MOBILE HOME ON THE RANGE: MANUFACTURING RUIN AND RESPECT IN AN AMERICAN ZONE OF ABANDONMENT

by

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Mobile Home on the Range: Manufacturing Ruin and Respect in an American Zone of Abandonment

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How does the symbolic transference of material ruination onto mobile-homeowners produce impermanence, social precarity, and financial risk? Achieving the “American dream” of upward class mobility, self-actualization, and respect through hard work is, for most Americans, materialized through homeownership. As markers of social status however, not all homes are created equal. Advertised as the American dream “on a budget,” manufactured homes—also referred to as mobile homes or trailers—represent an economical alternative to conventional homeownership, and as such meet a critical demand for affordable family housing in the United States. However, as occupants of nontraditional housing, mobile-homeowners are denied the legal and financial benefits of homeownership due to widespread cultural disdain for “trailer trash.” Situated in post-recession Lincoln, Nebraska, a “recession winner” with the highest reported rates of resident happiness and wellbeing in the United States, this dissertation explores the everyday reproduction of housing precarity for urban mobile home community (MHC) residents threatened with displacement due to redevelopment and revitalization. Drawing on 28 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in five MHC neighborhoods, my research illustrates how housing form mediates social expectations for ruination and respectability. By considering the complexity of housing—as shelter, the symbolic realm of the domestic, or as a financial vehicle for upward mobility—this project analyzes the social costs of abjection and contested belonging in aesthetics, finances, and stigma mitigation techniques for an estimated six to eight million mobile-homeowners living in 40,000 MHCs nationwide.
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CHAPTER ONE

There’s No Place like Home

His neighbors called him “the Wolf.” To the employees of the Crown Court mobile home community (MHC) in Lincoln, Nebraska he was known by his lot space, CC642, or when they were feeling less charitable, “that dumbass.” In his mid-30s and divorced, Brian’s manufactured home had been a gift from his father, who hoped to “keep him out of trouble.” However, his propensity for throwing loud parties and getting into verbal and physical altercations with other residents did not endear him to Crown Court’s staff. As such, I was warned not to approach Brian for an interview. “You get a different breed in the trailer park,” cautioned Leo, a Crown Court maintenance man. “Some people are just too stupid to live here.”

As it is, mobile-homeownership in a “trailer park” is not straightforward. Simultaneously owners (of homes) and renters (of land), urban MHC residents like Brian live in an endless state of legal purgatory that Sonya Salamon and Katherine MacTavish (2006) term “quasi-homelessness.” Without landownership, the categorical exclusion of manufactured (or mobile, trailer) housing produces immense social, economic, and physical costs for an estimated eight

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1 In accordance with this project’s IRB protocol (#13-0242), most names, including those of individual participants and places, are pseudonyms. Public officials, municipal employees, and non-resident stakeholders were asked to sign consent forms prior to participating in this research. As such, their names have not been changed, however to protect their identities I have chosen to use either initials or altered some details on a case-by-case basis.

“Crown Court” MHC refers to three adjacent mobile home parks jointly owned and operated by an out-of-state real estate corporation. Unless otherwise indicated, all Crown Court employee names have been altered to protect their identities.

2 “Manufactured home” refers to factory-built housing attached to a chassis constructed after the Manufactured Home Construction and Safety Standards Act, or HUD Code, went into effect. No legal definition distinguishes “mobile” from “trailer” homes, however the former widely replaced the latter in the mid-twentieth century; both refer to factory-built units pre-dating 1976. Like other researchers in MHCs (e.g. Hart et al. 2002; Rust 2007; Wallis 1991), the majority of my interlocutors used these three terms interchangeably to describe their housing, and as such I adopt a similar approach in writing.
million MHC homeowners across the United States. Although advertised as the American dream “on a budget,” mobile-homeowners become entrapped in an exploitative and under-regulated industry whose operations are dependent upon state and public abandonment.

This dissertation chronicles the affective traumas and unending impermanence structured into mobile-homeownership as a nontraditional housing form whose devalued social status is embodied in a sordid cultural figure, “trailer trash.” Moreover, this project seeks to answer the question of what happens when particular forms of housing are excluded from middle-class respectability identified with “the good life.” As markers of social status, the home signifies a complex cultural object representing both the symbolic realm of familial reproduction as well as an economic vehicle for social mobility. The ideological basis of the American dream is tightly bound to homeownership, which in turn indexes middle-class status, however owning a manufactured home produces and intensifies wealth inequalities for residents. What makes a manufactured home, then?

In mid-March 2015 I received a mysterious text from Carol, a Crown Court leasing agent and my friend. “It looks like CC642 blew up last night!” Curious, I rushed over to the 1970-model singlewide located just a few blocks from my rental home. Sure enough, it looked like a bomb had gone off in there (Figure 1). Empty beer cans and fast-food containers littered the ground along with shredded drywall and insulation. (Leo guessed Brian was after the copper wiring for salvage.) Later, at the Crown Court leasing office, I heard the full story from Carol.

“He’s such a dumbass,” she said of Brian. “Lost his home over $100.” In land-lease MHCs like Crown Court, mobile-homeowners pay monthly rent to their corporate landlords in exchange for lot space, maintenance, and access to utilities. Brian, believing he had been unfairly charged, had refused to pay his outstanding late fees. Moreover, he had been banned from the
office after sending several threatening, profanity-laden emails to employees. “So I said, nope, I’m not dealing with this,” Carol told me, although she stressed that “all he had to do was work something out with us.”

![Figure 1: Debris and a gaping hole torn into the siding of Brian’s singlewide, which he destroyed in response to his eviction for non-payment from the Crown Court MHC in March 2015. (Photo by author.)](image)

Ultimately, Brian was evicted from Crown Court for non-payment and breach of contract. For MHC residents, evictions expel both home and owner from the community. Per the Nebraska Mobile Home Landlord-Tenant Act (NMHLTA, 76-1475), it is incumbent upon the mobile-homeowner to remove their property from the park grounds within thirty days of the lease termination. Brian, either unable to afford the removal of his home or unwilling to care, instead surrendered his title to Crown Court MHC without complaint. Initially surprised by his sudden
complacency, park operators soon discovered that Brian had instead focused all his rage at his former home. Still, this destructive act was calculated; in addition to the scrapped fixtures and copper, Brian’s handiwork denied Crown Court the opportunity to profit on the future sale of his home. Unfortunately for Brian, this final act of revenge only amused Crown Court staff, who had intended to demo (demolish) the singlewide no matter its condition. Devalued both socially and economically, by “trashing” his mobile home Brian merely reaffirmed its worthlessness, and by extension, his own. Or, as Carol reminded me, “That guy was such a dumbass.”

For all its tangible (material) and intangible (symbolic) properties, the home is a pseudo-sacred cultural object and space; to purposefully destroy one’s home is therefore an act so heinous it can be seen as taboo. Yet myriad instances from the Great Recession of foreclosed homeowners ravaging their homes suggests that violent acts of destruction, including Brian’s, should be regarded as responding to perceived betrayal rather than indicative of an individual’s personal or moral character (Stout 2016). Homeownership has been considered indicative of personal morality and civility throughout American history, however in recent decades government abandonment of public services has reshaped homeownership into a type of neoliberal subjectivity wherein struggling or unsuccessful individuals are blamed for their own misfortunes. Per Carol, it was Brian’s alcoholism, temper, and being “a dumbass” that caused his ouster as opposed to any structural factors. Further, under intensifying neoliberal orders subjectification and individualism functions alongside expanding privatization. Whereas conventional homeownership is subsidized by the Federal government, the sociolegal “deviance” of mobile-homeownership excludes manufactured housing from most of these programs while relegating community residents to private mobile home parks; if present trends continue, for-
profit MHCs therefore offer a glimpse into a possible future of unfettered privatization of low-income housing markets.

Thus, this dissertation seeks to answer if mobile home ruination and obliteration—whether of single units like CC642 or of entire MHCs—is truly inevitable. What follows is an ethnographic account of precarious Crown Court mobile-homeowners whose claims to belonging, wellbeing, and respect enshrined in the ideological American dream of homeownership are under threat. Drawing on 28 months (2011-16) of fieldwork in Crown Court and eight additional Lincoln MHCs, including one year as a Crown Court resident myself, here I illustrate the social costs of material abjection, that is, what happens when symbolically polluted objects socially “contaminate” their owners? In this ethnographic account, I approach MHCs as zones of social abandonment, defined by João Biehl (2005:4) as a site that “makes visible realities that exist through and beyond formal governance and that determine the life course of an increasing number of poor people who are not part of the mapped populations.” In Porto Alegre, Brazil, Biehl uses this term to locate exceptional, precarious sites where unwanted persons are abandoned, forgotten, and eventually perish (see also, Agamben 2005; Scheper-Hughes 2010).

My research builds on this concept by showing how the social desire for “trailer park” absence and invisibility concurrently contradicts and complements mobile-homeowner desires for normalcy. Attending to the capriciousness of (mobile) housing, the stories presented here reveal an unsettled ideological landscape beset by anxiety and aspiration, of desire and abjection so potent it leaves destruction in its wake.
Permanent Impermanence

In many respects, manufactured homes represent the most “American” housing imaginable. Mass-produced in factories nationwide, as well as facilities in Canada and Mexico, manufactured homes comprise the second-largest percentage of housing units in the United States, and in recent years has become the country’s fastest growing type of housing (McCarty 2010; Salamon & MacTavish 2006). An estimated 18 to 22 million people live in manufactured homes, including an estimated six to eight million residents spread across approximately 50,000 MHCs (Baker et al. 2011; Salamon & MacTavish 2006). Furthermore, mobile homes represent the largest source of unsubsidized affordable housing in the United States (Burns 2001); as figures from the Lincoln Land Institute illustrate, from 1989 to 2010 manufactured homes accounted for 43 percent of all homes sold for less than $150,000 (McCarthy 2015).

Yet despite its prevalence, most legal and financial structures exclude housing attached to a chassis from conventional definitions of real estate. Although Government-Sponsored Enterprises like Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, under the Duty to Serve Program, are required to bolster support for underserved markets like manufactured housing, both agencies halted their involvement with the MH industry after sustaining incredible losses when the manufactured home market imploded in the late 1990s. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) 2014 White Paper on Manufactured Housing shows how without government support via subsidies, most major lenders either impose strict guidelines or altogether refuse to finance manufactured housing. As such, over three-quarters of all manufactured housing is titled as personal property and financed with chattel loans (23-24). By contrast an overwhelming percentage of modular homes which, like manufactured units, are built in factories and are only distinguished from “mobile” homes in their chassis (unattached) are titled and financed as real
estate (Beamish et al. 2001; Chernoff 1983). As such contradictions highlight, the unresolved cultural tensions concerning the synchronous material and affective dimensions of housing actively generate and perpetuate social inequality.

Ironically, the 2007-08 subprime mortgage crisis and subsequent regulatory tightening of the conventional U.S. mortgage market triggered significant growth in MHCs as investment properties. Crown Court typifies this trend towards corporatization. Headquartered in Colorado, Crown Court’s owners operate forty-plus MHCs in seven U.S. states which in 2015 were altogether valued at nearly $240 million. As a private firm, Crown Court’s corporate owners hold one of the nation’s top twenty largest MHC portfolios, which enables them to promise investors returns ranging upwards of 17.9 percent. Moreover, high profile MH investors including Warren Buffet and the Singaporean sovereign-wealth fund have further popularized mobile home park investment post-recession. MHC investment “boot camps” are held regularly across the United States; for $3,000 per ticket, attendees at the popular Mobile Home University (MHU) workshops are taught the ins and outs of profiting from mobile home(owner) abandonment (Rivlin 2014). This increased attention has slowed, if not stalled altogether, trends toward MHC closure and redevelopment. Yet, legal statutes prohibiting landownership places mobile-homeowners in park communities in a persistent state of permanent impermanence, a condition in which an otherwise-durable object—such as a home—is discursively dematerialized so as to impose temporariness onto that object and, by extension, its owner. As such, MHC landlords like Crown Court’s multimillionaire owners capitalize on resident-tenants’ imposed im/permanence while mobile-homeowners suffer the affective and material costs of financial and social abandonment as “halfway-homeowners” (Sullivan 2014).
Not all MHC residents experience such vulnerabilities equally. Salamon and MacTavish (2006, 2017) identify four types of MHCs, each describing an intensifying relationship of home- and landownership: (1) Seasonal park communities; (2) Rental MHCs; (3) Land-lease MHCs; and (4) Cooperative or subdivision communities. Somewhat unusually, Crown Court operates as a hybrid rental and land-lease community; in 2015, 73 percent of its residents either owned their home or subletted it from a private third-party owner, yet rented (or leased) the land on which their homes were sited. However, in recent years Crown Court operators have undertaken an aggressive effort to transition towards a rental model to increase their profit yields. Without landownership, mobile-homeowners in private, for-profit communities like Crown Court have few options to protest rent increases, contract terminations, and park closures.

Further, when compared to conventional real estate and mortgage practices, MH industry and MHC regulations are frighteningly under-enforced. According to Jared Clark (2017), at least fifteen U.S. states offer no special legal protections for mobile-homeowners; of those states that do, most either possess distinct MH landlord-tenant laws, require that all lease terminations are for “good cause,” extend land contracts to a yearly basis, or some combination of the three. Steven Miller and Beverly Evko (1985) argue that park operators’ control over their residents, who are—for all intents and purposes—homeowners, limits individual claims to the rights, benefits, and symbolic capital typically afforded homeowners:

The [mobile home park] resident lives under the same Constitution and Laws as do his fellow citizens, but he, unlike them, is subject to an additional authority, the mobile home park manager, who intercedes between him and his local government (695). [Those] living in the mobile home come to realize that although they are American they are often denied their rights as citizens between they live under a quasi-governmental power: the mobile home manager or owner (702).

Even Nebraska, whose Mobile Home Landlord-Tenant Act (1984) holds park operators responsible for maintaining a MHC’s private infrastructure, offers limited protection; as several
researchers note, MHC owners often skimp on major repairs, in addition to dramatically increasing lot rents or suddenly evicting tenants, to recoup their financial investment or take advantage of appreciating land values (Baker et al. 2011; Clark 1972; Desmond 2016; Hurley 2001; MacTavish et al. 2006; Sullivan 2014). For example, since 2000 lot rent in Crown Court has increased 56 percent (from $250/month to $390), becoming the most expensive MHC in Lincoln.

Altogether, the ambiguous sociolegal status of mobile-homeowners vis-à-vis their landlords portends endless uncertainty. As I explain in greater depth in Chapter Two, early- to mid-twentieth century laws and ordinances pertaining to “trailer parks” were not written with mobile home permanence in mind. But what is permanence in the context of housing? Conceptually, Euroamerican cultural traditions depict the home as enduring, meant to serve as the site of familial reproduction over several generations (Birdwell-Pheasant & Lawrence-Zúñiga 1999) and therefore regarded as distinct from other types of material culture due to its supposed lack of mobility (Lawrence & Low 1990:455). However, in reality even conventional homes affixed to “permanent” foundations are moveable; for instance, my paternal grandparent’s house, my brick-and-mortar childhood home-away-from-home, was relocated more than twenty miles away after it was sold. Furthermore, since the 1960s few so-called “mobile” homes are ever moved once sited (Hart et al. 2002; Rust 2007; Sullivan 2014; Wallis 1991). Despite these contradictions, popular and legal-political perspectives persistently regard manufactured housing as less permanent, temporary shelters compared to site-built dwellings.

Kenneth Burke (1935), noted American literary critic, argued that permanence is best conceived as a set of expectations rather than a self-evident reality. It is our past experiences, he added, that orient our expectations with respect to objects, which are further discernable only in
relation to one another: “Any given situation derives its character from the entire framework of interpretation by which we judge it” (ibid:52). Put otherwise, because manufactured homes are defined in relation to—and are perceived as being inferior to—conventional housing, societal expectations offer the basis and justification by which their assumed impermanence becomes reality.

Of the dozens of mobile-homeowners I spoke to, several admitted to feeling like “second-class citizens” due to their ownership of “trailer” housing. Even MH industry members confess that MHCs are largely invisible to the wider public; as Roger, Crown Court’s former district manager, explained: “They don’t care. If it’s old town Lincoln, nobody gives a shit. You can’t
physically see it from the street, or at least the majority of it. Again, low visibility? Low paying attention” (Figure 2).

Arguably, the neglect Crown Court and other Lincoln MHCs endured for decades spared these neighborhoods from the destructive wave that eliminated tens of thousands of urban mobile home parks from the 1980s onward (Aman & Yarnal 2009; Brown & Sellman 1987; Chernoff 1983). While “low visibility” once protected Lincoln’s remaining MHCs from redevelopment, cultural expectations that manufactured homes are less durable or permanent than conventional dwellings produces unequal power relations between park operators, the “land-lords,” and their homeowner tenants. However, recent “revitalization” agendas have led mobile-homeowners and non-resident stakeholders alike to ask to what extent, if any, MHCs “fit” into emergent visions of Lincoln’s post-recession revival.

Approved in late 2012, the West Lincoln Redevelopment Zone (WLRZ) exemplifies the public social drama produced by cyclical MHC ruination, abandonment, closure, and elimination. Initiated by Crown Court’s operators and supported by Lincoln policymakers, the WLRZ proposes replacing half of Crown Court MHC with 400,000 square feet of retail and hotel space alongside new market-rate apartments and ultimately displacing an estimated 800 mobile home residents. As it unfolded, the WLRZ exposed competing agendas for how, and in what shape, the “revitalization” of Crown Court should occur. Although mobile-homeowners were expected to bear the brunt of the proposed costs, their opposition was considered secondary, a consequence of their mandated powerlessness and im/permanence.

“I do not know what is going to happen,” testified one Crown Court resident, a single mother of two. “I’ve lived here for twenty years, and I know that Lincoln is growing and getting beautiful. But,” she went on, “I’m afraid. It will look beautiful, but what’s going to happen to us?
I am comfortable. I just remodeled. I’ve put *everything* into my house.” While sympathetic, the Lincoln Planning Commissioners nonetheless demurred; the deterioration was too severe, the neighborhood too obsolete, they countered, to be preserved. *Do you feel better now with all the information from today’s meeting,* they asked. She told them: “If you will tell me there is a beautiful house for my children, I’ll be happy. But who is going to provide it?”

**Blighted and Substandard: Manufacturing Predestined Ruins**

Can a “trailer park” be beautiful? In popular discourse, such a notion is practically unthinkable. Absent firsthand experience, most non-residents I interviewed doubted that park communities could be a nice place to live. Even those with friends or family who lived in a MHC were susceptible to “trailer trash” stereotyping.

“My mom used to live in Sunset Acres when she first moved to Lincoln,” said N.M., a subprime loan servicer who graciously hosted me during my 2016 field season. In a disbelieving tone, she told me how her mother “bought a trailer out there. I thought it was nice. I mean, I think a lot of older people live there, but I don’t know, it seemed nice. It didn’t seem trashy to me at all. Now, you know, I’ve never been to any of the others, to be honest.”

Sunset Acres, like Crown Court MHC, was established in the early 1970s and marketed as a “modern” mobile home subdivision; moreover, this large park is situated less than a mile north of Crown Court. I asked N., “Had you ever heard of any other parks?”

“Oh yeah, you hear *a lot* about them, and you hear a lot of people say they’re *trash holes* or something.” She laughed and shook her head. The *West Lincoln Redevelopment Zone* (WLRZ), she added, was an effort meant to improve the area’s overall image: “The goal was to, I
think they’re trying to class them up and get them better and have more owner-occupied, nicer units. Pulling out the old trashy ones, I know that’s their goal.”

For N., the cyclical ordering of manufactured housing from “nice” to “trashy” is expected as part and parcel of the “natural” ruination of MHCs reproduced in popular discourse. Similar to obsolescence, ruination entails a state of irreversible decay. While their affective power is undeniable (see Gordillo 2014), ruins are infallibly material in their rubble, scrapes, and rot (Laszczkowski 2015; Stewart 1996b; van der Hoorn 2009). Colloquially, therefore, ruins are rooted in their pastness. However, as Ann Stoler (2008) observes, “ruin” describes both a place (noun) and an act (verb) whose simultaneous temporality as past and present draws attention to “ruination” as an active, modernist, and political act of violence and erasure (Dawdy 2010; Gordillo 2014; Stoetzer 2018). Thus, revitalization projects like the WLRZ regard urban MHCs as “modern ruins,” undying relics of a foregone era in American history whose continued presence interrupts the presumed natural progression of urban development (Schwenkel 2013; Yarrow 2017). Undeniably, the ruination of manufactured housing (communities) is framed by powerful, affective language concerning decay, deterioration, and even trash.

Mobile-homeowners, too, are liable to identify their communities—but rarely themselves—with “trash.” For instance, several Crown Court residents incorrectly confessed to me that prior to operating as a mobile home park, Crown Court MHC was a municipal landfill. (In reality, the landfill was sited across the highway from Crown Court’s present location, however it closed in the 1940s.) Regardless of its facticity, the circulation of this specific rumor among Crown Court residents belies the potency of “trashiness” in (pre)figuring MHCs as polluted, decayed, and ruined spaces.
Like the MH industry more broadly, the Great Recession shone a spotlight on Lincoln’s sizeable MHC population after decades of relative invisibility. The state capital of Nebraska, by most accounts both the recession and its drawn-out recovery period were kind to Lincoln. In 2010, USA Today labelled the city a “recession winner,” preceding a wave of national accolades including highest wellbeing (Witters 2013), happiness (Olberding 2013), and caring (WalletHub 2016), all while boasting the nation’s lowest unemployment rate several times from 2013-17.

Yet, for all its success, Lincoln’s growing socioeconomic, educational, and health disparities mirror national trends where private interests are pitted against the public good, thereby adding to the largest wealth gap in America since the Great Depression. While hardly a new phenomenon, the persistence of these inequalities over decades undermines attempts to rebrand Lincoln as an up-and-coming hotspot whose recent accomplishments conflate contradictory notions of moral exceptionalism and unremarkable ordinariness where “life is right.” The perceived mismatch between Lincoln’s claims on “the good life” despite major disparities across the cityscape troubles policymakers, business interests, and public servants alike. Thus, following unprecedented success and national acclaim, several aggressive redevelopment projects such as the WLRZ have been presented as a solution for realizing Lincoln’s utopic promise at the expense of the city’s most vulnerable populations.

Yolande, a mobile-homeowner and nurse, solemnly described this dreadful predicament to me: “It is as if somebody is coming to destroy our house with a bomb, but we don’t know when.” Together with a dozen or so neighbors, Yolande had attended a public meeting with the Lincoln Planning Commission in February 2013 to oppose the WLRZ. Together, we spent three days in June 2013 sifting through news articles, mailed correspondence, and leasing documents Yolande had collected since she purchased her home from a church friend four years earlier. As
she unearthed the public record of their testimonies, she drew my attention to one passage that she had repeatedly underlined: *There is not a specific plan today.*

The public transcript illustrated how the language the Commission heard from policymakers describing WLRZ was noncommittal and vague. First, D. Landis, Director of Urban Development, told Commissioners that WLRZ was “a general outline,” or a “vision,” for potential redevelopment meant to transform Crown Court MHC into “a higher and better [land] use than what is there today.” Next, a series of planners and engineers discussed altering the affected area’s zoning from “mixed use residential” to “commercial-highway” in order to implement WLRZ. Repeatedly, the presenters stressed how none of the proposed changes would go into immediate effect, but instead sketched the “future appropriate use of the land” as outlined in the 2040 Comprehensive Plan.

“They say that nothing is going on, they’re not going to sell the property,” Yolande explained, referring to her landlords, Crown Court’s corporate owners. “But they [the owners] do want to do that. Maybe not now, but in five years. Ten years?” Indeed, Landis confirmed Yolande’s suspicions on that frigid February evening; noting that no developer had yet agreed to the plan, he nonetheless stated that Crown Court’s out-of-state owner “wishes to prepare to redevelop.”

Embedded within the “master narrative” (Stewart 1996b:97) of modern planning discourse is the assertion that specific neighborhoods’ transition into blighted, substandard “slums” is inevitable (Dawdy 2010; Graeber 2010; Marcuse 1986), especially if such places are perceived to be “functionally obsolete” remnants of the past with no remaining economic viability (Gregory 2013). As Shannon Dawdy (2010) argues, the “modern” ruins littered across the urban landscape serve as a reminder of this process, as reflections of the “natural” cycle of
investment, growth, decline, abandonment, and reinvestment (Schwenkel 2013; Smith 1979, 2002; Smith & Williams 1986). However, contrary to what the label suggests, “abandoned” places are not devoid of people. Rather, abandonment describes, first, disinvestment from local government and private investors, and second, by those with adequate social and financial capital to move away. Ultimately, those “left behind” come to embody specific stigmatizing attitudes associated with an area’s decline as people who “drag a city down, [and are] liabilities that limit its economic and social potential” (Diaz 2011; see also, Dawdy 2010; Gregory 2003; McDonough 1993).

Across the United States, the post-recession (re)discovery of MHC profitability brought such communities back into the limelight after decades of relative obscurity, and Lincoln, with its sizeable mobile home population, was no exception. However, as with the WLRZ, the Blight and Substandard Determination Study (2011) preceding it was highly controversial. Oddly, Crown Court’s landlords commissioned the blight study of their own property, and thus initiated the first steps of the redevelopment process. According to transcripts from subsequent WLRZ hearings, Crown Court’s attorney justified his client’s approach as “realistic,” arguing that it was unimaginable that the park neighborhood would remain as is. While the report confirmed what most suspected, its authors failed to attribute either cause or blame to the presence of substandard conditions. Rather, Crown Court’s owners were “commended on the foresight to look into the future,” and congratulated for their “due diligence” in having their property declared blighted.

Although numerous Lincoln planners told me that redevelopment projects like the WLRZ are “symbolic” guides for potential future action, nonetheless city officials were intrigued by the project’s promise; as one city staffer commented, “Rarely are 80 acres available for redevelopment in the core of the city.” Read through the public records, and Crown Court’s
blight declaration feels like a foregone conclusion, an admission of allowed—or predestined—ruination. For instance, photos of individual manufactured homes sans caption punctuate the blight report, which gives readers the impression of endemic obsolescence and decay. Furthermore, the myriad environmental and infrastructural issues Crown Court faced were declared insolvent, “beyond remedy and cannot be dealt with effectively by the ordinary operations of private enterprise.” I argue redevelopment projects like WLRZ reverse conventional wisdom gleaned from material culture studies by showing how abject populations are made in association with worthless, obsolete, and “rubbish” (Thompson 1979) objects, as opposed to places, in contemporary planning discourse. Bereft the basic legal protections typically afforded conventional homeowners, even those sympathetic to mobile-homeowners’ plight hesitate to safeguard residents from the ravages of for-profit poverty housing.

Amidst the WLRZ debates, one Councilwoman seated on the Planning Commission stated how she felt “really torn on this action,” adding her concern that the finding of blight and substandard conditions in Crown Court would not benefit existing residents, but would instead “use city tax dollars […] to displace people that are trying to do the right thing by investing in their own homes that they can afford.” Nonetheless, she and her fellow Committee members voted unanimously in favor of the WLRZ, “in the hope that the owner will communicate and answer questions and help people with their fears.”

In retrospect, it seems dubious, if not outright foolish, that Councilmembers placed their faith in landlords with three decades’ worth of reported negligence and retaliatory behavior to act in the best interests of their residents. Instead, relying on “objective,” “expert” risk discourse (Althaus 2005; Douglas 1992; Zeiderman 2013), public (re)intervention in the form of “decent, safe, and sanitary” redevelopment was found to be necessary. However, like social abandonment
and ruination more generally, Crown Court’s blighting cannot be considered a depoliticized “natural” event. Rather, its deterioration was actively produced within the context of public neglect, disinvestment, and cultural disdain for “trailer trash” over time. Indeed, targeted obsolescence disguised as “benign neglect” (Marcuse 1986) coalesces popular desires concerning the abjection and erasure of liminal or ambiguous persons and places. The Lincoln Planning Commission’s approval of the WLRZ despite vocal resident protest and well-documented corporate malfeasance evidences how the symbolic valuelessness or “second-class” status of “trailer homes” functionally transforms mobile-homeowners like Yolande into an abject population whose dispossession and removal is often celebrated. By contrast, I show how these narratives obscure the sociopolitical forces that actively worked to ensure the ruination of Crown Court MHC, as well as thousands of MHC neighborhoods across the United States.

Modern urban slums, as “ruined places,” represent the worst parts of the American anti-urban nightmare (Kunstler 1994): unsafe, “trashy” zones of high-risk and few opportunities, those who live beyond their porous boundaries simultaneously denigrate and fear their existence (Gilbert 2007; Gregory 2003; Little 2012; Williams 2010). “But what is critical,” argues Alan Gilbert, “is that so often slums and all the people who live there are tarred with the same brush. Slums and slum dwellers are viewed as constituting one undifferentiated problem with never a redeeming feature” (2007:703, emphasis in original). Homogenizing the poor and the spaces they occupy is a common feature of zones of social abandonment, leading policy makers and the “concerned” public to conclude that “solving” the problem of blight and ruination necessitates evicting much of the resident population and razing many buildings (specifically low-income housing) to the ground (Adams et al. 2009:626). Indeed, as far as justification goes, proponents need only point to the observable physical deterioration of these abandoned and ruined places.
Yet, as Stoler (2008:194) reminds us, “ruins are also sites that condense alternative senses of history.” That is, what if I were to reframe the question opening this section? What if trailer parks were beautiful? Ample anecdotal evidence proves that “beautiful” and “nice” mobile homes and parks exist despite popular opinion. B. Baier, the Lincoln Public School board member whose desire to develop targeted interventions for Lincoln MHC schoolchildren directly led to this research (Chapter Seven), told me in June 2013 about the gorgeous “condo park trailer” her parents once owned in a gated Sunbelt MHC. Similarly, Setha Low (2003) recalls how her adoptive grandparent’s retirement MHC in Orange County, California, “was like a gated community but without the gate” (199). In Chapter Four I delve deeper into what the similarities between mobile home and gated communities suggests for housing privatization that spans the socioeconomic spectrum, however for now I want to impress readers with an unthinkable truth, shown throughout the following chapters, of Crown Court mobile-homeowners’ individual and collective efforts to defy their preemptive, predestined ruination vis-à-vis the very object that determines their abjection: their (mobile) homes.

As “ruins,” MHCs poignantly highlight the conceptual ambiguity of ruination as a temporal, sensorial, and material condition. By identifying MHCs like Crown Court as American “zones of abandonment,” I illustrate how their present ruined state was neither inevitable nor inert, that is, a known quality or fact. Rather, by detailing how social abandonment and ruination is made, lived, and defied in symbolically and materially devalued spaces like “trailer parks,” this ethnography locates ambition, hope, and desire amidst a ruined landscape overcome with precariousness.
For Better or Worse: Theorizing Wellbeing and Precarity

Mobile homeowners since 2009, Yolande and her husband should typify the American dream of homeownership insofar as the dream promises “the belief or hope that in America every individual possesses, or ought to possess, an equal opportunity to succeed in life, regardless of how she defines success for herself” (Ghosh 2013:32). The couple paid $5,000 for their 1973-model home, however by 2013 Yolande estimated they had invested an additional $10,000 in repairs and remodeling. Lincoln’s post-recession construction boom helped offset the family’s finances after Yolande’s work hours were scaled back, as her husband—a subcontractor for a local construction firm—found enough work to not only pay for their home, but to also finance a second trailer, a 1966-model, for their son and daughter-in-law. Surely, in its present usage, the American dream’s assurance that unimpeded access to comfortable, middle-class lifestyles, primarily characterized through homeownership, is owed to all hard-working Americans (Jefferson 2013; Kefalas 2003; Perin 1988) unquestionably applies to Yolande’s family?

However, this is not the case, as the im/permanence Yolande as well as millions of MHC residents experience is practically a textbook definition of precarity, a theoretical term referring to the affective ordeal of unending insecurity generated by unstable and flexible labor regimes under late or advanced capitalism (Casas-Cortés 2014; Muehlebach 2013; Waite 2009). Where most research on precarity focuses on labor conditions (e.g. Molé 2010, 2012; Standing 2011, 2012; Wacquant 2008; Waite 2009), I situate mobile-homeowner insecurity as a consequence of owning categorically unfixed housing, evoking the literal origins of “precariousness” as tenuous land tenancy subject to the whims of another (Berlant 2011:192). Specifically, this dissertation proposes an alternative reading on precarity that considers housing as effecting precarious states
Here, I consider social precarity, defined by Anne Allison (2012:348-9) as “a condition of being and feeling insecure in life that extends to one’s (dis)connectedness from a sense of social community,” as a consequence of social abandonment and the a priori ruination of manufactured housing. In the context of the American dream, the im/permanence attributed manufactured housing casts doubt as to whether mobile-households can, or should, imagine a secure, stable future for themselves.

Anthropological research on wellbeing has consistently shown that happiness, satisfaction, or whether or not an individual has achieved “the good life” depends entirely on cultural contexts (Chua 2014; Fischer 2014; Mathews & Izquierdo 2017). Defined as a “positive physical, social, and mental state,” wellbeing describes a theoretical lens for articulating the factors that motivate people as well as what gives them hope for the future (Woodhouse et al. 2015:2). Conceptually, wellness studies understand wellbeing as more than merely socioeconomic status or household income, relying instead on a more holistic set of measures including a group’s sincerely-held beliefs and values (Fischer 2014; Mathews & Izquierdo 2017; Woodhouse et al. 2015). As such, wellness and wellbeing are aptly suited for research on the American dream, which is widely seen as indexing happiness through material possessions, specifically that of a (conventional) home.

Most social scientists perceive wellbeing as subjective and tied to an individuals’ sense of opportunity, or ability to satisfy personal desires and goals (Fischer 2014). As a concept, wellbeing—denoting the potential or hope for future, if not present, happiness—fittingly juxtaposes precarity, which describes an inability to cope or envision a better future. However, rather than view wellbeing and precarity as contrasting worldviews, I present mobile-
homeownership as a precarious condition that emerges from an active pursuit of happiness, that is, the American dream.

Lauren Berlant (2011:1) offers a compelling description of such a state as *cruel optimism*: “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing.” Likewise, James MacLeod (2009:4) writes that for a growing percentage of Americans, “the American Dream, far from being a genuine prospect, is not even a dream. It is a hallucination.” Thus, I approach wellbeing as not merely the potential or opportunity for (future) happiness or personal satisfaction, but rather as a set of factors enabling action or agency; in other words, wellbeing also means being able to *fight* for the future. Yet action, as well as inaction, may also serve as the basis for blame as those who are unable to achieve the American dream—or who did, and subsequently lost it—are often faulted for their misfortunes (see Greenbaum 2015; Jefferson 2013, 2015; Stout 2016a, 2016b).

Carol expressed such a perspective to me in early January 2015 over a few beers. “The reason people buy these [mobile homes] is because they’re like, ‘God, I can actually own real estate and the great American dream.’” Like most Americans, Carol scoffed at the notion that mobile homes were at all equivalent to conventional site-built housing. “Everyone tells us, the great American dream is owning your own home. That’s the great American dream. Apple flippin’ pie. Story of the American dream. So, if you can’t *afford* the great American dream for $100,000, you can afford the great American dream for $5,000.”

Indeed, the mobile-homeowners I came to know cited affordability as the primary motivator for owning a “trailer” home, a benefit the MH industry similarly flaunts:

*Why Should I Consider a Manufactured Home?* If you’re looking to get the most out of your ‘housing dollar,’ you need to consider a manufactured home. Depending on the region of the country, construction costs per square foot for a new manufactured home average anywhere from 10 to 35 percent less than a comparable site-built home,
excluding the cost of land. Today’s manufactured homes offer the quality construction, modern amenities and livability you are seeking…at a price that fits your lifestyle and your budget! (Manufactured Housing Institute 2014)

While mobile housing might fit certain lifestyles and budgets, Carol’s comments signify how cultural disdain for nontraditional housing fails to recognize mobile-homeowners as homeowners, and thus from having obtained the “great American dream.”

Although several of the central ideological tenants of the American dream concerning hard work, moral virtue, and the promise of inalienable rights and freedoms are based in prerevolutionary ideals, as a concept the American dream entered common parlance during the Great Depression, where it was employed to lament the excess of the Gilded Age and rapid industrialization (Ghosh 2013:329). In its present usage, the “dream” represents a combination of two distinct, albeit interrelated social desires: (1) the postwar belief that unimpeded access to comfortable, middle-class lifestyles is owed to all hardworking Americans (Jefferson 2013; Kefalas 2003; MacLeod 2009; Perin 1977); and (2) that discrimination and injustice, particularly racial and gendered, limits individual expression and opportunity to the extent that action must be taken to guarantee equality (Ghosh 2013:15). Both interpretations, however, situate housing as central to achieving the American dream insofar as the home represents a material asset signifying middle-class status, as well as a financial vehicle that provides security while also building household wealth.

