viewing consumer appliances as annoying, topiary as silly, and his job as manual only, thank you—show him less than aligned with the aesthetic and operational priorities of the hotel, and those of consumerism in general.

But, these moments of work also show Jack losing his moral struggle as he connects with the hotel in increasingly dangerous ways. Tearing up rotted shingles on the roof, Jack gets stung by a wasp, ushering in one of King’s central metaphors. His stung character goes from “creature of the mind…to wailing ape in five easy seconds” and then swears a vendetta on the wasps (158). Similarly (and centrally to the plot) basement boiler-tending leads Jack to find piles of records which ignite his desire to write “a long book exploding out of this central place in a hundred directions,” a desire which ratchets up his connection to the dark powers of the hotel, whom offer insider-access if he does their family-destroying bidding (226). If this somewhat over-plotted connection to the hotel ends with a monster-manager choosing the corporation over the family, it starts with direct, physical maintenance of the hotel. For example, in the old newspapers attesting to the hotel’s boom and bust history, one story, headlined “FORMER GRAND HOTEL SINKING INTO DECAY” has decade-old photos which

[W]renched at Jack’s heart: the paint peeling, the lawn a bald and scabrous mess, windows broken by storms and stones….He promised himself he would take very good care of the place, very good care. It seemed before today he had never really understood
the breadth of his responsibility to the Overlook. It was almost like having a responsibility to history” (233).

Here, the novel points to danger in responsibility, danger in maintaining something which can sting you. Caring for an edifice like the Overlook—a hive of wasps, as it turns out—means working to keep up something that can alienate and dehumanize, even as such work of upkeep offers other possibilities: peace, family and contentment. King’s Jack wants to be a good husband and father. But, as I will discuss below, he also wants to be great, to be as high up as the Overlook itself, and such aspiration links him in greater degrees to the very corporate power structure he at first disdains. King, writing not too long after the era of Hemingway, conveys this desire for greatness with Jack’s literary career.

In terms of free-agency and hierarchy, Jack’s two jobs might be put on a scale with the self-determined work of writing at one end and the hierarchically-determined work of maintenance at the other. Being a writer, at least in popular imagination, means working for yourself and nothing but. Indeed it means your work goes into the world engraved with your name. The care-taker job, on the other hand, suggests anonymous, low-level placement within a much larger organization. Though the work of writing promises to get him back on track, repair the mistakes he’s made and help restore his teaching job, this work also figures Jack as “enterprise for himself.” A principal appeal of the Overlook job is the time it allows him to write. As such, Jack is working in order to work, a rather Foucauldian situation. What would seem a most self-directed type of work, ends up drawing Jack into to the Overlook’s power structure.

Jack wants to be a great writer, a desire King uses as a rationale for complicity with the Overlook, as the personal aspirations of authorship conflate with the status and entitlements of a top-level manager. Throughout his descent, King conflates the prospect of Jack’s book with the entitlements of the hotel. Not surprisingly, critical discussions of this tend to look for a way to let
writing off the hook. For example, Dickerson suggests that the problem occurs as “the artist loses control over his material…. [shown in] Jack Torrance divert[ing] his energy away from his play and toward the Overlook” (33). As such, “the figure of the writer is reduced to that of a cipher, the author who follows orders and records rather than the one who imagines and creates. The writer as caretaker rather than meaning-maker” (34). Typing away as I am, I don’t wish to slander the creative and fulfilling work that is writing, but, the image of the writer as independent meaning-maker in control of his subject is rather close to figures celebrated entrepreneurial magazines such as Forbes. The self-made-man, the captain of industry, the innovator each show the same weave of myths—control, imagination, self-direction—as the great author.

Rescuing writing from a role the novel’s depiction of downward moral spiral is difficult, as King’s murderous caretaker/writer continually connects personal elevation with authorship. As Davenport puts it, “having placed four short stories during graduate school, one in Esquire, Jack Torrance considers himself a writer of elite fiction” (312). As such, he is “encumbered by fantasies of being the figure of the misunderstood genius… [while] at the same time he hopes to curry public favor as the author… of a gangster-filled best seller” (311). While suggesting that Jack’s problem with writing involves charlatanism, Davenport pinpoints an interesting issue here: writers as genius-like and misunderstood, yet popular and successful. In both cases this involves attaching greatness, exceptionality, uniqueness—a departure from the everyday—to the figure of the author. This is probably the target of King’s inclusion of writing. He specifically undermines the genius-writer in his non-fictional On Writing, which insists the “job” is best approached as work. And, like caretaking, mundane work at that. Citing the familiar feeling among writers that “God, if only I were in the right writing environment, with the right understanding people, I just know I could be penning my masterpiece,” King suggests “routine
interruptions and distractions don’t much hurt a work in progress” (232). Why? Because “life isn’t a support system for art. It’s the other way around” (101). He suggests that, “Writing poems (or stories, or essays) has as much in common with sweeping the floors as with mythy moments of revelation” (65). Basically, writing is maintenance. Though “moments of revelation” have a role, of course, the routine aspects of the work that make writing similar to sweeping floors doesn’t get much attention, like maintenance work in general. And the other side, the Great author side, The Shining suggests, carries the same aspirational ideology that leads to the construction of luxury hotels on mountainsides.

The Overlook as Monstrous Corporation

The following traits describe ‘corporation’: limited liability of shareholders for damages or debts; nuanced and complex “cross-ownership” structures, such as holding companies, that obscure responsibility; “strictly regulated” roles for labor; and, through all of these, a high degree of “distance from the surrounding society” in terms of both legislative regulation and the public good (Newfield 65, 64). The Overlook checks all these boxes: from the first line of the novel in which Jack inwardly describes Ullman as an “officious little prick” while smiling outwardly in order to secure the menial job, King introduces a hierarchy of management and labor. The hotel is isolated from, and literally above, the community, yet also depends on the labor it provides. King explains:

[I]n the little town of Sidewinder, the hotel had a smelly reputation. Murder had been done up there. A bunch of hoods had run the place for a while, and cutthroat businessmen had run it for a while, too. And things had been done up at the old Overlook that never made the papers, because money had a way of talking. But the people in Sidewinder had a pretty good idea. Most of the hotel’s chambermaids came from here, and chambermaids see a lot. (592)
While suggesting chambermaids enjoy a good view of corporate reality, a knowledge not entirely subject to the power of money, (a point which extends the discussion of Lutie as a domestic in Chapter 1) the passage also reveals limited liability and a distance from society that allows labor to be taken from the community without oversight from it. In terms of responsibility, while Jack the caretaker and this chambermaid lack legal title to the hotel yet connect closely with it, the actual legal owner, Al Shockley, at no point in the novel comes near it, except via telephone (7).

In the corporate form, Chandler explains, “ownership became widely scattered”—a useful phrase as “scattered ownership” indicates the entitlement without responsibility enjoyed by actual owners, and the devolution of both entitlement and responsibility down the hierarchical chain. King’s novel depicts such scattered ownership operating at multiple levels: legal owners, managers, maintenance men.

Al is but the latest in a series of tangled owners and investors; as the piles of records Jack finds in “The Scrapbook” chapter show, the hotel changed hands repeatedly after its post-war rehabilitation by the Howard Hughes-esque figure Horace Derwent. The labyrinthine and piled-up content of the chapter mirrors the obscurities faced by someone trying to trace corporate ownership. King, in the voice of a reporter trying to do just that (a task taken up by Jack, sifting through the clippings) writes:

Derwent’s investments include natural gas, coal, hydroelectric power, and a land development company called Colorado Sunshine, Inc.… The most famous Derwent holding in Colorado, the Overlook hotel, has already been sold… [to] a California group of investors.… [who] had opened the hotel for two seasons, and then sold it to a Colorado group called Mountainview Resorts… [which] went bankrupt in 1957 amid charges of corruption, nest-feathering, and cheating the stockholders.” (232-3)

As ownership detours through failure after failure, through organized crime, a writer’s school, and a few more investment groups with “anonymous-sounding company name[s],” the same individuals, escaping bankruptcy and legal action, are just barely visible behind the scenes,
remaining in control, and perpetuating the Overlook’s existence (235). Such immortality—and its basis in replaceable labor, at both the chambermaid and managerial levels—also defines corporations.

Chandler makes interchangeability of the individual worker a major component in generating this immortality. He writes, “the hierarchies that came to manage the new multiunit enterprises had a permanence beyond that of any individual or group of individuals who worked in them” (8). Yet interchangeability brings with it trappings of boot-strap individualism because, “with the coming of the modern business enterprise, the businessman, for the first time, could conceive of a lifetime career involving a climb up the hierarchical ladder” (9). Hierarchically arranged offices, that is, allow opportunities for advancement; if the permanence of the form depends on replacement of individuals, it also depends on this climbing. Conjoining individuality and interchangeability, the immortality (and productivity/profitability) of a corporation depends on workers locating identity, aspiration, and individual success in service and responsibility.

When, at the novel’s climax, the monster-manager version of Jack rages at Danny, “Now you’ll find out who is the boss around here. You’ll see. It’s me they want. It’s me. Me. Me!,” the entitlement explicit in the term “boss” stems from the larger corporate power implicit in the word “they” (629). Counter-intuitively, “they” make Jack “boss.”

King’s novel includes a number of bosses who reveal the complex interplay of power and service, of ownership and management in the corporate form. First is Ullman. Unlike in Kubrick’s version, in which a well-coiffed Ullman welcomes Jack with handshakes and smiles, King’s Ullman—“a small, balding man in a banker’s suit”—makes clear he does not want to hire Jack (6). Knowing that Jack drank heavily and lost his last job, Ullman, tells him “there is nothing personal…. I only want what’s best for the Overlook” (14). So why hire him? Because
Jack’s old drinking buddy “Al Shockley is a powerful man with large interests in the Overlook…. He wants you hired. I will do so. But if I had been given a free hand in this matter, I would not have taken you on” (7). A hierarchy emerges here: through a one-way flow of information, Ullman has access to Jack’s shortcomings, and is, in turn, subject to commands from a higher will—a figure both managed and managing. Yet Jack’s personal relationship with Al trumps the flow of power. Against Ullman’s “officious” mien, Jack wins (3). Overall, the bureaucratic Ullman is an unsympathetic character who registers as mechanical and miserly—and as emasculated. Jack calls him “prissy,” Watson, “a fat fairy,” and Wendy—extending the image to bosses in general—“didn’t much care for Ullman or his officious, ostentatiously bustling manner. He was like every boss she ever had” (3, 28, 129). When made the butt of a joke during the family’s tour of the hotel, “they all laughed, even Danny, although he was not completely sure what the joke was, except that it had something to do with Mr. Ullman, who didn’t know everything after all” (110). Yet King also makes Ullman a source of fear, tip-toed around by underlings. Both a figure of power and an officious fool the novel delights in undercutting, Ullman reveals a familiar representation—seen from Starbuck to Seymour Skinner—of the person both in, and subject to, power. To criticize the nature and effect of such power, its top agents are either buffoonized, made mechanically rigid, and/or emasculated. For example, to characterize Jack’s transformation into the monster manager at the end, King alters Jack’s average-guy voice. Reminded by Danny about the boiler and impending explosion, “it” responds: “Oh no! That can’t be allowed! Certainly not!” (635). The monster, it turns out, sounds a lot like Ullman—“prissy” and “officious.” And, forgetting a basic act of Overlook-maintenance, it is also incompetent. Obsessed with control yet powerless without others to act
for him, King’s corporate managers are dependent, subservient, and soft—the opposite of the rugged individual.

Fundamentally, such individualism doesn’t easily fit with the corporate form, with replaceability, subjection to control from above and pre-determined lines of advancement. This may be what prompted Fredric Jameson to describe “the true Other [as] the bureaucrat or corporate figure who stands in late capitalism itself and now its global institutions” (“Studies” 50). This figure, the officious corporate man—well represented by Ullman—forwards a broader anxiety toward standardization and repetition. In addition to demonizing managers, the figures most representative of corporatization, as tyrannical robots over-dependent on competent underlings, a major strategy for assuaging this anxiety is to apply to the corporate form an image of rugged individualism. So, just as nostalgic “Made in the USA” campaigns attach a sense of craftsmanship to mass production, figures at the top of hierarchies often wear the garb of the self-made entrepreneur.

Built in the early twentieth century and maintained—ghosts and all—into the novel’s mid-70s present, King’s hotel models how the historical process of corporatization, in which individualistic enterprises of the Progressive era morphed into faceless mid-century corporations, depended upon preserving patriarchal ideals of the earlier form. According to historian Martin Sklar, “many corporations were themselves impregnated with attributes of the proprietary era—for example their being dominated by a strong personality” (15). Derwent fills this role: a profiteer of both war and peace, described as “a friend of royalty, presidents, and underworld kingpins… [as] the richest man in the world,” Derwent is a businessman, an inventor, and a socialite—a self-made-man who yet moves behind the various organizations he associates with. Compare this to the hotel’s original owner, none other than the grandfather of the current
maintenance man, Watson. According to Ullman, “it proved too much for Mr. Watson, and he sold it in 1915” (8). According to Hallorann, “There was money in that family, long ago…. [but] they couldn’t make it go…. They ended up getting took on as caretakers in the same hotel the old man had built” (109). So, while the proprietary-era owner fails and yet stays with the hotel—leaving his descendant to care for the neglected basement-located systems of the hotel—the corporate-era owner takes credit for rebuilding it, but never quite gets pinned down. While Watson works in the basement, the only trace of Derwent is his name flitting through the basement records—maybe owning the hotel, maybe selling it—and he seen only in the novel’s bar-room party scenes, at a distance. As Derwent’s Gatsby-esque parties show, the individualist ideal is not the only legacy of the Progressive era: images of upper class leisure culture radiate outward from the first decades of the twentieth-century. Jameson notes this “obsession with the last period in [American history] in which class consciousness is out in the open” and claims that “the motif of the manservant or valet expresses the desire for a vanished social hierarchy, which can no longer be gratified in the spurious multinational atmosphere in which Jack Nicholson is hired for a mere odd job by faceless organization men” (Shining 123). He’s writing about the film, but the appeal of pre-depression America which Kubrick displays so well, particularly in the Gold Ballroom scenes, comes straight from King’s novel.

The ideals of leisure class and of rugged individualism—already an improbable fit—include a third trend stemming from the Progressive era: corporatism itself. It is thus far from accidental that King chooses this period as an origin for his hotel, a point in time from which the horror has been perpetualized, through the hotel’s ability to reproduce its activities season after season. Historian Jackson Lears locates in the progressive era a new anxiety around the rise of the corporation, writing that “as daily life became more subject to the systematic demands of the
modern corporation, the quest for revitalization became a search for release from the predictable rhythms of the everyday” (1). The hotel, with its games and parties, its promises of sex and service—all of it located in the wilderness, on the edge of a mountain—represents an institution built for this release. That it’s littered with corpses in eveningwear suggest a high cost of such ideals. The role of patriarchal ideals in this reassertion cannot be over-emphasized. Lears writes that as “the increasingly systematic organization of work made the achievement of manliness at once more elusive and more urgent” a number of strategies allowed “the reassertion of white manliness against the enervating impact of a desk-bound existence” (94). These strategies include both the image of the self-made-man and of an entitled leisure class. Three-quarters of a century later, King shows that the reassertion of manliness in such forms still holds power.
Chapter 4

Shedding Stuff: Neoliberal Possessive Individualism and Housekeeping in

_Housekeeping_ and _The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up_

Using two texts that book-end the neoliberal era, Marilynne Robinson’s 1980 novel _Housekeeping_ and Marie Kondo’s 2014 self-help housekeeping guide _The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up_, this chapter will explore a surprising aspect of neoliberal possessive individualism, shedding stuff, as well as a less surprising one, devaluing the work of keeping house.61 In many ways detachment from material goods is old news: the liberal economic paradigm always included ambivalence between attachment to, and escape from, material possessions and the spaces in which they are kept. Defoe’s quintessential economic being, Robinson Crusoe, stockpiles one of the biggest larders in literature while aiming to leave it behind, to escape his confinement amid a bounty. Discontentment with possessions, as well as the mundane labor their upkeep requires, is also central to capitalism, which preys upon desire for and dissatisfaction with possessions in generating its structural forevermore. But, well represented by Locke’s acorn-gathering man, as well as Marx’s focus upon accumulation and the commodity form, both liberalism and capitalism tend to involve possession of stuff. _Homo Economicus_ is often described as the possessive individual. Yet a number of recent cultural phenomena allow the centrality of possession to capitalism to be called into question.

Neoliberalization—an advanced iteration of capitalism—frequently seeks, vis-à-vis “stuff,” a utopian weightlessness: fluid, virtual, easy, free. Uber makes car travel possible without the weight of ownership; electronic currency allows payment without the weight of
money. There is bounty amid weightlessness: digital music collections and library database holdings take up virtually no space, and can be accessed anywhere. Fluidity factors large: home values have long been important to American selfhood, but the neoliberal subject imagines the house transferring ceaselessly between physical and liquid form, a rising price tag, a credit fund, a place to live, and a place to leave (as a retirement asset), all at once. Looking at this via maintenance reveals ruse and paradox: behind sleek lives, a global infrastructure of labor and material powers everything, with coal, oil, water and labor generating the virtual world, including the one in which I write.

Despite all of this detachment, consumerism remains central to American culture. According to The Atlantic, Americans in 2017 spent twice as much on “goods such as jewelry, watches, luggage, books and phones” as they did in 2002, despite a population increase of 13% (Semuels). Driven in part by the ease of online shopping, the average American buys sixty-six garments per year, and returns almost none of them (Semuels). The average home size, meanwhile, grew by a quarter in two decades, while self-storage capacity has doubled (Semuels). This excess feeds back into shedding things: “The average American throws away… eighty-one pounds of clothes and textiles each year, five times more than in 1980;” despite the proliferation of donation centers, most of what is donated ends up in landfills (Semuels). With all of this buying and throwing away in the background, this chapter will explore how neoliberal possessive individualism has come to involve freedom from stuff, both materially and affectively.

A number of fields address the shedding of stuff. Looking at property law, Dave Fagundes points out that “owners maximize their welfare, not when they amass land and chattels and keep others away… but when they pursue the polar opposite strategies… sharing their
property, donating it to charity, or giving it away” (1361). He finds that “what increases owners’ subjective well-being is using their property to create social ties, to give it a meaningful cause, or just to get rid of it” (1361). Like Crusoe, this escape from too much stuff often entails a return to closer relationships with one’s things. Looking at digital self-representation, Kylie Cardell finds that the work of “careful self-curation” involves deleting photos and posts as much as selecting them. “Ours is an age seeking to forget,” she writes (502). Capitalizing upon “a contemporary subject adrift in everyday visual ephemera” various platforms such as Life:Captured, which sells hardbound photo albums, appeal “to broad contemporary anxieties about the ‘virtualness’ of digital lives [with]… a drive to the material” (506). Conservative in the idea that a stable self can be extracted, as well as generally positioning “women as the preservers and narrators of family stories,” such platforms offer a “panacea for the individual adrift and weightless” (506, 505). Looking at the “US Minimalist Movement,” Jason Rodriguez explores books and websites that draw on the stuff-shedding traditions of Zen Buddhism, Christianity and anti-consumerism, and practices such as “the small house movement, minimalist wardrobes, and minimalist child rearing practices” (290). Addressing Leo Babuta (“whose website Zen Habits… is one of the fifty most popular websites in the world”) Rodriguez find that the “heart of minimalist practice is encapsulated in two basic principles: (1) identify the essential, and (2) eliminate the rest” (287). As he points out, Marie Kondo, the Netflix-affiliated home-tidying guru who advises people to toss anything that doesn’t “spark joy,” follows this tradition. As the second half of this paper will discuss, these stuff-shedding responses to the legitimate problems of excessive possession have yet to mitigate the production of waste.

This chapter takes such ambiguities and explores them in terms of neoliberal response to confining aspects of mid-century American culture, particularly those involving housekeeping.
At stake is a question: should housekeeping itself be shed? A fundamental figure of Keynesianism is the consumer of excess, which means the Keynesian *homo economicus* is, or was, a keeper of many things. In many ways this remains, yet under neoliberalism it weds with a fundamental challenge to the permanence of things. Less a “discreet concept that projects specific ends and limitations,” neoliberalism is adaptable, fluid, and dynamic, and should be thought of not as a noun, but “should, instead, be transfigured into neoliberalization as a verb” (Izso 149). The process of neoliberalization entails fluidity, and idealizes it—a point which makes the work of keeping house, a rather viscous endeavor, a key component of neoliberalization, and a problematic one.

Keeping house means, on the one hand, attending to solid things, keeping them stable, usable, ordered. Yet it is also deeply gendered work long associated with women’s limitation to the home. In addition to its general tendency toward fluidity, neoliberalism, “names a historically specific economic and political reaction against Keynesianism” (Brown 21). Like liberalization against feudalism, neoliberalization reacts against mid-century economics and culture, thus it also reacts to the two strands of housekeeping described above, both of which involve a specific “Keynesian” stasis: mundane upkeep of lots of stuff and, in this upkeep, a confining sexual division of labor. The role of shedding and detaching from such aspects of housekeeping would seem to auger well for a more liberated culture. But they also drive a wedge between the neoliberal subject and economic activity. While critiques of neoliberalism theorize an individual with a surfeit of economic-mindedness, this depends upon eliding broader economic dependencies, especially, as Wendy Brown puts it “the gendered division of labor between the market and the household” (106, original emphasis). The shedding of material possessions thus rehearses this elision, allowing perpetuation of what Maria Mies calls “housewifization,” a
reference to modes of production based upon the often super-exploited labor of women in the global south—a mode directly responsible for cheapening commodities, and thus for the production of waste described above. As Mies puts it “people working in this so-called informal sector are like housewives…. [because] their labour is invisible” (16). Much of this labor is hidden in the commodity form, and clearly a growing interest in shedding material possessions has not mitigated it.

Housewifization refers to the deeply exploited labor of a feminized, flexibilized global proletariat. But what of the un-paid housework which lends it the name? Much of the “shedding” discussed in this chapter, especially the section on Robinson, involves abandoning the work of keeping house, and here, unlike housewifization, the judgment is less clear. As Mies explains, late-1960s feminism established “that housework under capitalism had been excluded per definition from the analysis of capitalism proper, and that this was the mechanism by which it became a ‘colony’ and a source for unregulated exploitation” (33). As Mies explains, such theorization raised the “domestic labor debate…. At the centre of which was the question whether Marx’s theory of value could be applied to domestic labor or not” (33). Mies quickly moves on from the dispute, calling “its contribution limited” due to its exclusion of non-European forms of non-waged work—an exclusion she addresses with the concept of housewifization. But the domestic labor dispute raised questions about housekeeping that remain open. Discussing this debate, Lise Vogel explains that it established “the notion that something called ‘domestic labor’ should be theorized” in Marxist terms. (152). Yet, while “seem[ing] initially to confirm, even legitimate, socialist feminists’ double commitment to women’s liberation and socialism” soon enough “a range of problems surfaced” (153). These problems, as Vogel explains, involved the “surprisingly elastic” uses of the concept of reproductive labor,
which “stretch[ed] from biological procreation to any kind of work that contributed to people’s
daily maintenance—whether it be paid or unpaid, in private households, in the market, or in the
workplace. Likewise, the meaning of the term domestic labor fluctuated. Did it refer simply to
housework? Or did it include childbearing and child care as well” (153). Like Vogel, Mies also
mentions a broader definitional problem in the domestic labor dispute, which ultimately
“challenged… the very definition of ‘work’ and ‘non-work’” (32). These definitional “problems”
stem from a larger question about housework, especially the unpaid type: is it always exploited?
As addressed in my reading of Kondo in the second half of this chapter, plenty of people find at
least some parts of housework satisfying, and even “joy”ful. So, is housework something to
liberate from? Or something that liberates? Or perhaps even something that should be liberated?

Such questions are difficult to pose through Marx’s labor theory of value, since this
framework necessarily approaches labor as exploitation. This is not to deny that expanding
“productive labor” beyond the work of the traditional Marxist proletariat is one of the most
important theoretical moves of the twentieth century. But another Marxist concept might also be
worth applying to housework: alienation. Feminism has, of course, addressed this question.
Michaela Di Leonardo, for example, poses it as she defines kin work, writing that kin work is, on
one hand, a “way in which men, the economy, and the state extract labor from women without a
fair return” while yet, on the other, a power-building, network-creating, care-giving form of
work undertaken by conscious actors who make family life satisfying (451). Still, few academic
discussions of housekeeping directly address its alternatively immiserating and satisfying
aspects. Such questions loom large in the following discussion of Robinson and are addressed
explicitly in the section on Kondo.
To look at housekeeping in terms of shedding reveals that neoliberalization draws upon two progressive responses to mid-twentieth century American domesticity, (anti)consumerist anxieties over excessive material goods, on the one hand, and, on the other, second-wave feminist critique of housekeeping as exploited, un-recompensed activity underwriting capitalist accumulation, as work from which women should liberate. Such appropriations in turn reveal the protean nature of neoliberalism itself, as well as the conservatism at its root. As Cory Robin puts it, “not only has the right reacted against the left, but in the course of conducting its reaction, it has consistently borrowed from the left” (30). An example of how neoliberalization borrows women’s liberation in terms of housekeeping is detailed by Maria Hinojosa who explains that in post-NAFTA Mexico, Coca-Cola, Wal-Mart and other processed-food makers and distributors flooded the nation under the banner of women’s independence. Cheap, processed food would get them out of the kitchen (“The NAFTA Diet”). These appropriations sanction deep regressions: not just devaluation of care work provided by women, but disappearance of such work from view.

