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"WE HAD BECOME TRAILER PEOPLE": STIGMA, SOCIAL BOUNDARY MAKING, AND THE STORY OF THE AMERICAN MOBILE HOME PARK

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DISSERTATION

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the
College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

"WE HAD BECOME TRAILER PEOPLE": STIGMA, SOCIAL BOUNDARY MAKING, AND THE STORY OF THE AMERICAN MOBILE HOME PARK

Mobile homes and mobile home parks—still most often called trailer parks in common vernacular—occupy a particularly stigmatized position in American culture. A symbolic stand-in for a host of social ills, from bad hygiene and broken families to drug use and loose morals, mobile homes offer affordable housing at a social cost, branding their residents as likewise deficient. This piece of material culture did not come into being with such negative meanings attached. The process of becoming a symbol of stigma is an historical one, a story of meaning making in the midst of cultural shifts and changing norms. Since appearing on the scene in the early 20th century, the American house trailer has transitioned from trendy fad to housing pariah, and the power of its symbolism continues to label residents as pariahs by association. Through status connotations and class reproduction, the stigma that comes with being labeled "trailer trash" continues to have harmful consequences for the lived experiences of mobile home park residents today.

KEYWORDS: Stigma, Class, Mobile Homes, Whiteness, Symbolic Interactionism, Affordable Housing

Katie M. Founds

09/04/2020
Date

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DEDICATION

To Kim and Leah: Without your adventurous spirits, none of this would ever have come into being. Thank you for the many years of friendship, support, and generally ridiculous escapades.

To Tim: You pushed me toward the starting line and then cheered me (sometimes carried me) all the way to the finish line. Even in the face of unanticipated changes, your companionship on this journey has reminded me again and again that I am the luckiest.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iii

LIST OF FIGURES vii

1. BEGINNING: A JOURNEY INTO THE STUDY OF TRAILER PARKS 1

Genesis 2

Trailer Parks in the American Imagination 4

Literature 7

Methods 9
Ethnographic Field Site Description 14

Research Questions 20

Establishing Key Concepts: Approaches to Race, Class, and Language 21
Race 21
Class 23
Language 25

Layout of the Book 26

2. BECOMING: THE TRAILER TAKES ITS PLACE IN THE WORLD OF MATERIAL CULTURE 28

Material Culture and Meaning Making 28

Stuck in the Middle 35

A History of the American Trailercoach 39

3. BOUNDARY MAKING: TRAILER STIGMA AS A RESPONSE TO NORM VIOLATIONS 63

Creating Categories and Designating Dirt 63

Transgressing the Cultural Code 67
Cleanliness and Sanitation 68
Mobility and Permanence 74
Sense of House and Home 78
Consumption as a Cultural Value 84

Emplaced and Embodied Stigma 86
Keeping Them in Their Place: Putting Stigma on the Map 87
Place-Based Responses: Dealing with the “Trailer Problem” 91

4. BEING THERE: STIGMA INSCRIBED ON BODIES, HOMES, LOTS, AND LIVES 95

Single Stories 95

Stains of Body and Being 95

Embodied Stigma 97
The Shirt on My Back and the Food in My Belly: The Body and Consumption 102

Stigma Inscribed on Home and Lot 108
Good Lawns Make Good Neighbors 111

Being at “Home” in a Mobile Home Park 115
Right There in the Middle: Claiming a Place on the Housing Ladder 120
5. BRIDGE BUILDING: ADDRESSING THE GAP BETWEEN A SINGLE STORY AND A COMPLEX REALITY 124
Peeling Back the Layers of Meaning 125
Invisibility Keeps the Story Going 128
The Real Costs of Trashing the Trailer 129
Stigma Relies on Power: Unequal Power Relations in Mobile Home Parks 132
Fighting for Dignity: Power Dynamics Inside the Parks 133
Power from a Distance: Absentee Ownership of Parks 138
Challenging Power Structures at the Source 142
Challenging the Narrative: Telling a Better Story 143
Reading a Different Message: Patch Jobs and Parties 144
The Unique Dilemma of the Trash Trope 149
Shaping a New Narrative: Counter-stories and Liminoid Spaces 153
APPENDICES 159
APPENDIX 1: LIMITATIONS AND CALLS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH 159
APPENDIX 2: WHAT ABOUT TINY HOMES? 161
REFERENCES 163
VITA 178

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Sani-Top portable toilet.....71
Figure 2. The Pulverator 71
Figure 3. Pan-American 33' 73
Figure 4. Typical “trailer trash” portrayal with exaggerated features 97

1. BEGINNING: A JOURNEY INTO THE STUDY OF TRAILER PARKS

During the course of my fieldwork for this book, one image from my neighborhood became symbolic of what I was hoping to understand about trailers and trailer parks. It was a cast-iron statue of a moose, about four feet tall and delightfully quirky, that stood in the neatly manicured front yard of one of the first mobile homes you see when driving into the mobile home park where I spent three years as a neighbor and researcher.

The moose was immediately one of my favorite parts of living in the neighborhood. Its kind and eccentric owner, Betty, dressed it for all sorts of occasions. At Easter, it sported a pair of rabbit ears and stood over a basket of eggs. During football season, it wore a Denver Broncos jersey, and on election day, a sparkly USA hat. Mardi Gras beads, Hawaiian shirts, cowboy hats. Santa hats, leprechaun suits, jack-o-lanterns. The moose had many styles and celebrated every holiday and season. Betty delighted us all with her creative ways of dressing the moose.

At one point, the moose was stolen. I noticed immediately the day I drove into the park and it wasn't there. Through neighborhood chatter, it soon became apparent that the statue meant a lot to others in the park, too. It stood for something good, and Betty told me that she was surprised and moved by the number of people consoling her over the loss and wondering aloud what kind of person would steal a yard moose. It seems that we *all* felt robbed. A week or so after the moose was stolen, I entered the park to see a handmade poster board sign nailed to the tree outside Betty and Joe's house. "Thank you for all your support," it read. "We are touched." Not long after, a new, much smaller moose statue appeared. A sympathetic neighbor missed the well-dressed iron beast so much that they decided to give Betty a replacement. Soon after, another handmade sign was nailed to the tree, celebrating and saying thank you.

As I spent hour upon hour researching the ways in which layers of meaning were attached to the mobile home, mobile home parks, and their residents, I kept thinking of the moose. Here was a simple object—a few pieces of cast iron welded together in a crude

representation of a beast most residents had likely never seen outside a zoo. On its own it was basic and unassuming and not all that notable, but it was so much more in my neighborhood. As it donned clothing and accessories for every occasion, it came to represent celebration and joy and quirkiness. It was patriotic and jolly and a dedicated football fan. And, as we later discovered, along the way it came to represent community and neighborliness and support. For me this summed up so much of what I wanted to understand about the trailer and how it had attained such a deep cultural significance over time. How had this thing that was likewise basic and unassuming and not all that notable come to represent an entire way of life and a whole class of people? How had it been dressed in so many layers of meaning?

What follows is the story of how a simple piece of wood and metal—the American house trailer—came to mean much, much more, and what this means for mobile home park residents today. This is a tale of dressing the moose.

Genesis

The first seeds for this book were planted over a decade ago. In August 2007, along with two roommates, I moved into a dingy mobile home in a low-income mobile home park in Colorado, less than three miles from the five-bedroom suburban home where I had been living the previous year. We were young and idealistic Christians with a particular concern for issues of poverty. Our goal was simply to move into the neighborhood, get to know our neighbors, and help in any way we could. We were naïve and unsuspecting—victims of our own assumptions that all trailers must be nasty on the inside—and we only later found out that the 12 x 50 1968 Camelot for which we quickly signed a lease would have been slated for "remodeling" (a term to be used loosely at that particular park) had three young women not been so eager to move in. The other residents later told us we moved into "the worst trailer in the park." We managed the mice and ants and offensive smells as best we could, but we were eventually driven out by the presence of black mold, which left my allergic-to-penicillin roommate coughing all the time. We moved across the street to a smaller but newly "remodeled" trailer nine months later—a 10 x 50 1966

Pacemaker. I joked for years that the name was apt, as it was something that would have died long ago save for a few implants to keep it ticking. The "remodeled" plywood walls still featured lumber stamps, but we were not allowed to paint, said the manager, because the plywood had been "picked to match the paneling." The shower drain was on the uphill side of a slanted floor, and thus we needed a squeegee to fully drain the tub. And the furnace—well, we named it Frank. Despite its age and its quirks, we adored this home and remained for several years. It is, to this day, the home which I hold most fondly in my memory.

Our quirky and beloved Pacemaker was located in Parkside Mobile Home Park,[1] a small cluster of aging trailers and mobile homes—mostly rental or lease-to-own—located on the fringes of our city. Nestled up against an old dump that has now been reclaimed as protected wilderness land, Parkside hosts several dozen small lots, packed together in rows labeled A through H. The homes range from the 8-foot-wide models of the 1950s to the much larger models that became standard in the decades that followed (though none were "double-wides"). Each lot includes a small shed and a scraggly patch of dried grass and weeds bounded by a chain link fence. A few dumpsters are situated at opposite ends of the park, generally overflowing, as they are far from being sufficient to serve so many households. At the time that we lived there, the streets were still dirt, a mess of puddles after rain. In the winter, plowing is nowhere on the manager's priority list, so the roads become ice rinks and then slush pits. Despite its dingy appearance, the location of the park is almost idyllic. It is situated within walking distance of one of the city's quaintest neighborhoods, adjacent to miles of trails in the wilderness area, and just at the base of a road leading out of the city and deep into the mountains. I spent endless hours hiking and biking in the areas near the park.

Our years in Parkside were transformative and illuminating for me. I encountered different rhythms and rules of life that took me a while to adjust to. I learned to knock on the end

[1] The names of all places and people in this book have been changed to protect privacy.

of a trailer rather than the front door, and that cutting off a conversation because "I have to go" was significantly less acceptable than it had been in previous contexts. I experienced a kind of community and reciprocity with my neighbors that I had not encountered before (for example, with one family, we traded childcare for haircuts and the occasional meal). I watched some neighbors disappear in the middle of the night and others struggle each month to pay the rent and put food on the table, often working difficult hours. In particular, and without having planned it to be so, our home became a hub for local youth. We were young 20-somethings whom the kids considered cool just because of our age, and we were happy to hang out with kids who needed a place to be and adults to connect with. Many years later, I am still in contact with several of these families and youth (though most are now adults). Their voices will appear in later chapters.

When I moved away from Parkside, I was full of questions. I wondered how my neighbors had ended up in these aging units, most of them falling apart at the seams; how the manager was able to be so blatantly exploitative; what kind of stigma the kids faced at school; what it would take for them to achieve upward mobility; and why our friends and family assumed that we lived in a dangerous and undesirable place, long before they came to see our home. It was that neighborhood and those questions that eventually led me into the field of sociology and, ultimately, into the research at the heart of this book.

Trailer Parks in the American Imagination

Trailer parks occupy a unique place in American culture. On one level, they function as a sort of proxy for poverty, particularly White poverty. To correct what he saw as a potential overemphasis on Black populations in his study of eviction, Desmond chose a trailer park as his "ideal [second] ethnographic site because it concentrated (white) poverty in a way that mirrored . . . (black) inner-city neighborhoods" (Desmond, 2012, p. 1300). In his book, *The Color of Class*, Moss lists trailer parks alongside red-light districts as the "stereotypical paths to White urban poverty" (2003, p. 14). However, unlike Desmond, Moss intentionally tried *not* to focus on

mobile home parks because it was the too-obvious answer to the question, "Where do you find poor Whites?"

However, trailer parks have moved beyond simply being an indicator of working-class[2] Whiteness to serving as the preferred backdrop for the negative caricature of that demographic. Though there were periods in history when trailer parks and their residents could be framed in terms of patriotism and commitment to the defense industry, as we will see in later chapters, no such connotation of sacrifice or nobility remains today. In pop culture, trailer parks are—and have been from very early on—regularly used as indicators of a satirized class status, marking a subject or group as working class, likely with a low level of education and loose in their morals, along with a host of other "personal and cultural deficiencies" (Kusenbach, 2009 p. 401).

> In mass-circulation magazines, pulp fiction novels, and B-movies, trailer parks were not presented merely as hard places to raise children but as breeding grounds for dysfunctional families. In the popular mind, trailer parks were synonymous with poverty, filth, and pathological behavior. The people who lived there were drunks, sex maniacs, wife beaters, and child abusers. (Hurley, 2001, p. 247)

Shows such as *My Name is Earl* (Garcia, Buckland & Bowman, 2005), as well as films like *Raising Arizona* (Coen & Coen, 1987), portray the classic "White trash" character against the backdrop of low-income trailer living. The setting serves to amplify other stereotypical symbols of White poverty: "oily hair, overweight women who smoke, babies running around in diapers,

[2] Though often used almost interchangeably in literature about mobile home parks or stigmatized whiteness, the terms "poor" and "working class" have not always meant the same thing. Prior to the decline of union activity and other structural changes, to be working class did not mean one was a member of the working poor. In recent decades, however, it has become nearly impossible for those working unskilled or semi-skilled jobs (terms which are themselves problematic) to attain middle-class status. David Shipler captures this tension by emphasizing the term "working poor," a term that he says ought to be an oxymoron, but is instead a harsh reality. These are the families "who live barely beneath or a little above the federal government's official poverty line" (Shipler, 2004, p. x). In reality, my experience in mobile home parks has revealed some degree of variation economically (both within and between various parks): some families are subsisting on federal aid; others are experiencing some level of economic security. The majority of families I interacted with, however, were somewhere in the middle. As Rennels describes them, they are the group "who, whether experiencing poverty or not, engage in intensive labor and still struggle to make ends meet" (2015b, p. 285). In this paper, while the cited literature will include various terms and the population itself is not homogenous, I will primarily use the term "working class" for the sake of consistent terminology in discussions of class.

rusted cars parked on front lawns, clothes hanging on outside lines to dry, black velvet paintings, and drawling southern accents" (Moss, 2003, p. 14). Not surprisingly, Jeff Foxworthy, perhaps the most prolific purveyor of the redneck trope, titled his home-themed collection of "you might be a redneck" one-liners *Redneck Extreme Mobile Home Makeover* (Foxworthy, 2005). Its pages are filled with mullets, beer cans, junky yards, roadkill, shotguns, and things propped up on cinder blocks. Derelict people living in derelict homes, all as the butt of his jokes.

More than just being a general backdrop for a degrading portrayal of White poverty, mobile home parks conjure a curious and almost exotic other world in the American imagination. Having been relegated to the physical margins of cities and communities since their early days, most mobile home parks lie well outside any sort of common thoroughfares and remain largely hidden to all but residents and immediate neighbors. Tales of what goes on in such parks and what types of people live there become the stuff of pop culture legend, and media portrayals serve only to further entrench the stereotypical image of "trailer trash." The popularity of the Canadian mockumentary *Trailer Park Boys* (Clattenberg, 2001–2018) is a testament to the intrigue of common trailer park stereotypes, running an impressive 12 seasons and inspiring multiple films and specials. The show capitalizes on ubiquitous notions of the trailer park as a repository for criminality, drug use, and hyper-sexualized women sporting Walmart's latest fashions. Likewise, *The Great American Trailer Park Musical* (Nehls & Kelso, 2004) draws its laughs from a cast that includes a ditzy, over-sexed teenage girl; a meddling, middle-aged manager; and the loud-mouthed wife of a death row inmate. These three unlikely muses narrate a tale involving high school love, a marriage founded on teen pregnancy, an affair with an exotic dancer, and a marker-huffing, gun-toting, long-lost son who gags over the word "vegetarian."

In particular, the trailer park has been imagined as a lurid and sensational site of promiscuity and sexual deviance. The 1972 John Waters film *Pink Flamingos* was described by Roger Ebert as "a rivalry between two competing factions for Filthiest People Alive," where sex involves chickens and onlookers and impregnating women in order to sell their babies (Ebert,

1997). As well, trailer parks consistently provide the setting for numerous trashy romance novels, including such titles as *Sin on Wheels: The Uncensored Confessions of a Trailer Park Tramp* (Beauchamp, 1961) and *Free to Use Trailer Park Girl* (Shell, 2018). This imagined link between trailer parks and sexual immorality spans decades and extends beyond pop culture, as when a 1950 court case resulted in a ruling that to limit cohabitation with the opposite sex in a trailer did not constitute discrimination, even though no such rules were applied to hotels. The court stated that "the ordinance is a reasonable exercise of the police power because the situation relative to trailers and trailer camps may be 'more conducive to immorality' than exists in other types of lodgings" (*Allinder v. City of Homewood*, as quoted in Davis, 1975, p. 158).

I encountered this fascination with the curious and misunderstood world of trailer parks regularly when the topic of my research came up in conversations with friends and acquaintances outside the park. Most of the time, ears perked up and eyes widened noticeably, as if I had said I was studying some remote Amazonian tribe or the underground world of backwoods bootleggers. At other times, comments from visitors to my neighborhood betrayed the fact that their original preconceptions about what I meant when I said I lived in a mobile home park evoked a definite "other." "This isn't what I was picturing," they would say. "This looks like a *regular* neighborhood." Similarly, with our mobile home itself: "Wow, it's really big. It looks just like a *regular* house." Over time I felt myself grow cautious when telling stories from my early years, when I was living in Parkside. As with any stereotype, there are bits and pieces of truth there. Some of my experiences were quirky and humorous, and yet I did not want to contribute to the popular and monolithic representation of all things trailer park. After nearly seven years of living in two vastly different mobile home parks, developing relationships with neighbors and doing daily life in three separate mobile homes, I knew that monolithic representation to be woefully incomplete, and at times entirely inaccurate.

Literature

Despite the level of fascination trailer parks maintain in popular culture, scholarly work

dealing with trailers and mobile homes is relatively sparse. Previous ethnographic studies have focused on various social processes within mobile home parks. Johnson's (1971) early work focused specifically on the "working-class retired," examining their processes of community building and offering a window into aspects of mobile home life such as family life, social structure, and leisure activities. Benson (1990) spent two years researching mobile home parks in a Kansas meat packing town, primarily staying with various neighborhood families. Benson's research examines the symbolic boundary work performed between racial and ethnic groups, primarily Whites and refugees from Southeast Asia. In particular, Benson sought to capture these relationships in a context of rapid population change. Eley (2005) also focused on a minority population within mobile home parks, investigating how African American mobile home park residents use informal social ties to mitigate the effects of their economic insecurity. Desmond's (2012) ethnographic work included five months in a primarily White Milwaukee mobile home park and a comparative nine month stay in the city's Black ghetto. His research focuses on the use of "disposable ties" among families managing the crisis of eviction. Similarly, Sullivan (2014) carried out ethnographic work focused on eviction, spending extended periods of time living in Texas and Florida mobile home parks scheduled for closure, exploring the structural components of insecure housing and the impact of that precarity on residents facing eviction. MacTavish and various colleagues performed extensive research in several mobile home parks, emphasizing issues more prominent in community and family studies, such as women's resilience (Notter et al., 2008) and youth development (MacTavish & Salamon, 2006). In their most recent book, *Single Wide: Chasing the American Dream in a Rural Trailer Park,* Salamon and MacTavish state as their fundamental question "whether trailer parks are a good, or at least neutral, place to raise a family" (2017, p. 6). On a different tack, Saatcioglu and Ozanne (2013) approach the topic from a marketing perspective, investigating how "moral habitus" influences status negotiations and practices of consumption. Focusing more specifically on stigma as experienced by mobile home residents, Margarethe Kusenbach's (2009) research investigates

how mobile home park residents go about "salvaging decency" despite their stigmatized position in society. Kusenbach's work contributes to the literature on boundary work as a strategy for stigma management, with a particular focus on connecting to issues of stigma and housing.

Beyond this ethnographic work, a smattering of studies approach mobile home parks from planning or architectural perspectives, while others share their authors' personal experiences growing up in trailer parks (Berube & Berube, 1997; Thornburg, 1991; Hunter, 1995). Several scholars have offered detailed histories of the development of the trailer industry and its tenuous place within American social structure (Hart et al., 2002; Thornburg, 1991; Wallis, 1991). Hurley's (2001) work also presents a detailed history, but focuses on the role of the trailer in post-war consumer culture, framing it as a failed symbol of middle class consumer status.

Fundamentally, this research contributes to the literature by specifically tracing the formation of trailer stigma through history and into the present, examining both how it came to be and how it carries over into the lives of mobile home residents in our current context. While previous studies have foregrounded either one or the other of these aspects of mobile home stigma—emphasizing either historical development or current issues—this study gives substantial attention to both in order to understand the creation, proliferation, and continuity of stigma as it is seen in one of America's favorite symbols of low-class living, a scapegoat for all kinds of social ills and home to the poor American antihero. This work turns attention from the structural components that established and maintain the mobile home as a despised form of affordable housing to interrogate its stigmatized identity at the level of interaction and through the framework of its place within the hierarchy of cherished American social norms.

Methods

I entered my fieldwork knowing I wanted to focus on the formation and perpetuation of stigma as I examined mobile home parks. To this end, I used a two-pronged, multimethodological

approach.[3] The first component of my research followed an historical-cultural studies approach, delving into source materials upon which I stumbled almost by accident. During an impromptu visit to the RV/MH Hall of Fame in Elkhart, Indiana, one fall, I decided to explore their library. As I flipped through an early issue of a trailer magazine called *Trail-R-News*, I discovered a window into the broader cultural battle over how to define these homes on wheels and those who lived in them. Captivated by the opportunity to gain insight into stigmatization as a historical process, I decided to undertake archival research as part of my broader project, and I spent the next several years gathering and analyzing documents wherever I could find them.

What began with a simple curiosity about how far back people had begun using the term "trailer trash" soon evolved into a broader search for the emergence of discourses of contamination. I began to hunt through documents going as far back as the 1920s, when travel trailers first came onto the scene in the United States, to find out when and how the language of blemish (Goffman, 1963) began to show up in relation to trailers and trailer residents. I was able to accomplish some of this through online archival searches, finding early articles from publications like *Harper's* and *The New York Times*, as well as government documents and early research on the subject.

However, the majority of this archival research required trips to that small, unassuming library in Indiana where I had first picked up an issue of *Trailer-R-News*. Though the RV/MH Hall of Fame is an imposing structure, its entry a two-story wall of windows, entering the library feels a bit like stepping back into a 1980s church fellowship hall. The ceilings are low and tiled, the lights fluorescent. The floor is entirely green Berber carpet, save for a pink Persian rug upon which sit several pink wingback chairs. The furniture is sparse and mismatched: bookshelves

[3] I should note that some of the data and insights found here are also drawn from two smaller studies I carried out before starting my dissertation research. First, I conducted interviews with the owners and managers of three distinctly different mobile home parks in Kentucky, where I was living at the time. These initial interviews helped shape my questions regarding race and power relations in mobile home parks. Second, I performed content analysis on commercial real estate documents related to the buying and selling of mobile home parks. This study informed my understanding of how the discourse of trailer park stigma manifests even at the level of formal sales documents.

lining the walls, a desk, a small conference table, and some shorter shelves placed here and there, all simple stained wood. What makes the library delightfully quirky is the presence of models around the room, generally sitting atop the shelves. They are mostly models of iconic trailers, early motor homes, or hulking RVs—a hodgepodge of forebears to the sleek and at times gargantuan RVs produced today. On top of a shorter set of shelves sits a scale model of a once-futuristic dream, a multilevel trailer community, a sort of mobile home high rise. It harkens back to a time when mobile homes could still be presented as innovative and fashionable.

More importantly for me, the Founder's Library is a repository for a vast array of publications having to do with trailers, mobile homes, and RVs. There were meeting minutes from early trailer association meetings; yellowing newspaper clippings, pasted into aging photo albums; copies of dissertations and theses related to the industry, dating back to the 1930s and 40s; manuals and directories for thousands of RVs and RV parks. Also, it contains box upon box of magazines dedicated to trailers and mobile homes. Beginning in the late 30s and continuing for several decades, a variety of monthly magazines focused solely on trailers—travel, camps and parks, industry news, etc. Sporting names like *Western Trailer News*, *Trailer Travel*, and *Trailer Topics*, these magazines advertised primarily to "trailerites" themselves, as well as those who participated in other aspects of the industry. They featured stories from the road, advice on how to find a good park and which gear to use if you owned a Plymouth, tips on raising children or cooking a good casserole while living in a small space, and just about anything else you might think of related to trailers and trailer travel. Most interesting at first were the editorials and letters to the editor, which I first began to explore in the publication *Trail-R-News*. The editor of *Trail-R-News,* Jean Jaques, addressed the practical and cultural challenges of the trailer industry with unflinching honesty, and he consistently published similarly honest letters from his readers.

Because only a tiny percentage of any of these publications has been digitized, and none for public access (I secured a decade of *Trailer Topics* from a trailer enthusiast in Sweden for a fee), I spent innumerable hours creating digital copies of documents at the Founder's Library. I

quickly worked my way through issue after issue of each magazine, pausing to scan or photograph pages that I wanted to further investigate upon returning home from Indiana. Later, each of these files was uploaded into a database via my qualitative data analysis software. There, I read each document closely and coded them according to themes.

The second component of my research uses ethnography to examine the issue of stigma at the level of interaction. While survey data can, and has, provided insight into how trailer residents understand and experience stigma (see for example Kusenbach, 2009; Galeucia, 2016), I assert that stigma is not only articulated but embodied and emplaced, and that it is reified, affirmed, and contested in subtle ways that can only be observed on the ground. In order to capture stigma in situ, I spent three years living in a mobile home park with my husband and, later, our son. We purchased our home, rather than renting as previous mobile home researchers have done. This decision was born of necessity (a circumstance I will describe in detail in a later chapter) and serendipitously unearthed a cache of data I would never have discovered as a renter. Some of the most enlightening, frustrating, and at times demeaning treatment I received came via the process of buying and selling a mobile home.

Immediately upon moving in and beginning my research, I was faced with a methodological choice. Researchers would refer to it as a question of "grades of deception," or the degree to which I revealed my status as a researcher to those in my neighborhood (Bernard, 2011, p. 328). One approach would be to enter in the manner of full disclosure, introducing myself as a researcher there to study the neighborhood and to interview residents about their experiences living in a mobile home park. Of course, such an approach is more natural for the ethnographer staying a specified amount of time, a season clearly set apart from their "normal" lives. I, on the other hand, had purchased our home, and I had no sense of what it would look like to sell it or when we might want to do so. Alternately, I could enter the field and simply *be there*

(to the extent that this is possible),[4] to be a neighbor, and reveal my role as researcher in time and through established relationships. While this option allows for a greater level of natural interaction, it does limit one's use of conspicuous data collection, and some scholars have questioned whether it violates ethical standards (Bernard, 2011, p. 330).

For me, this choice was complicated by my earlier experience living in a mobile home park. My previous time in a park was spent simply as a neighbor, and in many ways I felt very much at home in my new neighborhood. Inwardly, I felt a strong resistance to the expressed role of researcher, a hesitation to appear as if I was trying to define myself as in any way above my neighbors.[5] In the end, I chose the second path. Though I presented myself as researcher in neighboring parks and other research settings, I elected to experience my own neighborhood simply as a resident and neighbor, at least until conversation came around to what I do for a living or I brought my research up on purpose. My hope was that by the time it did come up, I would have established strong enough relationships that "researcher" would be added as only one aspect of my identity, rather than given the prominence of master status. For the most part, I believe that hope was realized.

During my three years in the park, I regularly recorded field notes regarding the appearance and goings-on of the park, as well as my interactions with residents. These consisted partly of simple jottings or brief notes taken throughout the day, which I frequently documented on my phone using Google Keep. As well, I used formal field notes, which I recorded at length on my computer following an event or at the end of the day. I took walks around the park most days during the first year, and generally made an effort to be outside, where most interactions

[4] An important caveat must be made here. Obviously, my *own* understanding of my role as researcher makes it impossible for me to be "just a neighbor" in the purest sense. I was unable to be a *complete participant*, rather than a *participant observer* (Bernard, 2011, p. 260). Whether or not the understanding was shared, *I* knew that I was there to observe, to take notes, and in time, to seek interviews.

[5] When I shared this concern with the Martinez family, whom I had known for many years, I was assured that respondents would receive the request to tell their story as an opportunity and an affirmation rather than an objectification or affront to their status.

between neighbors took place.[6] I also tried to attend any events held at the community's clubhouse. Periodically, I took walks or drives through neighboring parks for the sake of comparison. In addition to visual observations and conversations, I collected community newsletters and the various documents that were left on our door (or shoved into a crack on the porch, the favorite tactic of a less-popular manager), including one pre-eviction demand for payment. Finally, to understand the area as a whole better, I spent time looking over various kinds of maps. Planning and census maps offered insight into zoning and demographic aspects of my neighborhood. Historical maps allowed me to see how land use had developed and changed over time and to analyze the demographic and economic changes that coincided with the founding of the mobile home parks in my area.

Ethnographic Field Site Description

I carried out my ethnographic research in a midsize mobile home park in a rapidly growing Colorado city. How I chose that particular park after driving through over 20 others will be addressed more thoroughly in a later chapter, but suffice it to say that the city offers no shortage of mobile home parks. Situated at the edge of the Rocky Mountains, with excellent wilderness access and a well above-average number of sunny days each year, the city draws a continual influx of the young and active (the average age is just under 35). One of the fastest growing cities in the region, it is quickly becoming home to a thriving combination of breweries, craft coffee shops, and trendy eateries. Despite its growth, the city has remained largely homogenous in terms of race, with a White population of just under 70 percent. Other than Latinos, who make up 17.5 percent of the city's residents, no other racial group has a presence of more than 6.3 percent.[7]

[6] I later realized that I should have given greater consideration to climate when choosing a field site. Colorado's cold winters made outdoor interactions hard to come by for several months each year.
[7] Statistics drawn from City Data. Detailed citation excluded to protect location confidentiality.

On a land-use map of the city, where purple represents industrial zones, Riverview Mobile Home Park, one of the parks that became my home, can be found squarely in the middle of one of the largest purple areas on the map. Eleven other mobile home parks share the area. Sprinkled in among the large patches of purple are sections zoned for offices or businesses. It is no surprise, then, that my friends and acquaintances from other parts of the city were often surprised to learn that my park even exists. It has been zoned into invisibility, as has been the pattern for mobile home parks nearly from their inception.

As the last park built in the area, Riverview also landed on the last available strip of land, adjacent to Roswell Creek, one of the city's largest floodways, and just downstream from where the creek is joined by two other major floodways. While creek-side property has a ring of semi-affluence to it, the effect of the natural beauty is somewhat dampened by the odor emanating from the wastewater facility less than a mile upstream. On countless walks around the neighborhood, I found myself drawn to the beauty of the trees and the running water, but I usually spent just a few minutes on the footbridge over the creek before the smell drove me away again. When the plant opened about a decade ago, the local paper touted its odor control methods and described it as "bordered by industrial neighbors" (Zubeck, 2007). The language did much to obscure the fact that hundreds of households lived in mobile homes just downstream.

Riverview Mobile Home *Park* is technically Riverview Mobile Home *Community*, but no one knows it as such. Founded in 1997, it was purchased in 2015 by RHP Properties, one of the nation's largest owners and operators of mobile home parks. RHP is representative of what MacTavish and Salamon (2017) have labeled the Mobile Home Industrial Complex (MHIC), a term intended to "capture the interlocked markets that make up this relatively misunderstood but commonplace . . . housing form" (p. 14). Moving in just one year after RHP acquired the property allowed me to see the park transition from being family owned to being run by a massive corporation. The difficulty of this adjustment for residents was painfully apparent at times.

Riverview's profile on Mobile Home Village ("the nation's premier online marketplace for buying and selling mobile homes"), touts it as one of the newest and best parks in the city. Scanning over its list of amenities shortly after moving in, however, I had to smile. The "basketball court" is a single hoop in utter disrepair, planted on a small square of concrete. The "planned social activities" became almost nonexistent when the park changed management about a year before I moved in. The "clubhouse" is basically a nice living room that costs so much to rent out that it never gets used. "Sidewalks," I thought to myself as I reread the profile after living in the park for over two years. "The sidewalks are as promised. And the playground." In my interview with the newest manager, about 6 months before I moved out of the park, I was told that much would change. She was eager and enthusiastic and already had several community events on the calendar. I left feeling hopeful that by the time this is published, she will indeed have made substantive changes. If nothing else, I left hoping that she would fulfill my request to drill some drainage holes in the "tunnel" section of the playground equipment, an elevated but sagging yellow tube of plastic in which water would gather and stagnate for days after a rain or snow storm. As mother to a toddler, I was tired of my son crawling in dry and crawling back out wet.

Slanted advertising aside, Riverview *is* one of the nicest parks in town. Unlike Parkside, where I had lived so many years before, Riverview has broad, paved streets and sidewalks throughout. The drainage system works efficiently, so there are never huge puddles after a storm, and the management consistently repaints speed bumps and maintains the streets. Each of the 132 lots has at least one tree, part of the deal promised to the first residents who moved into the park, and a two-car driveway. Only twice in my three-year tenure in the park did I see a lot sitting empty, without a home on it. Only one of those times did it stay that way for more than a day or so. Because the park was founded in the late 90s, it is filled with homes built long past the days when such homes were actually intended to be mobile. At least half of the homes are multi-section (not "single-wide"), and 60 percent of them have peaked roofs, breaking with the

stereotypical image of long metal boxes crammed together and deteriorating on a plot of land. In fact, most of the visitors to our home remarked that we lived in a "nice neighborhood," often following that with some version of, "It doesn't look like a trailer park at all." Clearly, in their minds, "trailer park" and "nice neighborhood" are dissimilar, if not antithetical.

Riverview's clean streets and newer homes stand out all the more because of the parks adjacent to it, all of which are in varying degrees of obvious decline. While it is not uncommon to see mobile home parks generally concentrated in certain parts of a city, the cluster of parks adjacent to Riverview is remarkable. There on a large patch of land near one of the city's main floodways, nine different parks are crammed together. These parks are separated by nothing more than a wooden fence line or a small street, or by one of the self-storage businesses almost always found near mobile home parks. For ease of description, I will refer to this cluster of parks as the "Village," though in reality it has no official designation. The parks in the Village defy the homogenous image often ascribed to "trailer parks" in the popular imagination. While Riverview can almost pass as a "regular" neighborhood, nearby Shady Brook Mobile Home Park features narrow, roughly paved streets lined with aging trailers in various stages of dilapidation. The homes are mainly 8 to 12 feet in width, dimensions from a time when trailers were still narrow enough to be towed down the highway behind a car, and they are crammed in so tightly that even passing through the neighborhood on foot feels slightly claustrophobic.