However, in the aftermath of the Great Recession Americans’ faith in the American dream, and of homeownership as the means of achieving it, have faltered (Fields 2015; Heiman 2015:xi; Jefferson 2013, 2015). Moreover, the recent resurgence of populist rhetoric and protest across the political spectrum defies the assumed “classlessness” of dominant American discourse, revealing the deep anxieties and tensions of a society preoccupied with class and
social status. This, despite a tradition of subdued critical class discourse in the United States; an observation either attributed to the “un-American” threat of “class-baiting” leveled against nationalist ideologies of meritocracy and equal opportunity (Dudley 1999; Ortner 1991; Walley 2013), or dismissed due to the presumption that “everyone is middle-class” (Heiman et al. 2012; Kefalas 2003). As a field of study, (global) middle-class studies emerged in the late 1980s as an inquiry into the processes of class formation amidst ever-increasing globalization and neoliberalism. Theoretically indebted to both Marxist analyses of class structure and power and Weberian attention to the affective and symbolic role of culture in class identification, middle-class studies focus on how economic and moral logics complement and contradict one another in the formation of place-based class identities (e.g. Heiman et al. 2012; Kefalas 2003; Liechty 2003; Perin 1977, 1988). Yet as a categorization, both researchers and laypersons alike often struggle to define exactly what the “middle-classes” are (Heiman et al. 2012). Ideologically associated with normativity, mainstream values, or the politically benign, the “middle-class” typically represents an empty—albeit aspirational—classification to draw away from inter- or intraclass conflicts (Berlant 2011; Heiman et al. 2012; Ortner 1991).3 The “middle-classes” lack clear definition, and as such identifying as middle-class is generally understood in relation to, or against, the upper and lower classes. Neither secure nor stable, being middle-class requires that individuals consciously (re)affirm the boundaries separating them from the “other” classes through a process Low calls “social splitting” (2003:139).

3 Despite this categorical “emptying,” scholars have long argued that belonging to the middle-class produces specific affective states. In White Collar: the American Middle-classes (1951), sociologist C. Wright Mills’ early and formative overview of the growing “middle” class of salaried, suburban workers contended that the proliferation of mass society and manufactured goods produces a specific psychological transformation within this population segment: “Among white-collar people, the malaise is deep-rooted; for the absence of any order of belief has left them morally defenseless as individuals and politically impotent as a group” (xvi).
Relegated to private, for-profit properties and shielded behind tall fences, thick vegetation, and/or commercial buildings, the physical and symbolic expulsion of mobile-homeowners from middle-class identification allows non-mobile homeowners like Carol or some Lincoln policymakers to dismiss “trailers” as impermanent structures barely distinguishable from a personal vehicle. Yet, as I describe in the following chapters, many of the mobile-homeowners I interviewed thought their homes to be “just as good” as site-built units. Thus, MHCs offer a compelling illustration of the American dream’s inherent contradictions. As similar anthropological and sociological research has shown, the meritocratic basis for the American dream is frequently proven fallacious, as success stories ignore endemic structural inequalities (Kefalas 2003; Pappas 1989; Walley 2013), conformity and anxiety belie personal freedoms (Berlant 2011; Low 2003), and historically marginalized populations continuously demonstrate how that dream has become—and perhaps has always been—inaccessible (Ghosh 2013; MacLeod 2009; Newman 1988, 1999).

For better or worse, “mobile homes” and “trailer parks” reflect more than America’s waning fascination with mechanical modernity. Inasmuch as mobile-homeowners occupy a liminal space on the precipice of “the good life,” both physically and metaphorically, the lived im/permanence of (manufactured) housing precarity exemplifies “the archetypal character of our age in the same way that the immigrant worker was archetypal for the early 1900s and the newly prosperous Levittown resident has come to personify the 1950s,” which Hugh Gusterson and Catherine Besteman (2010:2) term “Insecure Americans.” In other words, the insecurities Crown Court mobile-homeowners face are shared, albeit perhaps not to the same extent, by millions. Low (2010) describes the increased paranoia-driven securitization and privatization of housing across the United States as representing the American dream “with a twist” (29). Here, I borrow
this phrase to describe similar conditions among mobile-homeowners and other informally housed populations experience in their growing-yet-threatened private, for-profit enclaves. If, as Mary Douglas (1991:294) argued, the home is best conceived as “an organization of space over time,” then what this research offers is a study on the (manufactured) home as materializing futures, in other words, as a site where the future is either made or unmade.

There Is No Place Like Nebraska

Whereas post-recession Lincoln has been awarded with numerous accolades—most caring (WalletHub 2017), best work-life balance (Miller 2018), and best city to raise a family (WalletHub 2015)—perhaps the most celebrated was the city’s 2012 designation as “America’s happiest city” (Olberding 2013). Oldtimers and newcomers alike typically stress how friendly Lincolnites are. For instance, we Cornhuskers pride ourselves as being the nicest fans in college football. (“Through these gates pass the greatest fans in college football” is inscribed at every entrance to Memorial Stadium.) As such, W. Birdsall, Lincoln Chamber of Commerce President, told reporters in 2013 that Lincolnites’ happiness stemmed from how optimistic and secure residents felt about their futures (ibid).

The state capital of Nebraska, Lincoln’s “niceness” reflects general statewide attitudes and values. As I conducted fieldwork the state motto was temporarily (2014-16) changed to “Nebraska Nice.” Textual reminders across the state attest to Nebraskan virtues and good will, such as lyrics to the University fight song, “There Is No Place Like Nebraska,” or “the good life,” which adorns every welcome sign. So resonant is the latter message, in fact, that most Nebraskans inaccurately believe it to be the state’s slogan. (Rather, “equality before the law” is
Nebraska’s official motto.) Mary Pipher, renowned psychologist, author, and Lincoln native, aptly describes our shared home state as equally generous and generic:

We have ten-foot-tall sunflowers, accessible quiet places, and gentle people. Long-term Nebraskan residents tend to be large, rather plain white people whom my husband swears he can recognize in any airport in America. Nebraskans are the kind of people who compete to ride in the backseat, who put money in Salvation Army buckets, and who bake casseroles for grieving neighbors. We are humble people, proud of our football team, our Sandhills, our Native American heritage, and our few celebrities—Warren Buffet, Henry Fonda, Johnny Carson, and Tom Osborne. We don’t expect to be invited any place glamorous and we don’t make demands. We are happy just to be included (2002:9).

Or, as one promotional guidebook states, “The people of Nebraska are proud of their roots. It’s an honor to live in Lincoln” (McKee 2007:59).

Rootedness, and agrarianism broadly, are concepts inexorably linked to Nebraska’s presumed goodness. Like the enigmatic yeoman farmer of the Jeffersonian era, liberal societies like the United States regard certain “inalienable rights” as a condition of citizenship manifested by individual, moral character (Ghosh 2013). As the Declaration of Independence famously holds, these include “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness,” an alteration of the original Lockean framework of life, liberty, and property. Insofar as landed property (ownership) is thought as signifying happiness, or wellbeing, it should be expected that agrarian states like Nebraska, as well as its capital, Lincoln, proudly celebrate their high rates of resident wellbeing, which are, again, consistently recognized in national polling. However, as I describe throughout this dissertation, happiness and “the good life” are not guaranteed, as controversial projects such as the West Lincoln Redevelopment Zone illustrate. As homeowners without land, MHC residents

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4 The reason for this substitution has received considerable debate, however most historians agree that Jefferson’s use of the “pursuit of happiness” reflected John Locke’s earlier writings on the topic, in which happiness and civic duty was tied to property ownership (Creighton 2008).
present a compelling case for analyzing the affective, biosocial, legal, and financial costs that comes from being excluded from “the good life.”

In 2012, as Lincoln Councilmembers debated whether or not to approve the eventual displacement of an estimated 800 mobile-homeowners with the WLRZ, the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce, in cooperation with the City of Lincoln, hired marketing firm Archrival to promote their new brand vision: “Life is Right in Lincoln” (Figure 3). As J.S., a Brand Lincoln representative for the Chamber described it to me, the slogan meant to capture how it “feels right” to be in Lincoln. Adding how Lincoln seems “extraordinarily normal,” she explained how Lincoln’s revitalization sought to emphasize the city’s national accolades as well as its Midwestern “charm” and “frugality” to attract young entrepreneurs and “creatives.” The 2012 promotional video which launched the Life is Right campaign likewise portrayed Lincoln as a promising, up-and-coming urban hotspot:

This city isn’t what outsiders think. Lincoln has always had the reputation of being a sleepy Midwest city, but not the type of place people think about living. Especially young people. We’ve just never really been the place people dream about. That’s about to change. It’s time to change perceptions (LifeIsRight, http://youtube.com/watch?v=8M1rT9hX1nE).

Figure 3: Brand Lincoln’s 2011 promotional campaign, "Life is Right in Lincoln," meant to portray the Nebraska state capital as an up-and-coming metropolis in the aftermath of the Great Recession. (Photo credit: Lincoln Chamber of Commerce/Archrival.)
Similar to the near-ubiquitous belief in the American dream of homeownership, regardless of whether or not one believes they are able to achieve it (Ghosh 2013; Newman 1988; Perin 1988), so too is the pathos of “the good life” central in articulating Nebraskan identities as well as the stakes of belonging to such a place. What both the “Life is Right” campaign and WLRZ project signify, however, is a hope for demographic upheaval. By appealing to “outsiders,” such efforts seemingly capitulate to longstanding perceptions of the American Midwest as provincial and utterly uninteresting (Barker & Wright 1954; Foley 1995:2; Ginsburg 1989; Marchand 1985).

“Probably no region in the country has so benefited—and so suffered—under the process of mythicizing as has the fabled Heartland,” writes Osha Davidson (1996:119). While meritocratic idealism and an atmospheric ethos of hard work, good faith, and polite stoicism against adversity is considered characteristic of Midwesterners (Ginsburg 1989; Jefferson 2015; Kefalas 2003; Pipher 2002), so too is the Midwest frequently written off as fly-over country, an endless expanse of depopulated rural ghettos (Davidson 1996; Fink 1986:119; Kunstler 1994; Newman 1988:11) inhabited by uneducated racist rednecks (Davidson 1996; Frank 2004; Hartigan 2005; Wray 2006). Such inconsistencies are perhaps befitting Lincoln as well, as despite recent celebratory rhetorics income inequality has grown precipitously alongside Lincoln’s economic and reputational surge. As an example, a 2014 report found that although Lincoln has America’s lowest unemployment its poverty rate is higher than the national average due to depressed area wages that pressure many Lincolnites to hold two or more jobs. Further, homelessness in Lincoln has risen 41 percent since 2007, and of six neighborhoods in extreme poverty, two include MHCs (Shank et al. 2014).
Contextualized as a meritocratic “pursuit,” the promise of “the good life,” or happiness, is subsequently envisioned as a condition that is earned, discovered, or otherwise claimed (Robbins 2013:457) through an individual’s work ethic, good moral character, and a sense of civic duty, traits altogether signaled through (the American dream of) homeownership. In this respect, Lincoln, for all its quintessential “American-ness,” represents an ideal place in which to situate research analyzing the American dream as an ideological contradiction of promise and despair, of happiness and precarity. Or, as Pipher (2002:7) remarks, “Lincoln has often been described by disgruntled locals and insensitive outsiders as the middle of nowhere, but now it can truthfully be called the middle of everywhere.” However, I show that what constitutes “the good life” is interwoven into complex, and often inconsistent, beliefs regarding citizenship and place-based notions of belonging (Castle 2008; Kefalas 2003). As such, this dissertation asks what grounds precarious households located in an intricate social matrix of im/permanence and ir/respectability. Attending to mobile-homeownership as a highly significant in material, cultural, and affective domains, here I bring concepts associated with positive anthropologies into conversation with the harsh contexts often described by “dark” anthropologies, of which precarity is a core theoretical term.

As Lucia Cantero (2017:311) notes, a recent “happiness turn” has emerged in anthropology to counterbalance a preponderance of “dark ethnographies” (Ortner 2016; Robbins 2013), an apt term that describes most of the to-date scholarship on precarity (e.g. Allison 2013; Berlant 2011; Butler 2006). With an explicit focus on concepts like wellbeing and “the good life,” such “positive anthropologies” offer perspective on resilience and resistance, or how vulnerable populations fight for what is good or moral in spite of staggering odds (Robbins 2013). By applying such discordant theoretical frameworks in an ethnographic study grounded in
participant-observation, archival and mixed qualitative and quantitative methodologies, I offer a more pragmatic interpretation of Lincoln urban mobile-homeowner displacement and disenfranchisement that highlights resident resilience on the one hand, while also acknowledging the steep injustices structuring and limiting their agency on the other.

**An Anthropology of Home**

If Lincoln represents quintessential Americana, then “The Wizard of Oz” (1939) epitomizes the same for the silver screen. The classic American film centers on Dorothy, the protagonist, as she learns to appreciate her Kansan home and family while making her way through the fantastical world of Oz; indeed, the conclusion of the movie sees Dorothy repeating the phrase, “there’s no place like home.” Spoken in a hopeful, yearning tone, Dorothy reminds the audience that *home* is not just a place, or as Douglas (1991:289) defined it, “a home is not only a space, it also has some structure in time; and because it is for people who are living in that time and space, it has aesthetic and moral dimensions.” That is, while the home is undeniably material, the greater significance afforded its affective and symbolic aspects has broadly shaped its conceptualization in popular and academic contexts alike (see Carsten 2004; Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995; Birdwell-Pheasant & Lawrence-Zúñiga 1999).

As a topic of anthropological inquiry, the “home” dates back to the origins of the discipline. Where early ethnological studies understood housing as either functional or evolutionary responses mirroring the social organization and value systems of a culture (e.g. Engels 1884; Morgan 1887), by the latter half of the twentieth century the theoretical significance of the home came to be more associated with its structural and symbolic significance over its material properties (Lawrence & Low 1990; Miller 2001). Regarded as an
empty vessel or a mere backdrop for familial reproduction, ritual life, and/or social security, the home-as-built-environment has been given a “relatively passive role” by a majority of ethnographers (Lawrence & Low 1990:457; see also, Humphrey 1988). Likewise, Mari-Jose Amerlinck (2001) notes how attention to lived spatiality has been underdeveloped in the discipline, as most classic and contemporary ethnographic studies on housing rely on generalized, archetypical models. In popular U.S. cultural and mediascapes, the detached, site-built, single-family home signifies the standard, traditional, or conventional house-type.

Until recently, social science scholarship on housing has focused considerably less attention on structural variation in housing forms, and how such are interpreted culturally (for notable exceptions, see Low & Chambers 1989; Perin 1977, 1988; Oliver 1987). However, after decades of theoretical stagnation, material culture studies are undergoing a resurgence across the social sciences, including anthropology (Miller 2008; Tilley et al. 2006). The renewed emphasis on materiality has inspired ethnographic studies on housing as an architectural form and part of the built environment (e.g. Dalakoglu 2015; Lawrence-Zúñiga 2016; Leivestad 2018). Still, by and large dichotomous tenure binaries—whether one “owns” or “rents”—remain the determinant factor in most housing research for measuring resident outcomes (e.g. Desmond 2016; Ehrenreich 2002; Halle 1984; Kefalas 2003; Perin 1977, 1988). Mobile-homeownership, I argue, presents an optimal case study for exploring the conceptual disjuncture between tenure and form in American social, legal, and cultural systems as exemplifying an “improper” type of ownership that unsettles commonsense notions of residents and residence. By showing how housing form, as opposed to tenure, produces and exacerbates inequality and poverty, this study explores the social costs of housing’s conceptual vagueness and unsettled meaning for mobile-homeowners.
Certainly, where “trailer” housing is concerned, form is the preeminent feature informing popular attitudes regarding the legal, social, and economic categorization of manufactured homes. For instance, although Lincoln has an estimated 12,000-unit shortfall of affordable homes, few housing agencies or authorities consider manufactured housing as a viable placement option. D.P., a local nonprofit housing advocate, told me about one negative experience she had while attempting to house a client in a home located in a land-lease park:

> When we saw the rent, we were like, “Awesome, getting ready to cut the check.” And it was like, oh, this and that… And I was like, “Whoa, where did that come from?” All of a sudden, our total was $800. And I’m like, what? Why didn’t we know about this? So maybe it was just that person’s approach, but in the end I was just like, whatever. Move on. Let’s go with what we’re used to.

In our previous email communications, I had learned from D. that her organization did not work with mobile homes or communities whatsoever as a result of this frustrating experience. After D. recounted this event, I asked if she would ever consider housing in a park community in the future. She shook her head, adding, “I’m scared, and I don’t know enough.” She chuckled.

> “That’s probably the biggest reason. That, and I don’t wanna get shady. I don’t want to have someone pull something on me like that again, you know? That was weird.”

Like D., most housing advocates and policymakers I spoke to in Lincoln viewed mobile housing as unsafe due to its material properties regardless of any unit’s age or physical condition. Such beliefs are reflected in the 2011 Blight and Substandard Determination Study conducted in Crown Court, which declared 56.4 percent of the total housing stock “deteriorating or dilapidated” on the basis of age alone. Altogether, these examples illustrate how, despite academic tendencies to stress the affective or symbolic aspects of the “home,” the sheer physicality of housing is shaped by, as well as shapes, sociopolitical attitudes. That is, because manufactured housing’s material properties inform popular opinion, I argue that it precisely
through a mobile home’s *materiality* that the social stigma applied to mobile-homeowners is derived and its ruination predetermined.

Like Brian—“the Wolf”—Andrew (34) and Tricia (31), a married couple who lived in a 1974 singlewide purchased from Crown Court for ten dollars, plus back taxes, were widely seen as “trailer trash” by park employees and neighbors alike. I interviewed the pair one sizzling afternoon in September 2015; clad in denim shorts and a loose, light top appropriate for the heat, their neighbor, Carl (Chapter Four), later told me that Tricia thought I’d dressed “like a hussy” so as to “steal her man.” This, alongside my own observations from our initial interview led me to the following observation in my daily fieldnotes: *I thought, uncharitably, that this couple fits the stereotype of who many assume lives in a “trailer park.”* To elaborate further, Andrew was an ex-convict living on disability due to an undisclosed mental illness, whereas Tricia bounced from one part-time job to another, fired consistently for lateness, “no-shows,” and arriving to work under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

*The Jerry Springer Show* blasted in the background as we settled in the living room, handcuffs and karate belts tacked to unevenly-painted panel walls (Figure 4). Exposed wires from a missing smoke detector dangled from the ceiling, and as I took a seat Andrew warned me to watch for the “soft spots,” places where the floor had rotted away over time so that only the threadbare blue carpet remained.
Poor, crass, un- or underemployed, and “trailer park” residents, at first glance Andrew and Tricia seemingly defy typical Midwestern attitudes and values of conservatism, populism, fierce individualism and sensibility so cherished by boosters, publics, and policymakers alike (Foley 1995; Ginsburg 1989). Despite Americans’ discursive proclivities to blame poverty-stricken individuals for their personal circumstances (Greenbaum 2015; Maharidge 2011; Waquant 2008), recent research suggests that following the Great Recession a more conciliatory tone has been widely adapted with respect to the tens of millions of prime and subprime borrowers who lost their homes to foreclosure (Jefferson 2013, 2015; Reid 2017; Stout 2016a, 2016b). Yet, popular “trailer trash” stereotypes rarely offer mobile-homeowners the same latitude due to widespread beliefs that manufactured housing is an unsafe, toxic, and defective asset whose confounding continued occupation is thought of as indicative of its owners’ inherent ignorance.
For example, many non-MHC residents I spoke with cited tornados as a major factor preventing them from considering mobile-homeownership; this includes over a quarter (26%) of questionnaire respondents surveyed in three public events in Lincoln between 2016-17. This is a fair concern, as Lincoln is listed as having a “very high” risk level for tornados (HomeFacts). However, like 64.3 percent of Crown Court households I interviewed, Andrew and Tricia did not have a tornado plan in place.

“I like storms,” Andrew told me. “I want to be a storm chaser, so I’m not scared of ‘em. I mean, how many years has it been since I lived here? I wanna say 34 years, and I’ve not once seen a trailer get destroyed by a tornado.”

Sighing, Tricia looked up from the phone game she’d been playing to add, “I’ve called his mom, said, ‘There’s a tornado.’ She’d kick my ass if she knew [there was no plan], because she has a basement.” Andrew tried to interrupt, but Tricia shushed her husband with a glare. “You know that one time there is one, you don’t know what the fuck you’re gonna do.”

Andrew grinned. “Nah.”

“It’ll take the trailer right off with one swoosh,” Tricia replied, although Andrew maintained his lighthearted attitude. “Maybe I’ll end up in Kansas?” he teased. Just like Dorothy, I thought.

Tricia sneered, “They have a lot of tornados there in Kansas, they’ll bring your ass right back.”

Fantastical imagery or joking aside, the casual relationship between manufactured housing and mobility, whether by natural disaster, eviction, or planned redevelopment, reinforces popular distinctions between “trailers” and conventional housing; once again, form creates meaning. As material studies researchers have long observed, the mutually constitutive
relationships between people and objects leads individuals to anthropomorphize objects, attributing to them a form of agency (Hoskins 2006). However, as Daniel Miller (2005) states, “Anthropologists tend to forget what might be called the downside of the Maussian equation: that in a society where objects are reduced to their personlike qualities, people also tend to be reduced to their objectlike qualities, as vehicles for the expression of values” (39). For instance, homeowner identities, based on ownership of a highly prized object (a home), are believed to signal an individual’s respectability, morality, and social status (Halle 1984; Heiman 2015; Kefalas 2003; Perin 1977). Therefore, following Webb Keane (2005), I understand the home as a “bundled object” whose inherent properties are varied, culturally specific, and form a particular hybrid figure—the “homeowner” (Latour 1993)—whose moral superiority, citizenship and social status is materialized through the built environment. As such, my work offers a divergent perspective focused on illustrating how housing form is constitutive of personhood (Miller 2005:29). Rather than show how homeownership as a bundled object-identity personifies the (mobile) home, here I argue that through ownership and occupation of an ambiguous housing form, mobile-homeowners are instead objectified as ungrievable (Butler 2006) “trailer trash.”

Attending to “homeownership” as a hybrid figure comprised of an individual (or household) and the material qualities of the landscape and built environment resolves problematic renter and owner binaries by highlighting the significance of form in addition to tenure. Further, by considering how “improper” hybridity informs public contempt for manufactured housing, this approach posits other inquiries into reading object agency as failure, described by Carroll et al. (2017:2) as occurring “when objectification ceases to adhere” to sociocultural expectations. For instance, the ideological American dream identifies middle-class luxury, lifestyle, and comfort—in addition to signaling other intangible qualities like morality
and respectability—with homeownership. And yet, as demonstrated by the 2007-08 foreclosure crisis as well as the countless accounts of mobile-homeowner dispossession I describe throughout this dissertation, the home-as-object is often cruel, failing to uphold its promise. Moreover, the cultural propensity to attribute object-like qualities to persons can be costly, particularly where contamination, disorder, and also “trashiness” are assumed. Thus, as Mary Douglas (1991:287) writes, the im/material (mobile) home becomes tyrannical in its failure, ruination, and need for continued personal and social investment.

As such, for Andrew and Tricia their deteriorating trailer home was both a gift and a curse. Despite their checkered pasts, being (mobile) homeowners seemed to offer an unparalleled opportunity for normalcy and redemption as the pair struggled to regain custody of their two young children. “I paid for everything,” Andrew said proudly. “New water heater, new carpet in here. I fixed the hallway not too long ago.” He’d also transformed the front porch into a nursery, with toys strewn around an empty crib awaiting his and Tricia’s youngest son. “I got nice linoleum [for the kitchen], but…” he trailed off, eyes glued to the television and his fingers twitching for the cigarettes he’d recently quit for his sons.

“But I’m worried. It seems like they’re [the office staff] tryin’ to do over the people that own their own trailers, tryin’ to get ‘em out of here. I seems like they’re being nice to the renters, you know? And just being mean to the people that own their trailers because they’re tryin’ to get them out of here.” For Andrew and Tricia, their home, including the work being put into it, served as a safe place to raise a family. Yet, due to the sociolegal ambiguity and cultural disdain for “trailer parks” and “trailer trash,” the same object by which their couple hoped to subvert damaging stigmas also signified their cultural deviance, represented by what we might refer to as
their “not quite-ness” (Wray 2006): *not quite homeowners, not quite middle-class, and not quite respectable.*

Just as objects’ in/tangible properties shape and influence behavior subject to individuals’ interpretations (Keane 2003; Miller 2005; Tilley et al. 2006), it stands to reason that an objects’ subjective qualities may be discursively transferred to its owner, and vice-versa. Representing an unpalatable variant on the home, both in material construction and ownership rights, mobile homes diverge from sociocultural norms, therefore directly contributing to the widespread stigmatization of mobile-homeowners as well as the permitted ruination of mobile home neighborhoods. In other words, mobile homes fail to objectify their owners as proper, moral, and upwardly-mobile citizens despite resident and industry attempts to reframe these units as both respectable and economical.

**An Anthropology at Home**

Just as its materiality cannot be overlooked, so too must the affective strength of “the home” be acknowledged. While shelter is ubiquitous across human societies past and present, as an object the home is nonetheless exceptional for its symbolic significance (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995). Citing a broadly Euroamerican perspective, Rayna Rapp (1987:222) situates the home in relation to privacy, femininity, and domesticity, an association Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga (2001:174) echoes: “Houses and families are mutually constituting” (see also, Allison 2012; Bourdieu 1971; Carsten 2004; Kefalas 2003; Walley 2013). Low (2003) further argues that it is a nostalgic desire for the safety and security of the childhood home that urges wealthier, middle-class families to consider gated communities.
Such perspectives resonate strongly for me, as I have twice lost my childhood home; first, to bankruptcy and gambling debt, and second, when my paternal grandparents passed. In both cases, I felt profound loss as new families, different families occupied the deeply personal spaces that I had involuntarily lost. Moreover, both of these events set off a period of high instability for me, as I moved between four homes, plus my grandparents’, until I graduated high school, plus an additional ten moves in the years since I started college. (Also, my parents bought a new house together after I left for school, a place they have made into their own yet which has never felt like “home” to me.)

My experiences, which I share with innumerable lower- and working-class folks across the United States, are nonetheless largely invisible within American anthropology (for exceptions, see Foley 1995; Hurston 1935; Muzzatti & Samarco 2006; Walley 2013). This, in addition to a lack of critical ethnographic scholarship on homelessness (for exceptions, see Bourgois & Schonberg 2009; Dehavenon 1996; Passaro 1996; Spradley 1970; Susser 1996) produced incredible methodological and emotional obstacles for me as this research project coalesced. Like Douglas Foley, who in the opening pages of The Heartland Chronicles (1995) admits it was “hard to get a commitment” (1) from his graduate assistant to collect ethnographic data in his hometown of Tama, Iowa—“Being an Ivy League type, she has shown little appreciation for rural Iowa… Iowa and the Mesquaki Indians were not exactly her idea of big-time anthropology in some far-away culture” (ibid)—unflattering regionalism paired with classist stereotyping persists in public and academic discourse, which in turn affects how working-class anthropologists position themselves within the discipline (Darling 2009). Holly Genovese (2016), for instance, writes how the pressure she felt to hide her poor Southern background steadily increased from college to graduate school:
I realized I, for a lack of a better term, code “white trash.” I have bad teeth, frequently say “ya’ll” and “how come,” and have a habit for running around South Philadelphia in a Dale Earnhardt Jr. t-shirt. It is one thing to have your hometown judged by your peers, but it is quite another to realize that qualities you possess, habits born of a lifetime that you don’t even realize you have, make you read as unqualified or unfit for your chosen profession.

Likewise, Sara B. Dykins Callahan (2008) notes how learning to “pass” for middle-class in academic settings caused her profound guilt and anxiety; guilt for trying to hide the three-bedroom trailer and the mother who raised her, and anxiety that she would be found out and drummed out of her Master’s program. Although I never lived in a MHC before this research, I lived (twice) in a small apartment building that bordered a nearby park; I always knew their homes were nicer than mine. How then, I wondered then as now, should I rectify my shameful awe for manufactured homes, an askew stance given the preponderance of “trailer trash” revulsion in popular American culture? Or, how to balance my ethical obligation to write with care (Garcia 2010) and empathy without over-romanticizing or misrepresenting folks widely dismissed as “repugnant” (Harding 1991; see also, Brugger 2007; Grindal 2011; Tretjak 2013)?

Joel Robbins (2013), in outlining his vision for an “anthropology of the good,” argues for an anthropological re-commitment to the study of cultural difference. Similarly, Sherry Ortner (1991) undercuts her call for a robust Americanist scholarship on class, writing:

> It is worth stressing, however, that “cultural critique” or a critical cultural studies perspective does not (or should not) primarily mean studying ourselves—either our own society as ethnographic object or our own modes of academic production. Indeed I am rather nervous about both these trends, which, when coupled with the powerful critiques of anthropology as “orientalizing” [sic] or “essentializing” other cultures, threatens to

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5 Regna Darnell defines the “Americanist” tradition as “narrow ethnographic sense of specialization in the study of the American Indian” (2001:xvii) owing its methodological emphases on collaboration and linguistics to the work of Franz Boas and his earlier studies. Others, myself included, consider “Americanist” approaches to extend beyond the ethnographic study of Native Americans to encompass research conducted in the United States that takes seriously the region as (1) an area specialization with broad theoretical potential, (2) acknowledges the long genealogy of Americanist scholarship dating back to Boas and Lewis Henry Morgan, and (3) considers the broader importance of regional and national historical context to inform the present (e.g. Cattelino 2010; di Leonardo 1998; Greenhouse 2011).
undermine anthropology’s commitment to getting beyond its own cultural boundaries. Thus despite my shift to American research, I continue to identify strongly with anthropology’s mission of understanding other cultures (186, emphasis added).

Leveraging “difference” as a basis for cultural critique has a long tradition in anthropology (Marcus & Fischer 1986; for critiques, see Catellino 2010:281; Enslin 1994; Gupta & Ferguson 1997), and as such is frequently wielded as grounds for delegitimizing ethnographic “homework” or U.S.-based research broadly. For example, Margaret Mead’s classic, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928) explicitly states that anthropological methods are not suited to research in supposedly “complex” societies like the United States: “Furthermore, we do not choose a simple peasant community in Europe or an isolated group of mountain whites in the American South, for these people’s ways of life, though simple, belong essentially to the historical tradition to which the complex parts of European or American civilisation belong” (8).

As opposed to emerging as a distinctive area studies, “North American” studies as a topic of anthropological inquiry instead developed throughout the twentieth century as an extension of other regional and theoretical studies (Cattelino 2010; Greenhouse 2011; di Leonardo 1998).

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6 Although Greenhouse (2011:5) suggests that some resistance to U.S.-based research lingers, by the late 1980s “overt resistance” had largely dissipated. The acceptability of U.S. research is aided by the growth of anthropologists working “at home,” with some estimating that as many as half of all American anthropologists conduct studies in the United States at least once in their careers (di Leonardo 1998; Ortner 1991; Varenne 1999). Importantly, regional expertise on the United States—including a recognition of the broader historical tradition of Americanist ethnography—has occurred with the growth of researchers whose first projects are located in the U.S. as opposed to elsewhere (Ginsburg 2006).

7 Margaret Mead did, later in her career, go on to author numerous academic and popular accounts on American life, including a full-length study of U.S. culture, *And Keep Your Powder Dry: An Anthropologist Looks at America* (1942). During the Second World War, several anthropologists involved in the war effort wrote similar studies on American national character (Darnell 2001; Spindler & Spindler 1983); according to Herve Varenne (1977) these ethnographically “thin” accounts were often intended to boost public morale. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, more respected and well-known researchers chimed in on American state of affairs in an attempt to explain the rapid social and economic transformations accompanying suburbanization, deindustrialization, and social justice movements (e.g. Harris 1981; Mead 1951; Schneider 1968; see Moffatt 1990). Problematically, however, many of these studies failed to acknowledge the “invisible genealogy” (Darnell 2001) of Americanist ethnography including Franz Boas and his students (e.g. Zora Neale Hurston and Ella Deloria), the joint efforts of anthropologists and sociologists at the Chicago School (Hannerz 1980), or contemporary urban poverty studies (e.g. Hamzerz 1969; Lewis 1966; Spradley 1970).
Despite a handful of exceptions (e.g. Hannerz 1969; Hymes 1969; Leibow 1967; Powdermaker 1939, 1950; Schneider 1968; Spradley 1970), sociological, rather than anthropological, research dominated Americanist research (Ortner 1991; Stein 1960); in fact, as an undergraduate I was advised to switch majors if I wanted to pursue U.S.-based studies. Yet, an undercurrent of frustration predating the 1980’s “Crisis of Representation” is apparent in the ethnographic accounts of those drawn to, or chastised into, conducting research “at home.” In *City of Women* (1994:3) Ruth Landes, a contemporary of Mead, openly questioned the process of selecting a “proper” anthropological research site: “Looking back, it seems amazing that I should have been sent to another country to study the workings of its racial policy, on the simple assumption that the peaceful coexistence of two physical types of men requires special regulatory devices.” (For her Master’s, Landes had studied Black Jews living in Harlem, yet for her doctorate she was pressured to abandon this project in favor of more traditional research.) Likewise, Barbara Myerhoff (1978) wrote how a single question, deceptively simple, completely redirected a planned study on aging and ethnicity with elderly Chicanos/as:

But in the early 1970s in urban America, ethnic groups were not welcoming curious outsiders, and people I approached kept asking me, “Why work with us? Why don’t you study your own kind?” This was a new idea to me. I had not been trained for such a project. Anthropologists conventionally investigate exotic, remote, preliterate societies. But such groups are increasingly unavailable and often inhospitable. As a result, more and more anthropologists are finding themselves working at home these days. Inevitably, this creates problems with objectivity and identification, and I anticipated that I, too, would have my share of them if I studied the [Aliyah Senior Citizens] Center folk. But perhaps there would be advantages. There was no way that I could have anticipated the great impact of the study on my life, nor its duration [...]. In the beginning, I spent a great deal of time agonizing about how to label what I was doing—was it anthropology or a personal quest? I never fully resolved the question. I used many conventional anthropological methods and asked many typical questions, but when I had finished, I found my descriptions did not resemble most anthropological writings. Still, the results of the study would certainly have been different had I not been an anthropologist by training (11-12, emphasis added).
In this passage, Myerhoff alludes to traditional anthropological critique that is premised on cultural difference bases its theoretical soundness and validity on “being there” (Clifford 1992). However, feminist methodologies—and in particular Black feminist praxis—offer a critical intervention that complicates presumed researcher-subject relations and identities while radically locating anthropology-as-cultural-critique within the ethnographer’s own subjective, structured, and lived experience. As Lila Abu-Lughod (1991), Faye Harrison (1997), Irma McClaurin (2001) each argue, mainstream anthropological emphases on (cultural) difference often overlook both how difference is a social construction, as well as how “difference” operates to silence, marginalize, or altogether erase underrepresented voices in the discipline. Although her fiction has received posthumous praise, early Americanist and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston’s limited recognition in the anthropological canon is emblematic of the “invisible genealogy” (Darnell 2001) of U.S. ethnographers. Her unconventional writing style, far ahead of its time, nonetheless sought to locate ethnographic authenticity in the deep familiarity of personal, intimate experience (Carby 2008; Hernández 1995); indeed, Hurston opened her African American folklore study, *Mules and Men* (1935:1) by describing the benefits undertaking anthropological research “at home” affords:

In a way it would not be a new experience for me. When I pitched headforemost into the world I landed in the crib of negroism [sic]. From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had known about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut and what the Squinch Owl says from the house top. But it was fitting me like a tight chemise. I couldn’t see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spy-glass of Anthropology to look through at that.

Like Hurston, Kamala Visweswaran (1994) acknowledges the epiphanies inherent to ethnographic “homework,” which she eloquently describes as anthropology “in reverse.” That is, she writes how it is only upon leaving “home” that we realize “that home was an illusion of
coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance” (104). As with many first-generation scholars, who frequently describe a painful, growing gulf between themselves and their working-class loved ones (Walley 2013), Visweswaran names what I believe is the heaviest burden of ethnographic fieldwork: you can never go back home, to that nostalgic, sentimental place of childlike obliviousness. Moreover, the mere act of listening can deepen this sense of bereavement. As Bruce Grindal (2011) writes, the ethical struggle that accompanies being with informants, who are also friends and neighbors, as they say truly horrific things is deeply upsetting. Yet, as Julie Brugger (2007) argues, as anthropologists it is our responsibility to listen and carry that discomfort in the service of something greater than ourselves.

Per McClaurin (2001), “I argue that ‘native’ anthropologists in general have created scholarship (and new ethnographic interventions) in which our difference, our otherness, serve as valuable points of reference” (60, emphasis added). Whether conceived as a “spy-glass” or “double vision” (McClaurin 2001), there is radical potential within ethnographic studies situated “at home,” which are, despite lingering criticism, as theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous as any traditional research done “elsewhere.” Here, I take up this proud scholarly tradition, applying Constance Perin’s (1977:28) perspective on conducting research “at home” that is attuned to identifying and analyzing ideological and discursive contradictions in the ethnographic evidence:

Regarding contradictions this way provides a key, perhaps, to working in one’s own society. Observing at home does not provide the immediacy of contrast available abroad

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8 Both “native” and “auto”-ethnographies describe methodological approaches to ethnographic writing built on postcolonial critiques, calling attention to the embedded presumptions of the researcher/subject dichotomy (McClaurin 2001, Reed-Danahay 1997). Christine Walley (2010:114) describes the autoethnographic process as “the revealing points of awkwardness between the personal stories we wish to tell and the broader societal narratives through which we are encouraged to make sense of our experiences.” Under a broader framework of feminist theories, autoethnography allows for the realization of multiple subjectivities for researcher and subject alike (or together), a tactic that expands upon Writing Culture’s call for “polyvocal texts” (Clifford & Marcus 1986).
the throws all of one’s conceptions into doubt, the doubt that provides the anthropologist of one culture with the certainty of what there is to be said about another. Instead, I had to provide my own contrast and doubt in order to reach beyond what I already knew.

