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A Hundred Houses: Pauline Leader and the Spatial Poetics of Disability

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
Carl Nelson

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2019

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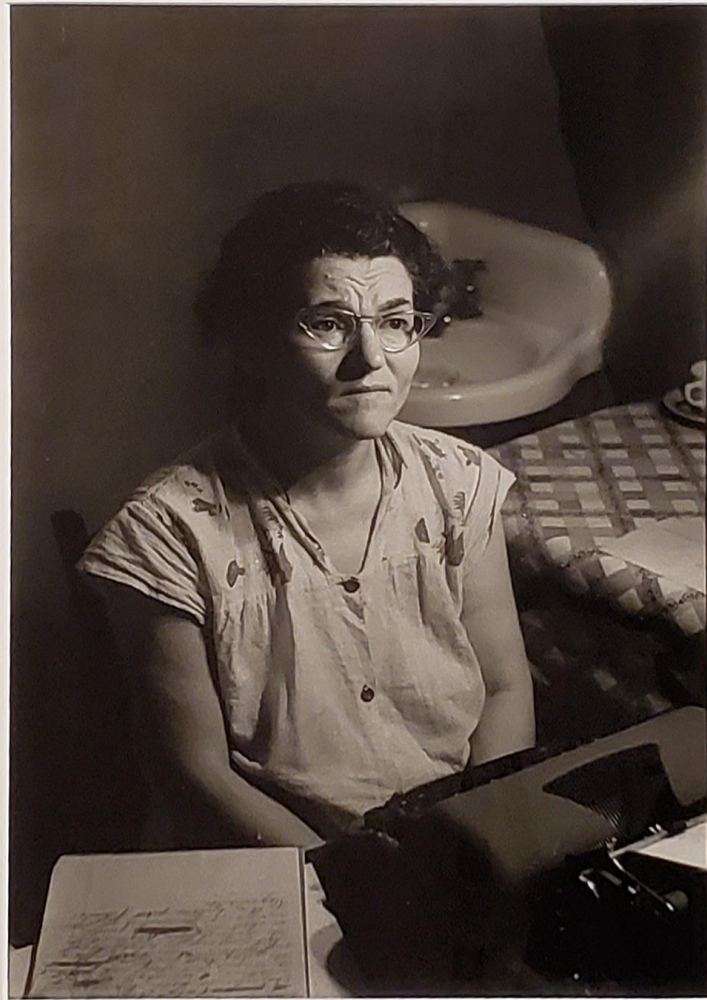
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ער זאָל האָבן אַ הונדערט הייזער, און אין יעדער הויז אַ הונדערט רומז, און אין יעדער צימער אַ
הונדערט בעדז, און דער דיליריום זאָל אים וואַרפן פון בעט צו בעט.

He should have a hundred houses, and in every house a hundred rooms, and in
every room a hundred beds, and the delirium should throw him from bed to bed.

—Yiddish Curse



Pauline Leader photographed by Jonathan Brand

I.

INTRODUCTION

Across the morning I spear the articulate flight of a bird
and make of it the disguise of my private design against the
uncertain morning...

(Once, the earth hanging half-way like an imaginary shadow
remarked the palpitations of your white heart, bird; you carried
your flight ever nearer to the sun-vortex; that was your reply.)

Forget the trembling bird remember only the triumphant
solution of the sweep,
Earth,-- but O do not unravel it
seeking the dusty count of one more 'clarity'--
you can find merely
an endless swirl of gauze
contriving somehow wantonly within the relativity of space
to be singularly free...

—Pauline Leader, “Poem for Myself”

In 1932, Ethel Mannin called the young Pauline Leader’s literary debut, “a terrible indictment of the social system and the moral code,” proclaiming, “everybody who doubts the need for a revolution should read this book.”¹ The review appeared in Mannin’s monthly literature column, “Sagas of the Working Classes,” in the February edition of *The New Leader*, a magazine closely associated with the United States Socialist Party. Leader had published her

¹ Ethel Mannin. “Sagas of the Working Classes.” *New Leader*, February 26, 1932.

memoir one year prior through the leftist Vanguard Press. By that time she was a familiar face on the Lower East Side, having lived in the Village for nearly six years, sharing her poems in bohemian circles. Lacking a fluid source of income, she worked on her manuscript between shifts in factories and sweatshops. There are moments in Leader's writing when her frustrations with this untenable dynamic shine through. In one scene, she recalls an adolescent fantasy: "Why was there not a revolution, a war, but a different war? No people should be killed; a war in which all factories were dynamited, so that the people might file out, free."²

But while Leader was indeed an outspoken communist, Mannin's review is not a reaction to a manifesto. Leader's *And No Birds Sing* is the first hand account of a deaf poet's internal experience of disability and class and the external social structures which mediate and construct that experience. Published in 1931, the memoir follows its heroine as she confronts the alienating effects of poverty, social surveillance, and physical difference in a series of successively trying spaces. Leader is a first generation American, born the eldest of three siblings in a working class Jewish family in rural Bennington, Vermont. Her parents, Isaac and Frieda Leader, are Eastern European immigrants from Ukraine and Belarus—the "Old World." Her mother is the family's breadwinner, working at first as a butcher in the local market and later as the landlady in charge of a one hundred room boarding house. Her father is the rabbi at the local temple and a scholar of Jewish literature. When she is twelve years old, Leader contracts a form of meningitis which leaves her completely deaf.

Her community and family, unwilling or unable to empathetically accommodate Leader's disabled body, categorically fail to support her. She is beaten, lied to, surveilled, expelled from school, and forced to stay in the home. Already a voracious reader and an imaginative story

² Pauline Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, ed. Mara Mills and Rebecca Sanchez (Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 2016), 109.

teller, she begins writing poems as a way to cope. While her parents dismiss her poetic impulses, she begins a defiant written correspondence with a Greenwich Village poet who critiques her drafts and encourages her to continue writing. As Leader comes into her own as a poet and a thinker, the cynical conformity of small town life becomes increasingly unbearable. Not yet eighteen, Leader boards a train headed for New York and leaves Bennington behind, embarking on a lonely quest for self-fulfillment. She finds herself in the Village in 1925, the cultural epicenter of American Bohemia. There she seeks kindred spirits while desperately navigating hunger, disability, and the death of her mother amidst short-lived stints in sweatshops and factories, where brutal conditions inspire her to develop her communistic ideas. Leader's memoir reaches its traumatic climax when she is admitted to a girls reformatory following a suspected pregnancy, and concludes on the day she is released.

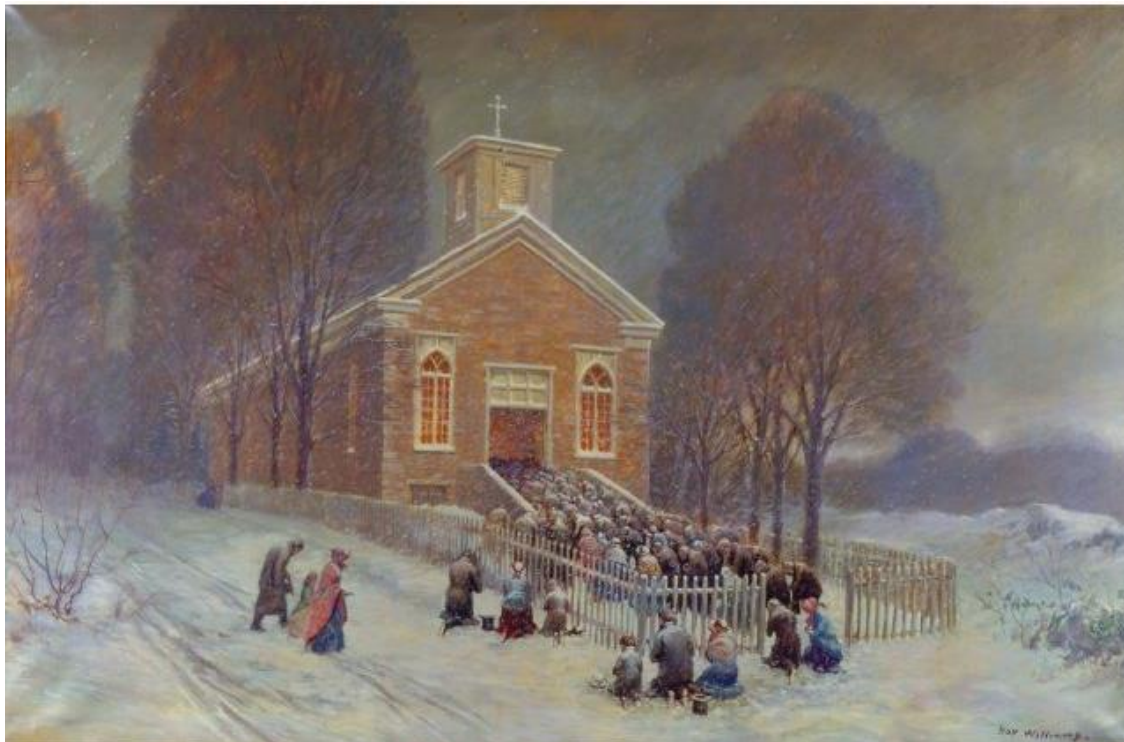
Leader began writing her ambitious memoir before her twentieth birthday. It is told with the earnest candor of a young woman still coming-of-age while interrogating the resonant effects of her youth in real time. The events she recounts are near enough to remain vivid, while distant enough to allow for critical reflection. She is a multidimensional protagonist. Never static, she weaves fluidly between detailed recollections of place and dialogue, lucid dreamscapes, political thought, fleeting vignettes, and streams of consciousness. A fitting analysis of her work, therefore, invites an equally multidimensional approach. I place Leader's prose and poetic verse in conversation with sociology, phenomenology, and Marxist disability theory in order to propose an understanding of the built environment which incorporates two fundamental concepts. The first is the role of social formations in collectively reproducing or disrupting the normative capitalist mechanisms of control which operate within spatial boundaries. The other is

the role of the poetry and the poetic imagination in making symbolic meaning out of inhabited or desired spaces and accessing metaphorical interiors.

Bennington in the early twentieth century is a homogeneous rural town dominated by Anglo-American nuclear families—fathers who work at the mill, children who attend the local school, mothers relegated to the domestic world. It is an inherently limiting place for a precocious child, and its people incite much of Leader’s anxiety. Raised poor in crowded homes, Leader envies the privacy and material luxury afforded to the wealthy, conditions architecturally embodied by Bennington’s beautiful houses—monolithic reminders of her own inadequacy. German-Jewish sociologist Georg Simmel writes that the social relationships between individuals within a given space collectively determine the strength of the boundary which defines that space. “The breadth or narrowness of the border [depends] on the tensions that develop within the group,” he writes, “the framework is narrow if it seems to be a constriction, which certain energies that cannot be displayed internally seek to escape over and over again.”³ Bennington’s framework is especially narrow, a product of restrictive small town homogeneity.

Leader initially dreams of severing the qualities which put her in tension with this narrow framework. As a child, she wants nothing more than to fluidly join the cultural ranks of the bourgeoisie—to live with her family in a beautiful house with a hallway and a piano, to participate in the unknown pleasures of a small town Sunday, to dress, speak, and act like the people who collectively construct her own shortcomings. But her fantasy is doomed to failure. Leader’s disabled body, economic and social inferiority, and deviant interior nature fundamentally place her at odds with the spatial “strategies” of her homogeneous town, Michel

³ Georg Simmel, “The Sociology of Space.” In *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, ed. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage Publ., 2006), 144.



Early Mass on Easter Sunday, LeRoy Williams (Courtesy of the Bennington Museum)

de Certeau's term for the self-reproducing mechanisms of normalization and control enacted in order to establish the meaning and function of a place. As a first generation American, Leader's assumed and assigned identity is that of an outsider. She is the daughter of Old World immigrants, members of a global Jewish diaspora who left their homes seeking prosperity. Leader largely denounces her Jewish identity, associating her tragic positionality with the ethnic and religious markers which make her and her family "other". Her family is unable to assimilate, burdening her with a neurotic awareness of small town difference.

While Leader's heretic impulses are initially fostered in childhood as a naive reaction to the dominant Christian way of life in Bennington, her rejection of her Jewry is not simply the product of internalized anti-semitism, nor is it cause to eliminate a discussion of that identity from any meaningful analysis of her memoir and political ideology. The non-Jewish-Jew is not

an anomaly, but a dominant archetype of a larger leftist historical and intellectual lineage. As Isaac Deutscher writes in *The Non-Jewish Jew*, some of the most influential theorists of the past century, people like Marx, Trotsky, and Freud, “all found Jewry entirely too narrow, too archaic, and too constricting [and] all looked for ideals and fulfillment beyond it.” Their transformative ideas make up “much that is greatest in modern thought, the sum and substance of the most profound upheavals that have taken place in philosophy, sociology, economics, and politics in the last three centuries.”⁴ These ideas were fundamental in birthing the American leftist moment during which Leader wrote, as well as her own communist ideology. And their pervasive influence is repeatedly felt in the theoretical texts which contribute to this project.

Fixated on imprisonment versus mobility, Leader understands the domestic and professional spaces her family inhabits as bounded realms of confinement which offer the shallow promise of prosperity at the expense of freedom and fulfillment. The practicing Jew is bound to the Jewish home, the temple, the school, and the archaic expectations which govern one’s role within these spaces. Leader deeply resents her family’s stubborn fixation on prosperity and their commitment to a demonized cultural lineage which constructs their economic and cultural inferiority, confining them to specific spaces while excluding them from others. The disdain she carries for her father, a scholar of the Talmud, stems from his unwavering ideological adherence to Jewish tradition. In a poem titled “Ghetto Etchings,” Leader writes:

Old Rabbi

Your eyes are cycles
struggling with the curves of a last desperate revolution
before they can attain

⁴ Isaac Deutscher, “The Non-Jewish Jew.” In *The Non-Jewish Jew and Other Essays*, ed. Isaac Deutscher and Tamara Deutscher (London: Verso, 2017), 26.

motionlessness⁵

Leader does not abhor her Jewish heritage itself or seek to condemn Judaism as a way of life. Rather she derides the mechanisms of subjugation inherent in any religious, social, or economic system and the futility of holding steadfast to “Old World” traditionalism in an America which, as she encounters it, offers little promise of acceptance or freedom. Describing men like her father, if not Isaac himself, she portrays the Orthodox Jew as blinded by the insular promise of “a last desperate revolution.” His revolution is not the political one that communists like Leader seek, but a self-defeating motion akin to the movement of his eyes. Unable to imagine a world beyond the doctrine of his faith, he is bound to remain in place. Like disability, economic status, or any other religious identity, she views Jewishness as the restrictive imposition of a way of life within concentric boundaries of control.

Although she distances herself from Jewishness along with manifold categories of particularist distinction, Leader does not—cannot—sever that part of herself completely. In her foreword to *And No Birds Sing*, Mara Mills notes that many of the characters Leader remembers most affectionately in her travels are Jewish—her mother, the owner of Hubert’s Cafeteria, a communist sweatshop worker, and her closest friend in the reformatory. While she pities her mother for subjecting herself to a lifetime of stress and physical labor—and her father for encouraging it—she also deeply respects her as a devoted matriarch ambitiously striving towards democratic, “American” ideals. And in his introduction to *Jewish Radicals*, Tony Michels writes that the Jewish labor movement “arose from the masses of Yiddish-speaking Jews who immigrated to the United States from the Russian Empire, Austria-Hungary, and Romania

⁵ Pauline Leader, “Ghetto Etchings.”

between the 1880s and 1920s.”⁶ Describing Leader’s family’s origins, Michels points to something intrinsically radical within the Jewish-American identity, an impulse which drove leftist progress in the United States throughout the twentieth century, particularly in the Lower East Side where Leader ends up. Leader belongs to a tradition of Jewish leftists, many of whom similarly sought to “escape Jewish particularity”⁷ in favor of a socialist collectivity.

Leader’s deafness abruptly submerges her in a state of lonely alienation. But while the loss of hearing is a new and terrifying reality, the deprivation it imposes contains parallels within her prior lived experience. She negotiates her disability by extending and relocating the narrative of her isolation to include her disability, a condition to which she metaphorically ascribes architectural qualities. As a child, her understanding of her own economic and social circumstances is not determined by an acute knowledge of structural inequality but by candid associations evoked by the spaces she inhabits. Be it the opaque windows in her mother’s butcher shop through which “there is no way out”⁸ or the crowded apartment which precludes privacy, Leader often reflects on social and economic boundaries as architectural, with the methodology of a child for whom the home’s interior provides a totalizing clarity. In his 1958 work *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard presents a phenomenological theory of architecture which attempts to understand how the individual encounters her environment through subconscious poetic associations, and how these associations implicitly form a relative sense of selfhood. “If a child is unhappy,” he writes, “the house [she draws] bears traces of... distress.”⁹ Bachelard’s imaginative work is uniquely applicable to *And No Birds Sing*, reflecting

⁶ Tony Michels and Tony Michels, "Introduction," in *Jewish Radicals: A Documentary History* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 1.