Outside of Shady Brook, a handful of the parks are for seniors, only accepting residents age 55 and up, while another park is listed as "adults only." These parks tend to be notably clean and quiet compared to the five family parks. On walks around the area, I always delighted in walking through the 55-plus parks. In general, older, largely retired resident populations are viewed in less transitory and stigmatized terms (Hurley, 2001). Walking down the quiet, perfectly clean streets of Skyline Mobile Park (yes, just "mobile park"), the retirement park closest to Riverview, there is the sense of a place that is settled and is home to residents who enjoy being there. Little bits and pieces of personality are placed everywhere on and around the homes, which

consist mainly of models from the 60s and 70s. On one home, I spotted a sign alerting passersby to the presence of "Old Folks at Play." Another home is clearly inhabited by a train enthusiast, with toy trains and train-themed signs all around the home and lot, much to the delight of my son. Gnomes are plentiful, as are garden whirligigs and beautifully maintained flowerpots.

The fact that Riverview Mobile Home Park was established in the late 90s marks it as an anomaly in the Village. The other eight parks in the Village cropped up in a decade of transition, after the closing of coal mines and a small airfield and just after the area was annexed by the city. They were all built between 1965 and 1971 (*MHVillage | The #1 Place to Buy, Rent or Sell Mobile Homes*, n.d.), before the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) established official standards for the construction of mobile homes.[8] On drives and strolls through these parks, I encountered the classic models I had seen advertised in my archival research: the Chief, the Eldorado, the Peerless, the Esquire, the Imperial Mansion, and so on. They were trendy in their time, advertised using words like "luxury" and "prestige," but only a few decades later, they have come to represent exactly the opposite.

Trailers aren't just found in parks in the area, however. Driving the side streets near the Village, passing by industrial zoning areas, one sees a scattering of aging RVs pulled off on the side of the road. In one instance, a massive RV, visibly falling apart, was spray painted a dull black from bumper to bumper, top to bottom, as was the truck used to tow it (in the odd instance that it actually moved). Eventually, it occurred to me that this color scheme might allow the RV to escape notice by authorities if parked in a dark enough area at night. Indeed, on nights when I would return home after dark, the hulking metal home remained largely invisible until my headlights shone on it directly. "Smart," I thought, as I drove past one winter evening. "Ugly as hell, but really smart."

[8] This is a factor that greatly increases the precarity of home ownership for residents. City zoning codes generally prohibit re-siting any home that precedes HUD standards. This means that in the case of a park closure, those who own older units can neither sell them nor move them. The homes are a total loss as an asset at that point.

The Village is situated just east of the interstate, west of one of the city's main highways, California Avenue, and just north of a main east-west thoroughfare, Lincoln Street. It is an area that was not originally part of the city proper but emerged as a small mining and railroad town to the north in the late 19th century. In addition to the train station, the town featured the aforementioned airfield, which opened in 1920 and remained operational until the late 50s. The area is not a particularly attractive one today, a pocket of industry and working-class commerce sandwiched between the wealth of the West End and the upscale neighborhoods on the farther north end of the city. The stretch of California Avenue just north of the Village features a string of old motels, many of them still sporting their original signage, advertising such amenities as color TV and air conditioning. Some of them have been repurposed, two as housing for community corrections, and more recently, one has been turned into a youth hostel. Two marijuana dispensaries sit a few hundred feet apart, separated by only a liquor store. The two stores have taken different tacks for presenting their product: One advertises "organic medicine," while the other proudly bears the name "Best Budz."

The rest of the area boasts the kinds of establishments one might expect in an area of town that caters to those with lower incomes: a wide array of fast-food options, gas stations, pawn shops, and discount groceries. Many of its businesses lack any semblance of sophistication, such as a porn shop simply called "Free Speech," marked by a sign that was once risqué but now looks almost staid, and a liquor store whose front door has displayed the same life-size cut out of a bikini model for at least a 15 years. When I moved into the area, Lincoln Street hosted one of only two K-Marts in town, both of which closed a year or so into my tenure. There are bars and restaurants that have been there for decades, their neon signs lighting up the street at night like a poor man's Vegas. Along the road, one finds a restaurant shaped like an ancient landmark, a bar named for a fairytale character, and a café whose huge sign includes an actual picture of a roast beef dinner. Outside of the dispensaries and some fast-food places that have received recent face lifts, the whole area just feels outdated. Signs of change are popping up here and there,

however—a craft brewery, a higher-end hotel, a fancy fitness club—and one can see the area beginning to gentrify slowly but surely. As always, the double-edged sword that is gentrification will bring economic health to the area but may mean displacement for many within the Village.

The difference between the area containing the Village and the rest of the city is more than just visual, of course. Demographic data of the area is striking. While there are indeed million-dollar mobile home parks in places like Southern California, and some retirement parks are chosen for lifestyle purposes, the census area[9] that contains the Village (plus an additional three mobile home parks within half a mile, along with several houses and duplexes), reflects the fact that mobile homes offer affordable housing. Whereas median annual income for the city is approximately $60,000, the number is just over $20,000 in the Village census area. The difference is even more marked when one considers median home value. While the median home value for the city is over $250,000, the area where the Village sits has a median home value of just under $10,000.

Research Questions

As I mentioned above, my initial questions regarding mobile home parks were myriad. As several scholars have so clearly demonstrated, mobile homes and even the mobile home parks where they are placed do not exist as isolated entities, easily set apart as a unit of study. Rather, they are part of "a broader field of interested actors . . . only one set of players in [a] web of relations" (Sullivan, 2018, p. 217). A journey into the world of mobile homes is a journey into the complex relations between state and local actors, between individuals and the broader community, between residents and managers and owners. It includes complicated personal histories and deeply entrenched power imbalances. In Parkside, encountering this world in all its complexity sparked an endless array of "how?" and "why?" and "who?," questions that I wanted to better understand. These questions only increased in number as I lived in Riverview.

[9] Census areas as defined by city data.

However, as time went on, two questions in particular captured my attention, specifically regarding stigma. As I continually encountered layer upon layer of meaning and connotation attached to mobile homes and their residents, both in pop culture and within my own social and academic circles, I wondered, essentially, "How did we get here?" How did this form of housing, which at its core is really just a home, become a caricature of boorish living, low intellect, and, particularly for White residents, a perceived failure to actualize their racial dominance (Hurley, 2001)? I wanted to know first how the stigma of trailer living had come to be in the first place. And secondly, "Why are we *still* here?" More than simply naming or describing the origins of the stigma that plagued my neighbors and their counterparts in other parks, I wanted to understand what gave that stigma such incredible staying power (or "stickiness," as I came to think of it). In seeking answers to these questions, I hoped to gain insight into stigma as a historical process. As well, I wanted to better understand how stigma functions to establish boundaries between the "normal" and the "other" (Goffman, 1963) and how it serves to maintain those boundaries across changing epochs and major societal shifts.

Establishing Key Concepts: Approaches to Race, Class, and Language

Race

As evidenced by past mobile home park research dealing with Latinos, African Americans, and Southeast Asian populations, some degree of racial diversity does exist within the broader demographic of mobile home residents. However, census data indicates that Whites make up over 80 percent of the nation's mobile home population (*American Housing Survey*, 2017).[10] In fact, this statistic reflects one of the things that has intrigued me most about mobile home parks: their enduring Whiteness. While most forms of low-income housing have eventually become associated with minority groups, largely because these populations represent a

[10] Accurate data for this statistic is difficult to find, and what is available is problematic. In this case, the category of Hispanic has been collapsed under both white and black, with no separate category for Latino populations. Also, government census data does not specify mobile homes in parks vs. those sited on private land. However, archival data and recent research continue to support the overall picture of mobile home parks as predominantly white.

disproportionate percentage of those in need of affordable housing, mobile home parks have remained a symbol of White poverty for nearly a century. Further research is needed to specifically illuminate the enduring racial homogeneity of this housing form and to explore the degree of overlap and separation between the terms *"*White trash*"* and "trailer trash."

In light of the historical predominance of Whites among trailer park residents, the tale of how trailer stigma developed is largely a tale of how boundaries were established to mark one part of the population off as "other" in a case where interracial markers could not be used as the dividing line. In her work in a dying Northern California logging town, Sherman (2009) described the challenge of identifying other markers of social distinction in a community displaying a high degree of race and class homogeneity. This was a challenge for the residents as well: "As poor rural whites in a community of poor rural whites, they are limited in their sources of distinction" (p. 6). In this study site, Sherman discovered that residents used morality to organize their social hierarchy. I saw similar tactics at play in both parks where I lived.

As a Whiteness studies scholar, I work through the lens of interrogating the interplay between class and race for stigmatized Whites and look for the driving forces behind the cultural impulse to define one part of the White population as "not quite white" (Wray, 2006). Just as "White trash" has been used to mark one group of Whites off from the dominant group, it is possible that the earliest instances of "trailer trash" were meant to set apart one group of trailerites from those who used the trailer as a status symbol. However, as the trailer itself has lost its potential as a positive status symbol, the term "trailer trash" has essentially become an instrument for setting off a group of poor Whites. In fact, in my interviews with owners and managers of mobile home parks in Kentucky, the racialized aspect of their discourse was most striking: Latino residents were framed as hard-working and successful for living in trailers, while White families—sometimes labeled "Americans"[11]—were described as drug-using, welfare-dependent

[11] Lipsitz also notes this association, pointing to the hidden assumption that "unless otherwise specified, 'Americans' means whites" (1995, p. 369).

failures. Whiteness, it appears, plays a distinct role in the internalization and enactment of the stigma attached to trailers and their residents; the White residents represent a point at which "the decorum of the white racial order has been breached and compromised or, perhaps more important, where the imagined boundary between whiteness and blackness[12] is undermined" (Hartigan, 2005, p. 115). Consequently, although mobile home park residents of other ethnicities certainly have their own experiences of stigma, some of which are represented in quoted interviews, the overall emphasis of this book (in terms of race) is on the stigmatization of White residents of mobile home parks.

Class

It is impossible to discuss a form of affordable housing without encountering the issue of class. Historically, sociologists have taken myriad approaches to defining social class. Karl Marx viewed class in terms of relations of production and exploitation. Less concerned with a neat typology of class divisions, Marx emphasized power relations between the capitalists, who were in charge of production and reaped its benefits, and the workers, who kept the whole machine going despite being alienated from the product of their own labor (Wright, 2005). Max Weber framed class in terms of shared life chances, which were determined by what an individual could bring to the market, whether actual property or valuable intangible assets (Breen, 2005). Weber's class framework included both economic classes and social classes: "Social classes, however, are much smaller in number, being aggregations of economic classes" within which individuals could experience mobility (Breen, 2005, p. 32). In the statistical data most commonly used for policy-based analysis in our contemporary context, income and occupation most often serve as proxy variables for class. At times, education is brought into the mix. These measures prove to be less objective than one might assume, however. McDermott (2006) points out that an individual with a college degree who later finds themselves working in a job that does not require a degree may,

[12] While Hartigan refers specifically to Blackness here, the same concept of racial transgression may be applied to blurring lines between Whiteness and any non-White category.

on a practical level, inhabit a class status more closely linked to their working-class job than to their middle-class degree. In her study of working-class race relations in two Boston neighborhoods, McDermott emphasizes a "notion of social class based on relations of exploitation [that] privileges occupation and authority in the workplace" (2006, p. 16).

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu offers a helpful framework for examining social class without isolating and overemphasizing structural determinants such as income or occupation. Rather, he emphasizes the concept of taste, or the ways in which individuals make distinctions in the world, "between the beautiful and the ugly, the distinguished and the vulgar" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 6). Put more simply, class is expressed through the way individuals approach everything from art to food, clothes, furniture, and sports. Tennis, for example, is generally associated with middle and upper classes, while bowling is emblematic of lower-middle or working-class recreation. None of these tastes can be isolated as a single indicator, however, as each nuances the other. As an example, Bourdieu discusses how clothing is an overlapping symbolic subspace that influences how one should interpret the classifying power of playing a sport like tennis. One who plays the game in a polo shirt with an expensive racket is embodying an entirely different lifestyle than one who plays the same sport in Bermuda shorts with a racket that belonged to his grandfather. Even if the two individuals being compared were given identical dress and equipment, their comportment and language would require nuances within the category of *those who play tennis*.

To describe this "system of dispositions," or tastes, Bourdieu employs the term "habitus." Habitus is essentially one's way of being in the world; it is comprised of their mental and behavioral schema and their skillset for navigating society. Habitus also encapsulates Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, or a set of skills and knowledge that have a sort of spending power in navigating social hierarchies. Language and dress are key illustrations. In a setting such as a job interview, for example, poor grammar and visibly cheap clothing immediately put one at a

disadvantage, whether or not the candidate in question is equal in competence, or even in education, to all other prospective employees.

The chapters that follow analyze the process through which the mobile home became emblematic of a failed and deficient class of people, investigating the development of stigma at the level of sign and symbol. While mobile home parks are disproportionately working class even in terms of objective markers like income, occupation, and education today, this was not always the case. In fact, the number of exceptions even in our current context suggests that these measures are inadequate for describing the stigma attached to mobile home parks or the status consequences for residents of these communities. Rather, the stigmatized identity of "trailer trash" is embodied and enacted at the level of basic interaction and the most ordinary components of daily life. More than an income bracket, "trailer trash" is perceived as a way of being in the world and a lifestyle shared by a whole class of "undesirables." Hence, while objective variables will be considered throughout, I will foreground a Bourdieusian framework for describing and analyzing class distinctions throughout the book.

Language

The dilemma of what to call these homes and the neighborhoods they make up is a key part of their history. They began as "trailer camps," a designation that soon grew distasteful for communities who wanted to promote trailering as a more permanent way of life. "Trailer parks" became the common nomenclature, and when that, too, acquired an aura of stigma, alternatives emerged and proliferated: "trailer court," "trailer manor," "trailer haven," etc. As the designation for the home itself changed from "trailer" to "mobile home" in the 1950s (once they could no longer be towed behind cars), "mobile home parks" became the common classification. Though the housing form has legally been titled "manufactured housing" since the 1970s, the term "manufactured housing community" has never gained a foothold in American vernacular. Today, "trailer park" and "mobile home park" are used almost interchangeably in common parlance. In my own general speech, I choose to use "mobile home park" most often; it matters to me that my

language doesn't further stigma in my daily interactions, and as I have never heard the term "mobile home trash," the distinction feels important. In this book, however, I use both terms frequently and interchangeably. This is in part because the book takes an historical view, and these neighborhoods were trailer parks long before they were mobile home parks. As well, my use of both terms is a reflection of the language used by my neighbors. Throughout my interviews, these residents used both terms with similar frequency.[13]

Layout of the Book

In the pages that follow, we will trace the cultural meanings attached to the trailer, as well as trailer parks and trailer residents, throughout its history and into our contemporary context. Following the story of this particular pariah of American culture will provide insight into stigma as a broad concept, and particularly to the assignment of stigma as an historical process. To begin, chapter two examines the trailer as a piece of material culture, exploring the way in which basic signs become meaningful symbols in society. After introducing some of the trailer's predecessors and contemporary cousins, the rest of the chapter primarily focuses on the history of the trailer for the first 50 years following its nascence in the 1920s. Both in understanding the trailer as material culture and in exploring how cultural notions about the trailer developed and took root, liminality becomes a key conceptual tool. Not only did the trailer exist in a sort of categorical middle ground between house and car, it claimed its place in the American housing scene during specific liminal spaces on the timeline, periods in which norms and categories were temporarily suspended—specifically the Great Depression and World War II.

Chapter three introduces my main theoretical approach to studying stigma. It begins with the work of Erving Goffman, who framed stigma as a response to deviance from what has been labeled "normal," essentially as a part of the process of social categorization. Mary Douglas'

[13] While it was beyond the scope of this research project, future research would benefit from a deeper analysis of *when* residents used one term over the other. I suspect that "trailer" is used most often in concert with other negative descriptors, while "mobile home" is employed in the context of positive identity work.

work on purity and pollution is brought into conversation with Goffman's work, because the trailer has not only been classified as other, but labeled as a kind of contaminant, or "trash.". The chapter then focuses on four specific cultural norms that appeared most commonly in my archival coding: sanitation and cleanliness; permanence and mobility; sense of house and home; and consumption as a cultural value.. These norms were perceived to be violated by the trailer movement, causing both trailers and residents to be cast into the category of "other." Finally, chapter three introduces various forms of stigma, with particular attention being paid to the idea of mobile home parks as an example of emplaced stigma.

Chapter four turns from stigma inscribed on geographical space to explore how it is embodied. This embodied stigma is projected on the body from without through dominant stereotypes, as well as inscribed on the bodies of residents in reality, bodies which are linked symbolically to the home itself. The chapter explores the idea of "trailer trash" through the Bourdieusian framework of class mentioned above, exploring how "trailer trash" stigma is embodied through class-based practices of cultural consumption. In the process, we delve into stigma as it plays out in the lives of my neighbors at Parkside and Riverview, examining how they perceive their homes and neighborhoods and their experiences with the label "trailer trash."

Finally, chapter five looks at the ways stigma is enacted at multiple levels of power and the consequences that enactment has for the lived experiences of mobile home park residents. Power imbalances can be expressed within the park through managerial dynamics. Residents also experience the effects of enacted from outside the park, through absentee ownership and heavily stigmatized commercial real estate discourse, as well as media portrayals of trailer park life. In particular, the chapter focuses on examining the power of media representations and how these representations can be understood and challenged in the case of "White trash" and "trailer trash" stereotypes.

2. BECOMING: THE TRAILER TAKES ITS PLACE IN THE WORLD OF MATERIAL CULTURE

Material Culture and Meaning Making

How did we get to a place where the mere mention of trailer parks evokes a denigrated "other" in the minds of most Americans?[1] The answer to this question is a story of symbol and meaning; thus, it is important that we begin with an understanding of the concepts of sign and symbol. Oliver puts it this way: "Signs are used to *denote* something. . . . Symbols are used to *connote* meanings in addition to those which they may depict. . . . Signs are distinct from symbols, but it should be noted that a sign may be a symbol as well" (1987, p. 160, italics original). A pair of sunglasses denotes a tool for shading one's eyes from bright light. However, they may also connote a sunny climate, a desire to maintain anonymity, or a particular style. A basic chair denotes a place to sit, but it may also connote an invitation to stay and talk rather than just pass through. Add some design flair to the chair and the symbolic meaning may override the core meaning of the sign. The object that purports to be a place to sit may now connote a level of wealth that places form over function, an object that asks you to pause and consider the status of the owner or the impact of design rather than sit down.

The mechanism through which a thing takes its place in the world of material and nonmaterial culture is the process of adding layers of connotation to a sign's basic meaning. This is an historical, continuous process. No aspect of material culture—none of the physical, inanimate things with which we interact—comes on the scene with a ready-made and immutable meaning. The meaning we ascribe to such objects is shaped over time as they play varying roles

[1] In his detailed history of trailers in America, David Thornburg begins with a similar question: "So how is it that the house trailer, which began life so hopefully, began life dancing chic to chic [*sic*] with industrialists and movie stars, came to be the pariah, the unmentionable, the leper of American housing?" (1991, p. 2). However, his analysis has major limits. As Endelman puts it, "the book's main interest is the 'true' trailerite, . . . someone who had no other residence but the trailer, had willingly chosen a nomadic lifestyle, and moved regularly from place to place" (1992, p. 73).

in our social interactions. Hence, material culture cannot be properly understood outside of its historical context, outside of its relationship to the nonmaterial (abstract, ideological) culture of the time. Likewise, "society cannot be grasped independently of its material stuff" (Dant, 1999, p. 2). This dialectical relationship between material and nonmaterial culture is at the heart of any attempt to understand why the trailer—at the level of sign, an inanimate thing made of wood and metal and rubber—has come almost universally to symbolize deeply entrenched views of social structure and individual identity.

Sociology has paid scant attention to the role material culture plays in shaping society. This is a major oversight. Archeologists emphasize material culture because it is essentially what they have left to work with after the flesh and blood of a culture are long past. However, this does not mean that the things with which we interact as we live our lives become irrelevant when examining contemporary society. Dant (1999) argues that,

> social forms [e.g., institutions, rituals, practices, modes of interaction, activities, beliefs] are not only contingent on human activities, but also contingent on the material environment of those activities. The material environment is not natural or given, it is itself a social product and as such it feeds back on the development of social forms. (p. 12)

The objects with which we interact are produced in the context of social interaction; by "produced," I mean that they take on their meaning and become what they are to us within the context of social life. Their definition is rooted in human perceptions and needs and the continual process of action and communication. In turn, they become the world in which future social interaction takes place, and they have an influence on how that interaction takes place and what kinds of meaning are attached to it. Dant pushes the concept even further, suggesting that humans establish a kind of "quasi-social" relationship with the objects that make up material culture. This is so in that material objects connote all sorts of social relations, and thus the object itself "stands in for other social beings" as individuals experience their social identity and location (Dant, 1999,

p. 2). A key example is the house. Discussing the role of houses in society, Oliver (1987) notes that "the dwelling is more than the materials from which it has been made. . . . The relationship of man to his home is intimate and essential" (p. 15). This relationship between people and their homes will be explored in detail later.

Let's examine another example. In the United States, people often have a kind of quasi-social connection with their cars. Consider the truck I borrowed from family every time I traveled to do research in the archives in Indiana. It's a very small truck, with brown stripes down the side and low clearance. It rattles and squeaks and bounces, and in several places the body has corroded all the way through, creating rust-ringed holes big enough to stick a fist through. During one of these research trips, as I drove down the highway toward the archives, stopping to get coffee along the way, I couldn't help but think about the ways I was wrapped in connotation, entirely encased in a metal box of cultural meaning. To the passerby, I didn't have a label that read "PhD candidate on the way to do research." I was the woman in the tiny truck, old and rattling, with holes rusted in the side. Such a truck may be functional for getting a PhD student to the archives, but it does not *connote* that activity at all.

On my drive that morning, I thought back to my own past cars. In particular, I thought about "Ruby," the 1995 Chevy half-ton pickup (ruby red, hence the name), onto which someone had keyed the word "b*tch" before I bought it. I eventually covered this word with a strip of duct tape, which of course did nothing to increase the classiness factor of the vehicle. In Ruby more than any other car—perhaps because of the blatant presence of keyed-in profanity—I had often pondered what other drivers assumed about me. I was a Master's student at the time, living in a five-bedroom suburban house with four other women. I spent half of my time doing homework at coffee shops, the other half riding a mountain bike. But was I the type of person who drives an aging Chevy half-ton with a strip of duct tape on the door? Where did other drivers think I had come from? Where did they think I was going? What kind of person does drive a Ruby, anyway? These questions, and the questions I asked myself on the way to the archives in Indiana that

morning, exist because in my cultural context, a car is much more than a sign; it is a powerful symbol, representing a whole other host of connotations and social relations.

Similarly, clothing is loaded with connotation in U.S. culture. This was illustrated keenly for me through an experience—more accurately, a combination of experiences—that I had in Chicago during graduate school. The first took place when I traveled one summer to visit an old college friend who lived in an outer suburb of the city. I was to meet her downtown in the afternoon, and we would take the train together back to her house. I traveled as I usually did in those years—t-shirt and hiking pants, toting a full backpacking pack so I didn't have to drag a suitcase behind me. It was a particularly hot day, and I was making my way around on foot. Overheated, sweaty, and getting tired from walking in circles as my friend and I crossed wires about where to meet up, I plopped down on a low concrete ledge outside of a hotel. I was too tired to notice that it was a rather upscale venue. It wasn't long before I started to notice the looks I received from hotel guests and passersby, some curious, some indicating thinly veiled disdain. Confused at first, it soon struck me that to most observers, I appeared to be some version of transient. I smiled inwardly at the dramatic irony of the moment. I imagined there was a vast chasm between the reality of my life and the things those onlookers might guess about it.

The second experience came the following August, when one of the conferences I attend annually took place in Chicago. I checked into the conference hotel, looked around a bit, and decided to go for a walk. I was in conference attire—slacks and a blouse, with a small purse—and I had my name badge (with conference logo) hanging on a lanyard around my neck. As I passed through the doors from the lobby to the sidewalk, I had a strange sense of déjà vu, and I quickly realized that I was staying in the very hotel where I had received so many questioning and judgmental glances just one year before. I made my way to the same concrete ledge and sat down, just to see what would happen. There, I was greeted warmly by the doorman working the curb. I received smiles from a few other guests. But perhaps more tellingly, I received no glance in particular from most. I was unremarkable because I belonged there, in that upscale hotel, in that

conference setting. The connotations of my clothing were no longer discordant with the connotations of the other symbols around me.

The vast differences between my two experiences at that Chicago hotel were a function of the connections between a material object and the connotations attributed to it by a particular society. I was the same person, in the same skin, living in the same house, working on the same degree. On both days, I sat in the same spot, outside the same building. I wore pants whose purpose was to cover my legs and shirts whose purpose was to cover my upper body. I wore shoes to protect my feet and carried a bag to tote my belongings. Yet layer upon layer of connotation attached to the symbols that adorned me meant that on one day I was read as homeless and on another I was perceived to be someone who would naturally be staying in a high-end hotel. These pieces of material culture played a critical role in my social interactions on both occasions.

As a form of material culture, trailers and mobile homes have a significant line of predecessors and close contemporary cousins, all of which are laden with their own layers of meaning. The Conestoga and covered wagons, the portable shacks of the gold rush, the caravans of gypsies and Romany itinerants—mobile living is not a new phenomenon. One writer in an early issue of *Trailer Travel* even refers back to mobile clay houses used in Greek culture (Willson, 1936). As we will see, the connotations attached to these other forms of mobile housing heavily influenced the meaning attached to the American house trailer. Writing in 1941, a sociologist studying the impacts of trailer living recalls,

> The passing of the Conestoga wagon which served as a home for pioneer families did not immediately abolish the general species, however, as anyone who has lived in the prairie states can testify. In fact, the canvas covered wagon without the unique features of the Conestoga serves even yet as the home of migratory families of professional horse-traders, gypsies and showmen. Well does the author remember the mixed curiosity and

> fear engendered in the minds of the children of the rural neighborhood where he grew up when a family of horse-traders 'camped' nearby. (Cowgill, 1941, p. 2)

In connection with the stigma faced by American trailers and trailer parks, a close cousin is found in the Travellers of Ireland (also referred to as Tinkers). Originally known simply as poor itinerant tradesman, likely forced onto the road by poverty and famine under British colonial rule (though this origin story is contested), this group of nomads later developed a distinct ethnic identity based on their peripatetic existence and a "negatively evaluated 'way of life'" (Helleiner, 2000, p. 8). They were known for the classic barrel-topped wagons they began using around the 1930s, but these have since been replaced by vans or trailers (often referred to as caravans in Ireland and England). Over ninety percent of Tinker families had become "motorized" by 1975 (Kearns, 1977). When the 1950s brought large-scale urbanization to Ireland, the Travellers gradually became less itinerant, increasingly living in permanent camps. These camps were quickly forced to the physical margins of their cities and the Travellers were pushed even further to the symbolic margins of Irish society. Just as American trailer parks have maintained an intriguing—albeit generally denigrated—air, so unauthorized Traveller camps[2] had an "'exotic' ambience" of otherness; however, the image was one "deplored by many Irish as an affront to humanity" (Kearns, 1997, p. 545). Both in itinerancy and in stationary living, the identity of the Travellers was inextricably linked with homes on wheels (Helleiner, 2000). Particularly in the case of the earlier barrel-top wagons, a piece of material culture symbolized a distinct group of people and their entire way of life.

The symbolic link between trailers and other forms of mobile housing in the American imagination was readily apparent in the early days of the "house trailer." Much of the early literature contains references to "gasoline gypsies," or some other variation of the gypsy, nomad,

[2] These informal camps are to be distinguished from Traveller camps set up by local governments, which were at least somewhat more orderly. Municipal camps, however, were only meant as stopgap solutions rather than permanent sites (Kearns, 1977).

or pioneer themes. As well, early manufacturers capitalized on names like Vagabond, Covered Wagon, and Prairie Schooner. Trailerists themselves sometimes claimed the images as their own, referring to themselves as nomads, gypsies, pioneers, and occasionally as tramps.[3] "The truth of the matter is," one woman wrote in 1951, "we're pioneers—leaders in an unparalleled new way of life" (Shetler, 1951, p. 5). "They say I'm a gypsy," wrote another trailerist. "Well maybe I am. But I know I'm going see the four corners of this continent before I shuffle off this mortal coil. So, thank heavens! I live in a house trailer" (Gist, 1950, p. 16). As we will see in my interviews with present-day mobile home residents, this contest for meaning continues, though no longer in the language of pioneers and gypsies.

In this chapter, we will explore how layers of connotation were piled on the material object of the trailer and later the mobile home. It is a process that took place during periods of rapid cultural and technological change in the United States and the western world. With remarkable consistency, key aspects of the trailer and trailer living were framed by outside parties as contrary to cultural values cherished by middle-class Americans. From the emphasis on citizenship and commitment that marked the 1930s (Susman, 2003) to the new suburban housing norms of the postwar years, the trailer was often portrayed as an imposter of, if not a traitor to, American values. Previous scholars have already provided detailed historical accounts of the emergence and development of the trailer as a form of architecture, housing, and community (Hart et al., 2002; Thornburg, 1991; Wallis, 1991). While I will provide basic scaffolding in terms of events and timelines, my main focus is on the trailer's evolution as a cultural symbol in the context of shifting norms in American society. I will also emphasize the first several decades of

[3] The tension of these identities is evident in the fact that articles penned by trailerists both embrace and contest these labels. These attempts to either attach or distance oneself from stereotyped labels can be understood through the framework of "boundary work," or efforts to symbolically draw lines around the "us" and "them" of society. Those who refer to themselves using terms that others use to denigrate them (the use of *redneck* as a positive identity is a more contemporary example) are practicing what Snow and Anderson (1993), in their research with homeless individuals, referred to as "embracement." However, in her research regarding stigma management practices among trailer families, Kusenbach (2009) found no contemporary cases where "trailer trash" was ever embraced as a positive identifier.

the trailer's history in America. I do this for two reasons: First, my source material is drawn primarily from trailer-specific magazines, and these had largely ceased to exist by the late 60s. Those magazines that remained had turned their focus to the travel side of the industry. For example, the October 1967 issue of *Trail-R-News* bore the subtitle, "The complete mobile home and travel trailer magazine." One month later, the publication had changed its name to *Griffin's Trailer Magazine*, with a subtitle that declared its focus "exclusively [on] all types of recreational trailers and towing vehicles." In his announcement of the change, the magazine's editor noted that travel trailering had become a highly specialized branch of the field, and he promised a separate publication for those who had read *Trail-R-News* for its mobile home content. Second, while no piece of material culture ever achieves a static state of meaning, I believe that the most formative years for the public perception of trailers and mobile homes took place in the early and mid-twentieth century. In the decades that followed, mobile homes "inherited this social stigma almost intact" (Thornburg, 1991, p. 183). More recent decades have seen the symbolism attached to mobile homes deepen and solidify but not experience significant substantive changes.

Stuck in the Middle

In many ways, the history of the trailer is also a tale of being stuck in the middle. It is a story of the in-between on several different levels. First (and in this case, increasingly over time), trailers have primarily been inhabited by people dangling in the middle of class and race categories. Most residents are White but are ascribed a "not quite White" version of that Whiteness (Wray, 2006). They are not asset-bare renters, but neither have they fully achieved the dream of owning both home and land. One scholar refers to them as "halfway homeowners" (Sullivan, 2014). They are "less than middle-class and less than white" (Hurley, 2001, p. 252). Second, trailers have consistently been placed in a tenuous category somewhere between car and house. On some level, the confusion was well founded, as early units were often assembled at home, incorporating aspects of house and car together in a kind of newfangled hybrid (Wallis, 1989). This ambiguity had consequences in early decades: The trailer's nebulous position

between house and car meant that it was overlooked by the regulating bodies for both automobiles and homes. Such lack of regulation contributed to the enduring image of the trailer as unsafe and haphazardly constructed. Even those selling mobile homes stood in a kind of in-between space: Should they be licensed to sell real estate or vehicles? Third, the parks where these trailers set up house have generally been zoned onto the margins of cities, into a kind of no man's land between urban and rural living. This is sometimes due to a push factor, as city governments try to keep the so-called trailer problem at bay and minimize regulatory headaches. In other instances, primarily in earlier decades, there was a pull factor, as owners and trailerites alike sought to avoid harsh city ordinances, which conveniently disappeared when one crossed the line into county land. Even the parks within city limits have regularly been relegated to border spaces between residential and industrial areas, seldom zoned as residential at all. In some cases, this zoning issue has been framed as another problem of classification: is a privately owned trailer park technically a residential area, or is it a business? Finally, and most importantly for this chapter, the trailer is a product of a sort of in-betweenness of time itself. The cultural meaning attached to trailers was most firmly established during periods of national cultural transition. These were distinct interludes on the American historical timeline, periods in which American society held its collective breath and temporarily restructured for crisis survival. In this chapter, I will emphasize two such phases within the trailer's nascent years.

In analyzing this in-betweenness of the American house trailer and the time periods in which it evolved as a cultural symbol, the idea of liminality provides a helpful framework. The concept of liminality was most famously developed by anthropologist Victor Turner in reference to the ritual practices of traditional societies, particularly the Ndembu tribe of what is now Zambia. An earlier formulation of the theory had described how primitive rituals involved three stages: the separation, temporary marginalization and seclusion, and eventual reintegration of the individuals participating in the ritual (Deflem, 1991). In the middle stage, ritual subjects are said to be in a liminal state, from *limen*, the Latin for "threshold." Departing somewhat from the

structured nature of this early model, Turner approached the process not just in terms of ritual but as a "social drama" that followed four phases, which can be summarized as follows:

> (1) a breach of regular norm-governed social relationships between persons or groups of a social unit; (2) a crisis or extension of the breach, unless the conflict can be sealed off quickly; (3) adjustive and redressive mechanisms brought into operation by leading members of the social group; and (4) reintegration of the disturbed social group or social recognition of an irreparable breach or schism. (Thomassen, 2014, p. 77)

In the liminal state, between the initial breach and either reintegration or permanent schism, a subject is "betwixt and between"; they are in the process of passing from one social status to another. In that liminal space, "status hierarchies are temporarily suspended" and common markers of social location are stripped. This constitutes a kind of temporary destruction of identity for the individual experiencing liminality (Thomassen, 2014). For groups undergoing transition, the ritual subjects share a common unifying experience, which Turner termed "communitas" (he preferred this term to "community" because it emphasized social relationship rather than a geographic area) (Turner, 2002). As a root concept, communitas is fruitful for understanding the kind of community that sprang up among early trailerites and for querying why that kind of community is largely lacking in mobile home parks today.[4]

In the case of the American house trailer, I believe that two specific liminal time periods are paramount to understand how a thing that violated so many norms was nonetheless able to find such an enduring place in the American social landscape. During periods when cherished structures were suspended and categories were softened, hundreds of thousands of Americans were introduced to trailer living. Parks became a prominent part of the urban and rural

[4] Later in his career, Turner drew a connection between the process of liminality that he had observed in traditional societies to the complex cultures of the Western world, differentiating between liminal states and what he termed "liminoid" states. Liminoid spaces are brief suspensions from normative structures, such as plays, novels, or vacations. In relation to trailer history, the idea of the liminoid is most applicable to the very early days of the trailer, when its main purpose was as a vacation vehicle. Similar to the RVs and motorhomes of our present time, early trailers were a tool for temporarily breaking from the norms and structures that were part of everyday life in America. The concept will come into play on a different level in chapter five.

landscapes. There, in the historical in-between, trailer living had claimed a notable place in the housing scene. Thus, the trailer was largely allowed to develop during these liminal periods where the very norms they threatened were for a time relaxed or suspended, and they were temporarily perceived as less of a threat. When these periods ended, and in the years following, the challenges posed by the continued existence of the trailer demanded a response. Several specific societal responses to the threat posed by the trailer will be discussed in detail in chapter three.