Neoliberal possessive individualism ratchets up long-held contradictions around keeping and keeping up, because neoliberalism builds upon consumer capitalism, meaning more stuff. But the neoliberal subject is also wary of stuff, finding in excess a dearth that threatens self-possession, and autonomy. Written in 1980, Robinson’s Housekeeping anticipates this. Its plot arc describes a radical virtualism that delivers self-possession (an amalgam of those imagined in Christian and Romantic traditions) through shedding material attachments and abandoning housework. Three decades later, Marie Kondo’s The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up shows that neoliberal self-possession continues to involve shedding, and, ironically, renewed attention to housekeeping. Shedding is an apt term, as both texts imagine a new self emerging once the
pressure of the old material has been sloughed-off, free to take possession of the neoliberal medium, virtualized space that promises totally free movement amid a bounty, or perhaps an excess, of possibilities—a vacuum in which the essential can be had. This chapter will explore a rising culture of shedding stuff by focusing on the ambivalent representation of housekeeping by Robinson and Kondo.

Housekeeping

Set in a small Northwest town in the 1950s, Robinson’s novel tells the retrospective narrative of Ruth Stone and her sister Lucille, orphaned twice early in the novel by their mother’s suicide and their grandmother’s death. Raising the girls until ages 12 and 10, the grandmother had been a housekeeper-extraordinaire who “perform[ed] the rituals of the ordinary as an act of faith” and, with cut flowers and homemade bread, with song and fresh applesauce, “had always known a thousand ways to circle [the children] with what must have seemed like grace” (16, 11, emphasis added). She has paid off her house, in which most of the novel is set, from her husband’s railroad job pension, saved money, and looks forward to transferring her possessions to her wards. She is, in short, a model of the mother at the heart of mid-century domesticity, as well as a Keynesian economic success story. According to Mary Esteve, her “mode of housekeeping—her activity of routine maintenance and her wealth’s dependability—becomes emblematic of this period’s comparably steady state” (226). Upon her death, the girls are able to stay in the house thanks to the arrival of aunt Sylvie, the polar opposite of this model. If Keynesianism entails a lot of upkeep, as argued in chapter 2, Sylvie suggests neoliberalism involves an opposite of upkeep—letting go. An “unredeemed transient” in the words of the staid town, Sylvie is a box-car riding, bench-sleeping rambler who lets the house slip into disarray,
while permitting the girls to avoid school—a combination which brings the concern, and eventually the intervention, of the town, in both official and unofficial guises. Eventually, in a major conflict of the novel, nosy neighbors start asking about broken windows, and a sheriff and a judge threaten state-backed removal of the girls from Sylvie’s custody.

Robinson intertwines this conflict between the female household and the American town with another, within the family, between Lucille and Sylvie. Lucille, scandalized by her aunt, aligns with the town, choosing to live with another family, becoming a clichéd teenage girl, concerned with appearance and propriety. Ruth, meanwhile, becomes more like Sylvie, caring for neither hair nor clothes nor house, and straying further from the normalizing orbit of school and town. Eventually, with the sheriff, judge, and pie-delivering townswomen on their heels, the two burn their possessions, set fire to the house and flee. The arson fails, but the flight succeeds. By the end Ruth has found “an end to housekeeping” after “breaking the tethers of need” and adopting her aunt Sylvie’s “drifting” lifestyle (209, 204). Transiency brings selfhood; Ruth, quiet and vanishing in the plot itself, finds her voice only after reaching this ascetic state, and tells her story from a house-less present.

The burn-it-and-leave response to “housekeeping” suggests a feminist response to the confining qualities of mid-century domesticity, a response which includes some of the earliest theorization of maintenance. For example, in her free-form “Maintenance Art Manifesto, 1969,” best known for asking “after the revolution, who’s going to pick up the garbage on Monday morning?” Mierle Laderman Ukeles writes that “Maintenance is a drag; it takes all the fucking time (lit.) / The mind boggles and chafes at the boredom. / The culture confers lousy status on maintenance jobs = / minimum wages, housewives=no pay” (3). Ukeles casts maintenance not only as a “drag” but as a surfeit and excess, writing:
clean you desk, wash the dishes, clean the floor, wash your clothes, wash your toes, change the baby’s diaper, finish the report, correct the typos, mend the fence, keep the customer happy, throw out the stinking garbage, watch out don’t put things in your nose, what shall I wear, I have no sox, pay your bills, don’t litter, save string, wash your hair, change the sheets, go to the store, I’m out of perfume, say it again—he doesn’t understand, seal it again—it leaks, go to work, this art is dusty, clear the table, call him again, flush the toilet, stay young. (2)

Clearly about a range of activities, the passage positions housekeeping at the center of the excessive tasks faced by its female speaker, a surfeit of gendered activities which together “takes all the fucking time.” The word “drag,” indicates a sense of entrapment in an excessive amount of work and the expectations and norms surrounding it. Many popular depictions of housekeeping from the latter decades of the twentieth century depict this sense of entrapment in an excess of tasks and expectations. Ira Levin’s 1972 novel The Stepford Wives, for example, links a surfeit of housework to a loss of humanity for housewives, who become, isolated in the dull work of keeping up their homes, housekeeping robots.

In “My Western ‘Roots,’” a 1993 essay, Robinson herself makes clear that housekeeping involves lot of little tasks that end up “contracting” the lives of those who preform them, writing,

At a certain level housekeeping is a regime of small kindnesses, which together, make the world salubrious, savory, and warm. I think of the acts of comfort offered and received within a house as precisely sacramental. It is the sad tendency of domesticity—as of piety—to contract, and of grace to decay into rigor, and peace into tedium.

Following Robinson’s depiction of housekeeping as sacramental creation of warmth that, unfortunately, contracts and hampers, critics apply feminist frameworks to Housekeeping. Paula E. Geyh, for example, “argues that it ‘both explores the centrality of the space of the house in the construction of feminine subjectivity and attempts to imagine a new transient subjectivity which is located in a place outside all patriarchal structures” (Esteve 227). Lee Clark Mitchell argues
that Robinson seeks “a more expansive sense of housekeeping, less ossified and tedious,” moving away from “strict household maintenance [to] a more generous notion of hospitality” (157, 153). From *Housekeeping*, Christine Wilson develops a positive concept of “habitability” which she sets against domesticity grounded in one place. She writes “habitability emerges in texts when space fulfills the subject’s psychological, emotional and social needs. It goes beyond traditional ideas of home that rely heavily on feelings of personal comfort, security, and stability, and incorporates the inherent flux and conflict in the way subjects relate to space” (299).

Robinson, Wilson argues, presents this fluid form of housekeeping to “sabotage the very definitions and regulations of the domestic, creating an ungrounded domesticity, a domesticity that is not situated in one particular location” (299). Many of these readings rightly focus upon Sylvie as a disruptor of a patriarchal status quo, one who indeed sabotages conventional domesticity, and keeps house in a non-traditional fashion. The next section will explore the way the novel positions this new version of domesticity against the conventional type.

*Housekeeping in Housekeeping*

In *Housekeeping*, housekeeping is going to get you—the way it gets Lucille. Throughout the novel, readers watch as she adopts conventional standards and changes from a girl who liked being outdoors into an angry person, obsessed with cleanliness and order. Her division from Ruth begins when she starts caring about her appearance before her peers, and ends with her lost to the realm of clean kitchens. By mid-novel, Ruth narrates her sister’s “changed… attitude” in terms of housekeeping and response to change, explaining, “Lucille saw in everything its potential for invidious change. She wanted worsted mittens, brown oxfords, red rubber boots. Ruffles wilted, sequins fell, satin was impossible to clean. None of the little elegances that Sylvie
brought home for us was to be allowed its season” (93). Ruth explains that “there were other things about Sylvie’s housekeeping that bothered Lucille,” mainly her “transient” habits, such as keeping her clothes in a cardboard box under her bed, which “offended Lucille’s sense of propriety” (103). As she aligns with cleanliness, Lucille begins looking at her family through the eyes of one of the only townspeople given a name—Rosette Brown, a prim little girl who takes ballet and embroiders dish towels, and, along with her mother, basically represents “those demure but absolute arbiters who continually sat in judgment of our lives” (104). Here Ruth imagines herself the center of attention, her outsider status of shocked interest to a community of 1950s-era automatons. With Rosette—an avatar of what might now be called “basic”ness—Lucille’s own change is caricaturized, her interest in clean spaces, durable materials and gender-specific activities is presented, at one and the same time, with a loss of self to the conformist town.

Such loss of self comes through housework. As she changes, Lucille combines cleaning with disgust at difference. Scandalized by the public embarrassment of seeing Sylvie asleep on a park bench earlier in the day, Lucille is “found…in the kitchen in a tumult of cleaning” (107). She rants about her aunt and “threw her dish towel at the cupboards” (107). This anger-cleaning finds a parallel in the novel’s final pages, in which Ruth reflects on the house she and Sylvie have now fled, imagining “Lucille, fiercely neat, stalemat[ing] the forces of ruin” and “wait[ing] there in a fury of righteousness, cleansing and polishing all these years” (217). Only by dint of repetition and familiarity does this conflation of cleaning and conformity go unremarked upon—it is The Stepford Wives version of domesticity, which links housekeeping to loss of humanity. In fact, it is a reduction of Stepford, in which loss of self stems not from housework per se, but from over-the-top housework, such as polishing floors at night. For Levin, such over-interest keeps
women isolated from each other and their community—the opposite of *Housekeeping*, which makes housework indicative of being too close to the community.

To clean a thing is to know that thing, and Lucille, as her name suggests, brings with her the light of knowledge. Angry at Sylvie’s habits—which include dining in the dark—she yanks on the kitchen light. Startled as Sylvie’s soft ambiance is eradicated, Ruth narrates a revelation. “We saw,” she begins, “that we ate from plates that came in detergent boxes…. [We saw] heaps of pots and dishes, [and] two cupboard doors which had come unhinged” (101). They see that “Everywhere the paint was chipped and marred…. the stovepipe and cupboard tops were thickly felted with dust” (101). There is humor here, but it stems from Sylvie being different, idiosyncratic. Lucille doesn’t illuminate a room neglected, but a room in which Sylvie and Ruth do not belong—thus the final ceding of the domestic space in its entirety to Lucille at the novel’s end. The revelation is that for Ruth and Sylvie at least, the kitchen is not the place to be. Among the eradicated when Lucille pulls the cord: the moonlight, the noise of insects, the texture of “a boundless and luminous evening, [in which] we would feel our proximity with our finer senses” (100). In a word, what is lost in keeping a clean house is nature.

Against this version is Sylvie’s. If housekeeping involves keeping order, controlling space, holding it steady against forces of disintegration and clutter, Sylvie’s housekeeping works in the opposite direction, opening the home to weather and allowing it to deteriorate, an activity I will tie to neoliberalism below. Throughout the novel, Sylvie lets the outside in—not the social-outside, but the natural-outside—her arrival, in fact, symbolically corresponds with a flood that brings the nearby lake into the house. Within a week of her arrival, “water poured over the thresholds and covered the floor to a depth of four inches, obliging us to wear boots while we did the cooking and washing up” (61). This symbolic reference meets numerous instances in which
Sylvie’s housekeeping involves actively opening the home. She believes, Ruth tells us, “in stern solvents, and most of all in air. It was for the sake of air that she opened doors and windows” (85). Linking active housekeeping with such de-stabilizing permeation, Ruth remembers Sylvie “talk[ing] a great deal of housekeeping” and “walking through the house with a scarf tied around her head carrying a broom. Yet this was the time that leaves began to gather in the corners” (84). Robinson makes good humor from Sylvie’s bumbling housekeeping. She isn’t simply neglectful, but actually “talks a great deal about housekeeping,” and takes actions such as washing “half the kitchen ceiling and a door” (85). According to Christine Wilson, Sylvie “suffers from a number of fundamental misunderstandings about what it means to keep house…. Redefining it as something that maintains permeable boundaries” (304). While Wilson reads Sylvie as acted upon by the house, as “being kept, not doing the keeping,” this sense of confinement amid the structure, as well as the agency provided to weather, camouflages the activeness by which Sylvie undoes the home in the name of nature.

Naturalization of change and fluidity are central to neoliberal discourse. This is especially clear in Joseph Schumpeter’s use of weather imagery to define one of the most far-reaching theories of neoliberalism, creative destruction. Invoking not only spontaneous order, but openness to naturalized, disruptive forces, Schumpeter describes “the perennial gale of creative destruction” a force that “incessantly revolutionizes the economic structure from within, incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one” (84, 83). Such weather terminology is applied even when the commercial character of these gales is explicit, for example when he describes “an avalanche of consumer goods that permanently deepens and widens the stream of real income although in the first instance they spell disturbance, losses and unemployment” (Capitalism 67). Explaining that his theory “might usefully be contrasted with
the theory of equilibrium,” Schumpeter indicates a neoliberal suspicion of equilibrium 
(*Development* xi).  
Ironically, the language of disruption twines with upkeep: as Schumpeter makes clear, disruption ultimately increases income—it is in everyone’s benefit. The appropriation of upkeep is even clearer in Hayek’s work, which also naturalizes change, and leads even more directly than Schumpeter’s to a celebration of individual disruptors. Hayek writes that “what is most urgently needed in most parts of the world is a thorough sweeping-away of the obstacles to free growth” (521). Linking “sweeping” to exceptional individuals, Hayek writes that “the existence of a multiplicity of opportunities for employment ultimately depends on the existence of independent individuals who can take the initiative in the continuous process of re-forming and redirecting organizations” (190). These figures, clothed in the garb of upkeep, are both maintainers and disruptors, whose disruptions actually serve to maintain, delivering, in this case, “employment.” The appropriation of upkeep to justify work of disruption, is central to neoliberalism. The distinctly non-maintainive work of undoing structure registers as keeping up freedom, openness, change, growth. For example, the Koch Industries “About Us” page explains: “Food. Shelter. Clothing. Transportation. Koch Industries creates life’s basic necessities, while innovating ways to make them even better. Yet our advocacy for a free and open society is what truly sets us apart.” Koch’s activities, it turns out, lie at the root of life itself. The word “innovating” is key: innovation, rather than real things, is the subject of upkeep in neoliberal terms. Sylvie, who doesn’t keep up the house, but rather its openness to weather, models this move. Before returning to *Housekeeping*, however, I want to first discuss the relationship of innovation to maintenance in general.

Attention to maintenance cuts through the logic that makes innovation a (if not *the*) basic value of neoliberal ideology. According to Vinsel and Russell, innovation arose, in the wake of
post-Vietnam disappointment in social movements “to take the place of progress….” Innovation provided a way to celebrate the accomplishments of a high-tech age without expecting too much… in the way of moral and social improvement” (“Hail”). The celebration of innovation, hegemonic by the turn of the century, pushed “armies of young tech wizards… to become disruptors” (“Hail”) As they point out, this came with massive devaluation of actual infrastructure, as well as over-valuation of new, flashy things. Moreover “innovation” diminished “those individuals whose work keeps ordinary existence going rather than introducing novel things” (“Hail”). This work is provided disproportionately by women and non-whites, thus attending to maintenance and upkeep at least helps identify the gender and race problems innovation elides. Robinson’s novel doesn’t celebrate new technology, but it definitely yearns for disruption while devaluing the most basic form of upkeep, housekeeping, which maintains the most ubiquitous element of American infrastructure: the home.

Robinson is, of course, no fan of the billionaire individuals and multinational corporations, such as the Kochs, whom actually work toward “dismantling public infrastructure supporting families, children, and retires” in neoliberal regimes (Brown 105). But by divorcing the upkeep of “life’s basic necessities” from acts of care within, and for the house, as well as from their actual source in the novel, namely the grandmother’s Keynesian-oriented ability to save money from her husband’s job, pay-off the house, and transfer it to her grandchildren, she performs the same devaluation of actual things. This is fundamentally regressive, in two ways noted by Brown. First, “the work and/or cost of supplying [public provisions] is returned to individuals, disproportionately to women” (105). But this doesn’t mean a simple return to a model in which women are openly tasked with the labor of the home. As Brown argues, and as
Robinson models, when individuals are cast as “falsely autonomous—shorn of needs and dependencies” there is a further elision:

what disappears analytically is the already liminal labor of the household… and the gendered division of labor between the market and the household. Now divested of a place in language, visually and discursively absent from public consciousness, these forces shaping women’s lives are intensified by privatizing formerly public goods and sheering benefits from part-time labor in which women are disproportionally employed” (106).

As will be discussed below, Robinson’s novel ends in this state. Ruth is self-actualized and works as a part time waitress; her history has been reimagined to privilege Sylvie as a new mother figure who provides without providing; her links to the community are torn. While this stems from legitimate concerns about the constrictions of mid-century domestic patriarchy, it ends up devaluing “housekeeping” itself. To explore the elision Brown notes, and its intersection with the Hayekian disruptor, I will now turn to Sylvie herself.

The Cowboy Aunt

In “My Western Roots” Robinson reflects on Housekeeping, writing “My one great objection to the American hero was that he was inevitably male…. So I created a female hero, of sorts, also an outsider and a stranger. And while Sylvie obviously has her own history, to the degree that she has not taken the impress of society she expresses the fact that human nature is replete with possibilities” (Roots np). In fact, Robinson makes Sylvie an outsider in two ways. Not only a “drifting” Western hero, “replete with possibilities” and unsullied by the “impress of society,” Sylvie is also an aunt. She is thus a rather unique hero: a female caretaker who is also a cowboy.64

At first glance, Robinson’s cowboy aunt suggests care work can occur in untraditional, non-nuclear environments. As liminal figures between the nuclear and extended family, aunts
combine care and dependency with the potential to destabilize the nuclear family. Exploring this relationship, as well as Sylvie herself as a “cowboy aunt” gets to the heart of the way neoliberalism appropriates progressive representation. Moreover, it helps explore a question posed by Brown, who asks, “When neoliberal reason casts each human… as self-investing entrepreneurial capital, responsible for itself… how does this comport with the need-based, explicitly interdependent, affective, and frequently sacrificial domain of family relations?” (102).

That is, if everyone is an autonomous economic subject, what about the interdependent family? As Brown points out, “liberalism’s old gender problem is intensified by neoliberalism” in part through an elision between the family and self, and a disavowal of sources of outside support, largely supplied by women (106). This isn’t new. It is upon “the discovery… that housework under capitalism had been excluded per definition from the analysis of capitalism proper” that spurred the late twentieth-century, feminist-led flourishing of awareness of non-waged labor underwriting the capitalist process (Mies 33). But neoliberalism takes the detraction one step further, allowing “the already liminal labor of the household” to “disappear analytically…. divested of a place in language,” (Brown 106). My argument, as follows, is that in *Housekeeping*, the aunt performs not only the elision between family and self, but the divestment of care work from language.

To explore this, I will draw upon Patty Sotrin and Laura Ellingson’s taxonomy of aunt figures in American popular culture, which includes the selfless maternal aunt (*The Wizard of Oz*; *The Andy Griffith Show*) as well as the negligent and malevolent custodial aunt (*James and the Giant Peach*; *Harry Potter*). They find that both types mix transgressive and conservative valences, with the former hidden under the latter. Overall, they write, “particular aunt figures… render auntin...
traditions and power relations” (443). Their aim is to “distinguish conservative from transgressive elements in these popular performances of aunting to show how the aunt might be rearticulated as a rallying point for progressive feminist conceptions of family, rationality, and feminine agency,” an aim which is especially important as “the proliferation of [non-traditional] family forms has far exceeded public imagination or accommodations for them (443, 454). Two constants cross these aunt figures. One is an oft-surprising intersection of conservative and progressive/transgressive weights. Second, is care. Caregiving (or lack thereof) grounds all representations of the aunt as much as youth grounds the figures of the child, or incarceration that of the prisoner. Applying their good/bad aunt types to Sylvie, who crosses each, actually reverses the dynamic they trace, for under Sylvie’s transgression of norms, conservative ideals operate.

The most dominant articulation is the conflation of aunt and mother, which naturalizes maternal care by suggesting any female kin can swap into the role of mother. But, even in pop-culture-paragon of nostalgic conservatism, The Andy Griffith Show, Aunt Bee, caregiver to both her nephew Andy and his son Opie, at once models the selfless maternal figure in “the home [at] the heart of America” while yet “unsettl[ing] the insularity and stability of the nuclear family” by marking the absence of an actual mother and wife (445). They point out that the show frequently focuses on Aunt Bee’s unease at being dependent upon her nephew, an “ongoing unease [that] calls attention to the emotional costs of the maternal ideal and the gendered inequalities of caretaking and caregiving” (445). Throughout Housekeeping, Robinson uses Sylvie to display this cost, making her hero’s unease in the caregiving aunt role palpable: in one scene the girls follow her after she feeds them breakfast, intercepting her at the train station, seemingly about the leave town. This helps explain why critics such as Wilson view her as “being kept, not doing
the keeping,” reading her as a prisoner of the house and the expectations to which she is held (304).

Across Sotrin and Ellingson’s spectrum of aunt figures, they find “the malevolent aunt [who] treats her nephews and nieces with a personalized malevolence which transgresses the deeply entrenched Western norms of child care, nurture, and family relations,” by linking villainy to lack of maternal care (447). While conservative in the embodiment of “the monstrous perversion of the aberrant mother,” such figures, argue Sotrin and Ellingson, offer transgression of traditional conceptions of female care by serving in plots to “nurture autonomy in their nieces and nephews” (448). This, Sotrin and Ellingson argue, models “feminist reconceptions of autonomy” as “not developed in isolation and through self-transparency but in the context of relational commitments and identifications… in social contexts”—negative ones, in this case (448). Leading Ruth out of her family home seems to model such autonomy-building. But, in Robinson’s novel, the house itself represents social contexts, thus Sylvie’s care ends up removing Ruth from them, leading her from a real autonomy, generated by social institutions, to a fantasy of radical independence, a home on the range. The aunt-niece bond interrupts and disallows any other relations—familiar, amicable, social, educational, or sexual—all of which are either overturned in, or excised from Ruth’s narrative. The plot depicts a woman who step-by-step, undoes her niece’s independence, fairly well-assured by the grandmother, in the form of a paid-off house. Sylvie allows Ruth’s public education to end, catalyzes a break with her sister, and leads her away from a stable home. And yet, because aunts are figures of care, Sylvie reads as new brand of a caretaker.

Robinson’s novel draws upon care in an “unsettling” way, as lack of care for domestic space and routine actually becomes the primary bonding ingredient. An aunt figure who arrives
to stabilize the house after its female head has died, Sylvie destabilizes it to the point of being barely habitable, and ultimately disintegrates the family, stripping Ruth of her ability and desire to function in society, or even communicate with other people. As Esteve puts it, “Sylvie’s status as a blood relative seems to grant self-evident legitimacy to her entry into the household…. mak[ing] it much easier to overlook the fact that Sylvie orchestrates Ruth’s conversion into a transient…. [and] the charismatic sway Sylvie has over Ruth and thus the morbid intensity of their bond” (231). For Esteve, Sylvie is “Housekeeping’s resident bad guy,” who “wards off her own isolation by luring Ruth (after Lucille leaves the household) into her fantasy world” (232, 231). The fantasy world Esteve references here is a dreamy section in a “secret” valley in which Ruth and Sylvie chase imaginary fairy-like children and encounter the foundation of a homestead filled with the fallen members of the decayed structure. But, central to my critique of the novel, and absent from claims that it offers a new version of domesticity, “transience” in Housekeeping is itself fantastical, depicted Hollywood-style, heavy on box-car-jumping and colorful travelers with interesting stories. At least it is in Sylvie’s discussion of it before Ruth actually leaves with her. The fantasy is itself hard to maintain once “transience” becomes a reality. Readers don’t see much of Ruth and Sylvie after they depart the house, but Ruth does explain that “We are drifters…. [N]ow and then I take a job as a waitress, or a clerk, and it is pleasant for a while” (214). But eventually, “it is as if I put a chill on the coffee by serving it. What have I to do with these ceremonies of sustenance and nurturing?” (214). This importantly shows that even in rejecting an identity based on such ceremonies, Ruth is yet tasked with them. Moreover, Robinson’s transient puts domesticity itself on the rack. Imagining the figure of the transient entering a sort of bourgeois, every-woman’s house, she writes:

[T]he tramps, when they doffed their hats and stepped into the kitchen as they might do when the weather was severe, looked into the parlor and murmured ‘nice place you have
here,’ and the lady who stood at the elbow of any one of them knew that if she renounced her husband and cursed her children and offered all that had been theirs to this lonely, houseless, placeless man, soon or late he would say, ‘Thanks’ and be gone into the evening, being the hungriest of human creatures and finding nothing here to sustain him, leaving it all, like something dropped into a corner by the wind. (184)

The “regime of small kindnesses [that]… make the world salubrious, savory and warm” do not, unfortunately, satiate (“Roots”). Though I’m not entirely convinced about this, Robinson usefully puts not men but women into this place of rejection—people expected not only to enjoy this “nice place,” but to produce and maintain it. But the idea that Robinson is articulating a “transient subjectivity which is located in a place outside all patriarchal structures” is problematic (Esteve 227, original emphasis). As Esteve puts it, “This perspective is wishful” (227). For her, the novel’s “raison d’etre [is]… to imagine breaking away from the world’s descent into [Keynesian] economic and theological rigor mortis” (227). Sylvie’s aunting provides this break, undoing her niece’s social and economic ties. Moreover, as the details about waitressing show, Sylvie renders her niece both fit and willing for a place in the increasingly “housewifized” service economy.

