

architectural space. Because window walls peaked in popularity in the 1950s and 60s, they witnessed the evolution of tract living, the rise of Levittown, and the surge of modern American suburban culture. Prominent critics of modern architectural space, such as Lewis Mumford, Lary May, and Lynn Spiegel, have each suggested that the mass installation and purchase of ranch tract homes complete with picture walls introduced new understandings about the distinctions between indoor and outdoor vicinities in this era — in short, it confused these former distinctions. In his work, *Recasting America*, Lary May writes that these interior walls became a creative element of modern décor, an essential element to the ranch home and modern way of life, a life that "made the seasons into an ever changing wall decoration...The interior walls of the house literally changed color with the seasons and made nature a direct part of the home décor" (May 178). Homes complete with picture windows soon became a staple of the postwar era, allowing for a type of mass voyeurism into the home from the outside, changing the postwar vision of public and private spaces, and even shifting the way modernist architecture and space were conceptualized. Capitalizing on their rise in popularity, mass marketing schemes publicized their spatial installations within domestic advertising in copious amounts.² Lary May even attributes the onset of the ranch home of the 1930s and 40s and the picture windows of the 1950s and 60s as a product of "...enthusiastic promotion by home magazines in the 1940s and 1950s" (May 174).

The new spatial orientation of suburban modern track homes complete with picture windows was so influential that it began to infiltrate the literature and poetry of the era. The "American ranch home complete with picture window" has been widely parodied since. Fellow postwar media critic Lynn Spiegel describes the onset of the luxurious, widely disseminated picture windows as the experience of watching "the family in the theatre next door" (136). This advertised, theatrical experience of American

² In fact, in addition to the American home, domestic consumer goods in the first four years after the war became a measure of American superiority over Communism's force throughout the world. The successful consumer campaign launched record sales totals: "In the 5 years after WW II, consumer spending increased 60 percent, but the amount spent on household furnishings and appliances rose 240 percent (147). More specifically,

In the four years following the end of the war, Americans purchased 21.4 million cars, 20 million refrigerators, 5.5 million stoves, and 11.6 million televisions and moved into over 1 million new housing units each year. The same patterns extended into the 1950s, a decade in which prosperity continued to spread. (148)



culture became normalized throughout suburban literature as well. In fact, Simon de Beauvoir mourned the change in social space of American suburbia, accusing it of being, "'rigid, 'frozen,' 'closed'....The mansions are torn down and the real estate 'development' takes their place: serried rows of ranch houses, painted in pastel colors, each with its own picture window and its garden, each equipped with deep freeze, oil furnace, and automatic washer, spring up in the wilderness." (39). Just as de Beauvoir's analysis pins domestic space as prototypically feminine, William Whyte's *Organization Man* (1956) portrays the suburban home in a shade of distinctly feminine pastel with a "pink lampshade in the picture window" (309). Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (1964) laments the passive reign of postwar suburban consumerism, writing that it places "America at a dead standstill [with] passive consumers who defined themselves solely through their washing machines, cars, and trash compactors... the tinsel tawdriness of Hollywood fan magazines and titillating advertisements" (Marcuse 47). Even the triumphant ending of Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit* (1955) ends with a description of a tiered succession of suburban track homes and the promise of a Levittown-like development of a new American dream.³ Thus, as the idea of serried rows of suburban houses complete with picture windows even began to permeate literary culture, these rows of indistinguishable ranch homes mimicked the sense of the Cold War containment era and conformist consumer culture that permeated postwar American domestic politics.⁴

Writing at the height of this suburban sprawl, many of Sylvia Plath's poems internalize the spatial orientation of the modern ranch home, exposing an innate connection to a localized space created for her — one that encapsulates her and one innately connected to the dominant cultural narrative of her gender. In several of her poems, this space "geographizes" a sphere within which her language could work, tracing

³ I use Levittown here as an adjective for large suburban developments. The first Levittown was built in New York and was named Levittown because it was first made and conceptualized by William Levitt and his company Levitt & Sons. The developments became widely known by their characteristics — large numbers of easily constructed suburban homes that were all similar in appearance.

⁴ With the spread and incorporation of the GI Bill of Rights in 1944, the rise of suburban and consumer culture became a major force of capitalism worldwide. May even proposes that the "'Race' was not the nuclear arms race or the space race; more accurately, it was the 'consumer race'" (145). While politically, containment culture's war against Communism became both a consumer race as well as a move to "contain" women domestically. Likewise, major advertising campaigns began to follow shortly, releasing new research on female target audience campaigns for such domestic products.



a ranch style glass ceiling that housed the space within which her poetic body could act. Plath's work narrates a localized space, which in turn constructs her poetic, spatial geography. She lodged her poetry within these boundaries, while from within this poetic place, she remains critically conscious of the boundaries that withhold her poetic narrators.

Plath often presents the suburban home as a territory of enclosure throughout her poems and as an extended metaphor for the advertisement for 1950s containment culture. In 1957, Plath and husband Ted Hughes had just been married and were living in the U.S. where images of the modern ranch home with picture windows flourished within the mainstream media.⁵ Consider for example "Soliloquy of a Solipsist" where Plath begins by locating the poet in an omniscient observer position outside of the home, existing outside of the sphere of containment the suburban home represents. She opens first by questioning her narratorial position within the poem: "I?" she asks. She then answers her own question:

I walk alone
 ...
 When my eyes shut
 These dreaming houses all snuff out:
 ...
 I
 Make houses shrink
 And trees diminish
 by going far; my look's leash
 Dangles the puppet people
 Who are unaware how they dwindle
 ...
 I
 Give grass its green
 ...
 I hold absolute power. (Plath 37)

The poems' title "Soliloquy for a Solipsist" hints towards Plath's couth intentions within the poem. Solipsism is the belief that the only sure thing is that one's own mind exists, and all knowledge that is created outside of an individual mind is unjustifiable. As such, the external world may not exist. What is interesting about Plath's use of solipsism is that her poem resides within the suburbs, and furthermore, within a series of homes all with