Thus, as we discuss the formation and persistence of stigma as it pertains to trailers, trailer parks, and trailer residents, it is the post-liminal phase that becomes most important. In Turner's model above, it is the fourth phase: "reintegration of the disturbed social group or social recognition of an irreparable breach or schism." We will see that in some cases, aspects of the trailer and trailer culture remain frozen in a liminal state, never fully resolved; this is true, for example, on classificatory and spatial levels. When I bought my mobile home in 2016, the process still included both a trip to pay property taxes and a visit to register my "home" with the DMV. I found myself inhabiting a space that was still half house, half automobile in the eyes of regulatory powers—and in the eyes of many of my friends and family as well. On a spatial level, mobile homes still exist in a sort of geographic in-between in many cases. While not banned entirely, as was more common in early decades, they are still not included in residential definitions of zoning. Nor have they been brought into the fold of legitimate neighborhoods, remaining obscured behind tall fences and industrial businesses.

Where the liminality of the trailer was resolved rather than frozen, it was never settled via a positive reintegration or a return to a solid place in the American social structure. Instead, where the liminal state was resolved, the resolution came in the form of eschewal. As we will discuss in chapter three, this movement toward eschewal is critical, as it is the point where an aspect of society is labeled not only as other, but lesser; not only different, but discounted. This is most clear in the case of establishing the status of mobile home residents on the American social

ladder. Rather than moving into a respectable, or at least acceptable, place in society, the resolution of their liminal status was a kind of deep marginalization, of being assigned one of the lowest rungs on the social ladder. It was permanent schism between normative housing and trailer living, between legitimate, rooted citizens and those whose houses sat on wheels.

The liminal periods at the heart of the history of the trailer—the Great Depression and World War II—were sparked by cultural crises, one economic and the other geopolitical. In the midst of these periods, cultural norms and in many cases social hierarchies were suspended until the crisis had passed and American society was able to move into a new stage. These two periods were critical in the transition of the trailer from primarily a vacation vehicle to a form of permanent housing, from a plaything of the middle and upper classes to a dwelling associated primarily with the working class. They witnessed the transformation from trailer "camps" to trailer "parks" to trailer "cities." These periods also marked turning points in regards to the position "trailerites" occupied in social structure, a testament to the link between housing and identity in American culture, a connection we will explore in the next chapter. Why does this matter? Why is it important that the trailer industry developed and took its place in American society during these liminal phases? As we will see in chapter three, stigma is rooted in the process of creating and cementing social categories. The suspension and reestablishment of categories during these liminal times, then, play a critical role in the establishment of the stigma attached to trailers, trailer parks, and trailer residents

A History of the American Trailercoach

The trailer as we know it came onto the scene in response to the advent of the automobile, in the late 1910s and the 1920s. As the automobile became more common, and the highway system improved in response to the sudden increase in cross-country travel, Americans embraced the new ability to travel long distances and explore their country. However, an adequate system of motels and other lodging places was slower to develop. Vacationers had to stop on roadsides, at campgrounds, and in empty fields for the night. Quickly wearying of

traditional tent camping in an age when most had come to expect certain conveniences (Dixon, 1937), travelers began to fashion homemade rigs that would allow for greater protection against the elements and offer more of the comforts of home. Most of these creations were essentially "tent-trailers," involving some hybrid of solid structure and expandable canvas. These could be seen gathered en masse at the meetings of a group called the Tin Can Tourists of the World (or TCT). Born out of the early auto camping movement and organized in 1920, the TCT was an organization of travelers who gathered at large camps and met for annual conventions. These were the motor gypsies who found their way onto the highways when the automobile became affordable to middle-class citizens, and thus they represented a wave of tourists with less wealth and less decorum than had previously graced the nation's vacation spots (Thornburg, 1991). Famous for their camaraderie and infamous among local businesses for their austerity (and at times, their lack of tidiness), the TCT ushered in the era of municipal campgrounds and eventually transitioned from a community of tent campers to one of trailerites (Cowgill, 1941).

Despite the prevalence of the canvas tent-trailers most common among the TCT, other early models were more akin to the trailer as we know it today. Some promising designers tried to manufacture their designs as early as 1920. Aviator Glen Curtiss's Motor Bungalow, with its bread-box roof and lightweight design, served as a model for later house trailers, but it did not fare well in its time (Thornburg, 1991). His later Aerocar featured Pullman-style berths, air conditioning, and an "airplane type observatory" (Wallis, 1991, p. 32). Curtiss's models were ahead of their time, but his commitment to cater only to the wealthy was his undoing. Those who *could* afford his creations were interested in other designs, and those others who might have gladly embraced the Motor Bungalow as a happy home could never dream of affording such a trailer (Thornburg, 1991). Instead, most trailers seen hitched to the back of Fords were homemade contraptions, clunky and designed according to function rather than fashion. In some cases, trailers originally built for other functions were repurposed as traveling homes; a 1936 article in *Trailer Travel* magazine, titled "We Have Lived in Trailers Since 1919," tells the story of a

family who started their journey as trailerists in an old circus wagon. They proudly claim to have produced the first "trailer babies," as two of their five children were born inside the repurposed wagon (Slagle, 1937).

At the end of the decade, from this cadre of box-and-tent-like homemade contraptions, one eventually stood out and set the standard for the industry that would follow. It was called the Covered Wagon, designed by a bacteriologist named Arthur Sherman after a family vacation marked by frustrating attempts to set up a canvas tent-trailer in the rain. "Simple. Compact. Functional. So homely it grew on you," the Covered Wagon caught on like wildfire with the trailering community (Thornburg, 1991, p. 15). The year was 1929.

The 1930s mark an important stage in the history of the trailer in America, a transformative time both for its use and its meaning as a cultural symbol. By the middle of the decade, the shift toward using trailers as permanent dwellings rather than vacation vehicles was undeniable, and the battle had begun to frame the movement, to solidify its meaning within the broader cultural lexicon. The variety of terms alone employed to discuss trailers, trailer parks, and trailer residents reflects the contest over meaning. Legislators and community members who felt antagonism toward the use of trailers as year-round homes often referred to the trailer "problem," "situation," or "menace." Sociologists Richard Fuller and Richard Myers, in presenting their theory that social problems have a sort of natural history, chose as their central illustration a single social problem, a single issue that threatened American values: the "residence trailer problem" in Detroit (Fuller & Myers, 1941). The label "trash" also came into use as early as this decade in reference to trailer dwellers (Thornburg, 1991), and the term "undesirables" was used quite frequently for this mobile demographic. Some suggested that this antagonism was rooted in fear, that the idea of a nation of trailerites frankly scared the average citizen (Hurley, 2001). A 1936 article in *Trailer Travel*, penned by a staunch advocate of trailer life, warned against "short-sighted restriction of trailers on every excuse but the real one, that somebody is scared" (Willson, 1937, p. 78). In this article, the author suggests that the frightened parties were those who felt the

burgeoning trailer industry posed a threat to their own economic prosperity and social influence. Social scientists expressed fear as well, concerned that the increase in residential mobility would lead to damaging levels of social disorganization (Cowgill, 1941).

On the other hand, trailerists themselves, as well as proponents of the industry, referred to the trailer as a "social revolution" or the "symbol of a new age." One author predicted that the house trailer was "destined to become one of the most important factors in human society" (Webb, 1946, p. 8). One of the most famous endorsements came from Roger Babson, a noted economist and businessman. In his article in the very first issue of *Trailer Travel*, "We'll Soon Be Living on Wheels," he famously declared, "I am going to make an astonishing prediction: Within twenty years, more than half the population of the United States will be living in automobile trailers!" (1936, p. 10). As he saw it, the trailer movement was "a natural expression, a revolt, of our people against what they apparently feel to be a condition of oppression." According to Babson, these oppressive conditions included, to name a few, being anchored to local employers, having no control over the land adjacent to one's own, being at the mercy of taxes, and having no easy way to get away from bad neighbors. Surely, Americans would soon see that trailer life offered the great freedom that was the very core of their national identity.

Notably, this decade included the first of two periods that are best described in terms of their liminality: the Great Depression. As the economic impact of the 1929 stock market crash forced throngs of people out of their homes, numerous trailers were transformed by necessity into year-round housing for migrant families. Soon, the nature of the trailer camp business was changed on a spatial level, as camps and parks began to show up in urban centers rather than on vacation routes, in areas to which migrants flocked in search of work (Hurley, 2001). Many of these families were "Okies," forced out of the Dust Bowl states and onto the roads in search of work. One contributor to *Harper's*, writing an article about trailer living, described them this way:

> Trailers coming from Oklahoma were the poorest we saw. Hundreds of families, every degree of poverty, followed one another on the road, with ten and twelve people in a groaning little Ford. Most of them were driving [West] to get work there. They all looked as if they had just left a famine region. Lean, emaciated, the children with bulging bellies, the hair crimpy and colorless, they all made a terribly depressing impression on me. (Bercovici, 1937, p. 73)

This particular group of migrants, only some of whom actually lived in trailers, would become emblematic of the "undesirable" mobile population in the mind of many citizens long after the economic crisis had passed. The Great Depression, however, did not relegate only poor farmers to mobile housing. The crisis was in many ways a great equalizer for all but those at the top of the social structure. With approximately one third of the workforce unemployed by early 1933, and with many more severely underemployed (Hill et al., 1997, p. 4), the era's famous "Hoovervilles" were full not only of those who had been poor before the crash. They were also home to "the nouveau poor: decent, law-abiding families, mostly, who had lost jobs, homes, status, hope—lost everything, it seemed, but their rattletrap car" (Thornburg, 1991, p. 34). These working and middle-class families found themselves parked side by side in Hoover's shantytowns, on roadsides, in fields, and in trailer camps that lacked adequate sanitation and infrastructure. A menagerie of uprooted citizens, just struggling to get by. One profoundly unsettling consequence of this situation was that the deeply held belief that hard work and clean living would lead to success was thrown into question. Both the hard-working fourth-generation farmer and the lifetime transient found themselves in similar economic straits. They were betwixt and between, dangling in the no man's land between the prosperity of the Coolidge years and the end of the Depression. In this way, the Depression years displayed a suspension both of long-standing social hierarchies and of many middle-class social norms.

This is not to say that the 30s saw only ramshackle homemade trailers, exclusively parked in Hoovervilles and similar locales. Among those less affected by the economic crisis, the

fad of the camping trailer continued to grow. One historian says of 1935 that "the Mobile Age was here," describing it as "America's brief romance with the house trailer" (Thornburg, 1991, p. 52). A regular contributor for *Trailer Travel* —always referring to himself simply as "the thin grey man"—recorded the following exchange:

> Among those gathered about to help the thin, grey little man change a tire, a discussion began of a subject much to the fore these days: Why the sudden popularity of the trailer coach?
>
> "With me, it's a matter of economy," said Scotty.
>
> "It gets me away from my worries," argued Bill, the mechanic. "Here we are, a dozen families of us in this camp . . ."
>
> "And all of us down with trailer fever," laughed the Hoosier.
>
> "By down, do you mean down?" someone asked.
>
> "I mean up—sky high," the Hoosier admitted.
>
> As the argument was resumed, the consensus of opinion seemed to be that novelty has much to do with it. Americans like whatever is new and the trailer is the latest wrinkle. (Willson, 1936, p. 17)

The thin grey man disagrees with this assessment, asserting that "trailering is no fad" and opining for several pages about escape from the tyranny of unjust housing markets, the long and rather noble history of mobile living, and the inner draw toward freedom. In reality, the trailerites with whom he spoke may have been closer to the truth. The oft referred-to "trailer fever" seemed destined to break as any other fever would. By the end of the decade, the discourse about trailers and trailer life began to lose its glow (Thornburg, 1991).

When the economic distress of the Great Depression began to ease, proponents of the rapidly improving industry tried to distance themselves from the homemade contraptions of the 20s and early 30s. In a 1937 issue of *Trailer Travel*, a trailerist recounts his experience trying to convince a hesitant hotel owner to allow him to park his trailer in the adjacent lot.

> The hotel man has been envisioning one of those crude, home-made box-like affairs with a section of rusty stovepipe tipping out of the roof—one that wriggled behind a decrepit Model T. [Instead] he saw a glistening, streamlined sedan with a good looking woman lolling inside and a long, sleek coach behind that harmonized with the lines of the car. (A. J. Sweeney, 1937, p. 16)

This is not the trailer of the Depression era, nor the canvas contraption of the TCT. Now, in the new Mobile Age, the car is sleek, the woman is good-looking, and the trailer matches them both in style and class. The same year, also in *Trailer Travel*, another writer praised the trailers of the new era as a solid business opportunity. He not only proclaims a new class of trailer, but tries to distance the trailerists of the late 1930s from the wandering undesirables of recent years.

> Five years ago trailers were looked upon as a mere novelty, and people who rode and lived in them were considered a pack of nuts, or at best, glorified gypsies. The majority of coaches were home-made and the few manufactured models were very simple in design and just one step ahead of a tent on wheels. . . . The trailer coach is now recognized as a mode of transportation that is not only practical, but that fills a definite place in the family life of the American people. (Johns, 1937, p. 22)

This was an era when a trailer could be "either a necessity or a luxury," the writer goes on to say, where the basic camp trailer might even include such luxuries as a piano. This is to say nothing of the "land yacht" used for deluxe travel, and the new-fangled "mobile home" with its multiple rooms and house-like feeling (Johns, 1937).

As trailer enthusiasts and industry leaders sought to change the image of trailers themselves, so also advocacy began in earnest for new trailer parks that would look nothing like the Hoovervilles and makeshift camps of the Depression era. Industry leaders recognized that the

most beautiful trailercoaches[5] in the world would not win over public opinion if they were camped in trashy parks. After all, the public didn't see the spotless interiors of the trailers themselves. They saw only the outside surroundings, and those were often significantly less well-cared for (Thornburg, 1991). In the effort to improve parks, the emphasis was on developing better sanitation. As we will see in chapter three, this was not just an issue of hygiene in the minds of Americans, but of citizenship and virtue. Cleanliness had moral implications, and thus the moral reputation of trailer residents was at stake.

The close of the 30s brought a shift in population among full-time trailerites. One author, writing for *Harper's*, attributed it to the death of a "trailer dream" (P. H. Smith, 1937). The trailer, he claimed, had been nearly on par with the automobile and radio for its appeal to "every sort of person imaginable" (P. H. Smith, 1937, p. 554). However, by the end of the decade, only some segments of the population remained enthusiastic. Those who continued to live in trailers were those who had purchased one either out of economic necessity or because of its convenience for work. Notably for the industry, some of the most enthusiastic trailerites were agricultural workers who couldn't afford factory-built models. They largely used homemade contraptions that consistently fell apart, being constructed from various scrap materials (P.H. Smith, 1937, p. 556). Trailers such as these no doubt contributed to the negative image that came to mind when the average American pictured a house trailer. It was for the other segment of the growing trailer population—those had undertaken the adventure of living in a trailer year-round, or for large parts of the year, by choice rather than by necessity—that Smith wrote his "Epitaph for the Trailer Dream." They had purchased their rigs with hopes of "escaping long-accepted social

[5] Without a detailed content analysis, it is difficult to trace the evolution of the terms used to describe the travel trailer and its descendants with any level of chronological specificity. The terms "trailer," "trailercoach," and "house trailer," among others, can be found throughout early trailer literature. There was a great deal of debate over what to call this house-but-not-a-house. In fact, one letter to the editor of *Trail-R-News*, concerned that "trailer" was too easily confused with shipping vehicles, suggested a combination of car and coach: "caroach" ("Has Name Idea," 1950). The labels are likewise variable for residents of these homes on wheels, including names such as "trailerite," "trailerist," "trailer dweller" and, of course, "trailer trash." In another letter to the editor in 1953, the name "dragabond" was suggested ("Reprimand and Suggestion," 1953).

practices" like taxes, bondage to an oppressive landlord, or entanglement with what another trailer advocate called "our present feudal conceptions of land-ownership" (Willson, 1937, p. 77). This aspect of the Trailer Dream was soon dampened by an onslaught of anti-trailer legislation, limiting everything from where trailers could be parked to how long they could stay, sometimes using obscure laws regarding how much floor space was required to constitute a permanent home. As well, these intrepid early adopters of trailer living had embarked on the enterprise with a sense of the oft-touted nomadic, pioneer spirit of the American people. Why if they were not "mobile-y inclined," then "they would not be Americans; they would still be living in the 'old country' across the sea" (Dixon, 1937). According to Smith, however, the dream had worn off when, after only a few years, "what began as a cozy arrangement . . . ended as a cramped one," and decent trailer parks proved difficult to find. Smith sums it up this way: "In reality, the Goddess of Liberty that beckoned the trailer on was an hallucination. When one drew closer to the figure it became a traffic cop holding up a stop sign or else pointing to a trailer camp which to many tourists looked like a place where elephants go to die" (P.H. Smith, 1937, p. 555).

The 1940s brought another key transition to the uses, occupants, and symbolic role of the trailer in America. As the 1930s ended, those who used their trailers as permanent residences (rather than as vacation vehicles) were by and large people whose occupations demanded mobility and elderly retired folk (Cowgill, 1941). However, when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941 and America was forced to enter into the Second World War, a mass migration of workers and military personnel ensued almost overnight. Centers of war production suddenly faced desperate housing shortages as workers flocked to help with the war effort. In an article in *Western Trailer Life*, one woman recounts,

> Nearly a million American families now live in trailers and war work is increasing this number every day. When Russell, my husband, applied for a war job in Waynesville, Missouri, he was told he must have a trailer before he could have the job. The little Ozark town had already jumped from 400 to 10,000 population. Every available room, tent,

> barn and bed was taken. Men on the night shift slept in their cars in the daytime and rented them out at night. Thousands of trailers were moored on the rugged, sloping hills. ("Housekeeping on Wheels," 1942, p. 8)

The sheer pace of change forced by the war crisis meant that the trailer industry, and in particular the trailer park system, could not keep pace. The almost immediate demand for trailer parks in defense areas meant that "unlicensed" parks appeared essentially overnight ("Eyes of the Nation Turned on Trailers," 1942). The infrastructure necessary for proper sanitation couldn't be established quickly enough, and not all trailer park owners demonstrated much concern for such standards. Some park managers simply wanted to avoid spending money on improvements because they would lose profit (Henderson, 1960). Others resented being blamed for the situation and asserted that the onus lay on the trailerites to uphold better standards of sanitation ("Trailerite—Good, Bad, or Indifferent?," 1950).

The housing shortage during the war years was so extreme, and the crisis so closely related to a national defense emergency, that the federal government finally acknowledged the utility of the trailer as a form of stopgap housing. The government ordered tens of thousands of trailers to be made in order to house defense workers and military men, along with their families. Almost 36,000 trailers were purchased for wartime government housing between 1940 and 1943 (Foster, 1980). Alongside the sudden proliferation of private trailer parks, huge government parks were established in defense areas such as the San Francisco Bay Area. In a period of less than three years, the Bay Area added an estimated 314,000 residents (Foster, 1980, p. 278). As the transient worker had altered the nature of trailer parks in the 30s, the government parks symbolically reinforced the change from transience to permanence in trailer use on a spatial level. Historically, parks had been located next to major thoroughfares so that travelers could see and access them easily. However, when trailer parks were built with year-round residence for workers in mind, the priority was proximity to the workplace, and parks were built close to defense plants rather than main roads. As well, the government parks were often huge, unlike the smaller mom-

and-pop private parks that had dominated the scene until then. One government park in eastern Washington hosted 12,000 residents, making their homes in more than 4,000 trailers (Thornburg, 1991, p. 151).

The mass increase in the use of trailers as full-time housing within the context of "patriotic" work—a situation that broadened the demographic of trailer dwellers significantly—made full-time trailer residence less of an anomaly. However, war-time limits on the materials that could be used to build them had a much more negative effect on the trailer's public image. The rationing of materials such as plywood, canvas, steel, and rubber forced trailer manufacturers to get creative, and the result did not do much to improve the already tenuous public perception of trailers. Government trailers were made largely of a material called homasote, which is a composite of wood pulp and ground newsprint (Thornburg, 1991). Thus, an industry already accused of using cheap materials (an accusation that was unfounded in many cases) was now making glorified cardboard boxes to house thousands of defense workers. To make matters worse, rubber rations meant that tires would be used to deliver one trailer, then removed and taken back to bring yet another trailer to the lot ("America Turns to the Mobile Home," 1942). "Perched on sawhorses or simple block foundations, these war trailers were not really trailers at all, in any true sense. Stripped of their wheels, they were reduced to mere apartments, and crude ones at that, little better than shacks, with *none of the mobility or promise of freedom* of a conventional house trailer" (Thornburg, 1991, p. 151, italics mine). Only a relatively small proportion of defense workers lived in government trailers, and peacetime brought a return to regular standards of manufacturing, and in many cases an improvement. Nonetheless, the image of those flimsy government trailers never left the minds of many Americans.

Nor was the public perception improved by the presence of those massive government parks, "best described as large parking lots for trailers" (Foster, 1980, p. 287). Lacking any aesthetic appeal or vegetation, muddy after rain and dusty every other day, offering only shared sanitary facilities—the Federal Public Housing Agency parks didn't do much to convince their

temporary residents of the glamour and appeal of trailer life (Thornburg, 1991).[6] The trailer industry had been working had to create an image of trailer parks as well-kept little communities, beautiful and full of modern amenities. The barren government parks and haphazard private parks born of sudden need painted exactly the opposite picture. To make matters worse, the defense parks gained a reputation as places "to which prostitutes migrated, in a scattering of whorehouses on wheels" (Isenberg, 2016, p. 246). This undoubtedly contributed to the image of the trailer park as a site of sexual deviance.

As with the Great Depression, World War II represents a liminal period in American history. The war years were marked by a suspension of many norms and hierarchies. In the government camps as well as private ones, people who may never have encountered one another (and who may very well have avoided one another) in peacetime were forced by necessity to live in close proximity, sharing bathrooms and laundry facilities and sometimes ration stamps. As one historian notes, shared hardship has incredible power to break down barriers between groups within a society (Thornburg, 1991). Symbolic boundaries between groups, such as housing and habits of consumption, were temporarily obscured by the crisis of war. As well, the war crisis and subsequent housing shortage temporarily suspended the stigma attached to long-term trailer residence on some level (Hart et al., 2002). To many, these new trailerites were not irresponsible gypsies, working-class migrants, or tax evaders. They were patriots, enduring the challenges of cramped trailer living for the sake of the war effort (Wallis, 1991). It was an interruption of boundaries, a moment ripe with the possibility of redefining categories. Of course, this suspension of judgment was not uniform within communities across the country. When activist and journalist Mary Heaton Vorse spent six months touring the country's defense areas, she heard difficult stories about living in government housing, including trailers: "'I came from a little town

[6] Several historians describe the federal parks in this way. It should be noted, however, that others praise these parks for their superior amenities and organization (Foster, 1981). Others are less glowing about the parks, but at least put a positive spin on their relative bareness. One article in *Western Trailer Life* lauded the way that "the spacious, open planning of the defense trailer camp affords youngsters plenty of room for playing in the sun and fresh air" ("America Turns to the Mobile Home," 1942, p. 14).

just like this one,' a trailer camp woman told me. 'There we had a nice home, and my husband and I were respected members of the community. Here people turn their noses up at me as trailer trash, and I have stopped going to church'" (Vorse, 1943, p. 452). The liminality of the period was also directly reflected in the suspension of anti-trailer legislation that would limit a city's ability to successfully address housing shortages or other crises unique to wartime. Cities that had once imposed strict limits on the length of time a trailer could stay, for example, decided to permit year-round living for the duration of the war. Likewise, supervision of sanitary and other code issues was relaxed during this time (Sullivan, 2018).

If World War II represents a liminal period in American history, a time betwixt and between, then the postwar years of the late 40s and early 50s were a time for reintegration, for reestablishing norms and hierarchies in a new age of prosperity and national pride. Granted, the housing shortage sparked by the war would outlast actual combat. In particular, the GI Bill created a new need for stopgap housing in college towns. When the war ended, the government rented, or in many cases donated, approximately 13,000 trailers to universities facing shortages of student housing (Henderson, 1960). These were used specifically as housing for married students.

Despite the continued use of trailers in places like universities, the industry leaders and advocates of trailer living knew that when the housing crisis had passed, Americans would render their judgment on the continuing validity of using trailers as permanent homes. Letters and articles from the time make it clear that residents and industry leaders knew of their tenuous position in this transition. One woman, whose husband's contract work kept the family on the move, describes the power that the trailer had already acquired as a symbol of social standing. She recounts taking her daughter to see a physician that they had visited once before, prior to moving into a trailer. "The next time, I took her to see the same doctor, but this time we had changed colors, our ears were too big, our eyes were purple, because we had become construction workers, trailer people" (Williford, 1952).

With trailer stigma threatening to push its roots even deeper into the soil of American culture, the stakes were high in this transition. As hierarchies and norms were reestablished and shaped anew in this postwar era, where would the trailer fit into the picture? In the popular trailer magazines, and this time more clarion than at the end of the Depression era, a call went out to improve the conditions found in trailer parks. A window of opportunity seemed to appear, as many of the ordinances limiting the length of stay for a trailer were never reinstated after the war (Thornburg, 1991). Here was a chance to solidify the trailer as a valid part of the community in any American city or town. Jean Jaques, editor of *Trail-R-News*, began his March 1952 editorial, "For the umptienth time in almost 12 years, I turn my attention to trailercoach parks" (Jaques, 1952). He offered the example of San Jose, whose leading citizens were so disgusted by the trailer parks in the city that one of them hung up on Jean Jaques rather than speaking about them at all. Jean Jaques had been advocating for improvements from the very beginning of his time editing trailer magazines, and he knew that this was a particularly important time to make changes. He openly challenged the resistance of some trailer park owners, saying, "Operators of parks—most of them 'camps'—roundly proclaim they are being persecuted when the facts actually are in favor of the editorial writers who are sincerely attempting to draw official attention to conditions which are shameful" (Jaques, 1952). Echoing the need to improve the situation, in his letter to the editor of *Trail-R-News*, one trailer park manager writes:

> Hurray for your October issue received today! At last a campaign seems to be under way to improve trailer parks. If trailer park operators could see beyond the tip of their respective noses, they would realize that how many people remain in trailercoaches after the housing shortage has been alleviated depends on how nice the available places are for trailercoach parking. Goodness knows the trailercoach manufacturers are apparently each trying to outdo the other to put out a more beautiful and at the same time practical unit. But any person who buys a beautiful trailercoach doesn't want to park it in a veritable pig pen!

> We have emphasized cleanliness and cooperation in conducting our trailer park and it is paying off. Not only financially but in good will in the community and contentment among tenants. Further, we do not refer to our court as a "trailer camp" for psychological reasons. Consider the common use of the word "camp." Something temporary or makeshift. We try to maintain a trailer court where people will feel that they want to be permanent.
>
> Improvements? I doubt if we will ever finish improvements. There is always something we can do to make the place a little nicer, a little more liveable. A little more appealing to those who live in trailercoaches because they *like* to.
>
> It is time the trailer park operators woke up and began to think of the future!
>
> Sincerely,
>
> SHADY GROVE TRAILER VILLA
>
> Althea D. Thomas, manager
>
> (Thomas, 1946, p. 73)

The need to improve the image of the slummy trailer park was not the only issue at hand as the war came to an end. There was serious damage control to be done regarding the image of trailerites themselves, and of the trailer as an appropriate dwelling for a respectable family. The effort to counter negative images of trailers, trailer parks, and trailerists was so overt that I will quote several trailerist writers at length here. In a 1950 issue of *Trail-R-News*, one woman writes in response to those who questioned her choice to raise a child in a trailercoach,

> So many people have mistaken ideas of trailercoaches. They're not ramshackle affairs populated by roving gypsies. They're solid, well-built homes, ranging in prices to suit all pocketbooks, in sizes to please any average family. I have a modern refrigerator, a hot water heater, a deluxe stove with broiler. From our studio couch we watch television on our 10-inch screen or just gaze fondly at our polished walls of our immaculate rear bedroom.

> . . . Wasn't I afraid to have my child grow up in a trailercoach park? No. Why should I? True, there are some seedy camps, just as there are slums all over the country, but we've never parked in them. Even during World War II when spaces for a time were crowded, we drew our coach to the beach, making private arrangements for lights, water and sewage. At every other time, we have stayed in modern parks, our neighbors being storekeepers, navy men, mechanics and retired people—typical wholesome, wonderful friends. (Shetler, 1950, p. 8)

In an article that same year titled "In Praise of My Trailerist Neighbors," another woman lauds the benefits of trailer park living. In fact, she points to common critiques of trailer life (close quarters and common facilities) and frames them as assets instead.

> Trailerists conduct themselves with more decorum than any equally large group of apartment tenants with whom I have found myself sharing a roof. This may be one reason seventy-three percent of the trailerists say they prefer trailercoach living to apartment life! There is no vicious ranting or railing and no unseemly entertainments. Children are accepted as part of the trailercoach community with good nature and enjoyment. Their parents try to teach them the respect of property necessary for living in such close contact with other families.
>
> . . . Perhaps the reason trailercoach neighbors become your friends more quickly and in larger numbers than villagers is that the trailercoach community does away with the anonymity and nostalgia of large town groupings. Community life based on the necessity of communal washrooms, recreation hall and gardens is no social chore, but a welcome aid to living and to the enjoyment of living.
>
> . . . The proximity of trailercoach neighbors seems too intimate to the stranger accustomed to a full-sized yard, but to the former apartment dwellers the ten foot lot seems Nirvana. The near neighbor proves an advantage in trailercoach living. You find it quite delightful to chat, borrow, assist and share in the fun of living. You become

> attached to your neighbors and discover you really enjoy having four to six in place of every one you had before. . . . The most valuable asset proves to be your heightened sense of democracy from this community in which you are an important cog in the smoothly running gears of the trailercoach town; the new unit of a neighborhood village of trailercoaches has sprung from the needs of the people and serves those needs in spiritual as well as physical values. (McMahon, 1950, p. 41)

Again in 1950, a woman writes in response to an inquiry about the nature of trailercoach park life. She says, in part,

> In the first place, we are anything but lonesome. Our trailercoach neighbors are largely business and professional men (both active and retired) and their families. Some of us are skilled workmen. And we all like one another!
>
> That sounds like neighborhood pride. It is, too—though we've been here only six weeks. Of course, not every trailercoach park is like Birmingham. There are trailercoach colonies as exclusive as Boston's Back Bay, and there are a few slummy parks scattered over the country. But here we have found a community of the friendliest, most congenial and interesting people you can imagine. And by and large, the most contented!
>
> And why shouldn't we be contented? We live in exquisite little apartments on wheels. We have apartment sized refrigerators and gas ranges, hot and cold running water, excellent heating and air conditioning systems. And each little home unit is set in its own garden-spot of patio, lawn and flower beds. Over each trailercoach spreads a great walnut tree, shedding cool, green shade from Easter till Christmas. Our broad, paved village streets, covering ten acres, are gay with strolling villagers in slacks and sun suits. In the eastern half of the village the voices of children greet you, anytime you want to get away from grown-up cares.

> Nobody is formal, here—and nobody is inconsiderate of your privacy. Evenings out of doors are as quiet as a country road. On the other hand, nobody is blue for lack of good company. . . .
>
> It is so different from living in an apartment block and having to spend money at every turn for entertainment. To be sure, we're in easy reach of the best Los Angeles can offer, but most evenings our friends' softly lighted patios or our own village entertainments are too attractive to leave. (A Good Place to Live, 1950, p. 6)

The debate over trailers and trailer parks was not just happening in publications dedicated to the industry, however. The topic had a strong presence in academic and journalistic circles as well. The assistant manager to a public housing project in Pittsburgh, Alexander Wellington, penned an article in *The Survey* titled "Trailer Camp Slums" (Wellington, 1951). Wellington's article reads almost like a direct rebuttal to the words of the trailer dwellers quoted above. Having undertaken informal research in several permanent trailer camps across four states (using interviews and questionnaires), he focuses his analysis on four camps in western Pennsylvania. The parks vary in size but are invariably placed on undesirable land (two of them built over dumps), and all are experiencing overcrowding. According to Wellington, trailer camp slums differ from other forms of slum housing in their rapid development and use of managers, as well as the suddenness with which most residents experienced their fall from a higher social class to that of slum-dwelling trailerite and the level of loneliness they feel living in a relatively transitory environment. The rest of the slum characteristics, however, are the same: "lack of privacy, poor sanitation, and a substandard environment for children" (Wellington, 1951, p. 419). Unlike the portrait painted of doctors and businessmen strolling around in sun suits, Wellington describes a group that belongs in the lower middle class, doing work as cab drivers, mill hands, and truck drivers. "None of them," he notes, "are employed in any sort of executive capacity" (Wellington,

1951, p. 421).[7] As Wellington tells it, these residents say, without exception, that they would like to get out of trailer camp life as soon as possible.[8] His final analysis is unambiguous: "Trailer camp slums are a very real, if as yet unrecognized, menace to our American way of life. They should be eradicated *now*, even in the face of an acute housing shortage, for the creation of more slums is not the solution to the problem of housing shortage" (Wellington, 1951, p. 421).

Conversely, some scholars spoke positively about the trailer movement. In pursuit of his master's degree in economics, one scholar authored a 1945 thesis titled *The House Trailer: Its Economic Implications and Future Place in the American Economy*. "Along with the discovery, under pressure of war, that trailers provide a flexible and ready means of temporary housing," the author notes, "has come the sharp realization of the civic problems thus created" (Gleason, 1945, p. 60). Local authorities had discovered that the park system that so successfully filled the need for stopgap housing had become a "problem child." Gleason notes four key objections:

1. sanitation problems and the threat to public health
2. nuisances created by the parks and the lowering of adjacent property value
3. "sociological objections," including questions about the appropriateness of trailers as a setting for children
4. overloading the civic budget by providing services for trailer residents who didn't pay taxes

Rather than reinforcing these objections, Gleason challenges their validity. In fact, regarding the objection that trailer parks are repositories of filth and disease, he counters that,

> First-hand experience convinces the present investigator that the ordinary trailer is probably cleaner than the typical American home, partly because it is smaller and

[7] Wellington is also careful to note that, with the exception of a few parks exclusively dedicated to "Negro families," these trailer camps are unequivocally white.

[8] As an exception to the rule of slummy parks, Wellington notes the "well laid-out, beautified site that caters to the needs of families on vacation stop-overs. Such camps are well organized and sanitary; their visitors are those that have regular homes to return to." Permanent camps, on the other hand, offer only "a more or less primitive existence" (Wellington, 1951, p. 418).