⁷ Michels, "Introduction," 12.

⁸ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 47.

⁹ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), 72.

Leader's spatial conception of her own marginalization as well as her characterization of remembered interiors.

As a girl, the cellar in Leader's family home actively captures her imagination more than any other room she encounters. In a formative scene, Leader describes a surreal journey into the cellar, soon before she develops the meningitis which makes her deaf. The details of her illness are not made clear; rather she explains her disability as a mystical burden bestowed upon her after entering a pool in the cellar and witnessing a society of gnomes:

You need not come here," said the king, and as he spoke the hammers kept red time on the forges. "You need not come here, you need not have come back here. He must go back with you. Those who go down into the darkness always bring back with them, when they return to the world light, a sign which sets them apart from other men. The gnome goes with you. The gnome goes with you," the king said, and the hammers kept red time on the forges. "Only on that condition can you return to your world"¹⁰

Gaston Bachelard is particularly drawn to the cellar. This fantastical realm, he writes, is "first and foremost the dark entity of the house, the one that partakes of subterranean forces."¹¹ One who ventures into the depths of the house must submit to irrationality and superstition. But as a young girl, Leader specifically uses her dream in the cellar *to* rationalize her disability. Leader's conceptualization of her deafness reflects many of the fundamental concepts of the social model of disability. Proponents of the model, contemporary scholars like Michael Oliver and Thomas Shakespeare, maintain that "the oppression that disabled people face is rooted in the economic

¹⁰ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 56.

¹¹ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 18.

and social structures... endemic to all capitalist societies.”¹² When a physically or mentally impaired person’s environment fails to accommodate them—socially, culturally, architecturally, or otherwise—their disability is actualized. In other words, Leader’s deafness on its own is not solely responsible for the difficulty she faces as a deaf person. The challenges it poses are constructed and accentuated by oppressive or poorly-adapted surroundings.

Yet Leader is more absolutist in her understanding, questioning whether her vision of the free individual, disabled or otherwise, might ever be realized through any attempt to accommodate (and therefore eradicate) difference within pre-existing boundaries. As Rebecca Sanchez notes, Leader’s conception of her deafness is “independent of any group identification around disability. It offers an alternative model for thinking about the relationship between embodied and social aspects of deafness.”¹³ The gnome, visible only in the presence of others, externally personifies her impairment. Leader is only able to operate “within the area of the walls the gnome had built.”¹⁴ It is a jailer, raising walls which reinforce self-doubt and diminish mobility, a thief, climbing into people’s mouths and stealing the words intended for her, and a mask, the grotesque face of an otherwise invisible disability. But while she abhors the people’s reaction to this mask, she nonetheless grows defiantly attached to it, choosing to follow “the secret way of the gnome.”¹⁵

Just as Leader does not wish to participate in a prescriptive religious and cultural tradition, she also does not wish to join a school for the deaf, learn sign language, or otherwise actively associate with “The Deaf” as a social category, despite a shared impairment. Rather she

¹² Michael J. Oliver, "Capitalism, Disability and Ideology: A Materialist Critique of the Normalization Principle." In *A Quarter-Century of Normalization and Social Role Valorization: Evolution and Impact*, ed. Robert J. Flynn and Raymond A. Lemay. (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1999), 4.

¹³ Rebecca Sanchez, “Leader’s Disability Modernism.” In *And No Birds Sing*, 221.

¹⁴ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 159.

¹⁵ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 109.

situates her deafness within a broader deviant identity towards which she has always felt a deep kinship, writing, “before the gnome came to live with me, I had known myself as different from the people.”¹⁶ She suggests that capitalist society constructs non-normativity and deviance in both cases. Deviant populations, all of which are viewed as broken under capitalism, are monitored and contained within the built environment—in schools, institutions, and in public spaces. Throughout her memoir, Leader reiterates the desire to evade architectural boundaries. In a poem called “Slavery of Earth,” she admonishes the “bondaged angularity” of the urban built environment:

Aware
I repeal
my former brittle song
“Earth is an arealess detachment.”¹⁷

After running away for New York, Leader grows to detest the confines of the urban landscape, perhaps as any rural transplant would. Earth as humans have divided it is not “arealess.” Rather it is the amalgamation of overlapping territories claimed, settled, and controlled by parties in tension. Nowhere is this more immediately felt than in the city, amongst the omnipresent skyscraper grid Leader calls a “dreamless rigid line of Earth walls.”

But it’s not as if this transcendental sentiment arises only upon leaving Bennington. In the years leading up to her sudden and permanent disability, Leader develops a profound sense of spatial and social alienation. As she confronts the oppressive strategies reproduced by the people in her small town and the economic morbidity of rural and urban life under capitalism, she is

¹⁶ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 61.

¹⁷ Pauline Leader, “Slavery of Earth.”

drawn to interiors which offer an escape. Leader's happiest childhood memories involve pastoral retreats to a farmhouse. Watching her mother iron a sheet, she flies "on the magic carpet of rhythm, out of the market, away from the market-smell, over the clock in the jail tower, over the post-office, out into the green, green fields where there was only freedom."¹⁸ The stories from her youth are full of these anecdotes. She is drawn to natural or imagined space because the oppressive limitations attached to her body are produced by mechanisms of control operating within the built environment. Poetic verse and music, too, offer equally powerful refuges.

As Leader comes into her own as a deaf poet, she is deftly equipped to experience alternate resonances from those which are "lost" in disability. Her poetic verse and her intrinsically poetic prose place the phenomenological immediacy of spatial encounters in conversation with the abstract forces which regulate those spaces. Bachelard argues for the importance of the poetic image; the metaphysical vessel which the individual instinctively accesses as she encounters spatial phenomena. The poetic image is the product of subconscious reverberations activated by a given object or space. He asks his readers "to consider an image not as an object and even less as the substitute for an object, but to seize its specific reality." Existing alongside the physical materiality of any object are a multitude of visceral poetic images associated with that object, stemming from memories, dreams, and the imagination. Bachelard writes that "the image, in its simplicity... is the property of a naïve consciousness; in its expression, it is youthful language."¹⁹ By classifying poetic verse as distinctly internal, Leader emphasizes the imprisoning effects of physical boundaries—the material form of social and political structures. "To practice space is thus to repeat the joyful and silent experience of

¹⁸ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 21.

¹⁹ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 19.

childhood;” Certeau writes, “it is, in a place, *to be other and to move toward the other.*”²⁰ The irony of Certeau’s word choice is not misplaced. Leader’s childhood, while seldom joyful, really is “silent,” and her impulse “toward the other” is as much a result of socially reified difference and alienation as it is the progressive dream of a poetic imagination.

This project is about the production and regulation of difference within the built environment and the dynamic spatial tactics which the marginalized “other” must employ in order to subvert capitalist hegemony and seek belonging within and beyond it. The following pages form a literary and theoretical bricolage; images and ideas varying in period and discipline are pieced together like stones forming a stable structure²¹. Moving through seven distinct microcosmic interiors which collapse social and mental phenomena within literal or metaphorical boundaries, they attempt to synthesize a sociospatial theory of class, disability, and poetry grounded in Pauline Leader’s lived experience. The stanzas which appear throughout this project are excerpted from the undated, unpublished manuscripts of Leader’s poems, collected, scanned, and sent to me by her niece, Rosa Smith²². The authors who comprise my theoretical archive explore individual subjectivity and positionality within a broader social or metaphysical context. Using Leader’s prose and poetry as both primary source and theoretical cornerstone, we can glean a wealth of deeply personal, imaginative conclusions which predate nearly every concept they serve to situate, reaffirm, or challenge.

Leader did not achieve lasting success as an author or a poet. She published only one novel after *And No Birds Sing*, a collection of endearing vignettes about the tenants in her mother’s boarding house, along with a handful of short stories and poems in leftist magazines.

²⁰ Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley U.a.: Univ. of California Press, 2011), 110.

²¹ This description itself alludes to the work of Virginia Woolf and Michel de Certeau

²² Certain poems, although it is unclear which, appeared in the “little magazines” and other literary journals.

Reviews of her memoir tended to dismiss Leader's ideas as the neurotic conclusions of "child consciousness... the young mind struggling towards self-realization, distracted by lack of guidance and overshadowed by painful delusions."²³ While Leader's circumstances conditioned her communist ideology, an emphasis on her youthful naïveté allowed critics to distance themselves from the memoir's political implications. Her husband, Millen Brand, enjoyed far greater success through his 1937 work *The Outward Room*, a psychological thriller whose protagonist's life closely resembles Leader's.

For all its optimism, Leader's memoir is bleak. Leader's personal triumphs lack the satisfying finality of those found in similar narratives like Helen Keller's *Story of My Life*. She does not ascend from a despondent stupor towards a liberating clarity, nor does she wholly approach her shortcomings with humble self-determination. The peace she finds in her poetry and in specific communal spaces merely offers moments of repose; always must she return to the world outside and critically confront the omnipotence of capitalism. Leader seldom separates her marginality from the structures which create it. When she does distinguish between the two, it is in service of a hopeful vision for a radically different society, one in which the environments and institutions that require reformation cease to exist at all. Her memoir is valuable not only because it helps us better understand the disabled body under capitalism, but also because it imaginatively questions the very function and value of place.

In her memoir's opening lines Leader remembers herself as a young girl "walking through the dark, apparently limitless streets, leaving the stores behind, coming to the houses, leaving the houses behind if I walked far enough"²⁴ before being captured by authorities. Her self-exile is the first of many symbolic attempts to evade the people who surveil and regulate her

²³ "And No Birds Sing," *The Times* (London), March 31, 1932.

²⁴ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 1.

disabled body. While their mentality is suffocating, her distinct perspective enables her to more readily develop her own leftist ideas and poetic identity. In the spirit of the non-Jewish Jew, she seeks alternate ideological realities in literal and metaphorical borderlines—natural or imagined worlds, collective spaces, and poetic interiors. On her final diasporic and ideological odyssey, Leader travels from her homogeneous rural town to a brutally contested metropolis where restless, deviant individuals collectively confront social and spatial hegemony head on. Diaspora connotes a collective memory, a shared understanding of one's distantly scattered people, and the reassuring knowledge of a motherland. But Leader's motherland is not in Jerusalem, and her ideals do not belong to a singular ethnic or religious minority. The horizon she looks towards as she interrogates and transcends spatial boundaries is a more just and equal America.

II.

THE MARKET

I remain sitting here on the box with my mother's glare on me, and stare at the opaque windows. There is no way out, the opaque windows say. I feel shut in, closed upon, as my mother will close in upon me when the customers have gone. There is no way through that opaque. I hate the market when the windows are like that. I must have windows through which I can see, out out out... I must have freedom.

—Pauline Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 1931

For part of her childhood, Leader's family lives "in the two rooms at the end of a dirty hallway... used only for sleeping"²⁵ directly above the market where her mother Frieda works. Frequent daily movement between these domestic and professional spaces renders them virtually inseparable. Without a distinctive boundary separating the small apartment and the business, Leader's conception of home and family becomes inextricably linked with a perpetual awareness of her low economic status and an internalized disdain for the working class immigrant minority she is a part of. The inadequacy Leader feels in relation to her wealthier peers is made nearly unbearable by the smell of the market, a stubborn odor which follows her out of these spaces²⁶. "The market-smell that stuck to my clothes," she writes, "I took [it] with me into the classroom... smell of cold meat, of cold pork, a peculiar raw smell. I could not get away from it.

²⁵ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 26, 8.

²⁶ "[Smell] connects the most inarticulate, instinctive and exclusively emotional [conditions] of... relationships to physical proximity... its stimuli remain below the threshold of consciousness... it is these to which we may probably ascribe a share in those elementary sympathies and antipathies... that are formed... between persons" (Simmel, 155)

Everywhere I went it went with me. It ostracized me.”²⁷ Outside of the market the smell marks her, betraying any promise of anonymity. It is a tell-tale symbol of her mother’s plebeian profession and her non-house. Exploring the poetic imagery of the house, Gaston Bachelard asks “can we isolate an intimate, concrete essence that would be a justification of the uncommon value of all our images of protected intimacy?”²⁸ Leader does not propose an answer. The years she spends in the apartment above the market as a child are instead a frustrating exercise in isolation and insecurity. The spatial intimacy promised by the home is largely eclipsed by the oppressive realities of labor, economic division, and social control.

The young Leader is constantly comparing her home in the market to the beautiful houses she admires around Bennington. She imagines the ideal house in relation to the space which surrounds it and the details of what is imagined to be inside. Its value is contingent on whether or not the property, its inhabitants, and their possessions reflect upper class American normalcy, as she understands it. Her own home, therefore, is defined by a lack. The absence of the ideal inspires lofty aesthetic aspirations. In an anecdote preceding her deafness, she writes longingly about one aspect of her dream house:

Such a house would have a hallway, the hallway of my dreams. A hallway where you took off your things, where you coughed a little to announce your presence, where you made little noises, shuffling noise with your feet, where you hung up your things instead of flinging them wildly on a chair²⁹

²⁷ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 16.

²⁸ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 4.

²⁹ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 39.

The hallway above the market where Leader lives “has a bad name.”³⁰ It is lined with doors which lead to the rooms of lonely alcoholics and poor degenerates. But the hallway in her dream house is part of a resistant fantasy, one in which her family might live “like other people.”³¹ It is the “dream of ownership, the embodiment of everything that is considered convenient, comfortable, healthy, sound, desirable, by other people,”³² the same “people” towards whom Leader directs equal resentment and suspicion. The house with the hallway and its nuanced markings of status and cultural normality, down to the mannerisms performed within it, belongs to an elite from which Leader is excluded. The hallway is a grand entrance, a non-necessary space in excess of any house she has lived in before. It is perfect, uncorrupted by public judgement, and completely her own. Similar to the cellar in her fantasy, it is a kind of phenomenological passageway which lacks formal inhabitants, leading its visitors to some unknown destination. The myriad rooms which might extend from it are merely a seductive suggestion.

The apartment and the house occupy opposite positions within a domestic hierarchy. Leader sees ownership of the house as the key to a privileged cultural identity promising privacy and prosperity. Its absence, therefore, determines her inability to assimilate. At Christmas time, she complains, “we could not have a tree, of course, for we did not have a house.”³³ Leader, who is Jewish, envies the decorative iconography of the Christian holiday. She understands the tree to as an object exclusively belonging in the interior of the house. Unable to truly claim ownership of this interior, she nevertheless hangs stockings in the apartment in an attempt to symbolically

³⁰ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 10.

³¹ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 38.

³² Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 61.

³³ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 33.

participate in an Anglo-American tradition. Leader's simple rebellion is in fact a meaningful attempt to increase her proximity to an unattainable space.

Making a further spatial distinction, Bachelard writes that larger houses offer their inhabitants greater opportunity for imaginative exploration and play. The multi-story house "represents an increase in the verticality of the more modest houses that, in order to satisfy our daydreams, have to be differentiated in height. Then there are the stairways... Twelve-year olds even go up in *ascending scales*... liking, above all, to take it in strides... What joy for the legs to go up four steps at a time!"³⁴ At the gristmill, a large factory where Leader is sent to purchase chicken feed, she fondly recalls climbing the steps to an upstairs office. "To get to the second story I must ascend a flight of stairs, the slipperiest flight of stairs I have ever walked up," she writes, "I am afraid every minute that I will slip. I am terribly afraid, but nevertheless it is thrilling."³⁵ The poetic euphoria of ascending a staircase is a youthful act ostensibly reserved for children growing up in expensive homes, not crowded apartments. Leader, however, reclaims this typically domestic phenomenon in the context of the factory. Yet while the gristmill affords access to this joyful sensation, the claustrophobic associations tying domestic and industrial space together are implicitly reinforced.

Leader's family's prosperity is contingent on her mother's tireless labor. She observes Frieda's constant movement, the necessary splintering of domestic and professional responsibilities between the two rooms upstairs and the market downstairs. Martin Heidegger, describing the meaning of the dwelling, writes, "the working woman is at home in the spinning mill, but does not have her dwelling place there."³⁶ Frieda, however, essentially dwells in her

³⁴ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 26.

³⁵ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 49.

³⁶ Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," trans. Albert Hofstadter, in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 143.

place of business. She is the market's most experienced vendor, overseeing and organizing daily activities. Leader's father, on the other hand, who "stay[s] home and read[s] books and [drinks] too much and [has] to be stung into action,"³⁷ is notably absent from the family's economic life, indulging instead in what she views as frivolous religious study. Thus her mother assumes the role of caretaker and breadwinner, a fluid presence moving between professional and domestic spaces. In her 1929 essay, *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf also suggests an inverse relationship between room and its occupants, in which the people who inhabit a space alter it *themselves* in some intangible, metaphysical way via a "creative force". In a discussion of rooms themselves, she writes that women's historical occupation of domestic spaces has endowed them with the qualities of femininity:

One has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one's face. How should it be otherwise? For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politics³⁸

Woolf mainly discusses women as writers, yet here she considers the room historically as a domestic, feminine space. She doesn't specifically define what constitutes this "creative force," therefore one might reasonably expand its scope to include women within a range of disciplines—as artists, business owners, or intellectuals—embodying qualities like efficiency, entrepreneurship, and labor, more broadly.