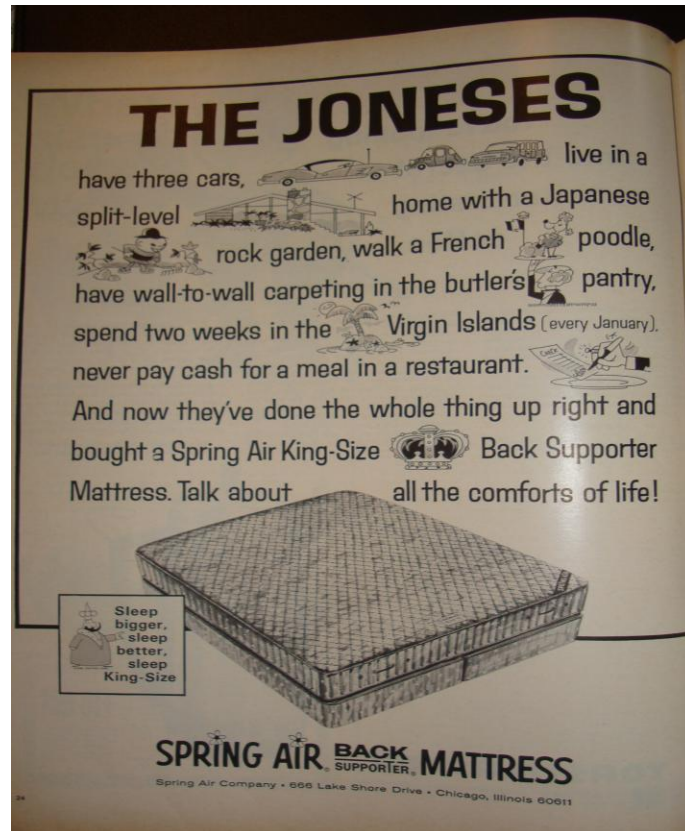
windows facing outward. Seen from a solipsistic point of view, Plath's vision of the U.S. at the time would have been flooded with images of such ranch homes and suburban ideals. Only the poet, the solitary "I" of the poem, maintains the omniscient power to exist outside of the "dreaming houses," to recreate them and "make houses shrink" out of their "dreaming" existence. The houses exist to "give grass its green" and to make "trees diminish," but they exist only as far as her "look's leash" allows. While Plath's narrator celebrates the poet's capacity for an absolutist and even imperialist imaginative freedom within the space of her poem, she incorporates a metaphor of the leash, simultaneously suggesting the idea of the restrictive, "leash-like" experience of 'looking' amidst these rows of "dreaming" houses. Ironically, the poet, while omniscient, experiences the spatial boundaries of looking — or trying to look into the suburban track homes, the "dreaming houses." One can only see what the window provides. The spectator's "look" is contained both poetically and physically by the modern suburban era. Her look's leash, and her solipsism in this case, is the encasement of the suburban home. Thus, while Plath experiences poetic freedom, in reality she bumps against the spatial borders of the modern suburban iconographic lifestyle, unable to escape its homogeneous existence.

Plath uses the combined tropes of domesticity as a metaphorical leash through an image of a contained, domesticated animal — a consistent metaphor she uses throughout her poetry. For example, in her poem "Words for a Nursery," she continues to lament that she must

[learn], good circus
Dog that I am, how
To move, serve, steer food
....my Master's fetcher... (Plath 73)



As her "master's fetcher," and a subservient "circus" dog to the domestic duties of the suburban home, Plath aligns her trope of domestic containment to leashed animals trained for servitude. In turn, these domestic tropes align themselves with the comparison of her "look" being on a "leash" and likewise to the comparison of the people inside their homes in "Soliloquy for a Solipsist" to "puppet people." Both appear strung, hung, and controlled in their subservience to domestic societal norms. For Plath, the people existing inside the periphery of the home exist in a sphere of puppetry, servants to a mainstream existence and subject to the commodified world of suburban Jonesian lifestyles (see figure 2, right). Within this contained domesticity, there



exists a carnivalesque version of the suburbs. The "families" exist as puppets performing on stages for the people outside their picture window. But they "dangle" "unaware of how they dwindle" to the outer crowd. Plath's narrator here creates a purely voyeuristic space, a purely performative space of the domesticity attributed to the space of suburban society. Within the window and beyond the "looks leash," the poet/narrator wants or desires to expose the reality behind the middle-class of the era.

Plath continuously recycles metaphors of domestic containment using the suburban ranch home. While her poem "Soliloquy for a Solipsist" presents a poetic narrator existing outside of the suburban world peering in at the puppetry of the era, her poem "Words for a Nursery" presents a narrator destined to a metaphorical containment and servitude. Oddly enough, both poems include an aspect of "leashed" existence implicit within her use of metaphors. In "Soliloquy for a Solipsist," she describes the



"puppet people dangling," "unaware of how they dwindle" for the audience of outer spectators. In "Words for a Nursery," she writes of performing dog-like for a "good circus" of spectators. Both poems imply a series of onlookers, while the omniscient narrator reports from the periphery — creating a stage of observation and exposing the scripted theatricality of suburban normalcy. Her use of domestic tropes presents the 1950s-60s' housing boom as a determined, commercial product, scripted and staged by the mainstream media.

These domestic tropes were repeatedly advertised throughout the era and became a staple of mainstream magazine culture. Writing in *Good Housekeeping*, housing boomer, William Levitt acknowledged that his aim in marketing suburban tract homes to target younger families was so they could control "some degree of uniformity" within his designs because young families could be pressed to model "somewhat conformist behavior" (May 184). For example, Levitt's "early developments had clear rules about when wash could be put out on the line (not on Sunday) and how often the grass should be cut. But he denied that there was any lack of privacy and asserted that people who lived in the housing developments were neither dull nor conformist" (May 184). Thus, while suburban tract home marketing targeted future "puppet people" to "dangle" from picture windows, housing advertisers accepted their conformist behavior as paradigmatic of suburban lifestyles and exemplary of domestic containment. These uniform routine habits of suburban tract home life soon evolved into accepted middle-class domestic behavior, and likewise, highly staged and monitored landscaping, laundering and domestic upkeep were embed within the social norms of mainstream media spaces and its consumer audiences. Plath notices this domestic theatricality and alludes to how the development of the ranch home contributes to the staged domestic performances associated with the era.

Her use of staged, domestic performances permeates Plath's collective poetry. For example, in "Lesbos," she describes the suburban lifestyle as "all Hollywood, windowless" (Plath 227). And in "The Munich Mannequins," she curses the "domesticity of these windows," damning the domestic burden of the suburban picture window (262). And finally, in "Dream with Clam-Diggers," she portrays the "neighbor's house" as obstructive to her view inside, "with shingles burnished as glass/blinds lowered" (43).