> requires less work to clean it, partly because dirt is so highly visible that housecleanings are more frequent. The average trailer home, from the standpoint of cleanliness, can best be compared to a well-kept yacht. (Gleason, 1945, p. 62)

Gleason does admit that trailer parks have their problems. Still, even those problems, he asserts, are not unique to trailer parks. Rather, they are part and parcel of any kind of community or housing form that appears too quickly, during a boom, as was the case for trailer parks during World War II. As well, he makes a careful distinction between the average trailer dweller and those "low income families with low living standards, [who] require supervision in the matter of sanitary conditions" (Gleason, 1945, p. 73). These trailerists, he says, are the ones camped illegally in backyards, not those inhabiting the average trailer park.

In the early 50s, several critical changes took place in the industry, two of which I will highlight here. First, there was a key change in nomenclature. Jean Jaques noted in his October 1952 editorial that the Wisconsin Trailercoach Association had voted to begin using the term "mobile home" in place of "trailercoach." The writer's enthusiasm over this change is palpable: "Hooray for Wisconsin," he says. "Though realizing the difficulties facing such a movement, *Trail-R-News* heartily endorses the . . . suggestion." After all, asserts Jean Jaques, "it is much more elevating to inform a stranger that you live in a mobile home than to say that you live in a trailer" (1952, p. 5) In a remarkable bit of subliminal messaging, *Trail-R-News* promptly replaced the tiny, repeated suggestion (placed between every small section of the magazine) that readers "Buy a Trailercoach" with a new admonition: "Never Say Trailer—Say Mobile Home."

The second critical change took place in 1954, when Elmer Frey of Marshfield Homes developed a new model of mobile home that would forever change the nature of its mobility. Striving to provide greater space, always in demand as the industry tried to market its product as a legitimate home rather than simply stopgap housing, Frey introduced a trailer that was 10 feet wide, as opposed to the "8-wide" model that had become standard. This had two effects. First, it added substantial floor space and a greater sense of openness to the mobile home. Second, it

officially made trailers too wide for towing behind family cars (Hart et al., 2002). On a concrete, spatial level, Frey's development changed the meaning attached to mobile homes. No longer were they built for travel and only secondarily useful as homes. These new, spacious mobile homes were built to be moved only as necessary, then placed on a chosen lot as a permanent abode.

Thus, as the late 50s moved into the 60s, the trailer industry made an important split. Manufacturers had to choose between building primarily travel trailers or mobile homes, which were no longer the same thing. The former industry eventually became the RV and motorhome industry as we know it today. The latter tack led to the development of the mobile homes (legally referred to as "manufactured housing," a change in nomenclature that has never taken root in common usage) that sit on patches of land and in the seemingly innumerable mobile home parks that dot the American landscape today. Here, we will follow the second path, the one that led to the places I called home for seven years.

In the decades following the split between the mobile home industry and the travel trailer business, the mobile home became bigger and bigger, and less and less mobile. The 12-wide was introduced in 1959 and accounted for nearly 75 percent of production by the first quarter of 1967 (Bair, 1967, p. 288). Twelve-wides became 14-wides, then 16-wides (the size of the home I owned), and finally the industry introduced the double-wide. Flat roofs became pitched roofs, and hitches disappeared from the front of many homes. Outlasting their intended expiration date by decades, many trailers that once travelled the highways remained in use in long-established parks. Ten- and 12-wides held their ground in the parks where they had been placed. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, my own home in Parkside was a 10-wide long past its prime. In its time, it would have been the harbinger of spacious living. In 2008, it brought endless questions about how we could possibly live in a space so small. Sometimes a mere fence away, as in the case of the Village, newer parks hosted double-wides that, once placed on the lot, were nearly indistinguishable from their stick-built counterparts. New parks had to use larger lot sizes to allow for these newer, bigger homes, though they often included sections for older, smaller

trailers. Describing these newer parks, Foster notes that the larger lot sizes and subsequent lower density meant that "overcrowding and its related environmental and social problems have diminished substantially through the years" (Foster, 1981, p. 257).

Despite the changing reality of many mobile home parks, the overall popular impression of these homes and their residents changed little. The 1987 film *Raising Arizona* (Coen & Coen) presents as a catalog of "trailer trash" stereotypes. Linoleum not only covers the floor but comes halfway up the wall, which is otherwise made of paneling one can punch through with minimal force. The husband is a serial ex-convict, and both he and his wife speak with low-grammar southern accents, despite the film taking place in the West. There are junky cars, cheap furniture, and laminate countertops in seafoam green. Clearly, the filmmakers know that this piece of material culture is the best vehicle for declaring just what kind of people these characters are: poor, uneducated, low-class, criminals. Where else would such people live? The stereotype maintains a strong presence in music as well. Sammy Kershaw's "Queen of My Double Wide Trailer" (1993) laments his relationship with a woman who has "a black heart and a pretty red neck." When she runs off, as she often does, he woos her back with the offer of an evening eating onion rings and watching TV. Twenty years later, in 2013, Kacey Musgraves's ballad "Merry Go 'Round" about settling for a life that is anything but dreamy refers to "tiny little boxes all in a row, ain't what you want, it's what you know." The song portrays a world with a mother hosting make-up parties, a brother smoking weed, a father having an affair just down the street, and a future filled with failed marriages and unwanted pregnancies: "Same hurt in every heart. Same trailer, different park."

There are key exceptions to the image, of course. As has been predominately the case from the beginning, retirement parks have remained largely immune to the levels of stigma applied to other parks. Notes Hurley: "Civic leaders and local authorities rarely raised fears about the threat to community health, safety, and morals, when the people in question wore dentures and ambled about with the assistance of walking sticks" (2001, pp. 259–260). Retirement parks

tend to be quiet and well-kept, and in the sunbelt states like Arizona, Florida, and California, huge mobile home parks often cater to snowbirds, who occupy their mobile homes only during the coldest months of the year.

Interestingly, in a sort of exception-to-the-exception here, even in seniors-only mobile home communities gender becomes a key factor in assigning stigma. Historian Lee Irby (2000) notes that single females made up over 25 percent of the residents in Wilder's Trailer Park (St. Petersburg, Florida) in 1957, and the number rose to over 40 percent by 1972. For these women, mobile home residence was generally a matter of affordability rather than an attempt to spend their golden years in the Florida sunshine. As Irby notes, "in 1959, nearly 70 percent of women of sixty five in the United States lived in poverty" (2000, p. 189). The lack of agency involved in their decision to live in a trailer park made them easier to exploit and disparage. In time, "trailer trash" included grandmothers in large numbers, . . . implying that women no longer of breeding age have no real value" (Irby, 2000, p. 189).

A second exception to the stigmatized image of mobile home parks in America is the few parks whose prime location led to refurbishment rather than razing. At Malibu's Paradise Cove, for example, 265 trailers—each valued in the millions—sit adjacent to a private stretch of beach, home to "entrepreneurs, financiers, and a handful of actors, designers and filmmakers" (Delavan, 2015). Perception of choice becomes important in considering why these types of parks are less stigmatized. Choosing to live in a mobile home because of location or a desire for simplicity has entirely different class implications than living in a mobile home because it's the only affordable option.

In chapter four, we will explore the implications of these years of accumulating meaning—this process of getting from trailerite to "trailer trash"—in the lives of my neighbors. As we will see, the ways that we interact with and talk about things and people has everything to do with the meaning they have for us. First, however, we will look more closely in chapter three

at the ways in which symbols and shared meanings are used to etch deep lines between the "normal" and the "other" of society through the creation of stigma.

3. BOUNDARY MAKING: TRAILER STIGMA AS A RESPONSE TO NORM VIOLATIONS

Creating Categories and Designating Dirt

We turn now from the history of meaning formation in regard to the American house trailer to examine the meaning itself. The battle for connotation so evident in the history of the trailer in America was ultimately a fight to establish where the trailer would belong within the constellation of American social norms. After so much development and improvement and change since the trailer first came onto the scene a century ago, why do the majority of mobile home residents still find themselves categorized as trash rather than respectable citizens of modest means? To get at the answers to these questions, we must examine the deeper social processes that lead to the formation of the kind of deep and enduring stigma that we find attached to trailers and those who live in them.

In the most basic sense, the potential for stigma begins with the process of establishing group boundaries; Goffman (1963) describes stigmatization simply as the process of categorizing persons and establishing one category as "normal." Of course, the establishment of symbolic boundaries between groups is a given in any society. Humans, as a rule, organize their world and the people in them, creating conceptual categories and locating others within those categories (see for example Allport, 1954; Massey, 2007; Goffman, 1963; Lamont & Fournier, 1992). Whether sizing someone up in order to establish a guide for interaction (Goffman, 1959), determining the boundary lines of class or ethnicity (Blumer, 1958; Barth, 1998), or constructing categories of gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Collins, 1992; Morris, 2008), human actors construct their individual and group identities by defining their opposites (Brodkin, 1998), or at least not-quite-the-sames; we are ever seeking to separate "us" from "them" (Blumer, 1958; Lamont, 2000; Lamont & Molnar, 2002; Bettie, 2003; Kusenbach, 2009).

Yet, while the process of categorization is natural and necessary for navigating reality and social interaction, categories are clearly not a benign part of social life in most contexts; the process doesn't end at the level of a basic organization of symbols. Instead, categories are assigned various levels of value, which are then used to create stratification and hierarchy and to maintain power inequities that often cause varying degrees of harm to any group deemed "other" (Collins, 2003). With issues of power, privilege, and identity at stake, some groups of people have a vested interest in maintaining, if not actually codifying, the symbolic boundaries that set one group off from another. Others have an equally vested interest in contesting and attempting to challenge those boundaries. Social scientists refer to this effort at maintaining boundaries as "boundary work." When performed by the dominant, or normative, group, boundary work can represent a form of social control in which "very potent and simultaneously very subtle mechanisms of control are brought to bear upon the actual or potential deviant" (Berger, 1963, p. 71). These mechanisms of control can manifest through informal sanctions, such as ridicule and ostracism, or through the enforcement of cultural customs or norms of morality (Berger, 1963). The sanctions can be more formal as well, manifesting in the form of legislation or controlled access to services. All of these have come into play in the life of the American trailercoach.

Still, mere differentiation, even value assignment and ranking, isn't the same as stigma. Stigma is more pernicious and at times more profound in its social implications. The word "stigma" originated among the Greeks in reference to a bodily sign that exposed a kind of moral deficiency in its bearer (Goffman, 1963). Its meaning has not changed much over time, still indicating, above all else, "a mark of disgrace" (Oxford University Press, n.d. -a). The stigmatized group or individual isn't just different; they possess an "undesired differentness." When we encounter the stigmatized person, we discover that he possesses

> an attribute that makes him different from others in the category of persons available for him to be, and of a less desirable[1] kind—in the extreme, a person who is quite thoroughly bad, or dangerous, or weak. He is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one. (Goffman, 1963, p. 3)

Over time, the "normals" of a society develop a sort of theory about the stigmatized person, "an ideology to explain his inferiority and account for the danger he represents, sometimes rationalizing an animosity based on other differences." The theory ends up imputing "a wide range of imperfections based on the original one" (Goffman, 1963, p. 5). To borrow Matt Wray's term, it is more than a stereotype—it is a "stigmatype" (Wray, 2006). The stigmatizing attribute ceases to be *one* thing about a place or person and becomes *the* thing. When applied to people, it often becomes what sociologists call the "master status," or the primary characteristic in defining a person. It is, essentially, the identity trump card.

In the case of trailers, their "undesired differentness" didn't just earn them (and consequently, those who live in them) the reputation of being other, or even lesser. Rather, trailers and their residents have been placed in a particularly debased category: trash. Trailers are not just a lesser category of housing; they are its waste product. Trailer residents are not just second-class citizens; they are the dregs of American society. Speaking with me about her experience growing up in a trailer park, one young woman described how her entire person was attached to and discounted by her living situation. "Did kids actually say stuff to you at school?" I asked her. "All the time," she replied. "[They would say] stuff like, 'You're nothing but "trailer trash," which is why you're probably also ugly' and I don't [know]—they were just using the living in the trailer and being poor as a way to attack *everything* about me."

Anthropologist Mary Douglas offers a helpful framework for further analyzing this case of perceived cultural contamination. In *Purity and Danger*, Douglas examines beliefs and

[1] The specific term "undesirables" was frequently used to refer to trailer residents in the early decades of the American house trailer.

practices related to holiness and defilement, both in primitive societies, where the distinction is overt, and in modern societies, where the definitions may be more symbolic and nuanced. Douglas's work is especially helpful for our analysis because the particular derogatory term aimed at trailer residents is a term that directly connotes pollution and contamination. Exploring the concept of "dirt," Douglas suggests that if we set aside our present pathogenic and hygiene-based understanding of dirt, we are left with the deeper symbolic meaning. We return to an original, premodern conception of dirt as

> matter out of order. . . . Where there is dirt, there is a system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, *in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements*. This idea of dirt takes us straight into the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obviously symbolic systems of purity. (Douglas, 1966, p. 36, italics mine)

In chapter two, we explored the idea that no part of material culture has meaning on its own, but only that which is attributed to it by society. This idea of a fluid, socially constructed meaning carries over to our concepts of contamination. Dirt is not "dirty" on its own; "dirty" is not an intrinsic quality of material culture. In fact, for the mid-nineteenth-century Midwestern farmer, dirt was perceived as having positive and even healthy characteristics (Hoy, 1995, p. 3). In a world where crops meant life, soil was celebrated. Rather than the world presenting us with anything inherently worthy of rejection, we endow certain people, objects, and spaces with the power to elicit disgust (Frykman, 1987, p. 160). Dirt, then, is a relative idea. "Shoes are not dirty in themselves," Douglas notes, "but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table" (1966, p. 36). Likewise, trash does not exist outside a system of classifications. How a society defines its trash can only be understood in cultural and historical context. The plastic bags that Americans throw away at an alarming rate are salvaged to become makeshift soccer balls in many parts of the world. Leftover food that would have been saved down to the scrap during the Great Depression is tossed in the rubbish bin without a thought during a time of prosperity. Our concepts of

contamination are not, then, based on intrinsic qualities. Rather, says Douglas, "our pollution behavior is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications" (1966, p. 36) It is an effort to establish order under the assumption that "differentiation . . . depends on disgust" (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 191). When applied to people rather than a material object, like the aforementioned pair of shoes, "the stamp of impurity functions as a police force protecting the honest from the dishonest, the establishment from the outsiders" (Frykman, 1987, p. 164). Before exploring how trailers and their residents were given the status of cultural pollutant, let us discuss some specific norms and categories that were challenged by the trailer as a particular piece of material culture.

Transgressing the Cultural Code

In many ways, the trailer appeared again and again to be in the right place at the wrong time, meeting a need but clashing with other cultural movements—and other key norms—at every turn. It was a conflict of form and function; here was a "home" whose form challenged deeply rooted cultural values and offended some of the most basic American sensitivities, yet it served its purpose as a housing unit well. Time only compounded the issue. As years went by, trailers and trailer parks increasingly called to mind too many aspects of an undesirable past. In spite of the fact that the material representations of such a past had long been phased out of existence, the mental images remained. Even when they are not formally proclaimed nor even articulated informally, "thoughts like these smolder in many people's unconscious mind, ready to flare up if the wind blows strongly enough" (Frykman & Lofgren, 1987, p. 164). Such is the deep-seated nature of cultural stigma. There are myriad ways this clash between trailer living and American norms played out. Here, I will focus on four key norms that had clear implications for how society ultimately chose to respond to the trailer movement: Cleanliness and sanitation, mobility and permanence, sense of house and home, and consumption as a cultural value.

Cleanliness and Sanitation

One of the most obvious themes to emerge as I worked through hundreds of trailer-related archival documents was the issue of sanitation and cleanliness. From the very beginning, much of the antagonism (and subsequent legislation) toward trailers and trailer parks was framed in terms of the threat they posed to sanitation and public health. In 1942, *The New York Times* mentioned trailer camps among the greatest risks for outbreaks of dysentery ("Campaign On to Prevent Dysentery," 1947).[2] On some levels, the concern was legitimate. The demand for trailer camps and parks was so sudden and so pressing that there was not time to develop a standard for infrastructure. While some park owners developed high standards on their own, most slapped together haphazard gathering of trailers in muddy lots that lacked even the most basic amenities, such as drinking water and proper waste disposal (Hart, Rhodes & Morgan, 2002, p. 9). Writing about trailer life for *Harper's*, Konrad Bercovici recalled his own journey from Connecticut to Florida: "Here and there we came upon a camp that had some half-decent facilities, but in the main, wherever we found camps they were unclean, and the showers and rest-rooms they advertised, in large signs on the road, would surely not have been approved even by a blind sanitation officer" (1936, p. 67).

Unfortunately, at the very time that the burgeoning trailer industry was trying to get sanitation under control, American culture was undergoing a transformation in regard to the value placed on cleanliness. In the decades just prior to the emergence of the trailer, "people in Europe and America began to find dirt more alarming and to be increasingly anxious about cleanliness. Dirt could assume a terrifying character it [had] never had before" (Forty, 1986, p. 158). This shift in perception would change how an entire culture approached hygiene. In the 1950s it would

[2] I was no longer living in Riverview when the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. However, I would suspect that the kinds of stigmatized associations with disease and outbreak, a connection largely drawn through assumptions about proximity and hygiene, might impact how mobile home residents are treated during the Covid-19 pandemic.

peak at a point of absolute obsession with perfectly clean homes and irreproachable personal hygiene.

The overlap in timing with the development of cleanliness as an American norm could not have been worse for the trailer. In response to urbanization and the overcrowding that accompanied migration to urban centers of industry, Americans had become increasingly concerned with cleanliness, particularly as embodied in personal hygiene and as displayed in the home. At first, cleanliness was presented as a preventative measure against diseases like tuberculosis that spread rapidly in cramped urban housing. Over time, however, standards of cleanliness took on a deeper meaning. As early as 1875, publications sought to remind readers that "the thing above all others which Society insists upon is 'cleanliness'" (*Southern Workman*, quoted in Hoy, 1995, p. 89), and by the end of the century the urban middle class had come to associate cleanliness with "health, civility and morality" (Hoy, 1995, p. 100). This move toward associating cleanliness with morality was largely due to the fact that evidence-based arguments for cleanliness had proven ineffective in convincing Americans to adopt better hygiene practices. Reformers thus tried a different approach to get their message across: "Because rational, scientific arguments presented such difficulties, the hygienists turned increasingly to methods that exploited *guilt*. However, before guilt could be brought into play, cleanliness had to be transformed from a physical problem into a moral one" (Forty, 1986, p. 167, italics mine). Reformers and industry leaders alike embraced the challenge. Indeed, "advertisements . . . warned of the consequences of neglecting health and cleanliness which ranged from emotional rejection by loved ones to social ostracism, illness, death and national downfall" (Forty, 1986, p. 169).

Throughout the early decades of the 20th century, advertisements and public campaigns encouraged women in particular to "chase dirt" from their homes, and schools taught children the skills of hand-washing and tooth-brushing. Kohler in particular capitalized on the cleanliness campaigns, selling gleaming white bathrooms that were "shrines of cleanliness," a necessary fixture in any civilized home (Hoy, 1995 p. 140). Before long, the bathroom had become

emblematic of the respectable, clean, American family. It became established as a sort of informal icon. The association between the personal bathroom and morality had huge symbolic implications for trailerites in the nascent years of the house trailer, as it was not until the postwar years that modern bathrooms became a standard fixture in trailers and mobile homes. While trailers were often fastidiously cleaned on the inside, they lacked the most important symbols of that cleanliness. This fact essentially negated their otherwise spotless condition in the minds of the public. This was all the more true as the nation entered into the prosperity of the 50s, when suddenly things that had once been luxuries became common middle-class commodities. This included all the accoutrements requisite to America's quest for a "cleaner clean" (Hoy, 1995), which included other items difficult to find in early trailers, such as the garbage disposal and the electric washing machine.[3]

The trailer industry's attempt to remedy the image problem caused by the lack of a gleaming bathroom was overt and at times laughable. One effort to prove that toilets could indeed belong in a trailer featured a foldable commode that was compact enough to fit in a briefcase . . . as if the idea of a toilet in one's briefcase could in any way live up to ideals of respectability and hygiene. Another ad touted the "Trailer Pulverator," a combination toilet and garbage disposal. While this gadget brought together two components cherished in a middle-class American household, the idea is bizarre, if not off-putting. When I first saw the ad, all I could think was, "It takes care of every bit of dinner—the parts that you eat, and the parts you don't." Still, the company made the important case that their product eliminated "outside trips to germ-breeding garbage cans" as well as community toilets. These were not mere conveniences. They were moral victories.

[3] As with the bathroom, the electric washing machine acquired a particularly powerful symbolic status in the nation's obsession with cleanliness. Commercial laundries were portrayed in much the same way as common bathrooms and showers. After all, "personal cleanliness . . . could not be achieved outside the privacy of [one's] own home" (Hoy, 1995, p. 156). Clearly, the common laundry facilities used in trailer parks violated this implied moral code.

Figure 1. Sani-Top portable toilet

Figure 2. The Pulverator

Cleanliness and the Foreign "Other"

Cleanliness was particularly an issue among the tenements[4] and the immigrant housing in cities like Chicago and New York, a fact that contributed additional symbolic meaning to sanitation and hygiene in the mind of Americans. Throughout the 19th century, basic facilities were shared by numerous families, and private bathrooms for apartments were almost unheard of until the end of the 19th century. Cleanliness crusaders and "Americanizers" recognized particularly poor hygiene practices among many immigrant populations and subsequently focused much of their energies on teaching these groups how to practice proper sanitation. In time, cleanliness had successfully been imaged as "a hallmark of being American" (Hoy, 1995, p. 121). Thus, being clean was not only a matter of morality and civility but a sign of citizenship and national belonging. Trailers and trailer parks suffered greatly from these associations of filth with overcrowded housing and shared facilities. After all, even in the crowded apartments so famous for filth at the beginning of century, private bathrooms had become standard (and in most cases, legally required) by 1900 (Hoy, 1995, p. 116). When Hoy briefly notes the use of mobile homes and trailers as housing during the war years, she describes them as inadequate largely because they had "too few bathrooms and questionable water supplies, [meaning] that hygiene was generally bad" (1995, p. 165). The fact that trailerites lived in such close proximity—especially close during housing shortages—and that they shared toilets and showers, linked them symbolically to the image of the dirty, uncivilized immigrant who had to be instructed in the ways of hygiene and shown how to be true Americans.

[4] The symbolic links between trailer parks and immigrant housing (urban tenements or shacks on the outskirts of the city) have not been addressed in previous literature and are worthy of greater attention in future research. Home to migrant populations, tenements were marked by incredibly cramped quarters packed into close proximity, situated in the worst sections of the city. Lacking private bathrooms for the first few decades of their existence, they were marked as breeding grounds for filth and disease (Hoy, 1995). Those who lived in shacks, similarly lacking sanitary facilities, found themselves on the geographic and therefore symbolic margins of urban society. On a more visual level, the image of an endless row of clotheslines hanging between tenements must have echoed in the minds of Americans as they viewed what became one of the most ubiquitous images of early trailer camps, a seeming favorite among photographers: flapping laundry hanging to dry outside these quirky homes on wheels (Thornburg, 1991).

Figure 3. Pan-American 33'

As time passed, the kind of "veritable pig pen" that was so common in the early days of trailer parks became the minority. The damage to the public image, however, was done. New ordinances made it even harder to undo: even the cleanest parks were zoned into obscurity or hidden behind a required "visual barrier," such as a fence or hedge. While the image of the unclean trailer park filled with unclean homes and unclean people became ever more deeply

entrenched, the industry tried hard to counteract its effects. This was never more true than in the 1950s, which marked both the peak of America's obsession with cleanliness and great improvements in plumbing and sanitation in trailers and mobile homes. Mobile home ads during the early part of the decade emphasized the bathroom, at times to the near exclusion of any other feature. In fact, even as early as 1948, the Pan American Trailer Coach Company ran a magazine ad for their new 33-foot model whose entire text lauds the trailer's bathroom features. Industry leaders clearly knew that absent the presence of a respectable bathroom, trailers would never meet middle-class standards of hygiene.

Mobility and Permanence

While the popular history of the United States is one of settlers who crossed the sea, pioneers who braved the Western wilderness, and prospectors crossing mountain ranges in search of gold, persistent patterns of mobility have often been perceived as a threat to social order. When the automobile burst onto the scene, for example, sociologists, psychologists, and various community leaders expressed concern about what increased movement might mean for American social structure and norms. A 1925 sociological study noted that the automobile appeared to some as "an 'enemy' of the home and society," keeping people away from church on Sunday mornings and at times usurping such things as a bathtub among a family's preferred expenditures (Lynd & Lynd, 1929, p. 9). In particular, sociologists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries viewed residential mobility as "inherently pathological" (Tobey et al., 1990, p. 1397).

The concerns only intensified with the advent of the trailer, and all the more as people began to use them for permanent or even semi-permanent residences. Suddenly a whole portion of the population wasn't necessarily "from" anywhere in particular. A November 1, 1936, *New York Times* article described the dilemma:

> The coach trailer, innocently trundling along the road or resting by the wayside, becomes suddenly an object of popular interest and national concern. Five years ago it was just a convenience for motor tourists, an overnight shelter, usually home-made, a mobile

> bedroom dragged along behind the car. Today, it is a fairly complete home, factory-built, and it is the only home of thousands of Americans who have gone gypsy, cutting loose from home foundations, street addresses and other conventional moorings. . . .
>
> The swift increase of the trailerites raises new problems for States and municipalities; for motor vehicle authorities, tax collectors, school boards, public health officers, landlords, real estate dealers, the house building trades, the railroads, the hotels. The thing has the economists and sociologists guessing.
>
> What will American life become, they ask, if the trailer fad goes on accelerating at the present rate? What sort of citizens will trailer children make? One startled observer predicts that half the people of the Unites States will turn nomadic within a generation. Another looks at the hordes of houseboat dwellers in the rivers of China and wonders whether America is in for a "floating" population of a like sort. All the while signs of the dawn of a trailer age are multiplying. (Robbins, 1936)

To many, it seemed inevitable that this "trailer age" was bound to come with a whole host of social problems. When the Atomic Energy Commission built a new plant in southern Ohio, for example, the Family Service Association set up a family counseling service; they expected to encounter not only physical issues but also "an astronomically rising divorce, delinquency and crime rate" (Schorr, 1958, p. 71). Others expected the newly mobile group to be "plagued by instability and loneliness," and predicted that mobility would have deeply detrimental impacts on children being raised in homes on wheels (Schorr, 1958, p. 72). Franklin Roosevelt's address at the 1939 White House Conference on Children in a Democracy expressed concern "about the children of migratory families who have no settled place of abode or normal community relationships" ("The President's Address: Children 'an Integral Part'; Defines 'Success' of Democracy Issues Which Challenge; Urges Planning and Action," 1939). While he was not speaking directly about trailers, FDR's words illuminate the common conviction that a

healthy child is a settled one. The concern remained over a decade later, when a disgruntled community member sent a letter to *Fortnight Magazine*:

> Have you ever stopped to wonder what the generation that is now growing up in trailers will be when they reach maturity? Right now they are being sowed with the seeds of insecurity, wanderlust and nomadic living which will make them people without roots or community affection in the years to come. I wonder that no one has ever studied the effects of what the trailer "way of life" is doing to America. (as quoted in "Thank You, Mr. Tatwell," 1952, p. 14)

In addition to being irresponsible parents, trailer dwellers were thought to be irresponsible citizens, draining municipal resources while neither contributing taxes nor involving themselves in the settled community (Drury, 1972). "The . . . difficult problem of securing reimbursement from trailer dwellers for the expense they represent to the community as a segment of the local population has not been . . . successfully dealt with," wrote one contributor to *The University of Chicago Law Review*. "This difficulty persists although courts have often indicated that since trailer dwellers participate in local benefits, they should bear a proportionate share of the expense" ("Regulation and Taxation of House Trailers," 1954, p. 746).

Researchers and journalists seldom found these fears about tax-avoidant, substandard citizens to be substantiated. For highly mobile trailerists, asserted one columnist, trailer parks exposed residents to varying points of view, preventing trailerists from being "narrow and provincial in regard to [social] problems" (Delp, 1950, p. 28). Rather, Delp continues, trailer parks offered such a diversity of thought and experience that "a trailer traveler can hardly do otherwise that become a better-informed citizen, and, therefore a more intelligent voter" (1950, p. 28). Good citizenship was also evident among more settled trailer dwellers. Writing about trailer communities that built up around a new steel works plant in Lower Bucks County, Pennsylvania, sociologist Donald Hager declared,

> [These] observations describe a group of families that do not differ appreciably from families that are to be found in other American communities. Mobility and an above average income appear to be the factor in which they differ most from any other socio-economic groupings. They possess characteristics that are generally prized by all American communities—sobriety, occupational skill and reliability, family stability, and a genuine interest in contributing to and improving the community in which they live. (1954, p. 34)

John Steinbeck, whose *Grapes of Wrath* had provided a glimpse of trailer camps during the Great Depression, encountered a much-updated version of trailer living when he traveled the country in a small camper in 1960. Following dinner with one mobile home family, he addressed the question of stability head on. Rather than a reassurance that mobile home families were as stable as any American, he was met with the argument that the notion of rootedness is itself a liability, if not a delusion.

> Sipping a highball after dinner, hearing the rushing of water in the electric dishwasher in the kitchen, I brought up a question that had puzzled me. These were good, thoughtful, intelligent people. I said, "One of our most treasured feelings concerns roots, growing up rooted in some soil or some community." How did they feel about raising their children without roots? Was it good or bad? Would they miss it or not?
>
> The father, a good-looking, fair-skinned man with dark eyes, answered me. "How many people today have what you are talking about? What roots are there in an apartment twelve floors up? What roots are in a housing development of hundreds and thousands of small dwellings almost exactly alike? My Father came from Italy," he said. "He grew up in Tuscany in a house where his family had lived maybe a thousand years. That's roots for you . . ."
>
> "'Don't you miss some kind of permanence?"

> "Who's got permanence? Factory closes down, you move on. Good times and things opening up, you move on where it's better. You got roots you sit and starve." (Steinbeck, 1962, pp. 100–101)

Here, the prose itself speaks to imagined links between permanence and morality. To set up the conversation, Steinbeck is careful to first note that these mobile home dwellers are "good, thoughtful, intelligent people." The implication is that their lack of stability would immediately call such characteristics into question for his readers. The day after this dinner conversation, he ponders the issue out loud with his travel companion, a poodle. "Could it be that Americans are a restless people, a mobile people, never satisfied with where they are as a matter of selection?" Steinbeck wonders. "Perhaps we have overrated roots as a psychic need" (1962, p. 104). It is, again, a battle for meaning. In the end, who is the true American: the rooted man, or the one who embraces mobility?

Sense of House and Home

On a deeply symbolic level, the trailer violated beliefs about the meaning, form, and function of housing. This is no small violation, as housing plays a significant role in American culture, serving as a display of status and acting as a powerful tool of social inclusion and exclusion.

> Like sex, death, and religion, housing has its hidden meanings. In the case of housing, the meanings concern status, position, power, and personal identity. They seldom emerge directly, but they are continually reflected in things that are said, argued about, and fought over. (Adams, 1984, p. 517)

Trailers challenged these hidden meanings. First, on the most basic level, there was resistance to the idea that a house could be a kind of consumer item, a product of industry, factory-made and as disposable as a bicycle or a car. A house was meant to outlast consumer products, along with most other possessions, even handmade. "Few of mankind's artefacts have the longevity of houses," observes Oliver (1987, p. 10). Rather, houses were made to be passed

down through generations, to endure through the changes in the society around them. Even in nomadic cultures, the *form* of the home, the image of it in the minds of a people, was meant to endure through generations (Oliver, 1987). The trailer was far from enduring, either in craftsmanship or form. Trailers were not meant to last more than a few decades. It was preposterous, this apartment on wheels, claiming to be a legitimate kind of American home when it could not outlast even a single generation. In form, the industry was constantly shifting and changing, and the owners of trailers often followed these changes. In the early years of trailers and mobile homes, it was not uncommon for families to upgrade to a newer model multiple times during their tenure as full-time trailer residents. (This pattern of upgrading ultimately influenced the class make-up of trailerites, as older units were then sold to buyers who could not afford anything new; rather than disappearing, old trailers "only [kept] circulating to more 'obsolete' populations"; D. Smith, 2003, p. 128).

Particularly in the postwar era, when the trailer industry was pushing the mobile home as a purely permanent residence—an equal if not superior alternative to apartments and traditional homes—the trailer industry faced the uphill battle of creating a space for its product within American housing norms. In describing the challenge that accompanied the introduction of postwar consumer culture in general, Hurley captures the situation well: "It involved coaxing people into new social relationships, or at the very least assuring customers that their new consumer habits would not unduly threaten traditional social hierarchies" (2001, p. 15). Drury echoes the dilemma of resistance to change in regard to the trailer (she emphasizes the word "home," which will be discussed in detail later in this chapter): "The concept of 'home' is sacred to Americans, and there is expected natural resistance to change in this concept. The idea of making that 'home' a consumer product that could have a limited life rubs against the grain of the American ideal" (Drury, 1972, p. 87. Trailer manufacturers not only had to sell shiny trailers with more space and modern amenities, they had to sell trailer life as a desirable—and more importantly, an *equal*—way of living. It had to be a way of living that offered new delights, rather

than eliminating familiar comforts. In some cases, this required the artful reframing of characteristics that seemed, on the surface, to be in direct contrast with American housing ideals. In a culture that valued spacious living and room to grow, trailer manufacturers lauded the fact that the cozy trailer required almost no housekeeping, and thus provided American housewives with another cherished commodity: extra leisure time. To a public that prized privacy, trailer park advocates trumpeted the benefits of tight-knit community, the joy of knowing your neighbors. Against a tradition that valued land ownership as part and parcel with home ownership, trailer ownership presented true American freedom—the ability to own your home without being tied to any particular job, neighbor, or tax law.

The timing for the emergence of the larger, stationary mobile home was particularly challenging because it coincided with the arrival of another new player on the housing scene: William Levitt's assembly-line-style suburban homes. Hurley notes the difference in how the two were received in the Lower Bucks County situation. The community and its leaders largely welcomed the "Levittowners," most of whom were steel workers, with open arms. "The construction workers [who lived in trailers], on the other hand," says Hurley, "were derided as 'trailer trash' and their community was labeled a slum" (2001, p. 196). In response, nearby communities quickly passed legislation to ban similar trailer communities.

Levitt's simple but affordable homes actually shared many characteristics with the mobile homes being shipped about the country for permanent placement on private land or in a park. They were just as cookie-cutter in style, with only minor variations between models. They were assembled in a process, in which teams trained to do specific tasks moved from home to home, performing a single part of the building process. Trailers, of course, were similarly made step by repeated step in a factory setting. Both structures were made to be small, simple, and affordable.[5] But the similarities did not outweigh the differences in American housing ideals.