By situating my project along symbolic and material borderlands where respectability and belonging emerge as highly contested social categories, I build on Mary Douglas’s (1966) notion that liminal spaces throw into sharp contrast cultural disjunctures and social boundaries, thus exposing the gaps inherent to commonsense rhetoric regarding “trailer parks.” Despite the prevalence of MHCs throughout the United States, few studies have been conducted in these communities, with the vast majority situated in rural landscapes in the South/Western U.S. (e.g. Kusenbach 2009, 2015; MacTavish & Salamon 2001; Salamon & MacTavish 2006, 2017; Sullivan 2014). Full length ethnographic studies on land-lease communities have, to date, been restricted to sociology (e.g. Desmond 2016; Salamon & MacTavish 2017); just one peer-reviewed article has been published by anthropologists with mobile-homeowners as its primary focus (Miller & Evko 1985). As Baker et al. (2011:54) note, the dearth of MHC research in the social sciences “may contribute to the low status of the mobile home park among the options considered by affordable housing advocates.” Mobile home(owner) precarity encompasses myriad domains (financial, cultural, physical, and etcetera), yet despite MHC residents’ “special vulnerability” (MacTavish et al. 2006:97), the limited sociological research on MHCs shows that residents may be reluctant to participate in research projects, either due to fear of managerial retaliation or by perceiving that researchers are unwilling to live in “trailer parks” themselves (Kusenbach 2009). Mindful of these concerns, this project therefore employs a methodological approach that regards competing conceptions of “the home” from home.

However, as a methodology “homework” can be inordinately discomfiting and difficult for the researcher. Like my interlocutors, my embedment in “American culture,” broadly
defined, meant I also had to navigate, narrate, and reflect on my awareness and relation to “trailer trash” stigmas. Projects situated at or near “home” necessarily require the researcher-cum-subject to confront their own situatedness vis-à-vis their interlocutors, however seeing oneself, or rather seeing one’s potential self, can be upsetting. Dorinne Kondo (1990) describes such a “moment of collapse” (17) she experienced, in an almost innocuous fashion, at a Tokyo butcher shop:

As I glanced into the shiny metal surface of the butcher’s display case, I noticed someone who looked terribly familiar: a typical young housewife, clad in slip-on sandals and the loose, cotton shift called “home wear,” a woman walking with a characteristically Japanese bend to the knees and a sliding of the feet. Suddenly I clutched the handle of the stroller to steady myself as a wave of dizziness washed over me, for I realized I had caught a glimpse of nothing less than my own reflection (ibid).

In an unconventional essay, Elizabeth Chin (2016) applies autoethnographic writing to ask the same question, that is, to imagine what never happened. Underscoring her evocative prose—which includes, among other things, a flatulent house, mutated mice, and an archaeologist’s standoff with an armed SWAT team—is an uncomfortable reminder: “I fear that what happened to her could be my fate as well” (204). As Susan Harding (1991) astutely notes, binaries of “us” and “them” frequently appear in ethnographic studies of the political “right,” of which the Great Plains is often association (Foley 1995; Frank 2004; Ginsburg 1989). Like MHCs, the American Heartland is vastly underrepresented in U.S. ethnography (Cattelino 2010). Further, academics are not immune to the influence of regionalism pervasive in national political and social discourse. Indeed, I have on more than one occasion found myself defending my “home” town and/or state; often, this occurs when complete strangers offer me “apologies” when they learn I’m Nebraskan. (On one notable occasion a woman from Philadelphia asked me what it was like growing up without electricity and modern plumbing. She was astounded to learn we had Internet access.)
Frankly, such stereotyping goes both ways. For instance, Faye Ginsburg (1989:5) notes how all of her identities—“being a young, unmarried, Jewish, and urban visitor from New York City”—affected her interactions with her North Dakotan subjects:

New Yorkers are considered rude, snobbish, morally questionable, and unappreciative of middle-American values. As my rapport with people increased, their desire to disparage me from my New York identity became apparent in the sights of relief and mutterings of “I thought so” that I heard every time I mentioned that I actually grew up in the Midwest, albeit Chicago (ibid).

Within all societies, power dynamics structure relationships between individuals and position them accordingly, thereby producing “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1991) that is partial, local, and embodied. Thus, with ethnographic “homework” as my primary methodology, this project seeks to understand how unending vulnerability, as a condition of exposure and social, financial, and physical loss (Butler 2006), complicates how place and identity is articulated and understood. Just as Gabriela Modan (2007) observes at her gentrifying fieldsite in Washington, D.C., researchers who are familiar to marginalized or stigmatized communities establish rapport sooner and access critical information otherwise unavailable to non-resident researchers:

While non-resident researchers have sometimes been seen as outside forces coming into the neighborhood to ‘get’ something from the neighborhood and leaving when they get whatever it is, resident researchers have tended to be looked upon more beneficently. This is especially the case when researchers are involved in the life of the neighborhood – when they have neighborhood networks which have been formed outside of, or in addition to, their research (although such networks inevitably have played a role in their research.)

As proof of concept, allow me to describe an example from my own fieldwork.
“Why’re you stalking the fire truck?” A pause, then the same question, this time shouted.

“Why are you stalkin’ the fire truck?!” Turning, I caught the annoyed glare of a mobile-homeowner two doors down who had been listening to music in his front lawn when he noticed me taking photographs of a fire engine parked outside his neighbor’s house.

I hollered back, “It’s for the office [management]!” Embarrassed, I meant to drive off however he hobbled down the street, waving me down.

“I just don’t like any of them ambulance chasers,” he said before apologizing. After introducing himself, JP (52) glanced down at my Colorado license plates and asked if I worked for Crown Court’s corporate office, headquartered in suburban Denver. Like most of the mobile-homeowners I met, once I told him that no, I was a resident-researcher and a “local girl” to boot,
JP visibly relaxed. Although we had never met before, JP struck up a conversation with me as if we had known each other for years. As he grumbled about the “crackhead and crankhead gangsters” who often parked near his home when purchasing drugs from the next door apartments, I marveled at how quickly this shirtless man missing most of his teeth with hot pink earphones draped over his protruding collarbones had accepted my presence, or rather, belonging, in his community.

I wondered, then as now, what is the methodological and theoretical significance of fitting into objectionable places and questionable crowds? As Hurston (1935:2) remarked, the poor- or working-class anthropologist “at home” is often humbled, her academic standing shrugged off in favor of more relatable social bonds:

I didn’t go back there so that the home folks could make admiration over me because I had been up North to college and come back with a diploma and a Chevrolet. I knew they were not going to pay either one of these items too much mind. I was just Lucy Hurston’s daughter, Zora, and even if I had—to use one of our down-home expressions—had a Kaiser baby, and that’s something that hasn’t been done in this County yet, I’d still be just Zora to the neighbors.

Like Hurston, subsequent generations of anthropologists “at home” describe this perplexing state of duality, that is, being simultaneously positioned as both “researcher” and “subject” (Gilfillan 2014; Harrison 1997; Myerhoff 1978; Walley 2013). Yet, while many ethnographers have written on the ethical dilemmas and discomfort when their interlocutors engage in criminal, violent, or otherwise-repugnant behavior (e.g. Bourgois 1996; Bourgois & Schonberg 2009; Hartigan 1999; Song 2006), it is far less common that researchers explore their own embodied

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9 Adopting a “neo-Boasian” approach through which the Americanist tradition is derived, Matti Bunzl (2004) argues against common researcher/subject binaries with respect to “native ethnographers.” Rather, he cites Berman (1996), who suggests Boasian methods instead cultivated “professional anthropologist” and “native fieldworker” subjectivities that overlapped and were not fixed.
potential, by which I refer to the circumstances by which they, too, might have become those persons.

Like Andrew, Brian, and Tricia, JP caricaturized popular “trailer park” stereotypes, yet our chance encounter is apropos for both the ethical and methodological complexities anthropologists working “at home” encounter. Am I so different? I don’t think so. Hot-tempered with an aptitude for holding grudges, not to mention the colorful vocabulary that had me threatened with having my mouth washed out with soap countless times, I recognize that with my background it would have been far more likely that I should have been the subject of this research as opposed to its author. (After all, a former high school classmate of mine appeared on *The Jerry Springer Show* while I was living in Crown Court.)

My impromptu conversation with JP illustrated, not for the first time, just how socially, culturally, and physically close I was to several informants. Declaring himself an alcoholic (“and I’m not ashamed to admit it!”), I told JP that my dad used to own a local, small town bar in the 1980s. As it so happened, JP used to be a regular there. In an instance, I went from “local girl” to “Bill’s kid,” and the conversation shifted to mutual acquaintances and requests for information about former friends. Similarly, Hurston (1935) also noted how familiarity becomes an important tool when working marginalized or otherwise vulnerable populations. Writing, “I knew that even I was going to have some hindrance among strangers,” she added how “in Eatonville I knew everybody was going to help me” (3). By upending the conventional roles of researcher and subject, anthropology at home offers a sideways glance into the discipline’s methodological machinations and assumptions. As a research agenda, “homework” therefore expands ethnographic potentialities to persons, places, and projects presently underrepresented in the field.
Just as Hurston observed, JP felt comfortable enough around “Bill’s kid” to share intimate details about his life. With a finger whose tip was missing, JP poked at one of several growths protruding from his skeletal frame and remarked that he had terminal cancer; he’d been told he had between three and six months left to live. Unworried for himself, JP was nonetheless concerned what would happen to his mother and wife, who lived with him but were disabled and housebound. With the same stubby finger, JP gestured at the large boxelder next to his trailer where he’d strung up a turtle that he had snagged earlier that day. It was all the food they had to eat.

Figure 6: A handwritten “4 SALE” sign leaning against J.P.’s singlewide in late 2015, the discolored outline of previous decorations visible on the blue siding. By October 2017, J.P.’s home was removed and replaced with a larger, newer rental unit. (Photo by author.)

Despite such dismal circumstances, JP remained proud of his home and all the improvement he’d been able to make. “This place looks better than ever now because all my friends help me with the yard work,” he said, touched that I had complemented his exterior décor. Nonetheless, his reasons for fixing the place up were tinged with uncertainty. “With all
those new homes coming in, I figure it’s important that I clean my lot up,” he told me, fearing a possible eviction due to improper “curb appeal.” Before moving on, we chatted about his future plans, including hopes to repaint the chipped siding. (He still hadn’t decided on a color.)

As it happened, I never had the chance to follow up with JP; shortly after our conversation, a “4 Sale” sign appeared at his home, propped up against the still-blue siding (Figure 6). The handwritten message scrawled underneath read, “ask about other things… whole house full of sh_t [sic].” By October 2017, JP’s house was gone, and to this day I do not know how the rest of his story played out. What I do know, however, is that JP, riddled with tumors, tattoos, and scars all pointing toward a type of hard and fast lifestyle, in a manner of speaking literally embodied the consequences of mobile-homeowners’ social abandonment. Suffering a terminal illness, JP’s body reflected the same ruinous state of sociolegal precarity, of permanent impermanence, imposed on his residence. Starving, he resorted to poaching turtles to survive, all while fearing possible, eventual, even inevitable eviction. And although someone else might interpret our sole interaction as evidence that JP—like Andrew, Tricia, and Brian—was truly, stereotypically “trailer trash,” I cannot help but reflect on his parting message as appropriate to his defiant character.

American insecurity across classed, racial, gendered, and educational lines is a well-known, if awkwardly silenced, social fact, and as such I recognize that it is due to an intricate mix of privilege, perseverance, and most importantly, sheer dumb luck that I ultimately avoided trailer park residence myself. However my life, like hundreds of millions of my fellow Americans, is nonetheless defined by precarity. This account, as I present it here, is contextualized by the moment in which I designed, implemented, and wrote up my research. On November 8, 2016, America rediscovered its (white) working classes, or at least its angriest,
most vocal demographic. Donald Trump’s unconventional political rise foregrounded fraught interstices between race, class, and the politics of belonging in the United States, as well as gave truth to the lie of American meritocracy. The media spectacle surrounding Trump’s campaign was rife with confusion as analysts struggled to characterize Trump’s core supporters, however post-election reports have tended to attribute his electoral success to one specific demographic: the white working-class (Gusterson 2017; Hartigan 2016; Walley 2017), popularly conflated with “trailer trash.” For example, in April 2017, former Alaska governor Sarah Palin and musicians Ted Nugent and Robert Ritchie, better known as “Kid Rock,” posted a controversial photo mocking Hillary Clinton. Irate social commentators quickly condemned the trio, with former Clinton counselor Paul Begala describing them as a “White trash Mount Rushmore” and pundit Keith Olberman tweeting, “Honest to God, had the painting fallen off the wall and hit this Trailer Park Trash trio, the national IQ would’ve gone up 25 points.”

As “Occupy Wall Street” signaled five years earlier, a period of renewed class consciousness is taking place in the United States. According to the U.S. National Bureau of Economic Research, the Great Recession ended in 2009, yet even economists now widely agree that income inequality in the United States is growing at rates far outpacing other industrial nations (Chetty et al. 2014; Piketty & Saez 2014; Piketty et al. 2018; Saez & Zucman 2016). Moreover, white working-class revivalism is making overnight best-sellers, with tell-all accounts like Hillbilly Elegy (Vance 2016), White Trash (Isenburg 2016), and The View from Flyover Country (Kendzior 2018) flying off the shelves. Meanwhile, across the globe nativist populisms are spreading as social media and the Internet profoundly alter public discourse and media consumption. Understandably, many Americans worry that civil society and core democratic institutions are under constant attack. And yet, the urban mobile home park, like Nebraska more
generally, nonetheless retains a sense of timelessness, trapped on the precipice of nostalgia for the past and an increasingly uncertain future.

Situated at the intersection of conflicting municipal, federal, and popular desires to shape the future of urban MHCs in Lincoln and beyond, this project contributes to pressing social questions about affordable housing as a basic human right despite the topic’s limited attention in academic, policy, and public media discourse. In addition, this work upends conventional wisdom in which “informal housing” settlements such as Brazilian favelas, South African townships, and similar are imagined as issues specific to the Global South (Durst & Wegmann 2017) by showing how active MHC abandonment, ruination, redevelopment and displacement produces uniquely American “slums” across the United States. Furthermore, by illustrating how precarity is materialized through manufactured housing (communities), my research contributes to facet in a growing body of literature on contemporary American insecurity (see Besteman & Gusterson 2010). As engaged ethnography (Low 2011), this dissertation confronts popular, and contradictory, beliefs regarding a specific space (Nebraska), place (trailer parks), and people (mobile-homeowners) through the lens of a cherished cultural object, the home.

**Post-Script: Lay of the Land**

In what follows, I focus on the contested, conflicting, and occasionally synchronous narratives surrounding Crown Court’s past, present, and uncertain future. Situating residents, park employees, and non-resident policymaker and stakeholder perspectives produces a cacophonous, contentious social landscape in which highly bureaucratized projects like the West Lincoln Redevelopment Zone play out. Attending to the (im)materiality of MHCs, the
ethnographic data described here illustrates how ruination and respect are made and remade in an infamous, anomalous site: the urban trailer park.

In Chapter Two, *Chasing the Good Life*, I follow the historical development of the MH industry and MHCs in both Lincoln and the United States more broadly. Applying recent anthropological scholarship on ruination to late-twentieth century gentrification studies, I show how the ruination and blighting of “modern” urban mobile home subdivisions was more a consequence of social abandonment than the “natural” material decay of manufactured homes and park infrastructures over time.

Chapter Three, *Home is Where You Park It*, builds on the archival and historic data from the previous chapter to illustrate how Crown Court mobile-homeowners “normalize” their housing through consumptive and aesthetic practices. Specifically, I describe how mobile-homeowners respond to imposed precarity from redevelopment agendas through symbolic alignment with respectable, middle-class homeowner identities. Through houseproud displays (Kefalas 2003) I show how mobile-homeowners, too, engage in a form of social splitting, or “micro-othering” (Moss 2003), as a means to distinguish themselves from undesirable “trailer trash.”

Chapter Four, *Money Talks*, further details Crown Court mobile-homeowners’ discursive tactics to construct respectable homeowner identities, in this case through explicitly financialized language. Here, I engage the theoretical concept *financial citizenship* (Layshon & Thrift 1995) to explore how mobile-homeowners narrate their selective participation with formal housing markets. Rather than self-position as marginalized economic actors, I instead describe how land-lease park residents’ interactions with informal markets may be empowering as well as increase
individual home values, however such strategies come at the risk of further commodification and inclusion in a financial system that does not consider mobile homes as “real” property.

Although these strategic engagements with respectability and financial discourses are meant to locate mobile-homeowners within the middle-class, oftentimes such distancing behaviors stymie community cohesion and, in some cases, inadvertently reinforce negative “trailer trash” stereotypes. In Chapter Five, *Bad Blood*, I trace the racialized epithet “white trash” from precolonial America to its present association with “trailer parks,” in the process showing how white- and Latino/a identified Crown Court residents articulate both morality and belonging vis-à-vis “trailer trash” discourse. Using the analytic of *racial longing*, I particularly focus on white mobile-homeowners’ use of racial (and racist) language to gain empathy across perceived class lines, and how such efforts instead reinforce the same stereotypes that residents are so keen to distance themselves from. Due to its racialization, Latino/a mobile-homeowners rhetorically evade “white trailer trash” stereotypes. However, as I illustrate, embracing dominant cultural attitudes that situate manufactured housing as impermanent and undesirable, Latino/a MHC residents risk further marginalization due to their relative invisibility.

Chapter Six, *Death and Taxes*, offers a cumulative portrayal of mobile-homeowner devaluation embodied in circulated memories of murder and violence, which I argue actively shapes Crown Court’s landscape as it is experienced by residents and employees alike. Specifically, I trace the social life (Appadurai 1986) of a manufactured home from factory floor to demolition. Detailing how cultural-legal systems first promise upward mobility, then entrap mobile-homeowners in assets whose ruination is all-but certain, this chapter explores the process by which “haunted” MHC landscapes are made and unmade.
The penultimate chapter, “A Better Class of Losers,” applies this analysis to an in-depth case study of Isabel, an evicted mobile-homeowner whose experiences belie the production of precarity in land-lease park communities. Caught in the midst of competing corporate and municipal agendas for revitalizing blighted MHCs, Chapter Seven explores the failed West Lincoln Redevelopment Zone project as demonstrating the need for a new approach to the “problem” of manufactured housing in land-lease (urban) communities as the affordable housing crisis in the United States continues to grow. Rather than upholding its promise to uphold Lincoln’s reputation as a place where “Life is Right,” I instead show how the circulation of MHC “ruination rumors” refigure mobile home parks as barriers to, rather than opportunities for furthering, Lincoln’s post-recession revitalization. That mobile-homeowner dispossession and displacement feels inevitable, I argue, justifies legal and extra-legal actions, such as “No Cause Evictions,” that reproduce MHC residents’ “second-class” status.

Manufactured housing (communities) are deeply significant in the American housing landscape as the largest source of unsubsidized affordable housing available, and as such these units will persist regardless of planners’ and policymakers’ stated desires. The concluding chapter, This Land is My Land, analyzes several case studies of MHC preservation illustrating an alternative future for these precarious properties. By arguing for mobile-homeowner inclusion and active engagement from municipalities, I show how the creativity borne from uncertainty, such as that which built America’s MH industry in the first place, offers positive steps forward for dealing with the worsening affordable housing crisis.
CHAPTER TWO

Chasing the Good Life

In December 1970, large ads started appearing in Lincoln’s two local newspapers promoting the first “modern” planned community for mobile-homeowners. Among the listed amenities were recreation areas, landscaping “with trees, grass, and shrubbery,” and a heated swimming pool. Also included was a private clubhouse with game tables as well as a fully-stocked bar. One of several corporate communities planned for construction in at least three states, Crown Court MHC promised residents affordability and luxury to support a “splendacious lifestyle with a mobile home.” Or, as the ad further exclaimed: “Forget all your old impressions of ‘trailer court’ living. All except the economy. That’s the only thing we kept. Everything else is new.”

With Crown Court’s grand opening, a new era of mobile home community living began in Lincoln, one which represented a stark contrast to previous generations of “trailer parks.” By comparison, these older, locally-owned and operated courts were smaller, less stylish, and aging rapidly. Altogether, 31 MHCs operated in Lincoln when Crown Court was developed, however when Lincoln’s last new park opened in 1989, only twenty properties remained.

One of these lingering MHCs was Arrow Trailer Park. Founded in 1955, Arrow was the second-oldest remaining community in Lincoln and had been in continuous operation for sixty years. Yet it, too, suffered a sad fate when it was unceremoniously closed and demolished in August 2015. Tucked behind overgrown prairie grass and a cigarette shop (Figure 8), Arrow was sold to an Indiana-based developer for conversion into an off-site parking lot for new luxury student apartments located in the gentrifying Haymarket District, located a mile to the east across
the “O” Street viaduct. Of the remaining 27 homes, all but one were owned by the park operator, who operates another all-rental MHC in northeast Lincoln. Altogether, these units were valued at $58,200, or $2,112 per home, however it was the land they desired. Developers purchased the property from him, along with two other businesses, for $795,000.

![Image of mobile home advertisement](http://www.newspapers.com/Image/22123724.)

**Figure 7:** These ads were part of a full-page spread published in *The Columbus Telegram* in 1970 promoting mobile-homeownership to young couples as good investment. (Photo credit: http://www.newspapers.com/Image/22123724.)

Meanwhile, Arrow’s final residents received a 30-day lease termination in June, the minimum notice period required by Nebraska state law. Although the park had mostly emptied by July, what few residents remained struggled to find housing due to prior felonies, poor credit or bankruptcies, or simply being unable to afford the dramatic increase in rent. Even after the water and electricity was shut off, a few holdouts remained.

I met one of Arrow’s last tenants one oppressively hot evening in early August; fresh off work and still wearing his fast-food work uniform, our interaction was awkward and brief.
(Neither of us were supposed to be there, after all.) Without air conditioning, the light breeze and tree cover was his only respite from the heat. I asked if anyone else was left, and he responded by gesturing to his home and the place next door.

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Figure 8: Arrow MHC in 2013. (Photo by author.)
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“That’s it,” he said. “All the rest are gone.” Pausing, he took a healthy gulp of cold beer he’d just bought from the gas station across the street. Looking down, he added, “I still live here.” He shook his head and repeated, softer, “Still here.” Two days later, his home was demolished.

Like dozens of communities before it, today Arrow MHC exists only in memory as its physical location has been razed and covered in asphalt (Figure 9). Altogether, the process of MHC erasure has removed these neighborhoods from public consciousness; from aesthetic
deception to camouflaging and restrictive zoning ordinances, mobile-homeowners’ symbolic removal inevitably precedes their physical displacement, a fate now planned for Crown Court residents as well. Overlooked by design, in this chapter I trace the local and national histories of manufactured housing and land-lease communities throughout the twentieth century to narrate the production of MHC obsolescence as illustrative of an active, rather than natural, desire to erase “trailer parks” from the collective nostalgia of America’s postwar prosperity (Hurley 2001).

Figure 9: Photographed in June 2016, the former Arrow MHC has been converted to an off-site parking lot. (Photo by author.)

Throughout the twentieth century, most urban studies in sociology and anthropology adopted theoretical perspectives popularized by the Chicago School, namely characterizing cities as vastly complex heterogeneous spaces organized into distinct niches or enclaves (Hannerz 1980; Low 1999; Mullings 1987). Critiqued for depicting urbanism as overly-individualistic and
corrupting (e.g. Frazier 1932; Simmel 1903; Wirth 1938), Ulf Hannerz (1980:243) remarks how “as it evolved, [urban studies] paid less attention to the relations between people than to relations between the latter and space.” As such, by the 1980s a reinvigorated urban anthropology drew attention to the political economy of cities (Low 1999:3), addressing metropolitanism as a regulatory apparatus spread across multiple levels of governance which, under late-capitalism or neoliberal regimes, both exacerbates existing inequalities and threatens growing vulnerable populations with displacement (e.g. Adams 2013; Fairbanks 2009; Hiemstra 2010; Maskovsky 2001; Wacquant 2008).

Ecological frameworks, however, have not been restricted to academic scholarship. As Neil Smith (1979, 1986, 2002) famously argued, the mechanism driving land appreciation or depreciation (and by extension, home and property values) is the fluctuation of systems of capital masquerading as a “natural” process. As properties go into decline, ruination and obsolescence is considered inevitable. In Rubbish Theory (1979), Michael Thompson describes obsolescence as a “decline in public esteem” (38) which precedes the “natural” decline of an object at or near the end of its expected lifespan. Initially relegated to non-residential hinterlands, over time the widespread social desire for MHC invisibility has mutated into an active push for wholesale closure and redevelopment, a trend observable in Lincoln as well, as one local planner told me: “Mobile home courts and mobile home subdivisions have not been a very active land use for us in Lincoln. The last application we had for a new one was over 20 years ago and the trend more recently has been redevelopment of existing mobile home courts, probably due to rising land values.” Predestined for ruination, MHC redevelopment therefore conforms to these expected, naturalistic cycles of growth and decline.
Designating MHCs as a “non-conforming” or “obsolete” land use functionally un-maps and symbolically depopulates these communities, thereby producing an abject population whose abandonment is justified as a consequence of occupying stigmatized places and structures. Left for ruination, this chapter traces the long abandonment of urban MHCs as an act of active destruction rather than benign neglect. Here, I take inspiration from the Marxist philosopher Walter Benjamin, who held that cityscapes exist as perpetual chaotic ruins whose sheer materiality blurs the temporal boundaries between past, present, and future (Gilloch 1996). Specifically, Benjamin found that once stripped of their original social and symbolic significance, ruined objects enter an “afterlife” that exposes their “truth” vis-à-vis the present in which ruins continue to exist. In the language of contemporary urban planning, “modern ruins” are typically depicted as futureless eyesores or negative spaces bereft of social or financial value (Dawdy 2010; van der Hoorn 2009). The sociospatial relegation and legal-financial exclusion of urban MHCs throughout the twentieth century, I argue, upends naturalistic planning discourse by illustrating how public will, rather than the material decay of subpar construction and materials, condemns MHCs like Arrow Trailer Park (see also, Dawdy 2010; Graeber 2010; Gregory 2013; Hamer 2011).

Citing obsolescence as justification for closure, proponents for MHC redevelopment often conceptualize manufactured housing as an historic artifact unsuited to modern American cityscapes. Newspaper and archival records seem to support such assertions, given the relative dearth of local, public records or media since the MH industry heyday peaked in the mid- to late-1970s. Yet, as Michel-Rolph Troillot (1995) reminded us, the collection, documentation, and interpretation of historical events also produces narrative gaps, or rather, “erasures.” The active ruination of MHCs functions to repudiate, as well as erase, the historic and present significance
of this particular housing type. Furthermore, the guiding impetus for the MH industry since the 1960s, as I describe below, has been to build homes that are “virtually indistinguishable” from conventional housing (Hart et al. 2002:1). Yet, it is precisely due to the aesthetic ambiguity of “trailers” that produces mobile homes’ sociolegal ambiguity, and consequently an extensive paperwork trail from which these Lincoln MHC histories are partially reconstructed.\(^\text{10}\)

Altogether, these historical narratives reveal the significant impact of manufactured homes on the American housing landscape from the Great Depression to the present.

**Traversing the Great American Desert**

Popular historical imaginations depict Nebraskan agrarianism and provincialism as part and parcel of its residents’ character. Atop the state capitol building in Lincoln stands the Sower, whose actions metaphorically refer to the act of “putting down roots” in the land. Obtained as part of the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, initial surveys of the “Great American Desert,” a vast territory including present-day Nebraska, were hardly promising. “It tires the eye to look at,” Josiah Copley pessimistically wrote in 1867. “The [Platte] Valley is a miserable waste, and I fear ever must be” (cf. Williams 1988:10). As such, the Great Plains emerged as a place defined by transport rather than permanence and, in contrast to the picturesque agrarianism embodied by the Sower, both Nebraska and Lincoln’s histories came to be defined by mobility and transportation.

According to historian John Hoyt Williams (1988), an American “transportation revolution” (7) occurred from 1820 to 1860, a period that includes the formal organization of

\(^{10}\) Here, I adopt a Foucaultian approach to historical analysis wherein the archive is understood as encompassing all the material traces generated in a particular time and place (Foucault 1969), including bureaucratic and news media documents (Hull 2012; Riles 2011) as well as the material debris, scraps, or rubble shed by these structures (Chapter 7). In “un-silencing” MHC histories, the archive, too, becomes a subject of analysis (Brettel 1998; Dirks 2002; Stoler 2008).
Nebraska territory in 1854 to facilitate east-west movement across the United States on the eve of the American Civil War. Then, as now, the Platte River directed the flow of people and goods across Nebraska; for instance, the Overland Trail became the most popular pioneer route west, with an estimated 300,000 travelers taking the Platte River path between 1840-60 (Hokanson 1999:54-5). The popularity of the Platte River Valley westward route attracted additional attention from railroad speculators during the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, as the river naturally guided travelers for hundreds of miles across the expansive Nebraska Territory.

Besides the Platte, the Missouri River runs along Nebraska’s eastern border and as such, investors were confident that Nebraska offered an ideal site for both inland river ports and a terminus point for westward railroads (Figure 10). While Omaha, the territorial capital, was advantageously located along existing river, trail, and rail routes, when statehood became imminent accusations of fraud and corruption led lawmakers to search for an alternative capital further south. In 1867, a small village of thirty residents named Lancaster was declared the Nebraska state capital; shortly thereafter, the town was renamed Lincoln to honor the late President Abraham Lincoln. Situated amidst the “waste,” the decision was highly controversial, as one legislator complained, “There would have been some decency in making Plattsmouth, Nebraska City, or Columbus the state capital, if Omaha could not be retained, but to locate it in a wild country, remote from any present or probable lines of travel, has not only the merit that either the commissioners are insane or have concluded to bring the whole ‘South Platte’ movement into contempt” (cf. McKee 2007:81).
As such, connecting Nebraska’s new capital city to wider transit networks was highly prioritized. In 1870, Lincoln’s first railroad service arrived, and by 1892 eight lines serviced the area (ibid:142). While Lincoln lacked any paved roads until 1887, the city’s later development allowed for ready incorporation of the latest transportation innovations such as the electric streetcar; by 1893 Lincoln boasted more street railway companies than any surrounding state (ibid:148). With its vastly improved transportation network and a rapidly growing population, Lincoln officials envisioned their city was fast becoming the next major Mid/Western metropolis à la Chicago or Denver.

However, the “Panic of 1893” and subsequent global recession quashed those ambitions, diminishing the region’s population from 55,000 in 1890 to 37,000 a decade later (Zimmer 2005). As industry and construction faltered, a series of droughts devastated agricultural production. Soon, the same railroads which had figuratively and literally put Lincoln on the map went bankrupt (Larsen & Cottrell 1997). The recovery, when finally underway, was slow; Lincoln would not achieve its pre-recession population levels until approximately 1925.

At the close of the nineteenth century, the American frontier seemed, for some, to have been utterly tamed. In 1893, American historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote, “four centuries from the discovery of America, at the end of a hundred years of life under the Constitution, the frontier as gone, and with its going has closed the first period of American history” (cf. Cope Ziska 2012:1). Lincoln, like several mid-sized farming capitals, seemed destined to remain a
stopover point on the long journey across the American desert; as Williams sardonically notes, “the Great American Desert, then, apparently useless and hostile, was a void not to be filled, but merely crossed” (1988:11). Yet Lincoln, well-positioned as a terrestrial travel hub, would soon discover promotional and business opportunities with the arrival of a new mode of transportation: the automobile.

Welcome Wagons: the Arrival of the Travel Trailer

Just as the Transcontinental Railroad manifested nationalist interests to connect America’s eastern and western coasts through the Great American Desert, the introduction of the automobile dramatically transformed the landscape of mobility across the United States. Spearheading this effort was President Theodore Roosevelt. An avid hunter and outdoorsman, Roosevelt promoted conservationism as a moral imperative for an increasingly urbanized American populous (Hays 1999). In particular, Roosevelt’s political rhetoric characterized American individualism as part of the mythical “frontier myth,” which Leroy Dorsey (1995:1) defines as “an account of how the constant challenge of an unknown and limitless frontier turns some individuals into martial heroes who, because of their epic struggles, some to symbolize American values such as progress and prosperity.” In contrast to those bemoaning the “end” of the American frontier, Roosevelt instead implored Americans to visit, rather than exploit, their national forests and natural landscapes, which he described as “free camping grounds for the ever-increasing numbers of men and women who have learned to find rest [and] health in the splendid forests and flower-clad meadows of our mountains” (cf. Dorsey 1995:5).

The early twentieth century conservation movement, historian Alan Wallis (1991) notes, embraced the ineffable American “pioneering spirit” while not shying away from technological
advancements. Rather, “modern” advances in transportation and industry were instead conceived as a source of inspiration and hope (Hays 1999), and afforded more Americans than ever the opportunity to “go west.” Yet in many respects traversing the Great American Desert was no easier a feat in a motor vehicle than it had been in a covered wagon. Traveling west meant fewer and fewer paved roads, and as such those places with paving capitalized on this advantage.

Dedicated in 1913, the Detroit-Lincoln-Denver Highway (today, Hwy. 34) became America’s first east-west highway (Figure 11). Overlaying both the Overland Trail and running alongside major rail lines along the Platte River, the Lincoln Highway, too, became a popular “travel” destination; by 1926, an estimated 337,000 vehicles, most from out-of-state, traveled across Nebraska’s 6,000-mile state highway system (NSHS 1996). As the “Gateway to the West,” Nebraska had once more become the main east-west route through the Great Plains:

Nebraska carries the motor tourist out of the last of the East and into the beginning of the authentic West. Its corrugated roads possess no apparent upward incline, but the traveler imperceptibly climbs from a one thousand to a five thousand foot altitude in the length of the state. Nebraska is the green of earnest cultivation at its Missouri Valley end and fades out into tan and dun—the features due of savage, untamed things—at its other. From carefully tended farms it runs at least into the open prairie, a foretaste of the sun-soaked, wind-brightened immensity of brown empty land that is Wyoming (Van de Water circa 1919, cf. Hokanson 1999:53).
The passage of the Federal Highway Act (1921) prioritized “modernizing” America’s roadways with pavement, and consequently grew the popularity of automobile travel beyond the most privileged classes. Soon, “roadside attractions” and businesses catering exclusively to auto-travelers grew into its own industry as municipalities competed against one another to attract visitors. Despite the lasting popularity of tent camping, an ever-growing percentage of vacationers began hauling their overnight accommodations along for the ride. These “trailers,” named as such because they literally trailed tourists out on the road, initially featured more slapdash, do-it-yourself construction features, although a handful of prefabricated models existed (Hurley 2001; Wallis 1991). Remarkably, the “travel trailer” industry managed to grow continuously throughout the Great Depression; per Wallis, “In 1937, sales reached an estimated $55 million; more than double that of the previous year” (1991:47). Together with tent-campers,
automobile “trailerites” drove the demand for new campsites so much so that by the 1920s “free campgrounds” began appearing across the United States as another attraction for enticing motorists.

While Roosevelt-era progressive conservationism stressed individualism, freedom, and (re)discovering the great American frontier for oneself, anxieties regarding the growing population of fulltime “campers” quickly emerged. As free “auto-trailer camps” became more popular, the presence of undesired “motor tramps” at some sites elicited concern, as expressed by the poem “Flivver Hobo” (1926), printed in the Omaha *Trade Exhibit* magazine:

He owns a dented tin machine,
    A roll of ragged bedding,
Perhaps sufficient gasoline
    To last to where he’s heading;
Some pots and pans, a dirty tent,
    Some rusty spades and axes-
He needs no home, he pays no rent,
    He never heard of taxes!
The Flivver Hobo is a tramp
    I met in hordes last summer,
At many a town’s Free Auto Camp-
    A most accomplished bummer (NSHS 2010).

Undoubtedly modern, trailerites nonetheless emerged as contentious figures due to their lack of fixedness and perceived intransience. Soon, auto-campers gained a reputation for their messiness and lack of care for the communities they visited (Hurley 2001:200). More worrisome still was the growing population of “hobo tourists” (Wallis 1991:40) who stayed weeks, if not months, in public campgrounds. Thus, as Wallis (ibid) writes, “As quickly as they had appeared, free municipal camps began to disappear.”

In 1921, Lincoln followed a growing national trend by enacting municipal zoning ordinances. (Zoning codes were not ruled constitutional until the landmark Supreme Court case *Village of Euclid v. Ambler Realty Co.* [1926]). Intended to safeguard public health, safety, and
wellbeing in addition to protecting property values, zoning ordinances spatialize and segregate urban landscapes according to specified land uses (Chernoff 1983). Such laws explicitly demarcate residential from commercial districts, insofar as “land-use planning, zoning, and development practices are a shorthand for the unstated rules governing what are widely regarded as correct social categories and relationships” (Perin 1977:3). As Constance Perin (1977) noted, zoning ordinances reduce social tension by granting residents control over the images and identities associated with their communities. Following Mary Douglas (1966), who argued that anomalous peoples prompt social action to limit the perceived danger or threat “placeless” persons represent, Perin observed how American land use practices throughout the twentieth century were seen as “gradually diffusing the magic circles of danger” (1977:183) embodied by ambiguous persons and structures (see also, Heiman 2012; Stewart 1996b; Tilley et al. 2006:35). Unsurprisingly, then, zoning ordinances often reflect culturally hegemonic attitudes concerning the “types” of persons and housing who “belong” in particular urban environments (Barker et. al. 2013; see also, Berlant 2011, Smith 1986:16, Reuben 2002:443, Maskovsky & Cunningham 2009).

Municipal zoning ordinances subsequently granted villages and cities unprecedented regulatory control over tourist motor camps; common restrictions included raising licensing and other related fees, imposing stay limits, or prohibiting trailers altogether (Hart et al. 2001). By the mid- to late 1930s most jurisdictions had passed laws prohibiting roadside camping outside of designated “parks,” however for the most part these camps were not designated nor intended for long-term use (Hurley 2001). To counter public outcry, municipalities quietly began converting existing “free” campgrounds into fee-based properties while either restricting or banning the construction of new camps within city limits (Hurley 2001; Wallis 1991). In Lincoln
the first, and only, recorded public campground for travelers was the Antelope Trailer Park, which opened in 1936 and was one of seven local facilities available to campers and their auto-trailers.