The picture window undertakes a role that continually stages domestic performance throughout Plath's domestic poetry, and her use of the domestic trope of the window slyly suggests the intermeshing of public and private spheres of domestic performance so often referenced in mainstream media.

In fact, this fusion of public and private became particularly important in American political culture. On July 4, 1959, the USSR held an American Exhibition in Moscow which exhibited a model American middle-class home that any American could potentially afford. A series of verbal exchanges occurred between Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev about the benefits and downfalls of American capitalism, which soon gave the now famous debate the name "The Kitchen Debate." The exhibition had on display a model suburban ranch home complete with modern appliances, furniture, and the newest "labor saving" devices that American capitalism and innovation could offer to the American woman. For Nixon and many other Americans, the suburban ranch home came to serve as a symbol of this ideal, of American superiority over Communism, and of proof of the American innovation that would prove victorious over Communism and nuclear war (see figure 3, below). But more importantly, it exposed the suburban ranch home as a political image, one which was placed on display for the world. Thus, the formerly private arena for the family soon became a public political performance of Cold War superiority, scapegoating its real issues onto domestic metaphors from the American homefront.





**She had to
cook with flames.**

(figure 3)





You don't.

Now there are Medallion Electric Homes with all-electric kitchens.

Clean. Spotless. Flameless.

No more by-products of combustion.

No more scrubbing soot and grime from walls and windows.

Electric kitchens stay cooler, too. Electric heat goes into the food—not up the sides of pots and pans. Besides an all-electric kitchen, a Medallion Home can also mean:

Flameless heating. In a Medallion Home you can enjoy heating with room-by-room temperature controls.

Flameless water heating. Electric water heaters require no vents so can be placed in a closet, behind a door or under a sink. This means more living space for you.

Flameless air conditioning. You can have it throughout a Medallion Home. Cool, filtered air keeps your family feeling fit and fresh.

Electric living is the trend today. In fact,

more than half of all homes and apartments built last year in Edison service territory were Medallion.

If you're planning to move, wouldn't a Medallion Electric Home be your best buy? It isn't out-of-date today. And it won't be obsolete in the all-electric future.

Medallion Homes are available in all price ranges. Try one on for size. And come out of the Stone Age.

Southern California Edison **SCE**



(figure 3)



Plath continues to "metaphorize" the suburbs using spatial metaphors of ocular strangling and with key language of Cold War containment culture as well as with verbiage reminiscent of Richard Nixon's famous Kitchen Debate. For instance, in "Night Shift," the narrator observes as with a foreign eye, as an outsider of the suburban microcosm. The narrator fears she would

impose on an evening
The noose cam from the outside:
A metal detonating/native evidently, to
These stilled suburbs. (Plath 76)

In typical Cold War fashion, the narrator adopts a spy-like persona whose anxious narrative exists outside through the lens of a "cam" which will soon "detonate" or "explode" upon the unexpecting, placid domestic sphere she looks onto. The eerie anxiousness permeating the Cold War involved both paranoia about "being seen" and being exposed as a "foreign" body amidst a sphere of conformity. Plath captures this feeling through tropes of ocular alienation: "from the outside" of "these stilled suburbs." In "Soliloquy for a Solipsist," she tries to shut out the suburbs entirely by "shutting her eyes" and by "going far, my looks leash." But here, Plath paints a paranormal picture from the outside, showcasing the "stilled suburbs" from a "noose cam" lens of vision. Thus cam strangles her view from the outside looking in upon the picture of the eerie suburban tranquility.

Her presence as a spectator acts as an imposition, an awkward invasion of private space, enacting a feeling of outer surveillance on the scene. The overarching feeling of containment parallels the repressed, strangled vision of the inside of the houses within the "stilled suburbs" and likewise mirrors the pressure of staged domestic conformism the rise of suburban ranch homes clearly regale. By using the word "impose," Plath suggests a silent tranquility that exists in the "stilled" and "eerie" atmosphere of the "stilled suburbs." Likewise, the word "detonating" presents an impending feeling of explosion, a disturbance to the composed, placid space of the "stilled suburbs" — the very feeling of Cold War unease on the domestic front. By choosing phrasings like "detonate" and "outside" and "native to these suburbs," Plath implies an innate connection between domesticity and Cold War politics, not surprising, since Plath writes in the wake of the



Kitchen Debate. The Cold War emanated a constant feeling of political and domestic unrest, which for Plath resides in her suburban metaphors.

While Plath often portrays her narrators as omniscient spectral interruptions to the conformed, silent suburbs, she develops the corollary spatial presence of the suburbs into abandoned, ghostly corridors in her poems. For example, Plath complicates this further in "Landowners:"

I malign the laden perspective
Of identical gray brick houses
Orange roof tiles, orange chimney tops,
And see that first house, as if between
Mirrors, engendering a spectral
Corridor of inane replicas,
Flimsily peopled...

My eyeful of reflections a ghost's
Eyeful, which envious, would define,
Death as striking root on one land-tract:
Life, its own vaporous wayfarings. (Plath 53)

Plath, here, opens with a distasteful "laden perspective" of monotonous "gray houses." She labels them "Landowners" — not happy nuclear families — and proceeds to chronicle her line of vision through "monotonizing" the serialization of suburban life. Here, however, the narrator's "noose cam" captures a color palette of bland and bleached hues, di-chromatic rows of gray and orange houses, popularized colors of the day.⁶ By aligning oneself with the narrator's spatial perspective, the reader encounters a series of different spectral layers of bland color splotches; the layering effect is specific to the imagery of the poem itself: the rows of gray homes, the layers of bricks, the infinite orange rooftops, the sheets of orange tiles, and the sequenced chimneys. "Mirrors" replicate these di-chromatic images incessantly: "engendering a spectral corridor of inane replicas" (53). The endless reflections here overburden the narrator; she encounters an "eyeful" of reflections as the mirrors engender the endless barracks of suburban homes.

⁶ Plath frequently discusses the overwhelming "beige-like" quality of the colors of houses in her *Journals*: I dragged myself to look round and put colors into words. Yes it was all brown and cream. Shiny, cream-colored wallpaper [...] Brown, medium brown, window curtains [...] A cream radiator under window with newspaper on it. A great dull blue-eyes television set" (J 633). In the same section, she later continues to describe the living room in a "brown tone, with a pattern of dull yellow and pink flowers, probably roses" (633-4).