³⁷ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 53.

³⁸ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Harcourt, 1929), 87.

Much like the “bricks and mortar” and “pens and brushes” in Woolf’s symbolic domestic rooms, Leader ascribes a unique femininity to the objects found in the market and the butcher shop: “the clean sawdust,” which her mother spreads across the floor, “the meat-chopper” and “the blocks” she scrubs clean daily, and the “forequarter[s] of beef”³⁹ she proudly lifts from meat hooks. These ostensibly masculine items are in fact the object of her mother’s dedication and the embodiment of her labor in the shop. On the maintenance of domestic items, Bachelard writes that housework (distinctly characterized as feminine) involves caring deeply for the objects which comprise the home’s interior. The “objects that are cherished in this way really are born of an intimate light,” he writes, such that “they attain a higher degree of reality than indifferent objects, or those that are defined by geometric reality.”⁴⁰ Leader’s awareness of her class stems in part from a self-conscious tendency to compare her mother with the other wealthier married women in the town, women who appear to relax in their homes rather than exert themselves in butcher shops. She harbors a deep resentment stemming from this glaring disparity. Yet, in cherishing the practical items which fill her professional space, Leader’s mother imbues labor with femininity and intimacy.

The crowded apartment and the market downstairs are further connected through a series of corporeal parallels. Leader places the female body at the metaphorical center of labor, domesticity, and community surveillance. In close quarters, the body is at once maternally rectified, judged, and destroyed. Frieda and her customers can often be found in the market “spreading evil stories”⁴¹ about the lives of local women. Leader is disturbed by their invasive bickering, a cynical small town pastime. Nearly every anecdote they share focuses on the details

³⁹ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 132.

⁴⁰ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 68.

⁴¹ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 12.

of feminine promiscuity and adultery. They discuss Anna, an ugly young Polish girl who becomes pregnant out of wedlock, Julie, a worker in Miss Bottome's boarding house whose daughter is raped, Lena's daughter, accused of prostituting herself after her mother's tragic death in a factory accident, and Mis' Leverets, who missed her own daughter's wedding. Leader reacts defiantly by expressing a defensive empathy for deviant individuals who she views as targets of such scorn, attempting to protect her friend, an alcoholic lawyer who lives next door, from public shame.

Leader often refers to the inherently invasive act of entering another person's room uninvited as "penetration."⁴² By conflating a sexual act with a breach of spatial privacy, she constructs an apt metaphor for bodily surveillance and regulation. In a voyeuristic scene, Leader secretly beholds her mother giving birth, extending the connotations of labor and collective judgement to the two rooms upstairs:

Strange sounds were coming from the other room... I crept to the door. It was open a crack and, peeping through, I saw my mother, naked except for a short shirt, writhing on the floor... the room seemed to be full of women, and they were all gathered around my mother... who was writhing without a sound on the floor because she did not want to wake up the children... she seemed to be somewhere else, where all was agony and a fierce bestial struggle⁴³

This pregnant passage depicts an intimate moment shared in a private domestic space. Leader recognizes the women who surround Frieda as her friends, her customers and the owners of local businesses. They are the same women with whom she relishes in the details of other women's sexual proclivity. Their spectatorship, while ostensibly an act of support, exacerbates her

⁴² Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 12.

⁴³ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 20.

vulnerability and mimics their familiar cynical congress, this time with Frieda at its center. Leader's subjectivity is unique. She watches through the crack of the door, surveilling the ceremony as an outsider. From her removed perspective, she spatially reenacts her position as she eavesdrops on their conversations in the market. And strengthening the spatial duality, what Leader imagines as a "fierce bestial struggle" inversely evokes the image of animals slaughtered and hung up on meat hooks in the market downstairs.

Leader also emphasizes the mutual destruction of the human and animal body as a condition of manual and domestic labor. In the butchershop, she observes "the sure thrust of [Freida's] knife... into the belly of a cow or pig yet to be disemboweled, the swarming intestines dropping into the pail she held ready,"⁴⁴ the violent act itself a form of "penetration." Frieda suffers a severe stomach rupture as a consequence of her strenuous labor. Ruptured as she herself ruptures slaughtered livestock, she carries the injury until her death. Bearing witness to her mother's pain, Leader wonders "why did prosperity include ruptures?"⁴⁵ Frieda's family's well-being depends on her constant physical exertion in service of a gruesome trade.

Leader's childhood in the market establishes the architectural materiality of inequality and the privileged spatial separation of work and life. The years Leader spends in her mother's butcher shop and the crowded apartment upstairs precede her experience in factories, reformatories, and a disabled body. In surveilling the sexual regulation and physical expectations of young women and women laborers in this formative space, she is introduced to the mechanisms which will ultimately construct her own marginalization. The market also serves to acquaint Leader with Jewish women employed in industrial spaces, a historically resonant

⁴⁴ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 42.

⁴⁵ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 43.

political image she will one day herself become a part as a laborer in the predominantly Jewish garment sweatshops on the Lower East Side.



Bennington Pageant Week, 1911, Frederick D. Burt (Courtesy of Bennington Museum)

III.

THE BLOCKS

When the market must eventually close, Isaac and Frieda invest in the construction of boarding house known as the Blocks. Leader's second novel, *A Room for the Night*, tells the rich story of the building. A 1946 review in the *Bennington Review* reads, "the Leader Blocks—a group of flats—is the fickle Vermont heroine of this picaresque book. As a heroine she is drab in appearance, but her tenants, transient and permanent, provide flamboyant color."⁴⁶ But as the beloved landlord of the property, Leader's mother, Frieda, is as fundamental to its history as the building itself. "The Blocks was my mother and my mother was the Blocks,"⁴⁷ she writes, articulating the inseparability of the two. "The house's virtues of protection and resistance are transposed into human virtues," Bachelard writes. "The house acquires the physical and moral energy of the human body."⁴⁸ In affectionately imagining her mother as the personification of the boarding house, Leader suggests a link between identity and architectural space and implicitly addresses the structural conditions which spatially confine workers to the location of their labor. Individuals in a capitalist society may functionally embody vastly different architectural spaces relative to their class. In her dream house, for instance, the Leaders would occupy a home which sufficiently reflected the venerated characteristics of a successful American family. As its hypothetical homemaker, Frieda might symbolize the domestic space she maintains in a more normatively gendered sense. Her economic reality and the security she seeks for her own family, however, inextricably tie her to the Blocks.

⁴⁶"Leader Blocks Scene of New Book," *The Bennington Review*, January 24, 1946.

⁴⁷ Pauline Leader, *A Room for the Night* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1946), 244.

⁴⁸ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 47.

Just as a building may metaphysically emulate the qualities of an individual, it may also form a unity with the landscape on which it is built. Georg Simmel writes, “to the extent to which a social formation is amalgamated with or is, as it were, united with a specific extension of land, then it possesses a character of uniqueness or exclusivity that is not similarly attainable in other ways.”⁴⁹ Architectural spaces, in Simmelian terms, are social formations. Leader’s recollection of the construction of the Blocks contrasted with Virginia Woolf’s description of the construction of an English university establishes a dialectic which illuminates the convergence of manual labor, landscape, and natural resources at the intersection of architecture. They are practically opposite structures. As Leader tells it:

At first there was not even room enough in what was to be the cellar for a man to stand upright as he swung pick and shovel, but in a few days the hole had widened and deepened. The heavy picks of the men working swung in and out, loosening roots and earth and turning over stones that had never felt the sun before... When the earth and the stones had been loosened, the men used the shovels to fling them over the side of the hole... the earth... would be mixed with the bags of dry cement and water and would reappear in the foundation walls of the Blocks. The stones, too, large and small, smooth and jagged, would be placed in the wet cement⁵⁰

The Blocks are erected soon after World War One in response to the wave of veterans re-entering the country without homes to return to. In light of this crisis, plots of land previously seen as useless held new potential as profitable real estate. “When the... War was over,” Leader’s parents “began to lay the foundation.”⁵¹ Thus the building addressed a social problem, a

⁴⁹ Simmel, “The Sociology of Space,” 139.

⁵⁰ Leader, *A Room for the Night*, 12.

⁵¹ Leader, *A Room for the Night*, 11.

housing shortage, determined by economic conditions, a generation of men returning from war without resources or lodgings.

Leader describes similar boarding houses squeezed between existing buildings and on front and backyards, their enterprising proprietors seeking to fill any in-between space. In this passage, working men manipulate the land in order to accommodate the building's foundation. Their bodily proportions relative to the labor they perform suggest the cellar's imagined dimensionality. Dislodged earth fragments are then mixed with cement and incorporated into the foundation. The homeostatic process metaphorically recapitulates the cycle of men displaced from their homes by war and subsequently reintegrated into American communities, often through unconventional means. Like Leader's parents, Eastern Europeans of the global Jewish diaspora, the social formation they occupy is the amalgamation of a rootless people with an appropriated landscape. Woolf, meanwhile, describes another notable structure erected under entirely different conditions:

Once, presumably, this quadrangle with its smooth lawns, its massive buildings, and the chapel itself was marsh too, where the grasses waved and the swine rootled. Teams of horses and oxen... must have hauled the stone in wagons from far countries, and then with infinite labor the grey blocks in whose shade I was now standing were poised in order one on top of another, and then the painters brought their glass for the windows, and the masons were busy for centuries up on that roof with putty and cement, spade and trowel... it was then the age of faith, and money was poured liberally to set these stones on a deep foundation, and when the stones were raised, still more money was poured⁵²

⁵² Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 9.

Woolf stands in a university courtyard. Her speculative account also emphasizes land and laborers. She considers the masons, craftspeople, and working animals who converged upon the untouched landscape and provided the (subtly euphemized) “infinite labor” necessary to realize an institutional and architectural vision. “Money” is imagined as a kind of natural resource, something literally mixed with cement like the stones in the Blocks’ foundation. It is also a metonym for the religious, political, and intellectual actors funding the fabrication of place during the “age of faith.”

While the university Woolf explores sits boldly on a once desolate marsh presumably chosen not for its geographical practicality but for its pastoral beauty, the Blocks are opportunistically wedged between existing buildings on a piece of land not previously thought useful. The stones which form the university walls were selected and imported, perhaps for their beauty and cultural significance; the Blocks are built using salvaged lumber, the “the wood of a house that had almost burned to the ground... still good enough to be used in the building of another house.”⁵³ The university is destined to stand for hundreds of years as a revered institution of higher learning; the Blocks will one day house Old World migrants and factory workers. The scholars sent to Woolf’s university will learn from the esteemed cultural elite, bearers of wealth, knowledge, and influence, hoping themselves to one day wield power and influence over modern society. Tenants renting rooms in the Blocks will merely attempt to make ends meet within it.

These two origin stories carry opposite social and economic connotations, yet mutually reinforce the notion that raw materials and open space—or the lack thereof—uniquely extend the spatial character of a social formation and the boundaries it occupies. The physical structure itself, the land it sits on, and the material used to build the Blocks all contradict the normative

⁵³ Leader, *A Room for the Night*, 13.

expectations of property and land usage in Leader's homogeneous hometown. Having given the lumber from the burnt down house new life, the Blocks are eternally destined to "[smell] like fire and smoke."⁵⁴ Like the "market smell," which clings to Leader's clothing, the Blocks' smoky odor marks the low class status of the building and its inhabitants. As a distinct social formation, the building's tenants mutually maintain its spatial character and reinforce its physical boundaries. But even before the first room is rented, the Blocks are materially and spatially deviant. Damaged and symbolically revitalized, both the building's raw materials and its tenants are offered a sense of place and purpose.

Frieda operates the Blocks according to implicitly progressive principles, namely a tendency toward collectivity and a refusal to exploit individuals for profit. She is wholly uninterested in currying the favor of an elite clientele. Rather she expresses a kinship with the working class which informs her decision to rent rooms entirely to low income tenants, "men and women who were for the most part factory workers," proclaiming, "if they can pay, they're as good as anybody."⁵⁵ In his introduction to *Jewish Radicals*, Tony Michels writes that the mass of first-generation Jewish American leftists were largely a product of their immigrant parents' teachings. "Immigrant jews were unique in their ability to bequeath a radical legacy to the next generation," he writes, "whose members played an increasingly prominent role across the terrain of the American left."⁵⁶ While Frieda never explicitly expresses a radical agenda or an affiliation with the leftist movements of the early twentieth century, the Blocks and her role within them have an undeniable impact on Leader's communist ideology. Either as landlord or market overseer, Frieda is a matriarch welcoming and upholding a kind of collective unity. She is

⁵⁴ Leader, *A Room for the Night*, 13.

⁵⁵ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 52.

⁵⁶ Tony Michels and Tony Michels, "Introduction," in *Jewish Radicals: A Documentary History* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 11.

omnipresent in her tenants' lives, "[taking] care of the other children, and the 'houses'... [collecting] the rents... [cleaning] the rooms... [and settling] arguments."⁵⁷ Her daily labor, as domestic as it is managerial, subverts the professional hierarchies commonly associated with a landlord-tenant dynamic.

Simmel maps out the reciprocal effect via which each individual inhabiting a bounded, socially cohesive space "gains an inner unity for itself, a mutual referencing of its elements, a dynamic relationship to its center." In the Blocks, Frieda is the center with whom her tenants form this dynamic spatial relationship. While it is perhaps theoretically imperfect to conflate a single human being with this objective center, she does in fact uphold a "positive sense of power and justice"⁵⁸ which the building's inhabitants and the local authorities arrange themselves around. In her fond recollections of the building's rotating cast of occupants—their scandals and dark secrets, as well as their triumphs and the friendship they provide—Leader poetically depicts this dynamic spatial relationship. In a breach from her typically despairing relationship to property and the home, she writes, "I lived in a hundred houses, each one different because each one was inhabited by a different person."⁵⁹ Alienated by her unattainable dream house, Leader finds stability in the multi-faceted domestic spaces of others similarly estranged from the Anglo-American upper class.

Within the Blocks, Frieda's irreverence towards individual privacy norms effectively diminishes the borders between tenants. Simmel writes that "the breadth or narrowness of the border is by no means proportional to the size of the group. It depends instead on the tensions that develop within the group. If these find sufficient freedom of movement such that they do not

⁵⁷ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 65.

⁵⁸ Simmel, "The Sociology of Space," 143.

⁵⁹ Leader, *A Room for the Night*, 263.

collide with the boundaries, then the framework is wide.”⁶⁰ Rather than causing conflict, this practice contributes to what Leader characterizes as a cohesive group identity, a kind of class solidarity cultivated through an allowance of deviancy. “They were shameless, the people who lived in the [Blocks],” she writes, “they did not hide as the other people in the town did.”⁶¹ When her health eventually takes a turn for the worse, her tenants begin regularly visiting her on her deathbed so that she might carry out her daily duties:

After my mother went to bed, life revolved around that bed. All the business of the [Blocks] was transacted from it. She could not go to the tenants anymore, so they came to her and sat around the bed and told her their troubles. Since she could not go for the rents, they brought them to her⁶²

Previously a welcome presence moving fluidly between her tenants’ private lives as necessary (once again obscuring the division between domestic and professional spaces), she now welcomes them into hers as it nears its end. While Woolf imagines domestic rooms permeated by a feminine creative force, Leader illustrates a similar room as a spatial vignette of working class solidarity in which her mother, at once a maternal figure and an archetype of labor, is the central presence. After a lifetime of constant physical exertion, she resigns herself to the bed, an object symbolizing rest and inaction yet here characteristically designated as a place of business. This creative force also presumably attaches itself to the factory workers who come and go with rent payments and personal concerns. “The spatial immovability of an object of interest creates certain forms of relationships that group around it,” Simmel writes. “Now every immobile asset,

⁶⁰ Simmel, “The Sociology of Space,” 144.

⁶¹ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 53.

⁶² Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 133.

around which negotiations or economic transactions of any kind occur, is indeed this kind of stable pivot point.”⁶³ The bed’s fixed position within the space reinstates the social stability perhaps initially disrupted by Frieda’s illness. It is a singular immobile asset around which the tenants may fulfill their economic duties and express their concerns. In this poignant scene, the community Frieda oversaw during her final years is symbolically condensed to the unit of a single room. Its spirit is an intimate reflection of collectivity and a clear portrayal of Simmelian social centrality.