However, even as the fledgling trailer industry undertook its first (of many) rebranding efforts to distance private, fee-based areas as scenic “parks” distinct from their crowded, and oftentimes insanity, urban counterparts (Hart et al. 2001; Hurley 2001; Wallis 1991), profound demographic shifts were transforming how travel trailers were most commonly used. For instance, while all travel trailer production before 1930 was intended for temporary or vacation use, by 1937 at least half of all “house trailers” were used as primary residences (Miller & Evko 1985:685). While still moveable, the increased demand for industrial and infrastructural labor on the eve of, and throughout, the Second World War prompted more families than ever to permanently occupy trailer housing. Further, widespread rental housing shortages pressed tens, if not hundreds, of thousands into trailers as the sole remaining means of lodging; in Lincoln, for example, one highway project near Lincoln in 1938 attracted workers from all corners of the country, and as apartments and tourist cabins rapidly filled to capacity, many workers had to rely on “house trailers for living accommodations” (Nebraska State Journal 1938).

The growing use-tension regarding “trailers” as either permanent or vacation housing would persist until the formal separation of so-called “recreational vehicles” from the larger mobile housing industry in 1963 (Burns 2001), however throughout the 1920s and 30s the trend towards fulltime “trailer living” was inescapable. Yet, municipal governments struggled with how to first classify, and second regulate house trailer encampments. By 1938, the American Bar Association urged for “stringent regulations for the nation’s 350,000 house trailers” (Lincoln Evening Journal 1938), while the Lincoln Star reported in the same year that the City Clerk was
being inundated with letters from concerned citizens regarding the “automobile tourist season and it’s ‘accompanying problem’ of the house trailer” (1938). Soon, rapid suburbanization and subsequent urban expansion would force many American cities, including Lincoln, to confront the legal and classificatory ambiguity house trailers represented as their city limits edged ever closer to existing unincorporated “trailer courts.”

“The Wrong Side of the Tracks”: Zoning Trailer Parks

Although Lincoln’s zoning code granted municipal authority to a three-mile radius surrounding the city, by the late 1930s Lincoln had yet to impose any regulations governing “auto house trailers.” With the sole exception of Antelope Park, Lincoln’s public campground, city officials altogether prohibited “trailer parks” from being developed anywhere within the city limits. Similar restrictive ordinances across the United States pressed most Depression-era parks into the urban periphery (Hart et al. 2002); in Lincoln, for example, nearly all the trailer camps built from 1935 to 1955 were located outside the city.

As Figure 13 illustrates, a small cluster of trailer courts formed along West “O” Street, the former Detroit-Lincoln-Denver Highway. Until the 1980s West “O” would continue to boast the highest concentration of MHCs in Lincoln. Directory listings from this period uncovered another interesting detail: the growth of private “park” ownership by individuals. However, these parks received scant attention outside occasional complaints about the summer tourist season as its “accompanying trailer house problem” (Lincoln Star 1938). This was, in part, due to their location, as Lincoln’s planners original felt that the Salt Creek floodplain would naturally prevent any westward development (McKee 2007:95, Figure 13). Furthermore, the severity of the postwar housing shortage pressured municipalities, including Lincoln, to scale back on
regulatory enforcement so as to help lower-income, unemployed, or otherwise precariously housed families find shelter.

Nationalist desires to own property, both land and home, predate the American Revolution, however even as travel trailers, camping, and auto-tourism grew in popularity throughout the 1920s, political rhetoric regarding the economic, social, and moral value of single-family homeownership reached unprecedented levels largely through the efforts of Herbert Hoover, who as both Commerce Secretary and, later, as President, promoted homeownership as the single most important national priority (Vale 2007). U.S. homeownership rates remained steady from 1890 to 1930, but as Lawrence J. Vale (ibid) contends, 1920s political rhetoric concretized homeownership as a moral imperative, a bulwark against communism, and indicative of individual civic-mindedness. Thus, by the 1940’s postwar housing boom both government policy and most of the American populous had whole-heartedly embraced the ideology of homeownership.
Figure 12: By 1975, the majority of Lincoln’s 37 MHCs was located along West “O” Street (Hwy. 34) and Cornhusker Highway (Hwy. 6). Of these, the “O” Street communities, including Arrow MHC, were the oldest. (Photo credit, Lincoln Evening Journal.)
There were, however, critics of these “own-your-own-home” campaigns. In *Homeownership: Is it Sound?* (1945), John P. Dean roundly critiqued the political prioritization of homeownership. Specifically, Dean questioned whether the social emphasis placed on homeownership outweighed the potential consequences, particularly economic, families would face should the market stall, plummeting home values and risking foreclosure. Writing on the eve of the largest construction boom and expansion of the housing market in U.S. history, Dean offered a grim warning:

The problem of home ownership, like the rest of the “housing problem,” will presumably someday be faced squarely by the United States. When that time comes America will no
doubt look back on our own time as an era in which society encouraged its families to stride ahead through a field deliberately sown with booby traps (171).

Long upheld as an aspirational ideal for most Americans, throughout much of the nation’s history homeowners only accounted for between twenty to forty percent of the population, with significant variation between urban and rural environments. Prior to the establishment of the Federal Housing Authority (1936), which relaxed lending and mortgage regulations for most prospective borrowers, homeowners typically adopted the “save-up-until-you-can-buy” approach (ibid:68), often offering at least fifty percent of the purchase price in a down payment. Consequently, few lower-income Americans, particularly those living in dense urban spaces, could ever hope to afford homeownership, a point even the Hoover administration begrudgingly conceded to (Vale 2007). However, the convergence of both American auto-tourism with the growing preference for homeownership greatly benefitted trailer manufacturers.

Early government interventions promoting single-family homeownership dramatically expanded after the Second World War. FHA-insured mortgages, especially their one percent down payments, made homeownership possible for tens of millions of working-class families traditionally locked out of the market. However, in addition to relaxed lending, restrictive zoning became a hallmark policy propelling many white working-class families into temporary economic stability primarily at the expense of African Americans (Anderson 2016; Rothstein 2017). Exemplifying the preferential treatment afforded white homeowners, the City Survey Program (1937), undertaken by the Home Owners’ Loan Corporation during the Great Depression, ranked the “desirability” (and therefore, lending availability) of neighborhoods in 239 American cities (Hillier 2005). Famously, these “Residential Security Maps” color-coded neighborhoods by grade, with green and blue areas deemed desirable, and yellow (“expiring”) and red (“poor conditions”) signifying places with few, if any, lending possibilities. Notably,
classifying third- and fourth-“grade” areas included residential demographics, particularly whether “infiltration of a lower grade population” (ibid:217) had taken place. Here, “undesirable” populations meant any ethnoracial minorities, especially Black Americans. Yet “trailer homes,” marketed as stopgap structures ideal for families waiting for “real” housing to become available, earned begrudging public acceptance despite their categorical ambiguity.

Figure 14: Appearing in the August 28, 1949 edition of The Lincoln Star, this advertisement boasts the advantages of the “modern trailer homes.” As later ads, shown above, also stressed, the “domestic” features of these units were highlighted alongside both the price and relative mobility. (Photo credit, http://www.newspapers.com/image/64806648.)

By the 1940s, an estimated one thousand families moved into newly-constructed, single-family detached suburban homes daily, but even with the adoption of factory-line technologies
and principles to conventional home construction, demand far outstripped supply. With “whiteness” rapidly consolidating as a more homogenous ethnoracial identity tied to the American dream of homeownership, trailer housing offered future suburbanites independence from relatives and tenement landlords (Hurley 2001). Indeed, as Jacob Riis, an early photojournalist, shrewdly noted, even “a shanty is better than a flat in a cheap tenement, any day” (1900, cf. Vale 2007:18). Consequently, the demographics of mobile-homeowners rapidly transitioned from military and construction workers in 1948, to young families by 1959 (Hart et al. 2002:17). To reflect these changes, by the mid-1950s the trailer industry, including park owners and consumers, widely adopted the moniker “mobile home” to mark the shifting market towards fulltime trailer residence.

Yet, “fulltime” hardly meant “permanent.” As I describe in Chapters Five and Six, mitigating the existential threat mobile homes present to conventional dwellings often entails enforcing their “proper” use; in other words, mobile-homeownership is deemed socially acceptable so long as (a) residence is temporary, and (b) traditional homeownership remains the ultimate goal. Raised in a New Jersey trailer park in the 1950s, Alan Berube (1997) similarly describes how a respectable stereotype structured social relations within the neighborhood: “The respectable stereotype portrayed residents of house trailers as white World War II veterans, many of them attending college on GI loans, who lived with their young families near campuses during the postwar housing shortage” (18).
However, by the 1950s the novelty of these “homes on wheels” was quickly waning as the percentage of long-term trailerites grew. By 1952, the disparaging epithet “trailer trash” entered mainstream discourse (Irby 2000), which in turn contributed to trailer parks’ growing salaciousness in popular media, especially serials like Trailer Tramp (1957) and Cracker Girl (1953), which played to cultural expectations linking mobile-homeowners to criminal activity and sexual licentiousness (Isenburg 2016). The existence of more positive silver-screen characterizations, such as The Long, Long Trailer (1951) starring Lucille Ball and a pair of films (It Happened at the World’s Fair, 1963, and Speedway, 1968) featuring Elvis Presley, nonetheless portrayed mobile home parks as wholly distinct from sprawling, middle-class suburban settlements. Conceived as the “vehicles of culture, as models of imagining and imaging communities” (Spitulnik, cf. Ginsburg 2008:216), mass media holds the noted capacity for influencing how individuals come to identify, and interpret, particular mediated images. And, despite the occasional flattering portrayal, most “trailer park” stories depicted “trashy” denizens
whose amoral character was manifest in the image of a ramshackle, rundown trailer (Isenburg 2016; Sweeney 2001).

By mid-century, “trailer parks” had become an undeniable, and uncomfortable, social reality across the United States. Legally and culturally ambiguous, trailer courts had come to define the lowermost boundary of the (white) middle-classes, and as such occupied a tenuous space between respectable middle-class lifestyles and pathological poverty (Halle 1984; Hurley 2001). As Wallis (1991:20) observes, the categorical blurriness trailer housing represented transformed cultural anxieties into outright rage whenever the issue of allowing factory-built homes in residential areas came up. Rather than prohibiting trailer parks based on sociocultural disdain alone, legal scholar Susan Chernoff (1983) argues that municipalities instead erected legal regulatory frameworks to restrict MHC placement and construction. Principal among these “shouted” reasons for curbing MHC development was the widespread belief that mobile home courts generated insufficient tax revenue to make up for the increased use of public services and utilities (ibid:243). Throughout the 1950s public anxieties concerning trailerites as tax-evading scalawags grew increasingly vocal. In Lincoln, although the number of families living fulltime in trailer homes continued to grow, planners and residents balked at the suggestion that new facilities should be constructed; in 1955 one columnist accused mobile-homeowners of relocating periodically to evade tax evasion: “For one thing, many trailers, up to 50 or 60 per cent in some camps, never get on the tax rolls. This is because the trailer occupants are on the move and gone either when assessments are made or when it is time to pay taxes” (Dobler 4:5).

Taxes solidify an individual’s relationship to the state as well as to their fellow citizens (Martin et al. 2009). In liberal democracies, taxes implicitly provide for the public good; as such, tax-evaders are often demonized as selfish and parasitic, utilizing public services without
reciprocation (Perin 1977). Although the inherent politicization of taxation can serve as grounds for political resistance via individual tax evasion or refusal (e.g. Martin et al. 2009; Roitman
2015; Thurston 2018:107), generally, paying taxes is conceived as a virtuous, moral act signifying belonging to a particular place or community. Moreover, insofar as property taxes are inextricably tied to property values, owners understandably fret over whether or not adjacent developments will negatively impact their home investments (Halle 1984). However, such “politics of homeownership” all-too-often devolve into blatantly racist, ethnocentric, and/or classist narratives, or what Maria Kefalas (2003:57) terms the “politics of resentment” (see also, Halle 1984; Perin 1977, 1988).

For example, in 1955 a resident group called the “West Side Community” formed to petition the Lincoln City Council to enforce its zoning regulations, in particular the three-mile zoning extension beyond the city limits, to regulate or even close any one of at least fourteen MHCs operating in the vicinity. (One of these communities included Arrow MHC, whose opening coincided with these debates.) Due to increased student enrollments, the unincorporated Garfield School District sought to annex with the Lincoln Public School system, however district officials demanded the annexation be accompanied by a city ordinance requiring all mobile-homeowners pay property taxes regardless of how frequently their housing was relocated.

Mobile-homeowners vehemently protested their unfavorable mischaracterization in the press and public discourse. First, a series of new ordinances passed in 1950-51 had restricted trailer home placement to “approved” camps “situated on the edges of the city” (Lincoln Star 1951), including each of the contested West “O” properties. Second, the process of licensing approval resulted in the closure of several communities; by 1955, 32.6 percent of Lincoln MHCs had been closed. Altogether, these rulings placed external movement pressure on many mobile-
homeowners, including an estimated 55 families displaced by the closing of Antelope Park, Lincoln’s sole municipal trailer camp, in 1950.

Describing mobile-homeowners as “probably the heaviest taxed citizens for the amount of property they own” (*Lincoln Star* 1952), trailerites responded to the negative press in kind. Responding to the Garfield School District controversy, one “disgusted” Lincoln mobile-homeowner wrote:

> And who said we don’t pay taxes? We have been paying taxes in this state on several trailers for the past 10 years—the last five years our takes were paid in Lancaster County although we were not always living in this county. Our taxes have always been well in proportion to those of homes of equivalent value to our mobile home… If a trailer is pulled it must be licensed and the taxes paid before we can get the plates. If it remains stationary it is assessed as personal property. I don’t see how anyone can get out of paying taxes (*Lincoln Evening Journal* 1955).

Similarly, Ina M. Flansburg, who operated a private MHC near present-day Crown Court, opined to the *Lincoln Star* that, “I think it’s time that Nebraskans realize that mobile homes accommodate a group of American citizens engaged in useful and important work and that the state legislature enact some legislation favorable to them” (*Flansburg* 4:6). Thus, in 1955 Lincoln’s first “trailer court code” went into effect. In order to operate, courts were required to obtain permits subject to annual health inspections. Per news reports, a “considerable number” of existing trailer courts either failed to apply for, or meet, these requirements (*Lincoln Star* 1955); as such, an additional seven MHCs closed in the five years following the code’s implementation.

Yet, rather than signaling the beginning of the end, the implementation of Lincoln’s trailer court code instead began the city’s “modern” mobile home era; between 1955 and 1975, thirty-nine MHCs would open. Although partial, the growing public and legal acceptance that “trailers” represented a form of permanent housing signified a major transition in the MH industry. That is, having largely shed its association with automobiles and easy mobility, the
“modern” mobile-homeowner could now expect to enjoy luxurious amenities and home craftsmanship more akin to conventional homeownership. However, blurring the material boundaries between factory- and site-built housing further stoked local anxieties. What if, park opponents feared, one could no longer tell which home was “real,” and which was a manufactured “mimic?”

Manufactured Mimics

It is time the public was informed of the fact that mobile homes serve as a home for people who need a mobile home and that these people are not gypsies. They are fine Americans who are serving our country in every possible way to help make democracy live. Some of these people are servicemen who want to keep their families together. There are construction workers who build our pipelines, including Lincoln’s new water main, the dams and power plants, the bridges including our O Street viaduct, our air bases, the large factories and our roads. Our highway engineers do not know from one month to another whether or not they will be in Lincoln, Grand Island, McCook, Scottsbluff, or any other city in Nebraska. No one can deny that in this country’s dynamic economy, mobile workers play a vital role and we are greatly indebted to them for their services (Flansburg 1955).

The passage of the Interstate Act in 1956 signaled another major shift in Americans’ attitudes towards travel as the slow, kitschy trek across the Great American Desert was replaced with a desire to quickly speed down ever-widening expressways. Unlike many cities, where these roadway projects entailed massive displacement via devastating Urban Renewal agendas, U.S. Interstate 80, laid atop the former Overland Trail and Lincoln Highway routes, instead nearly bypasses Lincoln altogether (Hokanson 1999:133). Regardless, American suburbanization generated enormous labor demands for projects from home construction to roadway development to infrastructural repair.

Due to continued (rental) housing shortages as well as growing anti-apartment bias, many workers and their families preferred “trailering,” which in turn prompted unprecedented levels of
new “mobile home court” development. In 1959, 13,000 communities existed, however by 1972 at least one thousand new parks were being constructed annually nationwide (Wallis 1991:173; Clark 1972). By the mid-1950s, industry members and residents alike began adopting the label “mobile home” to distinguish newer and ever-larger models from the first generation of easily-hauled units. Despite the name change, that so-called “mobile” homes were increasingly im-mobile is evidenced by the growing width of standard units as well as the difficulties related to transporting homes. Long past were the days in which all that was needed to relocate a “trailer” was the family car; by 1957, Nebraska’s Governor approved a measure allowing new 10-foot-wide units on state highways with the stipulation that such structures could only be towed behind “dual-wheeled trucks during daylight hours Monday through Friday” (Lincoln Journal-Star 1957). In the late 1960s, multisectional, or “double-wide,” units started to overtake the industry, although 14-foot “single-wide” units remained a popular, and more budget-friendly, option (Clayton 2002). Each increase in model size reduced transportability and, therefore, rendered “mobile” homes ever more permanent. However, as Wallis (1991) remarks, despite growing public recognition that mobile homes represented permanent housing, total integration remained impossible due to standards of legal differentiation that “can most accurately be described as separate but equal: as an alternative that is recognized within the house system but falls into a special class” (212).

Expanding city limits fast-encroaching upon existing mobile home courts in addition to the explosive development of new properties across the United States set the stage for innumerable contentious, even downright hostile, zoning board meetings. In Lower Bucks County, Pennsylvania, Don Hager (1954) wrote that, despite mobile-homeowners’ possession of “characteristics that are generally prized by all American communities – sobriety, occupational
skill and reliability, family stability, and a genuine interest in contributing to and improving the community in which they live” (34) sentiments echoed by the op-ed quoted at length above, the ambiguous sociolegal status of mobile housing provoked tensions between “mobile” and more “traditional” homeowners.

In Lincoln, for example, by 1968 city planners acknowledged that existing zoning ordinances were not designed with these newer mobile homes in mind. Furthermore, advocates for reform worried that restricting MHC development to commercial or industrial areas produced conditions unsuitable for the families that by then made up the majority of the mobile home population. After an eleven month study, a special committee recommended to the Lincoln City Council that mobile home parks should be allowed in residential areas. These changes would allow MHC developments in lands zoned residential, albeit after receiving a “special permit” from the City-County Planning Commission and approval from the City Council. However, councilmembers promised anxious conventional homeowners that “extreme care” would be taken for any new developments, with one Councilman adding, “I would not be in favor of putting one right alongside high-class housing” (Heitman 1969). As this quote illustrates, despite these gains mobile housing remained inextricably identified with “low-class,” borderline inappropriate, housing. By contrast, then-president of the Nebraska Mobile Home Association (and park operator) D. Hipple boasted that Lincolnites would be proud of their new parks: “They won’t be something one would want to hide” (*Lincoln Star* 1969).

Following the formal separation of the mobile and travel (or recreational) home industries in 1963, the MH industry fully committed itself to marketing and manufacturing structures intended for permanent, fulltime use as (af)fixed housing; by 1966, 85 percent of newly constructed mobile homes served as primary housing for residents (*Lincoln Sunday Journal and
Star). As one news article from 1966 boasts, “New design techniques have enabled us to put these units in the luxury class, both in space and furnishings, without a corresponding increase in the cost per square foot” (ibid). Similarly, another piece penned in October 1970 quotes the Mobile Home Manufacturer’s Association of Chicago, which drew a sharp contrast between earlier trailer camps and “modern” MHCs: “You can find mobile home communities that are first class in every respect” (Pope 6F). Again and again, the same message is reiterated: mobile homes are comparable to conventional, site-built housing in all respects save one, their affordability.

Figure 16: After Arrow MHC closed in 2015, the Sky View Trailer Ranch became Lincoln’s longest-running MHC. This postcard, shared to a Lincoln Facebook group in August 2016, dates to the mid-1950s. (Photo credit, https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10153718889936611&set=pcb.1149814665088972&type=3&theater&ifg=1).

With mobile homes’ transition from temporary structures to units built to be on par with site-built housing, over the twentieth century factory-built homes have come to represent an uncanny mimicry of the “traditional” family home, and as such is widely perceived as
threatening one of America’s most cherished cultural objects and ambitions. The anthropological literature on *mimicry* and *mimesis* generally notes how the act of copying unsettles the special characteristics of the original (Baudrillard 1983; Bhabha 1984; Coombe 1996; Taussig 1993); or, as James Ferguson (2002) suggests, in “becoming-like,” something fundamental or authentic about the copied object may be altered or perverted. Insofar as *homeownership* is identified with morality and the affective domain of social and familial reproduction, mobile homes’ aesthetic deception, that is, their uncanny indistinctness provokes significant (middle) class anxieties.

In Lincoln, such tensions culminated in several impassioned Planning Commission meetings from 1970 to 1973 over a 270-space MHC, Buckingham South, intended to be the first court built in A-1 Single Family, the highest and most prestigious of the residential zoning categorizations. Opponents sued to block the court’s development, arguing that in addition to overburdening the local school district, “area residents feel a mobile home court would substantially reduce property values and also violates good zoning principles” (Ekvall 1970). During one Council meeting, nearly sixty residents came to protest the proposed development over three-plus hours, and ultimately one Lincoln City Councilman introduced a bill which, had it passed, would have prohibited MHCs from A-1 districts.

Countering that “if granted the opportunity, we’ll do a first-class job” (Hoober 1970), the developer attempted to justify the respectability of the proposed MHC by presenting to the planning commission a petition signed by 383 local mobile-homeowners. Proponents repeatedly implored Councilmembers to divorce their outdated notions regarding shabby trailers from present construction and (im)mobility standards; if this could not be done, Norman Krivosha, attorney for the developer, argued, “If you don’t want mobile homes out in the county, why don’t you say that so we know what the county board’s position is? If residents of mobile home courts
are to be second class citizens, let’s say that so people don’t think when they buy a mobile home that they can live like other people” (Switzer 1973). Although Buckingham South received narrow (4-3) Council approval in April 1973, the MHC was never developed; at present, the site is a developed residential neighborhood well within Lincoln’s city limits.

Studying American land-use values, Perin (1977) argued, reveals a profound intolerance for ambiguity. Segregationist zoning codes intend to protect people and properties from the threat of “contamination” associated with the mixing of distinct “types,” however as the Buckingham South debates reveal, zoning also signals belonging to a particular place. Moreover, as manufactured homes grew indistinguishable from conventional, site-built structures, their perceived threat intensified. What if, detractors fretted, you could no longer tell the difference between traditional and factory-built housing? Yet even as these debates raged, another large MHC quietly received approval to operate on undeveloped lands zoned for A-2 Single Family use approximately one mile northwest of Lincoln’s downtown. With its opening in December 1970, Crown Court MHC became Lincoln’s first “modern” mobile home subdivision as well as its largest MHC and, just as the city’s 1955 trailer code witnessed the transition from older auto-trailer parks to mobile home courts, Crown Court signaled the next step along the path towards (mobile) permanence.

**Hidden in Plain Sight**

Unlike earlier trailer courts and tourist camps, which were typically owned by private citizens or municipalities, “new-style courts” like Crown Court were planned unit developments (PUDs) that attracted major investors and corporate backers. A precursor to the eventual shift toward corporate consolidation that typifies present-day MHC operations, “Crown Court” was a
trademarked name for communities planned in at least three states.\(^\text{11}\) Built for $1.25 million on residential, yet previously undeveloped, property, upon opening Crown Court was praised for its landscaped lots, which provided each mobile-homeowner a patio, gas grill, a driveway and individual storage shed. Like the earliest generation of auto-trailerites, the most requested amenity among Crown Court’s initial residents was “outdoor space,” of which Crown Court gladly provided, boasting the largest mobile home lots in the entire city.

Crown Court was an instant success, and in 1973 doubled in size to become Nebraska’s largest mobile home park, a title it holds to the present. Although six additional “new-style” courts opened shortly after Crown Court, providing a total of 1,800 mobile home lots in addition to Lincoln’s existing stock, competition between parks was limited at first. Rising prices in the conventional home market fueled mobile home demand; according to one article, a 1975 nationwide survey found that 53 percent of current mobile-homeowners had moved in from a traditional, site-built home (*Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star* 1975). Between 1969 and 1974, the percentage of all Lincoln homes that were “mobile” rose from 2 to 3.4 percent (ibid).

Just as the post-war housing shortage drove up consumer demand for factory-built homes in the 1950s, so too did the growing gulf between conventional and mobile home prices render the latter an ever-more attractive deal. Moreover, as the Nixon administration began to increase governmental disinvestment from public housing subsidies, unsubsidized mobile homes represented the sole homeownership opportunity for millions of lower-income Americans (Hart et al. 2002). As M. Huff, then-director of the Nebraska Mobile Housing Institute stressed to a local Lincoln newspaper, by the mid-1970s “mobile” homes were effectively permanent structures, with at least 90 percent never moving after being “parked” (*Lincoln Star* 1975).

\(^{11}\) Whether or not these other communities were ever developed is unknown, however according to records Crown Court was sold by its original developers in 1977 for $2 million, retaining the branded name with the transition.
However, such rapid growth exposed systemic weaknesses in the MH industry. Despite having shed its associations with automobiles and easy mobility, persistent legal ambiguity created problematic regulatory gaps for manufacturers; as one article from 1972 notes, “nobody knows just who is responsible for inspecting them. And quite frankly, Building Instructor [omitted] says that they’re not being checked” (Nobbe 27C). While complaints ranged from structural defects to subpar workmanship, among the most pressing concerns was faulty wiring which, when paired with highly-combustible building materials such as particle board, could spark fast-burning—and often fatal—fires. The Nebraska Motor Vehicle Industry Licensing Board, for example, saw a significant increase in investigations stemming from owners’ complaints despite not having any authority to levy fines or set construction standards; as R. Obering, Lincoln Director of Public Works, told the Sunday Journal and Star in 1972, “I am surprised that the federal government hasn’t stepped into this problem yet. It would be a good thing for all consumers to have nationwide mobile home manufacturing standards” (ibid).

As it happened, the federal government was in the process of doing exactly that. In 1974, Congress passed the Mobile Home Construction and Safety Standards Act, commonly referred to as the HUD Code, becoming the nation’s first (and only) federal building code. Once HUD went into effect on June 1, 1976, all factory-built homes secured to a chassis were designated manufactured homes, or HUD (certified) homes, in contrast to pre-HUD mobile homes.

The long-term effects of the HUD Code have been mixed. Undoubtedly, improved federal standards benefitted mobile-homeowners by heightening safety regulations. For instance, although fire-related fatalities remain higher among mobile home residents than the general population, since implementing HUD the percentage of resident deaths attributed to fire have decreased dramatically (Hall 2013). Moreover, HUD’s performance-based standards assured
government-back lenders of product quality and durability, and as such FHA, VA, and USDA finance options became available for non-MHC mobile-homeowners (Wallis 1991).

However, implementing HUD both ended the postwar mobile home (court) boom as well as unintentionally triggered the MH industry’s slow decline in the decades that followed. In addition to the mid-1970s economic recession, mandating regulatory reform increased average unit costs, thereby directly impacting manufactured housing’s major advantage over site-built homes. While MH production exceeded half a million units annually in the early 1970s, by the end of the decade that number was halved, leading to the closure of at least forty percent of all home factories (Clayton 2002; Wallis 1991:222). Pre-recession, an estimated twenty mobile home plants employing approximately 6,000 workers operated in Nebraska (Lincoln Journal Star 1974). In 1973, Nebraska was ninth in the U.S. in mobile home manufacturing (Lincoln Evening Journal 1974). However, at present just four plants remain in operation, primarily constructing modular units rather than manufactured homes (Chapter Six). And, while HUD regulations made it prohibitively expensive to either update or construct new facilities, “manufactured home” certifications practically obliterated any possible resale value for pre-HUD “mobile” homes. Its decline profoundly sharp and devastating, the MH industry has never returned to its early 1970s heyday.

Likewise, across the United States new MHC development had virtually ceased by the 1980s (Hart et al. 2002). In Lincoln, the rapid construction of first Crown Court, then three additional subdivisional communities by 1977 saturated the market and stalled any future developments; the last park built in Nebraska, Meadowbrook Estates in Omaha, opened in 1990. Of thirty-two communities open in 1980, 34 percent (11) were closed by 2000; just two new parks opened in that span (1985, 1989). And yet, just as modern constructions standards have
exponentially extended the average lifespan of a manufactured home, so too did “modern” MHCs become semi-permanent fixtures on the (sub)urban peripheries.

A staple alongside the famed Detroit-Lincoln-Denver Highway for over six decades, in May 2015 rumors began circulating of Arrow Trailer Park’s imminent closure. Soon, Crown Court leasing agents began fielding calls from displaced Arrow residents hoping to rent or buy, however few could afford the significant price increase between the two communities. Meanwhile, I asked a Facebook community dedicated to Lincoln history whether anyone had lived in, or knew of, former Lincoln MHCs including Arrow. To my delight, I received messages from several former residents: “My grandparents lived in Arrow Trailers for many years,” wrote one respondent. “I can still remember playing in the woods behind the trailer.” Notably, one woman in Kentucky told me that her grandfather had been the original owner.

“I had some wonderful memories there until we moved when I was about five years old,” she replied in a message, and asked if I could send her photos of the demolition. I happily agreed to provide some. Thus, in late August, several weeks after my fateful run-in with one of Arrow’s final residents, I crept back onto the property under the auspices that I was taking photos for an “aunt” who used to live there. Already, the park was half empty. I chatted briefly with one of the crew tasked with locating the salvageable homes to other local MHCs, although given that all of the homes were pre-HUD, the vast majority were destined for the scrapyard. The oppressive August sun bore down on us unimpeded; feeling my shoulders burn, I lamented the loss of the lush oak, elm, and maple trees torn out as part of the demolition. Before I returned to my car, the crewman and I watched as his team began to tear strips of metal siding from a brown home with letters spelling “MANAGER” pasted to one of the windows (Figure 17). The former tenants had been an elderly couple who, despite being unceremoniously evicted, left the inside
“immaculate.” Braced against his shovel, the worker added, “Someone’s going to get a real nice house from that.”

A month after Arrow Trailer Park was closed and emptied of its remaining homes, I ambled over to a local bar near Crown Court to watch the Nebraska Cornhusker’s football season opener. Seated next to me was an older man, Tommy, whose farmer’s suspenders made his New York accent sound even more pronounced amid the other patrons’ Midwestern twang. Eyes half-trained on the TV, we chatted off-and-on as Nebraska lost its first season opener in 29 seasons. Although Tommy was living in a nearby apartment, he told me that he’d lived in several homes across Crown Court throughout the years.

Unprompted, he mentioned Arrow’s closure: “Heard they’re turning into a parking lot or something like that.” He was unsure about Crown Court’s future, and wondered whether or not the park’s rebranding campaign was an attempt to cover up its unsavory character among Lincolnitcites. (As one resident told me, growing up he and his friends used to refer to the park as
“Trash Court.”) Laughing as she poured us another round, the bartender, another Crown Court mobile-homeowner, interrupted him, “Crown Court has a baaaaaaad reputation.”

Katherine MacTavish and Sonya Salamon (2006) describe rental-only MHCs, like Arrow used to be and Crown Court aspires to be, as typically older, shabbier communities that perpetuate “trailer trash” stereotypes. Regardless, although Crown Court’s operators felt that transitioning to a rental, “free-standing apartment” model would change public perceptions regarding the park, even avid MHC opponents agreed that the weed-strewn lot Arrow became after its closure was more of an eyesore than it had ever been when in operation. “We go by there every day,” local resident E. Pierce told the Lincoln Journal Star in December 2015. “This is a disgrace to the city coming into Lincoln and all that trash there” (Salter 2015). As such comments illustrate, the association between mobile homes, pollution, and “trash” can go on even after the neighborhood is closed.

Whether paved over or left to natural forces, like the vacant half of Shady Elm (Figure 18), MHC erasure completes the processes of neglect, abandonment, and obsolescence encapsulated in restrictive zoning ordinances and municipal-state regulatory failures to recognize manufactured homes as homes. Predestined for ruination, the decaying state of many urban MHCs is accepted as the inevitable product of subpar construction from its automotive and factory origins.
Erasing MHCs symbolically depopulates and unmaps these communities. For example, in June 2016 I gave a public presentation on Lincoln MHCs to a local nonprofit agency; during the question-and-answer period, one older gentleman told our small group that Arrow MHC “needed to be shut down” due to its decrepit condition, however another attendee who had worked with one of the displaced residents asked what should be done for them: “Where do they go?” Indeed, a common theme throughout my fieldwork was non-resident surprise when informed how many parks remain in Lincoln. (They unfailingly under-estimated it.)

Each of Lincoln’s remaining MHCs are threatened with anticipated closure, however one unexpected byproduct of mobile-homeowner “invisibility” is arguably normativity, that is, the
ability to blend in or fade into the background. When compared to similar mid-sized cities, Lincoln’s pre-recession reputation as a cultural “desert,” an expansive stretch of uninteresting farming country, slowed population growth and land appreciation so much so that most “modern” Lincoln MHCs were protected from closure. Desired or not, “trailer parks” are as American as baseball and apple pie and, as such, are hardly as novel—or newsworthy—as they once were. By 2000, the only reporting done on Lincoln MHCs occurred whenever tragedy struck; a murder here (2004), an arsonist there (2015), and lest we forget, wholesale displacement due to redevelopment.

The lack of consistent reporting on these neighborhoods beyond the rare crime story has enabled Crown Court and other Lincoln MHCs to quietly persist in obscurity. Indeed, where previous decades saw significant coverage and public debate over each controversial park opening, at present the opposite is true as MHC closures garner more attention. Insofar as MHC closures represent an abnormal, or extraordinary, event (Niehaus 2013) that foregrounds the perilous stakes of belonging and citizenship, in the next chapter I explore how precarious mobile-homeowners discursively and physically response to imposed displacement anxieties by transforming socially and legally devalued “trailers” into nice, respectable residences.
CHAPTER THREE

Home is Where You Park It

Originally built as emergency housing for families displaced by Hurricane Katrina in 2005, by the time I met Joe (63) and Reba (55) in December 2015, their meticulously decorated and remodeled singlewide unit bore little resemblance to its original condition. Previously separated, Reba joked that she had made it clear to Joe that their reconciliation hinged on what or not she would be allowed to redecorate. In fact, just two weeks prior to our interview Reba had installed new faux-wood flooring over the existing linoleum.

Chuckling, Joe added how “when we got back together I promised her a new stove.” Indeed, a new (“five-burner,” Reba clarified) gas stove graced the couple’s cozy kitchen (Figure 13). Insisting, “I don’t do trash,” Reba then began complaining about her next door neighbor’s garbage-strewn lawn:

I went to them [management] and said, that is disgusting. If I was to look in here and want to rent a place, and I pulled in and I saw that brown trailer with all the crap they had, I mean, piles of trash, I would turn around and I would exit right out of this trailer park. I wouldn’t even come in here.

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12 An estimated 300,000 displaced Americans were housed in “trailers” after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita devastated the gulf coast (Adams 2013; Shapiro 2014). Ordered by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) as emergency shelter, these units were hastily constructed and, later, were found to emit dangerous levels of formaldehyde (Murphy et al. 2012; Shapiro 2014). In 2007, the Federal government began prohibiting the private resale of FEMA units (Smith 2015), and in 2009 FEMA issued eviction notices to FEMA trailer residents in Mississippi, although after fierce public outcry the repossessions were postponed. However, tens of thousands of excess, unused FEMA travel trailers and mobile homes were auctioned en masse to MHC and RV operators and dealers beginning in 2010 (Hsu 2010; Smith 2015). Crown Court’s corporate landlords, for example, purchased at least thirty FEMA trailers for their Lincoln properties at around $1,200 each, which were in turn sold as a lease-to-purchase option for residents for $20,000. Like Joe and Reba, few buyers were ever informed by Crown Court staff of their home’s origins, a common complaint across the U.S. (Smith 2015).
In his ethnographic research among suburban mobile-homeowners, Kirby Moss (2003) describes widespread micro-othering between residents, wherein minor criteria are used by individual households to validate aspirational claims to higher social status within a marginalized community (see also, Leivestad 2015). Likewise, Alan Berube reminisces on his childhood trailer park as “life on a social edge… a borderland where respectable and ‘trashy’ got confused” (1997:17). For Reba, the physical appearance and upkeep of her home and yard distinguished theirs as a respectable, that is, “not trashy” residence.

Situating themselves as respectable (mobile) homeowners, residents like Joe and Reba attempted to normalize their housing choice by rhetorically aligning their home-making practices as similar to those of “conventional” homeowners as opposed to “trailer trash.” In this chapter, I conceptualize such behaviors as mobile-homeowner “housepride,” defined by sociologist Maria
Kefalas (2003) as practices that “make it possible to transform empty, meaningless physical space into a place pregnant with evocative symbolic significance” (107). Yet, as the previous chapter illustrated, manufactured housing and MHCs are symbolically, and negatively, charged spaces popularly characterized as unequal to traditional single-family housing. Thus, for mobile-homeowners including Joe and Reba, micro-othering behaviors enable individual households to counteract “trailer trash” stigmatization through symbolic and material (re)alignment with what is considered the “norm”; in this case, conventional (site-built) homeownership.

