

**LANGUAGE IN MOTION IN MARILYNNE ROBINSON'S *HOUSEKEEPING*
AND THE BOOK OF *RUTH***

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ABSTRACT. *The terminology used to describe people living in socially or legally ambiguous housing conditions is contradictory and contested in often unpredictable ways. Homeless people, as well as the laws and government discourses designed to limit their behavior, frequently choose language that is at odds with what their bodies are actually doing in the spaces they occupy. In this essay I will discuss the oxymoronic verbal formulations for how transients, especially transient women, move through and live in social space by looking at two texts that focus on homeless women and their social power, Marilynne Robinson's novel *Housekeeping*, and the biblical Book of Ruth (on which it is partially based). By placing these works in the context of the legal discourses of homelessness and squatting, and gender analyses of mobility, I hope to identify a mode of gendered embodiment based in the language of motion.*

Keywords: Marilynne Robinson, Ruth, homelessness, Bible, mobility, squatter's rights, gender.

EL LENGUAJE DEL MOVIMIENTO EN *HOUSEKEEPING*, DE MARILYNNE ROBINSON, Y EL LIBRO DE *RUTH*

RESUMEN. *Resulta contradictoria, y a menudo refutable de maneras impredecibles, la terminología usada para describir a personas que viven en condiciones de alojamiento ambiguas social o legalmente. Las personas sin hogar, así como las leyes y discursos gubernamentales diseñados para poner límites a su comportamiento, escogen frecuentemente un lenguaje que se contraponen a lo que sus cuerpos están realmente haciendo en los espacios que ocupan. En este ensayo me ocuparé de casos de oxímoron en expresiones verbales que abordan cómo los transeúntes, y en especial las mujeres transeúntes, se mueven y viven en el espacio social, analizando dos textos que se centran en mujeres sin hogar y en su poder social: la novela de Marilynne Robinson Housekeeping (cuyo título en español es Vida Hogareña), y el bíblico Libro de Ruth (en el que la novela está parcialmente basada). Espero identificar un modo de personificación genérica basado en el lenguaje del movimiento, ubicando estas obras en el contexto de los discursos legales de la falta de hogar y la okupación, así como de los análisis de género aplicados a la movilidad.*

Palabras clave: Marilynne Robinson, Ruth, sinhogarismo, Biblia, movilidad, derechos de los okupas, género sexual.

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Two women lie in an open field, asleep, arms wrapped around each other. Should we describe them as homeless or travelling? A family sits around a table, eating a meal in a mostly-empty building. Should we describe them as lodging or squatting? The terminology used to describe people living in socially or legally ambiguous housing conditions is contradictory and contested in often unpredictable ways. Homeless people, as well as the laws and government discourses designed to limit their behavior, frequently choose language that is at odds with what their bodies are actually doing in the spaces they occupy. In this essay I will discuss the oxymoronic verbal formulations for how transients, especially transient women, move through and live in social space by looking at two texts that focus on homeless women and their social power. The biblical Book of *Ruth* has long been a touchstone for feminist discussions of female community in the context of homelessness and migration. Marilynne Robinson's 1980 novel *Housekeeping*, which is partially a retelling of the biblical story, offers insight into the relationship between domesticity and transience in contemporary American literature. By placing these works in the context of the legal discourses of homelessness and squatting, and gender analyses of mobility, I hope to investigate how the descriptions of the body's motion and stillness in space can grant agency to socially disempowered populations

through identifying a mode of gendered embodiment based in the language of motion.

Feminist Geographers such as Susan Hanson have analyzed women's embodied mobility to understand how power is distributed in social space (2010). Mobility theorists such as Tim Cresswell and Tanu Priya Uteng have focused on the ways in which gender is created through "the dialectics of fixity and flow –of place and mobility. [...] How people move (where, how fast, how often etc.) is demonstrably gendered and continues to reproduce gendered power hierarchies" (2012: 2). I would like to look at the language used to describe embodied movement, and the social and political impact of that movement, to understand how verbal formulations can call into question these gendered hierarchies of power. The Book of *Ruth* begins with two women breaking free from patriarchal structures and redefining their embodiment as at once interdependent and mobile. As the story progresses they reestablish a stable family structure, but the radical dislocation that founded their relationship continues to undermine and redefine the system of marriage and motherhood they inhabit together. Robinson's novel reverses the narrative, with the motion into perpetual transience for Ruth, the novel's narrator, occurring at the end. Together the stories offer models of radically mobilized women whose agency in motion, and in combination with one another, redefines their social roles, gender positions, and bodies.