A 1946 review of *A Room for the Night* in the New York Herald Tribune provides some historical insight into Leader’s mother’s unique extralegal role, claiming, “the landlady of a small-town rooming house typically serves as mayor and chief justice of her little constituency.”⁶⁴ By tolerating illicit behavior while holding steadfast to her own values, she establishes her boarding house as an unofficial alternative to orthodox penal methods typically carried out by the state. At some point, local police officers begin bringing individuals charged with minor offenses to the Blocks rather than to jail. As one officer professes to the young Leader, “what those bums done to go to jail and get themselves a police record? Just had a little too much to drink... besides, it’s cheaper for the town to put them in the Blocks’.”⁶⁵ In this account, an agent of the state makes an ethical and political judgement which contradicts the written code of law and the disciplinary process. Recurring similar incidents solidify the Blocks as both a corrective alternative and a home for rehabilitation and prisoner re-entry. It is apparent, then, that the informal social and legal contract which characterizes the boarding house does not strictly remain within its walls but permeates the local jurisdiction in some small way.

⁶³ Simmel, “The Sociology of Space,” 146.

⁶⁴ Herbert Kupferberg, “She Lived in a Hundred Houses,” *The New York Herald Tribune*, June 9, 1946.

⁶⁵ Leader, *A Room for the Night*, 257.

Throughout the Great Depression, it is Frieda's non-normative sense of justice as landlord and spatial center which allows the property to sustain itself. She begins accepting partial rent payments from her tenants, sometimes in installments of a dollar or less. This lenient policy maintains a minimum standard of economic accountability, such that the "depression [affecting] the rest of the nation made no difference to the Blocks."⁶⁶ Leader observes a correlation between the tenants' socially disruptive behavior and their ability to seek economic alternatives in the face of a crisis:

People who obeyed the laws, ate, talked, drank, loved, slept at regular hours and at regular intervals, and kept their names out of the newspapers, lost out to the banks. We always managed to keep the Blocks one jump ahead of the sheriff and foreclosure. The Blocks continued to be a roof over our tenants' heads and it provided a roof for us⁶⁷

While dogmatic adherence to normative capitalist modes of thought costs better behaved people their homes, Leader's mother concedes her individual economic authority over the Blocks when she foresees its potentially damaging effects. Simmel compares the physical boundary enclosing a space to the frame of a painting. In either case, the surrounding border "proclaims that a world is located inside of it which is subject only to its own laws."⁶⁸ This is not necessarily true of all architectural space. The houses Leader admires, after all, are appealing specifically because they offer the promise of social assimilation and economic conformity—they abide by the laws of a larger frame. In *The Boarding House in Nineteenth-Century America*, Wendy Gamber writes, "in an era dominated by powerful—if often illusory—dichotomies between home and market, public

⁶⁶ Leader, *A Room for the Night*, 245.

⁶⁷ Leader, *A Room for the Night*, 248.

⁶⁸ Simmel, "The Sociology of Space," 141.

and private, love and money, boardinghouses emerged as unsavory counterparts to idealized homes.”⁶⁹

Leader is typically guilty of idealizing these pervasive bourgeois dichotomies, although she has never known them herself. In the Blocks, as in the market, the image of the home is defined by the functional obsolescence of privacy and nonmonetary domestic normalcy. Ultimately, the building survives the Great Depression because of its unorthodox social composition. Frieda and her tenants gain agency and reinforce the building’s physical boundaries by maintaining a resistant unity against prescriptive models of social and economic conduct. The Blocks, like the sweatshops and Bohemian spaces Leader will later encounter in New York, are defined by a social formation rooted in class solidarity and collectivity.

⁶⁹ Wendy Gamber, *The Boardinghouse in Nineteenth-Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 2.

IV.

TOWER OF SILENCE

When Leader is twelve years old, she contracts an aggressive form of meningitis. In the thralls of the painful infection, she loses her hearing. The town doctor assures her and her family that her auditory faculties will return in time, but weeks of patient anticipation do not fulfill his prediction. Leader makes a more than partial recovery, but is rendered completely deaf. Her immediate challenge, and the one which she will face from then on, is how to interrogate a world made newly formidable in silence. Surrounded by the overwhelming presence of other bodies, Leader is made particularly aware of the multiplicitous isolation her disability imposes. She is quick to articulate feeling of isolation in deafness because the physical spaces she is confined to as a function of her environment strip her of agency and preclude the possibility of meaningful solitude. Bennington is a rural mill-town. Thus middle class economic life revolves around the mill. Between the central importance of industrial labor and the prominence of Christianity, bodies move predictably through space between the factory, the church, the school, and the home. Few appear to stray from the established rhythm. Leader's disability constitutes a dramatic breach with the relative social homogeneity of the town, such that her internal experience of isolation is exacerbated by external modes of spatial confinement imposed by her community.

Leader is a meticulous if neurotic ethnographer, tracing the movement of bodies around her and speculating on their intent. She understands "the people" living in Bennington as a homogeneous population perpetuating a system of spatial control. By constantly surveilling and rebuking difference, the townspeople attempt to eradicate it. This surveillance is primarily a

visual phenomenon. She feels simultaneously judged and controlled by family, peers, and strangers—the inescapable presence of “...eyes, eyes, eyes. The eyes of the children [and] the eyes of the people” produce a sinister decentralized enclosure in which deviance is targeted and corrected. Eyes are dual agents of ostracization whose piercing lines of vision instill docility and subordination. They are most effective within the homogenizing body that is the small town. In her understanding, deviant individuals like herself, while equipped to observe this behavior, are also particularly vulnerable to its effects. Ever aware of the selective perception her disability allows, Leader becomes deeply suspicious of others’ intentions and integrity. In a sort of feedback loop, this loss of trust reinforced by self-doubt leads to a loss of mobility and freedom, and the effect is debilitating. “Under those eyes,” she writes, “I could not stand up.”⁷⁰

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau writes that as individuals interpret and inhabit urban space, their movements tend to disrupt the strategic intentions of city planners and authorities. He argues that space is produced by the movement of bodies—the pedestrians walking through the streets are agents writing the “text” that is the city. Simmel similarly views space as “only the human way of connecting sensory impulses that are unrelated in themselves into uniform interpretations.”⁷¹ All space, physical or otherwise, is the functional realization of our social or psychological instincts. The city’s true spatial character and function is the amalgamation of their disparate paths. Corrective spatial strategies, however, far from surrendering to these unpredictable patterns, are in fact collectively reproduced by individual actors. Certeau writes that these regulatory practices, originating in the mechanisms of state control, have “reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy, developed and insinuated

⁷⁰ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 88.

⁷¹ Simmel, “The Sociology of Space,” 138.

themselves into the networks of surveillance,”⁷² at once part of and separate from the state apparatus itself. Leader and Certeau do not analyze the same landscape—one observes the small town, the other the big city. Therefore their ideas have different spatial applications.

Leader partly associates her deafness and isolation with the spatial phenomenology of class—crowded rooms and opaque windows “imprison” her, limiting individual agency and mobility. But in reality, her oppression exists at a social and spatial intersection. The built environment works in conjunction with decentralized community control, establishing the spaces which reinforce and contain what Leader calls the “blind order of everything” (Leader, 47). The apartment, the market, and the town’s border all construct the boundaries which reify concentric territories of authority. While the protestant townspeople monitor Leader and her Jewish family, Leader’s Jewish family monitors their disabled daughter, and so on. In a short untitled poem, Leader seeks a vantage point in her town:

small town
 where is your horizon?
 though I have climbed to the dome of the post-office
 and peered from the clock-tower of the jail
 your highest buildings
 I could not find it
 and the lack of one suffocates me⁷³

As she looks down from Bennington’s tallest buildings, Leader is not fixated on the town below. Rather, she looks past its streets and buildings completely, seeking its horizon, the outermost boundary beyond which her deviant body and identity might evade subjugation. Simmel writes

⁷² Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley U.a.: Univ. of California Press, 2011), 96.

⁷³ Pauline Leader, Untitled.

that, “the smaller the circle which forms our environment... the more anxiously the narrow community watches over the deeds, the conduct of life and the attitudes of the individual.”⁷⁴ At the same time, he points to a false dichotomy between space formed by the built environment within clearly divided architectural or geographical formations and non-physical, decentralized territorial space like “the state”. Rather than existing separately, the two functionally reinforce each other through a social and symbolic mutuality. The circle which encloses Leader’s small town is at once small enough to suffocate her and large enough to call the existence of a “beyond” into question. Although it is undated, the poem likely foreshadows her impending escape. It is the embodiment of her isolation and the impetus of a diasporic urge.

Just as Leader believes herself to be watched, she surveils the spaces she inhabits. While recovering from her illness, she spends her days looking out the window of the room where she is bedridden. The window provides an a raised perspective from which to study the movement of bodies on the street below. Watching a distant parade slowly approaching from down the street, she anticipates the formation of musicians in the band and mentally arranges them in their expected order. Leader follows and predicts the movements of other actors as well. She watches her mother, for example, walking back and forth through the alley connecting the house and the Blocks. She is fixated on the movement of the crowd below because her disability—like her class and interiority—inherently separates her from it. Certeau describes the illusive effect of viewing a cityscape from the top floor of a tall building, a sort of “celestial eye” once only made visible only in the renderings of Renaissance painters. Of the spectator looking down at New York from the World Trade Center he writes:

⁷⁴ Georg Simmel, *Metropolis and Mental Life* (Chicago: Syllabus Division, University of Chicago Press, 1961), 16.

His elevation transfigures him into a voyeur. It puts him at a distance. It transforms the bewitching world by which one was “possessed” into a text that lies before one’s eyes. It allows one to read it. To be a solar eye. Looking down like a god. The exactation of a scopic and gnostic drive. The fiction of knowledge is related to this lust to be a viewpoint and nothing more⁷⁵

While acknowledging the mystical satisfaction inherent in this voyeurism, Certeau primarily treats it with contempt. The spectator can never truly claim meaningful knowledge of the city from such a great distance. Only on the street, amidst the citydwellers, can she expect to track and observe the patterns constructing urban space. He likens the spectator to “an Icarus [able to] ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below.”⁷⁶ Labyrinths dictates direction, leading those who enter them to predetermined destinations. In the cellar dream which precedes her deafness, Leader recalls, “I walked around the cellar, or rather the labyrinths wound around me... I had no thought of disobeying, or timidity.”⁷⁷ Windows or towers uplift the viewer, potentially providing knowledge, while labyrinths, existing far below, are controlled spaces which hypnotize their subjects into conformity. When she returns from the cellar, she does not re-enter the labyrinth of the people. A cultural, physical, and mental other, Leader’s movement counters spatial intentions.

The skyscraper, the bedroom window, and the clock-tower in the poem are all vantage points privileged by height and sonic isolation. Sonically isolated by virtue of her disability, Leader also imagines herself to inhabit a metaphorical tower of silence. “The journey down into the darkness,” she writes, “had broken the crust of my subconscious where all my supposedly lost or forgotten or left behind things were... I was deaf, I was imprisoned in a tower of

⁷⁵ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 92.

⁷⁶ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 92.

⁷⁷ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 55.

silence.”⁷⁸ Understood phenomenologically as a level of imagined space, the tower is vertically the opposite of the cellar. Upon leaving the gnome kingdom and breaking “the crust” of the earth and the subconscious, she is spatially transported from the lowest to the highest vantage point. Somewhere in the middle presumably rests the familiar world from which she has been definitively othered. Although she doesn’t depict the tower as her permanent fate, it is a place she returns to repeatedly as she rationalizes her isolation. It is a lonely structure, imprisoning her. Yet it also functions as a coping mechanism, a method of observation tailored to her disability. If the people surveil Leader from the ground, she so surveils the people from a kind of watchtower. She is confined to an elevated phenomenological vantage point while still remaining *physically* on the ground among the people, without being “possessed.” Neither dumbly assimilated among the chaotic mass of individuals nor estranged by blind verticality, she possesses the ability to read spatial texts with great immediacy and accuracy.

Upon returning to the cellar for the second and final time, the gnome king tells Leader, “your eyes are as clear as the water now, clearer than the water, so you will see plainly.”⁷⁹ The fantastical exchange recapitulates her metaphorical clarity, which stands in sharp contrast to the “pity and... obscene curiosity” she sees “wallowing in [the people’s] eyes. Wholly liquid from the darker depths of their being.”⁸⁰ While the people wade through a murky subterranean realm, gazing out and attempting to pull others in, Leader thwarts their efforts by escaping to a lonely safe haven above. Presenting her subjectivity in this way grants Leader greater authority as an author, a poet, and an informal ethnographer, while also tacitly acknowledging an arrogance cultivated in isolation. Observing and interacting with the world from the tower of silence, a

⁷⁸ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 88.

⁷⁹ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 55.

⁸⁰ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 89.

perpetually elevated perspective, she lucidly interprets remembered spaces and the movement of bodies within them.

The tower also gives spatial form to the symbiotic duality linking Leader's poetic mind and disabled body. "It was but right that my mind and body should be so closely interlaced, that they should feel each other so sensitively," she writes, "for were they not locked together in the tower of silence? They must listen to the within, rather than the without."⁸¹ Leader's deafness and deviant identity are subject to similar mechanisms of regulation and subordination. Together, they mutually construct her subjectivity as a viewpoint. An unwavering belief in her own interiority, optimistically imagined as the result of a shared physical and mental imprisonment, is Leader's best defense mechanism as she confronts the brutal uncertainty of the outside world. Following this interior impulse ultimately helps her to discover her burgeoning poetic voice.

⁸¹ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 183.

V.

HOUSE OF POETRY

A Spider sewed at night
 Without a light
 Upon an arc of white.

If ruff it was of dame
 Or shroud of gnome,
 Himself, himself inform.

Of immortality
 His strategy
 Was physiognomy.

–Emily Dickinson, “A Spider Sewed at Night,” 1924

When I read the finest passages of the Iliad, I am conscious of a soul-sense that lifts me above the narrow, cramping circumstances of my life. My physical limitations are forgotten—my world lies upward, the length and the breadth and the sweep of the heavens are mine

–Helen Keller, *Story of My Life*, 1903

“I was very conscious of the streets and of the houses,”⁸² Leader writes in the opening of her memoir, recalling a walk through Bennington late at night. From a young age she harbors a precocious awareness of her own body in relation to the built environment. Leader’s childhood is

⁸² Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 1.

frequently devoid of privacy; a series of too-close-for-comfort interactions in shared spaces. “Because of the market, we had no privacy; because of the houses we still had none,”⁸³ she writes. While these crowded interiors constitute the collective environment in which Leader cultivates an ideological alliance with the working class, they also inherently challenge her disabled body and stifle her restless poetic voice. Her deafness exacerbates the lack of privacy, the limited mobility, the perpetual surveillance, and the claustrophobia experienced behind closed doors—architecturally defined phenomena determined in part by economic conditions. Together, they comprise an oppressive totality. “All the world seemed to be against me, on top of me,”⁸⁴ she writes.

Leader’s home is an atmosphere of distrust and suspicion. Forbidden by her mother to venture outside and abused by her father when she disobeys, she is effectively confined indoors, unable to seek “[shelter] from the claims and tyrannies of [her family].”⁸⁵ Grasping at some vestige of independence, she applies herself completely to her poetry. Yet even while alone in her bedroom, her creative endeavors are frequently hindered by her parents’ cynical accusations. “When I shut myself up in my room to write my poems, there were always intruders,” Leader writes, “what was I doing, what was I writing? They were suspicious.”⁸⁶ Gaston Bachelard writes that “the house we were born in has engraved within us the hierarchy of the various functions of inhabiting. We are the diagram of the functions of inhabiting that particular house” (Bachelard, 15). The “function of inhabiting” the spaces Leader does is the mental fabrication of an alternative. She learns to cope by retreating to imagined spaces, initially various iterations of the dream house. “In my own mind, I lived in those other worlds, the worlds away from the

⁸³ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 132.

⁸⁴ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 16.

⁸⁵ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 52.

⁸⁶ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 104.

market [and] the two rooms upstairs,” she writes, “a world where there was privacy, where people didn’t come too close to one without first asking.”⁸⁷

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf situates Leader’s frustrations within a broader historical relationship between female disenfranchisement and creative autonomy. “Intellectual freedom,” she writes, “depends upon material things [and] poetry depends on intellectual freedom,”⁸⁸ primarily access to a private space and the financial resources needed to forgo grueling wage labor in service of individual creative pursuits.⁸⁹ Woolf is convinced that the woman who writes in the perfect study—perhaps with hardwood flooring, ornate floral wallpaper, bay windows overlooking a rose garden, an Edwardian secretary, and doors that lock—is more likely to eventually produce something of merit. But a “room of one’s own” is merely one architectural manifestation of the structural linkage between class, property, and cultural production, a critical but not solely deterministic vacancy in the history of women writers. The dream houses Leader mentally occupies, each presumably housing equally beautiful private studies, are similar in their symbolic material appeal. They are grand architectural spaces which offer the “intellectual freedom” Woolf describes as a prerequisite to intellectual fulfillment and happiness.