Despite its wide usage, community is a notoriously difficult concept to define. The common anthropological definition, for example, characterizes “communities” as local places with shared ecologies, social systems, and interests shared between people (Anderson 1983; Stein 1960). In the United States, community studies is among the major academic traditions in sociology, and to a lesser extent anthropology. Studies like Robert and Helen Lynd’s Middletown (1929, 1937) series and the “Yankee City” project by W. Lloyd Warner (1941, 42, 45, 49, and 59), among others (e.g. Varenne 1977) typified rural, less-populated communities as “typical,” non-exotic sites representative of American “character,” generally. Although critiqued (Arensburg 1916; Kimball 1955; Stein 1960), community studies nonetheless juxtaposed communities, however defined, against the more heterogeneous and chaotic metropolis. Indeed, several residents I interviewed spoke of Crown Court as a community in its own right, that is, as normal:

Let’s face it, when people move into a trailer park, their self-awareness, what they think of themselves is probably not the same as some other neighborhoods. And that plays on everything. Yeah, if you don’t live, or haven’t lived in a mobile home community, you have a whole different perception, and that goes to the stereotyping that you’re talking about. When you live here, you find out that it’s a community, in many ways it’s like any other community. It just fluxes a little bit (M, 64, emphasis added).
By contrast, Joe and Reba’s normalization strategies did not emphasize Crown Court MHC as a homogenous community; rather, by stressing her profound distaste for “trash,” Reba instead aligned her household with another “community” of sorts, namely conventional, middle-class homeowners. Margarethe Kusenbach (2009), in her research among Florida mobile-homeowners, similarly describes her interlocutors’ normalization strategies as a distancing mechanism used to limit the harmful effects of “trailer trash” stereotypes, one which leads “mobile home residents to point out essential similarities between themselves and other, presumably more respected, members of society” (421). In addition to home and lawn maintenance, Joe further normalized the pair by bragging to me about his personal, “first name basis” relationship with Crown Court’s corporate owners. For instance, when I asked whether or not the West Lincoln Redevelopment Zone (WLRZ) concerned them, the couple replied that they were not worried about the park’s future.

“When they had the first [community] meeting up here, I kinda established myself with [the owners],” Joe boasted. In contrast to his neighbors who, three years later, still believed that Crown Court’s demise was evident, Joe recalled how Crown Court’s owners personally reassured him that their intentions were not to close the park; rather, they simply wanted to rezone the property. “And then,” he continued, “the rumors were going like, ‘Oh yeah, someone’s already bought it for apartments,’ and this and that. Then, one of the guys that lives up here, who was half-assed drunk, he was saying that same thing. I think he’s one of the guys that started the rumor.” Joe shook his head. “I got tired of him when he called us trailer trash.”

Chuckling, Reba added, “When he lived it.”

Joe agreed with his wife, prompting to me to clarify that someone, another mobile-homeowner, had referred to them as “trailer trash” during a community meeting with their
corporate owners. Reba explained, “Yeah, it was one of the guys that lives over by the clubhouse, and his trailer is like trash.”

Joe: “He said we’re all trailer trash, and don’t matter. And I [said], ‘woah, woah, woah. You might be.’” Similar to their neighbor’s “disgusting” yard, Joe refused any association with trashiness, validated (he believed) by his personal relationship with his multimillionaire landlords. In concert with wider MH industry trends aligning manufactured housing with “stick-built” dwellings as opposed to either multi-family units or personal vehicles (Berube & Berube 1997:20), the following sections explore the intellectual processes by which several Crown Court mobile-homeowners normalized their housing, and by extension, themselves. Specifically, I show how houseproud behaviors—such as maintaining clean, orderly, and fashionable homes—mean to safeguard mobile households from insecurity or accusations of indecency by highlighting the similarities between respectable manufactured and conventional homeownership.

“A Place You Can Proudly Call Home”

Wellbeing, as a condition and mental state, is subjective as well as perceptive. Moreover, notions of self-worth, or dignity, are colloquially tied to pride as well as respect, which has been characterized as the personal search for dignity among peers (Bourgois 1996; Kivland 2014). For persons or places widely considered disrespectful, therefore, pride and dignity are crucial to an individual’s sense of personal wellbeing. Thus, as Joe and Reba illustrate, micro-othering and normalization behaviors allow individual mobile-homeowners to resist their emplacement, a term describing “a perspective in which the subject is inextricably situated in historically and existentially specific conditions, defined, for brevity, as a ‘place’” (Englund 2002:267, emphasis
in original), in “trashy trailer parks.” For mobile-homeowners, the politics of belonging have become increasingly contested over the decades as policymakers support widespread redevelopment agendas meant to displace them. As such, we should view mobile-homeowners’ housepride and homeownership rituals—landscaping, renovations, home repair and maintenance—not simply as an expression of personal taste, but rather as a meaningful claim to the rights and privileges of respectable, middle-class homeowners.

Such sentiments were further reinforced by Crown Court’s own marketing campaigns, as illustrated by their corporate motto, “A Place You Can Proudly Call Home,” which was emblazoned across every entrance sign. Situated just a couple blocks behind one of these welcome signs sat Jerry’s (67) 2005 singlewide (Figure 20), which, like his younger brother Joe’s, was another rehabilitated Katrina trailer. Similar to his brother and sister-in-law, Jerry gauged whether or not someone cared for their home (and themselves) by the state of their home and lot space.

Like Crown Court’s welcome signs encouraged, Joe told me, “I take pride in where I live, period.” With his wife, Jerry had lived in Crown Court since 2012, and could be frequently spotted in the summer months, shirtless, on his riding lawnmower. Beyond lawn care, Jerry prided himself on the sturdy wooden front porch he’d built himself. “That’s the way I do it,” he explained, using his home(site)’s look to prove his commitment to maintaining respectable appearances “That’s just the way it is. I don’t want somebody to go by my house and say, ‘God, look at that trashy place.’”
Figure 20: Like his brother and sister-in-law, Jerry renovated and remodeled his 2005-model FEMA trailer. Notably, he built his porch himself without prior approval from Crown Court's managers. (Photo by author.)

Whereas Jerry normalized his maintenance regime as “just the way it is,” his insistence that his manufactured home located in a land-lease park community could be described with the same language afforded to traditional, single-family dwellings confounds dominant cultural expectations that distinguish factory- and site-built units. Indeed, several non-residents I interviewed registered pleasant surprise whenever confronted by mobile-homeowner’s housepride, as illustrated by this local elected official:

All these little nooks and crannies, and places where you park and… it’s, it’s just kind of fascinating. You know, I was always so surprised, like, I remember one little, old lady, when I knocked on the door. And her tiny yard is just spotless, it’s all kept up.
The existence of *spotless* mobile homes, I argue, blurs commonsensical social boundaries believed to distinguish the middle and lower classes materialized through housing form. By beautifying their “trailers,” mobile-homeowners’ housepride activities symbolically complements the material ambiguity attributed manufactured housing due to its construction process. Altogether, the desire to normalize or “class up” mobile homes begs the question as to how, or even if, traditional site-built homes are any better.

Restrictive zoning ordinances, argued Perin (1988:9), belie Americans’ “intolerance for ambiguity,” in particular social mixing vis-à-vis housing form. As such, informally housed populations occupying liminal or ambiguous social categories are often perceived as threatening; as Mary Douglas (1984) noted, anomalous persons or places undermine the accepted social order by exposing contradictions in existing classificatory systems (e.g. Dalakoglou 2015; Sandoval-Cervantes 2017; Sullivan & Olmedo 2015). Extending Douglas’ argument that cultural beliefs erect and police social boundaries around notions of dirt, pollution, or other taboos to American land-use systems, Perin (1977) suggested that the symbolic value attached to homeownership in the United States produces a “social ladder of life” where particular forms of housing tenure find representation in the human lifecycle (e.g. youthful renters, adult homeowners, and townhomes for empty-nesters).

Such framing devices typify a sort of “purification technique,” a common practice in so-called “modern” societies described by Bruno Latour (1993) as attempting to create autonomous facts and figures (*see also*, Dant 2005; Keane 2007). Like “social splitting” (Low 2003), purification relieves fears and anxieties produced by anomalous spaces or persons, thereby establishing critical social distance between “us” and “them.” However, the lack of cultural
consensus regarding the constitution of these social boundaries permits mobile-homeowners to validate the normalcy of their housing via routine care and maintenance work.

Antonia (57), a Crown Court renter whose 2015 Solitaire (Figure 21) was identical in make and model to the unit I rented, further exemplified this specific distancing technique. Located on a corner lot just down the block from Jerry, Antonia, too, concerned herself with the appearance of the park. “I see a difference between Crown Court, Campsite, and Sunset Acres,” Antonia said, naming two other area MHCs, including one (Sunset Acres) where her parents had lived out their retirement years. Clarifying that “this is just my opinion,” Antonia proceeded to rank order each park in terms of cleanliness: “We always called it when I was younger, that Campsite was ghetto, Crown Court was middle ghetto, and Sunset Acres was the high-end ghetto.” She laughed. “That’s what we used to call it when I was younger.”

Antonia’s comments illuminate both the rhetorical construction of stigmatized places as “ghetto” as well as the hierarchical ordering symbolically distinguishing “low,” “middle,” and “high-end” communities. As racially coded language, “ghetto” affixes myriad negative attributes, such as criminality and poverty, with spaces disproportionately occupied by ethnoracial minorities, in particular Black and Latino/a Americans (Cahill 2007; Jargowsky 1997). However, Antonia’s rhetoric also “classes” Campsite, Crown Court, and Sunset Acres in a manner similar to that described by Berube (1997:19), who notes how internal divides demarcated tangible boundaries between “trashy” and “respectable” in his childhood trailer park: “Establishing where you were on the trailer park’s social ladder depended on where you were standing and which direction you were looking at any given time.” In Florida, Kusenbach (2009:407) terms these “distancing” techniques as an avoidance strategy wherein “informants distanced themselves and their associates from other mobile home residents and communities.
whom they considered fundamentally less worthy.” By drawing attention to their “trashy neighbors” and/or other “ghetto” communities, mobile-homeowners like Reba, Jerry, and Antonia are able to distance themselves from harmful lower-class or “trashy” stereotypes, instead identifying themselves as respectable and middle-class despite their “trailer park” residence.

Figure 21: Antonia in the kitchen of her 2015-model rental home, the same make as my own. (Photo by author.)

However, as Bruno Latour (1993) argues, despite the “modern” obsession with purification, hybrid figures abound. For example, Latour writes how, in acquiring a firearm, an individual human-subject is transformed into a specific hybrid figure, “the soldier.” (Likewise, in being possessed by the human-agent, the gun, too, sees its own potential for action altered.) Similarly, as a “bundled object” (Keane 2005) encompassing myriad material and affective properties, the “homeowner” represents a culturally-specific figure believed to index morality, respectability, and middle-class lifestyles in contemporary American society. Furthermore,
Euroamerican cultural traditions regard housing as inseparable from the private domain of social and familial reproduction, thereby adding even more affective power to the domestic space (Carsten 2004; Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995; Low 2003; Miller 2001; Perin 1988; Rapp 1987).

Like Joe and Reba, Antonia’s less tidy neighbors exasperated her. “I would clean up every dirty trailer there is in here,” she said in response to a question of what she’d most like to see fixed in Crown Court. “That’s all you gotta do. I’m not asking them to paint, to rebuild a porch. Just clean your yard. How hard is it to pick up all the trash around your yard? That’s all I would do.” Trash figures heavily into each of these narratives, figuring a negative embodiment against which mobile-homeowners claim respectable identities as homeowners. Insofar as the middle classes are seen as the “moral” class (Kefalas 2003; Kelly 2013), mobile-homeowner aspirations to middle-class normalcy is threatened by “trashy” neighbors whose unkempt yards and housing confirms popular stereotypes. Given the very real threat of imminent dispossession and displacement, acknowledged or otherwise, it is understandable why individual mobile-households would resist communal identification, even framed (somewhat) positively, with “trailer trash.” For Antonia, Crown Court’s ongoing revitalization efforts, including its rebranding as a community of “free-standing apartments” promised to improve its overall image. Comparing Crown Court unfavorably to Sunset Acres, the “high-end ghetto,” Antonia explained:

I think Crown Court needs more cleaning up than Sunset Acres does, I really do. There’s more rundown homes that need to be, I guess they [management] need to put more of an effort to tell the people, “look, you really need to get rid of some of your trash.” I think that’s where they fall by the wayside. I don’t think they have enough moxie, or gumption, or whatever to tell the people, “look, we’re gonna give you sixty days. If you don’t have this trash cleaned up, then we’re gonna come clean it up for ya, and then we’re gonna have to charge you an extra $150.” You know what I’m saying? I think that would help immensely. Get that stereotype out of here.

With these remarks, Antonia adopts a punitive stance towards park maintenance reflected in both Crown Court’s “guidelines for living” as well as “community rules” typical of most
American gated communities, similarities I explore in depth in the next chapter. Whether by imposing fines or requiring residents to pay fees for park services like lawn mowing or trash removal, these imagined policies seek to control unruly residents so as to “nicen” the overall appearance of the community. As Douglas (1984) noted, in order to maintain and protect cultural systems, societies develop rituals to guide “in-between” persons through transitional stages. Perhaps for Antonia, her own unease over living in a “middle ghetto” MHC might be alleviated by aesthetically improving Crown Court until it more closely resembled typical (sub)urban neighborhoods equated with middle-class lifestyles? However, as with any purification or normalization technique, this approach ignores the ambiguous sociolegal classification of manufactured housing which exists regardless of its condition.

The limited scholarship on manufactured housing often refers to these structures as “hybrids” (e.g. Hart et al. 2002; Wallis 1991) stemming from their particular blend of automotive and domestic features. As such, even though newer models like mine and Antonia’s almost always have their hitch, wheels, and axels removed upon siting, because the unit remains attached to a metal chassis and is not placed on a permanent foundation its status as potentially mobile (Leivestad 2015, 2018) remains. However within the context of the mobile home park, “micro-othering” and other normalization strategies nonetheless afford individual mobile-homeowners a means by which to challenge the widespread devaluation of manufactured housing as “second class” compared to site-built homes. Whether by their own efforts or their castigation of others, the mobile-homeowners described in this section evoke house “pride” as a means by which to claim personal respect and dignity despite their “trailer park” address.
Living With/In “Trash”

Far from inert or passive, places are actively constituted through practice and experience; as Margaret Rodman (1993:12) observes, “any experience of place weaves together space, built form, behavior, and ideas, at individual and collective levels” (see also, Basso 1996; Casey 1996; Modan 2007; Stewart 1996b). Thus, while Crown Court mobile-homeowners’ houseproud activities, on an individual level, represent normalization techniques meant to signal respectable, middle-class (mobile) homeowner identities, their concerns regarding the “trashy” appearance of neighboring properties reveals how places are produced across multiple scales (Lefebvre 1991). Moreover, as Kefalas (2003) argues, housepride does more than signal status, as such behaviors also stress individual claims to belonging.

Conceptually, place sensing describes the collective meaning-making practices that create a particular place, as well as how people narrate belonging to those spaces (Kefalas 2003:5; Stewart 1996a, 1996b). Given these processes of social construction, “sense of place” is necessarily understood as being complicated, contested, and ever-changing (Biello 2013; Stewart 1996b), and as such requires near-constant attention and vigilance by residents seeking to resist any (inevitable) change (Biello 2013; Kefalas 2003). For MHC mobile-homeowners, like any residents in marginalized and/or stigmatized communities, normalizing their neighborhoods as a respectable, moral, and good place offers personal redemption through experiential (re)constructions of place.

Amy (66), recently widowed and a lifelong trailerite, recalled the bullying her daughter endured because she lived in a mobile home. “Oh, you live in a trailer? Well, trailer trash,” she remembered her daughter hearing, “and that really bothered her. But she put her head up and realized that we’re just as good as them.” Here, Amy identifies another aspect of place-making,
namely cultural mediation (Dorst 1989). As I describe in further detail in Chapter Seven, absent firsthand experiences with MHCs many non-residents, including policymakers and nonprofit housing advocates, regard popular negative “trailer trash” stereotypes as being (somewhat) accurate, a common presumption the mobile-homeowners I met were all-too aware of. Like Jerry, Amy’s home (Figure 22) was brimming with small trinkets, mementos, and framed photographs. Further, both homeowners were immensely proud of the homes in which they had raised their children, and as such reiterated contempt at being perceived as second-class citizens when compared to conventional homeowners, a common theme I heard from the residents with whom I spoke.

For mobile-homeowners in land-lease communities, the politics of place-making requires locating good or positive features, in particular “niceness,” within their neighborhoods. Likewise, in her ethnographic research of gated communities in the United States Setha Low (2003) describes anxious residents’ justification for living in securitized, private enclaves as a desire for a “nice” community where neighbors share similar values, identities, and moral obligations to one another. Roberta Raffaetà and Cameron Duff’s (2013) study among Ecuadoran migrants in Italy similarly finds that public efforts to nicen streets, parks, and communal areas increases the particular value migrants’ attach to a place and, thus, strengthens their sense of attachment or belonging to their community. In both contexts, despite fluctuating and contested meanings assigned to specific places, by making them “nice” residents find (partial) reprieve from threats of displacement or insecurity. Moreover, these efforts produce specific moral geographies wherein residents may physically and socially emplace themselves as moral, respectable persons (Modan 2007; Valentine et al. 2012). Thus, narrating MHCs as “nice” places overall, despite a few “trashy” neighbors, allows precarious mobile-homeowners a means
by which to distance themselves, as well as their homes and neighborhood, from harmful stereotypes.

Figure 22: Pictures and mementos line the wall of Amy’s 1974-model singlewide home.

However, beyond individual rhetoric, protecting or defending meaningful spaces often compels residents to self-police and/or surveil one another. Seated across from me in the lift recliner she’d bought for her late husband as his health declined, the worn shag carpets and dated kitchen appliances located throughout Amy’s 1974-model singlewide bore testament to her three-plus decade efforts to protect her neighborhood’s reputation. “I was one of the two people that got the Neighborhood Watch started back then, in the early ‘80s,” she told me:

So, I pretty much knew everybody in this area, and a lot in the other part [across the street] ’cause my son had a lot of friends. You just felt comfortable, [because] you knew if you were gone that June and Ed across the stress would look out for you. Or, you had
neighbors that were watching out and you knew their names, you knew their kids. It was kinda like one big family.

The pathologization of poverty in the United States typically demands lower-income populations to position themselves as “deserving,” rather than “undeserving” or “unworthy,” poor whose moral failings are presumed to (re)produce their vulnerable circumstances (Bourgois 1996; Dávila 2008; diLeonardo 1998; Maskovsky 2006; Rubin 1976). Anthropologist Oscar Lewis (1959, 1966) is widely credited with developing the culture of poverty concept, which suggests that certain cultural values and beliefs borne from impoverishment, when reproduced, creates ripe conditions for intergenerational transmission of poverty. Beyond academia, Lewis’ ideas were refashioned to suit mid-century (neo)conservative “family values” politics (1980s-90s) to situate poverty as a moral failing due to the lack of personal responsibility (Bourgois 1996; diLeonardo 2009; Greenbaum 2015; Morgen & Maskovsky 2003; Newman 1988; Stacey 1990). Further, these policies increasingly identified intergenerational poverty as a condition emerging out of “broken homes” beset by rampant criminality, welfare dependency, and a lack of parental discipline (Gregory 2003; Stacey 1990).

In his seminal ethnographic study of blue-collar families in Washington, D.C., *Hard Living on Clay Street* (1973), Joseph Howell comparatively framed two working-class households, the Mosebys and the Shackelfords, as characterizing “hard” and “settled” living patterns. While he noted many similarities between the two families—political skepticism, a penchant for alcohol, tumultuous marriages, and bouts of rude or offensive behavior—he found these traits more strongly present among the Shackelfords.

“More than anything else,” he wrote (6), “hard living refers to an approach to life that is intense, episodic, and uninhibited… Though it is an over-simplification to say that the hard living people have no concern for the future, it can be said that they are preoccupied with the
problems and drama of day-to-day life, particularly personal relationships.” Significantly, Howells stated that more “settled” families tended to look down upon “hard living” folks, and in extreme cases labelled them “white trash” (ibid.)

With the postwar economic boom fading, many social scientists sought to understand why some (white) working-class families floundered and others flourished (e.g. LeMasters 1975; Parker 1972; Rubin 1976, Sennett & Cobb 1972), and consequently Howells’ classifications were widely adopted. Yet, as with the “Culture of Poverty” debates, several authors have noted how “hard” and “settled” categorizations too often naively rely an archetype model of white, middle-class nuclear families (Bettie 2003; Rapp 1999; Susser 1996). As the terminology implies, “hard living” families are described as less “settled,” that is, transient, in flux, and mobile. However, as precarity and “precariat” theorists decades later (Allison 2013; Millar 2014; Muehlebach 2013; Waite 2009) would admit, the factors contributing to rootlessness—insecure labor and housing—long affected the poor and working-classes before troubling the middle-classes. Despite critiques, some scholars continue to use “hard” and “settled” language to describe mobile-homeowners identity management strategies. Margie Kiter-Edwards (2004), for instance, concludes that “hard-living” mobile home mothers are less socially embedded than their “settled” peers, and as such are apt to become “overwhelmed by daily activities” such as cleaning and child-rearing. However, while Kiter-Edward’s analysis would benefit from further attention to structural factors which inhibit an individuals’ ability to accumulate and leverage social capital (e.g. Bettie 2003; Goldstein 2003), her work nonetheless complements similar statements made to me by Amy, particularly regarding narratives around raising “good kids” and “keeping children out of trouble” (525).
Indeed, “settled” MHC families are described as engaged and active, whether in the workforce or local affairs such as Neighborhood Watches, like the one Amy started in the 1980s (MacTavish 2007; MacTavish & Salamon 2006). Yet, as an abject population most mobile-homeowners I met felt, and responded to, their perceived social exclusion with reclusion (Chapter Six). Indeed, as Rubin (1976) observed, insurmountable pain accompanies feelings of personal failure; for example, her research found that 40 percent of subjects had an alcoholic parent, oftentimes one who worked (albeit intermittently). Recognizing that in addition to their biophysical effects intoxicating drugs, including alcohol, are widely used for escapism and relief (Buer et al. 2016; Bourgois & Schonberg 2009; Garcia 2010), it stands to reason that reclusion, too, provides similar reprieve for the abject mobile-homeowner.

Thus, home improvements and purchases can function as aspirational items that signal and signify middle-classness for mobile-households as well as struggling middle- to middle-lower families (Kefalas 2003; Rubin 1976; Williams 2011), a point I expand on below. Albeit differently, each mobile-homeowner described thus far as aligned, or rather, normalized their housing circumstances as accomplishing the middle-class idealism captured by the American dream of homeownership. Like manufactured housing, the definitional boundaries of the middle-classes are vague, and as such mobile-homeowners carefully identify the social lines that distinguish themselves as “deserving” and “good” as opposed to their “trashy” neighbors. This common tactic is described by several ethnographers concerned with the function of aspirational discourse among middle- to lower-class individuals living in industrial and postindustrial states (e.g. Mazzarella 2003; Heiman et al. 2012; Kefalas 2003; Zhang 2010). Those who occupy social borderlands, whether physical or imagined, are therefore compelled to consciously affirm (and reaffirm) their position. For Amy, as with several other mobile-homeowners I interviewed,
affirmation meant emplacing her mobile home neighborhood as safer than nearby areas. “If you think about it,” she told me, somewhat conspiratorially, “there’s actually more crime in the Near South neighborhood than there is out here. I’m more concerned about my grandson who lives down there in the Near South than I am here.”

Both the Berubes (1997) and Kusenbach (2009) identify a tendency for mobile-homeowners to position their communities as more respectable, or less “trashy,” than other local MHCs. Amy’s insistence that Crown Court is safer than the Near South neighborhood, as well as Antonia’s hierarchical ordering of Lincoln MHCs, similarly situates some places, and by their extension the residents, as better than others, a pattern I heard from several other Crown Court residents:

F (50): Here in this one [Crown Court], it seems to be more upscale, like everybody really tries hard to keep […] their fronts nice. They keep their homes clean, they abide by [the rules], that kind of stuff. They take a lot more pride.

M (34): It’s [Crown Court] established. It’s been here for a long time. It’s proven that it’s not horrible. We all know each other. I’ve made pretty good friends.

F (54): There’s places around here that are, you know, like I said, trash. But here is, I think it’s one of the better communities around.

Occasionally, normalizing behaviors went even further into the domain of upstaging, which Kusenbach (2009:421) describes as instances where mobile-homeowners assert that, in fact, their homes (or MHCs) are better than conventional dwellings. Reba, for example, argued that trashiness is by no means restricted to trailer parks:

It depends on where you live. You can go downtown and see these houses that are trashy looking, and people don’t care. Then you get neighborhoods where everybody’s out doing their yard, taking care of their yard, because they have pride in it. We may live in a trailer park, mobile home park, whatever you wanna call it. But we take pride in what we have.

Likewise, Amy assured me that compared to other, more traditional Lincoln neighborhoods, Crown Court was perfectly safe and respectable. “It just, I can’t explain it,” Amy
sighed, struggling to find the words to describe how Crown Court felt to her. “It’s like the perfect little neighborhood, where everybody knew everybody.”

The ordering of space is a political project, and thus a function of power relations (Lefebvre 1991). As Chapter Two detailed, the exclusionary and restrictive zoning of mobile homes and communities to commercial and outlying urban districts was justified on the basis of their material difference from conventional “stick-built” housing, even as later models were less and less distinct from their site-built counterparts. Likewise, persons unfamiliar with “trailer parks,” in my experience, tend to rely on stereotypical portrayals of “trailer trash” to delegitimize these MHCs as respectable and/or on par with other neighborhoods. By contrast, “trailer trash” discourse as a form of “micro-othering” enables mobile-homeowners to leverage their intimate sense of place to position either themselves or their entire MHC as respectable in comparison to other parks or neighborhoods. Furthermore, Crown Court residents’ propensity to assure me their community is “just like” (or even better than) any other in Lincoln, that is, a mix of “good” and “not-so-good” people and places, normalizes and embeds their otherwise-excluded neighborhood within the social and moral geography of the city.

Do it Cheap and Do it Right: Autoconstruction as Peripheral Place-Making

Housepride, place-making, and even some rhetorical defensiveness altogether illustrates how Crown Court mobile-homeowners’ construct middle-class identities. Per Pierre Bourdieu (1984), we might conceptualize such processes as habitus, which describes the sociocultural norms that orient an individual’s actions and thoughts. Conceived as a process rather than a static identity, I approach class and place as mutually constitutive and actively (re)produced (ibid; see also, Bettie 2003; Jackson 2001; Liechty 2003; Modan 2007; Walley 2013). And yet, the same
categorical vagueness enabling mobile-homeowners to claim middle-class identities also justifies exclusionary treatment on the basis of material distinctiveness. Mobile-homeowners, who are keenly aware their housing choices are not seen as conventional, often invest even more of their (usually limited) resources toward normalization projects to counteract managerial, or even municipal, interference.

Like the first generation of trailerites who traversed the Great American Desert in self-made campers, do-it-yourself projects permeate Crown Court, ranging from built-on rooms and porches to plumbing, piping, and electrical work. As improvement projects, these undertakings make each mobile home more “homey,” oftentimes by building secured, permanent features that attach the house to the property. Take Jerry’s porch, for example: “I go above and beyond what code would call for because I’m not going to do it and then you get a heavy wind and the next thing you know it’s teetering and going to fall down.” However, as these projects secure the homeowner’s property to the landlord’s, they are not allowed without special permits and permissions. Generally, residents forgo these, as Jerry explained:

I was supposed to get one of their [management’s] papers and draw it all out and everything with the size and dimensions and all that crap, hand it to them and they’re going to approve it or disapprove it. I didn’t even do that, I just built it.

Projects such as these represent a type of *autoconstruction*, defined as a process where peripheral populations construct their “dream homes,” often using illegal or extra-legal means (Caldeira 1999; Holston 1991, 2009; as “self-provided” housing, *see* Sullivan & Olmedo 2015). Viewed as “autoconstruction,” mobile-homeowners’ home projects, whether incomplete or merely planned, reframe home-making as a process that reaffirms both a claim of belonging to a *place* (Crown Court) and a respectable *social status* as (middle-class) homeowners. In Oaxaca, Mexico, Iván Sandoval-Cervantes (2017) describes similar processes undertaken by Mexican
migrant workers, whose unfinished homes signify a complex affective blend of aspiration and frustration as families face uncertain futures. Through his (auto)construction projects, Jerry, as a (mobile) homeowner, also materializes (or “spatializes” [ibid:210]) a personal stake in Crown Court’s contested present and future. And, although he was reprimanded for building without a permit, ultimately management allowed Jerry to keep his porch because “it’s not like it was going to be a junk up.”

As normalizing techniques however, these practices do not fully conventionalize mobile housing; the underlying precariousness of renting land remains, and mobile-homeowners like Jerry could face fines or even eviction for such flagrant rule violations. In this sense, we might further conceptualize these and similar houseproud actions as those of a bricoleur, defined by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962) as someone who “works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman” (11, emphasis added). Or, as Elizabeth Hatton (1989) describes, the bricoleur falls “in-between” a crafts- and odd-job person, in that they set out not with a specific project in mind, but rather gather together whatever materials available on-hand “to see what might be useful in the context of some present problem” (75). In Brazil, James Holston (1991) also contends that by virtue of their distinctiveness, the poor, working class’ autoconstructed homes (autoconstrução) reinforce and spatialize disadvantageous socio-structural relations through building homes which are, in addition to their location throughout the urban peripheries, subsequently identified as lower-status housing.

Joe, for instance, had to fight the local natural gas utility to hook up his kitchen stove. While the Crown Court maintenance team offered to install a line instead, Joe rejected their offer, ultimately compromising with the utility to do it himself. “They wouldn’t put it in a mobile home,” he recalled being told. “Oh, we don’t do trailer parks.” This was not an uncommon
experience, as several residents told me that most service professionals refuse to work on mobile homes due to the belief that mobile-homeowners cannot afford their services. Yet, Joe promised the utility that if they would let him install the line, he would let them service all of his appliances and hook-ups in the future. Ultimately, this cost Joe $650, however “in the long run that’s a good deal because [they] got a deal where they service all my appliances.” I asked Joe why he refused to let Crown Court’s maintenance team install the line, as it would have been less expensive. He scoffed and shook his head, recalling some shoddy work that had been done on his brother Jerry’s home before he built his own, sturdier, front deck.

“Well, that’s how we do it here,” he remember Jerry having been told. “So, I says, you ain’t doing no Southern engineering in my house. Get the hell out of here.”

“Southern engineering?” I asked.

“Well, there’s a difference between cheap and right,” Joe responded. “Now, he can do it cheaply but do it right. But Ted [maintenance] didn’t do it right.”

Piecemeal, and occasionally not permitted, MHC residents like Joe and Jerry nonetheless materialize their claims to both respectable, middle-class identities as well as community residency via the physical appearance of their (mobile) home. As a mode of self-expression (Miller 2001:9), the home becomes the medium by which Crown Court mobile-homeowners resist stigmatizing identities as “trailer park trash.” However aspirational, the devalued sociolegal status of land-lease MHCs may instead be held as further proof of mobile-homeowners’ “deviousness” as individual households flaunt community rules or insist on top-quality service for an economically devalued asset. Still, as modern bricoleurs, many mobile-homeowners I met refused to accept treatment as “second-class” homeowners, and instead
approached their imposed precarity as an opportunity to showcase their individual creativity and resilience.

Wheelin’ and Dealin’

Mobile-homeowners’ “home-making” activities, however, do not unequivocally make their “trailers” into homes as far as non-residents are concerned. Exemplifying this is Carmen, Crown Court’s former district manager, who off-handedly remarked to me one afternoon, “What’s crazy about it is that a lot of people invest so much money inside their house. They put in ceramic tile, or they plaster their homes outside. And it’s almost like a…” She paused, before adding incredulously, “Like a house.”

The anthropological scholarship on the middle-classes is primarily focused on consumption (e.g. Jefferson 2015; Liechty 2003; Low 2003; Williams 2010; critiquing this trend, see Goldstein 2012:226), yet consumption as practice can, according to Daniel Miller (1995) “be a source of considerable pleasure, it may equally be regarded as the source of considerable anxiety” (36; see also, Berlant 2011; Heiman 2015; Jones 2010). That is, consumption can be both freeing and agentive, however auspicious or excessive spending may provoke social chastisement (Jones 2012; Marchand 1985; Newman 1999). Yet, because possessions also constitute our identities (Belk 1988; Tilley et al. 2006), their affective—or “spiritual,” even—power over us may be deeply troubling (Engelke 2005; Jones 2010; Nakamura & Pels 2014:192.

Describing the “tension between materiality and spirituality” (Jones 2010:630), the [*fetish*](#), according to William Pietz (1985), is an historical relic, a concept produced from colonial encounters and Enlightenment philosophies. Like mimicry, fetish discourse emerges from the profound discomfort of similarity between (supposedly) categorically distinct things (Newell...
Thus, where mimics are disregarded as “inauthentic,” so too are fetishized objects deemed to be “inappropriately” valued (Latour 1993; Pietz 1985). Neoliberal rhetoric has coopted many aspects of fetish discourse, in particular scrutinizing the consumption decisions of poor and lower income populations whose impoverishment is regarded as a consequence of personal (ir)responsibility. That said, middle-class over consumption also receives its fair share of sociopolitical ire, especially concerning the high debt loads shouldered by millions of middle-class American families (Besteman & Gusterson 2011:7-8; Jefferson 2013; Williams 2008, 2011). As such, consumption creates a double-bind for mobile-homeowners, whose occupation of categorically ambiguous housing inspires normalizing, or houseproud, behaviors read as deviance by the wider public.

“Bet this makes you jealous,” teased Mark (49) as he led me through his recently renovated kitchen. Having finished paying off his sky blue, 1992-model singlewide the previous December, Mark had immediately set about updating the kitchen. First he’d installed new cabinets, purchased for $750 online. Next, he upgraded the appliances, adding a convection oven ($200) that also featured a dehydrator and bread proofer. Then, his wine wrack, brand new French doors (another $700), a bistro table; the renovations went on and on. His pride and joy, however, was his knife drawer, complete with a custom wooden organizer (Figure 23).

Truthfully, I had never seen an in-drawer knife tray before; growing up, reaching into my parents’ knife drawer was a risky endeavor as a jumbled mess of serrated blades, paring knives, and the odd pair of meat shears awaited incautious, grabbing hands. As an adult, I’d thought my counter knife block was quite fancy despite its Wal-Mart origins, however not even that held a candle to what Mark was showing off. So yes, I was jealous.
Obviously, Mark knew this, and as he continued the tour he made sure to keep inconspicuously mentioning the cost of each new feature. Yet, his boasting was tempered by his assurances that most, if not all, of these purchases had been sales or “deals” he’d made. For example, his cabinetry. “All these cabinets, I paid seven-hundred and fifty bucks for,” he explained, adding that they, like his stove, were purchased on Craigslist.

“That’s a nice deal,” I commented.

“Yeah,” Mark agreed. “It was a model display, so when that came across Craigslist, I jumped on it.” Although most mobile home interior features and appliances are slightly distinct from conventional, site-built units because of their factory-line construction, Mark explained that
the showroom model cabinetry he’d bought, which was smaller than most pieces, was a perfect fit for his manufactured home. He saved even more on installation, which, like Joe and his gas line, or Jerry and his front porch, he and his adult son mounted themselves.

“I like this kitchen,” Mark proudly remarked, his eyes scanning across the space he’d put so much time, effort, and money into. “Makes it look nice in here.”

As Miller (1995:46) argues, consumption is simultaneously a moral and ethical endeavor. Indeed, Mark noting how his renovated kitchen “makes it look nice in here” once more evokes “niceness” as coded language for middle-class aesthetics (Kefalas 2003; Low 2003, 2010).

Transforming his mobile home into a “nice” place, Mark, in addition to several other mobile-homeowners described thus far, attempts to normalize their housing as “just as good” as their (undisputed) middle-class, conventional home-dwelling counterparts who, too, might boast over their specialized knife drawers and luxurious, custom-built cabinetry (see Heiman 2015; Low 2003).

As neither owners of capital (bourgeois) nor sellers of labor (proletariat), the middle-classes are arguably formed around, and through, the consumption of goods, yet against the American Protestant Ethic which, among other things, eschews greed and embraces thrift, the desire for material goods incites anxiety between social (class) belonging and moral-ethical imperatives (Jefferson 2015; Liechty 2003). Within neoliberal framings frugality is further celebrated as a measure of personal responsibility even as widespread austerity measures disproportionately target the welfare state apparatus (Dunk 2002; Goode & Maskovsky 2002; Greenbaum 2015; Morgen 2001; Morgen & Maskovsky 2003; Waquant 2008). Indeed, research on the “falling” middle-classes reveals that even as families struggle to make ends meet, refusal to accept “government handouts,” i.e. subsidies, alludes to an individual’s moral standing (Dunk
Embracing precarious economic circumstances as “commonsense,” Jefferson describes this new “austerity citizen” (cf. Maskovsky 2012) as an individual who “takes anything she can get” (2015:320); someone, like Mark, who has learned to get ahead through *wheelin’ and dealin’*. Therefore, as a moral practice consumption provides opportunities for middle-class households to illustrate their care and character through frugality, while also displaying evidence of their success and stability through possession of specific luxury goods. Housing, too, constitutes a consumer good, and few (if any) conventional homeowners would equate their homes with manufactured units.

In Chapter Two I showed how, through aesthetic deception, manufactured housing became an increasingly indistinguishable mimic of conventional housing throughout the twentieth century; through normalization techniques including consumption, this chapter extends this analysis to show how mobile-homeowners claim respectable, middle-class identities vis-à-vis their (mobile) housing. However, as Daniel Miller (1995) notes, the categorical emptiness and blurred boundaries defining the middle-classes transforms consumption into a moral, or ethical, social act. Just as mobile-homeowners like Reba, Jerry, and Antonia police the boundaries of respectability with “trailer trash” discourse, so too are non-MHC residents—like the service providers who refused to work on Joe’s home because it was a “trailer”—invested in defending respectability and “niceness” through exclusion. Within such frameworks, Mark’s boastful attitude regarding his repurposed and jerry-rigged kitchen is reinterpreted as fetishistic behavior, an inappropriate valuation of his house(hold) that approximates, but is never equated to, traditional site-built housing.