Housekeeping focuses primarily on the conflict between the habitual behavior of transients and the expectations of middle class domestic life. Sylvie, a homeless drifter, returns to her childhood home in the rural Idaho town of Fingerbone to take care of her teen-age nieces Ruth and Lucille after her sister commits suicide and her mother dies. While Sylvie attempts to create a relatively stable domestic life for the girls, her instincts and behaviors are those of a homeless person, so she largely fails. Sylvie's sleeping habits are a prominent point of contention.

She slept on top of the covers, with a quilt over her, which during the daytime she pushed under the bed also. Such habits (she always slept clothed, at first with her shoes on, and then, after a month or two, with her shoes under her pillow) were clearly the habits of a transient. They offended Lucille's sense of propriety. [...] Once, because it was warm, Sylvie took her quilt and her pillow outside, to sleep on the lawn. [...] I was reassured by her sleeping on the lawn, and now and then in the car. [...] It seemed to me that if she could remain transient here, she would not have to leave. (Robinson 1980: 103)

Ruth posits an oxymoronic and ultimately untenable suggestions that one can "remain transient here." In this verbal formulation, transience is robbed of its essential meanings of temporal impermanence and physical motion; it signifies a set of quirky domestic behaviors that may be frowned upon by Lucille and her

over-proper friends but that are harmless and, above all, immobile. By contrast, Sylvie's mode of being in the world is constantly setting stable terms in motion. A particularly traumatic incident for Lucille occurs when "on our way to the Post Office ...we saw, in the fallow little park that memorialized war dead, Sylvie lying on a bench, her ankles and her arms crossed and a newspaper tented over her face" (105). Robinson's description offers up a series of words gesturing toward governmental and social institutions: the post office, the public bench as community gathering place, the park as public memorial, and the newspaper as social document. Sylvie's sleeping body has the power to transform these: the bench becomes an inappropriately exposed bed; the park becomes a "fallow" field; the newspaper becomes an ephemeral "tent."

It is no surprise that where and when Sylvie sleeps should precipitate a crisis. Legislation relating to homelessness almost invariably focuses on sleeping. In *Watters v. Otter* (2012), Occupy Boise argued that Idaho's anti-camping law was restricting their right to free speech. The court found that the ban on "sleeping" in public was reasonable, but that Occupy could continue their 24-hour presence as long as they did not fall asleep. A homeless group in Portland was able to circumvent the principle of sleep crime in *Anderson v. City of Portland* (2011) by arguing that laws against their tent city interfered with their right to travel. The traveler served as a socially acceptable category that justified the behavior of the homeless. Taken together the two cases demonstrate that sleep becomes a signifier for immobility. An Occupy Boise participant who was sitting still, or standing still, or even lying down, was considered to be sufficiently in motion to be legal. A homeless person in Portland who was sleeping, however, was imagined still to be travelling, so that the stillness of their sleeping body was only a technicality, a pause in the arc of their motion.

The legal logic of the Portland case has been taken up by a variety of homeless advocacy groups who attempt to apply legal standards for recreational hikers and campers to their homeless counterparts. Campers who sleep in the open by necessity, Wesley Jackson suggests, should be legally held to the standard of those who sleep there by choice.

When the privileged decide to live like the homeless, they bring with them their expectations of constitutional protections, and courts generally respect these expectations as the "reasonable expectations of privacy" that society is willing to afford. [...] Historically, society has not valued the presence or challenges facing homeless individuals. But society's value for outdoor recreation is growing, and these values can influence the expectations of privacy that individuals bring with them when they sleep in the wilderness without a traditional "home." (Jackson 2013: 935, 959)

The hiker may sleep for one night or several in a tent or under the stars, but those are still just brief pauses in a longer arc of motion from their stable place of residence out into the wilderness and back; if we imagine this longer story of recreational travel for one group, we must do so for all. Such legal language does not so much try to clearly establish the location of its citizens as to clearly establish their condition in a binary of mobility or immobility. Occupy Boise's argument failed because it tried to argue that society should accept immobile sleeping bodies. Jackson's and Occupy Portland's arguments succeeded because they accepted the social standard of mobility and labeled sleeping homeless bodies as actually in motion.