In this, Robinson’s articulation of a cowboy aunt reverses the conservative/progressive valences Ellingson and Sotrin trace; under the progressive aspect of the character, conservative ideas operate, namely that society gets in the way of freedom. As Cory Robin puts it, discussing Ayn Rand’s The Fountainhead, “the central plot device of her novels is the conflict between the creative individual and the hostile masses” (169). Robinson employs the same plot device. Moreover, showing links between neoliberalism and conservatism, Robinson appropriates nature to underwrite radical freedom from social constraints and to justify any wreckage left by the transition to this better state. More on nature below, but even here, one of Sylvie’s most positive traits, as an aunt who brings home fun things for her niece, reveals devaluation of keeping. Ruth
explains that Sylvie brings home “treasures” in the form of cheap sequined or ruffled items from “the five and dime [which] catered to her taste for the fanciful,” and then enjoys their disintegration (93). Sylvie we are told, “inhabited a millennial present. To her the deteriorations of things were always a fresh surprise, a disappointment not to be dwelt on” (94). That sounds fun, but it also suggests devaluation of durability, and sets her up for an embrace of the disposable. Similarly, the local “five and dime” sounds fairly wholesome in 2019, but the contemporary version of this character would probably be a regular customer at the places such as Party City, a corporate retailer of globally sourced “treasures.”

Sylvie’s embrace of decay is frequently read as “fluidity,” auguring a less constrictive type of domesticity. It also invokes what Robin calls “the Randian universe, [in which] it’s high noon all the time” (178). In her “millennial present,” as well as flair for the dramatic, Sylvie, the cowboy aunt, exhibits what Robin calls, “the notion of life as a struggle against and unto death, of every moment laden with destruction, every choice pregnant with destiny, every action weighed upon by annihilation” (179). In this Robinson’s fluid hero represents “antipathy, bordering on contempt, for the old regime”—the stability of the home, in this reading—and “a disposition to enjoy the present. Not because [it] is better than the alternatives or even… good…. [but] because it is there, because it is at hand” (41, 44). While Stepford worries about the effect of high standards of domestic upkeep in compartmentalized suburban homes, *Housekeeping* excises the importance of domestic upkeep, and even the importance of durable things, at a material level. In short, with her cowboy aunt Robinson does an extraordinary job of outlining the contours of the rising dispositions of neoliberalism.

Ultimately, “the drifting life,” the basis of Sylvie’s transgression of traditional domesticity, reduces to negation of housekeeping, to non-keeping. The problem of *Housekeeping*
is that in articulating the “contracting” aspects of housework, it excises care, interdependence, the importance of social systems, imperfect as they may be. Seeming to follow The Stepford Wives, which finds dehumanization in domestic routines and patriarchal expectations, Housekeeping is yet distinct. While the ideal state in Stepford Wives is a progressive domesticity in which men vigorously wash dishes and women engage in civic politics, artistic endeavors, as well as child care and housework, Housekeeping wants a purer freedom—what Robinson calls “that famous individualism associated with western and American myth” (“Roots”). In this it yearns to return to a state of nature, demonstrating what Esteve, comparing the novel to McCarthy’s The Road, calls “ongoing infatuation with an atavistic mode of patriarchy that cherishes the household of the soul” (227). Less about the burden of housework, Housekeeping seeks a more dramatic release. While the novel positions housekeeping as “mak[ing] the world… warm,” Ruth finds, as a major part of her personal journey, “that if you do not resist the cold, but simply relax and accept it, you no longer feel the cold as discomfort. [You] feel giddily free and eager, as you do in dreams, when you suddenly find that you can fly” (“Roots”; Housekeeping 204). With simplified overtones of both Christian asceticism and Transcendentalism’s tendency to view the social-mundane as interfering with access to “high things,” Robinson’s end state is stuff-less and fulfilled. Such embrace of this cold freedom, an individualized state of nature, could only ever work for a young, healthy, childless person, even as, with the switch to the second person, the narrative universalizes that person. In this, “drifting” resembles the outdoorsy meddle-testing retreats and activities that began enjoying renewed popularity, mostly for white middle class men, soon after the novel was published.

Floods, Arks and Transience
Robinson’s devaluation of housekeeping also comes through the combined symbolism of a flood and an ark, a bundle which often looks progressive to critics. For example, Wilson argues that by reference to ships, and specifically the ark, Robinson reimagines habitability. Robinson, she writes, “represents the ark as an improved house that opposes traditional domestic strictures” (306). She is correct about Robinson’s intention; arks are better than houses, as seen in the following lines from the novel:

Imagine that Noah knocked his house apart and used the planks to build an ark, while his neighbors looked on full of doubt. A house, he must have told them, should be daubed with pitch and built to float cloud high, if need be. A lettuce patch was of no use at all, and a good foundation was worse than useless. A house should have a compass and a keel. The neighbors would have put their hands in their pockets and chewed their lips and strolled home to houses they now found wanting in ways they could not understand. (305)

That neither critic nor author references the rest of Noah’s story is telling: the ark builder will soon be floating above a cleansed new world. As a boat made for two humans and all of nature, the ark aptly symbolizes the novel’s improved domesticity, and shows its neoliberal ethics in stark light. It presents an exceptional individual who knows what others don’t see, namely that social constructions are filthy, and need washing, the one who, in Hayek’s words knows that “what is most urgently needed in most parts of the world is a thorough sweeping-away of the obstacles to free growth,” (521). Notably, Robinson’s image of the world to be flooded grafts a distinctly mid-century aspect to the biblical story, with the far-seeing outsider set apart from Jones-like neighbors, with individual homes and gardens for lettuce, tied-down in ways they don’t quite understand. These small-minded neighbors, with their foundations! As Esteve explains, the novel takes place “in the early post-war years, when ‘embedded liberalism’ as David Harvey calls it, thrived; with Keynesian ideas still holding sway, the market was ‘surrounded by a web of social and political constraints and a regulatory environment” (225). In
the meddling of the town and the attempt of state officials—judge, police—to remove Ruth from Sylvie’s custody and break their naturalized female bond, Robinson casts doubt on this web. So too, does her use of the flood.

I feel compelled to point out that houses already have permeable boundaries. We call them doors. And windows. This is not to deny value to critical dismissal of the fantasy of the insulated, self-contained home. But to have an ethical base, that critique would need to explore the interdependent links between the home and the social “web.” Ruth Schwartz Cowan does just this with her concept of a “work process.” She writes that “the concept of a work process reminds us that housework (indeed, all work) is a series not of definable tasks but of definable tasks that are necessarily linked to one another: you cannot cook without an energy source, you cannot launder without water” (12). This allows water supply and drainage pipes, and the work of both laying them and preserving them, to be directly linked—like the material itself—to the seemingly discreet work of daily laundry. Such links are of course hidden in the commodity form, and the suburban landscape. But turning away from the neighbors only exacerbates the insularity. Levin’s *Stepford Wives* again makes a fine counterpoint. Its criticism of the insulated home comes as relationships between women from different families are severed by a surfeit of housekeeping, a model of the perfect home, sparkling clean, inhabited by a woman fully satisfied by such work. In its response to this same concern with the mid-century model, the transitional nature of Robinson’s text can be seen. Her critique of confinement becomes absorbed by an elision of the importance of care work itself.

For Robinson, letting go—of the home, of the self, of control over space as well as memory—is an idealized state, one with correspondence to Christianity, Romanticism as well as, to be discussed below, the minimalism of neoliberalism. Robinson remains defensive of Ruth’s
trajectory toward asceticism. Asked about “reviews of her book, which seemed to lack patience with Ruth’s sentiment that ‘it is better to have nothing,’ Robinson replied: [Ruth is] speaking from an old, old tradition, of an attempt to establish an equilibrium, or to establish a sort of freedom through renunciation of the world, in effect. It’s what every prophet in the Bible does” (Engebretson 15). Doubtlessly, Robinson takes seriously the freedom her transients represent.

In *Housekeeping*, lack of upkeep tracks with independence. Give up on keeping up, and you will be free. Cold, but free. Ruth’s unkempt hair, her and Sylvie’s utilitarian dress, the dilapidating and overgrown house all mark the protagonists as different from the crowd; all involve lack of upkeep. Protagonists and difference from the norm go hand-in-hand, and are revealed, here, via disinclination to maintain the spaces of the everyday. Claiming American individualism, Robinson’s narrator asks, “when did I become so unlike other people?” The answer isn’t entirely clear, but the substance of difference is. Of the townspeople, Ruth says, “surely they had in recent months remarked in me a tendency to comb my hair almost never, and to twist it and chew at it continually…. [T]hey had reason to feel that my social graces were eroding away, and that soon I would feel ill at ease in a cleanly house with glass in its windows—I would be lost to ordinary society” (183). Differences between *Housekeeping* and *Stepford Wives* are again illustrative: in both novels, over-tidy homes and bodies indicate constriction, and loss of self, while messiness indicates freedom from social pressure. “What a pleasure to see a messy kitchen!” says Bobbie, one of the few human women left in Stepford, when she visits Johanna, the protagonist. But in Levin’s novel the appeal of the messiness is as residue of human interaction occurring between neighbors and family members in the course of daily life. Bobbie’s line about the appealingly messy kitchen continues,

“It doesn’t quite come up to mine—you don’t have the little peanut-butter handprints on the cabinets—but it’s good, it’s very good. Congratulations.”
“I can show you some dull dingy bathrooms if you’d like,” Johanna said.
“Thanks. I’ll just take the coffee.” (Levin 18)

The women drink coffee and talk about the confining town and its surfeit of too-clean houses. Such a scene is unimaginable in *Housekeeping*: visitors are intruders, and no communication between households occurs. As Ruth puts it, the town “had no way of knowing that I spoke at all… since I spoke only to Sylvie” (183). In *Housekeeping* the appeal of messiness is different, indicative of getting back to a state of nature, rather than human nature, and indicative of the exceptional individual being unsullied by social expectations.

In defining a celebrated individual against “ordinary society,” Robinson’s claims to what she calls a “democratic aesthetic” break down (Engebretson 3). This aesthetic allows “a conception of fiction that is stylistically accessible and that expresses the dignity of ordinary individuals…. The focus on ‘ordinary people,’ rather than the rich, powerful, famous, or beautiful, expresses Robinson’s commitment to equality” (Engebretson 9). Stylistic accessibility is already a weak claim to democratic value, not least in a novel laden with extended metaphors. But its content, particularly the commitment to individualism, undercuts any “democratic aesthetic.” In *Housekeeping*, Robinson “expresses the dignity of ordinary individuals” by setting them against, rather than in, society. Drawing American and Christian myth together, Robinson sees outsiders as the dominant, disruptive and a-historical force in positive change, writing, “since the time of the Hebrew Prophets, it has been the role of the outsider to loosen… chains” (“Roots”). The disruptive, emancipating outsider reaches hagiographic proportions in neoliberal discourse, as well as American politics and depends always upon a backgrounding of society. The Western hero is indeed apt, cast as he is against desert backdrops. Tightly focused upon its central characters, whom it sets in juxtaposition with a flat town populated with flat people, the social has been reduced, purposefully, in *Housekeeping*. Only outsiders are important.
Her characters are put front and center precisely in their difference from the rest, a difference constituted by upkeep: of house and home; of community standards, such as education; of personal grooming and dress. Her protagonists may be ordinary people, but not as ordinary as the rest—the latter group keeps things up, while the former lights out for the hills.

In presenting an unraveling of housekeeping, Robinson draws on another strand of mid-century critique: the suburbanite’s disdain for the home, the small-minded neighbors, the limited town. Throughout, Robinson uses domestic upkeep to represent the normalizing, de-individualizing drag of society. The towns-women who butt into Ruth and Sylvie’s life, after noticing their dilapidating house and unkempt bodies, do so via housekeeping itself, “bring[ing] us casseroles and coffee cake…. Knitted socks and caps and comforters” as well as offers to send husbands over to “fix those broken windows… [and] split some kindling for you” (181). Robinson’s townspeople speak in a single voice and plot how to keep the free-thinking deviant in the fold. As Ruth explains, “Their motives in coming were complex and unsearchable, but all of one general kind. They were obliged… by a desire, a determination, to keep me, so to speak, safely within doors” (183). Like a number of twentieth century suburban and dystopian texts, the town’s threatening conformity comes across through too much domestic upkeep. These pie-wielding women could be versions of Levin’s robots, their humanity stripped away by virtue of the domestic space in which they operate. Or, they might be read as generous— they’re actually quite accommodating to Sylvie, bird heads and all, and legitimately concerned for Ruth. Yet the novel ends like Fahrenheit 451: the protagonist escapes the constrictive society, for an exile community of more enlightened individuals, living in the countryside.
Shedding Stuff, Finding Self

Sylvie’s housekeeping involves another aspect, seemingly distant from opening the home to nature, which yet performs this same devaluation: hoarding. Sylvie, while never quite unpacking, becomes an industrious keeper of tin cans. Soon after her arrival, Ruth explains that “She washed the labels off with soap and hot water” stacking them on counters, windowsills and the kitchen table (125). Drawing comedy from the interplay of order and disorder, Ruth explains “We did not object to them… because they looked very bright and sound and orderly…. Frankly we… could hardly object to order in any form, though we hoped that her interest in bottles was a temporary aberration” (125). It isn’t, and by the novel’s climax—lending, in fact, a lot of tension to the novel’s climax—the house is full of cans, bottles, newspapers and magazines. When townspeople start showing up out of concern for Ruth’s well-being, they find a house with a parlor stacked floor to ceiling with such items. In a comedy of errors that also caricatures the active opening of the home Ruth explains,

Sylvie knew that such collecting invited mice, so she brought home a yellow cat… and it littered twice. The first litter was old enough already to prey on the swallows that had begun to nest on the second floor. That was well and useful, but the cats often brought birds into the parlor, and left wings and feet and heads lying about, even on the couch.” (181)

The grisly bits are left lying there, and the room is allowed to become even more neglected, because, “who would think of dusting or sweeping the cobwebs down in a room used for the storage of cans and newspapers—things utterly without value?” (180). In this way, the very idea of keeping is linked to valuelessness. In this context Robinson drops a few lines that well indicate the novel’s position on, and revelations about, housekeeping.

Sylvie keeps these useless objects “because she considered accumulation to be the essence of housekeeping, and because she considered the hoarding of worthless things to be
proof of a particularly scrupulous thrift” (180). It is easy to read this as a sort of humorous mis-
fit: that Sylvie is trying, but missing something about housekeeping. As Wilson puts it,
discussing this scene, “Sylvie’s misunderstanding of housekeeping further manifests itself in her
misconception of literal keeping as a method of housekeeping…. Sylvie does not understand,
however,…that the act of keeping is itself not the objective” (304 original emphasis). I see less a
misunderstanding on the character’s part, than critical exaggeration on the author’s. With
Sylvie’s hoarding, Robinson suggests the work of housekeeping indeed aims at keeping, making
it the very “essence of housekeeping.” This allows attachment to, and care of, material things to
be read as pointless, of domestic activity to be concerned with the upkeep of useless things, of
domestic space itself to be full of junk. This devaluing of stuff is also confirmed by the novel’s
presentation of selfhood.

Beyond hoarding, the novel presents a world over-full with valueless things, and a
subject mired in an excess that is also, in its Protean chaos, a dearth. Frequently, the novel
describes “fragments of the quotidian,” providing lists of “heaps” of things, kept in drawers, and
basements, and memories, and more often than not, loosened from their places (73, 90). Such
fragments include, in one of the novel’s bleakest moments, books and knowledge. After Sylvie’s
arrival, flood waters destroy a list of things in the town, from wedding dresses to grave sites, and
leech into the town library, creating “vast gaps in the Dewey decimal system” (62). The novel
smiles upon such destruction: “the next day was very fine,” we are told, in a sort of “morning in
America” moment, a new start after the inundation of a public institution, one tasked with
maintaining information (63). Underscored by the triteness of “the Dewey decimal system,” and
sanctioned by an explanation that “because the hoard was not much to begin with, the loss was
not overwhelming,” Housekeeping critiques material attachments (63). Ultimately this sanctions
their appropriation. Ruth asks “What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally?” (92). Far from appreciation for the diverse and the variegated, the response to excess leads to a sense that “The world will be made whole” (152). About *Housekeeping*, Robinson writes that Ruth “deploys every resource she has to try to make the world comprehensible” (92). But not, apparently, those resources on the bottom shelves of the library. The wholeness sought is the type that comes with a flood, yet, paradoxically, comprehension is the type that comes from the inside out. Indeed, the completed retrospective narrative—beginning with the allusive line, “My name is Ruth”—testifies to this completed state, while also making “world” synonymous with “self,” with Ruth’s personal story (3). For Robinson, wholeness is an individual enterprise.

As such, *Housekeeping* doesn’t only not celebrate housekeeping, it renders acts of upkeep as hampering the ascension to a more fluid state, where ascetic “transiency,” Romantic transcendence and Christian transfiguration yield an idealized selfhood untethered from the real. In this, history and reality are subject to willful undoing. As Ruth departs the house, so too does she leave fact behind, freely reimagining her sister’s traditional lifestyle, and her mother’s death. Ultimately collapsing the actual and the imaginary “under the sign of general equivalence,” as Esteve puts it, the “narrative ends by reveling in a surfeit of fictitiousness, effectively bidding farewell to the actual” (241). Esteve argues that in its “politics of transfiguration… [t]he novel advances an alluring but ultimately regressive vision of political economy…. [rendering a] stealthy yet oddly blithe sabotage of ethical principles and values—liberal values that affirm the flourishing of relatively autonomous yet interdependent persons” (221). More than neoliberal, this detachment reveals the conservative impulse “to act for the sake of the invisible and ideal as against the material and the real,” (Robin 63). In *Housekeeping*, the narrator decides that “It is better to have nothing,” then engages in an atavistic retreat from the chaotic excess of society,
yielding a vision of the individual as self-fashioning, totally free in a fluid wilderness, unlinked even from truth—permitting, as Esteve puts it, “a pernicious form of indifference to actually existing persons” (238). Preparing the soil for our post-fact moment, Robinson’s favored characters present a figure “remarkably fit for a post-liberal world in which the auratic conditions of precapitalism and the hyperfictitious conditions of the new speculative economy emerging in the 1970s… conspire to enable…detachment from reality” (246).

Much of this detachment involves a combined sense of loss and change. After the lake floods the town, Ruth, contemplating the “fragments of the quotidian” stirred around by water, explains “Every spirit passing through the world fingers the tangible and mars the mutable, and finally has come to look and not buy” (73). This sense of flux and impermanence has the result of both freeing and glorifying exceptional individuals, the “survivors picking among the flotsam, among the small, unnoticed, unvalued clutter that was all that remained when they [real people] vanished, that only catastrophe made noticeable” (116). This allows an excess of material things to be read as a wasteland. About this context of cluttered, valueless flotsam, Ruth asks, “What are all these fragments for, if not to be knit up finally” (92). This renewed wholeness, however, is disconnected from the actual, and the ethical—disconnections serviced by a sense of nature as change—preparing the soil for post-fact world, one whose links to the real also depends upon an excess as context in which links to reality can disappear. In a further demonstration of conservative impulse, Robinson establishes that a sense of loss undergirds the project of making a new whole. She writes “when do our senses know any thing so utterly as when we lack it? And here again is a foreshadowing—the world will be made whole. For to wish for a hand on one’s hair is all but to feel it. So whatever we may lose, very craving gives it back to us again” (153). Using the same language as Robinson, Robin’s analysis of conservatism explains the centrality
of loss. Conservative ideology “speaks to and for people who have lost something…. and nothing is ever so cherished as that which we no longer possess” (56). Calling the move antihuman, Esteve points out that Ruth’s privileging of imagination to keep things alive in a more “extraordinary” way than they might have actually been, comes with the tendency to treat “her mother—and even more so her sister—as if they were characters in her own private novel” (Robinson 195, Esteve 224). This renders “validation of the compensatory equivalence of actually existing persons and otherworldly versions of them,” as well as a general looseness with fact and family history (243). In a sort of individualized version of creative destruction, naturalization of flux and impermanence sanctions a reading of real things as “valueless” and allows for their re-imagination.

Intersecting loss and change, the novel imagines a wasteland which is also an excess, a field from which wholeness can be found in disorder. In a key passage, one linking impermanence with nature—the sanctioning ingredient—Ruth tells us that “It was the order of the world, after all, that water should pry through the seams of husks, which, pursed and tight as they may be, are only made for the breaching” (162). Things, in short, fall apart. This deduction then sanctions an expansion of the self into all space. In this scene, laden with rebirth symbolism, Ruth explains, “it was the order of the world that the shell should fall away and that I, the nub, the sleeping germ, should swell and expand…. And given that it is in the nature of water to fill and force to repletion and bursting, my skull would bulge preposterously” (162). Linking this expansion of self with a sense of a “perfect” state as one devoid of stuff, these lines refer to an earlier moment when Ruth, sleeping outdoors,

let the darkness in the sky become coextensive with the darkness in my skull and bowels and bones. Everything that falls upon the eye is an apparition, a sheet dropped over the world’s true workings…. Darkness is the only solvent. While it was dark… it seemed to
me that there need not be relic, remnant, margin, residue, memento, bequest, memory, thought, track, or trace, if only the darkness could be made perfect and permanent.” (116)

This desire for a “perfect” state, one found when the wasteland/excess (well indicated here by the list of things) is eradicated by a solvent of darkness, or nothingness. After this comes a rebirth, free now of “watery darkness,” as a new self emerges. Darkness aside, the perfect state imagined here is stuff-less, yet contented, a place where the self can fill all space.67

Arcing from a chaotic home to self possession found in ascetic withdrawal, Housekeeping concludes with Ruth and Sylvie dragging their books and papers from a home in disarray, into a pile, and burning it all. Shedding stuff, or “breaking the tethers of need” as Ruth puts it, actualizes a new state of being (204). The components here correspond with a trend found in a number of popular depictions of housekeeping. The A&E reality television series Hoarders, for example, dramatizes the purging of excess possessions as a route to a better life. Focused upon the lives and homes of people with compulsive hoarding disorder, the show depicts interventions involving family members, psychologists and teams of cleaners, often in white suits. The “hoarders” themselves struggle, and often fail, to part with their stuff; the series foregrounds such affective connections. Nowhere, however, is the interplay of shedding possessions and self-actualization more prominent than around the celebrity of Marie Kondo.

Marie Kondo, Virtual Materialist

Three decades after Housekeeping, Marie Kondo also proselytizes escape from excess, but one that comes from a renewed attention to stuff. In this I argue she both models devaluation of stuff and she fits into a counter-tradition to the stuff-less one, a tradition of maintenance writers who find in upkeep a method of mitigating individual alienation, a “return” to attentive connection with the mundane materials and activities of the everyday. Matthew Crawford’s 2009
bestseller *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work* epitomizes this tradition, and makes a good comparison to Kondo. Crawford starts from a critique of the 1980s-era “virtualism” that “steers young people toward the most ghostly kinds of work” as well as a “creeping concealedness” around consumer goods that “betoken[s] a shift in our relationship to our own stuff: more passive and more dependent” (3, 2). He asks, “what are the attractions of being disburdened of involvement with our own stuff?” (3, 2). Against “a vision of the future in which we somehow take leave of material reality and glide about in a pure information economy,” and against a sense that “as workers and as consumers, we feel we move in channels that have been projected from afar by vast impersonal forces,” Crawford makes a case for “the ethics of maintenance and repair…. [for] focused engagement with our material things” (7). My reading of Marie Kondo, in the second half of this paper, positions her as following Crawford’s lead, extending the ethics of maintenance and repair from the garages and basements and trade professions upon which he focuses, into the home proper. The pro-stuff basis of these texts doesn’t come with a dismissal of possessive individualism. Both are intensely focused upon selves amid their stuff, and posit, on balance, a renewed possessiveness, as balm to alienation.68

Kondo’s own recent reality series, *Tidying-Up with Marie Kondo*, follows a similar format as *Hoarders*: viewers travel inside American homes and watch as people struggle through the healthy work of parting with stuff. A crucial difference however is in the lack of pathology around keeping; the people on *Hoarders* are sick, while the people on *Tidying-Up with Marie Kondo* are not. The state of excess possessions is thus, on the latter show, normalized and universalized, as a problem facing everybody. The different subjects of the episodes, a retiree, a young adult, a gay couple, a newly-married straight couple, a single man, a family with a new house, also universalize this condition. *Hoarders* is voyeuristic in a conventionally Riisian way,
dramatizing the pathologies and deformities of a generally lower-class group, cast as Other. Kondo’s show, which offers tips for viewers, is closer to self-help, much like its inspiration, her extremely popular 2014 book *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up: The Japanese Art of Decluttering and Organizing*. “Housekeeping” is the first Library of Congress subject heading for *Tidying Up* (the second is “Home Economics”), thus her text and its reception offer some footing for a question raised by *Housekeeping* itself—namely, what aspects of this arena of labor manifest in literature and pop culture most frequently, and with the greatest sense of anxiety?

