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Domestic Mythologies

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Domestic Mythologies

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Arts of Bard College

by
Natalie Lizbeth Montoya

Annadale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2022



Synopsis

Domestic Mythologies delves into certain object details inside the American home: the curtain, buttons, napkins, piles, the kitchen sink, and screens. Each essay hopes to reveal the way each object encourages certain ideological tendencies, and at their worst, ideological abuses. By investigating historical and contemporary promotions by way of their use in spaces, the effort aims at measuring our present alienation inside the space that is ready to, ideologically, burst at the seams: home.

Statement

In the style of Roland Barthes' *Mythologies*, explores three aspects of each object. First, the ideological analysis on "the language of so-called mass culture" relating to contemporary home essentials. Second, an attempt to analyze their semiological mechanics as having a restricting influence on us. Third and lastly, their role in "home" as myth.

Roland Barthes defines a myth as [stolen] language, or, as a type of speech, a system of communication, a message. Therefore myth is not an object, a concept, or an idea, it is a mode of signification, a form attached to a thing through our own substance of understanding. A domestic mythology follows this provided logic:

"Thus every day and every-where, man is stopped by myths, referred by them to his motionless proto- type which lives in his place, stifles him in the manner of a huge internal parasite and assigns to his activity the narrow limits within which he is allowed to suffer without upsetting the world." Barthes, 155

After unraveling the details — I will conclude with an analysis of home as myth itself, home as collage, home as a reconciliation between reality and person; between things, their explanations and their clashing with our general know-how.

Format

The format will follow a bookmaking process of joining text essays with playful graphic design to emphasize the object's relation and representation in space. The final product will be delivered to the office mailboxes of architectural board Ivonne Santoyo-Orozco, Ross Adams, and Olga Touloumi one week from today May 11th 2022 and will be distributed through the Bard College campus' public spaces. The publication is meant to act as a guerrilla house book, welcoming further mutation on how to think of home as containing arguably the most radical potential for great change.

Acknowledgements

Official dedications will be printed within the final publication but, a continued appreciation goes to my mother and my sister, my reasons and motivations for staying alive and working towards happiness.

To my advisor Ivonne Santoyo-Orozco, an incredible, awesome woman. Thank you for working with me through such an intense and vulnerable time. You are part of this, your essence is in these pages.

An acknowledgement for any and all faculty and staff at Bard College that I've encountered during my time here. Thank you for the lessons, and support.

Thank you to my partner, Chip Verspyck, for providing unconditional support and hugging me when I needed it. And his dog Oreo.

To my editing support, Julia Mendoza Friedman, a true rock.

And to Roland Barthes, for writing *Mythologies*.

*For Maxwell Verspyck
You are missed and remembered everyday*

1

THE SWITCH

The light switch is a familiar and built-in object. It was one of our first encounters with interface as boundary. A new modern condition of power, to the touch. Where home as myth started.

2

PILES

Piles are a physical emblem of current material anxieties. Piles are creatures that invade (or add comfort) to our personal spaces, connected to us, physically and emotionally.

3

CURTAINS

The curtain's original use was that of a door. Today they depict something else. They cover our windows. They come in thick rubber-lined fabrics to block out light. Our daily act of privacy.

4

NAPKINS

Should you be seated at a table with a napkin on your left and your right, which one is yours?

5

KITCHEN SINK

The kitchen sink. The ultimate hook and sinker of the mythological American home. The final straw of the melodrama of polarization.