The term "squatter," used to describe homeless people living illegally in unoccupied houses or apartments, offers a similar reimagining of the body's motion. Someone sleeping illegally in a room or building is not imagined to be lying down, but squatting, with feet on the ground and legs bent, not fully relaxed, and ready, at any moment, to resume their movement. The implication is that while they may appear to be staying in one place they are not really staying, or lodging, but are still in motion; the intermediate posture points to their intermediate legal status. *Movimiento Okupa*, a squatters' rights organization in Spain, linguistically asserts the stability of those living in empty buildings using *okupa* – a neologism based on *ocupar*– to occupy (Gonick 2016: 836). Sophie Gonick describes how female housing activists, known as *afectadas*, shift the language further, rejecting "the standard descriptor of *okupa*. In their words, families who squatted were not engaged in *okupación*. Rather, they were liberating and *recuperating* dwellings for their own use" (845). While occupation suggests a forceful seizing of property, recuperation emphasizes the process of healing or repair. The struggle over definitions of whether the homeless body is moving or not is also apparent in the Spanish Penal Code of 1995, enacted in response to squatters' rights movements, which introduced a penalty of 3 to 6 months for squatters who demonstrated the "will to remain" (Martinez 2011). As in the Boise and Portland cases and the homeless hiker legislation, what is really at stake is not the physical posture or behavior of homeless bodies, but the imaginary narrative of mobility they are participating in. Those whose bodies may be still but who the state imagines to be travelers or outdoorsmen are tolerated; those who imagine themselves to be residents are criminals.

The use of contradictory language to reimagine one's social status based on where one moves and sleeps is also central to the Biblical story of Ruth. The story begins with Ruth's surprising declaration of fidelity to her mother-in-law Naomi, which has become something of a poetic set-piece of emotional fealty, and is often repeated in marriage vows. Ruth's husband Mahlon has died, along with his

father and brother, and Naomi, bereft of her husband and sons, bids farewell to her Moabite daughters-in-law and determines to travel back alone to Israel, her country of origin. Ruth then declares:

Intreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the LORD do so to me, and more also, if ought but death part thee and me. (Ruth 1:16-17).

Ruth's choice of words, while apparently innocuous, resonates in complex and unexpected ways. She configures her life with Naomi as one lived in physical motion, and in opposition to the spatial location of women required by patriarchal conventions. Ruth's vow that "where thou lodgest, I will lodge," does not suggest that, upon their arrival in Israel, she and Naomi will share a stable homecoming: the verb לָוַן (luwn) is consistently associated with short-term, insecure, or even dangerous lodgings. It is first used in Genesis 19:2, when the angels visiting Sodom propose to "abide in the street all night" and Lot strenuously objects, given the likelihood that they will be sexually assaulted there. Whether the Sodomites are mainly condemned for homosexuality or for a failure of hospitality, the passage makes clear that to lodge, or abide, in the street is the antithesis of a safe or welcoming resting space. The next instance comes when Jacob, fleeing from his brother Esau, "lighted upon a certain place, and tarried there all night, because the sun was set; and he took up stones of that place, and put them for his pillows, and lay down in that place to sleep" (Gen 28:11). The passage places great emphasis on the dangers and uncertainties of such transitional lodging. Jacob only chooses his sleeping place "because the sun was set" and his only sleeping arrangements are stones for pillows. The term "tarried" identifies his quarters as a space where he waits for the sun to rise –like a chair in a bus station-- rather than even a temporary form of housing. Sleeping on his stony pillows, Jacob dreams of a ladder to heaven with angels ascending and descending, suggesting a kind of spiritual itinerancy in which the relationship between God and humanity remains in constant motion