[5] Another characteristic shared by both forms of housing was their use of racially restrictive covenants, a practice that contributed to the continuing racial homogeneity of both mobile home parks and middle-class suburbs.

Levitt's homes sat on foundations, concrete pads that declared a citizen was here to stay. Trailers sat on wheels, or on chassis if the wheels had been removed, with a towing hitch sticking out to remind passersby that this was as much a vehicle as a house. Levittown homes included lawns, an important marker of middle-class status,[6] while trailer parks offered tiny lots with just a patch of grass or small garden plot, if there was any vegetation at all. Suburban homes had room for all the latest gadgets in a time when consumption was king. Trailers simply couldn't store much more than the basics. Most importantly, Levittowners owned their land, while trailer park residents (save for a small portion who owned both home and lot) remained at the mercy of any park manager who wished to tell them to get off his land. Pride of ownership loses a great deal of strength when shrouded in precarity.

Beyond the idea of what counts as a *house*, trailers contravened beliefs about an even more sacred concept: *home*. In addition to its role as an enduring artefact in the landscape of material culture, the house as home has long been inextricably linked with the identity of its inhabitants.

> But the dwelling is more than the materials from which it is made, the labor that has gone into its construction, or the time and money that may have been expended on it: the dwelling is the theater of our lives, where the major dramas of birth and death, of procreation and recreation, of labor and of being in labor are played out and in which a succession of scenes of daily lives is perpetually enacted. Yet the metaphor is inadequate. . . . Dwellings are more than that; the relationship of a man to his home is intimate and essential" (Oliver, 1987, p. 15).

The home and its contents indicate what sorts of things a person does there, how rich they may be in resources, and by association, what sort of person they are (Forty, 1986). These associations

[6] In the 1960s, when symbols associated with middle-class suburban life were still taking root, Werthman noted that "possession of a middle class status [was] also defined largely in terms of whether or not one [lived] in a neighborhood with well-kept lawns" (Werthman, 1968, p. 64).

are built on deeply rooted symbolic systems that are nearly automatic in the mind of the observer. A certain kind of home must reflect a certain variety of inhabitant. Hence, movies like *Trading Places* (Landis, 1983), where the crux of the shtick is that Eddy Murphy plays a poor Black man, living in a rich White man's mansion. The filmmakers don't have to explain to us why this is funny. Nor would the film be drastically altered by substituting "poor White trailer trash" for a homeless Black man; audiences automatically understand that neither character belongs in a marble house with a butler. Either scenario would represent Douglas's "matter out of order."

This association between home and identity involves more than a physical structure, of course. In the American imagination, the idea of home is traditionally *emplaced*. Homes exist within the context of particular neighborhoods, in particular sections of town, in particular cities. Or they are located in isolation, which speaks a different message just as loudly. Wherever they are located, they are there, on a foundation, in a particular place. This has implications for the trailer on two levels. First, even after the mobile homes of the late 1950s outgrew towing capabilities, trailers were still perceived as at least *potentially* mobile. Though they seldom moved once placed on a lot, they still called to mind images of the earlier trailers, which defied contextualization, passing from city to city, from parks on the coastline to parks built next to feed lots. And as we have seen, when a thing defies contextualization, it defies traditional means of categorization, a situation that societies often find threatening to their sense of organization and hierarchy. Second, even when they are permanently placed in communities, trailers often find themselves "out of place" in traditional American conceptions of community and neighborhood. Perceived as invariably crowded and filthy and labeled as an eyesore, they are zoned into invisibility. Having been relegated to the geographic margins or hidden behind industrial buildings, the parks that house permanently placed mobile homes only add contextual stigma to the trailer.

Deeper still than basic class status implications, the home is believed to reflect the moral character of those who live there. This is an important point of overlap between beliefs about the symbolic role of the home and the cultural obsession with cleanliness and hygiene.

> A clean, fresh, and well-ordered house exercises over its inmates a moral, no less than physical influence, and has a direct tendency to make members of the family sober, peaceable, and considerate of the feelings and happiness of each other; nor is it difficult to trace a connexion between habitual feelings of this sort and the formation of habits of respect for property, for the laws in general, and even for those higher duties and obligations the observance of which no laws can enforce. Whereas, a filthy, squalid, unwholesome dwelling, in which none of the decencies common to society . . . are or can be observed, tends to make every dweller in such a house[,] regardless of the feelings and happiness of each other, selfish and sensual. (*Recreations of a country parson*, 1891, cited in Forty, 1986, p. 108)

Having acquired the reputation of being nearly unequivocally "filthy, squalid, [and] unwholesome," no matter how unfairly, trailers and trailer parks were consequently viewed as places in which common decency was not, and could not be, observed.

The relationship between home and identity is even more critical for women, a fact that became glaringly evident in the industry's efforts to paint the mobile home as an adequate domestic space. "We take for granted that [the] American home is always the woman's home," wrote Elsie de Wolfe in 1913. "A man may build and decorate a beautiful house, but it remains for a woman to make a home of it for him. It is the personality of the mistress that the house expresses" (quoted in Forty, 1986, p. 104). In the early days of full-time trailer residence, the trailer was largely a distinctly masculine space. It was for traveling workers and army men, and even as a plaything it was often used by hunters and other sportsmen. Promoting the trailer as a legitimate home meant that the industry had to sell it as a woman's space. The effort to do so is evident across the board in industry publications and advertisements. Magazine covers that had

previously displayed images of travel spots or portraits of male industry leaders, for example, began to feature images of women enjoying the recreations of trailer life, chatting with their female neighbors, or carrying out domestic duties with apparent delight.

Consumption as a Cultural Value

While industry and trailerist voices tried to say it wasn't so, trailers violated American norms of middle-class consumption on multiple levels. In broad strokes, we can look at how this form of housing violated such norms both in what it was and in what it contained.

First, as we discussed above, the trailer itself blurred the lines around what counts as a consumer product. They were factory built, designed in cookie-cutter fashion, and not made to last more than a few decades. All fine for a consumer product, but should one acquire a home that way? For many Americans, the image of the home and the concept of a consumer product were simply too dissonant to be placed in the same category, and that dissonance prompted resistance (Drury, 1972). Ultimately, the categorization of a trailer as a consumer good likely contributed to its link with the idea of trash. They were, in fact, made to be disposable, though they were seldom actually disposed of (D. Smith, 2003).

Second, the differences inherent to small spaces designed for wheels rather than a foundation limited the capacity of residents to partake in middle-class patterns of consumption. "For [the household goods] market, these families represent zero to their local merchants," wrote Wellington in 1951 (p. 420). When the newest, shiniest (and perhaps "cleanest") model of a gadget or appliance doesn't fit, a family simply cannot buy it, "nullifying the normal buying trend of trailer camp families" (Wellington, 1951, p. 420). In an effort to appeal to potential mobile home owners, and to improve the image of the trailer in the eyes of the public, a specialized market emerged. Companies made trailer-specific versions of everything from stoves to toilets to televisions, many of them miniaturized versions of the same product found in larger stick-built homes. However, in the eyes of consumers, miniaturized versions indicated a kind of shrunken ability to achieve middle-class domestic norms. In the kitchen, for example, smaller appliances

"carried the dangerous suggestion that the woman of the house was something less than a full-fledged homemaker" (Hurley, 2001, p. 233). The fact that trailers and mobile homes came with pre-selected, factory-made furniture further diminished the status of women as homemakers, as the decisions involved in furnishing and decorating have long been one of the most important ways in which a woman inscribes individual character and personality on a home (Forty, 1986, p. 104).

The 1954 DesiLu film *The Long, Long Trailer* illustrates this clash between the trailer's size and American standards of consumption. Not only did the trailer limit the young couple's "accumulating and hoarding habits," it specifically impeded their ability to express consumer norms of domesticity (D. Smith, 2003, p. 125). Early on in the film, as Nicky and Tacy load their belongings into their newly purchased trailer, the difficulty of cramming all the accoutrements of their middle-class life into their new home takes center stage:

> In a limp attempt to recuperate more space and wrench control from Tacy, Nicki asks his fiancé to bring along just *one* casserole dish. Tacy, in disbelief, refuses. More casserole dishes means more consumables (a world with both a pot roast and a souffle), bringing them closer to the illusion of middle-class comfort and abundance. (D. Smith, 2003, p. 126)

In an effort to retain the requisite items for the expression of middle-class female domesticity, Tacy and the women helping her load the trailer eliminate any space for Nicki's clothing and golf clubs.

In addition to the size of the trailer creating an impediment to habits of accumulation, the mobility of the trailer also creates trouble. Tacy's habit of collecting souvenir rocks at every stopping place eventually leads to near disaster as the extra weight makes the trailer impossible to tow over a particularly steep mountain pass. The implications are clear: trailer life limits the freedom to accumulate simply for pleasure and even precludes the storage of a man's golf clubs. Granted, the film ends with the couple happily embracing their new mobile home. They have

faced the challenges and decided that this way of life is worth it all. One scholar even refers to *The Long, Long Trailer* as "the most effective publicity for the trailer industry in the postwar era" (Hurley, 2001, p. 222). However, despite the film's positive spin, it makes visible the many ways that the trailer was inherently in conflict with the consumption habits and accumulation of status symbols expected of middle-class citizens following World War II.

The violation of patterns of consumption is important precisely because of these class implications. As we discussed in chapter one, social class is not measured only by one's income bracket. This is key to remember in the development of the trailer as a symbol, because during the first few decades of the trailer's existence, researchers consistently found trailerites to have incomes largely on par with the traditionally housed middle class (see for example Cowgill, 1941; Hager, 1954). In the early days, then, the issue was not always one of financial capital but of cultural capital. According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital exists in three forms: the *embodied* state, the *objectified* state, and the *institutionalized* state. We will discuss the first of these in chapter four as we examine the ways in which stigma is also embodied. In this discussion of norms of consumption, it is the second state—the objectified state—that is most pertinent. In its objectified state, cultural capital takes the form of cultural possessions. Consumption of goods and the display of "taste" is often a more compelling indicator of status than is income, in terms of how we view and interact with one another. We know this implicitly and it guides our consumption behaviors: "As consumers develop and follow particular taste regimes, they assert their social standing and differentiate themselves from other social groups" (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013). Consumption is a status marker, and in a culture where more and bigger are better, limited capacity to consume hampers one's ability to claim a respectable class status.

Emplaced and Embodied Stigma

The stigma that ultimately resulted from the trailer's violation of these and various other prized categories is complex. It is woven into everything from laws and building codes to cookbooks and country songs. To get at its most essential components, however, we must explore

it as both *emplaced* and *embodied.* While I will emphasize one or the other of these categories of stigma at different points in order to capture their unique components, the two are often inextricably intertwined in the case of "trailer trash" stigma. They are intertwined as sign-vehicles within broader symbolic systems (Goffman, 1951). The numerous points of overlap result from the fact that bodies themselves are emplaced—people are always *somewhere* in physical space (Bourdieu et al., 1999). As well, places have no meaning outside of that which is socially constructed. People with bodies define what a place means within each society.

Within these categories, it is also helpful to examine stigma via the differentiation put forth by Scambler and Hopkins in their study of individuals with epilepsy. They distinguish between *enacted* stigma, which signifies overt discrimination, and *felt* stigma, which encapsulates the shame and fear experienced by the stigmatized individual (Scambler & Hopkins, 1986, cited in Scambler, 2009). Steward and colleagues further break down the concept of felt stigma into the categories of *felt normative stigma* and *internalized stigma* (Steward et al., 2008). The former refers to "a subjective awareness of stigma which it is expected motivates individuals to take action to avoid enacted stigma" (Scambler, 2009, p. 446). The latter encompasses stigma as it is internalized both by the stigmatized (for whom it becomes "self-stigma") and by Goffman's "normal" (for whom it becomes prejudice) (Scambler, 2009, p. 446). In particular, the concept of felt stigma provides insight into the psychological aspect of stigma and the ways in which stigma is woven into the very mental schemas of both stigmatized and stigmatizer.

Keeping Them in Their Place: Putting Stigma on the Map

The emplaced nature of "trailer trash" stigma is rooted in the highly symbolic nature of spaces and places in the life of a society. Places are ultimately shaped by human actors in important ways, from determining land use, cultivating soil or extracting resources, or constructing things like roadways, parks, skyscrapers, and homes (Tickamyer, 2000). In doing so, humans endow a place with meaning, at times battling over the power to do so. The recent battle over Bears Ear National Monument in Utah exemplified this. One group sought to preserve the

site, sacred to Native Americans, as protected land. The opposing group wished to sell it off for extractive rights. These two land uses inscribe entirely different meanings on the same stretch of desert. Place is also the stage upon which we perform, the setting for our interactions, each physical location offering a unique array of props and sets. As social creatures, our identity is shaped by place at several levels. This can be true at the level of nation, city, or region. In her research with "rednecks" in the rural South, Shirley discovered that "where respondents have lived is connected to their identities, to how they view others, and to whom they compare themselves" (2010, p. 40). On a more micro level, social identities become most closely linked to the places where we spend most of our time; in America, this usually means home, school, and work. Of the three, home is mostly intricately entwined with the idea of identity.

The issue of place is underrepresented in sociological literature about stigma, though one of the strongest analyses was undertaken in regards to mobile home parks.[7] Goffman's foundational work on stigma leaves out the component of place as a potentially discrediting aspect in the lives of individuals, an oversight that Wacquant calls "remarkable" (Wacquant, 2008). Wacquant asserts that "territorial infamy displays properties analogous to those of bodily, moral and tribal stigma,[8] and it poses dilemmas of information management, identity formation and social relations quite similar to these" (2008, p. 238). When stigmatized places threaten to become permanent parts of a society's geography, "discourses of vilification proliferate and agglomerate about them" (Wacquant, 2008, p. 237). For "discourses of vilification," we might also read discourses of pollution and contamination: discourses of *trash*.

When home and neighborhood are stigmatized spaces, environs that have been declared undesirable, the effect on residents can be profound. This is a point of convergence in the

[7] In her work on evictions in mobile home parks, Esther Sullivan (2018) provides a thorough and engaging analysis of "socio-spatial" stigma as it pertains to mobile home parks and the ways in which trailer communities and their residents have been impacted by what Wacquant has called a "taint of place" (Wacquant, 2008). In particular, Sullivan emphasizes a socio-legal perspective, highlighting "the mutually constitutive relationship between the *perception* of place and the *regulation* of place" (Sullivan, 2018, p. 25).
[8] These categories will be discussed in chapter four.

emplaced and embodied aspects of stigma, as residents internalize their association with a marginalized space. Recalling his experiences at school, one young man told me, "The fact that everyone at school knew where my trailer park was kinda made it that much harder. Because everyone knew, like, 'Oh, if you're there, you're in *that* part of town, you're no good.'" For some, it claims the place of master status even in their own minds. When I picked up a memoir titled *Trailer Trash from Tennessee* (Hunter, 1995), for example, I expected trailer parks to figure prominently in the story. I was surprised to find out that the author lived in a trailer for only two years of his life, his tenure there taking up only a small portion of the book. Trailer park life had constituted only a tiny part of the author's childhood, yet when he told his story and chose a title, "trailer trash" was the identity trump card.

For some residents, "trailer trash" stigma means trying to hide where they live, a dilemma common to those living in denigrated places (Wacquant, 2007). One neighbor told me about a gathering she had attended where people were asked to say where they lived. "Knowing the stigma that comes with living here, I said something vague like, 'I live north of here,'" she told me. "And a woman was there who knew where I lived, and she kept pushing me, saying 'But what does that mean? Where do you live?' It was so awkward." During my own time living in Riverview, I found myself instinctively referring to a part of town rather than my actual neighborhood in some social settings. It was an instinct that caught me by surprise, and one that I was not proud of. A few months after moving into the park, as I was looking for some part-time work, I recorded my thoughts at the time: "I've been filling out job applications, and I have found myself making sure that I put '#246' instead of 'lot 246' for my address. I have an innate sense of hesitation to use an address that might indicate I live in a mobile home park" (field notes, June 11, 2016).[9] Another time, when the subject of residence came up at a dinner party outside of the neighborhood, I gave a rather vague answer to a couple I had just met: "We live near the

[9] The negative effect of a "bad" address in seeking employment is well document in other places. See for example (Gourlay, 2007).

Interstate and California Avenue." Assuming that I meant the wealthy area only blocks away, the man asked, "Oh, so do you live in an old Victorian?" When I replied that we lived in a mobile home, his response was immediate: "Really . . . how did that come about?" The implication was unmistakable: for me to find myself living in a mobile home, something must have gone awry, or some special circumstance must have presented itself. Klocker experienced similar responses—this time rooted in racial categories—when she told other White people that her multi-ethnic family lived in a distinctly White neighborhood: "We have had people ask us why we live in Cronulla (with the sub-text being—*there are brown people in your family, why are you living in a white place?*) My family is confusing for well-intentioned white people because we appear to have lost our cognitive map" (Klocker, 2015, p. 424). In both my experience and in Klocker's, even people who may not demonstrate open discrimination have clearly internalized the stigma as prejudice (Steward et al., 2008).

The "cognitive map" of who belongs in a trailer park, and the desire not to fall into that category, is deeply ingrained into the American imaginary. During the course of my fieldwork, I spoke to a woman from the larger community who had once admitted to me that living in a mobile home park was one of her greatest fears. Intrigued by her response to the mere mention of mobile home parks, I asked, "In your imagination, if all of a sudden you are in a mobile home park, what would that say about you? What would have had to happen for you to find yourself living in one?" She thought for a moment. "That would tell me that I had lost everything," she said. "That my business failed, and that I had lost everything. . . . I guess I'd say that it would be failure." In her mind, only profound crisis could explain a scenario in which she lived in a mobile home. It would mean that she had crossed boundary line, an internalized, though likely subconscious, dividing line between those to whom she belonged and *those* people—*poor* White people (Hartigan, 2005, p. 21). To imagine such a violation of her sense of social location caused her to respond with visible fear.

Place-Based Responses: Dealing with the "Trailer Problem"

Douglas (1966) suggests five approaches that societies take to prevent anomalies, or challenges to systems of category, from disrupting the cherished social order. First, society may respond by settling upon a given interpretation in order to reduce the ambiguity that is born of anomaly. Second, a society may deal with anomalies by physically controlling them. Third, a society may respond to anomaly by creating rules of avoidance. Fourth, a society may choose to frame anomalies as dangerous. Finally, in a different vein, society may employ the anomaly at the level of mythology to call attention to another level of existence.

Several of the cultural strategies enumerated by Douglas are seen clearly in how U.S. society chose to respond to the anomalous space called the trailer park. For one, there was a clear effort from the very beginning to physically control trailer parks through the application of municipal zoning laws. Efforts to control trailers in this way began as early as the 1930s and never abated. A 1969 thesis, *The Taxation and Regulation of Mobile Homes*, noted that many regulations were meant to "cloak" deeper prejudices against both trailer parks and trailerites. In some cases, this meant completely excluding trailers within municipal boundaries: "Anti-mobile home sentiments have led many communities to pass ordinances which outlaw mobile homes from within their jurisdiction. Complete prohibition 'in lieu of regulation' constitutes the most extreme expression of local hostility" (Bernhart, 1969, p. 215). The exclusion of mobile home parks played out as part of city planning, a process rife with expressions of inequality. Werthman notes that "to most middle class suburbanites, the environment is perceived as an expression of social organization . . . it is used primarily to symbolize status, identity, and psychic self-esteem" (1968, p. 152). The goal of planning, then, is ultimately to "maximize the symbolic status of a community class image" by excluding anything that might have a "contaminating" effect (Werthman, 1968, p. 127).

Other municipalities allowed trailers within their limits but restricted the length of their stay or applied building codes that effectively banned them anyway. Later, when the relative

immobility of mobile homes was undeniable, cities zoned them into commercial and industrial areas or onto other undesirable pieces of land. “Trailer parks were shunted to marginal locations on the metropolitan periphery, places that promised no other productive use. In the Pittsburgh area, trailer courts were built atop abandoned slag dumps, refuse pits, and coal mines” (Hurley, 2001, pp. 256–257). In *Sunset Trailer Park,* Allan Berube recalls his childhood growing up in a 1950s New Jersey mobile home park, right on the water. It was a place marked by oil-slicked waters, hazy with the fumes of ship traffic and industry, and filled with “trailers parked on lots built over rotten barges along the waterfront—this was life on the geographic edge” (Berube & Berube, 1997, p. 17). In fact, both of the mobile home parks that I called home were built on undesirable and to some degree unsafe land. In Parkview, we were warned by neighbors not to plant gardens, due to the toxic soil. Riverside sits in a major flood zone and also merits caution regarding the soil, a situation that residents try to work around. “Of course, you’re not really supposed to garden in these places,” one neighbor told me, “’cause we’re built on a landfill. But you know, I got a raised garden.”

In addition to physically controlling trailer parks, efforts were made to create rules of avoidance and to define such places as dangerous. Just after WWII, the planning commission of Pasadena, California, recommended banning the trailers that had once served as emergency wartime housing: these “blighted areas, the commission said, breed juvenile delinquency, disease, and crime” (“Pasadena, Too,” 1951 p. 25). Growing up near trailer parks in the 1960s, Hartman recalls the people who “my families and neighbors referred to as ‘trash.’ They were not just poor; they were bad. Dangerous. Possibly criminals, though we couldn’t be sure” (2011). The enduring nature of this perception was abundantly evident to me when my roommates and I first moved into Parkside. We were young 20-something women, single, moving into a neighborhood that, to most of our family and friends, felt a world away. Again and again, people expressed concern for our safety, though none of them had ever seen Parkview or even known of its existence until then. It was a trailer park; that’s all they needed to know to assume we were putting ourselves at risk.

(However, a 2010 study found that this assumption is a false one, finding "no significant difference in population-weighted crime rates between blocks with mobile home communities and other types of residential blocks"; McCarty, 2010, p. 127).[10]

More than being a dangerous place to live, mobile home parks have been framed as a danger to the status and moral well-being of the entire community. Davis records the attitude of the courts, as early as 1953, that, "Mobile home parks, by their very nature, are in the category of activities potentially endangering the public health, safety, morals, and community welfare" (1975, p. 281).[11] *By their very nature.* The assertion here is that there is something inherent to this form of housing, and by extension, inherent to those who live there, that is *dangerous*. Those in the trailering community found the assumptions insulting and at times called them out as too thinly veiled. In a 1946 issue of *Trail-R-News*, there was a brief notice titled "Booze Okeh, Not Housing." It simply read: "The city council of the so-called exclusive community of Rumson, New Jersey, not far from the Long Branch, late in July passed an ordinance prohibiting the use of trailercoaches for living quarters within its environs. At the same meeting, 11 liquor licenses were renewed" ("Booze Okeh, Not Housing," 1946). The author of this short report felt the sting of the implication that trailer parks were a greater threat to the morals of the community than was alcohol consumption.

Within decades of the trailer's emergence, trailer stigma was etched indelibly onto the both the literal and cognitive maps of American society. Trailer parks were eyesores to be hidden from sight. They were dangerous places, threatening both the physical and moral welfare of those who chose to venture into their environs, as well as posing a threat to the moral welfare of entire

[10] Mobile home parks specifically for sex offenders do exist. One such park in Florida was the subject of a documentary titled *Pervert Park* (Barkfors & Barkfors, 2014). Mobile Home University (to be discussed in detail in chapter five) took a tour through such a park during one of their Mobile Home "Boot Camps" (Neate, 2015). However, these parks are extremely rare.

[11] It should be noted that "public health, safety, morals, and general welfare" are termed the subjects of "police powers" in legal code. This framing alone symbolically ascribes an aura of danger to mobile home parks. Again, Davis records a 1971 ruling: "*The very nature* of mobile home parks and their proliferation requires that local governing bodies regulate them. Such regulation is within the police power of municipalities" (1975, p. 284, italics mine).

communities. A century after municipal trailer camps led the way for the mobile home park as we know it today, this firmly imprinted stigma of place continues to be likewise inscribed on the bodies and lives of mobile home residents today. It is to that lived stigma that we now turn.

4. BEING THERE: STIGMA INSCRIBED ON BODIES, HOMES, LOTS, AND LIVES

Single Stories

"The problem with stereotypes," says author and TED speaker Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009), "is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." In this chapter, we will discuss stigma as it is inscribed on the trailer itself and on the bodies of trailer residents. To tell these stories honestly, to describe these places honestly, will make it evident that the "trailer trash" images propelled by the media have their representations in the real world. As we will see, however, these instances tell only one story, epitomizing what Adichie referred to as "the danger of a single story." In my experience and in the experience of other mobile home park researchers (see for example Salamon & MacTavish, 2017; Sullivan, 2018), it is by far the minority story, yet its prevalence and largely unquestioned acceptance have very real consequences for the millions of Americans that call mobile home parks home.

Stains of Body and Being

Before looking at how stigma played out in the neighborhoods where I lived and in the lives of those I interviewed, let's return to stigma as a broader concept. In his foundational work on the topic of stigma, or "spoiled identity," Goffman (1963) suggests that there are three different types of stigma: abominations of the body (such as deformities); blemishes of individual character; and tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion. While he describes these types as "grossly different," there are significant points of overlap in the case of "trailer trash," particularly in the case of body and character. Of course, some scholars have rightly noted the ways in which the taint assigned to trailer residents also represents a sort of tribal stigma (Saatcioglu & Ozanne, 2013). While a sense of group identity was overt in the early days, when many among the band of "trailerites" embraced their identity proudly, that same sense does not seem to exist among mobile home dwellers today. However, it remains entrenched in popular

perception. As Salamon and MacTavish note, "The popular media perpetuate the misconception that the twelve million people who live in trailer parks nationwide *all* represent a distinctive *trailer-trash* subculture" (2017, p. 192).

In addition to this almost caste-like stigma, "trailer trash" connotes a profound blemish of character. As one scholar puts it, "Mobile home residents, frequently referred to as 'trailer trash' are depicted as alcoholics, crack heads, meth addicts, drug dealers, wife beaters, prostitutes, sex offenders, and as mentally insane. Women are promiscuous, men are violent, kids are out of control" (Kusenbach, 2009, p. 400). It is key to note, however, that in popular representations, these perceived stains of character are often inscribed on the body through symbols such as missing teeth and clothing that is either cheap, tattered, or wildly out of fashion. Some media portrayals translate "trailer trash" stigma onto the body in ways that appear almost disfigured, with bulging bellies and protruding or disappearing jaws,[1] recalling Goffman's "abominations of the body." Here, the stigma of character (thought to be reified through observable behaviors) and the stigma of the body are symbolically intertwined.[2]

[1] The popular portrayals of "trailer trash" and the ways in which those images are employed recall Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of the use of the carnivalesque to represent the exotic world of "bodily pleasure in opposition to morality, discipline and social control" (Fiske, 2011, p. 243). One element of the use of carnival is what Bakhtin called "grotesque realism," which "images the human body as multiple, bulging, over- or under-sized, protuberant and incomplete" (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 9). As well, the "trailer trash" themed parties discussed in chapter three are reflective of the carnivalesque desire to temporarily wander into the pleasures of low in society: "The pleasures of carnival are . . . unruly and lower-class, vulgar, undisciplined" (G. Sweeney, 1997, p. 254). For the duration of one of these trailer-trash-themed parties, partygoers of any class are temporarily given space to enter into activities that are normally considered outside the boundaries of appropriate behavior for those inhabiting a higher place in the class hierarchy.

[2] Writing about her experience as an obese pregnant woman, McCullough likewise articulated the links between body and character in the formation and enactment of stigma. Of her initial appointment with a physician, she writes, "I was rendered only a fat body that was unhealthy and morally dissolute, if not disgusting" (McCullough, 2013, p. 218).

Figure 4. Typical "trailer trash" portrayal with exaggerated features
Image credit: Emilie Say, Dreamstime.com

Embodied Stigma

This leads us to our discussion of the second category of stigma referred to in the previous chapter. Having addressed emplaced stigma, we turn now to what I will refer to as "embodied stigma." I do not use the term in the broader sense of "embodied self," which "is composed of mind, body, and the practice of social life" (McCullough, 2013, p. 219). In terms of stigma, the connection to the mind is best captured by the idea of *felt*, or *internalized*, stigma, as discussed in chapter three. Rather, I emphasize the latter two components—the body and the practices of social life. In particular, embodied stigma denotes two related aspects of stigma. First, embodied stigma refers to stigma as it is symbolically projected on the body from without, as in the case of popular images of "trailer trash." Second, the term refers to stigma as it is reified and inscribed on actual bodies, whether through physical, corporeal manifestations, or forms of consumption carried on and in the body. As we will see, the link between home and identity will draw the trailer itself into a strangely liminal place in our analysis of stigma; it is both emplaced on the land and deeply connected to the bodies of its inhabitants.

The connection between the body and stigma is well-established, largely in health-related literature, and particularly within critical disability studies (see for example, Coleman-Fountain & McLaughlin, 2013). Scholars in these fields have noted the ways in which stigma of character is not only read onto the body, conflating the physical body with the embodied self (McCullough, 2013), but also how the consequences of stigma are borne on the body through a multitude of harmful health outcomes. As well, they have noted how stigma informs how bodies move through space and interact with other bodies (McCullough, 2013). While many of these health-related perspectives on the embodiment of stigma are profoundly helpful, critical nuances force a degree of departure in the case of "trailer trash" stigma. Most importantly, health-related approaches to the embodiment of stigma deal for the most part with ontological issues, or "attributes" over which one has no control. One does not make a decision to be born with a physical impairment or to acquire a debilitating disease (exceptions to this, at least in public perception, are cases in which physical attributes are assumed to be a matter of lifestyle choice, such as obesity and HIV).

"Trailer trash" stigma, on the other hand, has a more complicated relationship with perceptions of choice. Fashion, hygiene, and housing are generally considered a matter of personal agency. Stigma is inscribed on the body not just through physical characteristics but through consumption (which is then read as an accurate representation of taste). While it has strong racial overtones because of the trailer park's enduring association with White poverty, the "trailer trash" stereotype is largely rooted in class; Ellen, whom I met through some mutual friends at a regular community gathering, indicated this when we were discussing the terms "White trash" and "trailer trash."[3] "I think 'White trash' is really offensive. 'Trailer trash' is . . . somehow less so. I guess because it's racism if you're talking 'White trash.' 'Trailer trash,' I think it denotes a certain income level." Interestingly, she moved directly into a story that she told

[3] While several scholars have asserted that the two terms are almost interchangeable in some settings, further research is needed to understand the racial overtones present in "trailer trash" stigma. While there is an excellent body of scholarship investigating the historical development of "white trash" (Wray, 2006), a similarly thorough historical analysis of "trailer trash" as an epithet has yet to be undertaken.

me was “unrelated,” about a friend who had terrible dental health because she hadn’t gone to the dentist until she was well into adulthood. The seamless transition between defining “trailer trash” and then telling me a story about poor dental hygiene indicated a clear mental link between the two, even if largely subconscious.

During my fieldwork, Ellen’s interview in particular illustrated this concept of embodied “trailer trash” stigma clearly for me. Middle-aged and always stylishly dressed, she had built her successful sales business from the ground up. Ellen was witty and insightful, and we enjoyed chatting. As I mentioned in chapter three, when the conversation came around to my research one day, I was struck by her guttural, fear-like response the moment I mentioned mobile home parks, a sense of unease written all over her face and dominating her tone of voice. When we met up for an interview, I asked her where that kind of intense, automatic response came from. “It goes back to really early days,” she told me. She went on to recount a story of a family road trip when she was about ten, in which her mother, who was notorious for her impromptu (and often unsuccessful) “shortcuts,” took the family’s Oldsmobile sedan off the beaten path and deep into a network of rural back roads.

> She was lost. And she didn’t seem to be anxious, but we kind of were. The kids were like, “Oh God, here we go.” And I remember going into a mobile home park, and it was kind of in a forested area, very rural. And I remember it being super scary. There was an unfriendly feel, [and] it created fair amount of anxiety. I remember watching my mom . . . she stopped the car, she got out, and then went and knocked on a door of one of these mobile homes. I think it was probably a pretty high poverty area. And I just remember the guy coming out. And from the car, I could see . . . you know, like no teeth, unclean . . . all the stereotypes. I remember being really frightened. We got out of there; it was no problem. But that was my very first experience, and it was like I couldn’t get away fast enough. And so from a very early age, I associated that environment with being lost,

> being scared, being anxious, being poor, bad teeth, unclean . . . boom, in one. It was an instance. It was a moment.

While part of Ellen's anxiety was rooted in being lost, she told me that this was a common occurrence with her rather adventurous mother. What is notable is the way that her sense of fear is linked to visual cues. Even from the car, she automatically interpreted certain images as dangerous and inhospitable: poor and unconventional homes, bad teeth, and being "unclean." Added to the stigma of place was a stigma inscribed on the body—the man who owned the mobile home bore on his body the signs of a questionable character. The centrality of these visual, bodily cues is reinforced by the fact that Ellen doesn't remember any particularly threatening behavior. "Was he nice?" I asked her. "I think he was neutral," she told me. "I don't remember him being mean or anything like that." It would seem that the man in that mobile home gave no other indication of being dangerous than missing teeth, the appearance of being dirty, and the fact that he stood on the porch of a questionable home.

One of my most profound and enduring memories from my time living in Parkside has to do with another aspect of this stigma as it is carried on the body: smell. As I mentioned in chapter one, our first trailer in that park was riddled with black mold. That was not the only scent, however. The home featured a pungent medley of odors, a potpourri of mold, cat pee, and cigarette smoke. It was so strong that some friends got headaches and stopped visiting us, and nothing we did seemed to sweeten the air. One unfortunate consequence of this situation was that the smell soon permeated our clothing. Several months after we moved in, I wrote,

> The rising spring temperatures are beginning to bring out the smells that winter had subdued in our home. Walking into the trailer, we are often stunned to feel our senses offended by a foul stench. More than that, we walk out of the trailer knowing that our clothes smell the same way. It is a little awkward. And I can see it on all of our faces: it is disheartening. (personal communication, 2008)

As I navigated what remained a very middle-class life outside of my home—classes for my master's degree, gatherings in suburban homes, afternoons studying in coffee shops[4]—I instinctively knew that the smell I bore carried incredible symbolic power. In the judgment of society, I smelled poor. I smelled uncultured. I smelled like "trailer trash." I contravened the standards of personal hygiene so intertwined with morality and class. Yet, there was nothing I could do about it as long as I lived in that home. The reality of the stigma attached to smell sank in for me even more as I watched some of our neighborhood kids go off to school each day bearing a similar odor. For most, it was due to living in older, poorly maintained trailers. For others, the problem was compounded by a second issue: a lack of family car meant that trips to the laundromat were infrequent (public transportation was terrible in our city). I knew that smelly clothes put those kids at a disadvantage from the moment they walked into the classroom. And I also understood that they couldn't do anything about it.