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13 Notably, these narratives often fail to acknowledge how Congress has subsidized conventional homeowners for decades with tax policies meant to promote, and therefore favoring, homeownership (Desmond 2016).
“I Wouldn’t Live in an Apartment for Nothin’”

As fellow ethnographers “at home” have noted (Gilfillan 2014; Walley 2013), recalling the standard Malinowskian “arrival narrative” is unrealistic, something I fretted about as my fieldwork began. (According to my parents, I was less than two months old the first time I traveled to Lincoln.) Yet, as my project similarly concerns the home as an affective and material space, I came to realize, after much encouragement by my friends and colleagues, that my literal “homecoming” was ethnographically significant.

On Christmas Eve 2014, my parents, Carol, and I toured the singlewide I was to rent throughout my principle fieldwork (Figure 24). I gaped at its spaciousness; 1,216 square feet, vaulted ceilings, and a kitchen so large, Carol gleefully insisted “you can plug in all of your kitchen appliances here!” My parents, who had previously toured the home, waited excitedly by the master bed and bath, which boasted French-style doors and a full garden tub. Meanwhile, Carol shouted from across the living room that she wanted me to check out “the guest wing,” which included two additional bedrooms and a second full bathroom. Yet, one feature stood out to me as the most impressive: the hanging light fixture in the kitchen/dining area. Like Mark with his knife organizer, I proudly told anyone who asked (and many more who didn’t) that my trailer came with a chandelier.
I’d never lived somewhere that had a chandelier before. (And no, I don’t especially care that it was technically not a chandelier.)

Unconsciously, I kept referring to the unit as either a “trailer” or an “apartment,” something Carol chided me about: “This isn’t a trailer; it’s a mobile home.” (To be fair, neither of us were correct; built in 2014, the structure was actually a manufactured home.) Gesturing to a south-facing window that overlooked my neighbor’s home, a 1972-model in desperate need of repair, Carol insisted that house was a “trailer,” adding that as part of Crown Court’s rebranding efforts older properties such as his would be gradually replaced with newer and nicer rental units like my own. Indeed, corporate policy was shifting such that (mobile) homeownership was practically prohibited in order to expand rental opportunities.

Carol, like several of her co-workers recruited from the real estate and/or apartment sectors, frequently derided prospective residents interested in owning a home on-site. For instance, several months later she told me about a phone call she’d received from an interested
buyer, “asking if ‘we can buy one of your trailers.’” As she spoke, she adopted an exaggerated, drawling Southern accent. She laughed, “I could sell you a roller skate! It’s better than a trailer!”

Likewise, D. Landis, the Lincoln/Lancaster County Director of Urban Redevelopment, described mobile-homeownership as more akin to renting in an apartment complex: “The underlying reality is mobile home living is you are a renter. That’s the underlying legal reality of a mobile home park resident. They’re a tenant.”

Likening mobile-homeownership to apartment rentals, or framing such housing as less valuable than a “roller skate” applies legal and financial frameworks to diminish the symbolic value of manufactured housing vis-à-vis more conventional housing types, including traditional single-family dwellings and apartment complexes, effectively culling mobile-homeowners from the “social ladder of life” (Perin 1977) indexed through housing. “Who rents in a mobile home court?” asked one Lincoln planner, who unlike Carol, Carmen, and Landis cited above, once lived in MHC in rural Nebraska. “An apartment, is it less than a mobile home? Or, is it more than a mobile home? Is it a lateral shift? I don’t know how that looks.” Shrugging, he then asked me, “What do you think?”

I think that for Mark, Jean, Jerry, and many more mobile-homeowners I met, buying a mobile home signifies a type of aspirational homeownership, and as such shares much more in common with the idealized American dream of (middle-class) homeownership than leasing an apartment. This is supported by ethnographic studies of consumption among middle- to lower income classes in industrial or postindustrial states like the U.S., such as Brett Williams’ (2010, 2011) research which connects the presence of pawn shops, paycheck advance outlets, and rent-to-own centers to low-income urban residents’ desires to realize middle-class lifestyles through consuming products symbolically associated with that class position (see also, Heiman et al.)
2012; Kefalas 2003; Mazzarella 2003; Miller 2008; Zhang 2010). Also, in contrast to the non-residents’ perspectives provided above, most mobile-homeowners I spoke with took offense to being associated with apartment dwellers.

“Oh, I wouldn’t live in an apartment for nothing,” scoffed Peggy (71), a retired electrician who had moved to Crown Court from another MHC in Kansas in 2004. Although Peggy lived alone in her 1,568 square foot doublewide (Figure 25), her numerous hobbies took up any available space; she even admitted to once cleaning her motorcycle in the middle of her living room. “An apartment is not big enough because I have to have my sewing room. I mean, I wouldn’t be able to stand having my computer sitting out here.”

Space, privacy, and in particular not wanting to share walls, ceilings, or floors with neighbors were all common reasons provided by homeowners for why they preferred mobile-homeownership to apartment rentals. Further, several residents, including Peggy, stated that they simply had too much “stuff,” the accumulated consumer goods signaling one’s middle-class status in addition to personal keepsakes and trinkets, for anything less than a “house.” Hilda, Peggy’s neighbor and dearest friend, aptly illustrated this typical problem.

“She’s got three bedrooms over there,” Peggy said, describing Hilda’s home and its contents. “Her front room is an office. And she’s also a preacher… Can you see a preacher lady being my best friend?” Together, we laughed; feisty and prone to profanity-laden tirades, it was admittedly difficult to picture Peggy befriending a pastor. She continued:

But her little middle bedroom is her sewing room. She’s got just enough room to get her big butt past her ironing board that’s sitting in the doorway, over to her sewing machine. That wall is full of shelves and everything with button containers and all this and that, this over here is full of shelves and containers with material. Over here by the closet, is full of totes with material. You open her closet—which she don’t very often close it—and it’s racks and racks of hangers of material […] And that’s the size house she needs.
For Crown Court residents, the majority of whom live at or below the poverty line, mobile-homeownership affords independence, and by extension, respectability. By purchasing a manufactured home, MHC households are able to live at (or near) their budget while also acquiring consumer goods, like wooden knife drawers or wine racks, identified with middle-class extravagance. MH industry leaders acknowledge this fact, and have over decades crafted clever marketing campaigns that emphasize how much mobile-homeowners can save compared to conventional owners (Hurley 2001:225). In Lincoln, ads identifying mobile-homeownership with thriftiness date back to at least 1971, as one mobile home park and dealership advertisement promising consumers affordable, quality homes for those interest in “homes produced the 20th century way – the value packed way.” Even Crown Court corporate management recognizes this
link, as their company motto proudly proclaims: “Ours is the best housing value for the working people of America.”

Houseproud behaviors, whether discursive or physical, inscribe a sense of place and create a moral geography within which an individual or community can be positioned. This is expressly true for those occupying liminal or extraordinary spaces. In the working-class neighborhood Kefalas (2003) studied, defensive behaviors expressed underlying anxieties of perceived or observed change. While defensiveness frequently reinforces social division along raced and classed lines—a topic I explore in detail in Chapter Five—these self-preservation techniques can also stave off the fears of displacement pressure. For Crown Court mobile-homeowners, whose future is deeply uncertain, maintaining a “nice” home and yard vis-à-vis “trashy” neighbors may offer a temporary respite from managerial harassment or even sudden eviction for “No Cause” (Chapter Seven). Euroamerican cultural norms prescribe clear delineations between public and private spaces, with the latter applied to the domestic domain of the family home (Habermas 1991), however a significant body of literature has found that home décor is often meant to be noticed by neighbors (Berlant 2011; Habermas 1991; Hartigan 1999; Heiman 2015; Kefalas 2003; Lawrence-Zúñiga 2010). Displaying trendy items and photographs near windows, or “casually” spreading certain magazines across a coffee table wordlessly signals belonging or status within a community (Miller 2008).

Like Hilda’s sewing supplies, or Jerry’s sturdy porch, Mark’s prideful boasting regarding his kitchen is notable for its future orientation despite Crown Court’s precarious future. Informing me that he’s “not quite done yet,” Mark pointed toward the front of his home, where his kitchen table sat underneath a wide expanse of west-facing windows. “I wanna put a breakfast nook in front here. I’m gonna build it onto that backside here, of this wall right here.”
More gesturing. “And then I’m gonna redo that window. It’s gonna be different later down the road, but it takes time.” By proudly showing off his organized wooden knife drawer and describing plans to construct a breakfast nook, Mark conveyed something to me about how he sees himself, his home, and his social status. And, like Joe and Reba, Mark resists any attempt to homogenize himself, and by extension his home, as “second grade”:

Overall, it’s public. Period. People say, “Where you live at?” “Crown Court trailer park.” “Oh.” You get that response because people think that you’re second grade because you live in a trailer home. Like you can’t afford a real home. Well, maybe it was my choice? Like I told this one person one time, maybe it was my choice to move here because I did own a home and I had health issues, so I moved in somewhere that was cheaper for me. And I’m on disability. I should have to explain that to you, I said. My home’s just as good… and I have to clean less than you would, duh!

As I have shown, mobile-homeownership exposes major contradictions within the American dream of (traditional) homeownership identified with middle-class respectability and normality, not least of which includes encountering the socially unexpected: a bevy of custom-built features costing an estimated $1,650 located in a “trailer” valued in 2015 for $8,300. The home indexes respectability, middle-class status, and the American dream of homeownership, however its conceptual vagueness allows mobile-homeowners to claim moral citizenship through specific behaviors (micro-othering, autoconstruction, consumption) despite owning a culturally and economically devalued object: a “trailer” house. However, this creative opportunism is not restricted to maintaining appearances; as the next chapter illustrates, mobile-homeowners further resist the “second-class” treatment of their housing using the language, logic, and rules of the domain in which their exclusion is most profoundly experienced: the realm of finance.
CHAPTER FOUR

Money Talks

One Man’s “Trash” is Another Man’s Treasure

I first met S.R. in 2011 while writing and researching the *Lincoln Promise Neighborhood Initiative* (see Chapter Seven), then at a local housing nonprofit. We kept in touch off-and-on in the intervening years, not atypical given how close-knit Lincoln’s nonprofit and advocacy circles are. (In fact, when I visited S.R. in 2013 he was temporarily working from a repurposed doublewide, which we both agreed was fittingly humorous.) Thus, I quickly prioritized reacquainting myself with his organization once my yearlong fieldwork stint began.

Despite deeply respecting him and his work, our opinions on Lincoln’s MHCs differed dramatically. To be fair, S. worked tirelessly to gain access to two MHCs located adjacent to an open-air sewage treatment plant where rumors of discrimination and illegal activities have circulated for decades only to be escorted off the property several times. With that in mind, it is perhaps understandable how, upon reconnecting in January 2015, S. began our conversation by excitedly telling me how, based on his knowledge, “about eighty percent” of Lincoln MHCs were slated for redevelopment “soon, maybe in the next two or three years.”

My shocked look of disbelief prompted a bit of backtracking. “Or, maybe ten years.”

Still, he seemed pleased with the proposed developments, including the *West Lincoln Redevelopment Zone*, so I asked for a formal interview with him. We met in February in a trendy local coffee shop near the state capitol building, and S., the textbook definition of gregarious, apologized in advance for any longwinded tangents. I assured him that longwinded is my preferred form of tangent.
Inevitably, the question of MHCs as a component of Lincoln’s dwindling affordable housing stock was raised. I asked S. if he considered MHCs as part of Lincoln’s affordable housing market despite the fact that many park communities, including Crown Court, refused to accept housing vouchers. True to his word, he went on for several minutes:

That’s why this question is so tricky. I guess also there’s another way to put it, I mean you can think about it this way too: do people have choices? You can ask people *do you choose to live here, or is this your only choice?* How many people actually have that luxury of being able to pick and choose what neighborhood, what type of housing you live in? Maybe that person that you talk to is *choosing* to live in the mobile home, and maybe they have other means that they can go live somewhere else but they’re choosing to live there. But the reality of it is the majority of folks who live in the mobile homes—and I don’t want to over-generalize—a lot of folks that are not documented, they have really poor credit, they’re super low-income, they’re basically one paycheck away, I mean, a lot of us are one paycheck away but, that’s really their only choice, their only option for housing. That type of housing exists because there really is not a whole lot of other options. Again, I’m not over-generalizing, I’m just saying that, mobile homes exist because there’s a market.

Here, S. alludes to how the MH industry operates parallel to the conventional housing market; as Jim Clayton (2002), founder of Clayton Homes—the largest home builder in the United States—likewise notes, success in the MH industry requires that one “seize a niche that’s under-served, and own the market” (107).

Freedom of choice is a central tenant of American meritocratic principles as an expression of individualism, however under advancing neoliberalism rhetoric surrounding “choice” has come to be increasingly identified as indicating one’s moral character and sense of personal responsibility (Goldstein 2002; Ho 2009; Hyatt 2002; Jefferson 2013; Miller 1995; Morgen 2001). Epitomizing the adage “one man’s [sic] trash is another man’s treasure,” the ambiguous sociolegal treatment of manufactured housing produces highly oppositional value systems among mobile-homeowners, industry members, and non-resident stakeholders, each
functioning to de/legitimize the acceptability of manufactured housing both in the present as well as for the future.

Although Evette (53) mostly characterizes S.’s hypothetical MHC resident, in our interview she stressed how, despite her less-than-desirable circumstances, mobile-homeownership was a choice she’d gladly make again. For example, when asked whether or not she would consider placing her home on a permanent foundation in order to make the structure eligible for classification as real estate, Evette retorted, “Hell no! I mean, rain water, flooding? Just goes underneath me. It just washes out the ants, and those are a real pain.”

Like Evette, the foreclosed homeowners Anna Jefferson (2015) studied in Michigan expressed resistance, shame, or altogether refigured their experiences with downward mobility or poverty in relation to the normalcy identified with the middle-class. In particular, reliance on state aid was associated with dependency, being “undeserving” (316), or even parasitic, not unlike the social derision Constance Perin (1977) observed for apartment dwellers or renters more generally. As I noted in the previous chapter, most Crown Court residents I met were loath to equate their housing with apartments or similar multi-family units. Whereas that chapter illustrated how these mobile-homeowners claim respectable middle-class identities aesthetically vis-à-vis consumer goods and home-making practices, here I describe a related tactic wherein mobile-homeowners mitigate “trailer trash” stigma through explicitly financialized language as a means of asserting moral personhood. By emphasizing Crown Court residents’ narrations of choice, this analysis considers how mobile-homeowners assert individual agency in spite of adverse financial circumstances or the threat of dispossession by redevelopment.

Admittedly, some residents’ situations were quite dire. When Evette and her ex-husband bought her 1997-model singlewide for $30,000 in 1999 from a local third-party dealer (Figure
26), the pair’s application to live in Crown Court was initially rejected based on their poor credit score. Although their dealer was able to persuade Crown Court to accept the couple—Evette attributed this to the $3,000 cash payment she put down on the home—the arrangement cost them dearly.

“Figure 26: Although she paid over $80,000 for her home, in 2015 Evette's singlewide was valued at just $8,600. (Photo by author.)

“You know how much I actually paid after I got it paid off?” she asked me. “Eighty thousand dollars.” That amount shocked me, as by 2015 Evette’s home was only valued at $8,600. I asked, “What was your interest rate?” Evette sighed. “Because of my ex’s bad credit…” She trailed off, then began again. “‘Cause we were married, it was, like, 23 percent.”
She grinned. “Yeah... So then, after the divorce, I had to get him off it and refinance through me.”

However, after Evette was diagnosed with Stage-4 thyroid cancer, she was forced to go from full-time to part-time work as an independent housekeeper. Luckily, Evette finally paid off her loan in 2014, ultimately spending over nine times the 2015 assessed value of her home. Despite the hefty price tag, Evette stressed that her affordable monthly payments ($153.96 per month, plus lot rent) represented the only realistic avenue for homeownership she had. As such, Evette deeply resented whenever her housing lifestyle was unfavorably compared to apartment rentals:

“Oh, you’re one of them, mobile home, white trash,” someone will say to me. And I’m goin’, yeah, but it’s mine. I can hook it up and leave when I want to. And I don’t have to answer to you! Where do you live? “An apartment,” he’ll say. Yep, you just answered my question. And it’s like, small, efficiency ones for $660 rent? What? Even if they live in an apartment, they think they have more money and can afford a house. Guess what? I can get a rent-to-own, four-bedroom, three-bath, bad credit okay, no payment down for that.

As Major L. Clark argued in 1972, the marketed affordability of mobile-homeownership did not offset its financial and social drawbacks, a perspective echoed in decades-worth of economic research that has declared mobile-homeownership, as well as renting more broadly, to be an “unwise” financial decision (Beracha & Johnson 2012; Tabner 2016). However, as anthropologists have long observed, no decision is made in a vacuum, that is, without context. For instance, Evette framed her decision to purchase a depreciating mobile home without land securitization as rational given her financial circumstances and preferable to renting an apartment. But resisting commonsense economic logic carries its own risks, not least of which is being labelled “unsophisticated,” “irrational,” or “easily duped.” With respect to financial citizenship, a concept I explore at length below, Mark Kear (2013) cautions against regarding
unconventional or informal economic practices as risk-free, given existing structural power relations within societies. Neoliberal dominance within advanced capitalist systems, Jeff Maskovsky (2006:76-7; see also, Lyon-Calvo 2008; Maskovsky 2001) argues, has reshaped what are considered acceptable forms of participation for urban residents, particularly those occupying deindustrialized or abandoned spaces. In *Barrio Dreams* (2004), Arlene Dávila gives ethnographic support to these observations, particularly with respect to the “marketing of space” (11). Situated in East Harlem, Dávila writes how certain “economic zone” projects, like the WLRZ, promise reinvestment with “proper” land management, namely by realigning community priorities to suit the needs of private interests, primarily through cultural tourism. Likewise, in the sections that follow I describe how mobile-homeowners including Evette rationalized their decision to own and occupy depreciating assets categorized as “chattel” as a good investment and, therefore, as reflective of their moral and personal character.

Insofar as housing has become increasingly *financialized* through the assimilation of capitalist logics into the domestic sphere (Birdwell-Pheasant and Lawrence-Zúñiga 1999:25; Miller 2005; Jefferson 2013; Stout 2016b), I argue that economic language provides an additional space in which mobile-households make a claim to “the good life.” However, as these accounts reveal, Crown Court residents’ attempts to balance the symbolic and economic value of their “trailer” homes, more often than not dominant sociolegal precedent rejects or fails to legitimize mobile-homeownership as conventional or normal.

**Financial Subjectivities and the American Dream of Homeownership**

According to Donna Birdwell-Pheasant and Denise Lawrence-Zúñiga (1999:25), over the past century dominant global perceptions have tended to commodify the “home,” transforming it
into a thoroughly financialized object while fundamentally altering the affective and material relationship between “home” and “owner.” Euroamerican traditional ideals regard the familial home as an investment, true, however one that demands significant material, symbolic, and/or emotional resources as it is passed down from generation to generation. By contrast, as an economic asset, the financialized home is largely stripped of its affective significance (García-Lamarca & Kaika 2016; Reid 2017; Stout 2016a). Consequently, homeowners become temporary stewards of their home’s monetary value, shifting the longevity of tenure from several generations to a handful of years. Before the Great Recession American homeowners moved once every six years on average, however post-recession data indicates that figure has increased to ten years; this, counter to the average mobile-homeowner, who has typically relocated less often than their conventional counterparts since the 1970s (Clark 2017).

Despite its commodification, conceptually “the home” retains its symbolic associations with respectability, morality, and “perfected citizenship” (Perin 1977:72; see also, Halle 1984; Jefferson 2015; Kefalas 2003). However, as becoming a homeowner requires access to significant amounts of financial capital, typically through a mortgage loan, mortgages, too, are believed to implicitly gauge one’s moral worthiness vis-à-vis access to credit and/or debt relations (García-Lamarca & Kaika 2016; Perin 1977; Williams 2011). It is the mortgage, therefore, that makes the home.

Like shelter, Andrew Layshon and Nigel Thrift (1995) regard economic participation as a basic human right. Financial citizenship, per Layshon and Thrift, is defined as the inherent right to economic inclusion, guaranteed by the state, for all its citizens; however, as these authors note, most states have failed to protect these rights. Capitalist systems, Jefferson (2015:311) notes, are premised on generating inequalities (as gains and losses), thereby posing an inherent
contradiction to the goals of citizenship. By adopting Foucaultian approaches to governmentality and security apparatuses, subsequent research has framed financial citizenship as a critical mediation necessary to combat the public divestment of social welfare associated with late global neoliberalism(s) (Kear 2013; Lai and Tan 2015; Reid 2017).

Commodifying “the home” has by no means resolved its conceptual murkiness as a simultaneously (im)material object of hyper-significance, and as such financial rhetoric creates opportunities for excluded or marginalized populations like mobile-homeowners to reposition themselves as “good” or “moral” persons via their financial decisions. The limited ethnographic scholarship on foreclosed homeowners in the aftermath of the Great Recession has shown how defaulters defied mainstream accounts condemning their excessive greed, recklessness, or lack of sophistication by constructing counter-narratives that question the morality of debt repayment and/or “strategic default” as moral obligations (Jefferson 2013, 2015; Reid 2017; Stout 2016a, 2016b). This work represents a departure from traditional anthropological debates on moral economies (Peebles 2010; Scott 1977) by illustrating how dispossessed residents rationalize their economic (dis)engagement with unequal and exploitative capitalist systems by directly appealing to morality and reciprocity (see also, Stout 2016a:84). Without formal legal and financial recognition as home-owners, mobile-homeowners likewise confront “trailer trash” stigmatization and affirm their respectability and full rights as citizens with thoroughly financialized discourse.

Like Evette, Jerry justified living in Crown Court as an affordable alternative to conventional homeownership. Seated on his custom-built front porch, he explained to me that despite all the drawbacks of land-lease park residence, mobile-homeownership had its benefits:

It's cheaper in the long run. They're smaller. My upkeep and maintenance isn't that expensive on it. As long as you keep up with everything that goes wrong, as soon as you figure out it's wrong or find out it's wrong, if you repair it and repair it properly, it's really cheap living to be honest with you. Better than a home. Now these are built just like the
homes. It used to be that they didn’t have to follow any standards. Now they have to follow building codes and everything else on it. Before just the walls were two by two walls. Now they're two by four. Some of them are even two by sixes now. If you order your home, you can order it to be a two by six instead of a two by four. They're insulated better now than what they used to be. To me it all has to do with the cost of living on it.

The Crown Court residents I spoke with unanimously agreed that their main reason for owning a mobile home was cost-related, and as such “money talk” quickly emerged as a consistent theme in my research. Yet, Jerry’s assertion that manufactured homes are “better than” site-built units is itself a counter-narrative, one which challenges conventional wisdom regarding housing valuation. Conceptually, value is more the product of specific social relationships than the inherent properties of an object (Appadurai 1986; Maurer 2005). While widely regarded as a natural social fact, Karl Polanyi (1957) argued that economic realities, such as Western “economic rationality,” are culturally produced, highly specific, and deeply tied to local contexts and histories. For example, that Euroamerican cultural traditions regard housing as doubly durable—both as a permanent structure and the site of familial reproduction—the “natural” economic value of the home is unquestionable.

Yet not all values are purely economic. Janice Nadler and Sheri Seidman Diamond (2008:721) argue that owners subjectively value their properties, including “all the reasons why owners might have a special attachment to their property” in addition to, or perhaps in spite of, its economic value, including:

The improvements [owners] have made over the years using their own labor and design ideas; the memories inexorably connected with the property, including milestones like births, birthdays, and weddings, along with mundane but no less important memories of everyday living; proximity to friends and family; connections with others in the neighborhood that leverage social capital; expression of personality; and the ability of a home to provide the opportunity to maintain and express personal and group identity (ibid).
Altogether, these “special” values enhance or outright dismiss conventional asset calculations, enabling mobile-homeowners like Jerry to adapt dominant financial logics to perform “normal” or “good” identities despite occupying structures situated at the lowest symbolic position within the American housing landscape. Reflecting national trends among mobile-homeowners, surprisingly few (17%) Lincoln mobile-homeowners I interviewed planned or hoped to one day own conventional real estate; thirteen (45%) residents had no plans to leave Crown Court in the foreseeable future.

Ailing for decades, in 1999 President Bill Clinton repealed the Glass-Steagall Act (1933), Depression-era legislation that sought to stabilize the economy by prohibiting banking monopolies. Its repeal triggered an onslaught of bank mergers and acquisitions as the boundaries between the “speculative” (or investment) and “real” (or commercial) blurred, especially as mortgage-backed securities and credit derivatives emerged as form of “opportunity finance” for institutions to reach traditionally underserved markets (Ho 2009:300; Miller 2005; Tett 2009). As 2007-08 collapse of the housing market illustrates, the financialization of housing exposes deep contradictions within American systems of home valuation, wherein banks are allowed to treat homes as financial vehicles while homeowners are encouraged, if not required, to regard their homes as symbolic spaces of domestic affect. As such, strategic behaviors relying on the home’s conceptualization as an investment, including strategic default or abandonment, incite social condemnation for failing to “properly” value one’s home (Jefferson 2013, 2015; Stout 2016a, 2016b). Yet, the exclusion of mobile home(owner)s from conventional home finance provides a compelling alternative. In lieu of economic value, mobile-homeowners instead create home values via nontraditional and informal interactions with the private MH market. As I illustrate in the sections below, such practices imbue moral, symbolic, and even financial value
into an otherwise devalued “trailer home” while allowing individual mobile-homeowners selective engagement as financial citizens despite being largely barred from conventional lending practices.

Flexible Terms and Conditions: Mobile-Homeowners’ Informal Lending Practices

Of Crown Court mobile-homeowners surveyed, 65.3 percent either purchased their home from a private citizen or local MH dealer. On average, mobile-homeowners who bought from the previous owner or someone in their social network paid less (avg. $9,102) and lived in an older (avg. 1981) home that was more likely (80%) to be a singlewide than a doublewide unit. Those who financed through either a local dealer or a larger financial institution, including Crown Court MHC, were twice as likely to live in a doublewide of approximately the same age (1989-90). While these data show that, on average, local borrowers paid slightly more for their homes than did those financing through larger institutions, these figures include two atypical cases where Crown Court management sold repossessed homes to residents at remarkably reduced costs. In these instances, mobile-homeowners were also responsible for unpaid back taxes on these homes. After excluding these outliers, local dealers’ rates (avg. $26,140) were more affordable than nonlocal lenders (avg. $32,570).

Whereas initial home sales are somewhat stabilized by manufacturer’s suggested retail price (MSRP) values, once a unit enters the pre-owned or secondary market prices may vary widely, even for models built in the same year. As Figure 27 shows, despite a general trend of depreciation over time, there is substantial variability in assessed home values, which many mobile-homeowners rely on in pricing their homes for resale. Further, after twenty-five years City assessment tools calculate original asset depreciation at ninety-nine percent, and therefore
are incapable of discerning between HUD (post-1975) and pre-HUD units. However, such financial ambiguity can benefit some mobile-homeowners. Like Evette, Gabriela (34) purchased a 1997-model singlewide home, which in 2015 was valued at $9,100. However, unlike Evette, Gabriela did not finance her home loan through a major lender like 21st Mortgage. Rather the seller, a friend of her husband, let the couple pay whatever they could, whenever they could, towards the balance. The pair paid off the home in full, with no interest charged, in under a year.

"The owner, that man is a blessing because he allowed us to move in without a down payment," Gabriela recalled during our interview (Figure 28). "Without giving him one penny, Allion. Nothing." That is, where Evette paid 23 percent interest and, ultimately, $80,000 on her
singlewide, Gabriela paid $11,000, no interest, on a home that with a higher 2015 assessed value than Evette’s. While some incongruities are explained by the initial asking price for each home ($30,000 and $11,000), nonetheless something unusual—by housing market standards—has taken place.

In conventional real estate, it is the land, as opposed to the home (as affixed property), that is the appreciating asset. In this respect there is no difference between mobile- and site-built homes, as both structures require continued maintenance and upkeep to prevent blight or obsolescence. Yet unlike MHC residents, traditional homeowners are also landowners, and thus generally—although certainly not always—enjoy asset appreciation. Categorized as chattel
property not unlike a personal vehicle, manufactured home value is instead calculated using a depreciation table (Table 1) based on age and structural condition.

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Table 1: Lincoln-Lancaster County assessed devaluation tool for MHs sited in MHCs based on home condition and manufacture date.

However arbitrary, even these calculated values do not predict MH sale prices in land-lease parks. Ophelia’s (43) first home in Crown Court cost just $800, a pre-HUD sold by the previous occupants. “Then,” she explained to me, “we fixed it and after two years, we sold it and bought the new one”—the 1968 singlewide in which she lives with her husband and five children. I asked if they had sold the home for $800: “No, because we painted, built a porch, and added carpet. I think it was $1,500.”

By contrast, Stefan (37), who inherited his 2000-model doublewide from his mother who, like Evette, financed through a major MH lender at a high interest rate, expressed more pessimism regarding potential returns:

You know, if I do decide to sell it, get it while I still can you know, a couple years ago it was $32,500. So, if it’s worth $28,000 now I can still walk away with maybe, you know, a little over ten grand or ten grand off what’s left on the loan. It’s not very much money to try and go out there and get a place and get going.
For Gabriela, Ophelia, and most of the Crown Court mobile-homeowners I met, the informality of used MH sales in park communities affords far greater flexibility than is typically observed in conventional real estate markets. Even institutionalized MH lenders, such as those Evette and Stefan’s late mother financed through, cannot match perks like reduced- or interest-free financing. In other words, owning a depreciating or “valueless” asset, per the County Assessor’s calculation table, can actually empower prospective mobile-homeowners with greater financial security via casual agreements.

As Arjun Appadurai (1986) writes, traditionally anthropologists preferred to analyze noncapitalist systems of exchanged identified with preindustrial and/or non-Western societies (e.g. Herskovits 1952; Malinowski 1918; Mauss 1925). These accounts tended to juxtapose noncapitalist economies against “modern” forms of exchange, in particular emphasizing the sociality, gifting, and the “spirit” of reciprocity believed inherent to “traditional” cultures (Appadurai 1986:11-12; see also, Latour 1993; Maurer 2005; Radin 1953); per Appadurai, “In this view, gift exchange and commodity exchange are fundamentally contrastive and mutually exclusive” (11).

However, in contrast to still-popular “rational choice” theories, contemporary economic anthropologists situate economic decision-making, whether capitalist or not, as culturally embedded practices. Constituting economic actions as meaning-making within specific sociohistorical contexts, certain practices, like consumption, can be reframed as moral and ethical social behaviors (Bourdieu 1984; Fischer 2014; Jones 2012; Miller 1995; Williams 2011). In addition to offering a corrective to traditional ethnographic penchants for over- or under-rationalizing economic exchange based on Western systems of valuation (Appadurai 1986), such perspectives enable us to better understand economic informality located within, or at the
margins of, more formalized systems. That is, although manufactured housing is underserved by major financial institutions, mobile-homeowners, especially those living in land-lease MHCs, nonetheless actively engage with/in less formalized economic systems ranging from niche lenders to direct, person-to-person haggling.

Like Gabriela, Carl (52) benefitted from an informal lending arrangement. After he suffered an unexpected stroke that left him permanently disabled, Carl knew that his household budget would be stretched thin and, as such, began looking for a cheaper alternative to his basement apartment. Thus, in 2011 when he was shown his current home, a 1979 singlewide with all-new kitchen appliances, he immediately recognized an opportunity.

Chain-smoking hand rolled cigarettes while seated at his kitchen counter (Figure 29), Carl described the easy process by which he had acquired his home. “I gave him eight [thousand] cash, and he financed three for me. [The dealer] said, ‘Just pay me $200 a month,’ and I said, ‘Okay.’” Like several other Crown Court residents I interviewed, Carl used the workers’ compensation he received after his stroke to front the initial cash down payment; alternative cash sources included annual tax returns and insurance payouts.

I asked Carl what the interest rate on his $3,000 loan had been. He grinned, replying, “No interest. Just straight up, he carried it for me. And I had him paid off within almost a year.”

Again, Carl’s situation is similar to other singlewide MH owners who financed through local dealers or the previous owners. In addition to not being charged interest, on average these borrowers paid far less for their homes (avg. $11,074.50) than did singlewide owners who financed through either Crown Court MHC or another large financial institution (avg. $20,123.75, plus interest). This figure includes five MH owners who paid the full sale price
outright in cash (avg. $15,200). Although Carl’s home was only valued in 2015 at $4,300 (less than 40% of what he paid), Carl felt the initial asking price had been worth it.

“My nephew thinks I overpaid for it, and maybe I did,” he admitted. “But I moved in and everything was ready to go. I didn’t have to do nothing. Just move in and paid.” Within the year, the home was his. “It’s nice to have the title to my truck and my home,” he told me, adding, “and I can move either one of them.”

Figure 29: Seated at his kitchen island, Carl uses his phone to check his monthly bill from Crown Court. (Photo by author.)

While conventional wisdom recommends eligible mobile-homeowners title their properties as real estate so as to benefit from anticipated value appreciation, that less than a quarter of these residents elect to do so has baffled analysts for decades (CFPB 2014). And, although land-lease MHC residents are broadly prohibited from retitling their homes, like Evette many prefer their present legal-financial arrangement, including their (assumed) freedom of
movement. Further, informal lending practices such as flexible repayment schedules without interest charged provide tangible economic benefits for many current and/or prospective mobile-homeowners, the majority of which live at or below the poverty line. Particularly for older, including pre-HUD, properties, tax-value assessments do not dictate sale price as sellers and buyers negotiate, barter, and finagle home values based on more holistic, or subjective, qualities.

This disjuncture between the (rational) economic and (irrational) subjective valuation of used mobile homes highlights how the definitional vagueness of the home, despite its deep symbolic and social significance, manifests complicated economic realities for mobile-homeowners. Despite attempts to fully commodify the home as a financial investment, myriad noneconomic values add additional—albeit not uncontested—value to such properties, values which in turn shape an owner’s affective and material relationship, as well as identification with, their residence. Like Carl, several owners admitted to perhaps overpaying whereas other residents, like Stefan, doubted they would recoup even the assessed value of their home upon resale. However, taken together these cases demonstrate an alternative, informal housing market premised on mobile-homeowner sophistication and expertise located largely outside the boundaries of the formal and regulated conventional market. In particular, mobile-homeowners’ social and cultural capital functionally empowers MHC residents, especially regarding the terms and conditions of their loans if financing through acquaintances or local dealers, in ways unimaginable in the traditional real estate market and, importantly, extends a foothold to homeownership for lower-income households.

And, despite its informality, this system is reproduced by the residents themselves when it comes time to sell. Gabriela, for instance, hoped to replicate the interest-free payment schedule she and her husband had been granted herself in the future. “As soon as we get the title, then I’ll
know how to do that process here,” she told me. A devout Christian, Gabriela believed it was her duty to provide assistance to other struggling families just as she had been given help. Her husband, a contractor, had three workers living in nearby Crete, Nebraska “that want to buy a mobile home, so I might help them buy those.”

**Tax Divestment as Strategic Citizenship**

In Lincoln, major controversies regarding new MHC developments throughout the 1950s and 1960s centered on the topic of taxation as opponents argued that mobile-homeowners’ ability to relocate their homes would permit widespread tax evasion. However, at present the question of mobile home(owner) taxation has largely been settled; according to the Nebraska tax code, mobile homes are classified as “real property,” albeit unaffixed or secured to land. Titled as chattel, mobile-homeowners are only responsible for paying taxes on their home, whereas their landlords pay land taxes. Thus, in a curious reversal of historic precedent, the reduced tax burden associated with owning a mobile home, as a depreciating asset, is frequently touted as an unexpected perk of MHC residence (Geisler & Mitsuda 1987:53; Wallis 1991).

“It seems for a lot of people, just in the general,” I casually remarked to Carl during one of our many visits, “the economics of it, it’s just more affordable [to own a manufactured home] than really any other option.”

Carl agreed. “It is. I mean, I could have a $30,000 house and I’m still paying $500 to $800 or more a year in property taxes.” He paused, taking a few thoughtful drags on his cigarette. “I’ve got a nice house, I think. Need to paint it, it’s been four years since I did that. But my property taxes were only $45 this year. Hell,” he laughed, “my truck’s three times that, and it’s thirteen-years-old!”
Property tax rates in Nebraska are the third-highest nationally. Moreover, Lancaster County, of which Lincoln comprises ninety percent of the overall population, is tied for the third-highest property tax rate in the state. Given this, I consider Crown Court mobile-homeowners’ tax discourse as embodying a form of “taxpayer identity politics,” defined by Sandra Morgen (2011) as a neoliberal subjectivity that situates moral and responsible taxpayers as overburdened by supporting wasteful social welfare programs. Insofar as taxpayers fund their governments, it follows that taxation concretizes citizens’ relations to the state and further defines the contours of the social contract between them. Conceiving taxation as a moral obligation, I suggest that mobile-homeowners’ strategic tax-reduction entails a form of ethical citizenship by, first, refusing government “handouts” by occupying unsubsidized low-income housing, and second, by contributing less to government-sponsored programs for so-called “undeserving” poor.