Ruth's promise, then, is not to occupy a home with Naomi, but to abide with her in the street, or to sleep uncovered with her in the wilderness. Ruth intentionally chooses terminology suggesting the conditional, unstable nature of their lodging. This is also apparent when she promises "wither thou goest I will go." The version of "go" she chooses ("yalak" יָלַךְ), often appears when movement or travel involves a resulting change in one's relationship to society. Its first occurrence, in Genesis 3:14, is directed at none other than the serpent, whom God curses for facilitating Eve's temptation by saying "upon they belly shalt thou

go.” The verb form next appears in God’s initial command to Abram to “Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee” (Gen 12:1). Abram, and his descendants, become wanderers for the next 600 years, and Jewish identity remains profoundly linked to a nomadic, exilic, or diasporic geographic trajectory for most of its history. While Abram and the serpent may occupy opposing positions on the spectrum of God’s favor, “going” for both involves a radical and irreversible transformation in which itinerancy and social rejection go hand in hand. Ruth’s choice of this form of “going” with Naomi represents more than a promise of companionship; she is proposing a redefinition of their identities toward one of mobile contingency and marginality. As Jennifer L. Koosed notes in her discussion of Ruth and Naomi’s relationship, the “uncertainties and ambiguities” of Ruth’s oath define her as “a border crosser who embodies plurality” (2011: 63).

It is worth noting that both Ruth in the Bible and Ruth in *Housekeeping* are not seeking a clear spatial definition for themselves, but one that is oxymoronic, or even nonsensical, in its bridging of mobile and immobile identity. Robinson’s Ruth wants Sylvie to “remain transient here,” the first and last words sit like immovable objects surrounding but not containing an irresistible force. The Bible’s Ruth clearly means to convey an immovable emotional commitment to her mother in law, but the certainty of that commitment is enacted through the uncertainty of their lodging and social place. Their verbal strategy differs from that of the *afectadas*, who wish to establish the stability of their position in society through a process of renaming. This sort of political activism responds directly to legal language that attempts to clearly define the mobility or immobility of a given transient body. Both Ruths, by contrast, encourage errant or wandering terminology that refuses to participate in the spatial clarifications the law requires.

Such sleeping that is not sleeping in a place that is not a place is exemplified in *Housekeeping* when Ruth sleeps in a tiny rowboat in the middle of a lake beneath a railroad bridge. Sylvie, who has spent much of her adult life riding the rails, is initiating her niece into a transient consciousness through their physical bonding in this terrifyingly unstable resting place. “Our little boat bobbed and wobbled, and I was appalled by the sheer liquidity of the water beneath us. If I stepped over the side, where would my foot rest? Water is almost nothing, after all” (1980: 164). The railroad bridge, a monument to mobility is at once megalithic and precarious; Ruth’s grandfather died when his train inexplicably derailed from it before her birth. When the train at last arrives, and the bridge begins to “rumble and shake as if it would fall” (167) Sylvie stands in the boat, making it nearly founder. Yet despite all of this, Ruth does successfully sleep there, nestled between Sylvie’s legs, their two bodies configuring a mother/child tableau.

I lay down on my side in the bottom of the boat, and rested my arms and my head on the splintery plank seat. Sylvie climbed in and settled herself with a foot on either side of me. [...] I slept between Sylvie's feet, and under the reach of her arms, and sometimes one of us spoke, and sometimes one of us answered. (161, 163)

Physical discomfort and disorientation leads to communion; their conversation ceases to be two separate voices asking and answering and becomes a murmur of sound indicating their shared presence. Like a horizontal Jacob's ladder, the bridge, which they will later cross to escape Fingerbone and become permanent transients, disrupts the earthly order of things, allowing them to reimagine sleep as a welter of contingent embodiment.

Maggie Galehouse and Elizabeth Klaver have demonstrated Sylvie's relationship to the culture of railroad tramping, the mobility and social marginality of which serves as the counterpoint to her attempts at housekeeping. Galehouse, who also notes the parallels between *Housekeeping* and the Book of *Ruth*, enunciates the historical disruption of social definitions that tramping caused.