6

SCREENS

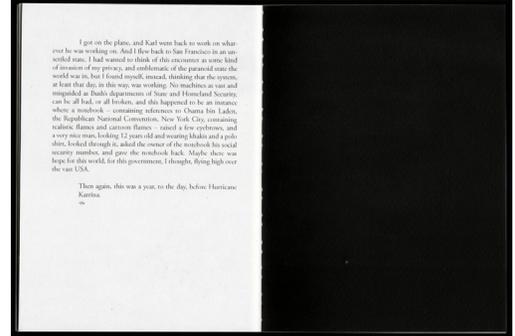
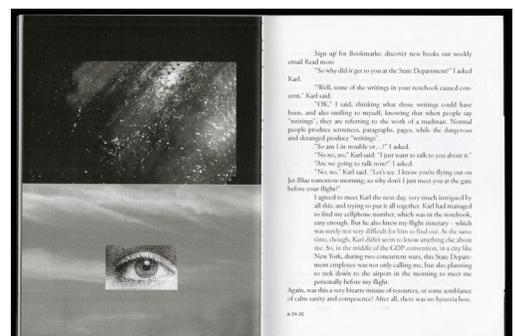
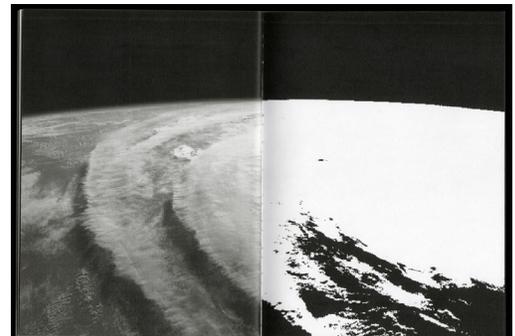
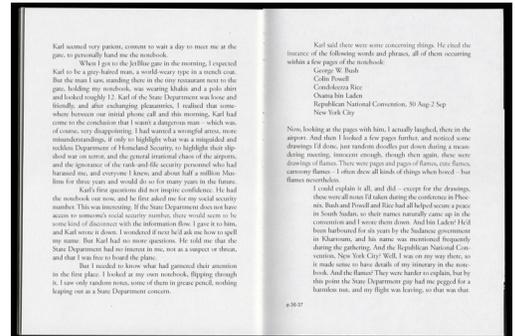
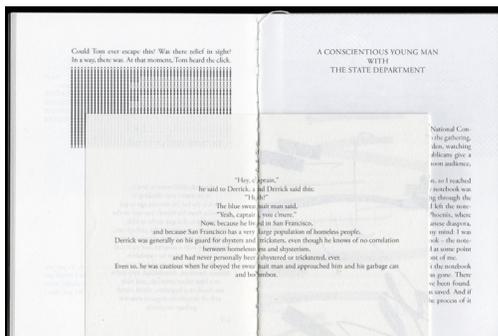
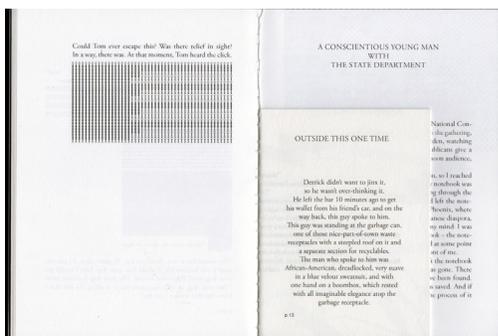
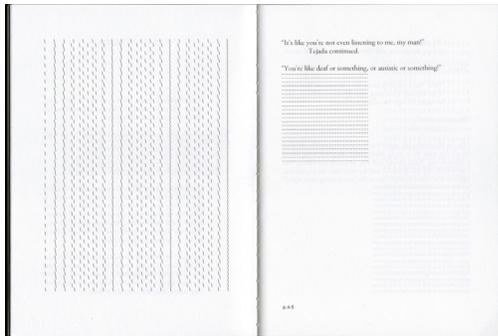
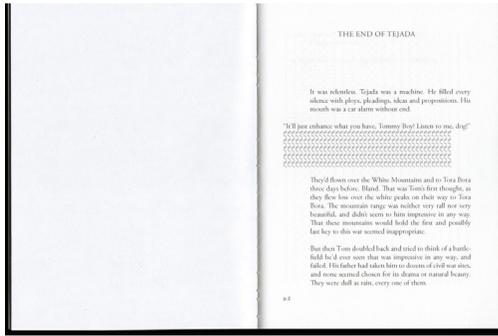
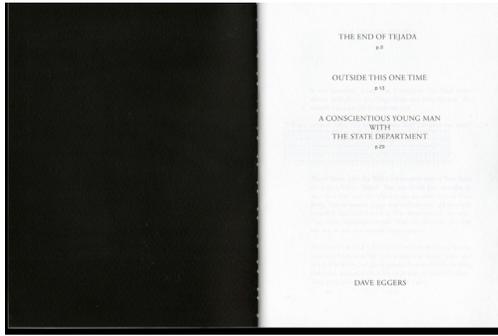
Screens are objects that have already penetrated it's way into home's everyday. What does it mean to be in a world full of screens? When and how did it happen? And where are we going?

*

FOUR LETTER WORDS: HOME AS MYTH

To explain what home is means to move away from it, far, wide, through cul-de-sacs and roundabouts, and back, to get to the real idea. What language is the speaking subject speaking?

Example source of final format to be scanned before distribution.