The narrator again exists on the outskirts, a "vaporous" apparition whose individuality is nonexistent amidst the rows of houses — so much so that the image of death immediately succeeds the trope of the suburbs in the poem: "death as striking root on one land-track." Within the "corridor of inane replicas," the narrator spies in the mirrors a ghost — whose killer is the suburbs themselves, "striking root on one land track." This, for Plath, marks the death of the individual.

Plath's suburban image of death mirrors the restrained lens of a television or as someone peering in through a window, and she develops this viewpoint of the suburbs from the lens of the "windowed" voyeur. In "Landowners," "Soliloquy of a Solipsist," "Dream with Clam-Diggers," and "Munich Mannequins," she sketches a picture of the suburban landscape that resembles the spatial restrictions of the glass picture windows of the identical ranch homes. She re-uses the suburban home trope in "Landowners" when she encounters the "identical grey brick houses" and in "Soliloquy for a Solipsist" when she peers into "these stilled suburbs." She also re-uses the same optical viewpoint in "Landowners," describing how she feels like she will "impose upon an evening." In "Soliloquy for a Solipsist," her narrator peers into the empty suburbs until her "look's leash" restricts her view. She also implies an aspect of domestic conformity in "Landowners" where her "noose cam" becomes a camera capturing a domestic performance. In "Soliloquy for a Solipsist," her narrator sees the "dangling puppet people" on display from their picture windows. Her tone in both poems implies an eerie, death-like invasion of the narrator upon a private domestic moment. For example, in "Landowners," she describes the suburbs as a "corridor of inane replicas" "flimsily peopled." Her "eyeful [reflects a] ghost's" viewpoint just as "death strikes root on one land track." And finally, in "Soliloquy for a Solipsist," her "dreaming houses all snuff out," and she has the "absolute" power to "make houses shrink" (Plath 31).

Plath's recycled domestic tropes, the suburban home, the same lens of sight, domestic performance, and haunting death-like tones, all suggest Plath's perspective on the rise of postwar American suburban culture as ingrained with uniform domestic conformity — one that implies a certain death for those women subject to such societal expectations. The same tropes repeat throughout her poetry, and in some poems, Plath's narrator begins to identify with the physical structure of the domestic space, products,



images, and objects themselves. Her identification with domestic space of the ranch home mirrors spatial debates between public and private areas of the home; it likewise echoes ideological-political debates surrounding domestic containment and gender roles of the period. In other words, Plath makes certain there is a distinct connection between her use of domestic geography in her poems and Cold War containment culture.

She routinely chooses to position the narrator outside her domestic geography to indicate a structure of domestic containment throughout her poems. But her fixation on homes, walls and windows, continues throughout her poetry. For example, in "Three Women," Plath narrates the disparate lives of three women, one of whom is a homemaker. In the poem, she asks: "How long can I be a wall?" only to inquire again later in the poem: "How long can I be a wall around my green property?" (Plath 185). Here, she equates her body directly with the actual physical structure encompassing a walled-in homemaker. Her relationship to her locale is always embedded in her gender identity as the Cold War suburban home was always a female space — or at least it was advertised as such. Plath continually explores her gender identification as a process of identifying with the domestic objects that surround her, such as in "Lesbos" where she describes the

Viciousness in the kitchen!
The potatoes hiss
It is all Hollywood, windowless. (Plath 227)

The Hollywood-ization of the domestic space and its image of the contented domestic goddess pervaded mainstream media, and the idea of the domestic as a structure of containment continues throughout her poetry — often identifying with the very windows and walls that contain her.

Plath invokes recurring metaphors of walls in ways that signal social anxiety surrounding domestic containment. For example, in "Spinster," she writes that "round her house he set/such a barricade of barb and check/ against mutinous weather/as no mere insurgent man could hope to break..." (Plath 49). Likewise, in "Gigolo," Plath describes the suburban landscape:

It is best to meet in a cul-de-sac,
A palace of velvet
With windows of mirrors.



There one is safe. (Plath 267)

In both poems, suburban containment structures become Plath's signal for the social anxieties embed within the walled-in reality of Cold War culture. The space of the "house barricaded with barb and check" suggests a vicious patriarchal imprisonment of the homemaker, such that "no outside man could hope to break." In "Gigolo," domestic containment is the "cul-de-sac with windows and mirrors" which then becomes a "palace" of "safety," or rather "the only safe place to meet." Paradoxically in these two poems, the domestic space of the home becomes both a space of containment and gender enclosurement while simultaneously a haven of safety and security from outer Cold War anxieties. However minor these references may seem, these utterances offer the rhetorical contour of the very boundaries that constructed gendered identity in Cold War culture.

Though many feminist critics of space and embodiment have analyzed social perceptions of Cold War femininity and "gendered" spaces, Plath's "localized" understanding of a confined feminist geography within her poetry is best enhanced by the criticism of Linda McDowell. In McDowell's *Gender, Identity and Place*, the locale of femininity is severely confined:

...The correct [places] for embodied women are drawn on to justify and to challenge systems of patriarchal domination in which women are excluded from particular spatial arenas and restricted to others. In this sense, to 'know their place' has a literal as well as metaphorical meaning for women, and sexed embodiment is deeply intertwined with geographical location. Social relations and spatial processes are mutually reinforcing (in different ways at different times and places...) in the construction of gender regimes with particular patterns of the segregations of the sexes and gendered hierarchies of power. (56)

McDowell's explanation of a woman's embodiment to an assigned geographical place deepens traditional interpretations of domestic tropes within her poetry. Plath's narratorial distance in "Landowners" and "Soliloquy of a Solipsist" proposes a desire to look from a detached outside view because she understands what it is like to be contained within the domestic construct; as such, her poems demonstrate an understanding that "women are excluded from particular arenas and restricted to others" (McDowell 56). The combined "literal and metaphorical meaning" is evident by Plath's sardonic use of images of the suburban ranch home throughout her poetic discourse.