Whether it is promiscuity, or class, or both, female hoboes threaten the status quo by reminding the nontransient population that women can and do exist outside the polarities of prostitution and domesticity, and that many women might find themselves, given a certain set of circumstances, sleeping in boxcars. (2000: 125)

Writing in 1933, criminologist Olof Kinberg distinguishes between prostitutes and vagrants, suggesting the first are an "initial stage" of "a socially noxious phenomenon," while the second are "an advanced stage" (553).

A woman with regular work, a domestic servant, factory hand, shop assistant, etc., can very well now and then engage in sexual relations with men for payment without, for that reason, becoming an asocial or antisocial parasite against whom it is the right and duty of society to interfere. (552-553)

What makes a woman a true threat to society is not sexual immorality, but a lack of clarity in the status of her mobility and thus her social position. To be "asocial," that is, without clear social category determined in part by occupying a certain space, is to be "antisocial," and the law must inevitably step in, as it does in *Housekeeping*. After their night on the lake, Ruth and Sylvie catch a freight train and ride back to town, where their appearance is sufficiently alarming to the community that the sheriff is called, and the legal process to remove Ruth from Sylvie's custody begins. Such radical sleeping, they discover, is not without social consequences.

In the biblical story, Ruth and Naomi also undergo a drastic change in their social and legal power through a night spent sleeping in the wrong place, but unlike

Ruth and Sylvie they are able to use the law tactically to empower themselves. When they arrive in Israel, Ruth becomes a migrant laborer in the fields of Boaz, whose interest in her is manifested in his attempt to fix her disempowered social status by controlling her movements and the space she occupies. “Go not to glean in another field, neither go from hence, but abide here fast by my maidens: Let thine eyes be on the field that they do reap, and go thou after them: [...] At mealtime come thou hither, and eat of the bread” (2: 9-15). Boaz’s kindness is protective, but also rigorously limiting. He determines where Ruth will work, who she will accompany, where and what she will eat and drink, even where her eyes will focus. His first words “Go not” uses (“yalak” יָלַךְ), the same form of “go” Ruth used in her oath to Naomi, and thus represents an inversion of the mobility-based transformation that vow implied. Because Boaz is a distant kinsman of Elimelech, Ruth and Naomi decide to enact a risky plan to gain legal power over him through the strategic use of Ruth’s sleeping body. Naomi instructs Ruth to go to Boaz’s threshing floor and, after he is tired from work and woozy from drink, to sneak in and lie at his feet. Ruth thus enters a male space in defiance of convention, and at her peril, and sleeps there in order to establish her legal rights. She leaves the threshing floor with greatly increased social power, having acquired Boaz promise to marry her and care for Naomi, by using her body to establish a legal claim. Her strategy thus resembles that of squatters, whose engagement with the legal system is based entirely on the strategic location of their bodies in combination with an awareness of legal technicalities. Raymundo Larraín Nesbitt, writing for a website targeted at English-speaking owners of Spanish vacation homes, describes squatters’ tactics with rueful admiration.

Squatters –smartly– will not break into a property that has inhabitants so as not to be criminally prosecuted. [...] The only article that dealt with this problem pre-reform was art 202 of the Spanish Criminal Code which referred to illegal trespassing. [...] There was a legal loophole which squatters exploited to the fullest. (2012)

Jackson’s use of backpacking laws to empower the homeless involves a similarly alternative application of the law. His describes it as “a backdoor method to provide Fourth Amendment rights to an otherwise marginalized group of citizens” (2013: 959). These architectural metaphors –back doors and loop holes– underscore that the strategies operate through the unconventional access to and use of space.