“We didn’t want to buy a house with all the tax liability,” explained Karen (50) who lived with her husband, Charlie (61) in a 1994-model doublewide a few streets over from Carl. “That’s the reason we purchased it. We even paid it off in six years, so that we did not have any financial burdens after [Charlie] retired.” Whereas Charlie had not lived in a mobile home before as Karen had, she joked that it had been easy to convince her husband to take “trailers” seriously. “It was so easy for him to realize that it was cheaper living than trying to buy a house and have to pay taxes and all that stuff.”

Seated at the couple’s kitchen table (Figure 30), up until this point Charlie had largely ignored us in favor of flipping through the weekly ads, however upon hearing this he perked up. “Our house is just as nice as any $100,000 house down the block,” he boasted.

Karen chuckled. “For us. You know, I don’t want a $100,000 house.”
However, Charlie had a point he wanted to make. Talking over his wife, he continued:

“We got this place because of taxes. We don’t have property tax. In Nebraska the taxes are so,” he trailed off, grumbling. “Well, they can kiss our—”

“Charlie!” Karen scolded.

Charlie simply shrugged. “I won’t pay a renter tax,” he said before going back to his ads, ignoring us once again. By refusing what he believed to be a “renter’s tax,” Charlie positioned his and Karen’s decision to be mobile-homeowners as morally and economically appropriate given local controversies concerning land taxation in a predominantly agricultural state.

Figure 30: Karen and Charlie’s kitchen in the doublewide home they purchased in 2008. Due to a mishap at the Lancaster County Assessor’s Office, their home was once valued at just $700, however in 2015 it had been raised to $18,500. (Photo by author.)
Conceiving mobile-homeownership in this manner, I argue, somewhat mitigates feelings of sociopolitical marginalization for MHC residents. Considerable ethnographic evidence has shown how deindustrialization and the precaritization of American labor has imperiled the middle classes, in particular its lower, working, or lower-middle segments (e.g. Besteman & Gusterson 2010; Jefferson 2015; Newman 1988, 1999; Pappas 1989; Rubin 1976; Walley 2010, 2013). The tendency to develop counter-narratives to explain present unfavorable or unstable circumstances in moral contexts is well-established, as is the propensity for (primarily white-identifying) individuals to “point fingers” (Newman 1988:194) at those whose im-moral behaviors are indicative of being “undeserving” of pity or support. In New Jersey, David Halle (1984) found that as working conditions became increasingly perilous, oil refinery employees—the majority of whom identified as white—increasingly embraced a nationalist “American” politics critical of government spending and policies favoring immigrant or foreign laborers. Likewise, Katherine Newman (1988) describes similar sentiments among workers who believed that present governmental policies favoring ethnoracial minorities “reverse discriminate” against hiring white men. Similarly, Karen felt both the WLRZ and Crown Court’s 2015 rebranding campaign had manifested her suspicions that her treatment by Crown Court staff was unfair, biased, and overburdening.

In 2012, Karen and Charlie were shocked to discover that their house was valued at only $700; although this computational error by the Assessor’s Office was quickly rectified, the couple’s frustration over the perceived mistreatment manifested as resentment toward their new neighbors, whom they believed contributed toward Crown Court’s overall “negative” stereotype. Their main issue? Rule-breaking.
“I think there is some [tension],” Karen said, once more interrupting her husband’s grumbling:

The last time we experienced that was when those people parked in our place [lot]. My husband went over and asked them to move, and the young lady was so disrespectful my husband would have smacked her upside the head if he could. He said, “You’ve got five minutes to move your car, or I’m going to take it to the office.” Well, they don’t even care about the office, because the office has shown they don’t care either. Well, then he went over and said, “I’m going to call the tow company.” Then that mattered. That little girl had a mouth on her. She used a slang for the Americans.

At last, Charlie was able to get a word in. “I was nice. I said, ‘okay, ma’am.’”

Placating him, Karen nodded. “I know. The little girl, she was mouthy, and she used some American slang. I can’t remember what the word was, but I know what she meant. *Gringo.* She used it. I heard her.” Soon, the conversation shifted toward Karen and Charlie’s perceptions of other communities. Like Antonia, both preferred Sunset Acres to Crown Court; as Karen assured me, “They really provide for their people, and they’re very open with their people. If you mention Sunset Acres, you don’t usually get the kind of comments that you get if you mention Crown Court.” (While I cannot verify these statements, in 2016 Sunset Acres was sold to another out-of-state investor notorious for their predatory and belittling attitude toward residents.)

Again, Charlie muttered, “Sunset’s got Americans.”

Karen hadn’t heard her husband, so I clarified what he said. She nodded. “Oh, yeah. Mostly Americans. You know, we’ve actually talked about moving there.”

Chapter Five more thoroughly analyzes the raced and classed dimensions of such comments, which occurred frequently throughout my fieldwork. Here, however, I focus on both Charlie’s refusal to pay a “renter’s tax” as well as his and Karen’s stated desire to live in an “American” MHC where (presumably) rule-following residents are (presumably) treated fairly.
both functions as a narrative device appealing to tax divestment vis-à-vis reduced mobile home property taxes as a moral strategy.

Governmental distrust and rebelliousness is characteristic of the American ethos, sentiments which extend to taxation. Per Morgen (2011), taxpayer identity politics fosters resentment over the perception that taxpayers are unfairly treated, a sentiment captured in Mitt Romney’s infamous quip during his unsuccessful 2012 presidential campaign:

Forty-seven percent of Americans pay no income tax. So our message of low taxes doesn’t connect. So he’ll [President Barack Obama] be out there talking about tax cuts for the rich. I mean, that’s what they sell every four years. And so my job is not to worry about those people. I’ll never convince them that they should take personal responsibility and care for their lives (Moorhead 2012).

Loïc Wacquant (2016:46) further argues that the reorganization of America’s “residual welfare state” has transformed social welfare from a public responsibility to a privilege, one which individual households must prove their “worthiness” to obtain (see also, Adams 2013; Fairbanks 2009; Piven 2002; Stout 2016a).

As I have shown, MHC residents tend to identify as homeowners rather than renters, which in turn informs their selective participation in primary, niche, and/or informal financial structures. Despite historical disdain for mobile-homeowners as tax-evaders, Charlie and Karen instead presented themselves as a savvy, economically sophisticated household unwilling to contribute to “wasteful” or “unfair” government programs via taxes, which are very controversial in Nebraska (as elsewhere). Like other forms of “micro-othering” discussed thus far, Karen and Charlie position themselves as respectable vis-à-vis their rude neighbors, whose “un-Americanness” was offered as proof of the couple’s morality (as taxpaying “Americans”). Last, Karen and Charlie told me of their plans to snub the same Assessor’s Office that miscalculated
their home’s value at $700 by using the same informal financial and selling arrangements described earlier.

“We want $20,000 [for the house] because it’s worth, according to taxes, $18,000,” Karen explained. Acknowledging that they’d never get back the amount they spent on the home ($47,000, at 9.5 percent interest) she justified their price as “what we want.”

“They’d pretty much have to pay it,” she added, “because banks don’t do loans for people to buy mobile homes. They have to have it pretty much up front, which is a lot.”

Again, the financial contradiction of mobile-homeownership presents itself as Karen and Charlie, whose exclusion from the traditional home loan market prevents them from recouping the amount spent on their home, also permits them to independently price their asset beyond its assessed (de)value, thereby funding their planned retirement. Yet, their particular case illustrates the precariousness of their situation; as Karen wryly commented, “We have to agree with the office” to even sell their home. Moreover, as described earlier, the commodification of housing has moralized the mortgage as a financial product. Despite residents’ attempts to position manufactured housing in land-lease communities as “just as good” as conventional units either via informal arrangement or beneficial taxation, MH detractors also adopt financial rhetoric to allude to both mobile-homeowner delegitimacy as well as justify their exclusion from traditional housing markets.

**The Uncanny Valley: the Financial Risks of “Not-Quite” Homeownership**

Taken together, mobile-homeowner’ discursive tactics regarding informality and taxation describe local contexts in which MHC residents cultivate homeowner subjectivities as a form of financial citizenship that shares much in common with conventional homeownership. Rather
than self-position as separate or marginalized by dominant financial institutions, mobile-homeowners like Evette, Carl, Karen, and Charlie instead frame their economic engagements as that those of strategic and savvy homeowners.

Yet critics of financial citizenship caution how economic inclusion, and in particular the formalization of informal economic practices, fails to address the inherent inequalities of capitalist systems (Kear 2013) while exposing already-vulnerable populations to greater risks (Kear 2016; Reid 2017; Williams 2011). For example, expanding financial access to underserved markets helped propel the hyper-commodification of mortgage debt through the late 1990s, triggering the 2007-08 subprime mortgage crisis and Great Recession, in which tens of millions of Americans defaulted and lost their homes to foreclosure (Ho 2009; Tett 2009). Underserved by major financial institutions, for decades mobile-homeowners have often had to rely on specialty lenders like 21st Mortgage Corporation or GreenTree Financial, which in recent years have extended the average repayment period on a new home loan from less than five years (1970) to upwards of thirty years today while retaining industry-standard high interest rates (Hart et al. 2002; Salamon & MacTavish 2017).

By normalizing their mobile housing as “just like” conventional, site-built units, Crown Court MHC residents inadvertently support the same financial structures that delegitimize and disadvantage them as land-lease mobile-homeowners. As Sandra Morgen and Jeff Maskovsky (2003) note, neoliberal subjectification requires that individuals locate themselves within dominant and unequal structures which, in turn, may interfere with and further delegitimize the informal work, social, and housing networks vulnerable populations thrive or survive on. Here, I revisit how perceptions of choice, conceived as indicative of moral character and/or personal
responsibility, functionally pathologizes the (financial) decision-making capabilities of mobile-homeowners as a consequence of their normalization strategies.

Consider K.E., a Lincoln city analyst who, unlike many of his colleagues, spent his childhood in a rural mobile home park, yet also admitted to his own disdain for mobile-homeownership. Like S., I had met with K. on-and-off over the years, however by the time we sat for our first recorded interview in December 2015 I’d grown distressed, irate even, over the hazardous conditions that (I felt) had been allowed to fester in Lincoln MHCs like Crown Court. And, like any good friend, K. patiently listened as our already-informal interview transformed into a venting session as I tried to make sense of it all.

“Basically, what I comes back to for me is that this is being allowed to happen,” I told him, recalling months of unexplained utility hikes, disconnected water service, and illegal evictions (see Chapter Seven). “People are being punished because of the housing that they live in. They’re going to lose the ability to even have ownership if they move into an apartment. People are being actively lied to when they purchase these homes.”

Taking a pensive sip of beer, K. replied, “I think that you can imagine I have a conflicted point of view when it comes to them [mobile homes]. I am sympathetic to that perspective, but I’m also sympathetic to the other perspective.”

“Which is?”

He sighed. “Well, I don’t like this scenario that you present that they lack honesty. It’s like, if the management would just honestly say, ‘We’re cancelling you out right now. Please find someplace to move.’” But they don’t have the balls to say, ‘Good luck finding something else.’ They don’t have that. Instead, they are like the bad boyfriend or girlfriend trying to end a relationship and they’re just being shitty to the other person. That’s all that this is.”
Building on Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality, studies on financial citizenship have emphasized that although financial inclusion is—or ought to be—a basic right for all citizens, institutions beyond the state are just as effective in regulating, controlling, and producing economic subjectivities. In contemporary American life, financial savviness measures, by proxy, individual rights as well as personal discipline dictated not only by financial institutions but by the subject herself. The ethnographic accounts of Crown Court mobile-homeowners presented here show how engagement, whether selective or active, with the largely informal and unregulated MH industry carries risks as well as benefits. Evette, again, illustrates how self-identifying as a conventional homeowner (mis)informs and (mis)guides mobile-homeowners regarding their legal rights and vulnerabilities.

“If you want me out,” Evette curtly told me, in reference to Crown Court’s corporate owners, “then you will find me a place. You will pay for the movement of my home because it’s on your land, and you can’t force me off because I have a contract.” Her contract, she clarified, was the original month-to-month lease she and her ex-husband had signed together in 1999. Laughing, she added, “My attorney would love to bring this one on.”

It is unlikely that she would win; as K. reminded me, “In the end, it is not a landowner’s responsibility to provide housing after he chooses, or she chooses, to use their land differently. It’s not a moral obligation.”

Unfortunately for Evette, the NMHLTA does not require her landlords to pay relocation costs for her home should Crown Court opt to terminate her land contract which, as I describe in Chapter Seven, can be cancelled for “No Cause” in as few as thirty days. Were this to happen, Evette would be required to remove her unaffixed, chattel property from park grounds—at a cost
ranging anywhere from three to ten thousand dollars (Sullivan 2014)—or else risk being sued for breach of contract by her landlords and having her home repossessed as collateral.

“How is that okay?” I asked K. He could only shake his head in response: “It’s not.”

Imperial, dominating, and tied to (the American) empire, neoliberalism has certainly been advanced with devastating might (De Genova 2007; Maskovsky & Susser 2009; McGranahan & Collins 2018), however perhaps more insidious has been its invisibility, its slippery ability to evade blame. This includes, as the mid-2000s housing crisis aptly illustrates, imposing systems that restructure or diffuse blame; as Wacquant (2016:8-9) notes, by emphasizing individual behavior as “excuses,” sociostructural explanations for present conditions are downplayed. For some, dissipating blame offers catharsis. As Noelle Stout (2016a) observes, after the Great Recession, foreclosed homeowners who had been dispossessed by Wall Street greed and widely condemned for their “greediness” found solace in online forums, where they were able to construct counter-narratives that reframed the morality of indebtedness and default. However, given its sociolegal ambiguousness, conventional wisdom regards manufactured housing as inherently deviant and as such, the morality of its occupants is always questionable. Even K., after a few rounds, framed mobile-homeowner precarity as the consequence of individual choices rather than a moral obligation or act of social wellbeing:

Things I learned livin’ in a trailer court is that life is about choices. You can choose to be actively engaged, save money, and go forward. You talk about people who could have a record and a [criminal] background? Yeah, I don’t have much sympathy for that, actually. You fucked up pretty early in life? You did some bad things? I understand that’s going to be tough on you to find new housing, and that you’re probably going to end up with a landlord that doesn’t take care of the property that will allow you to rent at probably a higher rate than you should.

Here, K. shrugged. “Consequences. They’re a bitch.”
There are myriad explanations for misfortune, all of them culturally specific, however as Douglas (1992) wrote, one common response is to blame personal misfortune as a consequence of poor, often immoral, choices. By “objectifying” risks as known, rational, and/or scientific “facts” (Althaus 2005; Douglas 1992; Latour & Woolgar 1979; Reno 2011) mobile-homeowners’ refusal to adopt conventional perspectives that regard their housing as unsafe, impermanent, and financially unsound is often reinterpreted as “hazardous” behavior for which they suffer consequences and overall poorer outcomes. As I have shown, conventional economic practice struggles to make sense of manufactured housing as a nontraditional, liminal type of home(ownership). Adhering to the commonsensical devaluation of “trailer homes,” non-residents like S. question why anyone chooses these communities; even former MHC residents like K. pathologize the structured inequality many mobile-homeowners experience in land-lease neighborhoods. Failing to acknowledge the structured risks of mobile-homeownership, such as asset depreciation or landlessness, mobile-homeowners’ poor outcomes become moralized, even deserved. Most economists, I argue, would likely consider the choice to own and occupy manufactured housing in a land-lease MHC as an “unsophisticated” financial decision, a label accentuated in its relation to more damaging epithets such as “trailer trash.” However, for many Crown Court residents I met, owning a “nice, beautiful” home was central to their moral and economic identities (Kusenbach 2015). Thus, in order to resolve the contradiction of “unsophisticated” versus “respectable,” mobile-homeowners are encouraged to adopt individualistic subjectivities that (attempt to) salvage personal reputation at the expense of mobile home (community) normalization more generally.
“Build the Fence”

Complex and at times contradictory, Chapters Three and Four depict the fraught social terrain MHC residents navigate via strategic normalization, whether by aesthetic or economic discourse. Such practices challenge how and what constitutes “proper” housing, and by extension, moral personhood and “the good life.” Against the backdrop of ubiquitous “trailer trash” stigmatization, mobile-homeowners threatened with displacement and dispossession—in Lincoln and elsewhere—find it imperative that they defend their right to belong.

In Brazil, James Holston (2009:6) writes that insurgent citizenship in the urban peripheries has created “a new realm of participation, rights, and citizenship.” Especially within the Brazilian favelas, marginalized working-class residents have transformed, via autoconstruction, “the peripheries into a space of alternative futures, produced in the experiences of becoming propertied, organizing social movements, participating in consumer markets, and making aesthetic judgments about house transformations” (8). Likewise, by normalizing their (mobile) homes and (mobile home) neighborhoods, Crown Court residents claim middle-class respectability, and thus belonging, so as to mitigate the existential threat of (planned) park closure and mobile-homeowner displacement. By embracing dominant marketized logics, mobile-homeowners are pressed to regard themselves as individual consumer-subjects acting in distinction from their neighbors. Positioning oneself as better than reaffirms the existence of a lower social status, which in turn naturalizes more vulnerable groups’ social, legal, and economic marginalization in much the same manner as mobile-homeowners’ associations with “trash” are often naturalized by non-residents.

Vicki (70), a retired servicewoman and one of the greatest storytellers I ever had the pleasure interviewing, exemplifies how the paradox of housing commodification profoundly
affects anxious urban MHC residents. Over lunch at a diner located near Crown Court, I began our third interview by asking Vicki to clarify something she had said during our first interview, specifically, how she believed Crown Court MHC was similar to a gated community.

“Could you expand a little bit more on that?” I asked. “What similarities do you see between a gated community and a mobile home park?”

Clearing her throat and setting down her utensils, Vicki leaned towards me on her elbows as she began her lecture-style response:

At one time there was a fence that went from the northeast corner all the way down, and there was a break for the entrance and then it went all the way down and turned the corner. Okay? That’s a gate. That can be considered a gated community. That fits the definition of a gated community. If they [management] want that, then they have to finish it. They have to come down with the fence all the way to the street, and I kind of like that. It forces people to use only two entrances to get in. So, what that does, in effect, is it can lessen the dangers that haunt other communities, such as break ins and stuff.

Pausing to sip from her Diet Pepsi, Vicki thoughtfully added: “Now, if they go in on the south side and make it a little more like the front side, on the east side that is, make it look a little more like a gate? That would help even more.”

For me, Vicki’s response brought on an odd sense of vindication and unease. I had long suspected an analogous relationship between MHCs and gated communities existed based on a number of shared characteristics I believe they have in common. Both are a type of planned community situated on undeveloped lands or, if already incorporated, rely on “non-conforming use” zoning to bypass regulations concerning capacity and lot size (Low 2003). Both tend to be owned and managed by private, for-profit corporations, who provide services through private contractors rather than utilizing municipal infrastructure and utilities (Low 2003, 2010). Last, both gated and mobile home neighborhoods are typically enclosed by gates or fences, spatially segregating residents from the surrounding environs. And, as gating signals an area’s elevated
status through symbolic exclusion (Caldeira 1999; Heiman 2012, 2015; Low 2003), that most MHCs share this trait with America’s most prestigious locales intrigued me.

Yet, as Vicki elaborated on what, precisely, makes an urban MHC like Crown Court a gated community, I understood how the comparison included additional, more sinister, parallels.

“Finish the fence,” Vicki continued, imagining an ideal management scenario. “Finish the fence to where if somebody comes up and climbs the fence, they’re up to no good. Make sure it goes around our entire complex. Make sure it’s sturdy. Make it a gated community where they [visitors] have to come in on the roads, of which there’s only two.”

This surprised me, as in our previous meetings Vicki, like most Crown Court residents I met, told me that she felt safe in her neighborhood (Table 2). Notably, the perception that “trailer parks” are dangerous places to live was a trope I often heard from non-residents, and as such many mobile-homeowners tended to stress their neighborhood’s safety. Curious, I interrupted Vicki. “Is that something that worries you? Someone trying to break into your house?”

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<th>Survey response</th>
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<th>Non-MHC residents (n = 21)</th>
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<td>4 - very safe</td>
<td>16 (22%)</td>
<td>0 (0%)</td>
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<td>3 - safe</td>
<td>43 (60%)</td>
<td>9 (43%)</td>
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<td>2 - unsafe</td>
<td>11 (15%)</td>
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<td>2 (3%)</td>
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\[ U = 387.5 \]

\[ p\text{-value} < 0.001 \]

*Table 2: Comparison (Mann-Whitney U) of ordinal survey responses between current MHC residents (2012, 2015-16) and non-residents (2016-17) to the question, “On a scale (1-4), how safe do you think Lincoln MHCs are?”*
Pursing her lips, perhaps annoyed that I’d interjected her mid-thought, Vicki shook her head. “No. If they break into mine, they can have anything they want.” She paused. “Not my life. They can have anything else.”

I nodded, then admitted, “When you said gated community, I guess that’s not what I thought.” Months later, however, I came to understand that this, too, was another similarity between MHCs and their gated counterparts, namely the blurred boundaries between privacy, exclusion, and belonging. Physical boundaries such as fences, gates, waterways, and environmental barriers operate in tandem with less tangible, but nonetheless real, borders to reaffirm social distinctions between “us” and “them,” those who are “respectable” and “trashy,” and who does and does not belong. These categories are essential to the reproduction of sociocultural structures and classificatory orders, and as such threats to these systems provoke anxiety or uncertainty (Douglas 1966). While the middle classes are defined, almost to a fault, as anxious, ethnographies on precarious, working (middle) class communities contend that those occupying spatial and symbolic borderlands, or the in-between, liminal spaces, exhibit far more pronounced defensive and protective behaviors (Halle 1984; Hartigan 1999; Howell 1973; Kefalas 2003; Liechty 2003; Walley 2013). As Low (2003) argues, physical boundaries like gates or fences are more symbolic than functional. These “symbols of exclusion” (2) visually dictate the parameters of the landscape so as to determine who does (and does not) belong. Yet, because such barriers cannot guarantee full protection from “outsiders,” their presumed porousness further alarms defense-minded residents (ibid).

When Vicki and I spoke in September 2015, I was not yet aware of Trump’s impending election, however his campaign was already in full swing and throughout my fieldwork I noted increasing White (post)nationalist (Maskovsky 2017) sentiment filtering into some residents’
narratives (Chapter Five). For instance, readers might draw connections between Vicki’s adamant desires for a complete perimeter fence and Trump’s “build the wall” mantra. As Low (2003) writes, physical boundaries like gates, fences, or walls function as a “psychological buffer” (90) for enclosed populations against the (perceived) dangers lurking “outside.” Just as “Build That Wall!” taps into deep nativist and anti-immigrant sentiment within the Republican base (Hall et al. 2016; McGranahan 2017; Roland 2017), for Vicki a completed edge fence will “lessen the dangers” from those who are “up to no good,” which she believed was a problem that “haunts other communities.”

Like Antonia, Vicki sought preventative measures to ensure that Crown Court did not become like other “lower ghetto” MHCs elsewhere in Lincoln. Punitive measures, including fines (Antonia) or security fences (Vicki) illustrates yet another aspect of neoliberal ideologies meant to bolster individual status and mitigate anxiety with self-regulation (Gershon 2014; Goldstein 2002). Deeply problematic, we should not forget that urban MHC residents like Vicki experience profound insecurity due to the sociolegal precarity of the (mobile) homeownership and the pervasive threat of redevelopment. As with most mobile-homeowners I met, Vicki had invested most of her savings into her doublewide, which she shared with a close friend who’d fallen on some hard times. Vicki, too, had endured a series of setbacks, including a nasty and expensive second divorce that had resulted in Vicki declaring bankruptcy, which in turn limited her available housing options and left her with a seventeen percent interest rate on the loan she was still paying off on her 1993-model home. Given the additional stress of managerial transition and Crown Court’s potential closure, it is reasonable that Vicki would crave some sense of security “at home.”
Yet, like many white suburbanites and gated community members studied in recent years (e.g. Heiman 2015; Kefalas 2003; Low 2003), enhanced securitization often codes for defining who does or does not “belong” along ethnoracial lines. For instance, Evette had convinced herself that Mexican nationals had bought the park and were pushing white homeowners like her out. “You know what?” she said conspiratorially. “And you know what? They [management] are not the nicest people when you go into the office. I’m sorry, I’m not prejudiced or anything, but they make you know that, ‘Yeah, we’re Mexicans, we own all this property now.’ It’s a Mexican company.”

I knew this rumor was not true. Despite its recent rebranding efforts (Chapter Seven) Crown Court’s ownership had been in the same company for over thirty years. Wondering if management’s poor communication regarding these changes coupled with racial anxieties of belonging fueled such rumors (Samuels 2015; Song 2006), I asked Evette for further clarification. Although she admitted, “Actually, you know, I might be wrong on that,” Evette doubled-down on her explanation for the ongoing changes in the neighborhood, including the 2011 Blight Determination Study: “It’s run by Mexicans. The whole thing. They took over a couple of years ago. And I just thought, okay, don’t rub it in our noses. But they have.”

Likewise, during our second interview Vicki referred to one street in Crown Court as “Little Mexico.” “That’s the only decent way to describe it,” she said to me from across our corner booth. “They have a lot of Mexican-Americans or Spanish speaking people there, okay? They got cars and trucks all over the place, which they’re not supposed to have. It’s very crowded up and down there.” While Vicki sympathized with many Latino/a families living in Crown Court, particularly the migrant households she described as being in a “hurt locker” and
doing whatever possible in order to survive, nevertheless she was suspicious of her next door neighbors, a “Hispanic” family she told me gave her “bad” vibes.

“I have a sixth sense, okay?” Vicki, a self-described Wiccan, said during the same interview. “The feeling I get about those people, the people to the north of me, to go knock on their door, that’d be like committing suicide as far as I’m concerned. They really don’t care. They don’t care about their kids. Why should they care about me?”

Indeed, as my fieldwork progressed I observed numerous instances of racial, and racist, language interwoven throughout residents’ narratives of belonging and future (in)security as Crown Court’s revitalization dramatically transformed the neighborhood’s physical landscape. Those who occupy liminal or transgressional spaces, argued Douglas (1966), are precisely those thought most threatening to the accepted social order, however as John Hartigan, Jr. (1999, 2005), more recently notes, existence along the blurred edges of sociocultural categories or identities can incite reification of those boundaries by liminal groups. The widespread cultural devaluation of mobile home(owner)s as “trailer trash” seemingly validates MHC ruination, abandonment, and redevelopment. It is against this threat of dispossession and eviction that the mobile-homeowners described here attempt to normalize their housing as no different from the idealized, middle-class dream of (conventional) homeownership so cherished in the United States.

All of these behaviors constitute “boundary work” (Hartigan 2005; Wray 2006) intended to position MHC residents as “normal,” however the unavoidable porousness of any boundary prompts defensive reactions that typically reinscribe and/or exacerbate other social boundaries along ethnoracial, classed, or gendered lines (see Caldeira 1999; Low 2003; Moss 2003; Perin 1977, 1988; Reno 2011). This is particularly salient for mobile-homeowners, who despite
occupying housing that has been thoroughly racialized as “white” and “poor” in popular culture and media representations, are witnessing profound demographic transitions that portend significant shifts in how belonging is constructed, articulated, and defended in precarious mobile home parks. In the next chapter, I consider another consequence of mobile-homeowners’ normalization techniques as reifying ethnoracial divisiveness and effectively stymying social cohesion among residents, thereby thwarting potential efforts to resist community closure and redevelopment.
CHAPTER FIVE

“We’re the Minority Now”

“The mobile home was supposed to be temporary,” explained James, a 38-year-old disabled veteran. Unlike most of his neighbors, James had spent the majority of his life in Crown Court as both a child, and later, with his wife and three children. After James was wounded and discharged from the military, the couple accrued too much debt, damaging their credit and preventing them from buying a conventional home. Although James hoped their 2002 purchase of a 1981-model singlewide would be “temporary,” thirteen years later he and his family remained in Crown Court. Taunted as a child for being “trailer trash,” as a father, James worried that his children would have similar schoolyard experiences, and as such was quite sensitive to trailer trash stigmas.

“To live in here, to be called ‘trailer trash?’” he remarked, seated across from me as his son, a toddler, delightedly slammed together his toy trucks into one another. “It does offend me, because we wear just as good of clothes as you guys!” He sighed. “The stereotyping, yeah, it’s kind of offensive.”

His outburst, in particular his decision to include me as part of the amorphous “you guys” whose clothing, as markers of (class) status, was “just as good” as his, struck me as odd. As noted in Chapter One, I had found that most residents, especially those who had spent most of their lives in Nebraska as I had, connected with me and with my background. Although I, too, lived in Crown Court, I was aware how my subject position as a doctoral candidate and researcher overrode some of my more obvious working-class mannerisms (see Callahan 2008;
Rennels 2015; Walley 2013). As such, emphasizing our shared identities often appeared, to me, as another normalization strategy, described in the previous chapters as an attempt to claim a respectable social position vis-à-vis higher-status persons (Kusenbach 2009).

James’ exclamation situating me with them (“you guys”) fundamentally altered how I perceived certain interactions with residents throughout the remainder of my fieldwork. Months after our initial interview, I happened upon James once again, this time during the annual Crown Court Halloween party. The main office was filled to capacity with neighborhood children dressed as vampires, princesses, ninjas, and an assortment of popular superheroes. I had agreed to volunteer at one of the game stations, and was in the process of closing down and tidying up when James, clearly aggravated, found me.

“I can’t believe it,” he shouted over the din of the crowd. “They did it again!” As he was visibly upset, I suggested we go outside and talk. Taking deep drags from his E-cigarette, James explained what had happened. It had to do with Crown Court’s annual Halloween decoration contest, which substituted as the October “Yard of the Month” award. In August, during our first interview, James had bragged, “I take Halloween pretty seriously,” describing the extravagant decorative displays that he liked to set up for his and the neighbors’ children. In 2014, James’ yard had received the runner-up prize in the Halloween contest, however he suspected that the competition had not been judged fairly.

“Between me and my neighbor,” he’d said at the time, “if we didn’t win, winner and runner-up, then it was fixed. The other neighbors even complained because I didn’t win.”

Arriving to the party along with his wife and youngest son, James told me that he’d sought out Monica, a Crown Court leasing agent, to ask who had won that years’ contest. Although he’d been told that the team was still finalizing the results, they “guessed” he had been
the runner-up again. In disbelief, James asked for the addresses of the winners so that he could compare them to his own lavishly-decorated home, however staff “couldn’t remember” which home had won.

“So I said to them, ‘I didn’t put $10,000 of work into this for you to screw me two years in a row.’ I just had to get out of there.” A few moments of silence passed, however James was not finished. “I don’t know anyone in the office anymore. I don’t feel welcome.” When I asked what he meant, James responded, “It’s all Hispanics.\textsuperscript{14} We’re the minority now.” Something in my expression, either a confused frown or subtle head shake, further agitated James, who added, “If you’re shaking your head like that, then you don’t see it. Look inside right now, and tell me we’re not the minority.”

Where I had seen a room packed with excited, costume-clad youth as well as their tired parents and Crown Court staff, James observed a wholly different scene. Moreover, as one white-identifying person to another, James expected that I perceived the same feeling of discomfort, of being unwelcome or not belonging, as he did. Certainly, since James’ childhood the population demographics of Crown Court MHC, Lincoln, and the American Heartland more broadly, have become far more diverse. Notably, Hispanic/Latinos are Nebraska’s fastest-growing minority group, their population having grown over 300 percent since 1990. In Crown Court, this increase has been especially pronounced. According to 2010 Census Block Group data approximately forty percent of Crown Court families identify as Hispanic/Latino. Such shifts upend dominant cultural expectations, particularly those which racialize “trailer parks” as

\textsuperscript{14} Most respondents used the ethnoracial descriptor “Hispanic” to refer to first- and second-generation Mexican immigrants living in Crown Court. Here, I use the term \textit{Latino/a} to describe self-identified “Hispanics” or “Mexicans.” While not fully divorced from Eurocentric and colonial terminological categorization, “Latino/a” is considered less problematic and more inclusive of non-Spanish speaking and/or pan-Latin American individuals (De Genova & Ramos-Zayas 2003; Urciuoli 2008).
white spaces, as well as frame the pejorative epithets “white trash” and “trailer trash” as synonymous (Darling 2009; Isenburg 2016; Krause 1998; Rennels 2015; Wray 2006).

For James, a white man sensitive to “trailer trash” stigmas, his mobile home park still signified a particularly racialized space where he and his family used to belong. Where the previous chapters showed how mobile-homeowners claim respectable, middle-class identities through normalizing discourses, this chapter extends the analysis to consider how traditional depictions of the American middle-classes are often conflated with dominant representation of ideological whiteness (see Frankenburg 1993; Hartigan 1999, 2005; Morris 2005; Ortner 1991; Perin 1988; Rubin 1976). Situated against the backdrop of precarious housing futures, where eviction, dispossession, and (planned) redevelopment is seen as inevitable, how is belonging constructed, asserted, or felt in liminal borderlands like trailer parks?

Recall how months earlier, James had subtly located me within another social class (“you guys”), equal to, but nonetheless distinct from his own social status. By contrast, the 2015 Halloween party presented a very different context in which our (assumed) class differences no longer mattered as much as our (again, presumed) shared ethnoracial identities. Hence, I consider how the fraught cultural disjunctures of race and class become visible in specific racial, as well as racist, speech. In particular, I focus on “trailer trash,” which indexes “white trash” in popular American discourse and thus reveals how “trash” is materialized as a racial category which both polices and blurs the boundaries of hegemonic whiteness. In contrast to the “normalizing” and “up-staging” strategies described earlier, this chapter depicts “distancing” techniques, namely fencing, bordering, and passing, intended to identify “trashiness” with certain racialized bodies (Kusenbach 2009, 2015).
While few Latinos/as I interviewed were concerned with, or felt affected by, negative “trailer trash” stigmas, all white mobile-homeowners were familiar with this disparaging label, even if they expressed disagreement on the extent to which it affected them individually. Furthermore, the salaciousness of most media representations of “trailer parks” undermines MHC residents’ attempts to normalize, that is, recast their homes and neighborhoods as respectable, safe, and “good” places. White mobile-homeowners like James, who have lived in Crown Court MHC for most of their lives, additionally buttress the community’s moral standing amidst (imagined) decline through nostalgic narratives of Crown Court’s past, a time when, as Robin DiAngelo (2011:58) notes, people of color were less visible or absent altogether (see also, Low 2003; Withers 2017:6).

DiAngelo continues: “White people enjoy a deeply internalized, largely unconscious sense of racial belonging in U.S. society” (62). However, while much has been written on the effects of exclusionary, anti-immigrant rhetoric among migrant populations, as well as those identified with (or as) being “aliens” (e.g. Hallet 2012; Hayden 2015; Hiemstra 2010; Nelson & Hiemstra 2008; Vega 2012), far fewer studies have analyzed how white people, especially poor or lower-income groups, respond to or express feelings of exclusion or unwelcome (see Heiman 2012; Lawrence-Zúñiga 2016; Low 2003; Saito 1998, for research on middle- and upper class whites’ response to perceived sociocultural marginalization). Here, I attend to cases of white mobile-homeowners’ racial, and racist, speech as “place protective” behaviors, described by Setha Low (2003) as practices that “defends a person’s sense of attachment and location in the social world” (80). In particular, I consider how my subject position, as a performed embodiment (albeit partial) of white working-class femininity, mediated and shaped how I interacted with Lincoln mobile-homeowners throughout my fieldwork (Walley 2013; on general ethnographer
positionality, see Cabrera 2014; Galemba 2013; Jackson 2001). James’ varied responses to my presumed racial- and class-identity aptly illustrates how a researcher’s intersectional identities frames her interlocutors’ responses, especially regarding sensitive topics like race, class, and the contested politics of belonging.

Although I do focus on Latino/a mobile-homeowners’ negotiated raciality and/or ethnicity in Crown Court MHC, readers will note that the majority of the chapter focuses on white residents’ attempts to mitigate damaging “trashy” stereotypes. As Kusenbach (2015) shows, Latino/a mobile-homeowners are less concerned with “trailer trash” stigmas, preferring instead to conceptualize their residence as a beautiful home unaffected by widespread cultural devaluation, an observation supported by my findings. As the limited scholarship on manufactured housing tends to focus on these stereotypes, Latino/a mobile-homeowners are vastly underrepresented in the existing literature despite their demographic significance (Kusenbach 2015; Nelson & Hiemstra 2008). I do not intend to contribute to this erasure of Latinos/as, or any other ethnic-racial minority group, from the mobile home landscape. Indeed, throughout this dissertation I have included Latino/a voices as well as those of Black, Native American, and white residents.

However, as I write these words (December 2017), sociopolitical rhetoric in the United States has been keenly attuned to emergent, or resurgent, white nationalisms primarily identified with the white working classes (e.g. Buck 1996; Darling 2009; Maskovsky 2017; Walley 2017). The unexpected political ascendancy of Donald Trump to the White House has fueled endless punditry and analysis, and although Trump’s populist message celebrates the cultural worlds linked to white working-class masculinity (Goldstein & Hall 2017; Maskovsky 2017), predominant tendencies characterizing Trump supporters as poor and working-class
“deplorables”\textsuperscript{15} has shifted most analysts’ attention from racial to class politics. Although my field research in Crown Court MHC preceded the 2016 Presidential Election, I nonetheless consider the insights generated from this work as well-suited, and timely, for examining how racial politics located in precarious, contested spaces are enacted in everyday speech and behaviors (e.g. Darling 2009; Hayden 2016; McGranahan 2017:4; Withers 2017). Here, I follow John Hartigan, Jr. (2005), who holds that, as researchers, we ought to attend to the “interpretive processes whites are engaged in rather than focusing solely on discerning the ideological core or belief structure that might be revealed by their comments” (246).