McDowell's contention is particularly relevant to Plath's work and likewise to Cold War gender politics. Because Plath's tropes of geographical location are a direct result of gender politics on the domestic front, McDowell's work is vital in understanding how her "social relations as well as spatial processes are mutually reinforcing in constructing gender regimes" and "patterned segregations" in her work. Plath's poetic tropes are "mutually reinforcing" because they figuratively recount the "construction of gender regimes" and cultural "segregation" women faced on the domestic front during the Cold War (McDowell 56). Plath's use of such tropes represents a gendered "hierarchy" of spatial relations. Poetry allows Plath to manifest a space of relative freedom and formulate a cryptic, 'tropic' critique of the period. Thus, through her use of windows, walls and domestic objects, she is at once simultaneously confined and free, classified and independent, safe and dangerous. Likewise, through her internalization of the complex spatial relations of the era, Plath's geography presents her personal privacies as public evidence, therefore blurring the former distinction between indoor and outdoor spaces. This distinction exposes the effects that external culture had on Plath and explains the confessional purging of her societal criticisms into the open space of our public poetry.

Fellow critic Steven Axelrod discusses Plath's occupation with domestic things in his book *Sylvia Plath: the Wound and the Cure of Words*. He contends that her use of the trope of the mirror offers "the ideal world of dream and the actual world of *matter*... Her imaginative mirror... was tarnished, exposing only its own limitations and *opacities*, reflecting merely an abyss that divided the *axis of vision* from the axis of *things*" (19; my emphasis). Thus, as Axelrod aptly contends, Plath's world was a place of restricted conflation of both fiction and reality, of opacity and vision, of materiality and surreality. I would further argue that her poetry exists in this "abyss," embedded within the "axis of things" (Axelrod 19) that divides her poetic being throughout her feminine "geography" (McDowell 56). This is the context and structure which has shaped Plath, a bound "feminine" geography within walls built for her. This enveloped her "axis of vision."

The repetition of household objects, her domestic structure, and even daily chores paints a suburban geography characterized by feminine labor and domestic spatial containment. Her "axis of *domestic things*" becomes enveloped within her "axis of



clean your carpets
the easy, low cost rental way...electrically

Rent Glamorene's amazing light weight electric rug shampooer... \$2.00 for 24 hours (\$1.00 refund with coupon).

Fill with Glamorene rug shampoo, now better than ever with Nulite,[®] for cleaner, brighter, springier rugs.

Now with finger-tip ease you clean your rugs quick and easy with professional-like results.

Then relax in the luxury of brighter, cleaner, springier rugs—thanks to Glamorene.

THIS COUPON WORTH \$1.00 ON RENTAL OF A GLAMORENE ELECTRIC RUG CLEANING MACHINE

When validated by store, this coupon is worth \$1.00 toward rental of Glamorene Electric Rug Cleaning Machine. Have store manager validate coupon by filling in name of store, serial number of machine you rent, and sign his name in spaces provided at right. To redeem coupon, mail it, together with the front portion of the label from a quart or half-gallon size of Glamorene Rug Shampoo, to Glamorene, Inc., P.O. Box 300, Clifton, N. J. Good only on the rental of Glamorene equipment. This offer expires midnight, December 12, 1964. (Only one coupon per family)

Your Name _____
Your Address _____
Your City _____
Zone _____ State _____
Store Name _____
Machine Serial No. _____
Store Manager's Signature _____

GLAMORENE[®]
Famous for products that really work.

Glamorene electric rug cleaning machines available at supermarkets, houseware and hardware stores

vision" (see figures 4, below, and 5, on page ###).

Furthermore, her "actual world of matter" and her imaginative "ideal world of dream" begin to conflate in her poems "Vanity Fair" and "Tinker Jack and Tidy Wives."⁷ In these poems, Plath's "actual" domestic reality wrestles with its immaterial ideal. For example, in "Vanity Fair," she writes that her "heart's oven / Craves most to cook batter" (Plath 33).

Her word choice here indicates a warring tension between the daily monotony of household duties and her

true innermost desires. Wrought with a sardonic tone, Plath plays with the idea of a woman's innermost desire or ideal — as though it could exist apart from "cooking batter" or domestic duties embedded in housewifery. Furthermore, the pairing of the ideal desires with material domestic objects displays this warring conflation. She pairs the immaterial ideal of a woman's "heart" with the domestic, material object "oven." Likewise, she pairs the immaterial essence of "craving" with the domestic duty to create a homemade "object" of pride: cake batter. These complex pairings play with the circumscribed space where Cold War women now found themselves: in between the domestic ideals of the era deployed by mass media. Here, the "axis of things" that surrounds women in Plath's

⁷ Steven Axelrod delves into a deeper understanding of Plath's conflation of an "actually world of matter" and an "ideal world of dream" in his book *Sylvia Plath: the Wound and the Cure of Words* (Axelrod 19).



poems unearths the ideological underpinnings of these feminine desires. It "exposes their own limitations" within a complicit system of patriarchal domestic containment.

GE self-cleaning oven

General Electric's P-7 Automatic Self-Cleaning Oven put the joy back into cooking because they take over the chore women hate most: cleaning a gummy oven. And ovens get that way. The culprits are the sticky fruits your family loves most. The stick-up casseroles, fruit pies. The splatter-drip meats au juice. The brown sugar Clinging Delights.

What a relief to let your oven clean them away automatically. No messy hand scrubbing.

Just set the oven control to "clean," latch the door and set the timer.

Off come the spatters, the crusted-on juices, the spills, the drips. And from some spots you could reach by hand.

The P-7 Self-Cleaning Oven feature is available on every kind of range we make. Built-ins and free-standing, 30" and 40". Conventional and electronic. And many colors, too. Harvest, Avocado, Copperstone or White. Your GE dealer will be happy to show them all to you. He won't have to show you GE's rugged construction. You probably grew up with it.

So get a GE Self-Cleaning Oven and cook to your heart's delight. And let the spatters fall where they may!

The J797 vs Meatloaf Suburbioso
Delicious as it is, nothing spatters like the traditional American meatloaf. And nothing fears meatloaf less than a GE Self-Cleaning Oven. The range is our classic double-oven American. The lower oven has the P-7 self-cleaning. Other features: dependable solid-state oven temperature control, Sensi-Temp® automatic surface unit, automatic rotisserie, meat thermometer, infinite heat surface units, two picture window doors. All colors. Similar Americans-styled model, our Versatronic® Range, features the amazingly fast GE electronic oven.