Ruth’s evocation of Mosaic law, as both Jennifer Koosed and Danna Fewell note, is imprecise, tricky, full of double meanings and evasions (Koosed 2011: 63; Fewell 2015: 91). She asks Boaz to be her “redeemer,” gesturing toward the law of the redeemer, which allows kinsmen to buy back the land of the poor to keep it in

the family (Leviticus 25: 25-28). Yet she mentions no land, and there is no reason for Boaz to know if she owns any. She refers to him as her “kinsman,” alluding to the law of leverite marriage which requires a dead man’s brother to marry his widow (Deuteronomy 25: 5-6), even though Boaz is not Mahlon’s brother. As Koosed notes, “People, especially people on the margins, often use law and custom in creative and imprecise ways in order to live and flourish” (Koosed 2011: 92). Fewell describes Ruth’s strategy in terms of Michel De Certeau’s discussion of tactical space. “She insinuates herself into the proper spaces of others, seizing opportunities to ‘make do’ in ways that stretch, manipulate, and transgress the social boundaries” (2015: 87). Ruth’s success can be measured both in the promises she receives from Boaz, and from his language. He responds, “Tarry this night, and it shall be in the morning. [...] I do the part of a kinsman to thee” (Ruth 3: 13). Where his previous command that Ruth “Go not to glean in another field” inverted her language from her oath to Naomi, this command begins with לֵוִי (luwn), the same word Ruth used to indicate her and Naomi’s socially marginal relationship to lodging. Ruth has not only convinced Boaz to take up her legal cause, she has influenced him into adopting her language. In using their bodies as political tools for their own empowerment, the two women manipulate and obscure language to gain social power.

The radical dislocation of embodied language associated with transient mobility also tends to unbind gender definitions. This is apparent in legal battles over transgender bathroom rights, which turn on scenarios of spatial mobility and emplacement. House Bill 2, the North Carolina “bathroom bill,” defines a public bathroom as a “facility designed or designated to be used by more than one person at a time where persons may be in various states of undress in the presence of other persons” (“Public Facilities” 2016). Such a description seems tangential to, and in some cases untrue of, what actually occurs in bathrooms; it envisions them as something like bedrooms or dressing rooms where people choose and don their clothing. Such a reimagination of public toilets as places of immobility is particularly apparent in American English. Restrooms are places where no one rests; bathrooms are places where no one bathes; men’s or lady’s lounges are places where no one lounges. Squatting, by contrast, is a term never used to describe what people do in public toilets. Establishing bathrooms as places of static rather than dynamic physical behavior enables the state’s efforts to stabilize the gendered nature of these spaces.

Successful legal arguments for transgender rights tend to recast the bathroom as a transitional space within a larger mobility narrative. In *Joel Doe et. al. v. Boyertown Area School District* the lawyers of transgender students presented bathroom use in the long narrative arc of the school day, arguing that students

not allowed to use the bathroom matching their gender identity would avoid the bathroom entirely. "The result is that those students 'avoid going to the bathroom by fasting, dehydrating, or otherwise forcing themselves not to use the restroom throughout the day.' This behavior can lead to medical problems and decreases in academic learning" (7). The appellants' argument, by contrast, focused on a single moment of revelation, describing a student who felt "surprise [...] when in an intimate space with a student they understood was the opposite biological sex" (17). The successful argument in favor of transgender rights recast the bathroom as a brief waystation in a given student's path through the hallways, classrooms, cafeteria, and bathrooms of the entire school. While a necessary stop to promote a student's health and learning, it did not represent the central staging place of a student's social identity, and thus of their gender. Gender is not defined as an unveiling of unexpected body parts in an "intimate space," but as a "lasting, persistent" (5) bodily engagement with the social spaces students move through.

In his discussion of the cultural implications of bathroom architecture, Lucas Cassidy Crawford points to a history of hygienic theories which have successfully reimagined public toilets as stable rather than transitional spaces (2014: 626). Crawford's analysis of a bathroom architectural design by the diller scofidio + renfro presents horizontal motion as a kinetic symbol of gender queering. He describes a long sink that moves through the wall connecting the men's and women's bathrooms with a common outflow.