Bachelard is also interested in the significance of “the house,” an object to which he does not strictly ascribe tangible form. The house “constitutes a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability. We are all constantly re-imagining its reality” (Bachelard, 16). It is at once a literal and metaphorical entity, its physical dimensions no more relevant to its true

⁸⁷ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 34.

⁸⁸ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 108.

⁸⁹ Woolf bemoans the historical disparity between revered male and female authors included in the canon, a trend she attributes to the seamless patriarchal transmission of wealth and status: generations of men solidifying cultural influence as they produced literature in the libraries of elite institutions, heirs to the material conditions which enable leisure and intellectual freedom. Without access to these resources, she doubts whether genius might reasonably be expected within the ranks of the working class.

essence than the memories and fantasies created within it. Bachelard calls the house “one of the greatest powers of integration for... thoughts, memories, and dreams.” This integration, he writes, is bound by “the daydream.”⁹⁰ Whether Bachelard views the house as the product or site of this integration is unclear, a distinction perhaps left intentionally ambiguous. While Simmel privileges the formative power of social relations in establishing spatial boundaries, Bachelard views space as meaningfully constructed by the imagination and the subconscious on the part of the individual. But that isn’t to say the house is without form. It is something stable, a world in and of itself which shelters, provides privacy, intimacy, and containment.

Woolf and Bachelard similarly articulate the effect of the built environment on the creative process. Woolf views the room within the house as the ideal location of daydream-bound phenomenological integration—the physical space in which the writer finds clarity of mind via daydreaming and produces writing. She calls humans “creatures of illusion,”⁹¹ and here the “proofs or illusions of stability” Bachelard’s house provides are equally present in an financial as well as an emotional sense. The benefits of economic empowerment include ownership of property, specifically access to “a room of one’s own.” While her thesis is inseparable from her understanding of patriarchal capital, Woolf is specifically concerned with the experience of solitary thinking. For it is in solitude, while unimpeded by worldly concerns, that the writer may let her mind wander idly and effortlessly—to think, to remember, and to daydream. Woolf writes that “it is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top,”⁹² electing not to distinguish between these two states. “The great

⁹⁰ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 6.

⁹¹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 35.

⁹² Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 31.

function of poetry,” Bachelard writes, “is to give us back the situations of our dreams.”⁹³ The house allows one to be idle, and this idleness allows one to dream. Poetry is the linguistic embodiment of this process. But as Leader demonstrates, mentally accessing a solitary poetic space is not contingent on ownership of an architectural one.

Unable to advance her economic position, it is ultimately Leader’s own poetic interiority which empowers her to seek an alternate means of escapism beyond the material world. As Bachelard aptly asserts, “the imagination build[s] ‘walls’ of impalpable shadows, comfort[s] itself with the illusion of protection—or, just the contrary, tremble[s] behind thick walls, mistrust[s] the staunchest ramparts,”⁹⁴ describing two psychological acts in tension. In her isolated state, Leader discovers the former as a reliable antidote to the latter. She begins to daydream, imagining herself as the sole occupant of various metaphorical poetic structures often endowed with spatial characteristics. The intangible walls Leader builds in her mind connect to form something akin to houses, the product of integrated “thoughts, memories, and dreams,” bound by the daydream.

In an attempt to manage the uncertainty her disability inflicts, Leader engages in the practice of mental spatial arrangement. She performs this distinctly phenomenological exercise by observing rooms, buildings, and bodies and ordering them according to learned or imagined patterns. During her brief enrollment in the local school, for instance, Leader has difficulty remembering the order of the rooms and the navigating between them. The hallways are like the Certeudian cellar labyrinth which dictates the movement of bodies. After sorting out the building’s layout, she recalls, “it seemed incredible to me that I had finally arranged [the rooms]

⁹³ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 15.

⁹⁴ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 5.

in my mind.”⁹⁵ She initially relies on this relatively unexceptional strategy as it grants her a degree of independence. But it quickly assumes a more abstract function. While bedridden, Leader describes looking out the window at a marching band passing on the street below. “I could see the band from my window... even if it was still blocks away,” she recalls, “as I waited for it to pass... I set it up, like a box of soldiers, in my mind.”⁹⁶ Despite having arranged the musicians, her failure to hear their instruments is upsetting. To console herself, she attempts to imagine their music by repurposing melodic memories from childhood—a surprisingly easy task. Leader goes on to dream up innumerable musical works, symphony orchestras with only her as their audience and conductor. “The music in my head,” she writes, “became a secret house of pleasure to which I returned every night.”⁹⁷ Harnessing the power of the daydream, she forms an intimate interior space by rearranging auditory memories in the present.

In light of this experience, Leader imbues her poetic process with the symbolic language of imagined or remembered song, writing, “the poems I would sometimes write I took to my mind and spoke over and over again until they fitted with the rhythm of the music, until there was no disharmonious note in the poem.”⁹⁸ By ordering the words like a musical composition, Leader engages in a different form of arrangement, adapting musical rhythm to satisfy the linguistic constraints of poetic form. On the reverberation of the poetic image, Bachelard writes:

In this reverberation, the poetic image will have a sonority of being... the grip that poetry requires on our very being bears a phenomenological mark that is unmistakable. The exuberance and depth of a poem are always phenomena of the

⁹⁵ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 75.

⁹⁶ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 66.

⁹⁷ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 70.

⁹⁸ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 70.

resonance-reverberation doublet. It is as though the poem, through its exuberance, awakened new depths in us⁹⁹

Poems and poetic images are immaterial forms which echo deeply in an interior space. Leader's imagined songs possess an obvious sonority in a conventional sense. But Bachelard reinforces the notion that her poems and the images they linguistically convey in fact have a distinct sonic spatiality, or "depth." In a familiar sentiment, Leader writes, "I sometimes spoke a phrase that haunted me, that would not go away. I took its words apart and arranged and rearranged them, until the phrase was, I thought perfect."¹⁰⁰ She arranges and rearranges poetic verse as she arranges people on the street, furniture in her apartment, musical notes, or rooms in the schoolhouse: according to a spatial order. Her mental spatial arrangement, her musical "house of pleasure," and her poetic process, therefore, are all part of a causal trajectory.

Discussing the limitations of the social model, Tom Shakespeare acknowledges those bodily facets of disability which cannot reasonably be accommodated. "Many parts of the natural world will remain inaccessible... sunsets, birdsong and other aspects of nature are difficult for those lacking sight or hearing to experience."¹⁰¹ During the earliest and darkest days of her disability, Leader's loss of hearing is indeed a primarily corporeal experience. At first, no birds sing in the same sense that no people talk or no dogs bark. Yet as she grows accustomed to a different kind of interior sensory spectrum, her poetic subjectivity challenges the too-literalism of Shakespeare's analysis. In a short poem, she writes:

A leaf's fall death struggle

⁹⁹ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 16, 23.

¹⁰⁰ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 95.

¹⁰¹ Tom Shakespeare, "The Social Model of Disability." in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (New York: Routledge, 2010), 9.

so softly loud my mind contracts
with the effort of imagination¹⁰²

While she certainly attributes specific disabling elements of her deafness to a physical lack—her inability to respond to unexpected confrontations in public or institutional spaces, for instance—Shakespeare’s example does not represent her unique experience. In the forest, Leader’s “mind contracts” as she imagines birds chirping and leaves falling, weaving words into rhythmic stanzas. In the metaphorical realm which exists beyond the built environment, neither birdsong nor poem is any realer than the other.

Understood to possess a symbolic spatial character, Leader’s poetry becomes a deeply empowering inhabitable entity. “I lived only in my poems,” she writes, “a new reality... I was no longer in my tower of silence, a prisoner. I flew out of its windows.”¹⁰³ To live in her poetry, her process and creative output, is to inhabit her own interiority. In this instance, the poem-as-house functions as the phenomenological product of poetic integration, forming an escape route leading from one imagined space to another. Yet while Leader’s poetry is a Bachelardian house in the abstract sense, her experience of it is, in fact, non-architectural. “My poetry became the door that led me out of my deafness,”¹⁰⁴ she writes. When she flies out of the windows of her tower of silence or exits through the poetic door, she escapes to an outer realm characterized by the lack of architectural boundaries, worldly constructs which reinforce the social actualization of her marginalized identity. The absence of these boundaries is also the absence or dismissal of their socioeconomic connotations, with which she is deeply familiar.

¹⁰² Pauline Leader, “Leaves, Leaves, Leaves.”

¹⁰³ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 129.

¹⁰⁴ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 119.

Woolf, too, imagines a parallel between architecture and the written word. She refutes the dominant understanding of narrative as chronological, instead describing novels as comprised “of sentences built... into arcades or domes.”¹⁰⁵ In her representation, the narrative’s shape is not formed “by the relation of stone to stone, but by the relation of human being to human being.”¹⁰⁶ The literary house is the sum of its parts, the relationship between characters whose collective intersection forms a cohesive narrative structure. What she describes is essentially a series of poetic images evoked by narrative form itself. In Woolf’s metaphor lies an urgent parallel with Georg Simmel’s sociological theory of space and the built environment. Physical space, Simmel claims, is not an absolute, objective thing, but is rather formed and rigidly maintained by the social or political relationships between individuals. On the difference between social cohesion within artificial and natural borders, he writes:

The physical border’s existing absolute precision illustrates particularly well the formative power of the social context and its inwardly motivated necessity in this very lack of prejudice by natural space. This is why consciousness of boundedness is not at its most precise with so-called natural boundaries¹⁰⁷

What Simmel terms “so-called natural boundaries” are largely oxymoronic in this context. Nature space is determined by the absence of man-made boundaries, the lack of a built environment or permanent settlement. While nature may fall under the jurisdiction of the state and rivers or mountain ranges may divide the terrain, the lack of social formations within them renders these divisions superfluous.

¹⁰⁵ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 77.

¹⁰⁶ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 71.

¹⁰⁷ Simmel, “The Sociology of Space,” 141.

Leader's need of an extra-social refuge is a reaction to this phenomenon. When she "leaves" Bennington, either by walking past the houses into the forest or tapping into her interior poetic space, the "consciousness of boundedness" which incites her alienation within the built environment falls away. Even so, the independent poetic spaces she inhabits are not wholly solitary. Leader's interiority lies at the intersection of the mental and the corporeal, entities jointly confined, as already mentioned, in the tower of silence. "I had need of that perfect lightness of spirit-kinship that existed between my body and my mind. I wanted nothing in the outside world to break that... psychic stream."¹⁰⁸ In the poetic realm—the tower's spatial exterior—words are not merely the individual units which collectively construct poetic verse, but ethereal forms subsumed into the intimate unity that is the psychic stream. Woolf writes, "is a vessel in which all sorts of spirits and forces are coursing and flashing perpetually."¹⁰⁹

Leader imagines the words she writes to have a visceral presence; they are the entities with whom she shares her poetic space, intimate companions within a metaphorical social formation who she "would have been terribly lonely without."¹¹⁰ In a poem titled "Deaf Poet to Her Lovers," she writes:

My beloved ones are words:
words are lips
that seek my still, deaf face
in love and anger
for something is lost

¹⁰⁸ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 182.

¹⁰⁹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 44.

¹¹⁰ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 105.

something is lost.¹¹¹

While her words are not human, they are personified by virtue of their intimate relationship with Leader. “True intimacy needs no ears,”¹¹² she writes. And in the same vein that she lives in her poems, she has placed herself within the walls of her own memoir. She is simultaneously the architect of her narrative house, an individual stone fundamentally contributing to its structure, and an occupant. Here, Bachelard’s characterization of the house a “power” for the daydream-bound integration of “thoughts, memories, and dreams”¹¹³ again comes into question. The occupant of a house daydreams within it, simultaneously projecting the memories of past homes onto its walls and forming new ones within them. In this sense it is the space itself which facilitates the integration. But as Leader and Woolf demonstrate, these two interpretations of daydream-bound phenomenological integration are not mutually exclusive. The integration of “thoughts, memories, and dreams,” through creative processes, disability coping mechanisms, or the creation of a novel itself, might all symbolically manifest in the form of a house.

While the transformative poetic space Leader discovers is immensely empowering, it does not offer a lasting escape from the panoptic alienation of small town life or her parent’s abusive methods of confinement. Her own family actively discourages her poetry, such that the act of writing becomes an unbearable challenge on its own. She foresees a miserable fate in Bennington, a series of ominous forces encroaching upon her from all sides. Unable to trust the very people whose support she requires, Leader grows even more defiant in her independence. It is in this solitary state of clarity that she resolves to leave. When she is seventeen years old, Leader runs away from home, boarding a train headed towards New York.

¹¹¹ Pauline Leader, “Deaf Poet to Her Lovers.”

¹¹² Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 104.

¹¹³ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 6.

VI.

“RESTAURANT, SWEATSHOP, OR FACTORY”

When she arrives in New York, Leader searches for accommodations, her meager savings affording her only the bare necessities. She lays down roots on the Lower East Side, renting a cheap “windowless room, where everything seemed windowless.”¹¹⁴ Faced with perpetual unemployment and hunger, Leader’s life in the Village is dominated by a constant search for paid work. She recalls endless days spent working “in restaurant, sweatshop, or factory with a terrible longing to break away.”¹¹⁵ Of all the places where she works, the sweatshop is the most impactful. Describing the cramped quarters, Leader writes, “half-heartedly partitioned off with a curtain were some women seated before machines pushed against the wall. There were two big windows, unwashed. The floor was strewn with buttons and scraps of cloth.”¹¹⁶ The unwashed windows call to mind the opaque windows in the market or the windowlessness of her rented room, resonant poetic images associated with the oppressive unintimacy of industrial spaces and the suffocating inseparability of life and labor. Like Leader and her mother, nearly all of the workers are Jewish, their presence serving to further reinforce the gendered inversion of Jewish women in non-domestic spaces¹¹⁷.

¹¹⁴ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 173.

¹¹⁵ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 176.

¹¹⁶ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 168.

¹¹⁷ Earlier in her memoir, Leader remembers Julie, a young woman from Bennington who worked many sleepless hours in Miss Bottome’s boarding house in order to support her daughter. “How many years had Julie been in Miss Bottome’s kitchen?” Leader wonders. “How many years of getting up before dawn and going to bed after midnight...? How many years in that little back room with no windows that Miss Bottome allowed you? Oh, I lost count” (Leader, 11)

The history of garment sweatshops on the Lower East Side provides a rich lens through which to view Leader's developing political impulses. In the early twentieth century, Jewish women immigrants and their daughters provided the majority of sweatshop labor, particularly in the readymade garment industry. These women were an essential part of labor organizations like the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. Their collective efforts as representatives of the Jewish labor movement contributed to the successes of the Communist Party USA and the Socialist Party, both of which advanced radical American politics in New York City and the nation¹¹⁸ Leader arrives in New York in the second half of the 1920s, at a time when America's leftist parties and labor organizers faced waning membership and a number of crippling political defeats following a period of decisive victories. During this time, it was the Jewish labor movement which helped to keep "radicalism alive and functioning."¹¹⁹ It is not surprising, therefore, that she did not find herself directly involved. But while Leader may not have been a card carrying member of a union like the ILGWU, her role as a sweatshop worker aligns her with the American Jewish leftist tradition, as a participant and an ally to a radical political movement.

Leader is determined to remain independent and self-sufficient, perpetually pushing up against the functional obsolescence capitalism attaches to her body because of her disability. "All the employers saw was my deafness," she writes, "dishes to be washed, floors to be scrubbed, the meaner factory jobs. These things were all that I was good for, I had found."¹²⁰ One of the most compelling arguments put forth by the social model of disability interrogates the ways in which capitalism renders disabled individuals economically unviable. Social model theorists like Jason Greig and Michael Oliver write that disability is in part constructed by the physical labor which

¹¹⁸ Michels, *Jewish Radicals*, 3.

¹¹⁹ Michels, *Jewish Radicals*, 17.

¹²⁰ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 165.

members of the working class must—but may be physically unable to—provide in order to survive in a capitalist economy. But this interpretation is not uncontroversial. In *Towards a Sociology of Impairment*, Bill Paterson and Kevin Hughes argue that the social model contradicts itself by imagining the disabled body under capitalism as a “faulty machine.”¹²¹ They claim that this language constitutes an adherence to the medical model which the social model rejects through the loaded implication that disabled bodies require “fixing.” While this critique makes an intriguing rhetorical connection, it fails to account for the realities of industrial labor, which are oppressive in and of themselves. It also disregards the larger anti-capitalist ideals of the social model, which posit that the most physically and mentally oppressive conditions socially constructing disability are rooted in capitalist means of production.