The J757 vs Casserole Cum Laude
Leave it to a casserole to bubble over and stick up an oven something fierce. Don't worry. The GE Self-Cleaning Oven is more than a match for the stickiest casserole. The J757 is a free-standing 30" model. Other features: dependable solid-state oven temperature control, no-drip cook top, easy-to-clean, high-speed Calrod® units, picture window door, infinite heat controls. All colors. Similar model now available with electronic oven, in most areas.

un-glue a world of sticky foods.

The J487 vs Apple Pie Americana
Few oven "glues" can match an apple pie. But not even the syrupy juice of half a dozen pies can crust for long in a GE Self-Cleaning Oven. The range is a double-oven, 40-inch free-standing model. Features: dependable solid-state oven temperature control, infinite control surface units (one of them the automatic Sensi-Temp unit), picture window, meat thermometer. All colors.

The JK29 vs Les Spud et Boeuf Nebraska (upper oven) vs Curiositas Caribe (lower).
Prefer to each cook your own thing? The GE JK29 built-in double oven has not one, but two Self-Cleaning Ovens. While the top one takes care of the rotis drizzings, the bottom oven cleans away the bubble-over from the covered dish. Other features: dependable solid-state oven temperature control, picture window doors in both ovens, easy-set oven timers, rotisserie, matching exhaust hood and surface units with pushbutton controls.

The JM99 vs Duck d'Amor
The spattery wine-basted duck. Don't duck out on this delicious fowl. Baste away and let a GE Self-Cleaning Oven pay the oven-cleaning piper. The oven is a custom built-in JM99. Other features: handsome picture window door and interior oven light, trim-looking backsplash, dependable solid-state oven temperature control, automatic oven timer, meat thermometer, convenient eye level controls mounted on the matching hood. All colors.

Progress Is Our Most Important Product
GENERAL ELECTRIC

(figure 5)

These material "limitations" become recurring images that Plath uses throughout her poetry. They represent her domestic material reality and locate her poetry within the suburban space of the 1950s and 60s housewife. For example, in "Tinker Jack and Tidy Wives," her writing is congested with domestic cooking objects, all hard, metal, and denoting some type of domestic chore associated with its materiality:

bring that *pot*
Gone black of polish
And whatever *pan* this mending master
...
I'll correct that mar
On *silver dish*
And shine that *kettle* of copper
At your *fireside*
Bright as blood. (Plath 35; my emphasis)



Each domestic object is ingrained with the chore associated with its presence within the home and thus becomes signified based on its contingent chore. The domestic object equals its corresponding domestic duty. The "pot" needs "polish," and the "pan" "mending." The "silver dish" needs its "mar corrected," and the "kettle" needs "shining." Throughout the poem, the reader cannot see the denotative object without its connotative association. For women, the domestic object has been signified with a connotative domestic chore. And while poems like "Landowners" and "Soliloquy for a Solipsist" show an escapist vision outside of the home, these poems are confined within the space of the suburban home and cluttered with domestic objects. In the localized space of the home, Plath's narrator reaches a new level of ocular containment as each object in sight carries feminine obligations within Cold War patriarchal culture.

Plath attaches the responsibilities of domesticity with domestic objects both within the confines of the home as well as within the daily consciousness of Cold War women. For example, in "Street Song" she writes of the daily routine of chores in a list-like, stream of consciousness fashion. Domestic chores occupy "the everywoman's" daily thought process:

Buying wine, bread,
Yellow-casqued chrysanthemums-
Arming myself with the most reasonable items. (Plath 36)

In "Resolve," she describes the "empty bottles on the windowsill" that obstruct her vision of the outside world. In "The Ghost's Leavetaking," she portrays this world as having "incompatible modes of time" and existing in a "no-color void" which fills "our meat and potato thoughts" (Plath 90). With such an influx of domestic objects throughout her poetic repertoire, a quick scan of Plath's work reads much like a women's magazine of the day — with each line an advertisement of the model American housewife's daily life. A different chore, a different appliance, and a different domestic object all surround her daily existence. Her domestic poems suggest a deep familiarity with the mainstream vision of the modern suburban home, from the panoramic view of the outside suburban street to the inner rooms filled with objects and chores. Accustomed to this daily routine of the home, she laments that "each day *we* create our whole world over" in "Tale of a Tub" (Plath 25; my emphasis). Plath's domestic poetry becomes infiltrated with the



domestic ads of containment culture, all enclosed within a suburban home and complete with a picture window and the televised stereotype of the model American housewife. In fact, her poetic environment reeks of mainstream American domestic stereotypes, which often seek to wall-in her poetic self.⁸

Plath's poetic geography gradually becomes more infused with images of the outer periphery of suburban homes (the windows, walls, and domestic objects), and she begins to circumlocute these objects through a self-reflexive poetic process. Unlike "Soliloquy for a Solipsist," "Night Shift," and "Landowners," in "Tale of a Tub" Plath writes contained *within* a bare, walled-in room in her home, this time describing the view of containment from the *inside out* as though the walls were closing in on her. While windows, walls and ceilings seem to haunt the poem, domestic objects likewise claim a damning, hostile personality. Plath directly orients her poetic lens *within* the figurative, material space of the poem, and her narrator views the room with sparing caution:

The photographic chamber of the eye
records *bare painted walls*, while an electric light
flays the chromium nerves of plumbing raw;
such poverty assaults the ego; caught
naked in the merely actual room,
stranger in the lavatory *mirror*
puts on a *public grin*, repeats our name
but scrupulously reflects the usual terror. (Plath 24; my emphasis)

Here, Plath tells a story *on* the walls and *through* the windows of her poetry. By describing her narrator's vision as a "photographic chamber of the eye," Plath once again heightens the importance of the ocular lens in her domestic poetry. Calling it a "chamber of vision," she narrates as though looking through the restrictive camera lens. Again, the camera's implication covertly implies a performance within a private space. Cognizant of being observed, the narrator stands naked in front of the mirror of a "merely actual