The more unusual consequence of this drain, however, has to do with another kind of fluidity: the horizontal movement of all water in the sink, as it moves slowly sideways, often under the hands of other users, to reach the drain. This movement literally defies the meaning of "sink," as the water does not spiral downwards, but travels laterally. This reconfiguration of water flow effects a transing of movement in a literal sense: it moves "across, through, between" rather than down and out of sight. (627)

Bodies and their fluids become less gender-defined the more we imagine bodies in bathrooms as in motion between other social spaces, rather than as stable walled-off forms in stable walled-off spaces. Gayle Salamon, in her discussion of transgender embodiment, coins the term "*homoerratic*," using a spatial metaphor to describe how transgender bodies can "wander or stray from their customary or expected courses in unpredictable and surprising ways and whose energy depends on the very unfixability of those erotic identifications and exchanges" (2006: 576-577). Her gloss of the term points to the combined moral and geographical quality of its origin; erratic is related to err, which can mean either to travel in a socially-approved fashion or to wander in what Kinberg would call an "asocial or antisocial" manner. A knight errant's motion serves a policing

function, while the erring criminals he pursues stray off their “expected courses.” In Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queen*, the Red Cross Knight’s first encounter is with the female monster Error, who is notable for her transgressive, unpredictable, body parts and reproductive power.

In *Housekeeping*, we see a similar disruption of spatial and gender mobility at Sylvie’s bodily margin. When Sylvie first appears in the novel she is wearing a “raincoat [that] was so shapeless and oversized that she must have found it on a bench” (Robinson 1980: 45). Ruth assumes a causal relationship between shapelessness and homelessness: a garment that eliminates the physical markers of gender “must” have come from the world of vagrant bodies that repurpose public furniture into places to sleep and store their clothes. The gender fluidity imbued on Sylvie by the coat is transferred to Ruth just before their night on the lake. “She buttoned it up, bottom to top, and pulled the wide man’s collar up around my ears” (161). She thus envelopes Ruth in the gender indeterminacy and social marginality the coat represents, even as she initiates her into the culture of railroad tramping from which those social ambiguities derive. Tim Cresswell, in his study of the social dynamics of female homelessness, describes how, during the “tramp scare” of the early twentieth century, female tramps become an “impossible category”; they could not fit into the labor-based roles society used to define itinerant homeless men, and were thus shifted into a liminal condition of transgressive gender ambiguity. The “gender treachery” of female tramps was most fully expressed in “the act of mobility itself” (1999: 185). Jacqui Smyth points to the continued “lack of a clear category for female transients” (1999: 281) throughout the twentieth-century, noting the appearance of the popular term “bag lady,” a designation which, like Sylvie’s coat, imaginatively blurs the body’s boundary, during the early 1980s when *Housekeeping* was first published.

A similar association between unfixed location in space, social position, and gender definition appears in the Book of *Ruth*, which has long been notable to Hebrew scholars for “gender discord” in its pronouns. Immediately after Ruth’s declaration of loyalty to Naomi, the two women are described using male pronouns as they travel to Israel and arrive in Bethlehem (Ruth 1: 19, 22). Andrew Davis argues that “women who are isolated from support systems and who must act on their own behalf with the resources available to them,” like Ruth and Naomi, are described with masculine pronouns to “hint at the masculine roles they have assumed in the absence of male support” (2013: 510-511). A third example comes at the end of the story, when the Israelite women compare Ruth to Rachel and Leah (Ruth 4:11). As Davis notes, Jacob’s wives are notorious tricksters, associated with the “bedtrick” (2011: 510) reminiscent of the one Ruth and Naomi pull on Boaz. In leveraging their gender to gain social power, then, women destabilize

their gender definitions. Even instances when Ruth, Naomi, Rachel, and Leah are using their sexual appeal and reproductive power to manipulate men lead to their being described with male pronouns.

A peculiarity of the Hebrew describing Ruth and Naomi's "bedtrick" suggests that we need to add the dislocation of individual identity to our collection of spatial, power, and gender dislocations. Naomi's instructions to Ruth in chapter 3 portray the women's bodies as interchangeable. She tells Ruth to dress and go down to the threshing floor, where she, Naomi, will take her place beside Boaz (Koosed 2011: 59). As we have seen, a similar bodily blending occurs when Ruth and Sylvie sleep in the boat, and this is even more pronounced earlier in the same section of the book, when Ruth dons Sylvie's gender-disrupting coat. The coat transforms Ruth into a transient, while also enabling a bodily blending with Sylvie that offers Ruth the maternal care and consolation for which she has always yearned.