These two examples—Ellen's story and my own experience in Parkside—also provide a clear illustration of the intertwined relationship between emplaced and embodied stigma. While missing teeth and poor hygiene are fundamentally corporeal manifestations of stigma, inscribed on individual bodies, they must also be understood in relationship to place. As Bourdieu notes, there is a direct link between the organization of social space and the organization of physical space; in the case of places like ghettos, refugee camps, and trailer parks, geographic marginalization becomes a physical imprint of social marginalization. The impact is both perceptual and practical, as the organization of space dictates geographical distance from goods and services, and, through the reproduction of class, influences one's ability to gain the capital necessary to access those goods and services (Bourdieu, 1999). The translation of social hierarchies onto physical space cements and perpetuates relations of inequality, ultimately

[4] Time spent in coffee shops was not just a product of my love for coffee. Our trailer was alternately baking hot and freezing cold during the summer and winter. So much so, in fact, that we spent summers referring to our home as Herbie Hot Box and winters calling it Fran the Freezer. While newer mobile homes often have extremely efficient heating and cooling systems, our aging 1966 model did not.

creating links between place and class reproduction. As class is reproduced, accompanying class stereotypes are often reified on the body. Even though these stereotypes are ultimately rooted in structural inequities and their imprint on geographic space, they are read as *proof* of the validity of stigma rather than as consequences or outcomes of that stigma being enacted. Take, for example, the image of missing teeth. Here, class reproduction (as manifested through issues such as limited income, lack of dental benefits, and the inability to secure a family car) combines with the fact that mobile home parks are generally located at a considerable distance from many critical resources (such as those that might provide free dental care) to create barriers to dental care even for those who want it. I watched all of these factors come together in the life of one young girl in Parkside, for example, who did not see a dentist until she was 16. Though she will potentially bear the marks of poor dental hygiene into adulthood, it is a reflection not of her character or intelligence, but one of the many ways that poverty etched itself onto her very body. Representing the third generation of her family to live in Parkside, her poverty as well as her way of being in the world was intricately linked to that particular place.

The Shirt on My Back and the Food in My Belly: The Body and Consumption

Just as trailers were judged in relation to standards of consumption in their early years, at that time chiefly because of their size, consumption patterns continue to play a role in marking both home and body as failing to meet middle-class standards. Consumer goods become another way in which stigma is inscribed and carried on the body and the home. Victor, who had been one of the kids from my early days at Parkside, indicated that the label of "trailer trash" was often tied in with possessions when the subject came up at school; specifically, he was mocked for not having "Jordans" during basketball season or new cleats during football season. His brother, Marco, also mentioned clothing. He told me that when he told people he lived in a mobile home, "they just looked at me like I was some weird kid." (He later re-iterated, saying that "they would look down upon me, look at me as a poor kid, worthless.") I asked if there were specific things people would point out to mark him as "trailer trash." "Clothes-wise, they would always look at me as the poor

kid," he told me. "I mean, I would have new clothes, you know, here and there, but it would be like a once in a blue moon thing." Jenny, who lived down the street and was 12 when we moved into Parkside, also mentioned possessions when I asked her if there was anything she didn't like about living in the neighborhood. The failure to display middle-class standards of consumption appears intertwined with her idea of what it means to be seen as "trailer trash."

> What I didn't like was being constantly considered as "trailer trash." Like I was always ashamed to tell school friends where I lived, or I was always ashamed to bring them to the trailer because of . . . it was a trailer. Who likes trailer parks? And so I was always feeling like I was the low totem pole as a kid. Cause I didn't have the new fancy dancy phone, I didn't have the fancy dancy backpack or new clothes. Yeah, so that's the only reason that I would think of about hatin' the trailer park"

However, the issue isn't simply the *power* to consume, or the ability to acquire the fanciest, danciest things. It includes *habits* of consumption as well. For example, clothing style also serves as a ubiquitous symbol in the "trailer trash" trope presented by pop culture, so much so that one can purchase a variety of "trailer trash" costumes for Halloween or trash-themed parties. The images generally include some combination of camouflage, flannel, torn or cut-off denim, bath robes, T-shirts with NASCAR logos or airbrushed animal portraits, the white undershirts often referred to as "wife beaters," and any article of clothing made to resemble a Confederate flag. These items, none of which fit into stereotypical middle-class consumer repertoires, symbolically inscribe on the body a set of perceived behaviors and attitudes. It is an important link, as we tend to assume that "any item of a person's behavior is . . . a sign of his social position" (Goffman, 1951, p. 295). The message imprinted on bodies via costume is that these are working-class people who hunt, love car racing, couldn't dress fashionably to save their lives, and are probably racist.

Interestingly, the use of undershirts and robes to represent "trailer trash" harkens back to a theme that has been present since the earliest days of trailer living: the blurring of public and

private spaces through a style perceived as inappropriately casual. As early as the 1930s, the public was unsettled to see that "some of the men in the [trailer] camps seemed to think nothing of going abroad in their undershirts, even on Sunday. Mornings, the women all trooped to the bathrooms in their housecoats. . . . On washday, they hung their laundry out . . . right before God and everyone!" (Thornburg, 1991, pp. 54–55). In my time in both Parkside and Riverview—parks that differed significantly in appearance and rates of home ownership—I observed that this aspect of park living had not changed significantly for a small portion of residents. In my field notes after walks around the neighborhood, I frequently noted people in pajama pants, and sometimes slippers. One time, I recorded seeing a woman walking her dog in her socks. And while most leases forbid it now, it is not uncommon to see laundry draped over porch railings or hanging on poorly hidden lines. As one scholar notes, visible laundry is among the factors "uniformly interpreted as signs that the working class is present"; it signifies that those to whom the laundry belongs either do not understand, or at the least choose not to display, appropriate middle-class, suburban behavior (Werthman, 1968, p. 76). This blurring of public and private spaces is not always, however, a simple indicator of lazy or apathetic residents. It is in many ways forced by the realities of proximity: trailers are most often situated quite close together, with doors and most windows on the side rather than the front, awkwardly facing the neighbor's windows, similarly situated maybe 25 feet away. The yards are almost always small, and in some cases nonexistent (I once saw a "keep off the grass" sign humorously posted on a patch of green AstroTurf that measured a single square foot). Thus, while it is not uncommon for a middle-class suburbanite to step into his fenced backyard or walk down the driveway to a mailbox in pajamas and slippers, a walk of the exact same distance finds the trailer resident either two feet from a neighbor's window or standing on the sidewalk, depending which direction they chose to go. Of course, proximity is not always the reason for a trip down the sidewalk in pajama pants or a bathrobe. However, it does call us to remember that one story is not the whole story.

There is another common variety of costume that stands in contrast to bathrobes and slippers. Made to represent trailer park women, it consists of some combination of denim, flannel, and leopard print, in variations of extremely tight and extremely short. This stereotyped ensemble likewise calls forth a blemish of character commonly linked to the "trailer trash" trope: hypersexualization. It is the other end of a spectrum that has been robbed of its middle. Discussing her experience as an obese woman in America, McCullough asserts that fatness and thinness have been constructed in a dualistic way, with profound implications for identity. "Embedded within this binary of fat and thin," she says, "the body, *which can only be one or the other*, stands in for the totality of self. . . . The body is the self writ large and is therefore stigmatized" (McCullough, 2013, p. 219, italics mine). Within the "trailer trash" stereotype, there is little middle ground for women. One is either a "trailer trash" babe (understood as a slut), or a homely woman in a bathrobe who has let herself go. The same does not seem to hold true for men, as I have observed an almost total absence of referrals to anything resembling a "trailer trash" hunk. The popular image of the hypersexual "trailer trash" woman is a far cry from the images espoused by trailer magazines during the early decades of the industry. For many years, trailer magazine covers and articles featured smiling, modestly dressed housewives holding a fresh baked casserole or tucking a child in to sleep, pleading the case for a less stigmatized trope about women in trailers. In fact, when *Trail-R-News* instead featured a series of rather risqué (for the time) covers, a trailerite couple complained that,

> while your magazine has interesting reading matter, the covers are an insult to the trailer business. Why leave the impression that the women who live in trailers go about half-nude, indecently dressed, like prostitutes peddling their wares? It just isn't fair to

womanhood, to the decent, right-minded women that do live in trailer homes. ("Please Discontinue," 1950)[5]

The symbolic links between embodied consumption practices and "trailer trash" recalls Bourdieu's concept of class as defined by cultural capital and the demonstration of tastes (or "manifested preferences"). He asserts that "art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a social function of legitimating social differences" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 7). In other words, the items we acquire and the things we find beautiful or ugly both reflect and reify class differences. Bourdieu's conceptualization of class habitus includes everything from preferences in clothing, such as those discussed above, to taste in art, music, sports (recall the NASCAR T-shirts), food, and home decor. As with clothing, these other symbols of preference and cultural consumption are also clearly employed in popular stereotypes of trailer residents. For example, when I sat down with the most recent manager of Riverview, Joanne—a down-to-earth woman with short salt and pepper hair—she brought up the image of the undesirable trailer resident through a single allusion to food: she called them "Cheez Whiz-sucking trailer trash" (though she assured me, as one of her residents, that she hadn't met any since she left the Midwest). Also referencing food, Jim Goad, in his *Redneck Manifesto*, tells the reader that his "aesthetic soup bowl has always been smothered with a fat ketchup splotch of white-trash flavoring" (1997, p. 26). Ernest Mickler's *White Trash Cooking* (1986) offers a panoply of recipes that feature mayonnaise and butter and potted meats. It is not difficult to make the connection between these recipes and the cheap tastes and bulging waistlines that dominate many popular images of "trailer trash." Home decor also features prominently in the "trailer trash" image. While watching *Raising Arizona* (Coen & Coen, 1987) with a friend, years into my

[5] Jean Jaques, editor of *Trail-R-News*, apparently found the accusation amusing. With his characteristic humor, he tacked on an editor's note suggesting that "the above writers better steer clear of Arizona, California, and Florida. For their type of 'peddling prostitutes' may pop out from behind a school or a Christian church." In a more formal response, he expressed dismay that the writers could "actually see anything but beauty in the perfectly moral and legal display of feminine charms. . . . Beauty as expressed on the covers of Trail-R-News becomes 'an insult' to respectable persons only because respectable persons look with unclean minds at beauty and charm and attractiveness" ("Regards Women," 1950).

research, I found myself saying, “Wait for it . . .there it is!” when the camera panned to the wall where I expected to see a painting on black velvet. Shelves full of useless kitsch, dream catchers, cross-stitched quotes, and mismatched furniture from the thrift store (always a feature in my home) are all part of the “tastes” attributed to low-class, “cheez-whiz-sucking trailer trash.”

For Bourdieu, these class-based practices of cultural consumption are a product of both social origin and educational capital. In Bourdieu’s initial survey work, “social origin” was specifically measured in terms of one’s father’s occupation. However, the concept links more broadly to the home as a site where class-based tastes are instilled;[6] “Trash starts at home,” echoes Goad (1997, p. 26). Whereas the education system instills taste in things like art and music, the home is the place where one develops one’s tastes in the stuff of everyday life, such as furniture, clothing, and food. In fact, Bourdieu asserts that it is “in tastes in *food* that one would find the strongest and most indelible mark” of the home (1984, p. 79). Hence the simple power of Cheez Whiz and ketchup in stirring up an image of working-class trash. The connection between the educational system and the reproduction of class is also apropos in the case of mobile home parks. In terms of formal schooling, we again find a scenario in which the act of exclusion through mechanisms such as zoning and districting (per Douglas, the strategy of physically controlling an unwanted anomaly) perpetuates inequalities for residents of mobile homes. In their ethnography of a rather large Illinois mobile home park, Salamon and MacTavish (2017) discovered that neighborhood children were charged higher fees for activities because they were just outside the boundaries of town proper. “Rather than opening doors for park youth, the Illinois schools reinforce the rigid class boundaries that exist between the town and the trailer park” (Salamon & McTavish, 2017, p. 184). The issue of proximity is particularly important when it comes to any kind of extracurricular activities. In our time at Parkside, we gave countless rides to

[6] This association was perhaps even stronger in the early days of the trailer, when geographic mobility was still a common reality. Perceived as rootless and thus disconnected from any particular school or community, it was assumed that any seeds of immorality taking root in trailer children must have been planted and watered in the home.

practices and concerts, but in most cases, kids whose parents worked strange hours, or whose family didn't own a car, simply couldn't participate in these activities. The tendency to be districted into poorer schools and the inability to participate fully in school activities have profound implications, as the education system is often the most promising route toward upward mobility for working-class children. Rather than gaining cultural capital that might help them navigate across class boundaries, they are funneled into a setting more likely to flatten their trajectory. In this way, "trailer trash" stigma and its inscription on physical space work to limit their overall life chances (Gieryn, 2000; Link & Phelan, 2001).

Stigma Inscribed on Home and Lot

When residents tried to symbolically distance themselves from *true* "trailer trash," however, they seldom referenced signs of the body. Instead, they relied on a different aspect of the "trailer trash" stereotype: they emphasized the condition of the mobile home and its yard, highlighting the ways that "trailer trash" stigma is inscribed on the home itself,[7] a trope often employed in pop cultural representations as well. Jeff Foxworthy's *Redneck Extreme Mobile Home Makeover* features drawings of Christmas wreaths made of old tires, cars up on blocks next to above-ground pools and busted refrigerators, mantels adorned with Elvis busts and NASCAR memorabilia, and taxidermy hanging on the wall above shabby secondhand furniture. "You might be a redneck," he says, "if any of your front room furniture is inflatable" or if "you have a lava lamp over five feet tall" (Foxworthy, 2005, pp. 6, 55). Each of these reflects cultural tastes that, in the American imagination, could only belong to those on the lowest rungs of the class ladder. As mentioned previously, while home and yard are not bodies (and at least the yard is firmly situated in geographic space), the profound link between home and identity marks them as bearing a stigma that is emplaced and yet somehow also embodied. Symbolically tied to the bodies of their

[7] Occasionally, behavior patterns were also included in descriptions of "trailer trash," including loud fights, drug use, and frequent visits from the police. In contrast to my own expectations, however, references to home and lot figured much more prominently in residents' images of "trailer trash."

residents, mobile homes are in many ways seen as an extension of those stereotyped bodies. Their walls bearing black velvet paintings and their floors covered in poorly patterned linoleum, mobile homes are assumed to embody the tastes of those who call them home. This connection between resident and home is particularly strong in the case of mobile homes, a situation that becomes cogent when one considers that in the early days of trailer living, the rolling homes really were more connected to their owners than to any particular piece of land.

In part, this pattern of using the home and lot to identify "trailer trash" may result from the fact that residents often find that they are unable to differentiate themselves from other mobile home residents (at least in their own neighborhoods) via markers of body or consumption, because they come from similar income brackets and similar points of social origin. Instead, they employ the very standards of cleanliness and order that have been used to set apart the trailer as deficient since its nascence.[8] Evan, whom I had known for nearly ten years when we sat down to talk, spent the majority of his childhood living in trailers and RVs. Now a young adult, he was living alone in a mobile home in one of the shabbier parks in the city. As we sat for his interview, he told me about his neighbors. Plenty of them, he said, were "normal" people—some who had kids, and one who had "a real nice lawn."

> But there's still a few people in there that I guess you could call "trailer trash." You know, broken down cars out in front, up on blocks or something like that. You know, plastic tarps everywhere. So I can see where people judge based on that, too, but I don't think you should just be based on the neighborhood, but based on your own trailer.
>
> Which I guess isn't saying much about mine, but you know, it's definitely different.

Here, Evan is practicing a form of boundary work, symbolically drawing a line between himself and the "trailer trash" he just described. He acknowledges that his own trailer doesn't meet the

[8] As mentioned in chapter one, Sherman discovered similarly creative boundary work during her research in a small logging town. The demographics of the town were largely homogeneous in terms of race and class. In the absence of traditional boundary markers, residents of the town employed the concept of morality to establish a sense of social hierarchy (Sherman, 2009).

standard he has just spoken of, but distances himself from it by essentially saying, "my trailer doesn't look great either, *but it's different*."[9] He continued, offering a more specific example of a neighbor who fit his idea of "trailer trash." This isn't just a messy lawn or broken-down car; it's a yard full of needless, nonsensical junk.

> The guy to the left of me has a couple fridges in his yard that if I open up my side windows on his side, I see a couple fridges, and there's a push mower. He's got an all gravel yard, so there's no reason for him to have his push mower. And he's got this like plush pig that just sits on his porch. And this pig is pointed at my window, so from my couch, I can open the window and there's this ridiculous plush pig staring [at me]. So it's things like that, too. It's just things that he's dragging up, things that he's just leaving there to rust. You know, I think that kind of thing hits the trailer park trash kinda on the head.

The yard seems to play an especially central role in how residents of mobile home parks assess one another. This is unsurprising, as the lawn has long been a status marker in American society and is one of the most immediately visible aspects of any neighborhood. Writing about suburban neighborhoods in the 1960s, for example, Werthman noted, "given the fact that well-kept lawns are used . . . as the major indicator of neighborhood status, it is not surprising that a single unkempt lawn can contaminate the status of every other home and family in its visible presence" (1968, p. 71). Lawns are used to judge the moral status of residents, such as whether they are hard-working or whether they care for others in the community (Werthman, 1968). That lawns and yards have a profound effect on neighborhood image is reflected in the fact that maintaining a clean lawn is a central part of any HOA and most mobile home lease agreements. Weeds left to grow or leaves left unraked could quickly earn us a $75 fee in Riverview, with an

[9] Kusenbach (2009) referred to this specific practice of differentiating oneself from others in the park as "fencing." Shwalbe and colleagues (2000), in their work on generic social processes, framed it as "defensive othering." Evan's particular reference calls to mind the words of one self-proclaimed *redneck* interviewed by Shirley; she distinguished herself from "*white trash*" in simple terms: "To me, there is a difference between clean dirt and dirty dirt" (Shirley, 2010, p. 51).

added $20 per hour for labor if the maintenance man ended up doing the pulling and raking. There was no hiding a bad lawn behind a fence, either, as fences became prohibited shortly after we moved in.

Good Lawns Make Good Neighbors

Becky lived across the street from us in Riverview and was my closest friend in the neighborhood. She and her partner had lived in their double-wide mobile home for 14 years at the time we sat down for an interview. Becky was short and muscular, her short, sandy hair usually hidden under a ball cap. In our entire three years living in the park, even in the Colorado winters, I never once saw her wear something other than shorts. She was self-employed cleaning houses and pet sitting, with clients in some of the wealthiest areas of town. At the time, she was also taking online classes toward a technical degree in pet training. She was one of the most resourceful women I've ever met, scrapping metal for extra cash and making her own versions of everything from laundry detergent to pet treats to beard oil. Over the years, we received many Christmas and birthday gifts that included her homemade products. Becky was also one of the most helpful neighbors I've ever been privileged to share a street with. She shoveled sidewalks and driveways when she knew someone needed help (like when I was laid up with an ankle sprain), and she kept an eye on everyone's houses when they were away. When we had a TV delivered while I was at work, and I later told her how relieved I was that it wasn't taken, she didn't miss a beat: "You should have told me so I could watch for it. You know I'd do that."

Becky's main emphasis in talking about what makes a good place to live was neighbors. She wanted neighbors that were quiet, respectful, and friendly. She didn't want dogs that pooped in her yard or kids that played too loudly in the street. The theme that dominated Becky's description of a good neighbor, however, was the care they took of their home and yard. It was clearly paramount to Becky (a fact that had always caused me a little anxiety, as we were terrible about keeping our yard looking nice). Frustrated with the overgrowth coming over the fence from her current backyard neighbors, she told me of the previous owner with an almost wistful tone:

> When we first moved in, the lady behind us was an older lady, just lost her husband. Kept that backyard like a golf course. Now it's nothing but weeds. She would sit out there on this little back deck and have her coffee and enjoy the view of the mountains. And she always kept the place up, 'cause she'd have her sons come over and do the yard work, take care of the house and it was just such a beautiful house. . . . And you know, she really took pride in her house. And you know, people like that are a joy to live next to.

The image of a golf course was repeated multiple times as Becky spoke to me, clearly her reference point for a classy lawn. Speaking of another neighbor who had since left, she said, "Oh God, she took care of that house. Her front yard looked like a golf course. She'd be sitting out there and, with scissors sometimes, cuttin' the grass or pullin' weeds or something. Always taking very good care of the house." Another neighbor echoed Becky's perspective. Carol was in her 60s and had lived in trailers both as a child, when they were "all the rage," and multiple times as an adult. When I asked her what she would improve about the park, she responded, "I've walked the park a bit, and you know, you don't know people's circumstances, and so I've never said anything, but there were a few trailers that looked like . . . their yards needed spruced up a bit. Maybe some junk thrown away. But they're few and far between."

This connection between lawn and home and a resident's perception of "trailer trash" was made even more clear to me when I sat down to talk with Heather, a middle-aged woman who had moved to Colorado from the East Coast a few years earlier, following a crisis in her extended family. Along with her husband and two young sons, she had been living in a townhome previously, and she wasn't happy to be living in Riverview now. She lived one street over from me, and while my relationships with my immediate neighbors had been largely positive, her experience had been full of tension. "That's one thing that I hate about being here," she told me. "You're just trying to keep the peace, and if it wasn't for affordability, I mean, I really don't want to live in a mobile home park." While none of the residents I interviewed self-identified as trash, Heather told me that she *felt* that way. "I just, to be happy, I have to ignore a lot of [things about

mobile home living]. And I feel like . . .” She paused, then continued with a tone of hesitation, as if afraid she might offend me. “I feel like ‘White trash,’ really.”

To explain the feeling, she referred almost exclusively to her home and yard. She told me she had been frustrated to discover the cheap materials used in mobile home construction, and she couldn’t seem to get rid of the grime that had been left by the previous owners. The size of the home was a struggle, too: “I don’t know, I still don’t understand what it is about living here that makes me just *give up*. I think it’s because I don’t have the space I that I used to. I don’t have an office. I don’t have a craft room. I don’t have a library, and so I have lowered my standards.” Still, Heather acknowledged that many of the residents kept their yards and homes looking beautiful. She did not see a whole neighborhood of “White trash.” But she felt unable to keep up with those who kept their homes and yards looking nice. “Even though, I mean, this is the nicest mobile home park around, and our house, you know, they look nice . . . I’m just not happy. I’d feel better if the inside of my house looked better, and I wish it looked cute like my neighbors. I just don’t know how to do it.” In her time at the park, she had received multiple fines and citations from the management for having too many things in her yard or on her porch, a fact that she spoke about with visible anxiety. She told me that a visitor early on had also commented on the disorder inside her home. She couldn’t seem to overcome the clutter in her house and yard—whether because of the stress of recent trauma or simply being unfamiliar with managing the layout of a mobile home—and she refused to have anyone visit her home. Interestingly, Heather carried on her body many symbols of “trailer trash” stigma, including poor dental health. However, it was a cheaply made, chaotic home and a messy yard, that made her feel like trash even in the nicest mobile home park around.

Part of what made Riverview the nicest park was that it did have some impressive yards. A few doors down from our home, José’s grass was lush, green, and immaculately maintained (he mowed it daily). Further down, Miss Carmen—a woman full of sass, who dyed her dog’s tail pink and could only be described as fabulous—kept a garden of flowers and trees worthy of any

suburban gardening competition. Still, there were undeniably examples of junk-filled yards in Riverview. Just down the street from my home there, one yard continually surprised me with its contents: bike tires, car fenders, a wheelchair, etc. On one occasion, a friend and I walked by to discover a huge shrink-wrapped ham sitting in the bush closest to the sidewalk. As well, appliances are often set on the sidewalk with signs indicating that they are free for the taking (my favorite was attached to an air conditioning unit, saying "works but ugly"). However, these lawns and sidewalk sections tended to be the exception, and just as proximity has much to do with the visibility of pajama pants, there is often more to the story in a junky yard. In many cases, it is simply that mobile homes lack what is the messiest room in most suburban homes: the garage. While most parks do have a small shed on each lot, mobile home living includes significantly less storage space in general.

It was this lack of space that forced me to confront my own prejudices about the image of junky yards early on in my tenure at Riverview. Within a week of moving into our 1999 Fleetwood, measuring 16 x 76, we woke up to find that our water heater had fallen halfway through the floor. The situation turned into a quite the fiasco—a plumber who refused to visit us once we gave him our address (an experience many of my neighbors were familiar with); a mix-up about inside and outside heaters that would only happen with a mobile home, which requires a specialty water heater no matter where it is placed; a battle over permits and inspections, which are likewise unique in mobile homes; and a cat that crept under the house while the skirting was open and got trapped there for days after (we were eventually alerted to his presence by the distinct odor of cat pee rising up through the floor). After days of frustration, we had a new water heater. And, to our chagrin, we still had an old one. It was a weekend. The appliance recycling guy who would eventually take it away (for a considerable price) was closed and then booked until the end of the next week. We didn't own a truck to take it anywhere. And having just moved, our shed was still packed to the gills with boxes. Knowing it was a lease violation to have the old unit sitting outside, we hid it as best we could, at first along the side of the house, then on

the back porch. I distinctly remember the anxiety I felt about having this clunky, rusty appliance sitting outside my house. In part, I feared a hefty fine from the park management. But if I am honest, I think I mostly feared being perceived as *the kind of person* who has an old water heater sitting in her yard. It was eye-opening to discover the dilemmas that come with lack of storage space and the surprising helplessness I felt about it. Of course, it is a dilemma that is not unique to mobile homes, despite being primarily associated with them. Throughout my time in Riverview, most of the allusions to trash in my fieldnotes are not in reference to Riverview, but to the road leading into the park, which featured some small houses and duplexes (all of which lacked garages), as well as a set of apartments. On that road, I often counted things like the number of couches on the roadside, the number of mattresses in the dumpster, and the number of days that had passed since a massive TV had been placed outside before it was taken away. Even as I write these words, I am living in a townhome far from Riverview, with painfully little storage. As I look out the window at the tiny back porch adjacent to ours, I see the impact of that garage-less reality: Just across the railing from my son's sandbox sits the toilet our neighbor replaced weeks ago.

Being at "Home" in a Mobile Home Park

I met the Martinez family in 2007. At the time, the family consisted of the mother, Maria, as well as her two young sons—aged nine and 11—and her live-in boyfriend, whose child she was carrying. Maria was cautious about us at first, an understandable mindset for a mother who was fiercely protective of her children. Despite the fact that their father had caused trouble right up until he was deported to Mexico, Maria was doing her best to raise those boys right (and they were indeed some of the most well-mannered kids I had ever met). The family lived in an older single-wide, typical of the park. She and her ex-husband had purchased the home used and moved it into the park themselves in 2001. The home was a 1972, but when I interviewed her years later, she was quick to tell me that "it wasn't really in bad condition, from where my ex-husband found it." For most of our time in the park, the Martinezes lived just across the street, and we saw them

almost daily. When our own trailer turned into a hub for community celebrations, one of the most memorable for me was a party to celebrate Victor and Marco's baby sister on her first birthday. We had a cookout, and Maria hired a clown. Like many park parents I have known over the years, Maria never let limited income keep her from finding ways to make her kids feel celebrated in a big way.

For our interview, we were sitting at a glass-topped breakfast table in an apartment on the south side of town. She and her sons had lived in this and similar apartments since they had left the trailer park in 2011, a few years after I moved away. When I asked her if she liked her mobile home, she answered emphatically, almost wistfully. "I did, because you know it *yours*. And you can do whatever you want to it, or paint it in whichever way, whichever color, you know. But I really liked it. And I miss it!" I asked what she missed about it. "Calling it my own home," she told me without skipping a beat. "Yeah, I do [miss it], you know. There's times when I tell Marco, you know, sometimes instead of buying a home, let's just go to a double-wide mobile home. Cause I like them!"

At the time that we were neighbors, Maria, a heavy-set Latina woman in her 30s, worked as a "team leader slash driver slash supervisor" for a company that cleaned houses. This work was incredibly hard on the body, and the damage to her back eventually kept her from working. While Maria told me she never really encountered negative attitudes about her home in her work setting—in fact, it seems that her coworkers admired her home ownership—she does remember that the boys experienced the stigma of mobile home living.

> And, of course, there's a lot of negative opinions and thoughts from people that don't have a clue what it is or how it is to live in a mobile home. Like I remember Victor one day coming home crying, telling me that a friend of his had called him a trailer tr… "trailer trash"? And I was like, "What?" Like I didn't understand what he was telling me. And he was like, "Don't you know that when you live in a mobile home, you're poor and this and that?" And I was like, "What?" Like, "No, like you got it wrong, dude. Like, you

> don't believe what people tell you, you know. They don't live here, so they don't know . . ." And I helped him understand that, you know, a mobile home is a *home*. It's just something that gets pulled to wherever you want to take it to (laughs).

When I sat down with Victor, now in his 20s, he also recounted the story. Interestingly, he, too, emphasized the concept of home. I asked him if living in the mobile home park had affected him at school.

> Well, when it came to the rich kids, they you know, would always call me "trailer trash" and that kind of stuff. But, other than that, I guess like when it came to school, like, I couldn't really relate to a whole lot of kids. Like, everyone had a home and this and that. Everyone would always talk about that, so when I didn't have like a legit home—like not a mobile home—for me as a kid it . . . kind of made me feel like I was lesser than other folks.

Like others I spoke to, however, Victor seemed conflicted in how he perceived his trailer. His interactions at school made it clear to him that he did not have a "legit home" in the eyes of his peers, and he internalized that in certain settings. However, when I pressed him on how he himself felt about it, he told me, "Well, to me it definitely felt like a home. Like, when I'm home, like I was happy. But the way other people perceived me because of where I lived, that's what really affected me."

The stigma associated with living in a trailer park poses a unique psychological dilemma for residents. Clearly, many (though not all) have deep feelings of "home" regarding their trailers and mobile homes. However, they also understand that the place they call home becomes a social liability as soon as they leave the boundaries of the park. Both Evan and Marco spoke fondly of their homes. However, they also both mentioned the effect mobile home living had on their prospects for romance. "I'd say dating life is definitely different when you live in a mobile home," Evan told me. "I mean, if you go on a date and you're gonna take a girl back home . . . there's always like a worry or a fear there a little bit, that they're not going to accept that you live

in a mobile home." Marco put it even more simply: "If you're trying to get a girlfriend, do not live in a mobile home." Residence in a mobile home park also had economic impacts via enacted stigma. As I mentioned in chapter three previously, this can manifest in the form of discrimination against job applicants whose addresses are in mobile home parks. For Evan, it also impacted his ability to access extra money to supplement his regular income. He told me of a recent effort to earn extra cash donating blood.

> Particularly the place that I went, they [turned me away] not based on tattoos or anything that I had, but based on where I lived. Specifically because I lived in a mobile home park, I was considered a transient, so I couldn't donate blood. I'm leased to this lot. I'm not moving anytime soon. So I'm not exactly sure where they get transient out of that, but it's an extra sort of income that's taken away from you.

My husband and I faced this dilemma of home-but-liability before we even moved into a neighborhood. We had been in the adoption process for over a year at the time that we moved from Kentucky to Colorado, where he was to start a new job and I would begin my research. The new job opportunity had come rather suddenly, and I found myself with a few brief days to find a good place to carry out my research in Colorado. I would have gladly plopped us down in any of the lowest-income rental spots, as they tend to be the most stigmatized, and stigma was central to my research. But the adoption made everything different. Unfortunately, moving states meant starting our adoption home study over again. Having previously lived in a largely rental park like Parkside, I knew without asking that I had to find the point of overlap between available mobile home space and a setting that a home study agent would approve. In the course of two days, I visited over 20 mobile home parks with available homes. Then I called a friend who does home studies for a local adoption agency, and I drove her through the few parks I thought might at least have a chance. In the end, she narrowed it down to two, only one of which she felt was totally guaranteed to pass as an acceptable neighborhood: Riverview. The park has no rentals and prohibits subletting, so we found ourselves doing something we had not anticipated: we bought a

mobile home in a neighborhood that, to me, looked like suburbia. While I later appreciated the chance to see the ways stigma played out even in a nice mobile home park, the dilemma felt frustrating at the time. While I had indeed toured a few parks that would justifiably give pause to an adoption agent, I knew that most of them were likely safe neighborhoods full of families and children to play with.

The role our adoption home study played in choosing a field site highlighted for me the power of mobile home parks as a symbol in American society. In the quest to adopt, whatever else was true about my character, or my background, or my potential to be a good parent, would take a backseat to the optics of living in such an "objectionable place" (Kusenbach, 2009). Even more so, the specific predicament of adoption points to how enduring these symbols can be. As early as 1951, other potential adoptive families were facing a similar situation. In a letter directed to the trailer-owning community, one prospective parent wrote "A Call to Arms":

> While participating in a recent discussion, I was surprised to learn that legitimate adoption agencies in California will not allow trailerists to take children. . . . I was told flatly by the supervisor of a local agency that she considered trailercoach housing wholly inadequate and unfit for a child. I questioned her about apartments and the answer was mainly "yes," while her wholesale approval went to houses. But I'm afraid it was pretty plain what her opinion of trailerists was. Now I wish to ask a few questions of my own—what is wholly inadequate about a modern trailercoach, is it the tiled bath and shower, the sparkling kitchen, the comfortable furniture? Why should it be unfit for a child that the father have a bank account, a small measure of security in these troubled times, instead of a crushing mortgage? If a man can be trusted enough to make payments on his three and four thousand dollar trailercoach, why can't be he trusted to adopt a child? Of course, I will admit, as you all must, that there are people who should never be allowed to adopt. They come from all walks of life, rich and poor, house, apartment or trailercoach. . . . I'm citing this one fact just to awaken your trailerists. From an unfortunate beginning of some

> rather seedy camps and not too inviting coaches, we have graduated to rolling palaces and a majority of beautiful parks. But we have left our mark with the general public and it's a bad one. Now we've got to fight our way out of it. (Shetler, 1951, p. 5)

Indeed, the bad mark Shetler spoke of has only become more indelible over time. So deeply ingrained is the symbolic link between mobile home residence and a slew of personal deficiencies that only the nicest park in town could make some home study agents believe that ours was a suitable home and family for a child. I had been excited about the prospect of moving back into a mobile home park for years, and suddenly the very places I looked forward to calling home were a liability in our effort to bring home our son.

Right There in the Middle: Claiming a Place on the Housing Ladder

While my neighbors seemed to understand that public perception placed them at the bottom of the totem pole, their own perspective of their place in the housing scene was much more nuanced. They clearly understood the fact that their home was a social liability, but particularly among those who owned their mobile homes, they also saw huge benefits. They knew they were a far cry from the huge houses that some of them cleaned, or plumbed, or built for a living, but they also considered themselves much better off than some—particularly those who shared walls with neighbors. After owning her mobile home for 14 years, Becky articulated this sense of being betwixt and between in the housing scene.