⁸ While her home during the writing of many of these poems was in England, Plath admits to being heavily influenced by American media culture in her *Letters Home*. Her experience as a guest editor at *Mademoiselle* offered her an inside view of the stereotypical articles, ads, and women for whom she was to mold her writing. In fact, her training at *Mademoiselle* even included a tour of an ad agency. In a fatigued tone, she wrote home to her mother: "I have, in the space of six days, toured the second largest ad agency in the world and seen television kitchens, heard speeches there, gotten ptomaine poisoning from crabmeat the agency served us in their 'own special test kitchen' and wanted to die very badly for a day..." (LH 120). In a later letter she writes, "I love you a million times more than any of these slick admen" (LH 120). And finally, after the tour of the ad agency, she complained dejectedly to her mother that she could write nothing but "glib jingles" (LH 129).



room." By describing the room as "merely actual," Plath emphasizes the projected normalcy of the space. She looks into the mirror. She revels in what the mirror can show through reflection. The woman, however, sees not a vision of her individual self, but rather a stranger possessed and contained within a room.⁹

A bizarre feeling of surveillance permeates "Tale of a Tub." The eye has become a "photographic chamber," and within the room, an "electric light" plays with the narrator's "nerves." Her grin for the mirror becomes a "public grin" — a performance for her mirrored self within the empty domestic space. Ironically, the contained self discovers it is not completely isolated in the room. In the following line, the mirror responds to her, personifying its own presence by "repeating *our* name." In the poem, this is the first but not the only instance where Plath will use the personal collective pronoun "our" or "we" to invoke a type of collective womanhood within the very mirror into which she peers. By writing that the mirror reflects "our" name rather than "my" name, Plath suggests that there really is no distinction between the woman in the mirror and every other domestically contained woman — searching the mirror for some semblance of individual reflection. The mirror, much like the walled-in containment of the home, becomes a self-monitoring space of reflection and domestic supervision. The reflection of the model homemaker is the monitoring force of compliant domestic ideals. The woman therefore is monitored through her own theater of conformity.

This ironic, solitary performance complicates Plath's sardonic perception of the theatrical image of the American home: the "theater" of the living room with the modern picture window. The performance is for a nonexistent audience, very similar to the process of composing confessional poetry. Similar to performance, the private spectacle of poetry writing is only ratified once it becomes public and published. Through this double-metaphor of self-reflection (through poetry and through the literal mirror in the poem), there is something horrifically terrible — almost gothic — in the mirror of her poetry. She writes that "it reflects the usual terror," describing a trepid revulsion in the performance of such a "public grin." Within this description, lies a lack of distinction between the public and private space of the room itself, and an overarching, horrific

⁹ Plath stages a similar domestic setup in her poem, "Mirror," where her narrator looks at her reflection in a mirror set against a backdrop of pink wallpapered walls.



emptiness pervades the room. The narrator stands, a contained "stranger" within the walls of the room, staring at a mirror that reflects back a performative grin. Plath locates an eerie presence here in the empty room — until the objects in the room unveil their presence.

The terror continues as Plath begins to perceive the inner qualities embedded within the domestic objects in the room around her, her vision littered with the very items that bar and define her daily existence. Further on in "Tale of a Tub," she asks,

Just how guilty are we when the *ceiling*
reveals no cracks that can be decoded? When *washbowl*
maintains it has no more holy calling
than physical ablution, and the *towel*
dryly disclaims that fierce troll faces lurk
in its explicit folds? Or when the *window*,
blind with steam, will not admit the dark
which shrouds *our* prospects in ambiguous shadow? (24; my emphasis)

Here, the narrator embodies this sense of enclosure, focusing first on the ceiling that "reveals no cracks that can be decoded." Such cracks would allow for an imaginary escape from the captivity of the domestic space. As she continues to search for an opening, she finds the "washbowl" with no "more holy calling than physical ablution" and the "towel" with a "fierce troll face." In fact, all the domestic objects which surround her seem to seep with an encircling gaze, a reminder of the domestic obligations that they espouse. In the empty room, Plath's domestic objects (the washbowl and the towel) begin to claim a personified life and a paranormal, looming personality. They become the worst version of their basic function — much like the domestic housewife whose individuality often becomes eclipsed by the daily chores she ritually performs.

In "Tale of a Tub," even the window is "[blinded] with steam" and will not allow the "stranger" to see her own "ambiguous shadow." The window thus restricts her vision between reality and fiction, creating an opaque distinction between public and private. She is allowed neither reflection nor a view in through the steam-blinded window. Throughout the poem, each object is engraved with a monitoring function: "the troll faces lurk" and the "window" tries to see beyond the "steam," but the window's vision is eclipsed by its own opacity. The mirror reaps horror, the shadow is ambiguous. As such, Plath's narrator is completely defined by her environment. She becomes what her



domesticity dictates. She becomes an ambiguous shadow, a blank phantom of a woman who does not even see a semblance of herself. She is but a raw silhouette of ambiguity — the carbon copy image of the model housewife. The "window blind with steam" will not permit the housewife to even see her own "prospects in ambiguous shadow." Caught between the bare, naked walls of the home, Plath's narrator cannot even see beyond the "prospects" of a life outside of the home. The mirror offers neither a reflection of a self nor a view outside its domestic walls. The tropes of the window, walls and mirrors directly invoke the uniform stereotypes caused by suburban containment. The objects of domesticity even leer viciously back at the narrator, shouting orders to their domestic servant. Once again, Plath summons the stereotype of the collective housewife, invoking the collective by speaking through the inclusive pronoun "our." Her poem underscores the collective, vapid space of the homemaker, each woman shut in a home performing the same daily routines in one solitary, simultaneous community.

Plath's environment in "Tale of a Tub" further dictates her public ambiguity by alluding to the lure of the "plunge" and the "shape" of the room "that shuts us in." This metaphor speaks to the domestic tale of all women: taking "the plunge" into marriage and finding "ourselves" "shut in" to the home interminably. She continues her narrative of containment, figuratively diving underwater:

We take the plunge; under water our limbs
waver, faintly green, shuddering away
from the genuine color of skin; can our dreams
ever blur the intransigent lines which draw
the shape that shuts us in?

...

the tub exists behind our back:
its glittering surfaces are blank and true..." (Plath 24)

Once again, the narrator is bordered by an impending sense of the shape that shuts her in. She is enclosed in "lines." Her "limbs" are restrained. The narrator is bordered by the domestic objects listed in her poetry: tubs, lavatory, mirror, ceiling, washbowl, towel, window — all of these objects encase her poetry, restricting movement beyond what seems to be a dark metaphor of "shrouds, shuddering, glittering surfaces, shadows, steam, bare painted walls, electric lights" (24). Here, the "tub" becomes the literal 'encasing' tomb that inflicts the drowning feeling that suffuses the poem.