While housekeeping in literature often tracks with conformity, exploitation, and loss of self, another tradition, forwarded by *House Beautiful* and *Better Homes and Gardens*, and tied to a long lineage of women’s manuals, approaches housekeeping in celebratory and instructional ways. Currently, Kondo bears the torch of this tradition. *Tidying Up* is a best-seller in numerous languages, landed her on *Time*’s most influential people list (2015). As Lam puts it, “if Google searches are any indication, interest in tiding-up is… at an all-time high, and some of this interest must be attributed to the rise in Kondo’s method—which is to only hold on to items that ‘bring joy.’” The joy yardstick is Kondo’s signature advice, though the text itself provides an actual strategy, and many tactics, for organizing stuff and keeping it organized—i.e. for the maintenance of maintenance. This doubling of objectives—ordering and keeping ordered—is actually central to her strategy, which distinguishes “daily” from “special occasion” tidying, and focuses mostly upon the latter (at least superficially, as discussed below). Kondo’s “special occasion” tidying is a full-blown purge, in which every item of a particular category of stuff (clothes, books, papers) should be culled, piled, touched with her signature question, and, absent joy, thanked for its service, and tossed.
Kondo casts her “Konmari method” as a trajectory, a change from a state of clutter to the “perfect,” a term she frequently uses. As Lam points out, articles about Kondo contain “effusive referrals of ‘she changed my life.’” This can be seen in her Netflix series. Each episode of *Tidying Up with Marie Kondo* follows a household (both the space and the people who live there) from a “before” which is messy, cluttered, and (in an oft used term) chaotic to an “after” which is clean and tidy. For example, in an episode titled “From Students to Improvements,” in which Matt and Frank describe their lives and space as chaotic, Kondo tells the camera in subtitled Japanese “I am so happy to help them transition to adulthood.” Another episode, titled “Sparking Joy After a Loss,” follows a widow as she begins a new life from under the weight of her husband’s things. *Housekeeping* also displays two versions of a kept house— one messy and over-full, the other pristine and tightly ordered. The movement from one state to the other structures each text, which describe arcs both characterized and catalyzed by housekeeping, or lack thereof.

In most ways, Kondo’s trajectory is the opposite of Robinson’s, moving not from order to mess, but mess to order, and reversing in this the value of each. Kondo ends where *Housekeeping* begins, in a well-ordered, warm “state of grace,” as delivered by the novel’s grandmother. But, in terms of shedding stuff, their trajectory is similar. Almost as if Sylvie and Ruth have taken the Konmari Method to its final and logical conclusion: they purge themselves of their papers and books, and finally, of the house itself. Kondo herself touches on this, asking “have you ever thought about what it would be like to have no fixed address? Our lives would be very uncertain. It is precisely because we have a home to return to that we can go out to work, to shop, to interact with others.” (170). For Kondo, the line is illustrative of a point about putting clothes away; no actual imagination about a houseless lifestyle ensues, of course. This is also
true of Robinson’s novel, as mentioned above. Imagining a house-less domesticity isn’t easy, but by ending in a houseless place, Robinson can be seen as puncturing the self-contained fantasy at the heart of Kondo’s work, the idea that the home is a place to return to, stable and separate from the dynamic market and busy communities beyond.

In this, Kondo shows that a twentieth-century myth about the home’s detachment from the productive economy remains alive and well. As a recent Atlantic piece documents, online shopping uses more energy and produces more waste than traditional forms. Patterns of globalization, dependent upon the housewifization of labor in both the global south and north, continues to perpetuate exploitation of labor and nature; Kondo, meanwhile, wants to make you feel okay with throwing out your stuff. Despite articulation of a better lifestyle, Kondo’s focus upon commodities within the home barely looks beyond its walls.

Kondo’s focus also backgrounds many aspects of upkeep within the house: cooking, cleaning, laundry, parenting, paying bills—all excised to foreground keeping, shedding and ordering. Kondo writes that “Tidying in the end is just a physical act. The work involved can be broadly divided into two kinds: deciding whether or not to dispose of something and deciding where to put it” (19). Both boil down to the work of keeping; the first is qualitative: what & if to keep, while the second is quantitative: how & where to keep. Kondo’s strategy reduces to this distinction, and her text in its entirety addresses these two aspects of housekeeping. Her method insists, first, that what-to-keep decisions precede how-to-keep ones; why organize stuff you don’t want or need? Don’t. Instead, make a pile. Then, go through this pile with the joy-spark touch. Here, the abstraction of “joy” meets a basic materialism in the advice that “the trick is to handle each item” (41). This tension, between abstraction and materialism, runs through the text, and provides some footing for discussing neoliberal possessive individualism. Kondo, following the
self-help genre, posits an idealized selfhood found amid perfect space, contented yet unanchored by material possessions. But, against her own attempts, she also subverts this image through her attention, and calls for attention, to the real. Beneath a sterile, vacuous, minimalist ideal, a case is made that satisfaction can be found in attention to perpetuated daily activity. In this she reverses Robinson’s image of radical freedom, even as she buys into, and sells it. These strands combine to offer balm for a common malady of late-consumer capitalism: keeping excessive amounts of stuff, much of it patently worthless, and freighted, by memory, value, future-potential, the guilt of non-use. In a reassuring voice, Kondo offers a method for purging all this roughage, and for staying regular ever after. This method involves attentive care for ones stuff.

Marie Kondo, Maintenance Writer

In this light, Kondo is a maintenance writer—one who writes about the maintenance of personal possessions, and who falls into the category of maintenance writers who link attentive care for basic things with both personal satisfaction and a release from the individually-alienating aspects of consumer capitalism. I have characterized this partially-non-alienated-labor position toward upkeep with Matthew Crawford’s Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry into the Value of Work (2009) and will now compare Crawford and Kondo. Even the titles correspond, each linking physical activity (Tidying and Work) with something less physical and very positive (Joy and Soulcraft). Both argue that satisfaction, threatened by passive relations to stuff, can be found in regular acts of handed activity (7). As Crawford puts it, “getting an adequate grasp on the world, intellectually, depends on getting a handle on it in some literal and active sense” (7, original emphasis). Similarly, Kondo repeats that putting your stuff in order means putting your life in order, down to the type of stuff: ordering your books means organizing your intellectual
life. In this, both posit a return to the “real,” a common refrain among maintenance writers. Crawford writes that “agency…. is activity directed toward some end that is affirmed as good by the actor, but… is not something arbitrary and private. Rather, flows from an apprehension of real features of the world” (206). Kondo writes that “The things we own are real. They exist here and now as a result of choices made in the past by no one other than ourselves. It is dangerous to ignore them” (183). Though more focused on the “private,” both suggest “real”-ness in stuff.

The advice of both—care for your stuff—stems from the same anxious starting point: subjection to larger forces which threaten the self, often in terms of an excess that is also an absence. Crawford writes that “both as workers and consumers we feel we move in channels that have been projected from afar by vast impersonal forces” while Kondo offers “escape [from] the vicious cycle of clutter,” to “order” and “control” of one’s life—an idea repeated throughout, including in her first and last sentence (4; 1, 204). In both, control, order, and handed, attentive possession (of stuff and self) are linked. Kondo, like Crawford, links upkeep with a contented, intellectually and emotionally satisfying lifestyle. Like all maintenance writers, both also lament that upkeep is not given its due. Kondo writes “in most societies tidying, the job that keeps a home livable, is completely disregarded because of the misconception that the ability to tidy… doesn’t require training” while Crawford “speak[s] up for an ideal that is timeless but finds little accommodation today: manual competence, and the stance it entails toward the built, material world (11; 2). The best-selling status of both texts suggests upkeep is given some due, though this popularity also indicates a dominant affect: disconnection and discontent amid plenty. From this affect, Crawford criticizes what he calls “virtualism,” an idea that things can be kept, and kept up, easily, automatically, and with a minimum of attention—Crawford calls this “the attraction of being disburdened of involvement with our own stuff” and dedicates his text against
it (7). While the self-help tradition pushes Kondo to follow the “virtual” script, as I will discuss below, she also exhibits the concerns of a maintenance writer, arguing for renewed attention to the real.

The word “tidy” in Kondo’s oeuvre provides an opening to discuss her divergent rationalities; it both is, and is not, appropriate for the work she describes. Tidying suggests small, regular acts of domestic order: picking up toys, hanging clothes, putting away kitchen tools. To call the piling, purging and ground-up reordering “tidying” seems off, akin to calling remodeling a kitchen “cleaning.” Yet even for her stuff-culling marathons, “tidying” works as Kondo’s verb. More than “cleaning” or “cooking” or “washing,” “tidying” focuses attention on the way quantities of household possessions are kept within a larger spaces (often nested spaces: shelf, closet, room, home). The term signals the work of keeping things in order. One doesn’t tidy a plate, but all of the plates. More than “clean,” “tidy” defines a state in which quantities of possessions are kept in a defined order, an order which bestows upon the nested spaces in which these objects are kept a larger version of the same state: tidiness. “Tidy” links quantities of things with quality of space.

As such, more than other housework terms, “tidy” draws attention to possessions, and to the work of keeping. As mentioned, Kondo divides “tidying” into two broad categories, “special events” and “daily” tidying—keeping the order by putting things away after use. At first glance, she celebrates the first wholeheartedly and discounts the latter, at least superficially. One might imagine The Magic of Tidying Up revalues mundane activity, akin to the slow-food movement’s savoring of shopping, cooking and eating.69 But on the surface, it's the opposite. “If you think tidying is an endless chore that must be done every day, you are gravely mistaken,” Kondo explains (29). As it turns out, putting your house in order—as well as your affairs, your life, your
future — is “a once-in-a-life-time-event” (29). Moreover, “unbelievable as it may sound, you only have to experience a state of perfect order once to be able to maintain it,” — i.e., the state of tidiness will be easily maintained ever after (30). In this, Tidying Up expresses an aim at the heart of late consumerism’s pitch: weightlessness, an easy relationship with one’s stuff, and more specifically the disappearance or at least “easy”-making of daily tasks of upkeep. She writes that “once you have put your house in order, tidying will be reduced to the very simple task of putting things back where they belong. In fact, this becomes an unconscious habit” (29). In this, she reveals a familiar position toward daily upkeep: it should be reduced in terms of time, energy and attention. In laying out her dual goals — ordering stuff and keeping it ordered — Kondo characterizes a “perfect” state as one in which “tidy” is easy and automatic, in which the system, once established, keeps itself ordered in its own use, or self-regulates. This seems unlikely; things, as Yeats put it, fall apart. Maybe individual results will vary.

The de-compositional nature of things aside, two positions toward maintenance of stuff inhabit Tidying Up; attention to the actual work of keeping shares pages with a utopian vision of possession which is effortless, in which daily upkeep should be minimized on the path, just wide enough for one, to happiness. And how does Kondo contrive happiness and the ideal, perfect state? In the same two ways. On the one hand is the utopian, weightless version: in the tidy room, Kondo writes, “I feel happy and content. I have time to experience bliss in my quiet space, where even the air feels fresh and clean; time to sit and sip herbal tea while I reflect on my day” (31). This state of perfect, tea-sipping bliss, this “drastic change in self-perception” is achieved through “the belief that you can do anything if you set your mind to it,” i.e., wedded to the hard work of actually ordering and purging your stuff. Not without a Franklinean belief in hard work bringing about a new self, the idea is also almost technological, replete with the “its easy” and
“you can do it too” tags that might be found on any number of products promising labor-free delivery of daily upkeep.

On the other hand, Kondo can’t help link “daily” tidying to contentment; again and again, the ideal state occurs not in blissfully stilled time nor perfectly ordered space, but within the work itself. Notably switching to the term “cleaning,” which she tends to avoid, Kondo writes “there are times when I am cleaning that I can quietly commune with myself. The work of carefully considering each object I own… is like conversing with myself through the medium of my possessions” (58). Here she is still in the “special occasion” mode, but this sense of deep satisfaction adheres to her discussions of “daily” keeping too. For example, folding. Dedicating a dozen pages to folding doesn’t rest easy with making such work “unconscious.” Quite the opposite, Tidying Up draws conscious attention to folding, a goal Kondo apparently felt it missed, necessitating a sequel, Spark Joy, which provides illustrations. One can’t overstate the attention Kondo gives to folding clothes. She writes, “Folding properly pulls the cloth taut and erases wrinkles, and makes the material stronger and more vibrant” (73). What is the proper way? She offers a few universals—avoid hangers, fold to store vertically, don’t stack, and “never, ever ball up your socks”—but basically the material itself should dictate the ideal way (81, original bold-face). As it turns out, “every piece of clothing has its own ‘sweet spot’ where it feels just right—a folded state that best suits the item…. There is nothing more satisfying than finding that sweet spot” (76, 77). Folding is “fun,” “an act of caring,” “a form of dialog with our wardrobe” (73, 74). Folding is not the only example: throughout, Tidying Up clearly presents “tidying” as deeply satisfying. Discussing shelved books, she writes that they become “invisible. Although in plain sight, they remain unseen” (87). Better to take them off the shelf, touch them, so that they become “conscious” (88). This is not about making for an easy relationship to one’s
space and stuff, but a more active one. None of this seems unconscious, or easy, yet neither does it sound hard. What it sounds like is non-alienated labor.

**Alienation, Gaps, Socks and Storage: A Case for Waste**

Self-directed activity yet influenced by the materials and objects worked upon? Check. Clear ends, desired by the worker, who brings them about? Check. Ownership? Check. A variety of tasks, and activities and materials? Check, check, check. People drawn together around common property, forming an organic community built up through the work? Not so much.

A concept which helps navigate these two sides of Marie Kondo, as well as the larger neoliberal possessive individualist mode in which she operates, is that of gaps, which I view as a sub-concept of alienation. The concept stems from Marx’s discussion of the working day under capitalism. He writes “the transition from one operation to another interrupts the flow of [a worker’s] labour and creates gaps in the working day, so to speak. These close up when he is tied to the same operation” (460). The closing of these gaps is the target of efficiency, of increasing the relative productivity of labor, a process usually involving machinery, but also technologies of time management. In closing gaps, much is lost, for these gaps correspond to control and decision making within the process of labor, as well as getting feedback from it, and provide time for interconnections with other people and activities of the day. The closing of gaps is the realization of efficiency, which has devastating effects on people. As Harvey puts it, quoting Andre Gortz, “In saving time and energy at work technology destroys all meaning for the worker. ‘A job whose effect and aim are to save work cannot, at the same time, glorify work as the essential source of personal identity and fulfillment’ (Contradictions 272). As Marx notes, “constant labor of one uniform kind disturbs the intensity and flow of a man’s vital forces, which
find recreation and delight in the change of activity itself” (460). Here, porous, time consuming,
non-efficient work is the ideal.

This raises an issue for the minimalist movement, which tends toward essentialist and
wise-use arguments, well encapsulated by the advice, from Leo Babuta to “get rid of anything
that’s unnecessary. All but the essential. Minimalism says that what’s unnecessary is a luxury,
and a waste. Why be wasteful when it just gets in the way of happiness, of peace? By eliminating
the unnecessary, we make room for the essential, and give ourselves breathing space”
(Rodriguez 287). Based in a virtualism that strives toward “breathing space” Babuta’s question,
“why be wasteful?” reveals the problems with critiques of capitalism rooted a critique of
consumption as excessive, inefficient and oriented around non-essential things. This critique falls
on both sides of the political spectrum. For example, a recent Monthly Review article argues that
“the act of consuming should be a meaningful . . . experience. In our culture there is little of that.
Consuming is essentially the satisfaction of artificially stimulated phantasies” (Matthews 58).
Consumption has become “less about satisfying inherent biological and psychological needs”
and more about producing waste and trivializing human relations (Matthews 58). David Harvey,
quoting Andre Gortz on the rise of consumerism, writes that consumer capitalism’s “mission is
to persuade people to consume goods that are ‘neither necessary nor even merely useful…. It is
precisely this consumerism of excess, this uselessness, that the mad men of advertising have
proved so adept at selling…. [this] excess is deeply alien to the satisfaction of wants, needs,
desires” (Harvey 275). Here, as in so many critiques of consumerism, an alienating excess bars
true satisfaction. The essentialism is palpable: real needs, authentic free time, real usefulness.
Behind this hums a utopianism of pure need met by rational use. The useful, the necessary, the
efficient: these track at least as much with conservatism as its opposite. Like the Left,
“conservatives remain leery … of the foolishness and frivolity of consumer culture,” and similarly argue for a return to “meaningful” activity (Robin 37). To explore this, I am going to invoke the mid-twentieth-century theorist Georges Bataille, and position him around Marx.

Unlike Marx who explores how surpluses are produced, Bataille starts with a surplus, an abundance of energy, which must be shed. Using the term maintenance in much the same way as Marx, as the things required to keep a person living and laboring in a particular time and place, Bataille writes “the living organism… receives more energy than is necessary for maintaining life; the excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system… if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit” (21). Kondo, at the individual level, follows this script: too much is the starting point, and the text focuses upon the work of ridding as prelude to (personal) growth. Kondo, like Bataille, puts shedding excess at the center of human experience. Both rationalize giving without return. On the one hand, this bestows upon all things the same equivalency and valuelessness that I criticized in Robinson. But it also reverses the role of usefulness in ways that ultimately allows work to register as useful for its own sake. To get to this, we need to follow his concept of waste. For Bataille, waste is useful. But only in “general.” Against (but ultimately in service of) the “general” need to waste, “particular” ends must manifest, ends which vary across time and space, from Egyptian pyramids, to Aztec sacrificial festivals, to North American Indian potlatch. Bataille’s project in The Accursed Share is to position all of these as various solutions to the problem of shedding surplus. While other peoples erected pyramids or found “relief” in festivals, “we use the excess to multiply ‘services’ that make life smoother, and we are led to reabsorb part of it by increasing leisure time” (24). For Bataille, “The only point [of these various examples of collective energy release] is the absence of utility…. They do render a
In Bataille’s theory, then, the needs and wants that we imagine driving our economy are a central mystification of modern life, analogous to Marx’s profit—pursued for reasons which don’t appear. For Bataille, “everything conspires to obscure the basic movement that tends to restore wealth to its function, to gift-giving, to squandering without reciprocation” (38). Utility is part of the conspiracy: as Bataille puts it “Economic activity, considered as a whole, is conceived in terms of particular operations with limited ends…. Economic science…. does not take into consideration a play of energy that no particular end limits” (23). In short, waste and use are bound together (120). On one hand, this actually is well recognized; all parties know that much of what consumerism brings is far from “necessary” even as increased consumer demand signals economic health. On the other hand, linking waste and use challenges the very premise of both, and problematizes, as mentioned, the critique of capitalism as producing waste and trivializing relations. This can itself be seen in comparing two strands of Marxist thought, one critical of the production of waste, the other critical of efficiencies demanded of labor. These thread through a number of components of Marx’s work, but can be characterized respectively by metabolic rift and alienation of labor.

Surprisingly for a figure so focused upon productivity, Marx’s work, taken as a whole, privileges porous, time-consuming, non-efficient activity—and casts it as non-alienated labor. But this bumps against an often-opaque idea about wise use that lurks around Marx’s thinking, an idea I’m calling “productive consumption.” This is not the same as productive labor. While the latter describes that which generates surplus value, productive consumption indicates labor aimed not at waste, but at social purpose. I take the term from a discussion of service work in
Capital I in which he writes about “tawdry products (use values) designed to gratify the most impoverished appetites and fancies,” saying “this part of productive labour produces use-values and objectifies itself in products that are destined only for unproductive consumption…. they have no use value for the process of reproduction” (1045, emphasis added). This intersects with his concept of metabolic rift, indicating a problem of wasteful production, a problem consumer capitalism has brought to extreme heights, showing plenty of prescience on Marx’s part. And yet this idea of productive consumption doesn’t seem to leave much room for activities that aren’t directly useful, nor does it sit well with alienation, which leads to a different valuation of inefficiency.

While the explicitly anti-essentialist “mature” Marx drops the term, the specter of “alienation,” as described by the “young” Marx yet haunts Capital, for with it Marx developed a rubric, of sorts, for good and bad labor, for how work has been dehumanized. Harvey explains that traditional Marxism excluded alienation “from consideration since it was a non-scientific concept that smacked of humanism and utopian desire articulated in the young Marx of … 1844 rather than through the objective science of Capital” (269). Yet alienation resonates with critics of capitalism. As Michael Heinrich notes, despite Marx’s dismissal of it, the theory of alienation “would go on to enjoy an extraordinary reception in the twentieth century” (21). This reception hinges on two key offerings within the term. First, alienation provides a way to address work as alternatively miserable, exploitative and impoverishing or enjoyable, fulfilling, and enriching. It also allows issues of mental health, oft confined to psychology, to be addressed outside the individualized and naturalized contexts of that discipline. As Matthews puts it, “For Marx, alienation was an illustration of capitalism’s mortifying physical and mental impact on humans” (52). Human contentment and pathology can be discussed, via alienation, without exorcizing
social inputs. But alienation, as discussed, also yields an image of good labor as porous and inefficient, and this rubs against the metabolism-oriented view of productive labor as good labor. The latter marks a return to essentialism, visible in the critique of consumerism as producing waste and trivializing human relations. The same article by Matthews demonstrates the extent to which this is taken. Following Baran and Sweezy, Matthews, exploring the origins and effects of loneliness, writes that under consumer capitalism “a frivolity had descended over much social interaction…. [T]he intellectual efforts needed [even] for conversation were made largely absent as social interaction became increasingly about acquaintances and small talk” (55). As mentioned above, this concern with frivolity has a conservative edge, approaching an affect Adorno finds in the “authoritarian personality,” namely, a sense that “it is good hard work that makes life interesting and worthwhile” (158). Participating in small talk seems like less of a problem than the idea itself, that everything needs to be “worthwhile.” None of this is to deny that capitalism produces waste, but rather to indicate the political stakes in labeling the wasteful and the useful.

The concept of gaps helps navigate this. Gaps itself has a strong reception in the twentieth century, including in feminist discourse. Nancy Fraser explains that “Contemporary capitalist society contains ‘gaps,’” provided by incomplete colonization of “what Eli Zaretsky has called ‘personal life’: a space of intimate relations, including sexuality, friendship, and love… that are lived as disconnected from the imperatives of capitalism” (181). Gaps, as such, are a component of Fraser’s disagreement with Judith Butler over the centrality of exploitation of homosexuality to the capitalist system. Contra Bulter, Fraser believes that “the economic disabilities of homosexuals are better understood as effects of heterosexism than hard-wired in the structure of capitalism” (183). With the latter view, as Fraser puts it, “Butler has
resurrected… one of the worst aspects of 1970s Marxism and socialist-feminism: the over-totalized view of capitalist society as a monolithic ‘system’ of interlocking structures of oppression that seamlessly reinforce one another. This view misses the gaps.” (183). Admittedly glossing over this conversation, I want to follow its logical extension vis-à-vis “gaps,” into the incomplete colonization of capitalism into personal life, and, as in Marx’s use, in the working day. In combination, this renders a foam-rubber image of “the system,” as a structure yet permeated with non-alienated pockets of space and time. I’ll return to the way this strengthens the structures of capitalism at the end of this chapter, but first let’s examine these spaces. On balance they suggest that the possibility of non-alienated labor within the channels of capitalism, or of “partially non alienated” is justified, whether or not it comes from folding your socks the right way. Still, that Marie Kondo finds non-alienated labor in folding clothes is a non-random example, because what she is actually making a case for is attention to storage, an activity which scrambles the line between waste and use.

Storage and preservation are fundamentally fertile activities, with preservation-via-container as the end of structures ranging from baskets and barrels, to Tupperware and warehouses, to tanks, banks, and the whole historical-geographical montage of domestic buildings. As huge and variegated as this category of containers is, its breadth and diversity pale to that of the human activities which produce, maintain and otherwise surround, permeate, resist and embellish these many containers. From stocking shelves to making barrels to carving gargoyles—storage and preservation, i.e. keeping—produces work, as well as works. The distance from storage and preservation to art is actually quite short. Paint, as mentioned, is one of the most basic materials of preservation, and of artistic representation and expression. Indeed, structures of storage are twined with skill and craft, and imbricated with arts and icons—from
patterns on baskets to the New York Skyline on the Chock Full of Nuts can, to the prints and television programming which hang on the inside walls of houses. Noting my own inability to contain this category of activity, I have to point out it includes the use of money, as storing value, and banking as storage of money. And it includes writing as storage of information. Ink, like paint, is a technology of preservation, providing a way to preserve information about everything from the mundane to the magnificent, yielding libraries and archives around the world, holdings which themselves range from bank records to epic poetry. Even the word story is rooted in storage. In short, acts of keeping, of fixing in time and place, intersect with many of our technologies and arts, technologies and arts seemingly both born from the impulse to store, yet also taking advantage of the surfaces and canvases created by containers. Efficient this is not, though calling it wasteful is absurd, tightly tied to preservation as it is. In any case, critiquing capitalism’s excesses and waste, and critiquing its alienating effect on labor and activity, while both logical and valid, raises a daunting question about drawing lines between waste and use.