> You know, you're not in an apartment, but you're still real close. And the walls are thin. And it's just, anywhere. I don't care if it's a mobile home park, or another neighborhood, or a community with condos and townhouses, that are close together. You have to respect other people. You have to respect your neighbors. . . . I am not ever going to share a wall with anybody, and this is a step up from that, but a step below having a house with a real foundation. *So, I just feel like we're right there in the middle.* And you know, as far as affordability goes, that's where it's at. And that's the way I see this. You know, I may be here for the rest of my life. I don't know. Because moving's a bitch. I've got good

> neighbors. I have nothin' to cry about. Financially, I've got my payments under control on that. You know, I'm thinking to myself, why move? I've got good neighbors. I don't know my neighbors if I choose somewhere else to live.

Sometimes the arguments in favor of mobile home living were in direct opposition to the reasons outsiders often give for their inadequacy. One clear example was the issue of privacy, which has held a prominent place in the cultural conversation around trailers since the very beginning. Even though it wasn't my first time living in a mobile home park, my own field notes record frustrations with privacy early on. I recall saying that I felt like I couldn't discuss certain things because there were neighbors with open windows 20 feet away on either side of my house. Getting my son down for a nap was filled with anxiety that nearby noises would thwart my efforts at gaining a little break. One day, I wrote in my field notes about the frequency with which people closed their blinds, and I wondered if it was largely an effort to gain some privacy—trading sunlight for a chance to be hidden from view. I know we often made that trade and found it frustrating.

When I spoke to residents about their perspectives on living in a mobile home, however, privacy and ample space were almost always listed as some of the best parts of the experience. Victor chafed against sharing walls with his neighbors in the apartment complex where he had moved, and he felt cramped in his apartment after living Parkside.

> I'd say the biggest benefit of having a mobile home [compared] to an apartment was that . . . you have all that space. Like I said, [you have] the yard and your home, basically. It was still relative to having a house, kind of, but you still have a yard. But in an apartment [it's] just a little smaller and not what I was used to.

Maria was even more adamant that mobile homes were superior to apartment life. Her tone was emphatic when I asked her if there was anything better about apartment living.

> No. There's nothing better. And if you're gonna compare an apartment to a mobile home, the mobile home is the way to go because you have your own space. . . . In your mobile

home you have that peace where nobody's bothering you. It's like a home, you know? You don't hear what you hear like here in the apartment. It's very different.

Like Maria, Evan told me that, given the choice, he'd much rather be in a mobile home long term than in an apartment. "A mobile home is pretty much a full-sized house, and a lot of the time you're paying just as much for an apartment as for a mobile home. Well, why would I pay for an apartment when I have to worry about neighbors . . . making noise?" Evan also liked the freedom to change things in a mobile home, to move a shelf without worrying that he was breaking his lease.

Even for Jenny, whose family had been leasing their mobile home[10] and who had fewer positive feelings attached to her time living there, the privacy afforded by mobile home living was something she missed. Like the Martinez family, Jenny was living in an apartment with her new husband at the time that I interviewed her. She liked the apartment, saying that it was "nicer" and has more of a "house feel." But when I asked her if there was anything she liked more about the trailer, she didn't even let me finish my sentence. "Living in a trailer? It gives you more privacy. You don't have to worry about neighbors. Because sometimes at night I can hear them up there . . . and them over there making noise, and it can get annoying."

Despite feeling that mobile homes represent a place several steps above the bottom rung of the housing ladder, residents navigate a society that sees it differently. At the same time that he declared his preference for mobile homes over apartments, Evan admitted that he knew some of his dating and social woes would be lessened if he lived in the latter form of housing: "If I was living over in those new apartments, I don't think I would personally have that sort of self-conscious doubt of, 'Hey, come over,' and everybody just kinda look at me like I'm crazy." Again we see the dilemma of home-but-social-liability. If one's social identity is shaped by

[10]The lease-to-own, or contract-for-sale, model for purchasing a trailer is both common and immensely problematic. Though it lacks fees and other hurdles, it is also a precarious contract with plenty of avenues for exploitation of the lessee (Salamon & MacTavish, 2017).

perception irrespective of reality, then the shadow of the single story continues to have harmful outcomes for mobile home residents, no matter their own feelings about their homes. How then can we begin to address this single story?

5. BRIDGE BUILDING: ADDRESSING THE GAP BETWEEN A SINGLE STORY AND A COMPLEX REALITY

I talked with Susan in the summer of 2013 while I was completing a pilot study for this work, interviewing owners and managers of mobile home parks in the area around Lexington, Kentucky. On a blue-sky August day, I cruised down a freshly paved frontage road, parallel to the interstate. I passed the occasional home, but I mostly saw farms with their traditional white fences. Unlike the other parks where I had interviewed managers, West Shores has only one entrance, flanked by curved brick walls with "West Shores" in Old English script in large white letters. The park is laid out in overlapping circles, with themed street names, clearly designed to run counter to the traditional "barracks-like grid[1]. . . overcrowded and devoid of open space" ("Trailers Gaining Popularity in U.S. but Urban Planner Asserts Community Opposition to 'Parks' is Growing," 1960). The roads in West Shores were in better condition than my own neighborhood of single-family homes, smoothly paved, with concrete gutters throughout to keep spring rains from turning lots and streets into little lakes. In West Shores, a mix of older and newer model mobile homes sit on large lots, and I spotted only a few remaining hitches among them. Individual mailboxes dot the edges of the road, a change from the centralized mailboxes in most mobile home parks. Most of the units have substantially large yards, few of which have any semblance of clutter. Carports and gardens abound, and in a few instances, residents had even built two-car enclosed garages. It was without a doubt one of the nicest mobile home parks I had visited, and as I found out during our interview, one of the only parks I have visited where the residents owned both their homes and land.

Because the lots are resident-owned, Susan's job was to manage the upkeep of the common areas as well as the fees and regulations associated with the West Shores Homeowners'

[1] As recently as 2014, a *New York Times* article described mobile home parks as "more like an army base than a neighborhood" (Rivlin, 2014).

Association covenant. Full of humor and sass, at times seeming almost amused by the young graduate student in front of her, she told me she enjoyed her job at West Shores. Unlike some managers, who work at their park but live elsewhere, she had been living in the community for over 20 years and owned two homes and lots. Sitting her in office, looking out at the beautifully maintained homes and lawns of West Shores, I asked her if residents there experienced the stigma of living in a mobile home park despite the fact that the neighborhood fit none of the popular stereotypes in appearance. She filled in the label before I could mention it. "Trailer trash? Yea-ahah," she said emphatically, "we've heard that." I told her I was surprised people still faced that label, living in park that looked more like a suburban neighborhood. "Some people [hear it], some people don't. [But] you know, you gotta come out and see West Shores. You have to, you have to meet the people and see the goings-on. We're not trailer trash."

Peeling Back the Layers of Meaning

"You gotta come out and see." This simple sentence played a key role in how I came to think about stigma and mobile home parks. In his theory of symbolic interactionism, Herbert Blumer (1998) puts forth three premises about how society is shaped through interaction. The first is that "we interact with things based on the meaning we attach to them." For a basic illustration, let's return to our chair example from chapter two.[2] If the meaning of a chair to me is functional, a place to sit, then I will "interact" with that object in a different way than if the meaning I attach to chairs (and furniture in general) is connected to decoration and a display of form over function. In the first case, I take a seat. In the second, I stand back and appreciate the design. Blumer's second premise is that said meanings are created through social interaction; they are socially constructed, rather than innate to any person or object. None of us came out of the womb knowing what a chair was for. We have learned what to do with a chair through a lifetime

[2] The image of a chair is used briefly by Blumer himself in describing how we learn what an object is through the indications of those with whom we interact (Blumer, 1998, p. 11). It was also employed by Mead (as quoted in Dant, 1999, p. 122).

of observing and interacting with others who were using chairs, and we have not all emerged with the same meaning.[3] Lastly, Blumer asserts that these meanings are mutable. Being socially constructed, they are continually suspended, amended, or reinforced through an "interpretive process" that occurs in the ongoing flow of social interaction. In my world, a chair has almost always been a place to sit. But through enough interactions with people who design them as art, or through the experience of a sitting on a chair that wasn't meant to afford an ounce of comfort,[4] the meaning I attach to the object "chair" might begin to shift and gain nuance.

Obviously, the implications of Blumer's theory become more profound as we move from chairs to more culturally significant people, places, and things. As we saw in the previous chapter, the layers of meaning attached to the trailer, trailer parks, and trailer residents over time have an enormous impact on how society views and interacts with them. These meanings, constructed through an ongoing cultural struggle over how to define their place in the social structure, now coalesce to create a cultural environment in which Evan couldn't donate blood and Ellen counts living in a mobile home park among her greatest, most deep-rooted fears. As I spoke to managers, owners, and residents of mobile home parks, however, it was Blumer's third premise in particular that began to echo most in my mind: meanings can be changed, but only through the process of social interaction. Again and again, I heard in my interviews some variant of Susan's statement: *If people would come and see this place, they would see that we're not trash.*

It had definitely been my experience in Riverview that outside visitors were forced to nuance the meanings they had previously attached to mobile homes and mobile home parks; those who had never been in one invariably voiced some variation of "Wow, it's like a house" and "It looks like a regular neighborhood." When Maria emphasized for me that a mobile home was just

[3] Dant offers several other examples using a chair, including the object's design, biography, and attachment to personal memories (Dant, 1999).
[4] In this example of sitting on the chair rather than speaking about it, an individual learns through interactions with one's self, interpreting situations through a process of self-indication (Blumer, 1998).

a home, then, I asked her if she thought people's opinions might change if they were to walk into a mobile home. "Definitely," she told me. "I think the difference would be that they would literally see with their own eyes that it's like a regular home." Later in our interview, when I asked what she would say to help educate the kind of people who would think of her sons as "trailer trash," her response was similar.

> [I would tell them] to give themselves a chance to either live in one, or try to buy one. That way they can feel what it is to live in a mobile home. Because I think it would literally change the way they think. . . . And, if they would experience that, then they can help other people not be so stereotyped, you know? And just help them understand that living in a mobile home doesn't make you any worse or better than any other people out there.

Again, in Maria's answer, I heard the echo: *If only they would come and see for themselves, they would change their minds.*

I heard this sentiment even when I interviewed the owners of a business situated just outside the Village, along with one of their sales associates. Whitby Homes started selling mobile homes in the city in 1971, but Bob and Pam purchased the business from Mr. Whitby in the 80s, when he was ready to move on. Bob had been delivering and installing mobile homes since the early 60s, when 10-wides were the biggest models available, and their first home together was a single-wide mobile home measuring 12 x 52. Though the business focuses on modular homes now, they still sell single- and double-wide mobile homes as well. Despite the changes in construction standards in mobile homes, and the even higher standards in modulars, Pam told me with visible frustration that they constantly come up against prejudice among realtors and discrimination by city zoning boards. "The realtors have the least perception of what we do here," she told me, "They're the most surprised when they come in [to the office]. They think they're all mobile homes with the metals roofs and the tires up top." When I asked her what she would want people to know about the homes they sell—both modular and mobile homes—the answer had a

familiar ring to it. “They’ve just got to come and see it to believe what these homes are like. But the misconception, like I said, is just the old time, metal siding, metal roof, tires on top to keep it from rattling and all. Are these gonna blow over in the wind? You know, it’s a misconception.” There it was again. *They’ve just got to come and see it.*

Invisibility Keeps the Story Going

Thinking through Blumer’s theory of meaning making through interaction, and particularly his third premise, helps us return to my second research question: Even if we understand how we got to this place of “trailer trash” stigma, we are left with the question of *why* that stigma has been so amazingly sticky. Part of the answer lies in *lack* of meaningful interaction between the general public and trailer parks. The trouble is, of course, mobile homes and mobile home parks have long been marginalized and rendered largely invisible; Sullivan notes how “a century of planning and zoning law has codified the invisibility of mobile home parks into law” (2018, p. 186). If not relegated to obscure patches of land (as I said, most of my friends outside Riverview hadn’t even known it was there), mobile home parks are generally required to have a visual barrier surrounding the neighborhood (Sullivan, 2018). During the 1960s, one resident in Yorba Linda, California, admitted, “‘We call them the people inside the wall,’ and we’re ‘the people outside the wall’” (Kneeland, 1971). The result is that the only mobile home residents with which most people “interact” are those they encounter in news stories and in popular media representations; the only opportunity for meanings to be amended rather than reinforced are thwarted by repetition of the same tired stereotype. Even in satirical writing, the articulation of stereotypes, though framed as parody, serves only to reinforce them through repetition without replacement. In a trailer park article featured in *The Onion,* the farcical reporting follows a researcher who studies a trailer park in hopes of challenging misconceptions. Instead,

> The professor’s findings . . . only affirmed popular conceptions, with unemployment, sexual promiscuity and lack of education the norm among residents. Affirming widely held assumptions about trailer parks, Kilty’s Kourt is little more than a muddy field filled

> with mobile homes in various states of disrepair. The blighted park is littered with rusted cars up on blocks, half-attached screen doors, makeshift clotheslines with laundry hanging untouched for weeks, and toppled TV antennas. Nor do the park's inhabitants—obese women who take notice of their filthy, pantsless children only long enough to scream at them; skinny, shirtless men who stink of McCormick vodka most of the day; a cadre of Ku Klux Klan sympathizers; and a sprinkling of clinically insane veterans—shatter any myths. ("Local Trailer Park Shatters No Stereotypes," 1999)

Though written in a genre that is by definition built on exaggeration and absurdity, descriptions such as the one above reiterate an image that is widely accepted as reality even despite its asininity. The problem is that absurdity is rendered a meaningless descriptor once something is accepted as reality. As sociologists W. I. and D. S. Thomas famously proposed, "if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Oxford University Press, n.d. - b). Residents of mobile home parks experience very real consequences based on the belief, continually reinforced by popular media, that they are somehow anomalous and deficient. In fact, though the industry had made great strides, even early academic analyses defined mobile home parks as "Hillbilly Havens" or "transportable slums" filled with "lower-class people" and "destined to create [problems]," (French & Hadden, 1968, pp. 225–226). When those with the highest perceived credibility join those with the loudest voice in declaring a group of people as defective, society will treat them accordingly.

The Real Costs of Trashing the Trailer

These depictions of mobile home residents and their homes in the media have profound consequences for the further entrenchment of the "trailer trash" trope. This is true whether the perpetuation of the stereotype is intentional or not. As some scholars point out, "a wide variety of media messages can act as teachers of values, ideologies, and beliefs that can provide images for interpreting the world, whether or not the designers are conscious of this intent" (Gamson et al., 1992, p. 374). Whatever the motivation behind any specific construction of reality, the end result

is that media representations often serve as a proxy for any real interaction. This is the case for representations that are essentially caricatures, like the residents portrayed in *Trailer Park Boys* or the stigmatized bodies that grace the character cards in the *Trailer Park Wars* board game. It is also the case for selective representation of real-life mobile home parks, such as those found in sensationalized news stories. Goffman addresses the issue of selective, spectacle-driven representation in *Stigma*:

> Each time someone with a particular stigma makes a spectacle of himself . . . a local community may take gossipy note of this; these events can even make news in the mass media of the wider society. In any case, those who share the noted person's stigma suddenly become accessible to the normals immediately around and become subject to a slight transfer of credit or discredit to themselves. (1963, p. 27)

As mentioned earlier, mobile home parks have acquired an almost exotic sense of otherness in the American cultural imagination. They serve as the almost mythical setting for the portrayal of "those poor people," those "trailer trash" people, just as the Louisiana Bayou provides the setting for the weirdly exotic portrayal of the world of poor White Cajuns in The History Channel's *Swamp People* (notably, some of the main characters live in mobile homes, though sited on private land). This recalls the final tactic for handling a threatening anomaly, as proposed by Douglas (1966): a culture may use the anomalous symbol as one uses myth, "to call attention to other levels of existence" (p. 40). Reality TV shows like *Swamp People*, in fact, are one of the most common sites for the otherworldly portrayal of working-class Whites. In programs like *Duck Dynasty*, *Moonshiners*, *Myrtle Manor,* and *Here Comes Honey Boo Boo*, the image of the White "other" is naturalized through a genre that purports to accurately portray "reality" (Rennels, 2015b). Through the process of editing and the ability to use cameras and microphones to highlight certain angles, sights, and sounds, the weirdness and bodily excess presumed to be central to the world of working-class Whites can be given center stage (Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008; Rennels, 2015b).

This treatment of mobile home parks as a different world is also common in news media, where stigma is perpetuated through stereotyped allusions that implicitly attribute a set of individual pathological behaviors to an entire group of people (Perez Portilla, 2018). For example, the word "trailer" is often used in a headline that would normally include the word "home." A man was not found shot to death in his home; he was found shot to death in his trailer. This immediately becomes a different kind of shooting for the reader, the portrayal now an exploitative form of "poverty porn" (Wasserman, 2013). This is a shooting in one of *those* neighborhoods, the victim one of *those* people. As Goffman notes, the discredit earned via spectacle is transferred to other parks and to other mobile home residents. Trailer parks must be the kind of place where people are shot to death. Mobile home residents must be the kind of people who would be involved in such criminal goings-on. In these news stories, the anomaly of mobile home living continues to serve as a mythical vision of another world, another level of existence. Even in articles whose emphasis is on mobile home park investors rather than specifically about park residents, the most sensationalized stories are used to exoticize their business endeavor. "When Dan Wiessman worked at Goldman Sachs," opens a *Washington Post* article about white-collar park owners, "he didn't have to worry about methamphetamine addicts chasing his employees with metal pipes. Or SWAT teams barging into his workplace looking for arsonists" (Effinger & Burton, 2014). These aren't white-collar things, the story implies; these are trailer park things.

As we have already discussed, the "trailer trash" trope is reinforced not only through news media but through films, television, video games, theater, music, literature, and other forms of media. Its presence is ubiquitous because its importance as a class and culture symbol in American society is profound. In their analysis of high and low discourses in literature, Stallybrass and White assert representations of the low in society are indispensable because "what is *socially* peripheral is so frequently *symbolically* central" (Stallybrass & White, 1986, p. 5, italics original). And so, mobile home residents make their way in a world that interacts with

them based on a meaning that is seldom rooted in any regular or significant encounters with their actual lives—a society more concerned with the maintenance of its hierarchies than with accurate representations of its citizens. People assume all sorts of things, said my neighbors.

That you're poor and worthless. (Marco)

That you're unintelligent. (Carol)

That you don't have good, working parents. (Victor)

That you're a redneck. (Evan)

That you're ugly. (Jenny)

In other words, mobile home residents live under the shadow of a single story, perpetuated unrelentingly by those with the power to shape the narrative of high and low in society—usually those at the top of the socio-economic ladder (Stallybrass & White, 1986). We will discuss the socio-economic (and political) actors at play in American society more later in this chapter.

Stigma Relies on Power: Unequal Power Relations in Mobile Home Parks

In "Conceptualizing Stigma," Link and Phelan (2001) make a crucial statement: "Stigma is entirely dependent on social, economic, and political power—it takes power to stigmatize." A stereotype without added power remains simply a stereotype, not a harmful stigma. This is why the powerless can stereotype the powerful without any stigma resulting from the process. The working class, for example, may have deeply ingrained stereotypes about the corporate bosses who control them, but those bosses do not inhabit a stigmatized identity in society. The power structures at play become less obvious, say Link and Phelan, when "power differences are so taken for granted as to seem unproblematic" (2001, p. 375). In the case of trailer parks, we've seen power at work in discriminatory practices, whether through zoning or the inability to donate blood, consistently framed as unproblematic because they "protect the general welfare" of the community. Other scholars have highlighted the way trailer residents are affected by power imbalances through predatory lending practices (Salamon & MacTavish, 2017; Sullivan, 2018). We have also seen it at work in the immensely powerful media. As is the case with similar

redneck and hillbilly tropes, trailer stigma is framed in media representations as an innocuous farce, "a *cultural joke*, circulated through trailer trash magnets, trailer trash films, and trailer trash jokes on *The Tonight Show*" (D. Smith, 2003, p. 127, italics mine). In this way, the stigma on which the "joke" relies is framed as entirely unproblematic.

The stakeholders at work in maintaining the "trailer trash" stereotype—the media, lenders, and zoning boards being only a few examples—represent all fields of power listed by Link and Phelan: social, economic, and political.[5] These groups and actors hold immense cultural influence and, most importantly, "control access to major life domains like educational institutions, jobs, housing, and health care [and thus can] put really consequential teeth into the distinctions they draw" (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 376). In other words, these groups have the power not only to define something as real but to direct the outcomes of that belief. These power dynamics play out on both large and small scales. They impact residents' lives at the level of interaction, through park management, and from a distance, through mechanisms such as absentee ownership and real estate investors.

Fighting for Dignity: Power Dynamics Inside the Parks

After 14 years in Riverview, Becky had witnessed a revolving door of park managers, as well as seeing the park change from a family-owned enterprise to a corporate-owned one. It was purchased by RHP, the largest owner of mobile home parks in the nation. When we first moved in, a particularly unpopular manager—Allie—was still working there. Becky warned us early on that Allie had a habit of losing rent checks and then blaming it on the crevices in the drop box. Multiple times, Becky had received eviction notices before Allie finally realized that the check had in fact been paid on time. With her characteristic mix of warmth and sass, Becky told us she

[5] Brodkin likewise points to these fields of power when differentiation between ethnoracial assignment and ethnoracial identity in the case of American Jews. While ethnoracial identity is something we construct for ourselves, ethnoracial assignment "is about popularly held classifications and their deployment by those with national power to make them matter economically, politically, and social to the individuals classified" (2006, p. 3). We develop our ethnoracial identity within the context of this outwardly given ethnoracial assignment.

had taken the matter into her own hands. The month after her last notice, she placed her check in a fluorescent colored pet waste baggie, added some random items for weight and bulk, and dropped the whole thing in the drop box. “There’s no way you’re gonna miss that check,” she told us, laughing.

While she was able to laugh as she told us the tale of the fluorescent poop bag, Becky’s interactions with management caused her to express more emotion than I witnessed from her in any other scenario. Laid-back and fun-loving, Becky’s feathers were not easily ruffled. She was ever the diplomat, always suggesting effective but minimally confrontational solutions to issues with neighbors. In my three-year tenure at Riverview, I saw her get visibly angry only a handful of times, and always in response to feeling disrespected or mistreated by managers in the park. One January afternoon, I recorded the following encounter:

> Today, as I was getting on my bike, Becky came across the street, more purposefully than usual. She had papers in her hand. Her face appeared agitated, and I asked her how she was. She told me she was furious, and showed me the pink slip that had been placed on her steps. It said it was the second notice about needing to pay rent or vacate. She never got a first notice, and either way, she paid her rent. She was furious that they didn’t call or knock on the door (she was home at the time that they delivered the notice), and that she called the answering service, but didn’t think they’d call back. She dropped the f-bomb at one point and immediately apologized.

Later that day, Becky texted me to let me know it had been worked out and to thank me for letting her “blow her stack.” The level of anxiety and anger I witnessed in my otherwise easygoing neighbor that day demonstrated for me one of the key ways that unequal power relations within the park—oftentimes rooted in the stigmatized perceptions of owners and

managers of parks—can be carried within the bodies of residents.[6] While further research would be required to speak conclusively, it seems likely that the stress associated with "trailer trash" stigma, whether enacted through park management or others, may produce negative health outcomes similar to the well-documented physical impacts of racism. There is a substantial body of evidence that the stress associated with racial discrimination has serious consequences for the mental and general health of minority populations (see for example Anderson, 2013; Williams, 1999).

Relations between park managers and their residents have been heavily influenced by the recent movement away from "mom and pop" ownership of mobile home parks and toward a model of absentee ownership by large corporations. It was easy to see how this trickled down to management and then played on at the level of interactions within the park. During an evening conversation in the street with Becky and another neighbor, Cathy (who had lived in the park since it opened), the two ladies reminisced about management over the years. They spoke at length about a manager who had worked at the park while it was still family owned. "Gayle stood up for us," Becky told me. "She fought for us." Cathy agreed: "Yes, we were her people. She wasn't going to let anyone touch her people." During Gayle's tenure, the park had a thriving social calendar at the clubhouse, including weekly kids club, movie nights, and various holiday gatherings. When the park was purchased by RHP Properties, they cut out almost all social activities and let go of the people who had been running the kids club. "They wanted the profit margin to seem larger," Cathy said. Under corporate ownership, Becky observed that the owners were "just looking for a warm body. Which is what most corporates do. Just get a warm body in there." During another conversation, a woman from just down the street echoed Becky's sentiment when she described a conversation with one of our shortest-lived managers: "She kept

[6] Sullivan found a similar embodying of unequal power relations in her work on evictions in mobile home parks. Park residents were constantly "haunted" by uncertainty and a sense of helplessness against the possibility of forced displacement (Sullivan, 2018).

saying corporate this, and corporate that. Corporate, corporate, corporate. These are people, not a corporation. She will have to realize that she works for the people who live here, not corporate."

In many cases, the managers hired by absentee owners seemed to base their interactions more on popular stereotypes than on any real knowledge of or respect for their residents. I distinctly remember a holiday party where an interim manager, sent by corporate, was talking about the raffle: "One draw per trailer!" she announced cheerfully. The tension in the room was immediately palpable. In a nice park like Riverview, "trailer" is an insult. Next to me, Joe—a jovial, well-liked man who owned a Harley and looked every bit the part—said quietly and with disgust, "Trailer? It's a mobile!" Something about that moment and the look on Joe's face epitomized for me the interactions I saw between managers and residents during almost my entire time in Riverview. Luckily, Joanne, despite her tales of "Cheez Whiz sucking trailer trash" from the Midwest, treated the residents of Riverview with respect, almost affection. I left feeling hopeful that the community might again find themselves with a manager who "wasn't going to let anyone touch [her] people." Still, Joanne frequently expressed concern with upsetting "the brass," so I knew she, too, felt the pressure of pleasing corporate first and foremost.

Even in parks that remain family owned, however, not all managers are like Gayle. Parkside was owned by a couple who had acquired the park through an in-house transfer in 1992—the first time the park changed hands since it was built in 1959. Rather than hiring an on-site manager, as was once common, Frank and Lois commuted 45 minutes from their large ranch-style home on 10 acres to manage the park themselves. While Lois was generally hidden away in the RV-turned-office, Frank took care of any face-to-face interactions. Within a month of being there, we found it difficult to refer to him as anything but a slumlord. Trying to capture my thoughts, I wrote,

> It has been difficult to watch [our neighbors] be taken advantage of again and again. Charging outlandish rents (when compared with the assessed value of the actual trailers) and ignoring code requirements in the name of being cheap, our landlords seem to have

> no problem kicking folks while they're down. Meanwhile, they drive home to a huge house in the richest part of town, and take annual vacations to Hawaii. (Personal communication, 2010)

The assessed value of our home, for example, was just under 25 percent of what we paid monthly for rent and water; In other words, every single month we shelled out four times the assessed value of the home. All the while, we were consistently threatened with fines and received repairs that were patchwork at best. Our neighbors in Parkside also had negative memories of Frank. "Sometimes he was really mean to people," Maria told me. "He would just ignore people and he would wait as long as he could to help them on whatever they needed to get done in their mobile homes." Marco and Jenny recalled him being friendly to them as kids, offering "a dollar and some candy" to pull weeds and such, but remember him as "harsh" and "verbally threatening" in his interactions with their parents. Jenny's last interaction with him was on the day that he evicted her family, a week before winter settled in. She pushed back against his condescension the best way she knew how as a teenager who was about to be homeless: she scrawled "I hope you can live with yourself knowing that you put a minor out in the cold" in permanent marker on the wall.

Even as we faced similar frustrations with ridiculous fees and shoddy repairs, my roommates and I were treated better than our neighbors overall. Frank realized early on that we were not under the specter of homelessness if evicted, as was the case for most of our neighbors, and that we had a good sense of our rights. After only a couple instances in which he demanded we do something and we responded with, "No. You can't legally require that," Frank changed his tone with us. He began to speak to us with a gentler voice and frequently attempted small talk about things outside the park. Others, lacking our safety net, could not afford to stand up for themselves, and they paid the price. When we moved out of our black-mold-riddled trailer and into the one across the street, we watched in dismay as Frank put a fresh coat of white paint on the outside of our old home and promptly moved in a family with small children.

Power from a Distance: Absentee Ownership of Parks

The stigma attached to mobile home parks and their residents, along with the narrow interpretation of many symbols there, can become particularly nefarious when combined with unequal power structures that directly affect park operations at a higher level than management. Just as I often witnessed managers interacting with residents based more on stereotypes than any real knowledge of the people and their lives, the same tendency can be seen among those Joanne referred to as "the brass." The pattern of allowing actions to be guided by stereotypes has taken root more and more at the highest levels of the park industry, as the trend toward absentee and corporate ownership gives power into the hands of people whose interactions with mobile home residents may consist solely of a walk-through before buying the property. In 2015, one journalist attending a conference about mobile home parks spoke with an attendee who "owns a trailer park but has yet to step inside a trailer" (Neate, 2015). Owners have referred to mobile home parks as "the Dollar General of housing," "the Walmart of housing," and "a Waffle House where everyone is chained to the booths" (Effinger & Burton, 2014; Rivlin, 2014). If those who control the property operate from a diminished, stigmatized definition of the neighborhood and its residents, the enactment of stigma is unavoidable. While it seldom plays out at the level of interaction, as is often the case with park management, the enactment of stigma through corporate or absentee ownership can still have crushing consequences for residents. A 1992 article in *The Boston Globe* decried "the emergence of a new breed of park owner who has sharply increased lot rents, forcing hundreds of families from their last refuge as homeowners," as many discover that their "dream [of affordable home ownership] has dissolved" (Hohler, 1992). Rents were raised several times during my tenure at Riverview, a situation that continually caused frustration and anxiety in the community. At a gathering in the clubhouse one January day, I spoke with Roberta, who had likewise felt her dream of security dissolve. "When I moved here, I thought, 'I'm home,' but I wasn't," she told me. While she complained of managers being abusive and disrespectful, real panic entered her voice when she spoke about the rising rents. She had heard of one nearby

neighbor whose rent was raised almost $200. “There’s no way I can afford that on a fixed income,” she told me. Roberta, who feared she would need to drop home insurance in order to pay the rent, told me that instead of feeling at home, she felt trapped.

Mobile Home University

One glaring example of the perpetuation of “trailer trash” stigma at the top of the power structure is Mobile Home University (MHU). The organization—“devoted to providing . . . the most accurate and up-to-date information on the mobile home industry, based on 100% fact and no fiction” (MHU website)—is run by Franke Rolfe and Dave Reynolds, who together have a $500-million mobile home park portfolio (Sullivan, 2018). Several times a year, to the tune of a $2,000 registration fee, eager investors can attend Rolfe’s “Mobile Home Boot Camp” to learn how to turn a profit on struggling mobile home parks. During her research regarding the larger processes at work in mobile home park evictions, Sullivan attended one of these boot camps. There, she found herself submersed in a course about “the basics of profiting off poverty housing,” where Rolfe touted the ways in which deepening American poverty promises stable returns for mobile home park owners (Sullivan, 2018, pp. 160–161). At times, the rhetoric at these training retreats is demeaning at best. While Rolfe repeatedly warns attendees visiting parks not to make fun of residents, a remark that might seem benevolent on the surface, he seems more interested in staying out of trouble than actually advocating for the dignity of residents. In one video recording of a boot camp, Rolfe prepares attendees for an upcoming field trip to see a park by offering some basic instructions: “When we’re out on the property,” he says, “don’t make fun of the people, even though their lifestyle is gonna be pretty depressing. Don’t say ‘Gee, what an idiot’ because they’re probably going to be standing in their yard. You know, don’t go throw peanuts to them or something” (CREUniversity, 2012). As he says this, he gestures like he’s throwing food to an animal, and the attendees laugh loudly. This crowd of people—learning that you ought to be nice to residents, but that they are the kind of animal-like people who will make

you want to exclaim, “Gee, what an idiot!”—these are the people who leave the boot camp and move on to buy parks in order to make a profit off those whose lives are marked by precarity.

Rolfe seems to talk out of both sides of his mouth at times. In one article on the MHU website, declaring mobile homes as the winner of “the superbowl of real estate,” Rolfe suggests that the stigma about mobile home parks is not always well-founded. He states,

> there is a huge stigma wall that keeps most investors out of this asset class. People think that “trailer parks” are all about crime and poverty. They’re not. The typical mobile home park is a community of folks that do not have high incomes, but have the same lifestyle and aspirations as everyone else. They take care of their property, wash their cars, send their kids to school, everything that people in a subdivision do.

However, these moments of challenging the stereotype are rare. Gary Rivlin, who interviewed Rolfe for a *New York Times* article about MHU, noted that Rolfe seems to have a narrow view of park residents and observed that he entered the industry in part because “he discovered that he was drawn to what was to him an exotic, fringe world that he had stumbled into” (Rivlin, 2014). Rolfe’s rhetoric does call to mind the use of trailer parks as a supposed window into another world, a world whose “weirdness” he finds entertaining (Rivlin, 2014). In expressing his affection for the weird, he shares stories that achieve the transfer of stigma described by Goffman, transmitting the taint of the spectacular few onto the reputations of the many—onto those whom Evan described as normal and Susan called “just your average Joe.” In part, this aspect of Rolfe’s rhetoric in the boot camp setting serves as a form of boundary work, maintaining symbolic class boundaries so as to assuage attendees’ fears about what Goffman (1963) would call “courtesy stigma”—essentially, stigma by association. In the world of hedge funds and money making, owning mobile home parks “doesn’t sound good at a cocktail party” (Effinger & Burton, 2014). While Rolfe doesn’t speak directly to the challenge of overcoming the “embarrassment in associating yourself with the trailer-park business,” (Rivlin, 2014) his reliance on stereotyped images symbolically maintains cherished boundaries between a middle-class

prospective owner and his future working-class tenants. It maintains the aura of the mobile home park as a mythical "other," and in fact boot camp attendees told Sullivan that part of the draw toward boot camp was a chance to encounter "life on the other side of the income scale" (Sullivan, 2018, p. 175). Indeed, corporate owners in other settings often frame mobile home park ownership as a way of entering into a world that is entirely other. "It's hairy, and it's colorful, and it's sometimes scary," said one San Francisco–based owner of several parks (Effinger & Burton, 2014). He adds that he has been grateful for the chance to glimpse the world of the American poor, a view that has made him more appreciative of what he has.

"To stereotype is to erect a boundary between yourself and those you don't want on your side of the chicken wire," says Goad. "It's like grabbing one of those flashlight-thick felt-tipped pens . . . and drawing a thick LINE between YOU and THEM" (1997, p. 76). This process of maintaining cherished boundaries between groups is important for a group such as MHU, because it is easier to justify benefiting from another's misfortune when you are on the other side of the chicken wire, clearly on separate sides of that flashlight-thick dividing line. In its grossest applications, this mindset has been used to justify everything from slavery and eugenics to the Jim Crow policies that prompted the civil rights movement. In the world of mobile home park ownership, it primarily justifies financial exploitation. "It costs $3,000 to move a mobile home from one park to another. As a result, tenants cannot leave when you raise their rents," writes Rolfe in one of his numerous short articles on the MHU website (Rolfe, n.d.). In fact, the MHU model of profiting from park ownership relies on the fact that many mobile home tenants have nowhere to go, even if they feel the rent increases are unjust. He knows that, increasingly, people like Roberta really are trapped in place—or as Rolfe said, chained to the Waffle House booths—and this fact means dollar signs for any potential park owner.