Throughout the poem, there is a sense of deathly terror in the entrapment, a sense of the revealing solitude of the "naked" form encapsulated by the "merely actual room." With this feeling comes terror both within and about the structure. Once again, the nude in the mirror becomes less than real, a replacement for the nude which stands in front of the mirror — a figure that, shuddering, moves "away from the genuine color of skin." She becomes severed from the faithful, literal self-reflexivity a mirror claims to provide, a dead simulacrum of the former self. Once the mirror becomes distanced from the reality of the room, the narrator delves into "dreams" calling them "intransigent lines," the very "shape that shuts us in." Here, once again, Plath uses the inclusive personal pronouns "us" and "we," hailing the collective sphere of women on the domestic front who experience a similar tale of comatose domestic entrapment. A short while later, she asks: "can our dreams ever blur the lines which draw the shape that shuts us in?" By questioning the reader thus, she presents a paradoxical question: can women afford to have dreams in the contained sphere of the home?

Plath continues her narrative in "Tale of a Tub," invoking a Garden of Eden-like setting, parodying the dominant narrative of "Eve-ian" predestination, and calling women to emerge from their domestic fate. She continues:

Yet always the ridiculous nude flanks urge
the fabrication of some cloth to cover
such starkness; accuracy must not stalk at large:
each day demands we create our whole world over,
disguising the constant horror in a coat
of *many-colored fictions*; we mask our past
in the green of eden, pretend future's shining fruit
can sprout from the navel of this present waste. (Plath 25; my emphasis)

Here, the metaphorical reflection of stark nudity morphs into a metaphor of the Genesis narrative of Adam and Even enclosed within the Garden of Eden. The poem is brimming with Edenic references like the desire to cloak the nudity: "the fabrication of some cloth to cover," the blame of the woman for the expulsion from the garden: "we blame our past," and the forbidden fruit: "shining fruit." These images hearken a biblical past of both figurative and literal domestic containment.

Her Edenic containment reflects the first form of domestic containment, a damning of female to the domestic hearth, and a penalty of "our" debt to Eve-ian 'sin.'



The containment at the end of the poem becomes the containment of the dominant narrative that has become a 1950s version of domestic containment. A new freedom must emerge, she writes, from the dominant narrative. Towards the end of the poem, Plath tends toward a glimmer of liberating hope, hailing optimistic adjectives aside the damning clichés of Edenic femininity. She writes of the "future's *shining* fruit" which can "*sprout* from the naval of this present waste." Here, Plath prophesizes that from this domestic containment, this "present waste," can sprout something revolutionary — to write poetry in "white breastmilk."

Plath finishes the poem with similar optimism. She prophesizes that

*we shall board our imagined ship and wildly sail
among sacred islands of the mad till death
shatters the fabulous stars and makes us real. (25)*

Plath poem suggests the idea that women can actually escape the containment in one of two places: in death and poetry. The bounds of artifice can be escaped through the "imaginary ship" and through the fantasy of death and reemergence in poetry. Only in death can the narrator escape the ideology of the present, the eternal gender roles of the American housewife, and the "time and space that shaped her" contained identity and her pre-constructed type. She writes that she shall "board an imaginary ship" of poetry in order to escape the very geographical location of the walled-in housewife. Upon this ship, she can flee the ambiguous cloned image of the homemaker because only this ship can "make *us* real." Therefore, the "axis of the housewife's vision" can escape the walls, can see through the window, and will soon be able to see a real reflection in the mirror.



Works Cited

- Alexander, Paul, ed. *Ariel Ascending: Writings about Sylvia Plath*. New York: Harper and Row, 1985. Print.
- Annas, Pamela. *A Disturbance in Mirrors: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1988. Print.
- Axelrod, Steven Gould. *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*. Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1990. Print.
- Bachelard, Gaston. *Poetics of Space*. In *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. Ed. Neil Leach. New York, Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Basnett, Susan. *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1987. Print.
- Brain, Tracy. *The Other Sylvia Plath*. New York: Longman, 2001. Print.
- Broe, Mary Lynn. *Protean Poetic: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. Colombia: University of Missouri Press, 1980. Print.
- Bryant, Marsha. "Ariel's Kitchen: Plath, the *Ladies' Home Journal* and the Domestic Surreal." *The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Anita Helle. University of Michigan Press, 2007. Print.
- Englehardt, Tom. *Victory Culture*. New York: Basic Books, 1995. Print.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Norton, 1963. Print.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. In *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. Ed. Neil Leach. New York, Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Lefevre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. In *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. Ed. Neil Leach. New York, Routledge, 1997. Print.
- Marcuse, Herbert. *One Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon Press Books, 1964. Print.
- May, Elaine Tyler. *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*. New York: Basic Books, 1999. Print.
- May, Lary. *Recasting America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. Print.
- McDowell, Linda. *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1999. Print.



- Miller, Douglas T. *The 1950s: The Way We Really Were*. New York: Doubleday, 1977. Print.
- Mitchell, Andrew. *Advertising, Exposure, Memory, and Choice*. Hillsdale: Erlbaum Associates, 1993. Print.
- Mumford, Lewis. *New Homes for a New Deal: A Concrete Program for Slum Clearance and Housing Relief*. New York: New Republic, 1930. Print.
- Nadel, Alan. *Containment Culture: American Narratives, Postmodernism and the Atomic Age*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. Print.
- Parmet, Harriet L. *The Terror of Our Days*. Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2001. Print.
- Perloff, Marjorie. *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991. Print.
- Plath, Sylvia. *The Bell Jar*. London: Faber and Faber, 1966. Print.
- . *Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: Harper and Row, 1981. Print.
- . *Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950-1962*. Ed. Aurelia Schober Plath. New York: Harper and Row, 1975. Print.
- . *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Frances McCullough. New York: Dial, 1982. Print.
- Rosenblatt, Jon. *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1979. Print.
- Spigel, Lynn. *Make Room for TV*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992. Print.
- . *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print.
- . *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. Print.
- Sturken, Marita. *Tangled Memories*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997. Print.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda. *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*. Boston: G.K. Hall & Company, 1984. Print.
- . *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003. Print.
- White, William Hollingsworth. *The Organization Man*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1956. Print.