If storage and preservation are a fundamentally important frame for understanding a culture, where can this be seen now? Commercial storage has risen up, as mentioned; numerous brands fill storage-niches, from California Closets to Rubbermaid. But the real issue of storage and preservation in the early twentieth-first century is that of data and information, and it brings us right back to the neoliberal subject, and selfhood among an excess which is also a dearth. As I write this, Facebook’s (and the rest of social media’s) role in the 2016 election is only just coming to light, but clearly the platform’s propriety power to analyze a historically unprecedented and perpetually expanding archive of information about people provided a tool for an organized campaign to increase anger and sow misinformation in such a way that the ability to present fact was drowned in noise. This is but one clear repercussion of the power
generated between this extraordinary holding of information—the “documentary trail following us,” as Richard Cox puts it—and the chaotic, excessive virtual world of stuff people put on the internet (Cardell 501). 2016 aside, keeping, and shedding, remain potent forces at the center of digital selfhood. Kylie Cardell puts Kondo’s calls for tidiness, read as type of curation of the self, into the context of online self-presentation, the “growing popularity of personal archives, in the record-keeping practiced by individuals in everyday life” (501). Cardell finds that this type of activity “addresses a contemporary subject adrift in everyday visual ephemera” and, in doing so, underwrites a sense of self—both “conservative and aspirational”—as “stable and linear, an object to be excavated from a mass of personal digital data” (506, 505). As she points out, this is very much in line with Kondo’s project (505). It is also, I would add, the same ideal posited by Housekeeping (minus the “digital” part.)

_The Conservatism of Self-Help_

I want to return here to Kondo and gaps. As discussed above, the idea is that spots—physical and temporal—of non-commodified, non-alienated human existence indeed populate the capitalist system found in between the spaces and times that capitalism counts and counts on. Housekeeping contains the possibility of such gaps, at least for members of the economic classes Kondo addresses, people with some degree of free time and personal space. In this very escape, however, “gaps” also contributes to alienation. Just as pockets of air within a structure make it both durable and light, this view of gaps strengthens the larger system, and keeps it from view. Kondo displays this throughout. For example, she writes that “Being messy is not hereditary nor is it related to lack of time. It has far more to do with the accumulation of mistaken notions about tidying” (6). Here, Kondo demonstrates the limits of self-help. Like all self-help, the onus is on
the individual. A direct assault on the generation of “mistaken notions” about desire and satisfaction and stuff is not in the texts’ purview. As Lam puts it, sampling responses by economists to Kondo, and quoting Financial Times columnist Tim Hartford, “the clutter that piles up in people’s apartments is a product of people’s cognitive blunders,” blunders which ascribe value to things that have none. Apparently, a number of “cognitive biases”—explained by “behavioral economics”—“keep us from being tidy.” Such economics allow an answer to the question, posed by Lam, “why do people have so much trouble throwing things out? Turns out, the answer lies in people’s heads.” As Laura Kipnis would put it, “Sorry hon, it’s you.”

Throughout all of this, social inputs are excised from view.

This is inherent to self-help. According to Noah Berlatsky’s “12 Rules for Spitting on the Poor,” “If the essence of neoliberalism is an ideological belief in the rigorous virtue of individual choice, then self-help books are the true heirs of Milton Friedman” (26). The self-help genre “doesn’t just happen to be apolitical,” but is helpful to selves precisely in the advice to ignore social and structural causes (26 original emphasis). As Berlatsky puts it, “recognizing unfairness in the world, or working to change that unfairness, isn’t simply outside the purview of self-help. It’s presented in self-help, as an actual barrier to happiness and achievement” (26). Surveying a number of recent examples, Berlatsky finds in all the advice to “set your house in perfect order before you criticize the world” (26). This example comes from Jordan Peterson’s 12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos, a title which betrays a central anxiety to which self help ministers, a sense that daily life is out of control and chaotic. Control is the bedrock of Kondo’s text, undergirding the central point that “when you put your house in order you put your affairs and your past in order too,” and actualize the future self you desire (4). Of the advice to put “your house in perfect order before you speak out,” Berlatsky writes that it is “a sweeping claim that
only the neatest, cleanest, most admirable people should dare protest injustice” a position that would “invalidate the work of… King… Mandela… Malcolm X, and basically every activist ever, since activists are human beings, and no human being has ever had their own life in perfect order” (26). As in Kondo’s text, self-help seems to jump from “order” to “perfect” order.

In Kondo’s discussion, the “perfect” pops up a lot—an entire section titled “Why you should aim for perfection,” asks, “what is the perfect amount of possessions? I think most people don’t know” (124). Kondo of course makes individual choice the standard. The perfect number of possessions is up to you, and few indications of ties to a global supply and labor chain will come of the Konmari method. Worth underscoring, however, is that “perfection” in Kondo’s cosmos, and “success” in her method, means, for everybody, less. She writes, “If you have lived in Japan or the United States all your life, you have almost certainly been surrounded by far more than you need” (124). In pre-neoliberal consumerism this would register as anti-establishment rhetoric; now it’s standard fare for magazines and websites such as Better Homes and Gardens, nearly every issue of which addresses the “curing” or “cutting” of “clutter.” As indicated in a number of anthropological studies, upper and upper-middle class aesthetics (and ethics) increasingly focuses upon less. Anne Meneley explains that

Movements such as minimalism exhort consumer restraint, a prestigious piety of conspicuous non-consumption, an aesthetic asceticism desirable to those who can afford what Veblen famously called conspicuous consumption: high quality, durable goods such as sleek marble countertops and hardwood floors, adorned only by distinctive objects. (118)

And while lack certainly remains a mark of poverty, the very conspicuous consumerism Veblen associated with the nouveau riche now “indicates a lower-class position—and is increasingly medicalized” (118). Clearly, in Meneley’s account, minimalism is no real break from consumerism.
In this vein, *Tidying Up* presents an absolute celebration of material objects, put in terms of consumerism. Generating a home space in which people “are surrounded only by the things they love” and in which assessing the extent of joy an object brings rests, of course, on the premise that stuff has the potential to bring lasting joy and contentment—a premise *Housekeeping* positions itself against. And the perfectly tidy space and life which forms the goal of the work (and the text), while not without its dollop of asceticism, is also rather fetishistic. In this light, the twenty-first-century minimalism-*in*-the-house follows a similar pattern as the twentieth-century minimalism-*of*-the-house: it takes more work. Constructing the austere, “clean” lines of mid-century architecture and furniture requires more work (and often more material) than busier traditional design in which trim boards and other decorative coverings allow seam-tolerances to be looser, materials to be rougher, edges to be less precise. Similarly, the perfectly tidy house really means more stuff-related work: a lot of touching and tossing and moving and cleaning. Konmari adherents should beware all the joy-sparks don’t burn down the house. Additionally, as known by anyone who has felt a bit uncomfortable in a very tidy space, tolerances for imperfection are themselves minimalized, which doesn’t auger well for lasting satisfaction.

The minimalist frame allows Kondo a drop of resistance to consumerism. The current US minimalist movement, according to Jason Rodriguez, is a group of (mostly online) writers who are “critical of US consumer habits and such associated phenomena as escalating credit card debt, environmental degradation, and cluttered living spaces, and [who] represented consumerism as an endless cycle of desire production” (286). The idea here is that recognition of “cluttered living spaces” as a negative product of consumer capitalism, like environmental degradation, makes minimalism a form of resistance, even as Kondo herself is categorized as a
minimalist who is “not always explicitly anti-capitalist” (287). Here and there, Kondo does, off-handedly, indicate larger issues behind having too much stuff. Against a gradualist approach to a “perfect” (few) number of possessions, Kondo explains that getting rid of one or two things a day, does “not compensate for the fact that when I shop I buy several items at one time” (18). While ignoring the production of desire, Kondo does drop anti-consumerist bits. She “urge[s] you to refrain from stocking up on things. Instead, buy only what you need” (164). About storage issues, she writes “there is no need to buy dividers or any other gadget. You can solve your storage problems with things you already have in the house” (147). Here again her maintenance-writer sensibilities peek out. The anti-capitalist valence of employing at-hand things, rather than purchasing something new, to repair and maintain, is a mainstay of people who write about upkeep. Still, advice to buy only what you need and to throw away unused items confirms the middle/upper class biases of American minimalism. Throwing unused things away is a privilege, and one that both contributes to, and sanctions, more purchasing. Also, buying in bulk is often cheaper than “buying only what you need,” thus “stocking up” is often a method of trimming expenses.

In terms of both housekeeping and possession itself, Kondo’s text contains two opposing logics. On the one hand is the effortless utopianism of the smoothly humming home, which pops up repeatedly as a sort of over-goal to which people should be working. Yet clearly the interest in her text focuses upon the exact opposite: tightening physical relationships between people and their stuff. Again and again she advises people that “the trick is to handle every item” and to make piles because they “give you an accurate grasp of how much you have” (41, 44). Her texts, as well as their popularity, indicate that a lot of the anxieties and concerns about housekeeping
attach less to drudgery, routine, and repetitive work within the home, than to a sense of excess and disarray, which the balm of direct, handed attention can salve.
Coda 1

“Very Well Contented”

The Maintenance of Work (And the Work of Maintenance)

in Robinson Crusoe

Maintenance raises a very basic question: what makes work good and what makes work bad, at individual, group, national and social levels. This question has haunted literature—and political economy and theory—since at least before the beginning of the novel, as Robinson Crusoe well-displays. Crusoe begins with a rejection of work, of both law and business, “employment[s]” Robinson calls “directly contrary to the life I delighted in” (36). More than anything he has an “inclination of wandering abroad,” and specifically of seafaring. A central irony of the text is that this wandering character, avoiding a comfortable middle station, spends most of it planted on an island, recreating the comforts of home. Robinson is drawn to such work—the work of preservation, storage, husbandry, home-making, tool repair—work of maintenance and upkeep. This quality precedes his time on the island: Even as he departs from Brazil, acting, as he says as “his own destroyer” to set out in a new direction, he “took all possible caution to preserve my effects and keep up my plantation” (36). Robinson is, despite his wandering aimless nature, a preservation, provision and storage machine. Or, maybe not despite: aimless wandering has one aspect similar to maintenance and upkeep: it is endless, it is the type of work which just goes on and on.

Robinson likes this work, or at least doesn’t not like it. Despite the occasional lament of “infinite” labor, he constantly comes up with reasons, often shaky, to keep working. For example, the doubled wall of sharpened posts encircling his home. Of this fortification, he says
“I spent sometimes two days in cutting and bringing home one of these posts, and a third day in driving it into the ground” (56). Here, as elsewhere, work structures and carries his narrative. Interrupting these descriptions of work are frequent moments of woeful discontent at being “set…upon this dismal island,” where he finds, “I wanted many things” (55). These moments occur when he is not working. He doesn’t lament the “infinite” work itself. He utters no such line such as: ‘I spent two days sharpening a single stake, and a third pounding it into the ground with an iron crow bar, woe is me. Please, God, get me off this island.’ No, moments of work are misery-free.

If Robinson likes such work, so too does Defoe. The text itself operates as vehicle for displaying the work of upkeep, with which it is overfilled. Detailed descriptions of making pots, raising goats, building a home, fixing roofs, raising grain, ordering supplies and developing a daily routine not only provide Crusoe the character with contentment, but the text with much of its content. In depicting an isolated individual re-inventing quotidian technology, Defoe makes a major achievement, rare in the genre Ian Watt credits him with giving “rise” to: he renders the work of daily upkeep in fascinating terms, even as he renders the tedium of such work. Of the novel-form, Watt makes primary the desire to display “truth to individual experience, which is always unique and therefore new” (13). For Defoe, he writes, “the writer’s exclusive aim is to make the words bring home his object to us in all its concrete particularity, whatever the cost in repetition or parenthesis or verbosity” (29). For Defoe, repetition, parenthesis and verbosity don’t detract from realistic portrayal of experience, but are in fact strategies for delivering it. Re-invention, and re-discovery of mundane, not-unique techniques, along with repetition of activity, well-captures fidelity to experience, as lived by readers, whose reading time is bracketed by a host of oft-repeated activities. Parenthesis too generates a sort of Defoeian realism: some of the
most interesting passages of the text read like a tangle of work, one leading to the next, detouring in and out of tasks and projects and time. For example, here is a representative paraphrase of the infinitum of tasks the text consists of:

…this done, I discovered a need to store barley, not yet existent, but soon to be abundant, which led me, Robinson, to cut twigs for a basket—twigs which I dried for a season—then I made a great many baskets (which I learned to do, by the way, as a boy watching and helping village basket-makers—such observant- and helpfulness being part of the general disposition of boys—so I knew what I was doing); with these baskets I could carry dirt, or lay up anything I might want [which is anything and everything.] Done with this, I then needed a pot—well, I did have one pot, but it was too big—plus I needed a pipe, but I’ll tell you about that later. Then I spent the summer planting the second row of stakes around my second home. Did I mention raisins? I now made raisins, and I packed up a bunch and went exploring the island. Oh, and soon after I trained a parrot to speak. (91-2)

Not without its absurdity, this orgy of activities is yet not without its realness. Were I to write out the things I did over the last week that might be called work, it wouldn’t be all that different, in terms of repetition, verbosity, and parenthesis.

The text itself reflects a tension between tedium and excitement. A great adventure story, it is yet painfully repetitive. To read the lists and tangles of tasks which make up the literary work is, for me anyway, to fluctuate with Crusoe between a desire to escape, to finish, to be delivered of the tedium, and an inclination to continue, to keep the work going, to find satisfaction, along with the character, in all this activity. In truth, this captures how I feel about all work, literary and otherwise. I like it, but also I don’t. As such, Defoe’s text captures the experience of work in a way that deserves the term realism. And, yet, satire abounds: the central character not only waffles over his own contentment—he’s happy, he’s miserable, he’s happy, he’s miserable—but frequently contradicts himself regarding his needs and the ends to which he works.

Against what still seems like the dominant approach to this text, Defoe underscores the
lack of rationality in all this work. So, Crusoe worries over his food supply amid description of heaps of food. He no sooner explains that “I had no need to be venturous, for I had no want of food…and…very good too” then he ventures off to the other side of the island, finds it even more plentiful, and laments that he’s “taken up my lot on the worst side of the island” (93, 94). Back home, he expresses momentary “satisfaction” at returning, then starts his massive barley operation; as it grows, birds start eating it. His reaction? “I should be starved” (99). From the first, Defoe describes abundant food supply on the island. As with hunger, so too does the work put toward safety rest on questionable ends. The double fence of oversized posts protects a home already built off the ground. Later, he encircles it again. In the extent to which Crusoe finds want (indeed manufactures it) Defoe explores something other than a straight-forward fit of means to ends. This does not mean hunger and safety and self-preservation (or wealth and power) are unnecessary. They are fundamentally important, as ends to which the work is bent. It’s just that the action or activity often precedes the reason for it. And, to invoke my title, the work of maintenance well serves to maintain work, both within the plot, and for the literary work itself.

Perhaps the greatest contradiction around the ends to which work is put is “Ease.” “Giving over,” the search for a ship—a search which basically doesn’t happen—Robinson explains “I began to apply myself to accommodate my way of living, and to make things as easy to me as I could” (58). Best way to find ease? Hard Labor! Robinson starts making a table and chairs, and then more chairs. These terms, apply and easy, appear in the same contradictory relationship, a relationship which makes work the route to ease, in Crusoe’s father’s speech, at the beginning of the text. The middle station described isn’t pure leisure, but ease achieved through application and industry. The father thus presents his son with a contradiction about work, a still familiar one, in which the ends “ease and pleasure” are achieved through
“application and industry”; in which work is the route to leisure. At the same time, both ease and labor are themselves denigrated, the labor and sufferings of the mechanic part of mankind should be avoided as much as the embarrassments of the upper part.

In order for the narrative to proceed, Robinson needs to go, but he’s taking these dual denigrations/celebrations (of labor and of ease) with him, contradictions which have been carried into our own culture. What makes Crusoe interesting is his fluidity, a state of constant movement. In the novel’s best known part, life on the island, movement in place, rather than ocean-crossing fill the text. Yet, in another testament to its realism, Defoe makes his character incapable of seeing busy-ness and work as ends in themselves. This might not be his problem alone: process simply has no form without a conception of the product, the end, the reason, to which work is put. Busyness must become business. Which makes maintenance itself, rather than success, or greatness, a perhaps less pathological thing upon which to focus and aim, because it just goes on and on.

What I believe to be the greatest benefit of both studying and performing maintenance is that it offers satisfying work for individuals while drawing attention to dependencies, often hidden. Yet, maintenance is often myopic and focused on the moment, which entails the opposite of such revelation. Defoe models these two sides: the central character, who expresses “great satisfaction” in his own labors of domestic re-invention, is yet supported by the work of slaves, and by a burgeoning world of production from which scores of tools and raw materials wash up, from two separate shipwrecks, on his radically individualized shores, ready-at-hand. In a section in which Crusoe figures out how to make bread, this myopia intersects with the experience of satisfying work. In it, Robinson says, “It is a little wonderful, and what I believe few people have thought much upon—namely, the strange multitude of little things necessary in the providing,
curing, dressing, making, and finishing this one article of bread. I that was reduced to a mere state of nature found this to my daily discouragement” (100). Two things must be discounted here: first, despite his claim, Crusoe isn’t at all “discouraged” by this effort. In fact, it’s the complete opposite. In a multi-page series of all the necessary tasks of bread-making, Defoe provides the text with one of its most enthusiastic moments of discovery, discovery of how to do something very basic. Soon after this moment, Crusoe expresses “joy” at his success (103). Second, Crusoe is not “reduced to a mere state of nature,” as he himself is occasionally aware. Shortly after this bread-making section, he reflects on “the good providence” of the shipwreck being “cast up nearer to the shore” and imagines what would have been “had [he] got nothing out of the ship” an image which includes ripping animals open with his teeth. To call Robinson Crusoe an ironic treatise to human interdependence would be too far. Still, readers are provided, via the re-enactment of upkeep, a display of the extent of mundane labor which supports the worlds they inhabit.

I want to return to the idea of pathology. I submit that Americans (or maybe “moderns” is a more appropriate term) are crazy about work, and by “crazy about,” I mean both enamored, and less than sane. Like a lover, work absorbs our hopes and fears; we obsess about it when it’s not around and get annoyed with it when it is. We see in it a route to success, a source of lasting satisfaction and a balm to national maladies. Yet we let it use us, and accept a host of racial, sexual and occupational inequalities that contradict basic national ideals, and every moral code. We too work for leisure, and then often use it to keep busy.

Google almost any quotidian activity: production, preservation and preparation of food; construction of garments; throwing of clay; expansion of domiciles; training of pets—and you
see that Robinson Crusoe is not alone in finding something compelling in such work. As in Defoe’s text, much of the excitement around such activities draws on the language of discovery and adventure: the discovery of figuring out how to do something mundane. For example, frustrated at the dearth of quality goat-raising guides, Ted Allen explains on Raising-Goats.com, that he “set out to find these secrets myself. It was not easy at first, but I pursued and persevered. I ended up doing my own research to find out the truth about these secrets so that I can take good care of my own herds.” On the one hand, I want to celebrate the “adventure” of figuring out how to do something fairly basic and “useful”—ie, not hang-gliding. The moments of my own life in which I’ve find myself drawn lustily into the details of a particular mundane activity, such as carpentry, but also, and more recently, pickling cucumbers, are pretty far up there in contentment. Somewhat Crusoe-like, I find myself applying ends to such work. For example, my pickles make great gifts, and I can now eat pickles all year long. Whether these ends are legitimate or not is questionable; that they are applied after I’ve decided to make the pickles is not: they are, like so many ends, tacked on. I honestly don’t know what makes the activity so appealing. But there is definitely something of contentment, in the process of making and then ordering content. Again, the popularity of similar activities shows I’m not the only one.

Bizarrely—and also in line with Crusoe—the language of “ease” also attaches to these activities. Ted Allen’s website has a giant red banner telling viewers to “Finally, Discover The Simple Steps on How To Raise Goats Easily.” “Off the Grid.com” meanwhile, tells me that I’ll “be amazed at how easy it is [to tan a deer hide]” while dozens of youtube videos offer some variation on “how to make a dress in x number of easy steps”. My favorite, from Birdtricks.com, is a double your money back guarantee to “Teach your parrot how to talk in less than 48 hours!” Of course the easiest way to make a dress, tan a deer hide, raise a goat or train a parrot is to not
do so. I say this, in particular, to the ghost of John Locke, still haunting us with the impulse to justify our heaps with rational ends: the “Industrious and Rational” are very often one and the same as the Fanciful and Covetous.

I want to end with the parrot: While a number of these activities fit under a rubric of upkeep (though an admittedly capacious one) others—such as teaching a parrot to talk—fit less comfortably. One could probably argue that teaching Poll to talk is an act of maintenance, perhaps of sanity, providing Crusoe with someone to speak with. My point in ending with the parrot, however, is that teaching it to speak aims at the maintenance of work—i.e., something to keep busy with. I raise this as first a rear guard against any idea that I’m promoting a type of bootstrapism, or claiming, to borrow a line from Adorno’s Authoritarian Personality Survey, that what makes life living is good hard work. Attention to the work of upkeep shows how thin the distinction between work and “leisure pursuits” is—a point which ultimately leads away from the current political economic ideology that people’s social value is denoted by their ability to provide productive labor. Among a number of other things, what makes life worth living is some combination of useful and unnecessary activity—and maintenance serves both. Moreover, maintenance shows that they aren’t really separable. People who perform daily upkeep are also people who decorate the day: the ones who make delicious food, who water the house plants, who feed the pets. As elsewhere in this dissertation, art itself links with upkeep, well shown by the relationships between food and gourmet cooking and shelter and architecture. Paint is one of the most basic materials of both material preservation and artistic representation, a point I never get tired of making. Crusoe isn’t a painter, but he is a writer, and it is thus interesting that one of the few things he never succeeds in making is ink. And it is here that this novel about a radically isolated individual can be seen pointing to the deeply social, interdependent and humanizing
nature of upkeep. One doesn’t get to write if one is truly “independent”—the only thing a truly independent person gets to do is scavenge for food.
1. Maintenance, Maintenance, Everywhere

As landlord of the King’s Court Shopping Plaza, I pick up lots of trash. Once upon a time, I took the litter personally, as if picking it up one day, the place should stay clean the next. Now, I take it like weather. Heavy or light, it will be there. Scratch-offs and floss picks, duck-sauce and bindle-bags, napkins, tissues, plastic forks. Each tenant’s business generates a unique trash-footprint: take-out boxes from the Chinese restaurant; balled-up foil from the deli; used mouth guards from the MMA gym. Then there’s the package store—the El Niño of trash. Everyday, brown bags with crushed cans, fifths flattened by tires, bottles, broken or intact. A box of Bud-Lite cans by a loading dock on Saturday morning; a cluster of Watermelon Smirnoff nips, left like deer scat by the curb. And lots and lots of cigarette butts.

To this trash, and King’s Court in general, I owe credit for the capacious use of the term “maintenance” as employed in this dissertation. Property management entails work immediately recognizable as maintenance: grounds-keeping and roof-patching; repointing and repainting; snowplowing and pot-hole-filling. But it also includes other work—bookkeeping, marketing empty units, negotiating with tenants, hiring contractors, securing loans, paying taxes—less recognizable “maintenance,” but which yet aims at keeping the building in place, and the business running. Running my business depends on tenants running theirs. Like Alice’s Red Queen, at King’s Court we’re all running in place, and it takes a lot of work.
Beyond management and busy-ness, the plaza reveals an even wider horizon of maintenance. The upkeep of property, income-producing and value holding, thus a piece of capital, bringing home its bacon. Maintaining King’s Court means maintaining class, and social relations from which I benefit. And the trash itself? Maintaining the plaza means perpetuating many systemic problems: waste, sprawl, environmental damage, the alienated labor of global mass production. And the point of all this work, and money, and alcohol, and exercise, and new old lamps from the antique store? Upkeep, too, I think—of lifestyle and recreation and compulsion, of satisfaction and health and vice, and on and on.

As one way of unpacking all this, let me offer a three-part distinction.

**Static-object maintenance:**

Activity aimed at creating stasis; keeping the there *there*.

**Motive-object maintenance:**

Activity aimed at perpetuating repetitive or fluid motion; running; keeping the happening *happening*.

**Abstract-object maintenance:**

Activity aimed at perpetuating less-than-clearly-defined conditions; keeping up satisfaction, safety, self-esteem, wealth, health, happiness, contentment, success, and of warding off their opposites.