Outside of her memoir, Leader fictionally reflects on sweatshop labor in three short stories published in *Survey* magazine between 1930 and 1931, “The Girl Who Looked Too Much at the Clock,” “Overalls,” and “No Laughter Allowed.” They are disturbing vignettes of factory life, each taking place in the imaginary version of a place where she actually worked. It is likely that Leader wrote these offshoots as a way to experiment with image and structure while she worked on similar sections of her memoir; they share a number of anecdotes and stylistic choices. In “No Laughter Allowed,” Leader imagines sweatshop workers as mechanically fused to the sewing machines they operate. “The rhythm of the machine was staccato;” she writes, “the body of the worker moved in a constant staccato jerk, head and shoulders were brought up, brought up, brought up, and flung back in a never ending jerk in time with the machine.”¹²² Factory workers in an industrial economy like that of 1920s New York are expected to be mechanically obedient—mentally docile and physically infallible. A laborer’s body is profitable

¹²¹ Hughes and Paterson, “The Social Model of Disability,” 329.

¹²² Pauline Leader. “No Laughter Allowed,” *The Survey*, September 1, 1931.

if it is efficient and productive, able to be left running for hours like any other machine operating on the factory floor. As Greig writes, “In order for capitalism to grow and function, it requires ‘fit’ and productive bodies.”¹²³ The sweatshop is the spatial iteration of capitalist productivity in its most historically brutal form; the disabled worker who fails adhere to these standards is, essentially, defective.

At times Leader’s deafness *does* render her unable to adhere to the unspoken commandments of sweatshop labor, a deficiency which repeatedly costs her a job. “As I had been expelled from school,” she writes, “so was I being expelled from the factories.”¹²⁴ More often than not, Leader is a burden which these institutions cannot be bothered to accommodate. Her body is devalued because she puts productivity, meaning profits, at risk. And at its most resilient, her deviant identity—which includes her deafness, creative spirit, and radical politics—is fundamentally at odds with the normative values of industrial spaces. But while Leader is hardly a valuable asset to any sweatshop overseer (and an easily expendable one), she temporarily manages to perform the mechanical obedience needed to briefly sustain unskilled positions, writing, “I felt in me the required deadness that was necessary to endure the confines of the cage. Then I too, like the others, went about my work, obediently, mechanically.”¹²⁵ In “the cage” Leader imagines yet another bounded realm of confinement, a metaphorical space extended to encompass the obedient docility of sweatshop labor. While she inhabits the tower of silence as a lonely condition of her deafness outside of industrial spaces, laborers are relegated to a similar fate within the sweatshop regardless of impairment. In the image of the cage, conditions of class and disability typically expressed within Leader’s disabled body are again spatially

¹²³ Jason Reimer Greig. "Disability, Society, and Theology: The Benefits and Limitations of the Social Model of Disability." In *Reconsidering Intellectual Disability: L'Arche, Medical Ethics, and Christian Friendship*, (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2015), 86.

¹²⁴ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 109.

¹²⁵ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 177.

consolidated, this time through the unifying oppression of many individuals. Michael Oliver writes, “For us [disabled persons], the commonality among different groups is not otherness but the experience of oppression under capitalism.”¹²⁶ By this logic, the factory or the sweatshop may also be imagined as collective spaces. While the physical requirements of the labor itself are not equally untenable, “oppression under capitalism” is the closest thing sweatshop workers have to an equalizing force.

Required to meet the demands of factory production in close quarters, laborers like Leader also actively seek to subvert mechanisms of control and exploitation. This subversion may take place collectively, through unionization, or individually, through the nuanced act which Certeau calls the tactic. Tactics subvert strategies, the mechanisms of control and surveillance made possible by the firm establishment of place. They are a means of subtly contradicting the authority which governs individuals occupying a given place, disobedience performed “within the enemy’s field of vision.”¹²⁷ The tactic is an ephemeral, often invisible act—it is temporally opportunistic, reliant on “a clever *utilization of time*, of the opportunities it presents and also of the play that it introduces into the foundations of power.”¹²⁸ This distinction sets the tactic apart from more combative, transformative actions like the organization of a union, actions which attempt to renegotiate the governing strategies of a place. Leader’s tactics are many. Eagerly anticipating the end of the day in the restaurant dish pit and the sweatshop, she is fixated on the clock hands whose position determines her freedom. One such clock, a miniature of an iconic London tower, becomes the object of her affection. “My greatest weakness was Big Ben. I loved to look at him,” she writes. “I loved the relief I felt when the little hand, at last, after years, so it

¹²⁶ Michael and Colin Barnes. "Disabling of Enabling Welfare: What Next for Disabled People?" In *Understanding Disability: From Theory to Practice* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹²⁷ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 37.

¹²⁸ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 39.

seemed, painfully climbed to noon and began its downward slide to nine o'clock. How I loved it!"¹²⁹ Considered a distraction by her supervisor, Big Ben is eventually removed from the wall on account of Leader's frequent checking in. The simple act of stealing glances at the clock in industrial spaces, while surveilled by supervisors, is a tactic operating through and directly related to the passage of time.

Tactics which do not operate through temporality do so through linguistic manipulation. As Certeau writes, "rhetorical alterations point to the use of language by speakers in particular situations of ritual or actual linguistic combat... 'ways of speaking' provide the analysis of 'ways of operating'."¹³⁰ Linguistic tactics may subvert the spoken word, through colloquialism or slang, but they may also be non-verbal. Leader, for instance, loudly laughs to herself on the factory floor in spite an "invisible sign [reading] NO LAUGHTER ALLOWED."¹³¹ Her use of the word "allowed," a homophone for "aloud," is a clever means of articulating the factory's authoritarian silent mandate, a kind of linguistic tactic on its own. *Sewing Machine*, a poem written by ILGWU laborer Miriam Tane, imagines a common machine language spoken amongst sweatshop laborers:

Backbone hooked to sweat-browned chairs
 Inseparable as wounds to flesh and tears,
 Imprisoned like cloth between hand and shears,
 Leashed to blind machines (like human hounds)—
 Sputtering
 Esperanto of electric sound¹³²

¹²⁹ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 151.

¹³⁰ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 39.

¹³¹ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 177.

¹³² Miriam Tane, "Sewing Machine," In *Garment Workers Speak*, ed. ILGWU (New York: International Ladies Garment Workers Union Education Dept, 1940).

Like Leader and the theorists of the social model, Tane blurs the lines between the laborer's body and the machine she operates. She also depicts laborers "leashed" like "hounds," a confinement image which metaphorically resonates with Leader, herself "an animal who has been caged"¹³³ in the sweatshop or the factory. But most compelling is Tane's imaginative characterization of machine noises as an "Esperanto of electric sound." Esperanto is an international auxiliary language, the amalgamation of global linguistic structures and forms, belonging to no one country and created with universal intent. In this poetic interpretation of a linguistic tactic, sweatshop labor itself is imbued with a kind of covert collectivity. The notion of a non-verbal, mechanical Esperanto speaks to the ethnically diverse character of early twentieth century sweatshops, industrial spaces largely staffed by immigrants and first-generation Americans like Leader. Tane's poem appears in *Garment Workers Speak*, a compilation of primary source documents written by the women laborers of the ILGWU. It is one of many poems, suggesting that while Leader may not have paid dues to a labor union, her leftist prose and poetic verse belong to a radical literary tradition instrumental in exposing and reforming oppressive industrial conditions.

Leader fully realizes her political ideology upon experiencing the grueling realities of sweatshop and factory labor firsthand. "I had communistic ideas without knowing that they were communistic," she writes, "I was ignorant of the many labels that I would have acquired naturally if I had been able to hear... especially I was for freedom. Freedom of the individual. Freedom from such awful things as factories and sweatshops."¹³⁴ The radical voice Leader harbors throughout her childhood is critically nurtured once she arrives in the Lower East Side.

¹³³ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 176.

¹³⁴ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 177.

But beyond conversations held in bohemian circles, she is not radicalized through any formal indoctrination. Rather, her political ideology is informed by an environmental awareness of the capitalist pressures weighing on her creative spirit and disabled body in demanding industrial spaces, the familiar reiteration of lifelong physical limitations and economic struggles. Tony Michels historicizes her “communistic ideas” as part of a Jewish cultural attraction with much deeper roots, writing, “communism’s promise to put an immediate end to capitalism, imperialism, and all forms of inequality tapped into utopian longings and fervent emotions evident among immigrant Jews since the early labor strikes of the 1880s.”¹³⁵ Unable to prevent her mother’s rupture or liberate her from the all-consuming mentality equating endless labor with prosperity, Leader’s childhood intuition and personal experience intersect in the manifestation of her communist identity.

¹³⁵ Michels, *Jewish Radicals*, 10.

VII.

THE CAFETERIA

Leader seeks community and companionship in a Village cafeteria, where young artists and poets congregate late at night. She paints a picture of an “ordinary cafeteria, like any of the thousand other cafeterias in the city... [with] too ornate windows... [and] rows of imitation marble-topped tables, each with its napkin holder and condiments and sauces.”¹³⁶ Her tongue-in-cheek description of the cafeteria’s kitschy interior suggests a self-awareness of her own idealistic aspirations about material wealth and property. The “too ornate windows” are the antithesis of the opaque ones in her mother’s shop, or the windowlessness of her rented room. The “imitation marble-topped tables” call to mind the Vermont house Leader admires as a young girl in the opening lines of her memoir, a beautiful house “set far back from the street, in its own grounds... white—marble, I thought, for I liked the word marble—[with] pillars. I thought of it often.”¹³⁷ The cafeteria is certainly not the “real thing.” It is an imitation of luxury where ketchup packets sit on gilded surfaces; yet it offers an endearing satisfaction. Like the warring corridors of her youth—the beautiful entrance to her dream house and the “dark, dirty, liquor smelling public hallway,”¹³⁸ above the market—these architectural dualities spatially reinforce the futility of assimilating into the anglo-american cultural hegemony often viscerally reflected in the aesthetic characteristics of the built environment.

Despite its conventional appearance and daytime clientele, by midnight each day the cafeteria becomes a microcosm of Village bohemia distinctly contained within architectural

¹³⁶ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 161.

¹³⁷ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 1.

¹³⁸ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 99.

boundaries. The crowd which reliably arrived in the later hours “transformed or rather hid its ordinariness with its carelessness, their youth, their dreams. It became an extraordinary place, taking on the qualities of these people.”¹³⁹ In other words, the kinds of people who occupy the cafeteria fundamentally alter its spatial character. In a 1931 review of *And No Birds Sing* published in the *New York Evening Post*, William Soskin identifies the unnamed cafeteria. “Hubert’s, I think the cafeteria was called, and at its tables around midnight you found... young people talking eagerly and intensely... their social communion seemed to be an escape from a dreary world that had no room for their free-dancing and impolite spirits”¹⁴⁰

Hubert’s is also mentioned in the “Shouts and Murmurs” column in the 1929 edition of the *New Yorker*. The article pays homage to the cafeteria following its recent closure and sheds light on a collective payment ritual known as “sitting in hock”:

Dwellers of the Village, who took it seriously, used to drop in at Hubert’s without money in their pockets, order something over the counter, and then wait around until some friend came in to pay the check. They spent the intervening time in talking about one thing and another. This trust in the gay camaraderie of bohemia wasn’t always justified immediately. Friends dropping in for coffee were cordial, but frequently they were without funds and also found themselves in hock. Then they would all have to wait until some lucky fellow came along who had sold a verse or an etching, or had got money from home. He would pay their check. This was called “bailing out of hock.” The record for sitting in hock was held by one forlorn man who waited seven hours with a seventy-five-cent check. At the end of five hours he manage to borrow a nickel to phone a cousin to come to his aid¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 162.

¹⁴⁰ William Soskin. “Reading and Writing.” *New York City Evening Post*, May 18, 1931.

¹⁴¹ “Hock at Huberts.” *The New Yorker*, June 29, 1929.

The unnamed owner of the cafeteria, “a Jew of forty, gross, with highly manicured nails,”¹⁴² is not unlike Leader’s mother in her role as landlady. While his line of business does not require him to be as involved in the lives of his clients, the late night cafeteria crowd relies on his presence as a kind of Simmelian center. Like the Blocks, Hubert’s is a communal space which operates according to an informal, non-normative economic and social contract. Occupants of both spaces manage to remain in good standing with their respective proprietors without adhering to a rigid transactional system. Hubert’s patrons “sitting in hock” bank on the good will of the manager, who trusts that their debts will eventually be settled, as Leader’s mother trusted her tenants to make at least partial rent throughout the Depression, despite waning wages and employment. His tolerance maintains a collective unity rooted in tolerance and reinforces the cafeteria’s distinct spatial character. “He realized his power,” Leader writes, “he meant life or starvation to many of them... he let the freaks stay.”¹⁴³ Leader’s depiction of the Jewish man, while characteristically sardonic, is nonetheless appreciative. The article about Hubert’s goes on to describe the cafeteria’s eventual demise following a change in ownership, as “the new management, unused to disorder in business, failed.”¹⁴⁴

Before happening upon Hubert’s, Leader is timidly loyal to the Automats as a food source. These now obsolete establishments, common in twentieth-century Manhattan, dispensed fast food from self-serve kiosks. “Once a customer made his selection from the wall of tiny glass windows displaying a high-rise of culinary delights, he inserted the required number of nickels into a slot and turned a knob, opening the door and removing his food.”¹⁴⁵ The Automat allows customers to order, pay for, and receive meals without ever interacting with another person. This

¹⁴² Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 162.

¹⁴³ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 162.

¹⁴⁴ “Hock at Huberts.” *The New Yorker*, June 29, 1929.

¹⁴⁵ Nicolas Bromell. “The Automat: Preparing the Way for Fast Food.” *New York History* 81, no. 3 (2000), 302

inherently inclusive technology in part reflects the remedial ideals of the social model of disability by accommodating deaf patrons. In a normal cafeteria, Leader fears that she will be “asked something, and rendered helpless.”¹⁴⁶ Hubert’s, however, ultimately proves to accommodate Leader’s deafness in more meaningful ways.

During her early visits, Leader is both privileged and hindered by her anonymity. She is a silent observer, sitting alone and ordering only coffee and rolls in order to avoid the difficult interaction required of a more complicated order. She seeks to be a part of this community by any means, at first satisfied “merely to be in the proximity of [their] talk... even if I sat in my tower of silence.”¹⁴⁷ Unlike Bennington, a homogeneous social space where the eyes of “the people” formed a debilitating surveillance apparatus, the “eyes [of the Hubert’s crowd] were not smooth and composed.”¹⁴⁸ That is to say they do not attempt to correct deviance because they are themselves deviant. Because the cafeteria’s late-night patrons accept and expect difference, the irregular way in which Leader occupies the space does not constitute a breach with its normative standards of behavior. “Would there ever come a day when they saw me?”¹⁴⁹ she wonders. The social model of disability “consigns the bodily aspects of disability to a reactionary and oppressive discursive space,”¹⁵⁰ the very *lack* of a reaction within this nonnormative space upholds the model as it typically operates in the world outside the establishment.

Eventually, members of the midnight crowd take an interest in Leader and attempt to introduce themselves, necessitating the admission of her deafness. Rather than deeming her unworthy or incapable of meaningful interaction, these interested individuals enthusiastically

¹⁴⁶ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 158.

¹⁴⁷ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 171.

¹⁴⁸ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 159.

¹⁴⁹ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 161.

¹⁵⁰ Bill Hughes and Kevin Paterson, “The Social Model of Disability and the Disappearing Body: Towards a Sociology of Impairment.” *Disability & Society* 12, no. 3 (1997), 328

engage her by scribbling notes with pen and paper. “They did not seem to mind my deafness,” she recalls. “They wrote in my cheap notebook and perhaps when someone else had the notebook and they wished to say something to me and could not wait, they used napkins as paper.”¹⁵¹ The patrons at Hubert’s welcome Leader and adapt themselves to her deafness through alternative tactics of communication while occupying an architectural space which itself accommodates non-normative social and economic ideals. Within the walls of the cafeteria, Leader’s individual intellectual and social value is not determined by her ability to interact “normally.” Her notebook and the cafeteria-goers’ willingness to use it partially renders the disabling elements of her deafness obsolete.

In June of 1927, Leader wrote a letter to the editor of *The New York Times* proposing a new kind of poetry reading—a gallery space in which “the poems of young and unknown creators would be displayed, neatly typed, on the wall.” The concept of a silent poetry exhibition is ideally suited to the reformative ideals of the social model. Leader was undoubtedly motivated by a desire to make local poetry accessible for herself and other deaf people. Yet she frames her concern as a matter of social inclusivity and poetic truth. “Recitals are dominated by certain personalities who only allow certain poets to read,” she writes in her letter. “Besides, poetry cannot be read; the reading of a poem itself is a sensitive art. To fully appreciate it, one should read the poem.”¹⁵² Her characterization suggests something about the nonverbal essentiality of poetry which specifically drew her to the medium in light of her disability; in proposing the exhibit she seeks to re-center the solitude of poetic appreciation. John Rose Gildea, a friend of Leader’s and a fellow Hubert’s poet, brought her idea to eccentric Village printer and publisher Lew Ney, who took an immediate interest. The inaugural showing, billed as the First National

¹⁵¹ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 164.