Excerpt from FOUR LETTER WORDS: Home as Myth

Home. In ROGET'S POCKET THESAURAS on it's 102nd print since 1923, "Home" is listed in the index between Homage (above) and, expectantly or not, Homeless sits below. The number assigned to "Home" is 189. It's a word with it's own number in the index, it's own synonyms, a font size up, and emboldened too. This means it is a word of utmost interest, a frequently asked question, or FAQ. I flipped to page 53 that starts with 186...187... 188... 189. Here, in place of the word that haunted me with it's obnoxious ambiguity, a word I hoped to unravel by frolicking with it's associations, Home turned out to be a small, albeit the first, sub-describer of the word Habitation.

This thesaurus, self described as "A Treasury of Synonyms and Antonyms" describes itself as a handy and valuable reference tool for those who wish to write and speak more effectively and accurately in the English language. Certainly a book can only vaguely and indirectly help someone speak better English. The cover description ends with these two sentences, the only two it will ever needed:

"It will help you to find the words that express your ideas most exactly. It will show you how to use those words according to their precise shades of meaning."

Suspicion and mundanity gather around why such a valuable tool, one of supposed immense value, thwarts and redirects it's own audience, towards a life where ideas are only partially realized, where a bubble of similar shades of meaning are able to be expressed, and therefore, indubitably overlap and overshadow each other. This practice keeps the pool of linguistic culture small, and it keeps ideas and the people behind them, small and manageable, through what Roland Barthes describes as "ideological abuses". He finishes his Mythologies book with this reflection:

"...we constantly drift between the object and it's mystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it but we destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but we restore it to a state which is mystified. It would seem that we are condemned for some time yet always to speak excessively about reality." 159

Habitation, assigned it's own number in the 1972 Roget's Thesaurus, is followed by it's immediate synonyms. The first listed, abode (n.), has it's origins, according to my Apple iMac digital (Oxford) dictionary, in Middle English translated from an 'act of waiting'; and just an eye flutter below, it is defined as the verbal noun from abide.

To abide, or abide by, means to accept or act in accordance with a rule, decision, or recommendation. This is a little ways away from the common so-called welcoming "Welcome to my humble abode" joke expelled usually from one of a few scenarios: an exhausted host who's either been expecting and preparing for you (or has not), from someone who has a does in fact have a so-called "humble" abode, whatever that means, or from someone who's abode is not humble at all.

Lastly, abide, refers to a living or dwelling substance in connection to persistence. An abiding feeling or memory is one that endures, lasts, or continues for a very long time. The Old English origins of abide chisels to the seeds of 'wait' and 'onwards'. It's Germanic origin leads us to the word 'bide'. Bide means to remain or stay somewhere, but the common phrase 'to bide one's time' means to wait quietly for a good opportunity to do something. Now this is more like it. But why trek so far to know what it really is? What does it mean that we cannot define a word that we use everyday?

The search for a useful meaning of home is so far, inaccessible and ultrapersonal. Like looking into the sun, home is only something we can see via it's representations or looking around it, but we might never directly be able to say, with collective agreement, what it is that is considered "essential" to this packed ideology of home in America.

Home is one of the many four letter words entangled with our ideologies of extreme spectrums for quality of life i.e., both happiness and devastation. Other four letter words that will never qualify as simple include: Love. Want. Hate. Good. Envy. Safe. Kind. Will. Some. Very. Hope. Etc.

Inhabiting a home is hard work. It can be overwhelming. We use it everyday, even when we don't, it's where our personal piles are. We are more careless and loose about our most cherished philosophies than we care to admit, or maybe even realize. There is evidence of this in the everyday, but especially now, in our media consumption. Home is a place, no doubt, but it is also, always, a feeling too. Home is a reference to the self, a center, and perhaps most importantly, an ideology that cannot be grasped or held, only felt and lived. Or can it?

Home is often thought of in layers. As soon as one layer is understood, seen, or spoken, another emerges. Home is an artery of a much bigger system. Home is the smallest scale of analysis for questions of life's cruxes: politics, ideologies, and moral moods of a certain time. Home is a field, one of implications, intentional or otherwise, even for those considered "houseless". Home is a place that actively tests our abilities to coordinate and to handle ourselves, it has everything to do with who it is we think we are, it is always there. Does "home" in America have a future? Should it have a future?

Home as a haunting and mystical phenomena is associated with private reflection, with exclusivity regarding the upkeep of (at least, or increasingly) one individual, but it is just as much a governed institution as any other building. Home as it is known now lies under the state's rug. You'll notice, every once in a while, the dust hits us, interrupts us, makes us spit and cough out the unintended consequences or accounted-for complications. We are reminded that our homes are only private when we can afford and maintain such a thing, or when we are reminded that our privacy is where we must deal with things our country will not help us with. Home as loosely defined through narrative, consumerism, and legal mysticism supports a crude handling of such an important four-letter-word and (so-called necessary) idea to "a successful or good life".