Not meant as ridged categories, nor to conflate cleaning bathrooms with owning property, these terms help untangle, as well as underscore the breadth of activity aimed at upkeep. And they overlap. Take for example Coast Guard Ice Breakers opening shipping lanes in winter months: as metal objects exposed to wear and weather, as complex vehicles being run, and as devices by
which consumption continues, they intersect all three. Ships, upon which both commerce and empire depend, tend to make great examples of the breadth of maintenance.

At the plaza, upkeep isn't just a part of reaching a goal, but actually is the goal. Keeping the building in place and the businesses open is the whole point. Recognizing maintenance as an objective rebuffs the constant invocation of growth and change, the hegemony of the new, which prompts even property management trade magazines to explain that managers must “manage through change” as the market invents “new property types, and… new management opportunities” (Alexander and Muhlebach 36). The stakes of this recognition are high, as indicated by this very article, which notes that “one cannot manage change that is occurring in the market and in society, but one can develop strategies and tactics for managing through it” (Alexander and Muhlebach 36). This morsel of political economic wisdom has itself enjoyed a long shelf life, stemming from Adam Smith’s invisible hand formula which celebrates self-interested activity over economic planning. I note this because, with recognition of upkeep as a fundamental aim of much economic activity, the logic of market spontaneity drops away in the face of oft-hidden dependencies. Furthermore, the logic of future potential drops away in the face of the real things—the many, many things—held in time and space by human hands.

As landlord and property manager, I actually work against change, and toward perpetuation—of both building and business. Keeping the building in place against wear of weather and time and use (not to mention taxes and insurance and debt) provides a place for tenants to operate their businesses, and thus pay me rent, which I use to keep up the building. Together, we keep streams of rent flowing, or at least trickling—upwards, for the most part—over time.
2. Roofs and Leases: Technology of Maintenance

This article is not about such work, not directly. It is about “technologies of maintenance”—the systems, structures, texts and ideologies that produce and mediate such labor and activity. As an example, consider roofs. Roofs are a technology of maintenance not because they require upkeep (though of course they do, in a very literal sense) but because they play a maintenance-function: not just kept up, they keep up. In mute criticism of Joseph Schumpeter, roofs ward off disruptive influences of weather, climatic and economic, and define a stable area, usable for the same purposes, everyday. Roofs, that is, produce maintenance. Domestic roofs produce domestic maintenance and commercial ones commercial maintenance. Leases also produce maintenance, and aim at upkeep. The plaza lease, in particular, mediates the activities described above by defining clear static and motive ends (building and businesses) and, as I will discuss below, grounds abstract aims in concrete ones. Full of jargon, boiler plate and the stilted syntax of legalese—the shalls and herebys that offer a feudalistic residue quite fitting for a place named “King’s Court”—plaza-leases are yet a technology of maintenance worth cautious, partial, emulation.

What do leases aim to maintain? Not only building and business, but a mutually-binding relationship: tenant-landlord. Defining this relationship in clear terms, the first paragraph of my plaza lease reads, “Landlord leases to Tenant and Tenant rents from Landlord the premises known as [address].” After limiting this relationship to a specific place, for a specific amount of time, the third paragraph lays out the specific “Use”:

Tenant covenants and agrees to use the Demised Premises as a Glass and Metal Fabrication shop [—as a Newspaper Business; as a Recording Studio; as a Church; as a Hair Salon; as a Locksmith Shop; as a Retail Liquor Store—] and agrees not to use or permit the premises to be used for any other purpose without written prior consent of the landlord, which consent shall not be unreasonably withheld or delayed. The landlord shall
have the discretion to withhold consent for the use of the premises for a purpose that competes with other leases. (1)

Do your thing, the lease says, as long as it’s reasonable, and as long as it doesn’t interfere with my other relationships, which, rest assured, will not interfere with yours.

How does the lease maintain this relationship? Like a roof, suspended to block what might fall from the sky, the lease raises a wide, protective expanse of verbiage against what might befall, a sort-of proactive dragnet, catching in an anticipatory way, any potentially disruptive factors. These include: competition from other tenants, property tax increases, late payments, returned payments, non-compliance with town, state, or federal regulations; both the allowance, and the suffering, of “any odors, vapors, steam, water, vibrations, noises or undesirable effects” (8). They include disruption from broken furnaces, A/Cs, water heaters, lights, plate glass; from fire, accidents, attorney’s fees, claims of negligence, damage or destruction by “flood, fire, tornado, explosion, windstorm, or by the elements or other casualty” (8). They include total condemnation, partial condemnation, subletting, mechanics’ liens, interruption in utility service, bankruptcy, default, non-compliance of signage, and disruption from “all labor disputes, civil commotion, war, war-like operations, invasion, rebellion, hostilities, military or usurped power, sabotage, [and, my favorite] from governmental regulations or controls” (11).

Much of the lease simply lists potential disruptions to compact, business and property. No wonder John Locke, that herald of contractual submission, envisioned the environment around pacts as populated with threats. Anything that might “interfere unreasonably with the safety, comfort or enjoyment of the building by Landlord or any other occupants of the building or their customers” is raised, and a method is provided for dealing with it. In this, the lease aims at more abstract objects: safety, comfort, enjoyment (3). It reads “Tenant, upon paying rents and
performing all the terms on its part to be performed, shall peaceably and quietly enjoy the
Demised Premises, subject nevertheless, to the terms of this lease” (11). Such abstract ends, as
well as such subjection, follow Locke’s own take on contractual relations. In the “Property”
chapter of *The Second Treatise of Government*, he writes that men “joyn and unite into a
Community, for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living, in a secure Enjoyment of their
Properties, and a greater Security against any that are not of it” (331). Locke is talking about
subjection to government, and my lease involves subjection to, among other things, rent. But
there is a more important difference. The lease keeps up peaceable and quiet enjoyment by
assigning responsibility for various types of maintenance, ie by rooting the contract in the
upkeep of clearly defined things. This occurs, ironically for a document steeped in economic
liberalism, by binding people to a place.

In this, leases and novels (the literature of liberalism) are worth juxtaposing: novels take
specific characters and move them around in time and space, generating a cohesive series of
happenings—a plot. Readers note changes as a way of understanding the work: the Pequod gets
to the Pacific; Uncle Tom goes down river, Eliza makes it to Canada; Beloved returns and then
departs, again. The lease on the other hand creates universal characters with no personality, and
then describes a few hundred ways in which they might stay in place, doing the same thing over
and over again.

And yet, the lease actually provides a lot of room for change—for both growth and its
opposite—as well as for a lot of variety. Each version describes nearly identical terms, yet each
mediates very different tenant-landlord relationships, ranging from “let’s have a beer” to “see
you in court.” Variation within repetition plays a major role in the plaza-lease’s evolution. In
many ways they—or really “it”—is a living document, altered with every new tenant and option
period, and often, against the contingencies of the moment, ignored. While binding, the realities of small business in twenty-first century suburban Connecticut often destabilize the lease, and tenants who find they need more or less space, or who need a reduction in rent, or need, simply, to leave, mid-term, not infrequently find their lease more fluid then it appeared. Written, maintained, and revised in personal interactions, as well as in binding language, the lease provides an example of a type of text which plans and orders relations in a deterministic way, yet lends itself to ad hoc tailoring.

3. The Plaza Lease: Clear Gray Mediation

As such, the plaza-lease exhibits qualities of “gray” mediation. The term “gray media,” refers to contracts, maps, user agreements, as well as to issues of access to and legibility of such documents. A central issue of gray media is the way documents deploy authority, power, and control, often in less than clear ways (thus a related term “opaque media”). So, Luciano Floridi explores how gray media facilitates “gray power,” which is “an ability to control events and people’s behavior by influencing the influencers, behind the scenes” (13). Paul Klee describes the “‘gray point’ as a multivalent nucleus that oscillates between chaos and the emergence of an order” (11). About gray media, Susan Leigh Star writes that “Many information systems… employ what literary theorists would call a master narrative, or a single voice, that does not problematize diversity. This voice speaks unconsciously from the presumed center of things” (4). In short, one aspect of “gray” is the way institutional and technological methods of record-keeping go hand in hand with the often “recessive” deployment of normalizing authority.

In addition to ordering information and fixing-in-place norms and methods, gray also describes the less-than-compelling nature of such texts. According to Fuller and Goffey, “Grayness marks the breakdown of clearly defined contrasts… a certain blankness that is not
indifference or affectlessness but something approaching… the ‘neutral,’ a fading and withdrawal…” (11). This “opaque” aspect of gray mediation is especially problematic in light of the fact that such documents order and plan our time and space. Amid all the “gray,” the stakes and agents and methods and requirements of such ordering can go unnoticed—as an example consider the user agreements we sign off on with nary a glance. All such documents might usefully be considered as technologies of maintenance; the use of doing so is the illumination of the actual things such documents aim to keep up.

While much gray media aims at keeping up things which aren’t immediately clear, the plaza lease, despite thick verbiage, puts it all out front: rent, usable space, tenant/landlord relations. Such clarity can be seen in the “Use” paragraph:

Tenant covenants and agrees to use the Demised Premises as a Glass and Metal Fabrication shop [—as a Newspaper Business; as a Recording Studio; as a Church; as a Hair Salon; as a Locksmith Shop; as a Retail Liquor Store—] and agrees not to use or permit the premises to be used for any other purpose without written prior consent of the landlord, which consent shall not be unreasonably withheld or delayed. The landlord shall have the discretion to withhold consent for the use of the premises for a purpose that competes with other leases” (1).

This defines a clear, harmonic and not very demanding relationship. This harmony often comes through clear divvying of maintenance. So while clause “f.” of the “Repairs and Conditions” section explains that “Tenant shall be responsible for maintaining the front entry of the Demised Premises and the rear loading dock area of the Demised Premises,” section “g.” makes clear that “The Landlord shall be responsible for allowing vehicular traffic to and from and in the parking areas at front and rear of the Demised Premises” (4). You do this & I’ll do that, says the lease, and together we shall peaceably and quietly enjoy the mutually desired results of our legal relationship.
In protecting this relationship, the lease demonstrates an irony, with some purchase in gray media in general. The opacity of the language comes as the lease strives for clarity. The clarity aimed at is one of responsibility in the face of possible unknowns, a goal which requires working through lots of potentials, which builds up verbiage, which creates opacity. But, underscored by use of labeled paragraphs and enumerated lists, the document itself tries To Be Clear.

This aim sits alongside another impulse, which is to limit my responsibility. Thus even the clarity offered by the labeled paragraphs is limited in the lease’s last section, number 36, titled “Captions,” which explains “The captions, numbers, and index appearing herein are inserted only as a matter of convenience, and are not intended to define, limit, construe or describe the scope or intent of any paragraph, nor in any way affect this Lease” (15). But this matter of convenience shouldn’t be discounted, since even as the lease limits landlord responsibility by assigning it to the tenant, it does so by striving for transparency of responsibility in the face of knowns and unknowns. The aim of clarity actually structures the text itself, via grammatical methods such as the list form, and the hypothetical conditional clause, both of which maximize the capacity of sentencing. Frequently the list form and the hypothetical conditional blend into full paragraphs of listed possibilities interstacked with each possibility’s prescription, like fingers in folded hands, yielding sentences unshackled from periods or limits on comma and semi-colon usage. Opacity proliferates—this really is “boiler plate.”

Yet such opacity should perhaps not be devalued, or even feared—and not only because it indicates the attempt at clarity in the face of unknowns, and thus at the perpetuation of a relationship. But because, if and when a particular problem arises—a threat to harmonic compact such as a malfunctioning furnace, or payments delayed by governmental regulations—the
grayness of the relevant passage of the lease drops away, and it takes on a lot of color. This “coloring” may help distinguish “gray” from “opaque” in a useful way: opaque refers to thickness and understandability while gray invokes issues of relevance and care. Opaque is difficult to make sense of; Gray is not worth the effort. Thus a section in the lease which delegates responsibility for heating equipment goes from gray to color very quickly when the furnace’s heating coil rusts out of its mounts, drops through the plenum and lodges in the ductwork—ie, when ten grand suddenly hinges on a few lines of text. Yet the opacity of the section might remain, especially if—as often happens—the bit of color is buried in an interminable list-like sentence rife with conditional clauing and immoderate comma usage. Having spent a lot of time with my lease in writing this, I’m fairly convinced, as argued above, that the lease is not doing this on purpose—that the opacity is actually a result of an attempt to be clear, and that the grayness, in turn, is a result of the opacity. But this might not be true in other types of opaque media, in which bits of very relevant information—the selling of personal info to third parties pops to mind—are purposefully couched in grayness. I find myself returning the role of “captions” and other devices of textual navigation—perhaps when opacity can’t be avoided, the presence or absence of such devices indicates the extent to which grayness is accidental or purposeful.

The clarity and specificity of the real estate lease is a valuable, and workable, part of the contract. Our contract with the state, conversely, is as abstract as it gets. We seem to have little control over government or the larger economy, and no clear role in either—aside from being sources of taxation, and labor, and as a consumer base. Yet the state and the economy deliver unto us our property, and routines, as well as many of those abstract-objects listed above. In Locke’s theory of government, and in neoliberal theories of economy, abstractions lead. Whether
it’s development, security, progress, wealth or even equality, it comes first, and putting abstractions first, as I tell my composition students, just doesn’t work. The lease, on the other hand, backgrounds abstract motives, rooting them in concrete aims. It keeps up peaceable and quiet enjoyment by rooting them in the upkeep of clearly defined things—roofs, heat, rent.

4. Foucault, Dussell and Re-Spontaneous Order

Clarity and accessibility are important not only because gray media entails substantial bodies of information that tend toward opacity, but because such documents involve accretions of information, built up over time, and revised based on demands of the moment. Clarity and accessibility contribute to such composition and revision coming from the ground up, not only from the top down. Against the issue of authority, this openness comes up a lot in discussions of gray media. James Goebel and Anirban Gupta-Nigam, looking at gray media in terms of information management, explain that such management is “constantly being revised and improved” (2). Responding to Star, they write that the problem of authority means “the challenge for social scientists… is to develop indirect reading practices… in which ‘every conceivable form of variation in practice, culture, and norm is inscribed at the deepest levels of design’”(4). Inscribing variation is no easy task since variation arises in use, and needs to be inscribed in design, which—at least in traditional, mainstream concepts—precedes use. While reading practices are indeed necessary—especially the calls for a “suspicious attentiveness” when using gray documents (ie: pay attention, potential renters, you’re on the hook for the furnace)—I think this speaks to the need for writing practices which allow bottom-up variation to be inscribed in a top down way. What we’re talking about with “gray media” is the creation of order(s), and I think the term helps point to a certain need: the need for methods by which order and planning
depart from both Foucaudian institutional control and Hayekian spontaneous order. Gray media, that is, might just offer a method of planning yet open to bottom up, democratic control—a sort of re-spontaneous order in which knowledge derived in use can be inscribed in design.

This brings us back to maintenance, for keeping things up (or running) provides a context in which response can develop in use. Matthew Crawford’s concept “the ethics of maintenance and repair” is again salient (6). Such ethics hinges on his conception of agency, which intersects individuality and self-reliance with interdependence and care. Agency “is not something arbitrary and private. Rather, it flows from an apprehension of real features in the world….the goodness in question isn’t simply posited. There is a progressive revelation of why one ought to aim at just this, as well as how one can achieve it (207). This “progressive revelation” of not only how-to, but why-to, develops in the process of work, specifically the work of upkeep. Maintenance in this sense is responsive, rather than spontaneous; aims and requirements manifest in the moment, yet are “not simply posited,” but objective, in both senses of the word.

The question is, how might such ‘re-spontaneity’—a kind of middle ground between devolved and hierarchical authority—extend to economic and political contexts of upkeep? What technologies of maintenance might best reveal, record, deploy and revise these non-private, non-arbitrary ends?

The answer can only be found in something that Foucault has taught the left to fear: those big ordering and planning mechanisms called institutions. By considering institutions as technologies of maintenance, as well as objects of maintenance, they take on a less sinister aspect. The lease, as well as the plaza, simply exemplifies aspects of institutional arrangements. Many of these should be dismissed, most obviously the private nature of the document, its
limitation to two parties’ control (despite affect upon others, such as employees), and the
privilege it bestows on yours truly, the landlord. But a few aspects deserve emulation. Starting
from basic Lockean liberalism—freedom to enter contract—the plaza-lease intersects clear
‘static’ objectives (upkeep of space and structure) with clear ‘motive’ ones (upkeep of businesses
and a clearly-defined human relationship). By focusing upon upkeep it helps generate the context
in which re-spontaneity, as described above, can occur.

As mentioned, studies of maintenance frequently describe re-spontaneous effects of
upkeep. Nathan Ensmenger’s discussion of software and maintenance offers a clear example. He
explains that “the real work of [software] maintenance…. involve[s] what are vaguely referred to
in the literature as ‘enhancements,’” a catchall term for “responses to changes in the business
environment.” Basically, people constantly use programs beyond expectations: “[a]s users learn
to exploit the capabilities of the system, they ‘discover or invent new ways of using it’ which
encourages developers to modify or extend the system, which stimulates another round of user
driven innovation or process change, which in turn generates demand for new features.” Like
maintenance in general, “the work of software development [is] never done,” which in turn
suggests that upkeep should be considered ‘response to use’ as much as ‘performance as
expected.’

‘Performance as expected’ and ‘response to use’ denote two ostensibly opposite stances
toward technology—one deterministic, rigid, and top-down, the other accretive, fluid and
bottom-up. The latter is particularly well-expressed in David Edgerton’s The Shock of the Old,
which re-focuses mainstream history of technology away from invention and innovation, to use,
in time and space. By doing so, Edgerton writes “we shift attention from the old to the new, the
big to the small, the spectacular to the mundane, the masculine to the feminine, the rich to the
poor.” He suggests much is to be gained if we consider constructed objects not as technology but as things. “Thinking about the use of things,” he writes, “rather than of technology, connects us directly with the world we know rather than the strange world in which ‘technology’ lives” (xvii). As he points out, the vast majority of technologies are basic, familiar and are constantly being fixed, altered, combined and improvised in use.

“Performance as expected,” on the other hand, encapsulates a dark version of technology: Foucault’s. Foucault describes “calculated technology of subjection” meant “to solve the problem of the accumulation of men [through] the growth of an apparatus of production capable of both sustaining them and using them”—clearly a repressive force, as well as a maintainive one (221). Under, and supporting, a “system of rights that were egalitarian in principal” Foucault locates “all those systems of micro-power that are essentially non-egalitarian and asymmetrical that we call the disciplines” (222). What are these disciplines and micro-powers? These technologies of subjection? Somewhat surprisingly, Foucault is also talking about very mundane “things”—schools, and the skills learned therein, hand-writing and doctor’s exams, programs, like the ones Ensmenger discusses, and, of course, shopping plazas and leases. I think this actually offers some hope for ‘technology of power’ which promotes democratic control—at least if one entertains the possibility that institutions by which power is accumulated, are not always and only invisible prisons, binding and proscriptive as they may be.

Enrique Dussel offers such an approach, and pinpoints why “maintenance” is the key component. Dussel views institutions as potentially positive, as originally constructed in the spirit of service and obedience to people. But, over time, “these institutions show on the one hand signs of fatigue through a process of entropy and erosion, and on the other hand the inevitable fetishization that bureaucracy produces in institutions… turning them toward the
survival of a self-referential bureaucracy” (23). As this occurs, obedience is lost and repression ensues. As such, Dussel describes political action and democracy as perishable. He writes that “political action is a precise, contingent, and perishable moment. Through repetition in time… such actions become deposited and coagulated in institutions…. These institutions both accumulate the achievements of past strategic actions and serve as the condition for future actions” (45. Democracy, like software development and shopping-plaza maintenance, “is a perpetually unfinished system,” unfolding in the moment yet “accumulated” in time; the components of this system require constant maintenance (51). While Dussel describes this work as “the noble vocation of politics … a thrilling patriotic and collective task,” I think it might be closer to picking up trash (xv).
Origins:
Sarah Winchester and Paris, in Connecticut

1. Paris in Meriden, CT

With an orange dripless caulk gun and like two hundred paper towels, I fill and smooth the gaps in the crown molding, moving my ladder around the octagonal nightmare of bathroom, with its million corners, trying to avoid the homeowners’ shampoo bottles and toothbrushes and shavers. It’s the end of the day and I’m tired and want to go home. It took all day to hang the crown and I’m trying to not rush the finishing touches. Finally done, I walk out through the bedroom, where Viva La Bam is loud on the TV. On the bed—king-sized, of course—is Paris.

“Still on?” I say. “You really like this show.”

She doesn’t answer or even acknowledge me. Nor has she all day, as I passed the bed over and over again, carrying cut boards between the bathroom and my saw in the driveway. From the bathroom, I could hear her laugh and snort at the show, a Jackass spin-off featuring a skateboarding moron and a huge tacky house. But to me she’s said not a word. Occasionally her mother, Cindy, charges in, phone to ear, speaking bits of conversation like “three hundred dollars? Seriously?” and “Maria, no, Maria, listen to me, there’s no way she would do that.” She leaves Paris a glass of soda, a plate of sliced apples, a bag of Fritos. Paris, who is three, munches away. She spent the day on the bed, watching what must be a Viva la Bam marathon. I’m twenty-five, and working as a home remodeler. I go out to the driveway and fold up my saw stand, coil the cords, put tools in the van.

It’s housing-boom days, before the recession, and down the street the development is still under construction. I hear bursts from a roofing crew’s nail guns and see the men working in teams, one placing a shingle for the other to fasten, then pop-pop-pop, then another shingle. I’ve
been at this house a lot. Cindy and her husband Gino bought it a year ago and keep adding to it—swapping clamshell trim for colonial, installing closet units, a higher-end microwave. And through them I’ve gotten even more work. Their extended clan is flourishing in central Connecticut, ten or more nuclear families, all McMansioned or aspiring to it. Their homes and lives look too-consistent Each has a plastic-wrapped faux-gilt sofa, a bottle of Kristal on display, an SL or Corvette with tinted glass in the garage. The husbands are flat-roof or asphalt-resurface contractors, and use lots of hair product. Each employs a troupe of dark-skinned, Spanish-speaking men, and is proudly hands off. None is remotely handy, which is where I come in. The wives answer the phones from home, interrupting conversations with each other to take business calls. Children proliferate, but—especially weird to me now, over a decade later, with a three-year-old daughter—there are no bright plastic toys or stuffed animals or Play-Doh or crayons. Gino and Cindy’s three girls don’t even seem to have bedrooms in the big, new house, but, as far as I can tell, share a room that could be in a hotel: no posters, no games, one queen bed centered on the wall, with a beige, floral-print comforter. The third bedroom serves as an office, but a year later I’ll convert it to a nursery when Cindy gets pregnant with their long-awaited boy. The girls act like little versions of their parents: they swear and eat junk food and speak badly and spend, like Paris, all day watching MTV. I am fascinated by them, and find myself describing Gino’s family to friends at bars, saying things like: “Seriously, the living rooms are exactly the same! Plastic-wrapped sofa, Kristal, giant television,” or “And there’s this cousin or something in Wallingford and their kid’s name is Vegas!” or “seriously, I’ve been in everywhere: there is no kids room!”

What they do have, are TVs. More than any other task, Gino et al summon me to hang flat screen televisions on their walls. At Gino’s house this process is referred to, by children and
adults alike, as “fixing TVs,” as if something were broken and I’m there to make it right. At last count, Gino and Cindy have 12— one in every room plus six in the basement home theatre. In the adjacent man-cave barroom we’ve opened a new frontier for flat screens—the ceiling. Last week, I hung two 24-inchers directly above a pair of reclining massage-chairs, wondering vaguely, as I went along with the plan, about my own liability were one to fall. As a historical note, flat screens used to be heavier, and I struggle to lift even the mid-sized ones. When needed, Gino brings “The Mexicans” home. They are told to take off their shoes. I am not, but mine aren’t covered in roofing tar. One of the guys exchanged an eye-roll with me as we tucked the wires behind the ceiling mounted ones at Gino’s direction. This made me happy; I work alone and take solidarity where I can find it. But I don’t take my shoes off.

After caulking, I sweep the sawdust from the driveway and Gino pulls in. His kids run out of my own literal woodwork to greet him. Even Paris comes down—the first I’ve seen her move today. “Check it out!” he says, opening the automatic tailgate on his Denali with the key fob. Shoved in at an angle is a huge box.

“62 inches, Baby!” he says, slapping me on the back. “Come back tomorrow and fix it.”

I help him carry it into the house with the kids running around us, hanging on the box, shouting, “Can we watch it now, Daddy?” “Can we?” “How big is it, Daddy? How big?” These are direct quotes. The girls tear into the box, flinging chunks of Styrofoam, sheets of plastic wrap. “Oh, man,” the oldest says, “This TV’s fucking huge!” I back out and leave.

The van wobbles on its springs as I pull out of the driveway and turn down the wide, new street. The houses are big, and beige, the trees are small and surrounded by too much mulch. It’s familiar, this place, and yet so alien—which is how I feel whenever I work for the extended
Gino clan. Living in these developments, adding endless Home Depot garbage to their over-sized homes, I wonder, is this normal, or bat-shit? Or both?