¹⁵² Pauline Leader, “Poetry Exhibitions for Unknown Bards,” *The New York Times*, July 11, 1927.

Poetry Exhibition, was held at a Bedford Street tea house just two blocks away from Hubert's. High turnout and the enthusiastic contributions of local poets made the experiment a veritable success. It is clear that Leader's participation at Hubert's empowered her to transformatively improve the accessibility and inclusivity of the bohemian subculture.

The cafeteria's external environment is as essential to its unique spatial character as its interior. In his 1966 poem *Local Stop, Sheridan Square*, Hubert's regular and aesthetic realist poet Eli Siegel remembers the business and the public square on which it lived:

But when you come south on the subway and emerge
From rumbling and dark and steps and platform,
The first thing you see is space—
Blessed, hopeful space, in a city as large as any.
Streets converge—Barrow, Grove, Seventh Avenue, Christopher,
But there is space
And that means there is possibility: for space, somewhere, as a philosopher might
see it, is the same as possibility¹⁵³

The city's subway system is its cellar—a dark labyrinth of subterranean tunnels. What Siegel illustrates is the moment of relief felt upon ascending the subway stairs and “emerging” in the middle of a public square. He imagines the square as something akin to a clearing in the urban landscape. This brief architectural opening offers “hopeful space,” or “possibility,” in a city whose rigid walls weigh incessantly upon its inhabitants. If open space is possibility, then the urban built environment imposes a claustrophobic finality, the pressure to inhabit narrow predetermined spaces in normative ways.

¹⁵³ Eli Siegel, "Local Stop, Sheridan Square," in *Hail, American Development* (New York: Definition Press, 1968).

In *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau describes what he terms “local authority,” the individual and collective practice of countering spatial intentions and making subjective meaning within the city:

Far from expressing a void or describing a lack, [the city] creates such. It makes room for a void. In that way, it opens up clearings; it “allows” a certain play within a system of defined places. It “authorizes” the production of an area of free play (*Spielraum*) on a checkerboard that analyzes and classifies identities. It makes places habitable¹⁵⁴

Certeau’s words give theoretical weight to the clearing Siegel sees in Sheridan Square. Members of the late night Hubert’s crowd, the “poets, painters, prostitutes, and free souls of Greenwich Village”¹⁵⁵ steeped in the tenets of bohemian nonconformity, are emboldened by this opportunity for spatial play and abstraction. The square’s seemingly unremarkable name also carries a certain significance. It is named for Philip Sheridan, a general who fought for the Union during the Civil War. Certeau is interested in proper names for places, the official spatial monikers determined by the powers that be, and the ways in which city dwellers detach themselves from historical intent by ignoring, subverting, or even renaming such places. Siegel is not ignorant of names, and pays homage to “the General who rode so greatly.”¹⁵⁶ But apart from its proper name, he nonetheless appreciates the space as a moment which disrupts the convergence of “Barrow, Grove, Seventh Avenue, Christopher,” offering undefined emotional and philosophical value.

¹⁵⁴ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 106.

¹⁵⁵ Soskin. “Reading and Writing,” 1931.

¹⁵⁶ Siegel, “Local Stop, Sheridan Square,” 1968.

Leader finds comfort at Hubert's "after the too-reality of [her] life by day in restaurant and sweat-shop."¹⁵⁷ Her initial attraction to the cafeteria is similar to that of the mill workers renting rooms at the Blocks, who seek relief from "the hellish monotony of the factory [before] the seven o'clock factory whistle."¹⁵⁸ Inhabitants of both spaces are "allowed" to counter the bodily movements and docility required of industrial laborers. The enthusiastic bohemians of the midnight Hubert's crowd meaningfully engage with Leader and consider her poetic ideas in a way she had not imagined possible. While she appreciates the cafeteria and the friends she makes there, she nonetheless remains doubtful of her place within that subculture and earnestly questions its integrity. "If the illusion persisted," she writes, "it was because the illusion was stronger than any mere reality" (179). As both a sweatshop worker and an active poet during a politically fervent American political era, Leader's identity exists at the intersection of the laborer and the cultural critic, each role shaping her perspective on the other. Her poetry may not have achieved lasting recognition on its own, but it suffices to say her imaginative work had a significant if immeasurable influence on many of the contemporary authors and poets who encountered it within that space.

¹⁵⁷ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 170.

¹⁵⁸ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 53.

VIII.

HOME FOR GIRLS

Leader's relationship with her mother rapidly deteriorates in the months before she runs away. She describes "a series of broken promises, betrayals, resentments, suspicions... which had accumulated and which had erected a wall between us."¹⁵⁹ This growing distrust owes itself in part to her mother and father's efforts to isolate their deaf child. Attempting to shield Leader and themselves from judgement, they hide her coat and hat so that she is unable to leave the house during the wintertime. Ironically, these traumatic events play out during the brief period in which Leader and her family actually live together in a house, essentially perverting one of her childhood fantasies. Infuriated by this profound loss of independence and autonomy, she writes, "I see the selfishness behind this, this mother's love. To save me I am to be kept shut up in the house. That is her love. But it is not the way; that is the worst way—to shut me up in the house, to make me a prisoner... I am in danger of becoming really deaf."¹⁶⁰ Leader's fear of "becoming really deaf," is a mantra central to her memoir.

In accordance with the social model of disability, Leader believes that her deafness is only as limiting as the dependency it necessitates and the judgement it garners. She becomes "really deaf" when she is immobilized within the house, or when she must ask strangers to write down directions. When one is "made really deaf" they are socially marked, or othered. "But for the people I would not be deaf."¹⁶¹ she expresses repeatedly in different variations, reinforcing the notion that her deafness is itself constructed by its deviation from the normative social spaces

¹⁵⁹ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 133.

¹⁶⁰ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 71.

¹⁶¹ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 105.

she is required to exist within. Greig characterizes the dominant social understanding of disability not only as a perceived physical obsolescence but as the erosion of individual value within a community. He writes that “for the body to attain moral worth, it must meet the terms of the ‘cult of normalcy,’ a set of rituals that police a normal way of being in society.”¹⁶² The “cult of normalcy” and what Leader understands as “the people” are effectively the same thing—decentralized bodies which implicitly operate according to a contract of social normalcy. In the context of the homogeneous rural town, the terms of this contract are particularly rigid.

Institutionalization is the apex of this marking. The institution, whether a reformatory, an asylum, or an institute for the deaf, physically excludes the admitted individual from the “cult of normalcy” by requiring them to adhere to rigid expectations within isolated architectural boundaries. Recalling the way in which reformed children were received by the public in Bennington, she articulates an understanding of disability and deviance as similarly constructed and regulated in social space. “There was a boy in town who had been to the reformatory” she writes. “Everybody knew it and everybody had invisible accusing fingers pointed at him as if he were a leper.”¹⁶³ His deviant identity, previously a mostly invisible quality, is made publicly visible in the wake of his institutionalization. Michael Oliver writes that the institution “is repressive in that all those who either cannot or will not conform to the norms and discipline of capitalist society can be removed from it... it stands as a visible monument for all those who currently conform but may not continue to do so—if you do not behave, the institution awaits you.”¹⁶⁴ He refers to institutions for the disabled in the context of the social model, but his characterization is easily extended to encompass institutions like the reformatory. As a child,

¹⁶² Greig, “Disability, Society, and Theology,” 86.

¹⁶³ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 3.

¹⁶⁴ Oliver, “Capitalism, Disability and Ideology,” 4.

Leader becomes accustomed to the specter of the reformatory after her parents' repeated threats to have her "sent away"¹⁶⁵ for failing to behave. The institution becomes merely another imagined interior. It is the antithesis of her dream house—the spatial actualization of her own physical and intellectual alienation as a "visible monument." Just as she constructs a dialogue between the spatial phenomenology of her deafness and her class-specific experience of the built environment, Leader imagines the social alienation and practical limitations her disability imposes as an extension of her already deviant identity.

At the end of her memoir, Leader spends five days in an institution. Perhaps foreshadowed by her parents' threats, she finds herself not in a facility for the deaf or disabled but in a girls' reformatory. Her admission is largely the result of a neurotic misunderstanding. Ignorant of reproductive science and her own biology, Leader convinces herself she is pregnant when her period does not begin on time. She expresses her concerns to a doctor, who smilingly refers her to a nearby facility without disclosing any vital details about it. Leader arrives at the reformatory on her own accord, unaware that she is entering an institution whose corrective methods are completely at odds with her identity and cherished moral convictions. The building is "a small, detached house on a side-street"¹⁶⁶ with iron bars on the "second- and third- and fourth-story windows."¹⁶⁷ From the marketing literature in the lobby, she learns that the reformatory is known as the "Home for Girls."¹⁶⁸ Leader doesn't reveal the full name of the institution, and she was released before her name could have been entered into any official records. Her description of the Home's location, architecture, patients, and interior, however, give us reason to believe that she was admitted to the Elizabeth Home for Girls. The "free-

¹⁶⁵ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 3.

¹⁶⁶ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 185.

¹⁶⁷ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 187.

¹⁶⁸ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 209.

standing structure” designed by renowned architect Calvert Vaux¹⁶⁹ was located in the East Village on E 12th street, less than a mile from Hubert’s Cafeteria. Founded by the Children’s Aid Society, it opened its doors in 1892 and operated as a girl’s reformatory until 1930¹⁷⁰.

The New York Times ran a brief article after the grand opening of the Elizabeth Home. “The handsome structure,” the journalist writes, “was designed as a home and training school for destitute girls, and is well adapted to the needs of the inmates. The building is of pressed brick



(Courtesy of the NY Historical Society)

with sandstone trimmings. It is four stories high.”

The Home featured rooms “set apart for typewriting and sewing-machine classes, [and] dressmaking,” as well as a variety of dormitories, single rooms, and bathrooms on the upper levels. The article goes on to report the successes of the Children’s Aid Society, reporting that “in the last year 22 girls had been trained in the dressmaking department, 99 in the machine room, 24 in the laundry, and 35 in housework, while 108 had been sent to situations, 28 to employment, 44 returned to friends, and 44 to various institutions.”¹⁷¹ No further information is

given about these “situations” or “institutions.” It is apparent that the reformatory functioned either as a corrective trade school teaching industrial skills deemed useful to female laborers or as pipeline to orphanages and mental asylums.

¹⁶⁹ Lauren Snetiker, "Landmarks50: Children's Aid Society, Elizabeth Home for Girls," Off the Grid: The Blog of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, November 18, 2015,

¹⁷⁰ Barbaralee Diamonstein-Spielvogel, *The Landmarks of New York: An Illustrated Record of the City's Historic Buildings* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 324.

¹⁷¹ “Elizabeth Home for Girls.” *The New York Times*, December 14, 1892.

Before realizing its purpose, Leader is impressed by the reformatory's architecture and interior. The attractive building is the architectural opposite of her windowless room, the embodiment of urban isolation and class struggle. Unlike the foreboding institutional buildings burned into our collective minds, the reformatory masks its purpose behind a welcoming facade of wealth and aesthetic elegance. "It was a beautiful place in my eyes," she writes, "the floors were waxed, the woodwork polished."¹⁷² She admires the girls in their "middies [and] gingham dresses,"¹⁷³ garments visible in photographs of patients at the Elizabeth Home. These sartorial signifiers are not unlike the "sweet Sunday dress [and] hat and thin gloves and white stockings and shoes,"¹⁷⁴ Leader dreamt of wearing in Bennington. Its main gathering space is a large sunny living room with a piano, something the young Leader once valued as a "symbol of that world where there were no markets, no rooms, no dirty public hallways."¹⁷⁵ In her vulnerable state, the reformatory causes a kind of spatially induced mental regression, a resurfacing of the material aspirations she seemingly renounced in favor of enlightened communist ideals upon realizing the intersection of oppression in the city.

As a child in Bennington, Leader purports to "swing between two worlds,"¹⁷⁶ each born of a conflicting impulse. On one hand, she wishes wholeheartedly to embrace her self-perceived nonconformity, the spirit which drives her poetic interiority and thoughtfully critical nature. She feels a sense of camaraderie with other local girls, admiring their carefree independence and expressing disappointment when they are "married and the streets saw them no more.

¹⁷² Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 185.

¹⁷³ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 185, 192.

¹⁷⁴ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 6.

¹⁷⁵ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 15.

¹⁷⁶ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 57.

Respectability had got them.”¹⁷⁷ On the other, she is comforted by the dream of ownership, seeking access to the material currency of assimilation which promises to eradicate her social and cultural alienation. But these two fantasies are fundamentally irreconcilable. Pierre Bourdieu, a sociological descendent of Simmel and Marx, describes the material and behavioral signifiers Leader registers as the stuff of cultural capital:

These principles of vision and division, the differences between practices, the goods which are possessed, the opinions which are expressed become symbolic differences and constitute a real language. Differences associated with the different positions, that is, goods, practices, and especially manners, function... as distinctive signs¹⁷⁸

As Bourdieu suggests, the “goods, practices, and... manners” associated with a social group are not easily trifurcated; material and behavioral signifiers work in tandem to make spatial strategies of control and dominance effective. Together they form a symbolic visual language, one which continues to resonate even in deafness. The beautiful Christian homes Leader envies not only shelter but *produce* the very people who construct her alienation. “I hated the people,” she writes, “but it was really the envy of a man who knocks at the gates that are forever closed to him.”¹⁷⁹ Hanging stockings and dreaming of Christmas trees, Leader seeks invisibility through normalcy. By selectively failing to conflate certain forms of assimilation with the erosion of selfhood, she is able to rationalize her inconsistent desires. But the reformatory, which Leader at first optimistically imagines as the prophetic return to the house of her “eleven year old

¹⁷⁷ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 115.

¹⁷⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, "Physical Space, Social Space, and Habitus" (lecture, Vilhelm Aubert Memorial Lecture, Institutt for Sosiologi Og Samfunnsgeografi, Oslo), 17.

¹⁷⁹ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 93.

dreams,”¹⁸⁰ in fact proves to be a twisted perversion of naive childhood fantasies and a reflection of the social normalization and hegemonic control reinforced by the powerful image of the upper-class American home.



Girls at the Elizabeth Home (Courtesy of the NY Historical Society)

¹⁸⁰ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 192.

Oliver defines institutional normalization as “the ideology that allowed people to be returned to their community in that they can be ‘normalized’ or in its later variant, be allocated normal (valued) social roles.”¹⁸¹ The reformatory relies on the image and praxis of the Anglo-American home as an instrument of normalization. Its architectural aesthetics as well as the moral code, domestic behavior, and gendered labor which patients are required to perform within it are crucial to the success of its corrective approach. The Times article describes a telling speech given at the Home’s opening reception by a Miss Grace Dodge, “who argued that the training in the ‘geometry and physiology of dressmaking,’ as she termed it, and the methods and management of the housewife, were prime essentials.”¹⁸² The “normal (valued) social roles” the reformatory attempts to allocate amongst its patients are intended to correct deviance, sexual promiscuity, and ultimately any form of individuality deemed socially untenable. If its corrective approach is successful, the girls will be married or employed in garment sweatshops like the ones Leader experienced. If it fails, they will be sent to asylums or orphanages, institutions of a higher corrective order.

Leader does not remain in the reformatory long enough to experience its corrective approach entirely. Yet she learns nearly everything there is to know by observing the other patients and interrogating the immediate effects the physical environment has on her mental wellbeing. After receiving medical clearance from the staff nurse and settling into her room, which she refers to as “the cage,” she eventually meets the other girls in the reformatory. As they eagerly surround their newest peer, she recalls, “I could have loved them for it, that they approached me without fear... or obscene curiosity.” But returning to a familiar motif, Leader is abruptly disturbed when she notices that:

¹⁸¹ Oliver, “Capitalism, Disability and Ideology,” 6.

¹⁸² “Elizabeth Home for Girls.” *The New York Times*, December 14, 1892.

Their eyes... were dead eyes. What eyes were not dead, were cowed and cringing, worse than the wholly dead eyes, because in them I could still see life, life plainly dying. Only the corners of their lips lifted with the sniffing curiosity which could not reach their eyes, because the door to their eyes was locked and closed forever¹⁸³

Eyes which are “wholly dead” do not yet serve the same panoptic function as the eyes which surveil Leader in her hometown. The girls in the reformatory lack the capacity to visually enforce a system of spatial control and regulation because they are themselves contained, isolated from society and stripped of their freedom. In the factory and the reform school alike, “deadness” is simultaneously expressed as a result and a condition of confinement, required either to rehabilitate or produce productive laborers. Leader’s choice to use the phrase “the door to their eyes” is telling. The window is a more obvious optical metaphor, as in, “the eyes are the window to the soul.” Through this subtle linguistic variation, she implicitly questions how intact their souls actually are and recalls a former desperate childhood query: “could I not find anyone in this world overfull of people who would open the door and let me in?”¹⁸⁴ The girls in the reformatory who are normalized and returned to their communities will ostensibly reproduce newly internalized strategies of subjugation and exclusion. Their eyes will fuse with a network of collective spatial surveillance, effortlessly identifying and ridiculing difference and guarding the door to a world of privileged normalcy.