Thus, from the media to municipal legislation, from local park management to the highest levels of industry and investment, the chicken wire boundary between "trailer trash" and respectable citizens is firmly established and continually maintained. If stigma indeed relies on

power, having so many powerful actors invested in maintaining the "trailer trash" trope means that the task of contesting culture's story about trailer parks and trailer residents is a daunting one.

Challenging Power Structures at the Source

Link and Phelan suggest that one important way to address stigma is to "change the power relations that underlie the ability of dominant groups to act on their attitudes and beliefs" (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 381). In her work on evictions, Sullivan calls primarily for this approach, unveiling the structural issues of housing inequity that plague the lives of mobile home residents and increase their sense of precarity and further diminish their sense of personal worth. She makes recommendations for change ranging from establishing a clear understanding of residents' rights to enacting regulations that increase protection from mistreatment and eviction, to advocating for resident-owned parks and community land trusts as possible alternatives to traditional models of mobile home park ownership (Sullivan, 2018, pp. 198, 203). Salamon and MacTavish, who research trailer parks specifically in rural areas, likewise promote an approach that challenges power structures related to what they have termed the "Mobile Home Industrial Complex" (MHIC). The term is meant to "capture the interlocked markets" that comprise mobile home parks as a form of affordable housing (Salamon & MacTavish, 2017, p. 14) and includes mobile home manufacturers, dealers, and financers, as well as park operators, investors, and municipal powers. Based on decades of research, these scholars suggest practical changes at every level of the MHIC.

In my research, I am less interested in the structural or socio-legal approaches these scholars take. Though these approaches are an absolute necessity to address the influence of "trailer trash" stigma on the lived experiences of mobile home residents, I assert that efforts to change structures cannot stand alone. These important changes mitigate the practical impacts of cultural stigma—we might think of them as symptoms of the disease—but they fail to address the stigma itself, which is continually created and maintained at a symbolic level.

Interrogating the issue from a more symbolic interactionist perspective, I am concerned with confronting stigma at its root—the symbolic boundary lines that separate "us" and "them," the traditionally housed and the deviant mobile home dweller. Delgado similarly acknowledged the need for change at the level of symbol in his work on racial stigma. While inequality for minorities plays out practically at the level of legislation and institution, "for many minority persons, the principal instrument of their subordination is . . . the prevailing *mindset* by means of which members of the dominant group justify the world as it is" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2413, italics original). Delgado's approach suggests that we change the stigma by challenging the deeper narratives underlying the systems. Stories are subversive, he says, serving as "a powerful means for destroying mindset—the bundle of presuppositions, received wisdom, and shared understandings against a background of which legal and political discourse takes place" (Delgado, 1989, p. 2413).

Challenging the Narrative: Telling a Better Story

Toward the end of our interview, I asked Ellen what she thought might change that kind of guttural fear response to the thought of living in a mobile home park. Our time together had been as much a conversation as an interview, and I could tell she had been reflecting on this already.

> How could I change those attitudes? Probably just what you were saying, about bridging the gap. Getting to know people in a trailer home community would probably do it. Communication, openness, getting to know people. That would probably be it. So then the question is, you know, are you motivated to do that? [It would take] having an awareness of it and then [being] willing to try and make that change. And I don't know, just in a more general or universal sense, if some of those things were changed in the media, that would certainly help in a more subtle way.

Ellen lists two strategies that could help her attach new meanings to trailer parks in her own life: first, spend some time in mobile home parks and get to know their residents on a personal level,

and second, change how mobile home parks and their residents are portrayed in media. Per Blumer, the first strategy would be most effective, as personal interaction is the most potent tool in helping us suspend and amend the meanings we hold dear. Interactions with residents have the potential not only to challenge stories about the legitimacy of a mobile home as a home; they can also confront assumptions about other aspects of the popular image of "trailer trash." This first strategy is the one that impacted my own perspective so profoundly.

Reading a Different Message: Patch Jobs and Parties

Part of challenging deeply entrenched stereotypes involves acknowledging that a story is incomplete and then being willing to listen to the *whole* story. In some cases, it means being open to a different story entirely. This was one of Parkside's great gifts to me, a change that broadened my view and ultimately led me into the field of sociology. Years later, my time in Riverview continued to broaden the story of mobile home parks for me. Though the examples are myriad, let me offer two of them here.

When I think of messages inscribed on the homes and lots of my neighbors, two images stand out in my memory, particularly from my three years in Riverview. The first of these is the image of duct tape. Once, following an after-dinner walk, I wrote in my fieldnotes that the evening light somehow made the dingier aspects of the neighborhood more visible. A heavily caulked window crack where I hadn't noticed it, or a ragged sheet where I had assumed a curtain hung. And always duct tape—on car windows, house windows, and a panoply of other small things in need of repair. In the framework of the single story told about "trailer trash," duct tape might symbolize any number of personal deficiencies: laziness, indifference, perhaps even a lack of the intelligence necessary to gain basic repair skills. As the years passed in Riverview, however, the story began to look different to me. In time, when I saw duct tape, it symbolized to me the precarity that many of my neighbors faced on a daily basis. Proud to be homeowners but living on a limited income, many residents couldn't afford to fix the issues that regularly arise when one's home is made of cheaper materials (in our home, someone leaned against a window

early on and the glass was cracked from that point forward) or one's car is pushing 200,000 miles. In many cases, residents in mobile home parks are one major mishap away from financial ruin, so the best course of action available is often a temporary repair with strips of America's favorite fix-all.

This sense of precarity is inherent to a situation where, as Joanne told me, "They own the houses; I own the land." Once, about a year and a half into my time in Riverview, my parents were visiting for the weekend. I was telling them about the interim manager, about how she had thus far treated the residents rudely and been quick to impose harsh fines for seemingly small infractions. My dad, in his classic humor, spoke of all the ways he would retaliate, or the snarky things he might say. Later that night, I reflected on the conversation. "I just couldn't help but think that [Dad] . . . doesn't understand the precarity of what it means to be on a piece of land that you don't own, and in a house that you can't really take anywhere else either legally or financially," I wrote. While my neighbors and I owned our homes, many of us outright, the pride of that home ownership was somewhat weakened by the fact that someone could evict us from the land beneath us.

Again, that sense of precarity is carried on the body. The knowledge that the assumed security of home ownership can be rendered null by the inability to pay rent on the land creates a sense of underlying anxiety and a compromised sense of dignity. This is the anxiety and felt stigma that caused Becky to show such strong emotion each time she received an unwarranted eviction notice. Similarly, one of my earliest memories at Riverview is stopping by the clubhouse to sign the lease. I got there just in time to see another man leaving the office. "Here's four," he told the manager. "You've got eight more coming" (he appeared to be discussing money). She looked at him with hesitation and a hint of reproach. "Hey," he said with a tone of resignation, "I don't *like* living like this."

The second image that stands out in my mind when I think of my years in Riverview is not one I would have anticipated: the bounce house. I was caught off guard the first time I drove

down my street and saw a bounce house filling up every square inch of my neighbor's driveway. It is, frankly, an absurd sight: a giant inflatable castle crammed into a space that isn't meant to hold a giant anything. It turned out to be the first of many times I would see bounce houses in Riverview and other parks within the Village. In Riverview, they were always in the driveway, but residents in parks without driveways had to get creative, cramming them into yards barely big enough for a trampoline, much less a blow-up castle. Viewed through the lens of the single story about "trailer trash," a bounce house sitting on a driveway simply looks tacky. Bounce houses don't fit into high-class consumption repertoires in general, but even less so when packed into a physical space they were not designed to fit in. They force partygoers into the street and create noise that can be heard streets away. And later, when the party is over and the bounce house is deflated, the sight of a giant sagging pile of brightly colored nylon spilling over onto the sidewalk just adds to the image of the junky lot. As with duct tape, however, as time went on, the image of the bounce house became part of a different story for me; bounce houses came to symbolize the importance of family to my neighbors. Each time I saw an inflatable castle sitting in a yard or driveway, I knew that the giant rental likely represented a significant financial sacrifice for someone. Even the smallest rental costs 30 to 50 percent of lot rent in Riverview, no small amount for a family on a tight budget. For many park families, however, the chance to have their children feel like they have a celebration that is literally big takes precedence over repairing many of the things they simply apply duct tape to instead.

On some level, the kinds of changed meanings I experienced are possible for someone like Ellen. Individuals can choose to seek out ways to personally "bridge the gap," particularly when some aspect of their lives occasionally brings them into contact with mobile home parks, as did Ellen's sales business. However, fostering personal connections with mobile home residents on a grand, societal scale is a tall order. Many strategies (such as offering the sort of park tours that take place for attendees of MHU's boot camp—a method that echoes the industry of "slum tourism" that takes wealthy travelers into favelas, barrios, and shantytowns across the globe

(Shepard, 2016)), run the risk of further othering and exoticizing mobile home park residents. Still, a homologous approach, emphasizing personal connection, is worthy of future discussion among stakeholders interested in countering the "trailer trash" stereotype. Salamon and MacTavish's recommendation that communities end the de facto segregation of mobile home park children in many school districts is one approach that would directly increase interaction between park residents and residents from the broader community (2017).

The issue of power remains important when we discuss the need to change attitudes about mobile home residents. While shifting attitudes among the general populace is important, all the while we continue to feed on the messages and representations dispensed by those holding cultural sway. Thus, in this discussion of addressing stigma at the level of symbol, or what Delgado called "mindset," I am particularly interested in the issue Ellen so clearly called out when I asked her what might create a world in which she was less fearful of mobile home parks: the power of media representations to shape perceptions. As previously mentioned, these representations often serve as a proxy for actual interaction in the case of mobile home residents, and this has profound implications.

> We walk around with media-generated images of the world, using them to construct meaning about political and social issues. The lens through which we receive these images is not neutral but evinces the power and point of view of the political and economic elites who operate and focus it. And the special genius of this system is to make the whole process seem so normal and natural that the very art of social construction is invisible. (Gamson et al., 1992, p. 374)

In other words, the media has incredible power to define what is real for a culture, and as we discussed previously, once something has been defined as real, it will have very real consequences. And if the "reality" has been successfully framed as normal and natural, the outcomes will likewise be accepted as the natural way of things. Repeated often enough and made to seem unremarkable, popular images take on this sense of normalcy. Just as it is difficult to

counter images of dangerous Black males when movies continue to cast Black men as thugs, it is hard to reframe the image of mobile home residents while *Trailer Park Boys* runs for twelve seasons. And it is difficult to change perceptions when news coverage continually emphasizes the trailer as a setting for pathological behavior. Commenting on the similar impact of the misrepresentation of Latino populations in news media, Juan Gonzales notes,

> Media shapes reality as well as reporting it. We are seeing images, not as the world is but as someone who gathered all that information, distilled it and decided what was important for us to understand. Therefore, that process of explaining to people what the world is, is really a powerful process. If it's incomplete, if it's biased, if it's stereotypical, it will then become reality for those who receive it because they don't have much else to counter that. (quoted in Picker & Sun, 2012)

In news media as well as other forms of media, those who gather and distill information, deciding which images viewers and readers of media ought to see, hold high rank in the American power structure. Thus, Link and Phelan suggest that it is necessary to "change the deeply held attitudes and beliefs of *powerful groups* that lead to labeling, stereotyping, setting apart, devaluing, and discriminating" (2001, p. 381, italics mine). In other words, it is even more effective to change the minds of those with the power to shape public perception.

Admittedly, to push back against media portrayals is a tall order. Cooke-Jackson and Hansen suggest that "it would be unrealistic to expect media content producers to abandon stereotypes or ignore their bottom lines" (2008, p. 193). There is a great deal of money to be made in creating characters whom audiences feel justified mocking as entertainment. However, challenging powerful media images *is* possible. Gamson and colleagues assert that "the underdetermined nature of media discourse allows plenty of room for challengers such as social movements to offer competing constructions of reality" (1992, p. 373). Though stubborn and sticky, media images can be challenged, particularly if one draws support from those who have found the single story to be untrue in their daily lives (Gamson et al., 1992).

The Unique Dilemma of the Trash Trope

Before practical approaches to challenging media representations can be considered in the case of "trailer trash" stigma, future advocacy-oriented research in this field must pay specific attention to the unique paradox of class and race implications inherent in the label, largely by virtue of its close association with the label "White trash." In America, a society marked by a culture of White supremacy, where racial categories have life-and-death consequences for minority groups, voices advocating for an end to the misrepresentation of poor Whites will undoubtedly be met with resistance and accusations of absurdity.[7] This is all the more true in our current political context, where poor Whites have been made into the poster children for the far right political base.[8] It is a profound challenge, then, to humanize trailer residents in such a way that others will acknowledge the harm caused by the stereotyped identity residents inhabit and find its impact significant enough to be worth combatting. Hence, developing a strategy to foster such humanization requires attention to the nuances inherent in the ascribed identity of "trailer trash."

As we have seen, the terms "trailer trash" and "White trash" are often used almost interchangeably. The degree to which they are interlinked calls for an exploration of both identities when examining stereotyped media images. In fact, where "trailer trash" is mentioned in studies of media culture, it is generally placed under the larger umbrella of "White trash," with the trailer itself employed as one of the most prominent, unmistakable symbols of "White trash"

[7] Even in countries with more detailed guidelines regarding the use of stereotypes in reporting, a group like "white trash" would find little protection. In developing her models for disrupting media stereotypes in the United Kingdom, Perez Portilla draws attention specifically to forms of (mis)representation that she asserts could be considered hate speech. They are representations of statuses covered, for example, by the Editor's Code of Ethics for the UK's main independent regulator of print media, whose discrimination clause prohibits pejorative references or unnecessary levels of detail regarding an individual's "race, colour, religion, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation or . . . any physical or mental illness or disability" (National Union of Journalists, 2011). This code affords little protection to groups of marginalized whites, as whiteness is clearly not a protected racial identity, and class status is nowhere to be found in the categories protected by the code of ethics.

[8] This, again, is a single story. At the same time that my neighbors had a "Killory Clinton" headstone in their yard for Halloween in 2016, another home up the street posted signs supporting democratic candidates for every election during my tenure at Riverview. However, the white working class does make up a large portion of this base. For a balanced, well-researched understanding of why this is so, I recommend Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land* (2016).

living. In *Framing Class: Media Representations of Wealth and Poverty in America*, Kendall establishes five common frames used for representations of the working class and working poor segments of American society. The third of these frames, and one of two "caricature" frames, is described as "white trashing the working class" (2011, p. 142). To "White trash" the working class, she says, is to imply that the working class, even those who belong to the dominant race, are "tasteless, lazy, and otherwise inferior"; it is to mark them as "less worthy" than their middle- and upper-class counterparts (Kendall, 2011, p.142).

The particular situation of being "not quite white" (Wray, 2006) requires a distinctly intersectional understanding of the stigma attached to poor Whites. Sweeney discusses the complexity of this particular intersectionality in her work, stating that "'White trash' holds a complex and contradictory position in American society with regards to race. They belong to the dominant race in American culture (White) . . . and yet they have been and continue to be marginalized" (G. Sweeney, 1997, p. 252). The trashiness of "White trash," says Sweeny, is framed as an inherent characteristic, entirely natural. The practice of normalizing the marginalization of "White trash" has deep historical roots. Sweeney notes the shared "outsider" status between early "White trash" groups and mixed-race populations, groups generally relegated to the geographic margins. Thus, not only does "White trash" identity become linked in popular imagination with racial animosity toward those of impure breeding, but it is also symbolically associated with geographic marginalization. Consistently associated with places on the periphery of society proper (backwoods, swamps, hills and hollers), "white trash [identity] seems to grow out of . . . otherwise undesirable spaces" (G. Sweeney, 1997, p. 253). This latter aspect of "White trash" identity—the connection to undesirable spaces—translates particularly well to the "trailer trash" image.

While its linkages to "White trash" are undeniable, "trailer trash"—a label removed from racial referent and then tied to a specific, material icon of "trashy" living—is a particularly

classed identity.[9] "Trailer trash" is especially potent as a means of discrediting the class status anyone so labeled (whether or not they actually live in a trailer), recalling Goffman's description of stigma as a "discrediting attribute." Kendall notes two specific examples. The first is in reference to Paula Jones, whose involvement with the Clinton impeachment scandal led one former campaign advisor for the president to comment, "Drag a hundred dollar bill through a trailer park and you never know what you'll find" (James Carville, quoted in Kendall, 2011, p. 143). The accusation that Jones was "trailer park trash" who would do anything for a hundred dollars served the purpose of discrediting the integrity and believability of her claims. In being associated with a trailer park, Jones was lumped in with "part of a subset [of the population] blamed for everything from . . . American's obesity problem and Elvis adulation to incest, child abuse, alcoholism, spouse beatings, the fracturing of the family and [more]" (Eastman, 1998, quoted in Kendall, 2011, p.144). Surely a credible witness can't be found among the group who is the cause of so many social ills. Kendall's second example is the "White trashing" of Sarah Palin, partially via association with trailers, in an attempt to discredit her status as a viable candidate for vice president.[10] The ascribed identity of trash for Palin has long outlasted her own political campaign. When she attended a 2016 campaign rally in support of then-candidate Donald Trump, an op ed for Cleveland.com suggested that—given her terrible grammar, gun-praising rhetoric, and the fact that her son had just been charged with domestic violence—"Republican National Convention organizers should house the whole dysfunctional [Palin] family at a trailer park in Ashtabula" (Larkin, 2016). Interestingly, even those in the Ashtabula trailer park didn't appreciate the implications. A letter to the editor only four days later from a park resident

[9] Isenberg points to the situation in Lower Bucks County, PA—in which Levittowners were celebrated and trailer residents derided—as an example of the power of the trailer as a stigmatized object. She notes that the two communities were similar in makeup, in that "the families were stable and had about the same number of children. . . . [Yet] the construction workers were deemed trash not because of their class background per se, but because they lived in trailers. It was their homes on wheels that carried the stigma" (Isenberg, 2016, pp. 240–1).

[10] For another analysis of Sarah Palin as a caricature of "white trash" and hillbilly images, see Isenberg, 2016, pp. 303–306.

stated that, while he agreed with the general sentiment of the op ed, he "must take exception to . . . casting the Palin clan to 'a trailer park in Ashtabula.' There are a lot of trailer parks in depressed areas of Lake Erie. I feel to single out Ashtabula does us a serious disservice. Furthermore, we don't want her any more than probably most of Northeast Ohio" (Lang, 2016).

While it's encouraging to see an Ashtabula trailer resident willing to contest the use of his neighborhood as a backdrop for the "White trashing" of a political figure, mobile home park residents do not seem to have a strong voice of advocacy within American culture. I suspect this is in part due to the internalization of their stigmatized identity. In an echo of Cooley's "looking glass self," Barnett and Flynn (2014) posit a similar explanation for why African Americans don't always challenge misrepresentation in the media, even in social media, where the message isn't necessarily controlled by outside powers. These scholars suggest that in some cases African Americans have so internalized the media stereotypes about themselves that they cease to actively resist them as falsehoods. For mobile home park residents, a similar sense of internalized disempowerment is combined with another powerful factor: the lack of a concrete sense of in-group identity. The camaraderie and sense of identity epitomized by the Tin Can Tourists has long since been swallowed up by the specter of discredit and exclusion.

What of the voices of those who spent time in trailers but have experienced class mobility and now hold powerful positions in society, particularly within the media? While several Hollywood actors spent their childhood years in trailer parks (Hillary Swank, Demi Moore, and Ryan Gosling, to name a few), this particular background detail is rarely discussed. Seen out of context, with class markers removed, those who could advocate for a different image of trailer park residents aren't as inherently visible as racial or ethnic minority groups breaking in to

challenge media stereotypes.[11] The fact that trailer residence remains largely invisible as a biographical detail may again be reflective of the lack of any sense of positive in-group identity among mobile home park residents.

Shaping a New Narrative: Counter-stories and Liminoid Spaces

If lack of in-group identity, and the strange (at times vilified) identity of trash-but-still-mostly-White, render many models of resistance unlikely to succeed in the case of "trailer trash," the starting place may be more fundamental. Let's return to Ellen's words: "It would take having an awareness of it and then being willing to try and make that change." I suggest that two levels of awareness are key in this case. The first level is to make visible the very real harms caused by "trailer trash" stereotype. This level of awareness belies the assumption that "trailer trash" tropes are benign bits of cultural humor, applied blanket-style to anyone who calls a mobile home park home. As mobile homes and trailers are often home to individuals and families struggling financially, it also reveals the harms experienced by those facing actual or potential poverty and counteracts the media's portrayal of the "happy poor." The trope of the happy poor frames poor Whites as content with their lives and disregards the hardships that accompany poverty (Rennels, 2015a). "I grew up poor and white," says Robin DiAngelo. "I never understood people who say, 'we were poor but we didn't know it because we had lots of love.' Poverty hurts. It isn't romantic or some form of 'living simply'" (DiAngelo, 2006, p. 52). This level of awareness was particularly transformative for me, as I found myself shaken by the image of big-hearted teenage Victor walking into a classroom and hearing himself referred to as trash, or a cash-strapped Evan being told that no, his "transient" blood was too risky to earn him any extra money today. I

[11] While Bourdieu would assert that one's original class habitus always remains primary, and a secondary habitus will never feel entirely natural, individuals from the working class can learn the proper display of middle- and upper-class tastes to a degree (Bourdieu, 1984). When this is accomplished, working-class origins are no longer obvious to the casual observer, as in the case of the three Hollywood stars mentioned above. Conversely, rapper Eminem has been more vocal about his years in a trailer; however, he has employed the exoticness and rough reputation of a trailer park childhood as part of his persona rather than used it as an avenue to advocate for a more nuanced view of mobile home park residents.

myself had made plenty of trailer park jokes throughout the years, never imagining the damage such a label could do to a child's self-esteem, or the barriers to access created by having a stigmatized address, or the bodily impact of bearing the stress of unequal power structures and feeling trapped.

The second level of awareness involves fostering recognition that "trailer trash" stigma is a single story, an inadequate representation of reality. It is critical, however, that the process of exposing one narrative as incomplete be accompanied by the presentation of a newer, fuller narrative. As I suggested regarding the satirical piece from *The Onion*, repetition of a widely naturalized stereotype without any kind of replacement image only serves to further entrench the stereotype. To open the door to change, exposure of the single story must be accompanied by a new story, a new construction of reality. To be effective, the new narrative must be realistic, incorporating the aspects of the stereotype that are true while giving visibility to all the other parts of the mobile home park story that don't line up with popular images (Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008). In other words, we must tell the story of my neighbor to the left, who shot beer cans for fun, wore white undershirts anytime he wasn't working his beer delivery job, and made moonshine in a still in his backyard. But we must also tell the story of my neighbor across the street, who worked in special education at a local elementary school, was always fashionably dressed, and whose house was beautifully remodeled and spotless.

In considering how to foster the development of these levels of awareness, we return to Turner's concept of liminality. More specifically, we must examine his related concept of the liminoid. Turner developed the idea of the liminoid to speak of breaks in normative structures in postindustrial, leisure-oriented societies. In these societies, liminal experiences are largely replaced by "liminoid moments found in artistic performances and the practices of leisure consumption" (Andrews & Roberts, 2015, p. 133). Liminoid moments involve the suspension of norms and structures in moments of play or art, like watching a sporting event or theater production or reading a piece of literature. In these liminoid moments, audiences experience a

kind of communitas and are largely removed from the constraints of normative social systems. What is key for our purposes is that, just as liminal periods in American history were central to the development of the trailer as a symbol, liminoid moments can play a role in creating space for those meanings to be contested. “Liminoid phenomena,” says Turner, “are often parts of the social critiques or even revolutionary manifestoes—books, plays, paintings, films, etc., exposing the injustices, inefficiencies, and immoralities of the mainstream economic and political structures and organizations” (1974, p. 86).

Embracing the revolutionary potential of liminoid spaces, deeply engrained stereotypes can be contested at the level of symbol through the suggestion that another narrative is possible—what Delgado calls “counter-storytelling” (1989). Tasha Rennels, who spent her childhood in a trailer park, advocates the use of autoethnography as a form of counterstory. (This has the potential to be particularly effective in the academy, where “trailer trash” stigma goes largely unchallenged and jokes are acceptable even at academic conferences focused on justice issues.) Disgusted by the barrage of negative media portrayals of the places she grew up, Rennels states:

> For this reason, I have chosen to write alternative stories that are rarely, if ever, found in popular media—stories that talk to, talk with, and talk back to mediated representations and canonical ideas about white working-class people; stories that take the ‘trash’ out of ‘white trash.’ To write these stories, I rely on critical autoethnography, a method that entails providing cultural analyses through personal narratives using a critical lens. (Rennels, 2015a, p. 352)

Alongside autoethnography, documentaries can be a powerful form of counter-storytelling. Though caution must be taken to avoid the perception that any population worthy of a documentary must necessarily be exotic, a more accurate portrayal of the history and current struggles of mobile home residents could provide a powerful counter-narrative. As a caution, however, Delgado suggests that “stories and counterstories, to be effective, must be or must appear to be noncoercive. They invite the reader to suspend judgment, listen for their point or

message, and then decide what measure of truth they contain" (1989, p. 2415). Thus, the most effective means of introducing a counterstory about mobile home parks may be the most subtle moments of subversion. Rather than shouting from a headline, "Trailer parks are not trash!," shows, plays, books, and other forms of art can take a more nuanced approach. On one hand, advocates can begin to introduce a narrative in which mobile home parks and their residents are relatively unremarkable. By this, I mean that they are, as Susan said, "just your average Joe." A film might include a trailer park without making it the butt of any jokes, inhabited by a character who doesn't look or act all that differently from any middle-class viewer.

Books for children and young adults can create liminoid spaces and offer counterstories for those still developing their view of the world around them. Save for one dual-language book specifically aimed at presenting a more positive image of trailer park residents (Dillard, 2018), a search for children's and young adult books set in trailer parks reveals stories that use the trailer as a symbol for struggle and outsider status and frame it as a place to be escaped (see, for example, Ellis, 2017; Hertenstein, 2018; Herrera, 2014; Marlowe, 2000). Or they employ its power to evoke the dangerous and exotic (Roberts, 1997). As above, a middle ground in which trailers are presented as *normal* may be most effective. A children's book might include a character who lives in a trailer but is not the poor kid whose family displays pathological behavior and whose goal in life is not to get out of the park.

Counterstories can also take the form of representations that complicate the narrative and highlight the positive aspects of a stigmatized group. One example is a project called Country Queers (including a podcast by the same name), which is "an ongoing multimedia oral history project documenting the diverse experiences of rural, small town, and country LGBTQIA+ folks in the USA," and which has several aims, including the attempt to "complicate ideas about who and what make up rural spaces and . . . push back against the narrative that queer people can only thrive in metropolitan spaces" (Country Queers, n.d.). A second example of this kind of counter-storytelling is an organization called Appalshop. The organization operates in the deeply

stereotyped region of Appalachia, whose residents have long been the target of derogatory tropes about poor, stupid, backwards hillbillies—who, like "trailer trash," are represented almost exclusively through a lens of failed Whiteness. Alongside a panoply of practical community initiatives, Appalshop works to "tell the stories the commercial cultural industries don't tell, challenging stereotypes with Appalachian voices and visions" (Appalshop, n.d.). Through film, radio, and theatre, Appalachian residents are portrayed in ways that go much deeper than a single story about Jed Clampett.

In a journalistic context, 100 Days in Appalachia tells counterstories in the context of news media, hoping to provide nuance to the stories told about their communities by outsiders who "parachute" in. The organization was formed immediately following the 2016 election, and the founders describe their origins simply: "Weary of the influx of bus tours and parachuting journalists seeking insights into rural America, we launched 100 Days to push back on the national narratives that had reduced our region to a handful of narrow stories" (Coester, 2018). More recently, 100 Days in Appalachia launched the Appalachia Advisors Network (www.aan100.org), offering the services of Appalachian journalists and advisors, as well as regional resource guides for journalists from other areas. While lack of group identity may make organized efforts such as those found in Appalachia more complicated in the case of "trailer trash" stereotypes, individual use of tools such as social media platforms holds enormous power in our current context. And, as trailers are themselves used as a key symbol in other stereotypes about poor Whites, efforts to dispel myths about similar groups may be carried out in tandem.

Ultimately, counter-storytelling—producing limonoid spaces in which new symbols and meanings can take root—creates an opportunity to achieve what Susan, Maria, Pam, and others saw the need for. It is a way of helping others to *come and see*. Come and see Becky's beautiful yard and watch her shovel the driveway for her elderly neighbor. Come and see Maria serving food to a passel of neighbors for her daughter's first birthday, while a clown makes giant bubbles in the street. Come and see my next-door neighbors' newly remodeled mobile home, with tile

floors and oak countertops and vaulted ceilings. Come and see my neighbors bring food and toys and baby gear when we finally come home with our son after a long and painful adoption process. Come and see the community Christmas party, where my grey-bearded neighbor plays an absolutely perfect Santa Claus and homemade treats fill the tables. Come and see that the single story is only a small part of the whole story. As Susan said, “You gotta come out and see. We’re not “trailer trash.”

APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1: LIMITATIONS AND CALLS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

It is beyond the scope of this book to offer a thorough model of practical action for challenging "trailer trash" stereotypes in various media representations. Given the challenges and nuances of contesting "trailer trash" and "White trash" identities in a culture where poor Whites are largely vilified and minority voices deserve to be elevated, further research and greater input are needed to establish other strategies that might bring about measurable change for those experiencing harmful effects from this specific trope. In the United Kingdom, Perez Portilla's suggested models for addressing media (mis)representations include: (1) complaining before media regulators; (2) media monitoring; (3) anti-hate campaigns; and (4) humor, art, and festivals (Perez Portilla, 2018). While these and similar models provide a helpful starting place, they do not necessarily translate easily or well to the uniquely paradoxical interplay of race and class inherent in the stereotypes ascribed to poor Whites in America. In their discussion of challenging media stereotypes of African Americans, Barnett and Flynn suggest that social media will be the "streets" on which revolution is carried out: "The call is for African Americans to advocate for themselves on social media and to tear down media representations that damage their standing in our communities, because we all know that [it will not happen] through traditional media" (Barnett & Flynn, 2014, p. 77). The power of social media is also worth exploring in the effort to contest "trailer trash" stigma.

Another shortcoming of this study is that it pays inadequate attention to the role of power in meaning formation during the earliest decades of the trailer and trailer parks. In part, this is due to my belief in the centrality of labels in understanding stigma. In time, it became evident that interrogating the origins and development of the "trailer trash" label in detail is an archival task large enough to warrant a separate study. The task is an important one, however, as it is not enough to ask who has the power to *maintain* a harmful label in its present expression and who benefits from the maintenance of that label; one must also ask who had the power to *create* that

label and how that particular actor or set of actors benefited initially. Whose interests were legitimized and reinforced though the establishment of a "negative counterexample"? (Harkins, 2004, p. 4). Power is key, then, in understanding the origins of a label like "trailer trash," as it is not just the cognitive process of meaning making and stereotype creation that matter. "What matters most is *whose* cognitions prevail—*whose* cognitions carry sufficient clout in social, cultural, economic, and political spheres to lead to important consequences for the group that has been labeled as different" (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 378 italics mine). Thus, a separate study regarding the origins and early uses of the label "trailer trash" is needed to shed light on the power structures at play in the creation of the now-enduring stereotype.

Finally, the history of meaning making in relation to the American house trailer is fertile ground for specifically studying the links between stigma and language (particularly labelling processes) beyond just the term "trailer trash." The shifting terms for trailers themselves, for the places where they parked, and for those who reside in them clearly illustrate the battle to use language to shape meaning and symbols. In several cases, articles specifically call out links between language and psychology, as in one article that noted the "extremely potent psychological effect" of using the term "camp" instead of "park" to refer to gatherings of trailers ("Eyes of the Nation Turned on Trailers," 1942, p. 10).

APPENDIX 2: WHAT ABOUT TINY HOMES?

Over the course of my research, one question has followed me to every conference, every classroom, and every informal research conversation: "Have you looked at tiny homes?" The issue these inquiring minds are referring to, of course, is that tiny homes are trendy while trailers and mobile homes are anything but. The class and status implications of the two housing forms are wildly different, yet they seem to be essentially the same basic thing (though tiny homes are even smaller in most cases). In fact, many tiny homes are being placed in park settings. While future research is required to further assess the issue, I do have some preliminary thoughts.

I suspect that, to a large degree, the status difference is related to imagined links between class and agency in American culture. Things like poverty, low education, and a total lack of middle-class behavioral repertoires reduce agency by narrowing options. Conversely, those with money and credentials experience increased agency in almost all facets of life. Mobile homes and tiny homes reflect differing degrees of perceived agency on multiple levels. First, while it is assumed that no one lives in a mobile home unless there is no other option (recall Frank Rolfe: "We're like the Dollar General of housing"), people live in tiny homes because they *choose* to. They are imaged as minimalists, or multiple-property owners, or people who simply wish to have more disposable income. Secondly, the two forms of housing express different degrees of agency at the level of design. While remodeling can personalize a mobile home, they begin their lives in a cookie-cutter fashion. They are factory built with little variation (in the early days, even the furniture was pre-selected) and the materials are not the highest grade. On the other hand, in most cases tiny homes are presented as a model of custom design and quality craftsmanship.

It is important to remember, however, that the trailer was also trendy in its early years, and many early models were custom made. It's possible that tiny homes will eventually follow a trajectory similar to that of the trailer. For example, the class composition of trailer owners changed in part because people began buying used models because of their affordability rather than because of their trendiness. Trailers originally purchased to display status changed hands and

came to reflect a lack of status over time. This trajectory is not unlikely in the case of tiny homes. Similarly, as they become more popular, cookie-cutter versions of tiny homes are popping up. As this trend continues, the imagined link between tiny homes and custom design may diminish, altering the status attached to this fledgling housing form.

Of course, all of these conjectures are rooted in the cherished norms of the present—that agency is tied to wealth, that bigger is always better unless you *choose* smaller, that consumption is a symbol of power, and that uniqueness (think rarity) is a marker of status. Should these norms shift and change, the tiny home may travel an entirely different road than did the trailer in terms of its place in the status hierarchy of American housing. It's a story that this mobile home scholar will be watching with keen interest.

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2017	Introduction to Sociology	University of Colorado, Colorado Springs
	Introduction to Race and Ethnicity (Online)	University of Saint Francis
2016	Introduction to Sociology	Rocky Mountain College of Art + Design
	Gender and Mental Health (TA) Sociology Through Medicine and Health (TA)	University of Kentucky
2015	Inequalities and Place Introduction to Sociology Inequalities in Society	University of Kentucky
2014	Introduction to Sociology through "The Wire" (TA) Introduction to Sociology through Food Studies (TA)	University of Kentucky

SCHOLARSHIPS AND AWARDS

2019	SSSP Lee Student Support Travel Scholarship
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