**Part II: Sarah Winchester**

Insanity and normality, and lots of building, permeate the story of Sarah Winchester, which I heard around this time, during my first career, as a remodeler. In 1884, after the death of her husband, William, son and heir of the rifle company founder, she moved from New Haven to California, and built with her inheritance a 160-room Victorian mansion over the next thirty-eight years. The sound of hammers soothed her ghosts, so she paid her carpenters to work the night, banging nails, expanding her house, board by board, to break the curse her family had fallen under.

Sarah learned about the curse from a Spiritualist she visited when tuberculosis killed William just a few months after his own father died. She learned too that it was responsible for the death fifteen years earlier of her only child, a daughter named Annie Pardee, aged six months. As if that wasn’t enough, all the murdered souls of Indians and soldiers, not to mention millions of buffalo, killed by Winchester shot wanted revenge on the family whose repeating rifles had mass produced their demise. So, they took their vengeance on her husband, and on his father. They gave Annie Pardee the disease marasmus, which interrupts the absorption of nutrients, and forced Sarah to watch, helpless, as the baby withered. But, the Spiritualist said, Sarah could escape the angry dead. She could outrun the curse by building. Building and building and building and never stopping, even for a moment.

At least that is one story. Biographers, first-hand accounts, people that knew her, tend to try to rescue Sarah from the stain of insanity that comes, apparently, with a four-decade, curse-
driven remodeling project. In any case, the facts are clear. Alone, possessed of many millions, the 45-year-old widow packed her belongings into six box cars, followed advice to find a warmer climate and stay busy, and moved to San Jose in the Santa Clara Valley, in the Bay area of California. She bought an eight-room farmhouse and employed people to expand it continuously until she died in 1922. The house grew haphazardly and relentlessly—cancerously, one might say—incorporating outlying barns and sheds as it spread over what had been an orchard. A once freestanding bell tower found its way to the center of the house, which in period photos looks, with all its turrets and gables, like a small haphazard city. Sarah did the design work, and when things failed, structurally or aesthetically, they were ripped off or covered up or just abandoned and something else was tried. The resulting architectural faux-pas, like a staircase to nowhere and a second story door opening to a twenty foot drop into the garden, were left in place.

Other eccentricities don’t do much for the sanity argument. Posts and balusters were installed upside down, windows had thirteen panes and rooms had thirteen windows. The house had thirteen bathrooms. Skylights were installed in floors, looking down into the room below; hallways dead-end; bathrooms had all-glass, curtain-less entries. The house had 950 doors, each with its own key. The one for the front was gold.

Lots of materials accompanied the unrelenting construction. Sarah, 4’10, ordered the most lavish products in the world for her gigantic house. Mahogany and boxwood from Africa, rosewood from Mexico, ¼ inch thick Lincrusta wallpaper from France, spider-web Tiffany windows from New York, and the first elevator on the West Coast, an Otis, also from Connecticut.

Maybe proximity is the key to normality, and getting close to people, spending time with them in their homes and lives, no matter how odd, leads to sympathy. The three biographies I’ve
found—one academic, one for children, one by a former gardener at Winchester’s house—all take up the task of normalizing Sarah. To do so, they first invoke the myth. Sarah refused to be seen, and wore a veil at all times; she only ate alone, over a $30,000 set of china which she kept in a basement safe between meals; she refused to have her picture taken; she spoke with the dead; she designed residential additions with the same.

No, no, and no, say those who knew her, personally, or through research. They invoke the woman’s clarity of thought, her thorough knowledge of the house and grounds and workers, her ability to run the estate day after day into her old age. They point out that lots of other rich nineteenth-century women spent their time and money designing intricate oversized homes. Winchester just followed suit. The 44-step staircase that turns seven times yet rises only nine feet because of its tiny, two inch risers? Totally logical for a woman with arthritic ankles. The glass bathrooms? Make sense for an old woman who might need a servant’s help off the toilet. Skylights in the floor? Oh, she just wanted to see what was going on downstairs without having to walk. They cite residents of San Jose who remember playing piano for her as children and being served fresh ice cream in her gardens. Though said to be a recluse, they note she went into town often, first in a buggy, later in a Buick, to buy bolts of fabric and other perfectly normal supplies. When Sarah died, they point out, the safe in the basement was opened. The china was not found. There were no jewels or cash or gold. In the safe were: an obituary from a July 24th 1866 edition of a New Haven newspaper and a lock of her baby’s hair.

I remember driving out of New Haven during those building boom days, on my way to Gino’s, past the old factories where Winchesters were made, and then through suburb after suburb. I felt Sarah and her house were stand-ins for this whole crazy place—a country recovering from a trauma, a country medicated on construction. The endless building and
remodeling, the cabinets and the Corinne, the crown moldings and rain-mist showers, all the
paint-sampling homeowners and the self-righteous contractors driving around in white Ford
vans, just like mine, to wire glamour switches or put down Pergo like the Lord’s good work. Just
a sheen, I thought, a gloss coat of meaningful activity covering up a land and culture ruined by
plastic developments, and Viva La Bam. Now, with plastic baby toys laying all over my house, I
don’t know. Normal or insane? Proximity and familiarity push whatever it is toward the former.

Part III: Back to Paris

At first I thought Gino and Cindy were Portuguese. I couldn’t otherwise label the
language they dipped into, but knew it was a Romance one. Embarrassing myself while hanging
a light in the kitchen, a few years after the bathroom crown, I complimented Gino on speaking
not only English, but Spanish, which he uses with his workers, and Portuguese. He told me it
was Roma. “We’re Gypsies,” he said, as I stood on a ladder screwing tiny light bulbs into the
new “chandelier” fixture. Cindy was there, and they told me a bit about their culture, that they
got married young and only to each other. “Wait,” I said, “how old are you?” Turned out, they’re
a year younger than me, which came as a shock. I was in my mid twenties and regularly quoted
The Big Lebowski. They had four kids and a faux-gilt sofa.

I’ve given up remodeling, and with it the insider view of other peoples’ homes. I miss it,
especially Gino and Cindy’s family. They are some of the weirdest people I have known to live
inside so much vinyl siding. And they really like each other. Plus they came to depend on me,
and thought I could do anything, which tends to warm the heart. For a few years after I started
teaching, they kept calling, not taking no for an answer, and I kept going, now and then, to hang
a TV, or sometimes even fix something actually broken, like a garbage disposal drain.
The day after the crown molding, the house is quiet, Gino at work, Cindy upstairs, TVs silent. I get ready to hang the giant television Gino brought home, and Paris flops down next to me on the living room floor, amid tools, boxes, baggies of hardware, Styrofoam. The sleek black set centers the mess, rising above it all. Belly down, Paris kicks her calves in the air and wipes away the patterned triangles on the maid-vacced carpet with her palms. She starts asking what things are.

“That’s a wrench,” I say. “That’s a socket. That’s a bolt, but we’re not going to use it.” I end up talking to myself. “First, I’m going to mark the wall, then I’m going to make the holes. Where’s that level?” She’s fiddling with a red and blue screwdriver, done listening. I notice she’s singing to herself.

But when I tip the TV facedown to the carpet and dismember the huge plastic base from the frame of the thing, she takes note, asking, skeptically, “Are you fixing that TV?”

It’s a tough question, actually, and I stumble for an answer. “I’m not really… fixing it,” I say. “I’m just, uh… putting it together.” She points to the stand I just wrangled off to the sound of bending and cracking plastic. It’s bigger than she is.

“What’s that?”

“Well, that’s the stand, but we don’t need it, because it’s going on the wall. See. This is what’s going to hold it on the wall.” I lift the fancy, adjustable hanger her dad bought.

She looks at me, and the TV, and the stand, judging whether what she witnessing is okay or dangerous, or just plain boring.

“So, when you gonna fix it?”
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Notes

1 This and other recent investigations into janitorial work show that neoliberal shifts in custodial work have exposed workers to greater exploitation and danger. According to Yeung, “Before the 180s, most businesses had their own janitorial staff. Then business owners and stores began outsourcing the work to cut costs.” With labor itself as the major expense, a range of janitorial firms, from corporate to owner-operated to black market, seek various ways to cut costs, ranging from low pay, to telling employees to use “two different names to avoid racking up overtime” to, in at least one case, full blown slavery. According to Yeung, in 2007 two Ukrainian men “trafficked about 70 people from their home country to Philadelphia and forced them to work as cleaners after winning subcontracting gigs at companies such as Target and Wal-Mart. Two of the women [were]… raped by one of the traffickers.” In many cases lack of oversight in hiring the managers and foremen of the mostly Latina crews is the most direct source of exposure to predation, though as the reference to big box retail suggests, lots of factors play a role. See also *The New York Times*, May 2017: “To Understand Rising Inequality, Consider the Janitors at Two Top Companies, Then and Now.”

2 A more recent biological use of “Maintenance,” is synonymous with homeostasis, and dates from the same year: 1922. From the *OED*, “The process or action of maintaining physiological stability, esp. stable body mass…. designating the energy or nutrients required to keep an organism in such a state (as distinct from energy used for growth or reproduction).”

3 Mukherkee’s focus upon nurses actually pushes against such automatic-ness, and, in fact, the question of lines between automatic and handed maintenance is at the heart of his essay, “My Father’s Body: At Rest and At
Motion.” In this hybrid academic-personal form, Mukherjee gets to significant question about how different types of systems maintain constancy in invisible ways.

4 These lines come from Karen Ho, whose Liquidated provides an ethnography of Wall Street bankers in the years after the share-holder revolution. Ho makes a case for studying powerful groups at the level of everyday practice, a move which counters abstraction and metanarrativity, the sense that things just happen, or happen because of the market, neoliberalism, or greed. Instead, she asks “how exactly Wall Street investment bankers and banks, at the level of the everyday, helped to produce a financially dominant, though highly unstable, capitalism” (5). The answers are many, but much of the daily work of bankers involves destabilizing industry and labor by eliminating actual support staff (like back office workers) and is borne by their self image as maintaining capitalism.

The use of the word “maintenance” in the quote is not off-handed. Demonstrated by Ho, and confirmed by Piketty, work, in actual physical terms, has become a central part of the ideology and practice of elites in the post-Keynesian era. Intersecting with concepts of meritocracy, and borne by hands-on language such as “shaping,” the idea that those at the top are both very skilled and work really hard, and those at the bottom not so much, has become a central part of neoliberal discourse.


6 Frequently, however, Maintainers give voice to the idea that academic work is itself a form of maintenance. Usually this occurs in sotto voce, in chit-chat, or as an aside in presentations, but Matt Thomas makes it central to his work in “Against Innovative Scholarship: The Monastic, Benedict, and Wiseman Options,” which argues against trying to position maintenance as new in scholarship, and suggests, rather, “to look at what we have.”

7 As Ensmenger points out, this massive energy usage (complimented by massive water use for cooling) is especially ironic in light of the ephemeral terminology of “cloud,” a word he describes as “perfectly misleading” because it elides the role of infrastructure. At this elision, he points out, Silicon Valley “industry” has been very successful (“Cloud”).

8 In More Work For Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology From the Open Hearth to the Microwave, Cowen traces a pattern of technology-driven increases in housework for women across two centuries, from agrarian homes with open hearths to device-filled kitchens of late-twentieth-century suburbs. She finds that each new technology brought increased work, based on rising expectations (of cleanliness, of varied diet), on physical maintenance of more material objects in the home (oil lamps, toilets) and on replacement of work done by men with that by women. In the twentieth century, ostensibly labor-saving devices such as the washing machine, the vacuum cleaner and the automobile, followed this pattern (65).

9 Componentization refers to a design philosophy that constructs machinery, as well as software, from relatively isolated parts, that can be swapped with new ones (often at the direction of computer diagnostic devices). This augers a deskilling of machine maintenance and repair, as sussing out mechanical goblins no longer relies on the long experience of mechanics, and the actual work involves replacing a box-like component, rather than opening such parts. See Mike Fuller, “Plug and Play Saves Time,” 2007.

10 Human excrement, in particular, gets a good deal of attention. In her presentation, “Waste, Remediation, and Maintenance in the 19th-Century Paris Sewer,” Amy Wickard explores the development, from a patchwork of cesspools and straight-pipes, of a central sewer system. The Paris sewer was a “circulus, a socioeconomic concept and infrastructure for remediating and recycling urban waste in suburban and rural agriculture.” Urban excrement, in other words, was used to fertilize rural food production, working against what Marx would later call “metabolic rift.” Indicative of a surprising (but entirely welcome) strain of literary attention within the ranks of the Maintainers, Wickers argues that the ways “writers and artists saw the [Paris] sewer offered significant clues as to how they thought about Paris, and about cities in general. They framed the old sewer as an intestine, an underside, a repository of shame; while narratives about the new sewer spoke to modern ways of seeing, cleaning, and moving around in the city.” Worth considering in terms of a culture of disposability, Wickard describes a pre-sewer “waste society” [a]s self-fulfilling because designating a resource as waste makes it unusable, promoting ever more consumption of pristine resources.” Against this, however, she sets up concerns, based on the new sewer system, of
an alternative “recycling economy dedicated to eliminating waste, [in which] every resource is effectively under surveillance….Cleaning up the city and introducing new infrastructure was a kind of social, political, and architectural re-ordering that imposed greater control.”

In “Attacked by Excrement: The Political Ecology of Shit in Wartime and Postwar Tokyo,” Paul Kreitman, pointing out that “Nothing permeates the membrane between nature and culture quite so effectively as shit,” argues that “attention to the… political economy of excrement illuminates how societies have responded to the unforeseen pressures of total war, and reveals the fundamentally contingent nature of embedded enviro-technical networks” (343).

11 In “‘Lifetime Issues’: Temporal Relations of Design and Maintenance,” Cohn explains that this divide “is often explained by engineers at the Lab in terms of the different skills or personalities that are required in different phases of the lifecycle of a mission (272). Following the career of a woman, “Julie W.,” who stuck with the mission through both phases, she explains that “Julie… compare[s] her own ‘meandering career path’ with those of her male colleagues with whom she worked in the past, men whom she describes as the ‘cream of the crop’ and ‘top of their class at CalTech’ who went ‘straight to the top’ at the Lab. These are men, still touted as the ‘pioneers’ of the Mission, whom [Cohn] had seen arriving to podiums to receive accolades or to speak about the accomplishments of the Mission…. In deciding to stay on as lead engineer of Spacecraft Operations, she expresses feeling at the time like she was “dropping out of the game,” watching as her colleagues moved on to mission after mission” (272).

Also discussing space flight, specifically NASA’s shuttle program, Roger Launius, argues the divide between innovation and maintenance played a role in the shuttle program never reaching its intended goal of making space flights as routine as air travel. He writes, that “the NASA engineering culture emphasizing innovation and R&D ensured that those who were a part of the shuttle program constantly sought to upgrade the system rather than maintaining and flying it as is common among airlines.” Such a drive towards innovation meant “that none of the orbiters were identical…. The ‘maintainers’ were not dominant at NASA and the constant modification of the technology ensured that there was never an opportunity to operate it efficiently.”

12 As much a critique of history as an opening into a discussion of technological systems, Mohun writes “Set aside for a moment what you think you know about riverboats, guns, telegraphs, railroads, and other ‘tools of empire.’ European exploitation of central Africa would not have been possible without the very African form and seemingly simple form of transportation [known as porterage]. In fact, all over the world long lines of porters played (and in some places, still play) a critical role” (1). Pointing out that very little has been written about African technology, Mohun writes that “it’s clear that European imperialism would have been impossible without a wide range of African practices that, in the Congo, also included canoes and other watercraft, building of forts or ‘bomas,’ and management of water, food, and bodies. We also, by the way, know next to nothing about the Africans who were employed to build, operate, and repair European technologies such as riverboats and railroads (and later automobiles and airplanes).”

13 In “Messaging Gendered Lessons About Maintenance: Farm Equipment, Domestic Appliances, and University Expertise,” Bix finds that “the culture of maintenance expertise displayed a clear gender divide.” She writes “Maintenance-related college work both reflected and reasserted gender boundaries; male ag-engineering majors learned to trouble-shoot farm machinery, while female home-ec students learned laundry strategies and clothing care.” Despite this, both populations positioned themselves to their technologies in similar ways, “insist[ing] that the modern pace of technological change made the challenge of maintaining farm and home equipment ever more complex. Both groups viewed questions surrounding maintenance as important enough to deserve sustained scientific study in academic labs. Both groups prioritized translating that knowledge into practical advice, both for undergraduate classes and a state-wide general audience.”

14 Exploring the hegemony of Google Maps in terms of “public participation in spatial knowledge in society,” Jean-Christophe Plantin argues that while “Google Maps opens up cartography to participation, it simultaneously recentralizes this participatory knowledge to serve its corporate interests.” Despite it’s openness to participation, Google Maps alters the public role from “creating content to providing database maintenance activities”

15 As Tansey points out, archives tend to be housed by an institution “such as a university, government, corporation, or another cultural heritage organization (such as a library or museum);” many of these are either underfunded or
increasingly privatized, leading to labor, access, and preservation problems. She writes that “archives have significant backlogs of ‘hidden collections’ unavailable to users...[;] rely on volunteer or intern labor to get professional-level work accomplished, and... still face significant challenges in preserving electronic records” (2).

One of the major visibilizing potentials of this comes not through upkeep, but break down. When systems fail, when water doesn’t flow, or flows too much, the people behind the scenes become real. Marx notes the defetishizing potential of faults, writing “It is by their imperfections that the means of production in any process bring to our attention their character of being products of past labour. A knife which fails to cut, a piece of thread which keeps on snapping, forcibly remind us of Mr A, the cutler, or Mr B, the spinner. In a successful product, the role played by past labour in mediating its useful properties has been extinguished” (289). Recasting this in terms of maintenance alters the scope a bit—especially when “successful product” includes a lifetime of maintenance.

This is not to suggest all industrial maintenance work precludes these values. Hodkiewicz, Kanse, and Parkes surveying maintenance workers in Australian mining operations find they are well-paid and highly-skilled, and that that feel they have at least some role in “procedural management,” though not enough. Overall, they still conclude that “maintainers lack autonomy and capacity to improve the quality of their work tasks and procedures.”

Currently beyond the scope of this project, I would like to reconsider the degradation to which office work has been subject in popular culture through the matrix of maintenance. Offices are social spaces, involve lots of different types of handed activities which link people together. This work would seem to potentially offer satisfying activity in the terms Crawford applies to trade work.

This does raise the prospect that maintenance, as a writing practice, performs a sort of tokenization. As Kathy Knapp points out, looking at post-9/11 fiction, “narratives centering on white middle and upper-middle-class male experience are themselves on the rise in the post-9/11 era (xi).

Marxists continue to pose this broad question. Harry Magdoff begins a recent Monthly Review article by asking “how the hell does this economy work? Millions and billions of diverse transactions are made everyday, and yet the system holds together” (“The Clock Slows Down” 44). Michael Heinrich writes “Everybody, including those who profit from the operation of capitalism, is part of a gigantic wheelwork. Capitalism turns out to be an anonymous machine, without any foreman who steers the machine or can be made responsible for the destruction wrought by the machine. If one wishes to put an end to [it]... capitalist structures in their entirety must be abolished” (185).

Marx describes a system driven toward perpetually growing production, yet dependent on naturally limited material, and socially limited ability to consume. As Burkett puts it “For Marx... capital accumulation can maintain itself only through environmental crisis” (Red and Green xx) As John Bellamy Foster points out, Marx described a system which “he characterizes with terms such as ‘endless drudgery and toil,’ ‘ignorance,’ and ‘brutalization’” (129). These tendencies are present no matter what specific forms capitalism takes because “humans and nature are treated as mere instruments of valorization, this process possesses an intrinsic destructiveness toward humans and nature that constantly produces these miserable living conditions in newer forms, even in the case of an increased standard of living” (129).

As Heinrich explains, while “abstract labor is not visible,” the abstraction is “carried out in the actual behavior of humans,” it is real labor during the production process, made invisible, in the commodity form (49).

Marx explains that money capital can become productive capital “only because labour-power is found in a state of separation from its means of production (including the means of subsistence as a means of production of labour-power itself); and because this separation is abolished only through the sale of labour-power” (Volume II 115).

Capitalists are in the following position: “the means of production must be sufficient in mass to absorb the mass of labour which is to be turned into products through them. If sufficient means of production are not present, then the surplus labour which the purchaser has at his disposal cannot be made use of; his right to dispose of it will lead to nothing. If [on the other hand] more means of production are available than disposable labour, then these remain unsaturated with labour, and are not transformed into products” (Marx, Volume II 111). The work of the capitalist, in this sense, is maintaining ratios.
25 About stocks, Marx writes: “As the scale of production grows, and the productive power of labour grows through cooperation, division of labor, machinery, etc., so does the mass of raw materials, ancillaries, etc. that go into the daily reproduction process. These elements must be ready at hand at the place of production” (Volume II 219).

26 Nikhil Pal Singh explains that “bracketed by Roosevelt’s New Deal and Johnson’s Great Society, what I call the long civil rights era was . . . the product of a dual phenomenon: the Keynesian transformation of liberal capitalist state during the 1930s and the emergence of black social movements that were urban, national, and transnational in scope and conception” (7).

27 For example, 1876’s Shifting for Himself follows Gilbert Grayson, 16, who must go to work after his legal guardian, Mr. Briggs lies about the exhaustion of a fortune left by Gilbert’s dead father. His response to Briggs telling him “that you must now go to work” is “I am ready, sir” (12). The novel follows Gilbert through a series of jobs, such office errand runner and paperboy. Yet Alger rarely shows a single act of work. In a chapter titled “The First Day in Business” which concludes with the line “he did not shirk from his new responsibilities” not a single responsibility, task, tool, or activity relating to the process of the job is mentioned, with the exception of the lone word “errand” (36). Instead, Alger fills the text with chatty interactions between people with clearly defined positive or negative motivations. Shifting for Himself reads like the world’s most asinine Henry James novel, a novel of (reduced) manners aimed at making a case for hard work as the basis of justifiable wealth and leadership. This, and other Alger novels, are both about work, and yet not about work, and demonstrate what I call reversal of upkeep.

28 Boiler-tending factors in a number of texts from later in the twentieth century. For example, the primary daily task of Jack Torrence’s caretaking job in The Shining (1977) is to check the hotel’s decrepit, oft-patched boiler, less it’s always “creeping pressure” blows Jack, family and hotel to “the fuckin’ moon”—which it ultimately does, minus the family (27). Looking at the flame Jack sees “a steady blue-white jet hissing steadily upward channeled destructive force, but the key word Jack thought, was destructive and not channeled: if you stuck your hand in there, the barbeque would happen in three quick seconds” (22). As the hotel’s hand, Jack’s connection to the profit-generating, domesticity-cartooning hotel yields sexual aggression, angry disappointment, and plots against small children and mothers, not unlike Jones, in his connection to Petry’s apartment. A more positive image of boiler-tenders in hybrid domestic-commercial spaces comes in Hayao Miyazaki’s Spirited Away (2001), through the character Kamaji (whose name means boiler-man, and now, according the Urban Dictionary, “a sweet guy who is very smart”). Generally helpful to the young protagonist’s search for freedom through work after being bound into profiteering bath house with a number of corporate markers, not unlike Kings Hallorann (see chapter 3). Both mechanized and animalized (he resembles a spider), he is in constant motion, yet seemingly mounted on a platform, like a motor.

29 While Ellison’s novel is usually considered in terms of modernism, the novel certainly demonstrates the inclusion of mass-media tropes, including those of comic books. According to Cloutier, “Ellison’s engagement with comic books allows us to draw out . . . the novelist’s aesthetic and ethical ambivalences” (294). These include “the question of whether the American fantasies and myths found in mass culture contribute to an individual’s cultivation or lead to unrealistic expectations and a life of crime” (296). Though certainly focused on social questions, “Ellison’s recourse to comic book allusions offers a new angle for understanding what he calls the ‘unreality’ of . . . Harlem” (296).

In terms of social critique, Ellison, who had befriended Wright earlier in his career, became increasingly critical of Marxist critique. According to Jackson, “By the time he saw his former mentor for the last time, in 1956, Wright "felt betrayed" by him . . . while Ellison saw Wright as someone caught in ideological trap (“Ellison”).

30 Shelley Jarenski’s “Invisibility Embraced: ‘The Abject as Site of Agency in Invisible Man” and Michele Wallace’s “Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture” each explore “invisibility’s role in the maintenance of white hegemony” (Jarenski 87).

31 According to James Murphy, this long-repeated history is based on “the assumption that the campaign against leftism originated in the Partisan Review;” an assumption he proves false by documenting critiques of leftism in both journals, as well as in numerous other sources of literary critique, such as the Daily Worker (11, 13). In this version of literary history, Wright is seen as following the Partisan Review’s lead, as indicating “capitulation to an
enemy, an abandonment of old [orthodox Marxist] positions and practices for the purpose of political expediency” (11). Murphy argues against this, pointing out that while some proletarian plays could be characterized as cardboard “agitprop,” the professional background of most 1930s novelists, as well as “the length of time usually involved in writing a novel meant that the form itself was ill suited to agitprop…. As the Partisan Review editors pointed out in 1934, the novel was the form that was most free of leftist” (108).