She opened her coat and closed it around me, bundling me awkwardly against her so that my cheekbone pillowed on her breastbone. She swayed us to some slow song she did not sing, and I stayed very still against her and hid the awkwardness and discomfort so that she would continue to hold me and sway. [. . .] When we got up to leave, Sylvie slipped her coat off and put it on me. She buttoned it up, bottom to top, and pulled the wide man's collar up around my ears, and then she put her arms around my shoulders and led me down to the shore with such solicitude, as if I were blind, as if I might fall. [. . .] I wore her coat like a beatitude, and her arms around me were as heartening as mercy, and I would say nothing that might make her loosen her grasp or take on step away. (Robinson 1980: 160-161)

Robinson emphasizes the emotional intensity, and the bodily awkwardness, of this strange embrace. Ruth finds in this bundling together of bodies and clothing the emotional swaddling she lost with her grandmother's death and her mother's suicide. The coat encases Ruth up to her ears even as Sylvie wraps her in her arms. Ruth says that Sylvie "led me down to the shore," but with both Sylvie's arms around her shoulders, "grasping" her close, they can only walk like people tied together for a three-legged race. Robinson leaves us confused about just where one body ends and the other begins, and both blend into the amorphous identity fostered by the coat.

Bodily blending and strange, miraculous rebirth also occur at the end of the book of *Ruth*. When Ruth gives birth to a baby boy with Boaz, "Naomi took the child, and laid it in her bosom, and became nurse unto it. And the women her neighbours gave it a name, saying, There is a son born to Naomi" (Ruth 4: 16-17). Despite being elderly and barren, Naomi's body has become so fully bonded with Ruth's that she can nurse her child. Such an amalgamation is at once

miraculous and transgressive, like the body of Spenser's monster Error, suggesting a reproductive disorder that, while channeled back into the patriarchal line, implicitly undercuts the rigorous boundaries it requires. Under Mosaic law the baby is legally Mahlon's heir, and thus Naomi's grandson. Jennifer L. Koosed points to an array of shocking implications in these overlapping triangles of mothers, husbands, and sons: "[Naomi] functions as both husband to Ruth and wife to Boaz, father to Obed and mother to Obed" (2011: 58-59). The same laws that Ruth and Naomi used to gain social power, now consolidate their place in society by subverting all of its fundamental categories of family, gender, and identity.

Housekeeping ends where the Book of *Ruth* begins, with two women leaving home and recreating themselves as wanderers. Threatened with separation by society and the law, Ruth and Sylvie burn their house and cross the railroad bridge in the night. The town presumes them dead, so they effectively become non-persons. "Perhaps all unsheltered people are angry in their hearts, and would like to break the roof, spine, and ribs, and smash the windows and flood the floor and spindle the curtains and bloat the couch" (168). As Stefan Mattesich notes, such anger emerges from a desire to destroy the distinction between inside and outside, public and private, motion and stasis "figured both as house and body" (2008: 70). The word the biblical Ruth uses for "lodgest" --לון (luwn)-- has one additional, rarer, meaning: it can signify a verbal complaint --to "murmur" or "grumble." This usage appears almost exclusively in Exodus and Numbers, when the children of Israel are always "murmuring" angrily to Moses about of the privations of their wandering lives.

And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness: [...] Would to God we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we did eat bread to the full; for ye have brought us forth into this wilderness, to kill this whole assembly with hunger. (Ex 16:12-13)

The Israelites' main complaint is that they have been shifted from stable beings, who "sat by the flesh pots," to transient beings who do not have a clear home or a reliable source of food. Their לון (luwn), or unreliable lodging, leads to their לון (luwn), or murmuring. The relationship between these meanings derives from the notion that remaining somewhere all night involves a sort of obstinacy one would expect from a grouchy troublemaker. Those who tarry the night in a place that is not their home are always murmuring, creating a noise, generating a background hum of dissatisfaction that disrupts those with comfortable beds to sleep in. Ruth's oath to Naomi thus resonates, or perhaps murmurs, with all those who are displaced and deracinated. Not only does it redefine what it means to go, stay, and be at home in relation to gender and power; it involves a constant murmur of moving language that, like their own moving bodies, is never at rest.

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