Stolen press materials also provide Leader with valuable insight into the methods of the reformatory. “Environment was mostly to blame,” she reads in the Home’s pamphlet, and wonders, “why were not the homes corrected? Why then were not the poverty, the too closeness,

¹⁸³ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 193.

¹⁸⁴ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 183.

the lack of any human privacy, the nagging mother, the bullying father—why were not these things corrected?”¹⁸⁵ Similar to how Leader initially separates access to coveted spaces from their oppressive interior realities, the Home evades responsibility for poverty and structural inequality by emphasizing exteriors, performative facades¹⁸⁶. “The Home dwelt long and lingeringly on marriage,” the pamphlet continues. “What sort of hell went on after the marriage, the Home did not concern itself with. Only to get the girl married. Surface. Surface. Let the surface be smooth.”¹⁸⁷ At best, the reformed patient is relocated to a socially sanctioned environment in which she may fill a domestic or industrial role.

While imprisoned by her mother in her home in Bennington, Leader writes, “I must go out. I was not made for a house existence.”¹⁸⁸ She is formally released from the reformatory when her period eventually arrives, less than a week late. As she is clearly not pregnant, the staff no longer has reason to keep her. Although her imprisonment is brief, the reformatory’s effect is profound. Once a bastion of American privilege and acceptance, the symbolic promise of the house is gradually corrupted. The poetic images Leader associated with the house as a child—those of intimacy, beauty, and security—become eclipsed and eroded by the image of the reformatory. Confined indoors, Leader is “in danger of spiritual death.”¹⁸⁹ When she leaves, her poetic spirit is intact and her ideological desire to inhabit a world outside of the “cult of normalcy” in all its spatial and social manifestations is the strongest it has ever been.

¹⁸⁵ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 210.

¹⁸⁶ “These girls who would have their lives ruined ever afterward by parole officers who checked up their least act, who told their employers ‘what they were,’ with the result that they were fired. No work... oh, what was the use! They drifted back to their old habits, and inevitably they were brought back here. What else was there for them to do? Those other girls, the better educated ones, they were no different from us, but their superiority consisted in being able to get away with it” (Leader, 205)

¹⁸⁷ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 210.

¹⁸⁸ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 71.

¹⁸⁹ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 72.

IX.

CONCLUSION: NESTS

My heart is like a singing bird
 Whose nest is in a water'd shoot;
 –Christina Rossetti, “A Birthday,” 1861

Leader believes deeply in “freedom of the individual. Freedom from such awful things as factories and sweatshops... freedom to do as one wished, go where one wished, like the birds.” She writes, “I was a bird myself... that was how I wanted to live, that was how people should live.”¹⁹⁰ If humans are birds, their song is proof of their freedom. No birds sing under capitalist conditions of labor; when individual value is determined by physical productivity and efficiency. No birds sing in sweat-shops or butcher shops or windowless rooms. Birdsong is not a sound necessarily, but the intimate expression of an internal impulse—a daydream realized. Birdsong is poetry; rhythm, music, and language in the abstract. Unlike the people, the birds do not conceal their words from Leader. Their song is not limited to the physical world; its poetic resonance lives internally in her memory and imagination. It is the language of migration, flirtation, and solidarity, registered among many across great open divides. Birdsong evokes the anticipation of the rendezvous and the joy of the departure. As Bachelard writes, “I am a man, a being that has lost the confidence of birds.”¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ Leader, *And No Birds Sing*, 177.

¹⁹¹ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 95.

“The space of a tactic is the space of the other.”¹⁹² As “other,” Leader seeks spaces which do not challenge her disabled body and erode her individual value. Her poetry is a resistant tactic, as is her participation in collective spaces. In the natural world, birds instinctively perform Certeaudian tactics as a matter of play and survival. The bird’s flight is an opportunistic “maneuver” through space, a non-linear movement which transcends a spatial order in order to evade a predator or reach an unknown destination. The bird’s-eye view is a liberated perspective. Phenomenologically, winged flight provides the dreamer with the elevated vantage point of the tower of silence, sans confinement. To be free is to fly out of the tower’s windows. The bird may fly high above the tower itself, high enough to find a small town’s horizon, and still higher to see the world as an “arealess detachment.” The metaphor’s natural spatial extension is the nest.

“A nest is a hiding place for winged creatures,” writes Bachelard, “invisible from above, and yet far from the more dependable hiding-places on the ground.”¹⁹³ The nest is intimate, impermanent, and non-commodifiable; an adaptable space. Like the tactic, the nest is born of a “creativity as persistent as it is subtle, tireless, ready for every opportunity, scattered over the terrain of the dominant order and foreign to the rules laid down and imposed by a rationality founded on established rights and property.”¹⁹⁴ Birds build nests atop trees in the countryside and tall buildings in the city. The nest built in the gutter or on the roof constitutes an alternative use of a pre-existing structure. Like the Blocks, made of uprooted earth and charred lumber salvaged from a burned-down house, the bird assembles its nest with fallen twigs and branches, a unique extension of the natural or manmade structure on which it rests. “The Old English and High German word for building, *buan*, means to dwell,” writes Heidegger. “This signifies: to remain,

¹⁹² Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 37.

¹⁹³ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 94.

¹⁹⁴ Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 38.

to stay in place.”¹⁹⁵ On the one hand, to stay in one place is to be rooted and secure. On the other, it is to be stagnant and perhaps immobile. Birds build their nests as they see fit, dwelling no longer than their offspring or the seasons require.

In his phenomenological analysis of the nest, Bachelard finds a familiar poetic image in the story of Quasimodo, the misunderstood hero from Victor Hugo’s 1831 novel, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. To the bell-ringer of Notre Dame, the cathedral’s tower is at once a home, a hiding place, and an elevated vantage point. As Hugo writes, Quasimodo “was accustomed to see no object in the world beyond the religious walls which had taken him under their protection. Notre Dame had been successively, to him, as he grew up and expanded, his egg, his nest, his home, his country, the universe.”¹⁹⁶ In more ways than one, Quasimodo is Pauline Leader’s literary equivalent. The lives of the two disparate characters share a number of literal and metaphorical parallels.

The basic arc goes something like this: a troubled protagonist, alienated from birth by forces beyond their control, becomes deaf or otherwise disabled at a young age. Their disability amplifies their isolation as other—they are surveilled, punished, and considered less than by the members of their community. Unable to comfortably exist in a homogeneous society rooted in economic and religious hegemonies, they embark on a self imposed exile to a place which offers protection. Whether it is found in one or many locales, this place has a multiplicitous function. The protagonist who inhabits it does so in a nonnormative fashion, transgressing its established spatial intent. It is an in-between place which offers refuge and solitude, an escape from the oppressive expectations of the world outside. Within it, the limitations imposed by the protagonist’s disabled body are rendered void; they are empowered by a sense of purpose. In this

¹⁹⁵ Heidegger, *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*, 144.

¹⁹⁶ Victor Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (New York: Random House, 1941), 128.

place, they are able to access a realm beyond the material world; it is a gateway to an imaginative interior space.

The many narrative differences between *And No Birds Sing* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* are of little importance to this comparison. What is remarkably alike, to recall Bachelard's phrase, is the "function of inhabiting." Like Leader, Quasimodo is a social other forced to interrogate the cynical regulatory strategies reproduced by the people around him. "Quasimodo was deaf, but he was sharp-sighted," Hugo writes, "and the fury of the populace was expressed not less energetically in their countenances than in their words."¹⁹⁷ He makes a home of the bell tower in the great cathedral and serves a crucial role in its function without being himself an accepted member of the church. Leader, a non-Jewish Jew, similarly advances an ideological tradition of Jewish-American radicalism without adhering to the tenets of Judaic traditionalism. And in the belfry, as in the Blocks and the cafeteria, architectural space is occupied in a way which socially subverts its ostensive function.

Quasimodo's bell tower is simultaneously his tower of silence and his house of poetry. While Leader generally describes these two spaces as separate, she also repeatedly articulates a link between isolation, self-preservation, and interiority. In the belfry, the hunchback finds transformative solitude and accesses poetic resonances:

When he felt this bunch of bells swinging in his hand; when he saw, for he could not hear, the palpitating octave running up and down that sonorous scale, like a bird hopping from twig to twig; when the demon of music, that demon which shakes a glittering quiver of stretti, trills, and arpeggios, had taken possession of the poor deaf bell-ringer, he was once more happy¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁷ Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, 174.

¹⁹⁸ Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, 199-200.

Like Leader, Quasimodo's deafness does not prevent him from "hearing" the bells. His experience of music is non-literal but no less real; the interior manifestation of remembered sound literally "possessing" him with glee. "The two towers were like immense cages," Hugo writes, "in which the birds that he had reared sang for him alone."¹⁹⁹ As the bell-ringer, he is of course rhythmically inclined, sounding the bells daily with the steady meter of poetic verse.

In June of 1242, while the Notre Dame cathedral was being built under Louis IX, the Talmud was burned en masse. It was again widely confiscated in 1247 and 1248²⁰⁰. In the Code Noir of 1685, Louis XIV called on the officers of France to "chase from our islands all the Jews who have established residence there."²⁰¹ On April 15th of 2019, the world saw Notre Dame engulfed in flames. The fire started in the spire before spreading rapidly across the wooden lattice which supported the surrounding attic roof. While the damage to the roof of the cathedral was extensive, the stone bell towers remained largely unscarred²⁰². Rebecca Sanchez points to the political climate of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, during which Leader wrote her memoir. "The Page Act of 1875, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the Naturalization Act of 1906, the Emergency Quota Act of 1921, and the National Origins Act of 1924"²⁰³ all constituted federal attempts to legislate exclusion and assimilation, several of which targeted immigrants of the Jewish diaspora. Leader, Quasimodo, and the timeless archetype they inhabit suggests the resilient perpetuity of the other in a factionalist world. In the Notre Dame fire, we bear symbolic witness to the violent cyclicity of subjugation

¹⁹⁹ Hugo, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, 131.

²⁰⁰ "Christian-Jewish Relations: Burning of the Talmud," Jewish Virtual Library, 2008, , accessed April 29, 2019.

²⁰¹ King Louis, XIV, "The Code Noir (The Black Code)," *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité: Exploring the French Revolution*, , accessed April 29, 2019.

²⁰² Larry Buchanan, "Why Notre-Dame Was a Tinderbox," *The New York Times*, April 17, 2019, accessed April 29, 2019.

²⁰³ Sanchez, "Leader's Disability Modernism," 223.

which plays out in institutions and contested territories. This contemporary image, while tragic, appears hopeful in this context.

The literal and metaphorical interiors Leader guides us through champion the socially and politically progressive potential of spaces which evade classification. Within them, individuals seek forms of affiliation and solidarity beyond class, nationality, and religion, non-commodifiable modes of existence. “Daydreaming even has a privilege of auto valorization,” writes Bachelard, “It derives direct pleasure from its own being.”²⁰⁴ Ultimately, the refuges Leader and Quasimoto inhabit do not “cure” their physical impairments, reintegrate them into society, or resolve the limitations attached to their disabled bodies. Instead, they merely presents the optimistic potentiality of such places as a defense against a pervasive mechanism of domination and control.

Leader lacks a sense of belonging in the place where she is born, her spatial alienation and rootlessness exacerbated by her deafness. As a first generation Jewish-American and a child of a global diaspora, she inherits a spiritual desire to “move toward the other.” She evades her Jewishness just as she seeks to evade the boundaries which reify her class, disability, and social deviance in the hopes of finding spaces where boundaries are collectively subverted and dissolved. On the empathetic spatial malleability of the non-Jewish Jew, Deutscher writes:

Living on borderlines of nations and religions, they see society in a state of flux. They conceive reality as being dynamic, not static. Those who are shut in within one society... tend to imagine that their way of life and their way of thought have absolute and unchangeable validity and that all that contradicts their standards is somehow ‘unnatural,’ inferior, or evil. Those, on the other hand, who live on the

²⁰⁴ Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 6.

borderlines... comprehend more clearly the great movement and the great contradictoriness of nature and society²⁰⁵

In the intellectual tradition of the non-Jewish Jew, Leader shies away from moral absolutes. Her disability as well as the literal or metaphorical spaces she encounters throughout her memoir all exist in “a state of flux.” In the market, she inhabits the borderline of a domestic and industrial space. In the Blocks, a recycled lumber structure squeezed in between houses on the ghost of a front yard, homeless veterans and transient factory workers rent rooms. She accesses natural, interior spaces in the forest and in the depths of a poem. Her tower of silence is at once a foreboding prison and a protective vantage point. And the gnome curses her ears as it guides her unlikely path. If Leader is inconsistent in her articulation of her ideology and disability, it is with the enlightened logic of one who dwells on borderlines.

Simmel, a German-Jew, at one point turns his attention towards the sociospatial formations of minority groups in relation to a dominant majority. Faced with considerable adversity, the members of the minority must somehow gain defensive power, either by dispersing across a great expanse or by banding together in concentrated groups. The smaller the afflicted party, the better chance it has if spread apart. A larger group, however, increases its odds of survival when it stays close together. Historically, the Jewish people have taken both approaches. “In so far as their Diaspora distributed them throughout the entire civilized world, no persecution could affect *all* their sections,” Simmel writes, “and if life was made impossible for them at one place, there was always the possibility of joining others elsewhere for protection and support.”²⁰⁶ Minority groups like the Jews, he claims, maintain the best defense in a widely

²⁰⁵ Deutscher, “The Non-Jewish Jew,” 35.

²⁰⁶ Simmel, “The Sociology of Space,” 157-158.

dispersed formation. For while they may be unable to independently develop “direct power or autonomous institutions,”²⁰⁷ they will maintain a unifying connection to their diasporic center.

Although Leader distances herself from her Jewish heritage, her communistic vision of the ideal individuality resembles the sociological formation of Diasporic power. Transient, bird-like individuals who move freely between spaces, perhaps escaping oppression or limitation, are nonetheless connected to a unifying ideology of freedom and collectivity. Leader encounters these values in heterogeneous architectural spaces defined by the toleration of social and cultural difference. In boarding houses like the Blocks, working class people live deviant lifestyles by night which resist the daily authority of the nine to five factory shift. In Hubert’s Cafeteria, bohemian drifters more idealistic in their individuality seek a gathering place in which to share their leftist cultural and philosophical ideas. Leader’s worldview is the realization of Diasporic tactics approached with a heretic absolutism. It is the successive splintering of a decentralized minority not into stubborn factions but individual units, and the removal of those social and physical boundaries which determine where one may build their nest.

Through the course of her young life, Leader comes to understand that the oppression she suffers as a disabled person is constructed by the same authoritative strategies which subjugate the poor and socially deviant. She locates the nexus of this system within the built environment—the architectural boundaries which determine areas of ownership or exclusion and, within them, arbitrarily designate spaces for eating, sleeping, fucking, working, and so on. While she desperately seeks a way out, she does not particularly desire a world in which her difference is accommodated to the point of erasure. While her deafness totalizes her marginalized identity, it is also the embodiment of her proudly deviant individuality. Just as it functions to remove her

²⁰⁷ Simmel, “The Sociology of Space,” 158.

from the spaces and behaviors of the people whom she once envied, it is through this literal and metaphorical distance that she discovers borderless landscapes of lucid interiority which evade surveillance and confinement and harnesses the potential of poetic imagination.

AFTERWORD

“For Pauline”

—Millen Brand, *The Outward Room*, 1937

It is worth noting that Pauline Leader is my great grandmother on my mother’s side. She died in 2001, when I was four years old. While I have no memory of Pauline, I grew up hearing stories about her from my mother and my grandfather, like how her children would talk to her by writing words backwards in the air with their index fingers. Copies of her memoir remain a fixture on the bookshelves of my childhood home and my grandparents’ house in Rockport, Maine; objects so familiar they had all but faded to my periphery.

That is, until one year ago, when I suddenly felt compelled to read *And No Birds Sing*. I was drawn in by the experimental yet efficient quality of her prose and the tragic honesty of her story. Read like a case study with a sociological eye or simply as a poetic narrative, it is a remarkably beautiful memoir. Why I picked the book up when I did is not immediately clear, but it strikes me that our timelines match up almost perfectly. Pauline was in her early twenties when she completed her manuscript, as am I while I complete mine. While our lives are immeasurably different, I like to think we share some constant in the timeless experience of “coming-of-age” and the impulse to reflect critically on our youth. I feel I have grown close to her in and through this project, and I am grateful to her for the poems and perspective she imparted.

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