32 An example of this logic can be seen in Rampersad’s claim that Wright “showed his skill in writing not only Communist-style narrations but far less didactic fiction” which would not “dismiss Bigger’s inner life as unworthy of artistic attention” (Ellison xvii, xxiii).

33 Alan Wald suggests that Invisible Man “is widely read today [2007] as an avowal of free will and individual choice against racists, Communists, nationalists, assimilationist sellouts, and all ‘scientists’ (Ellison’s term) who aspire to project an identity for the ‘invisible’ Black Man, who is essentially an ‘Everyman”—a reading which makes Ellison “consistent with the cataclysmic shift in political perspective of a generation of onetime Marxists… typified by Lionel Trilling, Edmund Wilson, Mary McCarthy, and Saul Bellow [all of whom generate] a naïve counterposition of rigid ideology to varieties of purported ideology-free experience” (57, 58). Though providing The Street with a Wright-like leftist agenda “to spur the reader to surmount the apprehension of social forces as the fixed forces of nature, which was how their fiction protagonists misunderstood their situation, Wal demonstrates how Petry’s novel is also read as marking her increasing disavowal of the organized left, as “the distancing of social cause…is used for the artistic purpose of accentuating her characters’ inner struggle” (126). With The Street, Petry, as she puts it in her 1950 essay “The Novel as Social Criticism,” was writing her way out of an era in which the fiction of social realism involved “endings as rosy as that of a western movie done in Technicolor” in which “trade unions, usually the CIO, come to the rescue in the final scene” (35). Her essay, which defines all of her work as “social criticism,” argues for greater realism in the focus on the individual, on “characterization,” as an alternative to “sociological” work which ends up devitalizing characters, making “their defeat or their victory… not their own [as] they are pawns in the hands of a deaf, blind, stupid, social system” (35). As Wald points out, this “seems a bit unfair to the Communist literary tradition in the United States,” but does point to “one of the principal challenges facing all left-wing writers… avoid[ing] the temptation to place blame totally on social, political, and economic circumstances lest characters become cardboard” (122).

34 Petry’s novel, published just after WWII and just before the US adoption of Keenan’s containment strategy ushered in the Cold War proper, doesn’t quite fit the rubric of early cold war novel, though could still be said to be written in a context of growing anti-communism and US cultural commitment to possessive individualism.

35 As Richardson puts it “the physical layout of Trueblood’s cabin, including the sleeping arrangements therein necessitated by the cold, establishes the conditions for the incestuous encounter between him and Matty Lou and reflects the family’s extreme economic deprivation” (133). Working off of the point that Trueblood’s story is one of “stark underdevelopment” Benjamin argue that Ellison makes him a trickster, winking at the Man as he performs abasement for the rich white man. Quoting Johns, she writes “Truelblood may be a ‘liar,’ or raconteur,” a classification that gives us permission to ‘approach his story about committing incest with his daughter as a tall tale, the genre of choice for raconteurs’ and categorize it as a narrative ‘that says nothing definitive about black sexual desire’”(131).

36 Upkeep and uplift as prescribed by Hampden also involved a sexual division of labor and the cult of domesticity. As Laura Hapke explains, Hampden began enrolling women at its founding in 1868, providing “a peculiar training in housework and teaching” (86). She writes that “in the mind of Hampden’s white principal, Gen. Samuel Armstrong, women of color were not ladies, nor were they expected to marry up. Hampden remained true to the cult of domesticity in other ways”—by listing “married and in good homes” as a teachable occupation (86).

37 The image of time-worn woodwork as disgusting and indicative of exploitation, deserves some comparison to other texts. In Rosemary’s Baby (1967), for example, Ira Levin makes such elements a charm for his protagonist. Against the unappealing “white cellblock[s],” in mid-century Manhattan, the (evil) Bramford’s oldness appeals (7, 22 original emphasis). And it’s not just the upper class, privilege-based appeal of “the elevator—oak paneled, with a shining brass handrail all around—which was run by a uniformed Negro boy with a locked-in-place smile” (9).
Actual dilapidation has charm, as seen in Rosemary’s first impression of 7E, in which “Rosemary and Guy... saw rubbed-away places in the wallpaper and a seam where it had lifted and was curling inward; saw a dead light bulb... a patched place of light green tape on the dark green carpet. Guy looked at Rosemary: Patched carpet? She looked away and smiled brightly: I love it; everything’s lovely!” (10). Petry and Levin are perhaps closer then their protagonists on this point: The Branford is a locus of evil, in which a group of upper class tenants prey on a young woman’s body; though far form central to the plot, Levin too shows the dependence of this group on cellar-located black labor. In the basement laundry room, Rosemary encounters “a bevy of Negro laundresses,” whom—unnamed and undifferentiated—she then avoids, as her presence interrupts their gossipy camaraderie making her feel intrusive and “Negro-oppressing” (28).

38 Such a study might begin with a nod toward *Lost in Space*, the 1960s TV series about a nuclear family colonizing a distant planet. Or it might begin with earlier science-fiction, pointing out the distinctly suburban aspect of Edward Bellamy’s future Boston in 1887’s *Looking Backward*. The intersection of utopia and early suburban projects has received attention:

39 As an example of such messiness, take, for example, Jack Finney’s 1955 novel *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, which sits across the suburban/science fiction line is distinctly unclear about whether suburbia is the victim or the perpetrator, the object to protect, or to flee. In the novel, drone-like aliens lacking personality and individuality replace residents of suburban Santa Mira, California. Basic home maintenance actually plays a major plot function, for, as an indication they don’t truly belong, the aliens promptly neglect upkeep of their hosts’ suburban property. Unexpectedly for conformist automatons, at least to my mind, Finney’s non-human-replacements let their property go to pot, a convenient visual indication for the white protagonists that their town has been invaded by Others. About *Body Snatchers*, Jurca explains “the pods [like] the highway [act] as a vehicle of undesirable suburbanization; while [suburbanites] sleep they are replaced with affectless, conformist duplicates who immediately cease to take care of their property: ‘in seven blocks we haven’t passed a single house with as much as the trim being repainted, not a roof, porch, or even a cracked window being repaired’” (149). No maintenance, no life, at least not the human, i.e.: white, type. Finney makes the aliens representative both of the brainwashed white-collar drone, but also, in their lack of upkeep, of the non-white anti-neighbor, threatening to drag the suburb into slum-dom. Markedly different in terms of upkeep, Ira Levin’s 1971 *The Stepford Wives*, makes replaced suburbanites (robots, in this case) into upkeep machines, the fact (rather than the absence) of their domestic labor indicative of loss of humanity. Obviously, both gender and time-period play a role here: it is unfortunately not surprising that the domestic care work of women registers as automatic, while that of men as indicative of individual possession.

40 Discontent is everywhere in and around these texts, and their genres. Both attach the terms ennui and discontent to their middle, or upper middle class male protagonists within the first ten pages. About *Player Piano*, Wesley Burnett and Lucy Rollins write that “Managers and engineers have become the elite and are trapped in their work; the rest... spend their abundant leisure trying to find ways to fill their time” (18). Says Leonard Mustazza, in “The Machine Within: Human Discontent, and the Genre of Vonnegut’s *Player Piano*” that “Paul Proteus’s discontent with his lot and his society is very much like that of Orwell’s Winston Smith or Huxley’s Bernard Marx” (101). Nikil Saval explores *Gray Suit* in the context of “corporate life that can’t be escaped” leading to “much of the greatest work dissatisfaction” (23, 24). Catherine Jurca bases her critique, one with much academic currency, on the “fundamental dissatisfaction with the suburb” (Long 194).

41 Disrepair is a state of objects, often presented in terms of setting and atmosphere, while daily upkeep is an activity, usually presented in terms of plot and character. In the image of suburban discontent, the two each factor, and, for the most part, don’t line up evenly. The state of disrepair would be, presumably, met by acts of repair (which are discreet in nature) while the activity of upkeep would aim presumably to order objects in disarray—a term which indicates regularity rather than exceptionality. Objects in disrepair—car, flooring, walls—may repair, but not usually in terms of the daily domestic upkeep, which is presented as part of the novel’s discontented gestalt.

42 One angle, as mentioned, is a financial one. In 1956’s *Organization Man*, William H. Whyte describes this as “Budgetism, the ‘smooth, almost hypnotic rhythm’ of regular, unvarying monthly payments” (Roland 161). More generally, the house/trap metaphor manifests in many places. A 2015 example comes from a Belle and Sebastian
song: “Life is a rope, death is a myth/ Love is a fraud, it’s misunderstood/ Work is a sentence, family’s a drag/ This house is a trap;” the lyrics land with emphasis on the word “trap,” and the song’s title “Play for Today” resonates with the novel’s “jump” message. Similarly, The Money Pit, a 1986 comedy film uses a victim-of-homebuilding-expense script to follow Tom Hanks through misadventures resulting from shoddy construction, shady realtors, inept town government, and baboonish contractors.

While there is a real South Bay Connecticut, part of the town of Morris, it is far from Long Island Sound, and the upper/upper-middle class, suburban, “Gold Coast” area of Fairfield county which lies in commuting distance to New York. That Wilson uses a real town, Westport, as the lower middle class model and a fictional one for the rich one is odd. Wilson is from Westport, and in all likelihood it served as the model for both towns, as it incorporates both types of development, and sits, like his fictional South Bay, on the water.

This moment is worth putting into the light of Kathy Knapp’s work on post-9/11 suburban fiction. Drawing on Elizabeth Anker, Knapp writes “the post-9/11 novel revolves around the ‘metaphor of male mid-life crisis’ born of ‘a longing to return to a bygone era of American omnipotence wherein white, heteronormative, patrician masculinity was still sacrosanct’” (xii). Though the fear of dwindling American power is not on the horizon in 1955, Wilson’s novel shows that the rest of this bundle is alive, at the very moment in history for which twenty-first century white masculinity yearns—the “great again” 1950s. This suggests a historical hall-of-mirrors form of nostalgia, with, perhaps this image of racial service at its base.

From at least The House of the Seven Gables, American authors have used dilapidated, yet just enough up-kept mansions to symbolize the deterioration of class in the face of a consumer-oriented mass.

Neither the ethereality nor the shoddiness of post-war developments have been confirmed by history. Sixty years on, few of these developments have been torn down, but now sit generally closer to centers than newer developments, built, for the most part, on former farmland. The houses themselves often feature extensive additions, including shed and doghouse style dormers, which, sitting fully on the frames and foundations of the original structures, suggest a decent build quality.

I would like to consider this in light of the concept of the anthropocene, a concept which suggests we should consider as a discreet era the period in which human activity becomes a major factor upon the planet. While the question of when this era should be seen as beginning is contentious, locating in the 1950s is where Monthly Review comes down on the question. A 2015 article “When Did the Anthropocene Begin…and Why Does it Matter,” point to “dramatic social-environmental changes after 1950” (6). This periodization puts the Keynesian era and the era of neoliberalism into a unit based on the massive pump-priming generated by consumerism, and its perpetuation of continual production around the world. Quoting Foster, Angus writes, “‘What transpired in the post-World War II period’…was ‘a qualitative transformation in the level of human destructiveness’”(9).


For a history of suburbia along these two lines, see Kenneth Jackson’s 1985 Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States. For discussion of suburbanization and race see David Roediger’s 2005 Working Toward Whiteness: How America’s Immigrants Became White. Here, Roediger traces the way the early twentieth century wave of Southern and Eastern European immigrants “worked” their way to white racial status by the middle of the century, by distancing themselves from African Americans through different types of work, including that around home ownership. Roediger describes “whitening as a process in social history in which countless quotidian activities informed popular and expert understandings of the race of new immigrants” (8). (He actually seems to have used the phrase “countless quotidian activities” in most of his books). This process of whitening came through “countless quotidian activities,” occurring places from industrial assembly lines to supermarkets, but the owner-occupied house provided the location in (and on) which mundane activities of daily upkeep were most successfully transformed into indicators of whiteness. Pointing out that by 1940 new immigrants
owned homes in greater numbers than native born Americans, Roediger reverses a common element of the “American Dream” narrative, writing that “the new immigrant did not so much ‘buy into’ the American Dream of home ownership as help create it” (159). As restrictive covenants and red-lining increasingly barred African-Americans, but not new immigrants, from suburban neighborhoods, and as popular images of cities positioned blacks as “anti-neighbors,” the owner-occupied home became the sine qua non of working- and middle-class whiteness (177, 174). Wilson’s novel well documents the reaction to this development by the upper middle and upper class.

In a 1973 Playboy interview, Vonnegut himself claimed to have “cheerfully ripped off the plot of Brave New World, whose plot had been cheerfully ripped off from Yevgeny Zamyatin’s We” (3). He also tells the interviewer that “You understand, of course, that everything I say is horseshit” (2).

On one hand, it is possible that this is accidental. Vonnegut’s earnest-irony style of representation and Pynchonian taste the absurd might just not be the ingredients for a convincing nightmare. Indeed, the world of Illium and the larger automated state often appear less-than-threatening: a robot helicopter using a PA to tell revolutionaries that, basically, resistance is futile, is dispatched easily with a rifle shot; the economy-controlling super-computer, EPICAC, is confounded by a riddle. On the other hand, Vonnegut might be up to something patently literary with his novel’s familiar-ized dystopia, namely commenting on other, more established, texts and genres. Vonnegut depends on employing, and alterting, generic conventions to establish his novel’s relationship to Orwell and Huxley. Technology yields opiated masses in Illium, as it does in Oceania and World State—but it also yields a TV bar-shark, adept at betting he can name a song sung on any muted show. Machines have robbed men of something importantly human, in Vonnegut’s dystopia, and yet, in the novel’s final scene, men joyously begin repairs.

Gottlieb writes of the novel’s automated economy, “this social transformation, which is tantamount to making the working population feel superfluous, is sanctioned by a state religion based on machine worship” (95). Gradinaru, quoting Heidegger, writes that “everywhere we remain unfree and chained to technology” (609).

Stephen King’s 1976 short story “Trucks” would be interesting to explore in this sense: it envisions trucks becoming sentient and encircling a truck-stop diner until the former drivers and other humans lose their resolve and start pumping gas. The story is better than it sounds.

Moments like this help explain what Vonnegut means by saying “It's one of the weaknesses of our society that so few people are willing to be father, to be responsible, to be the organizer, to say what’s to be done next. Very few people are up to this. So if somebody is willing to take charge, he is very likely to get followers -- more than he knows what to do with. The standard behavior pattern in our society now is for the father to deny he's father as soon as he possibly can, when the kid is 16 or so.” (Playboy 2)

A line of critique worth mentioning here, is that Halyard is engaged in a sales pitch, aiming to get the Shah, leader of a developing, and highly racialized nation, to buy the products of American production. Hints here and there suggest Americans aren’t the only victims of this consumer-production economy: the US military, it seems, is active in, to use the terms of the era, both the second and third world. Edgar, a former soldier, has served in “Hjoring, Elbesan, Kabul, Kaifen, [and] Ust Kyakhta” (144).

Both authors agree however that married women should be the emblem of consumerism: the cold, cheating, social climbing Anita staring idly into the TV next to her automatic laundry machine versus the warm, faithful, enthusiastic Betsy, seen in the novel’s last moments carrying packages from stores and smiling “radiantly” (276). The wives thus reveal each authors’ polar opposite valuation of consumerism, and, as critics of both novels agree, neither does a remotely adequate job of writing either character, going too far in their opposite direction.

Here, with the references to Italian American heritage, and seemingly with not-fully-white aspect of the term “ruddy,” Vonnegut portrays ethnicity, if not racialization, of the working class.

This is worth considering in light of Marx’s discussion of machine maintainers, as “a numerically unimportant group whose occupation it is to look after the whole of the machinery and repair it from time to time…. This is a
Both Cheryl Harris and David Roediger have argued that whiteness is property, thus it follows that this property requires maintenance. In Working Toward Whiteness, David Roediger traces the way the early twentieth century wave of Southern and Eastern European immigrants “worked” their way to white racial status by the middle of the century. Between sanitized narratives of progress that ignore the perpetuation of blackness as the Other against which whiteness registers, and scholarship that ignores the history of real racial marginalization of such new immigrants, Roediger describes “whitening as a process in social history in which countless quotidian activities informed popular and expert understandings of the race of new immigrants” (8). As mediated through “countless quotidian activities,” this process of whitening can be considered through the analytic of upkeep; aimed at an end, whiteness, which must be maintained through mundane and endless activity. Such activities took place everywhere from industrial assembly lines to supermarkets, but the owner-occupied house provided the location in (and on) which mundane activities of daily upkeep were most successfully transformed into indicators of whiteness. Pointing out that by 1940 new immigrants owned homes in greater numbers than native born Americans, Roediger reverses a common element of the “American Dream” narrative, writing that “the new immigrant did not so much ‘buy into’ the American Dream of home ownership as help create it” (159). Though often requiring sacrifice of comfort and health—sacrifices that fell especially hard on women and children—the desire for home ownership persisted. As restrictive covenants and red-lining increasingly barred African-Americans, but not new immigrants, from suburban neighborhoods, and as popular images of cities positioned blacks as “anti-neighbors,” the owner-occupied home became the sine qua non of working- and middle-class whiteness.

Other aspects of upkeep—ones with continued importance today—attach to the owner-occupied home. As Roediger points out, even small suburban lots offered a place to garden, and, at least symbolically, produce food in a self-sufficient manner, thus transporting old-country activities into the back yard. Home ownership also “acted as a kind of bank, providing security when age [or injury] made work in jobs requiring brute strength less possible,” allowing the domicile, and those in it, to maintain themselves after wage labor was no longer possible (161). Labor on the home added value to the ‘bank.’ Using Richard Harris’s term “sweat equity,” Roediger points out that “home maintenance, extension and, at the extreme self-building [were, and are,] substitutes for wage income’…. [T]his dimension of ‘home/work’ carried racial dimensions as well. Do-it-yourself magazines featured white handymen exclusively” (162).

Allen’s concept of the buffer class follows Marx. In his 1852 analysis of the French Revolution, The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Marx argues that the “buffoon” emperor Napoleon III “is forced to create an artificial caste, for which the maintenance of his regime becomes a bread-and-butter question” (129). This is the local management caste, fitting “along side the actual classes of society” and responsible for staffing the “enormous bureaucracy” which keeps these relations in place. Marx views the rural small holders of property as the basis of this class, writing that “small-holding property forms a suitable base for an all-powerful and innumerable bureaucracy. It creates a uniform level of relationships and persons over the whole surface of the land” (128). Through rents and taxes the coffers fill from the work of holding on to these yeomanries. From the leveling of aristocratic gradients, the state steps in, establishing offices and posts as it goes. “It is,” the young Marx writes, “precisely with the maintenance of th[e] extensive state machine in its numerous ramifications that the material interests of the French bourgeoisie are interwoven in the closest fashion” (63).

The word stuff enjoys capacious use, to say the least (“the word that can substitute everything” as The Urban Dictionary puts it). I use it in American vernacular sense of owned things, i.e.: my stuff. This follows the OED’s “Property, esp. movable property, household good or utensils; furniture.” The word, I think, is actually the closest to the vernacular version of the (surprisingly current) legal term “chattels” which means any item of property, other than the landed type.

That something better will arrive through destruction is, according to Sasha Lilley et al.’s Catastrophism, is a major aspect of “apocalyptic politics” that cross neoliberal, conservative and green modes. Each of these political orientations welcomes collapse: the sense “that society is headed for a collapse [is]…regarded as a great cleansing, out of which a new society will be born” (1). Lilley et al. remind us that out of the crises of the 1970s, “neoliberalism, not revolution, was the fruit born” (58). While greens and conservatives tend to see the root of collapse in social and human activity, neoliberals tend to naturalize disorder itself, as in Schumpeter’s frequent use
of weather to describe economic activity—i.e.: “gales of creative destruction” that bring “an avalanche of consumer’s goods that permanently deepens and widens the stream of real income although in the first instance they spell disturbance, losses and unemployment” (Capitalism 82, 67).

63 There is of course ruse here as well. A recent Dollars & Sense article on rent control well captures neoliberalization’s shifting valuation of stability and change. In it, Barton points out that “Rent control provides tenants with stability and predictable rents. The real estate industry has long told us that homeownership is good because it increases community stability, while renters are ‘transient.’ Then when tenants demand the stability that can be provided by rent control the real estate industry switches from the civic language in which stability is a virtue to the economic language of efficiency so that harmful ‘transience’ becomes beneficial ‘mobility’” (14).

64 Male caretaker-cowboys, however, enjoy relative prominence: Clint Eastwood’s 1992 film Unforgiven, for example, features a protagonist living outside society, one who kills numerous bad guys and is yet a dedicated daddy. This is just the tip of an iceberg of texts that use male care of children, and women, to justify the transgression of social norms and restraints, and make violence register as positive action—i.e., Die Hard. Often this involves rescue, rather than daily care—a further departure from the reality of how care is provided, by imagining acts of dependence as momentary and profound, rather than daily, perpetual, repetitious and small.

65 I have simplified this categorization of aunt figures. Sortin and Ellingson also discuss a third type of caretaking aunt figure in the witch mode seen in Sabrina the Teenage Witch as well as in Practical Magic. This types denote “a sexually appealing, single woman obsessed with consumerism, heterosexual attractions, and physical appearance and adornment” (450). While “a post-feminist logic underwrites these popular enactments of the aunt as witch…. [they] nonetheless transgress heterosexual and familial conventions by centering pleasure, intimacy, and caring in female relationships, extolling a female-centered and communal model of kinship” (450). While sexuality is resoundingly absent in Housekeeping, Sotrin and Ellingson’s central point about this figure—that she offers an apprenticeship model of family care—pervades the novel. Like Sylvie, whose deviant transiency functions a bit like witch-ness to empower her, and her ward, in ways the normal people of the town cannot understand, “in Sabrina, the aunts mentor rather than mother their niece, conflating family, kinship, friendship, and apprenticeship” (450). Apprenticeship indeed becomes a dominant mode of Ruth and Sylvie’s relationship, apprenticeship not in the pop-culture magic “that materializes [Sabrina’s] impulsive wishes” in a sexualized and consumerist landscape, but in the exact opposite of these things, asceticism. Still, the end result is, at least for the fiction, much the same: Sylvie teaches Ruth how to be different. A fourth type, the Black “mammie” aunt who cares for white children (seen most prominently in Gone with the Wind) receives some attention toward the end of their article. Unlike the other types, this version is non-kin, racialized, and is “bound physically and economically to the domestic sphere, even as her presence liberates the White woman from domestic servitude” (452).

66 The allusion, of course, is to Moby Dick. Of relevance to Housekeeping, the first words of Moby Dick are not “Call Me Ishmael” (3). Before “Call me Ishmael” appears, Melville offers, in two short chapters, a host of “Extracts” about whales, compiled by “a sub-sub librarian” (xxxix). These extracts, piled up in front of the narrative, and almost begging to be ignored, are culled from history, philosophy, scripture, Shakespeare—and from hearsay and popular culture. By locating all of this, as well as the sub-sub librarian’s lowly act of curating it, ahead of the text, Melville reminds readers that the story descends from many sources. At one point in the narrative, a footnote begins “since the above was written, the statement is happily borne out by....” (216). Knowledge is even running ahead of it. The narrative is thus founded upon a historical-social body of knowledge, curated by an invisible librarian, undercutting the very individuality so often noted in its ostensible first line.

67 The reduction of the Romantic tradition is worth noting. In an example of what is sometimes called Goethean science, Theodor Schwenk’s Sensitive Chaos: The Creation of Flowing Forms in Water and Air (1965) analyses the way water influences natural forms, finding that one of nature’s basic life-bestowing strategies follows one of water’s basic properties: to ball itself up. This self-containing aspect of water can be seen in all bodies, which are, in this sense, a method of containing water—keeping it balled up, for a while, against its other impulse to drain downward.

68 To be fair, Crawford, in his approach to trade work, does explore the ethics of responsibility for other people’s stuff. And Kondo, discussing her own work as a consultant, more or less follows suit, though not in an explicit way.
For more on slow food and neoliberalism, see Sarah Sharma’s *In The Meantime: Temporality and Cultural Politics*. Sharma writes that slow food is “less about a politics of time conducive to ethical relations that it [i]s about learning the right individualistic practices of time…. The type of time that is valued by the slow food movement is ‘natural time,’ whether… of the earth, the seasons, or the biological clock” (122). In addition to a similar appropriation of “nature,” to the one discussed above, Sharma’s discussion seems to raise the prospect “gaps,” though she doesn’t use the term itself. She writes, “The slow food movement is oriented around a series of spaces that offer “shells”—protected spaces in which to deal with a range of sped-up forces” (123). These protected spaces are both special and temporal.

For more on storage in this vein see Julia Hendon’s 2000 “Having and Holding: Storage, Memory, Knowledge, and Social Relations.” In it she storage in Mesoamerican cultures, arguing that “storage is indeed an element of mutual knowledge… part of the spoken and unspoken dialogue through which people construct and challenge a moral order” (42).


For the sake of tenants’ privacy, I have slightly altered the name of the plaza.