As such, guiding this analytical framework is the colloquialism \textit{bad blood}, understood as a metaphorical and idiomatic device that describes the everyday racialization of “trash” in Crown Court MHC. In the United States, folk notions of race remain imbued with biological essentialisms (Roland 2013) which (re)produce dominant racial hierarchies. However, in its figurative usage “bad blood” recalls historic (and contemporary) concerns with so-called “degenerate” whites, whose impoverishment and itinerancy undermines, and therefore threatens, nationalist and supremacist claims of “natural” racial superiority (Hartigan 2005; Isenburg 2016; Wray 2006). However, as a figure of speech “bad blood” also describes the growing tensions between white and Latino/a mobile-homeowners in the contested space of Crown Court MHC, for which James’ Halloween outburst is apropos. Insofar as (racial) belonging involves “clarifying who We are, and distinguishing Us from the dangerous and contaminating Other among us” (Roland 2017:445; \textit{see also}, Harding 1991:374; Hartigan 2005), situating oneself as respectable, and thus rightfully belonging in the mobile home park often results in the

\textsuperscript{15} Similar to Mitt Romney’s campaign gaffe described earlier (p. 145), former Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton told supporters at a rally in September 2016, “To just be grossly generalistic [sic], you can put half of Trump supporters into what I call the basket of deplorables. Right? Racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, Islamaphobic, you name it.” And, like “the 47%,” “deplorables” has become a rallying cry at Trump rallies.
(re)positioning of a particular racialized (or ethnicized) group over another. Understandably, this produces social anxieties, tension, and bitterness among neighbors. And yet, I argue that these contestations might also force a reconceptualization of whiteness which confronts lingering essentialisms in addition to the class- and colorblind language typically ascribed to the “normative” (white) middle-classes (Bonilla-Silva 2002; Hartigan 1999, 2005; Scott 2009).

“You Look like You Belong in a Trailer Park”

As a concept, belonging denotes both an affective state and a claim to membership, which includes all the rights and benefits accorded to a particular group (Mbodj-Pouye 2016; Nelson & Hiemstra 2008:322; Roland 2013; Vega 2012). In the context of critical race theory, “racial belonging” describes how local processes of racialization are mapped onto geographic space, making salient specific place-based identities in the everyday (re)production of race (Dávila 2004; Jackson 2001; Roland 2013; Wirtz 2017). However, the identification of MHCs with whiteness was never a foregone conclusion, rather it is (and was) a consequence of sociocultural and historical formations, in particular the post-war housing crisis and subsequent suburban construction boom.

Poor “white trash” have long been identified with itinerancy, an association that extends to their housing. From ramshackle lean-tos, rotting cabins, to “trailers,” the homes of the white underclasses are generally seen as revealing something odd about its occupants (Hartigan 2005; Isenburg 2016; Rafter 1988:44). Yet, the severity of the post-war housing shortage, along with industry and manufacturer innovations that transformed Depression-era “trailers” into modern “mobile homes” tempered social contempt for white “trailerites,” especially those who viewed their homes as temporary until a “real,” suburban dwelling was available. From 1940 to 1960 the
largest growth in homeownership rates in American history took place, spurred along by policies such as the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944 (known as the GI Bill of Rights) and the expansion of the Federal Housing Authority. However, prior to the passage of the 1968 Fair Housing Act, legal segregationist policies offered symbolic protection for whites fleeing dense urban neighborhoods for new, sprawling planned subdivisions, including “modern” MHCs like Crown Court.

However, despite their socioeconomic and cultural marginalization, poor whites, including “white trailer trash,” still possessed (and possess) a privileged social identity, namely whiteness (Harris 1993; Scott 2009). The postwar housing shortage and subsequent construction boom literally built ethnoracial segregation into the American (sub)urban landscape. For aspiring white suburbanites awaiting either financing or an actual home to move into, this meant demanding the same segregated (trailer park) developments as their wealthier suburban counterparts (Hurley 2001). Just like the fast-growing suburbs, trailer park operators met their demands, partially in hopes that doing so would rehabilitate the negative image travel trailers garnered throughout the Depression; of course, their optimism was dashed as “trailer trash” entered common parlance in the early 1950s (Irby 2000; Isenburg 2016). Even after the Fair Housing Act made discrimination illegal in other sectors of the housing market, as for-profit businesses operating on private property, most MHCs continued to deny resident applications on the basis of race, age, religion, or family status well into the 1970s (Berube & Berube 1997; Hurley 2001; McCarty 2010; Moss 2003). Such policies, and their informal (and illegal) perpetuation to the present day reinforces commonsense associations between (lower-income) whites and “trailers.”
Despite the popular, albeit inaccurate, portrayal of contemporary MHCs as white spaces (Benson 1990; Kusenbach 2015), we would be wrong to assume that “trailer parks” enjoy the same widespread identification with normativity, moral character, and respectability often afforded suburban communities (see Dorst 1989; Frankenburg 1993; Low 2003; Perin 1988). As cultural “tricksters,” sociolegally ambiguous mobile-homeowners deviate from the “social ladder of life” (Perin 1977) reflected by American land-use practices. Whether through consumption practices or financial discourse, “place-protection” behaviors (Low 2003:80) meant to normalize “trailer housing” often backfire, instead validating (white) mobile-homeowners’ perceived deviance. Or, as E. Paul Durrenburger and Dimitra Doukas (2008:216) remind us, “To be privileged by race and still not be affluent can only result from being multiply inferior—slow-witted, lazy, unfit; easily duped, incapable of understanding their political interest, and thus [white trash] are worthy of contempt.”

For the mobile-homeowners I met and interacted with, maintaining one’s respectability meant navigating a contentious sociocultural landscape wherein the very place so fiercely defended was also symbolically (not to mention physically) contaminating. Whether framed in positive or negative terms, an individual’s racial or ethnic identity became a proxy for determining if they belonged or not. For instance, in March 2015 I witnessed a telling exchange between Carol and two white mobile-homeowners who had stopped by the leasing office where I was volunteering. There to pay their lot rent, the married couple appeared to be in their mid-50s, both relying heavily on canes for walking assistance. As I offered both a seat and some coffee, my off-hand comment that “I ain’t had coffee yet either,” prompted a grin from the husband.
“That’s a redneck word there!” he remarked, his excitement causing all of us, Carol included, to burst into laughter. However, as Carol processed their payment she leaned over to me and with her face scrunched up with disgust, whispered, “Oh god, they smell.”

Stereotypical depictions of “white trash” emphasize poor hygiene and unattractiveness as indicative markers of white “Others,” that is, as “trashy” figures illustrating “one form of whiteness that ‘sees’ whiteness from a distance” (Newitz & Wray 1997:5; see also, Allison 2002[1988]; Hartigan 1999, 2005; Rennels 2015; Song 2012; Wilson 2002; Wray 2006). Here, it must be noted how “redneck,” another racialized moniker not unlike “hick” or “hillbilly,” was not intended as an insult; rather, the joyousness of this man’s remark highlights another instance in which Crown Court MHC residents and I bonded over certain shared tendencies. (It is also worth mentioning that I grew up just a few dozen miles from the hometown of comedian Dan Whitney, better known as “Larry the Cable Guy,” who made his career affecting “redneck” mannerisms and faking a “hick” accent.) The marked white identities “redneck” or “hillbilly” have been redeemed in both entertainment and (conservative) political spheres to some extent (Callahan 2008; Isenburg 2016; Newitz & Wray 1997; Williams 2017). However, with few exceptions (e.g. Eastman & Schrock 2008; Goad 1998), “white trash,” and its material correlate, “trailer trash,” remain wholly debased cultural figures (Darling 2009; Hartigan 2005; Sweeney 2001).

“Now, those are trailer people,” Carol stated once the pair left. For her, the mobile-homeowners’ appearance, speech, and residence confirmed their proper emplacement in the “trailer park” as a natural byproduct of their polluted, marked, and devalued whiteness. “Sometimes,” she added, “it’s just, you look like you belong in a trailer park.”
Racializing MHCs as both white(ned) and marked produces a recognizable figure, “trailer trash,” who embodies not only “failed” whiteness, but justifies residents’ “second-class status” as well as park redevelopment and mobile-homeowner dislocation. All mobile-homeowners, regardless of their racial-ethnic identification, wrestle with this potent, and damaging, cultural figure. On occasion, residents adopt “trailer trash” identities akin to a shared sociolegal status, however as Chapter Three illustrates this tactic is rarely successful as “respectable” mobile-homeowners, like Joe and Reba, distance themselves from “trash.” (Recall Joe’s disdain: “Woah. You might be [trailer trash]” [p. 94])

Less often, individuals jokingly embrace “trailer trash” characteristics, as one former tenant I briefly met exemplified. Rebecca, a white woman in her late fifties, had applied for a housekeeping position at Crown Court. As she waited for her interview with Lisa, Crown Court’s manager, we amiably chatted. It was during this conversation that I learned that Rebecca had once lived in Crown Court, “about 35 years ago,” or shortly after the park had opened (1973-74). Then seventeen, newly wed and pregnant with her first daughter, Rebecca and her husband were thrilled to have their own home in one of Lincoln’s newest neighborhoods. Laughing, Rebecca then told me one of her favorite stories from those years.

“I just had my daughter,” she began, “and I was out in the backyard, working in the garden. It was summer, pretty dang hot, so I took my shirt off and was out there in just my bra.” She added that it’d been a fairly revealing bra, which had us both giggling.

Once we recovered, Rebecca continued: “Then, I noticed there were some new neighbors moving in, so I decided to bring them over a basket of vegetables as a welcome gift.” Winking, she added, “I think you know where I’m going with this.” Sure enough, not realizing she was clad in just a (revealing) bra, Rebecca took some vegetables over to her new neighbors.
When her neighbor, an “older” woman, answered the door, “she acted as if she didn’t like me. It wasn’t until I was walking back home that I remembered that I was walkin’ around in my bra!” Again, we laughed, however this story depicts a common trope regarding trailer trash women as promiscuous and sexually licentious (Darling 2009; Hartigan 2005; Isenburg 2016; Newitz & Wray 1997; Rennels 2015). Although Rebecca humorously depicted her younger self as appearing to validate this stereotype, she nonetheless framed this episode within a larger narrative portraying Crown Court as a beautiful, respectable community. Moreover, by moving into a conventional single-family home two years later, Rebecca further distanced herself and her family from the “trailer trash” stereotype by embracing a more traditional perspective toward manufactured housing as temporary dwellings.

Within the contested site (Low & Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003:18) of an urban MHC, such accounts illustrate how white-identifying mobile-homeowners either situate themselves, or are emplaced by others (Little 2012), as belonging in Crown Court MHC. In particular, these stories highlight certain interactions with “trailer trash” as a racialized and denigrated cultural figure. In contrast to social type or stereotypes, figures are formed through dynamic relational processes; in other words, “the figure not only emerges against a ground but also defines the ground through the very process of its coming-into-view” (Barker et al. 2013:165; see also, Hartigan 2005; Kelly 2013; Lambek 2013). Not merely objectified stereotypes, figures actively respond to sociolegal structures, popular media representations, and the physical environment in either claiming or rejecting certain identities. And yet, because figures cannot be freed from the broad and complex historical and cultural systems against which they are recognized, their actions might unintentionally reify dominant stereotypes, as both Carol’s assumptions and Rebecca’s youthful mistake showcase.
Furthermore, attending to “marked” (Phelan 1993) forms of whiteness, including “trailer trash,” reveals significant fractures in the façade of hegemonic whiteness, and thus offers meaningful insight into the lived, messy, and complicated realities of race and racialization (e.g. Hartigan 1999; Miraftab 2016; Jackson 2001; Roland 2013). As ethnographic studies on Latino/a and Asian immigrants living in suburban communities suggests, engaging the fraught politics of racial belonging ultimately alters the social landscape (Dávila 2008; Lawrence-Zúñiga 2016; Saito 1998; Vega 2012), what Pem Davidson Buck (2012) calls the “reordering of whiteness.” For Latino/a mobile-homeowners, the racialization of “trailer trash” as white (trash) potentially limits the damaging effects of this degrading epithet for them.

Ella (26), a Latina mobile-homeowner, likened “trailer trash” with other racial slurs. Relaxing in the spacious kitchen of her doublewide unit one afternoon, she described her view as follows: “I’ll give you an example. In Spanish, they’ll call you mojado, you know? A lot of people get offended, but it doesn’t sound as ugly in English, like when you say ‘wetback.’” Intrigued, I asked Ella if it depended on who said what, and she agreed:

It’s hillbillies, you know? That’s what you think of when they say “trailer” or “white trash” or “trailer trash,” that’s what comes to my mind. It’s because of everything from the TV, you know, and people. That’s what they have a picture of. It’s just an ethnicity thing. And it is! Just like if you go to a Mexican place and you ask other questions, white people might not see it as offensive as a Hispanic person, you know? It’s just how it is.

Despite its concrete properties, “trailer trash” is an undeniably racialized moniker, one which challenges (hegemonic) white privilege or supremacism (Hartigan 2005; Isenburg 2016; Krause 1998; Wray 2006). Among the mobile-homeowners I surveyed, 35 percent explicitly associated “trailer trash” with whiteness, oftentimes substituting one for the other without pause. However, all mobile-homeowners inevitably engage with “trailer trash” figurations. For white mobile-homeowners like James, describing MHCs as white spaces (Hill 1999) to which he and
his family belong nonetheless exposes painful reminders of childhood taunts and teasing for being “trailer trash.” By contrast, equating “trailer trash” with “white trash” allows Latino/a mobile-homeowners such as Ella to distance themselves from this damaging label as non-white identifying persons (Dávila 2004:171-2; Dick 2017; Hallett 2012; Kusenbach 2015). Yet, missing from this interpretation is the deep significance of socioeconomic class as an inter-, as well as intra-racial figuration for determining “trashiness.” As Hartigan (2005) notes, “white trash” describes “a lurid stereotype and debasing epithet, [applied] to poor whites whose subordination by class is extreme” (1, emphasis added). Building on the previous chapters, where mobile-homeowner normalization strategies meant to claim respectable middle-class identities, let us now revisit how class meaningfully intersects with these discursive and behavioral techniques in the context of precarious urban mobile home neighborhoods.

The American Lumpenproletariat

Nationalist anxieties concerning pauperism, itinerant, and therefore “contaminating” whites predate the United States. Originating in fifteenth-century England and France, pejorative labels such as “lubbers,” “waste people,” and “bogtrotters,” legitimized the social boundaries between respectable whites and their idle, impoverished counterparts (Hartigan 2005; Isenburg 2016; Wray 2006). Even before the advent of scientific racism, social critics expressed a profound preoccupation with dirt and the contaminating dangers the “unfortunate” classes represented to society (Douglas 1966; Hartigan 2005). In the antebellum South, for example, “dirt eaters” included poor whites who “were not acceptable on any level of Southern society” (Stephens Nuwer 2016:142) for sharing (or adopting) a cultural practice associated with Native peoples and African Americans (see also, Rafter 1998:46; Scott 2009; Wilson 2002).
These cultural preoccupations with dirt and embodied (im)purities coalesced by the 1820s into a lurid figure: *white trash*. Multiply portrayed as either the “victims” of institutionalized slavery or traitors to the Southern cause (Hartigan 2005; Isenburg 2016; Wray 2006), before long “white trash” became a rhetorical shorthand for identifying diminished, tainted, and untrustworthy whites.

The racialization of “polluted” whites is further evident in the socialist structuralist writings of Marx and Engels, whose *lumpenproletariat* dressed in tattered rags, lived in squalor, and were incapable of achieving class consciousness (Stallybrass 1990; Wray 2006:50). Significantly, Marx and Engels characterized this ahistoric “dangerous” class as a mindless mob easily manipulated by the bourgeois: “The *lumpenproletariat*, this passive decaying matter of the lowest layers of the old society, is here and there thrust into the [progressive] moment by a proletarian revolution; [however,] in accordance with its whole way of life, it is more likely to sell out to reactionary intrigues” (Marx & Engels, cf. Bussard 1987:675). Contrasted against the sympathetic *proletariat*, the *lumpenproletariat*’s vague, yet reviled, depiction is remarkably similar to aforementioned period pejoratives (i.e., cracker, dirt-eater, and white trash) while also resonating with contemporary figurations.

For Traci (38), a white mobile home renter who, like James, spent her childhood in a trailer park, being called “white, trailer trash” calls to mind a limited set of representative figures.

“If you take a look at what the media shows you, what do you see?” she asked me during our initial interview in October 2015. Before I could respond, she continued:

When you see *redneck*, or *trailer trash*, what do you see? Big-ole woman in a moo-moo, or a guy with a mullet. Take a look at how things go, it’s the same carbon copy cutout. Maybe a different backstory, but there’s always a trailer, there’s always somebody with a mullet, and somebody missing teeth. It’s just how it is.
Even though they had never met, I was struck by the similarities between Ella, the Latina doublewide owner described above, and Traci’s reductive explanations equating either “hillbillies” or “rednecks,” both racialized slurs describing marked whiteness, with “trailer trash.” Instances like these exemplify “t/races” of essentialist, or folk, interpretations of racial belonging in everyday lived contexts (Roland 2013). In other words, widespread social acceptance of the interchangeability of white and trailer trash produces the specific cultural worlds within which individuals variously position themselves. For Ella, both identifying and being identified (Baker 2004) as “Hispanic” allowed her to distance herself, and by extension, her family, from harmful stereotypes. Traci, however, cannot remove her white, Southern-accented embodiment from being associated with “trash” in the same manner, and therefore resorted to other mitigation strategies. Yet, neither woman rejected the existence of “trailer trash,” rather both settled for articulating how they, themselves, did not represent the stereotype.

Beyond “normalizing” and “upstaging,” Kusenbach (2009) describes two further strategies by which mobile-homeowners distance themselves from trailer park stereotypes. James’ Halloween outburst represents a form of fencing, wherein the individual protects themselves from damaging stigmas by erecting symbolic lines of difference within their own neighborhood. Ella, too, used this technique by asserting that “trash” referred to her white neighbors rather than her own household.

For white-identifying Crown Court residents, fencing (re)figures individual households as deserving and respectable, that is, wholly unlike despised trailer trash. Law professor Joan Williams (2017) illustrates how, in recent years, the cultural redemption of white working-class identities valorizes the postwar period where whites’ upward mobility, reinforced through segregationist housing policies, inferred individual morality and respectability (see also,
Maskovsky 2017; Roland 2017). Located within this broader movement includes the cultural redemption of blue-collar white labels like “redneck” and “hillbillies,” whose favorable depictions in popular sitcoms such as The Beverly Hillbillies (1962-71) or full-length features like Forrest Gump (1994) and Fargo (1996) showcase somewhat foolish, yet ultimately well-intended and harmless caricatures. However, these rhetorical boundaries positioning some working-class, lower-income whites as “deserving” (if struggling) necessitates the existence of an “undeserving,” or “hard-living” population; thus, the perpetuation of the American lumpenproletariat, white trailer trash.

“What does it mean to be poor and white?” asks Annalee Newitz and Matt Wray (1997):

It means bucked teeth and acne and greasy hair and large Adam’s apples and lanky-limbed men and sloppy fat women and dirt and filth and “uhhh-huumph” and “y’all” and racism and ignorance and “you might be a redneck if… ha” and Deliverance and Elvis and Patsy Cline and trailers, and “incestuous and sexually promiscuous, violent, alcoholic, lazy, and stupid” (7, emphasis in original).

That’s quite a list, and Traci wasted no time removing herself from the stereotype. From the recording of our first interview, her opening words were, “Hi, I have degrees in English and psychology, and I’m eighteen hours from a Master’s degree in creative writing.”

Traci’s mother moved her family from their rural Alabama MHC to Nebraska when she was seven, and “there was this stigma of where we came from.” Other children teased Traci for having lived in a trailer, telling her that “low-class people come from a trailer.” Worse, “I had adults telling me this.” However, for Traci leaving the park meant leaving behind her community, one which, she was quick to assure me, was far more welcoming and warm than any Nebraskans she encountered.

“The biggest difference that I saw right off the bat between where I was from and where we came to is the fact that we had all sorts of different-colored people,” she explained. “We had
different cultures.” Her Auntie Cal, for instance, was an older, “mixed-race” neighbor and park matriarch who Traci thought the world of. Likewise, by age five Traci spoke fluent Spanish and was, by her own estimation, “Pretty pitch black… When we moved here, I was very, very, very tan. And that was cause for an issue, because I have almond-shaped eyes and I was brown and I could speak two languages, and my English wasn’t clear because they couldn’t understand [my accent].”

Newitz and Wray (1997), and others (Darling 2009; Hartigan 1999; Williams 2017; Wray 2006) note how “white trash” are often accused of being racists. Emphasizing her own (multi-)cultural capital, paradoxically obtained through her trailer park upbringing, Traci again distanced herself from “trash.” Indeed, Traci further described fluency in American Sign Language (ASL) and familiarity with Islam and Hinduism. Emphasizing her very tanned body also illustrates a curious reversal of white “passing,” or rather, im-passing. Sociologist Debbie Storrs (1999) describes similar stigma management strategies among mixed-race American women, who, contrary to dominant expectations, regard their whiteness as “spoiling” their identities (see also, Wilton et al. 2013; Hughey 2012). Embracing “multiple” (191) racial identities, oftentimes depending on external contexts, illustrates the fluidity of raciality, or “racial projects” (Omi & Winant 1994). Like Ella, and other Latino/a mobile-homeowners I spoke with, Traci, a white woman, nonetheless fenced herself off from “Other” (i.e., racist and trashy) white persons, assimilating darker (tanned) skin as well as education and worldliness to position herself as respectable and worthy.

So, imagine my surprise when, during our second interview, Traci launched into an unexpected diatribe against the Sudanese refugee families living in the nearby apartment
complex. Initially, Traci was describing a terse encounter she’d had with someone driving his pickup truck through Crown Court.

“This guy pulled up the other day, and he whistles at me,” she began, incensed that the stranger had not even attempted to greet her respectfully. “He doesn’t even say, ‘hey, excuse me, nothing.” As it turned out, the man wanted to know where one of the main roads bisecting Crown Court was at, however Traci’s family had moved in less than a month before and therefore she had no idea where he needed to go. The pair spatted, before Traci, frustrated, responded, “Go find out over there”—meaning the next door apartments—“and see if any of them speak English. Go find out. Get out!”

Like our first interview, Traci continued before I had the chance to get a word in. “I was mad,” she explained, “cause he had an attitude problem. It’s the way people that live in mobile homes are treated, you know?” Certainly, I agreed with her. Throughout my fieldwork, I’d heard several Crown Court residents describe their “second-class” treatment, and even I withstood some (well meaning, I’m sure) teasing from friends and colleagues for living in the park. However, it was what Traci said next that took me by surprise:

I mean, if you look at this, and honest to God, I think the people that live in the apartments over here are by far more savage than the people who live here. I literally saw a boy picked up the other day and slammed into the ground by another boy with all these guys hopping around… Like, I mean, they acted like monkeys.

Trent (41), Traci’s husband, who had been mostly quiet up until then, suddenly cut in. “That’s a terrible choice of words,” he muttered, shaking his head.

Nonplussed, Traci snapped at him, “Well, it’s what it looked like! Seriously, they were beating on their chests and,” here, she mimicked the behaviors she’d witnessed, affecting an accent and calling out, “Yo, yo, yo!” Deflating somewhat, she added, “I’m just kind of worried. You get a bad rap for living in a place like this.”
Traci’s dehumanizing characterization of her African neighbors exhibits another distancing technique described by Kusenbach (2009), *bordering*, where residents draw distinctions between their own respectable neighborhood and other “trashy” communities (*see also*, Berube & Berube 1997). While this can occur between different park communities, as Antonia’s remarks in Chapter Three illustrate (p. 98), bordering rhetoric also delineates between *social types* and the communities to which they are thought to belong. Here, Traci alludes to the racialization of MHCs as white spaces in contrast to subsidized, low-income apartment blocks associated with African Americans in popular and academic literature (e.g., Desmond 2016; McCarty 2010; Moss 2003).

Unbeknownst to me, less than a week later I would witness yet another sudden racist outburst as James learned, to his displeasure, that he’d once again lost the Halloween decoration contest. Episodes like these typify a common dilemma I encountered throughout my fieldwork, where white-identified mobile homeowners would resist “trailer trash” stigmas which, among other things, label them as racists, then seemingly affirm those stereotypes with blatantly racist language. Further complicating matters was how these residents’ actions or self-descriptions blurred the color lines they meant to maintain; for Traci, describing herself as “pitch black” and multilingual, whereas James had married and started a family with a Native American woman. Hartigan (1999) describes similar discursive “blurring” in Briggs, an inner-city Detroit neighborhood predominantly occupied by self-described “hillbillies.” While living in close proximity to Black Detroiterst often provoked pejorative-laden, racist language from anxious whites, the same residential integration created close, interpersonal familiarity where white and Black residents each claimed, or extended, “racial ‘kinship’” (114) to one another. Dalton Conley (2000) recalls in an autobiographical study of his childhood spent in a predominant
African American housing project that he and his younger sister longed to resemble their Black and Puerto Rican friends as their physical differences made them feel as though they “didn’t belong” to the neighborhood; it was not until Conley was older that he came to recognize the privileges his whiteness conferred, even within the project itself. Thus, although James and Traci’s words and actions may seem paradoxical, poor and working-class whites have for generations vexed and complicated hegemonic representations of whiteness conflated with (middle) class privilege.

**Bad Blood as Metaphor**

The *trickster* is a prominent figure in mythologies worldwide and, unsurprisingly, the annals of anthropological inquiry. A trickster “changes shape, crosses boundaries, and breaks rules of conduct and logic” (Seale-Cozallo 2012:186), thus Perin (1977) consigned mobile-homeowners, deviants of the American dream, to this contentious social slot. As cultural tricksters, the figure of the white mobile-homeowner as “trailer trash” harkens back to an earlier period in which *trashiness* symbolized corrupted or polluted blood, that is, genetic inheritance.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the American eugenics movement purported to offer “scientific” solutions to elites’ social anxieties regarding pauperism, licentiousness, criminality, and above all, preventing racial miscegenation (Hartigan 2005; Isenburg 2016; Krause 1998; Rafter 1988). Laws such as the *Virginia Racial Integrity Act* (1924) and other “One Drop” rules set legal definitions for who could, or could not, classify themselves white; anyone with any known non-white ancestry was prohibited from claiming Caucasian heritage. The sole exception to the “one drop” rule was that so-called “Pocahontas” clause, which stipulated that any white person with no more than 1/16th Native American “blood” could still claim whiteness. This exception emerged in
authority to determine the boundaries of whiteness along the lines of color and class. For instance, in the landmark case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), famous for its “separate but equal” racial segregation doctrine later implemented in postwar Federal housing policies, the petitioner, Homer Adolph Plessy, was denied admission onto “Whites Only” railcars because his heritage included an African American great-grandparent and, thus, he was considered “Black.” However, anti-miscegenation laws were not enough, proponents feared, to quell the threat represented by “lower-order” whites. Widely reviled and regarded as deviant, especially given their propensity to live alongside Black and/or Native peoples and assimilate their cultural practices, the mere existence of “white trash” undermined the legitimacy of white supremacist agendas and arguments (Rafter 1988). Indeed, if possessing even one drop of non-Caucasian blood signaled pollution and endangered white racial “purity,” then how could the existence of “pure” white trash be explained?

Like James, Jean (60) bristled when “trailer trash” came up during our interview. Disabled and semi-retired, Jean had lived in mobile homes all her life and was sensitive to these popular stigmas. “If you were lower class,” she recalled, “Oh hey, you’re white trailer trash.”

Here, Jean highlights how class status intersects racial identity in determining “white trash.” The haunting possibility of downward mobility, that social class is all that separates an individual from the “monstrous” white underclasses has remained a staple in Euroamerican popular culture since the seventeenth century, forging boundaries between an “Us” and “Them” largely internalized by the white middle- and upper classes (Hartigan 2005; Isenburg 2016; Rennels 2015; Scott 2009; Sweeney 2001). Hartigan (2005) identifies a clear example of this in Robert Louis Stevenson’s (1886) *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, as the main character, Jekyll, whose

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response to wealthy white Virginians’ claim to be the descendants of John Rolfe, and Pocahontas, a Native woman (Tatum 2013).
The thing about White Trash is that mainstream White America cannot completely disclaim it no matter how hard we try. White Trash cannot be marginalized by race or by immigrant status or even cultural heritage, but only by our own discomfort and denial: White Trash are what we come from, and what we fear to be (146).

Because *race* is a cultural, not biological, reality (Baker 1998; Hartigan 1999, 2005; Roland 2013; Visweswaran 1998), ethnoracial boundaries shift and flex across time and social contexts. Although *constructed* as a biological “fact,” whiteness, argues Harris (1993) is instead “an ideological proposition imposed through subordination” (1730). For Harris, being “white” embodies a form of *property*, one that grants its unmarked holders rights of exclusion to determine the conditions and contours of whiteness in order to maintain white supremacy and privilege (ibid:1736). As such, wherever white trash’s racial lineage was confirmed “purely” Caucasian, alternative reasons for their “degeneracy” were developed within the fledgling “science” of eugenics.

For some elite whites, “poor white trash” were *lower* than Black Americans in the dominant racial order because to be privileged by race and still unsuccessful betrayed “the lie at the heart of racism: that the ‘inferiority’ of the Blacks is embedded racially, rather than in conditions of poverty and deprivation” (Sweeney 2001:147; *see also*, Hartigan 2005; Isenburg 2016). Eugenical science offered an alternative solution to explain “lower-order” whites, namely genetic inheritance of “undesirable” features. From the colonial era onward, the symbolic significance of blood, in particular “blood kinship,” informed popular understandings of familial relatedness and inherited predisposition (Hartigan 2005; Schneider 1968) in addition to legitimizing hierarchical racial orders and colonial, later national, sovereignty across the expanding nation (Sturm 2002). Mannerisms identified with the middle-classes, such as morality,
amiability, and respectability were subsequently conceived as proof of “good breeding,” whereas undesirable traits like dim-wittedness, drunkenness, or idleness suggested a “degenerate” bloodline.

Two family studies, *The Kallikak Family* (1912) and *The Jukes* (1915), offered “evidence” that feeble-mindedness, alongside a suite of “degenerate” qualities, were genetic traits linked to “bad blood.” Literally, *Kallikak* translates to “beautiful” (*kallos*) and “bad” (*kakos*); the pseudonym meant to impress upon readers the distinctive genealogies of the subject family. Inaccurate and wildly embellished, the Kallikak study nonetheless told of a progenitor, Martin Kallikak, a Revolutionary War soldier who, first, “dallied with a feeble-minded tavern girl,” who gave birth to a son, “Old Horror.” Later, Martin married a “worthy Quakeress” who “bore seven upright worthy children” (Hartigan 2005:87). Famously, the Kallikak report included staged photos of slumped, misshapen “morons” situated against ramshackle housing as evidence of degeneracy. Once again, improper and unkempt housing identified its residents with trashiness, now essentialized as a consequence of “poor breeding” and “bad blood.”

Such commonsense associations, as “t/races” (Roland 2013) still resonate among the general populace, which justifies Jean’s biting remarks towards those who called her “trash.” However, like Traci, Jean’s distancing rhetoric soon adopted over racial (and racist) overtones. As our conversation progressed, I asked Jean for her thoughts regarding her mobile home neighborhood. Jean replied that while she liked her home, her new “Iranian” neighbors worried her.

“It’s funny,” she said, “Iranians don’t speak English if they don’t want to, right?” I asked what she meant, and Jean described a recent encounter with a neighbor she’d caught stealing metal siding from her yard. “So, I went up to him and said, ‘You *stole* that from me!’”
Suddenly her tone shifted, becoming higher-pitched as she exaggerated an accented voice. “‘I’m not. Eeeh, no. No.’ I said, ‘What do you think, should I call the cops? ‘No, naah. No, naah’” (see Hill 1998). Although I tried not to show it, her tone had put me off. I glanced down at my prepared questions, specifically those addressing safety and policing in mobile home courts, and asked if she’d called the cops. Her response: “I did, but they couldn’t prove it ‘cause of course they [the neighbors] didn’t speak English.”

In the post-Civil Rights era, dominant middle-class white etiquette has adopted a “colorblind discourse” that avoids race talk by claiming to “not see” race (Bonilla-Silva 2002). Rhetorical racial avoidance is so engrained in hegemonic whiteness that it produces a state of “white fragility” (DiAngelo 2011) where white Americans experience acute discomfort whenever race comes up in a public setting. Colorblindness demarcates intraracial class lines by ascribing race talk, including racist speech, to lower class or “trashy” whites (Hartigan 1999, 2005; Williams 2017). As such, Jean, Traci, and James’s racist comments all seemingly validate the “white trailer trash” stereotypes they find so offensive, affirming their position as white “Others” within the dominant racial framework.

Each instance of hearing such frank, unprompted racial comments provoked a different response; with James, I apparently shook my head, whereas for Traci I awkwardly reminded her that she would remain anonymous in the final write-up. Originally, I omitted Jean’s comments from the transcript altogether, so potent was my discomfort (or rather, fragility) with how candidly racist she would be, to a stranger no less. Although I would love nothing more than to add that my response was a visceral reaction to blatant racism—and yes, I was upset—later I forced myself to acknowledge that my instinct to preclude these moments was an artifact of my own shaky standing in the internal class hierarchies of “whiteness” as a social reality as both
working-class and upwardly mobile (via educational level, at least). However, upon even further 
reflection both the setting (her home) and format (semi-formal interview) of our conversation 
suggested to me that Jean’s words carried intention beyond expressing racist sentiment. While 
middle-class white etiquette espouses colorblindness, in private or “backstage” settings among 
friends or acquaintances, racially coded or “unmarked” speech is used to affirm shared racial 
identities (Pagliai 2011; Picca & Feagin 2007). Perhaps, in addition to being racist, Jean meant 
to affirm our mutual whiteness despite dissimilar class, age, and educational background?

In Black Reconstruction in America (1992[1936]), W.E.B. Du Bois observed how the 
racialization of working-class laborers derailed class-consciousness movements through rhetoric 
that emphasized racial difference and white supremacy. White bourgeois capitalists, he argued, 
structured society such that all whites expected racial privilege regardless of their socioeconomic 
position. This “public and psychological wage” conferred material advantages to lower class 
whites as partial compensation for lower pay (see also, Buck 2012; Harris 1993; Roediger 1991); 
put otherwise, so long as whites’ hegemony remained intact, any whiteness, even marked, was 
culturally privileged. As Harris notes, “Because real power and wealth have never been 
accessible to more than a narrowly defined ruling elite, for many whites the benefits of whiteness 
as property, in the absence of legislated privilege, may have been reduced to a claim of relative 
privilege only in comparison to people of color” (1993:1758).

Indeed, Harris’ own grandmother was able to “pass” as white due to her fair skin, 
allowing her access to the privileges of whiteness in the segregated, Jim Crow South (ibid). 
Despite their phenotypic identification as “white,” the legacy of exclusion of “white trash” from 
representations of ideological whiteness suggests that these white mobile-homeowners’ racist 
remarks are attempts to “pass” for normative, unmarked white raciality. Rather than “racial
belonging,” however, these episodes depict white mobile-homeowners’ *racial longing*, which I define as the desire for unqualified or unmarked racialization. Whereas racial belonging refers to the processes by which certain bodies are raced in specific socio-spatial contexts, the concept of racial longing shows how symbolic intraracial boundaries incite marginalized members to defend their sense of (racial) belonging through explicit racialized language (Hartigan 1999; Kefalas 2003; Moss 2003). Paradoxically, then, racial longing drives class- marginalized white mobile-homeowners to violate normative, middle-class etiquette even as they claim the privileges and protections of hegemonic, unmarked whiteness (Ashcraft & Flores 2012).

To illustrate an instance of discursive racial longing, I return to Jean, and her remarks that I first deleted, then later added, to the transcript of our initial interview. Although I’d grown familiar to the interview process and rarely needed to even glance at my questions, Jean’s responses threw me off. In a stuttering voice, I asked her to describe how she felt about Crown Court’s possible closure and redevelopment. Once again, she responded with explicit racist sentiment:

> I do worry about [Crown Court closing], I do. Because you never know, Allison. Stuff happens. I never thought the world would come to what’s going on now. I mean, the Confederate flag has been known to everybody for what? As long as I’ve known, it’s been the flag that’s been flown in the Carolinas and the South. Now they’ve taken it down. They want to remove the Ten Commandments from some monument. They want to tear that down. I’m like, *god*, what is this world coming to? They had a deal on Facebook the other night, “*do you agree: This flag and the Confederate flag?*” And I wrote, “What happened? For many years we’ve dealt with the American flag is ours, and the Confederate flag is ours. It all depends on who wants to honor which flag. Not my problem.” Blacks overpowering everybody and thinking it’s the police, too, but I don’t think it’s the police. I think Blacks are coming and, I’m sorry, I’m not pro-Obama. I’m 60-years-old, and I’ve never voted a day in my life.

For months, I struggled to make sense of these comments, to disentangle the “interpretive processes […] rather than focusing solely on discerning the ideological core or belief structure that might be revealed by [her] comments” (Hartigan 2005:246). White resentment was surging
on the national stage throughout my fieldwork, as modest victories made under the Obama administration, like removing Confederate flags and statues from public areas, as well as highly visible justice movements including Black Lives Matter were reinterpreted as anti-White (Anderson 2016; Bjork-James & Maskovsky 2017; Buck 2012; Ryborg Jønsson 2017). Yet, years later I still wonder at how a question about Crown Court’s planned redevelopment necessitated addressing these contentious, but unrelated, topics. Further complicating or confusing matters was both our location, Lincoln (named for President Abraham Lincoln, whose 1863 Emancipation Proclamation ended slavery in the United States), Nebraska (a “free” territory not admitted into the Union until after the Civil War), as well as our subject positions, with myself, a Nebraskan, and Jean, whose home state of Vermont is hardly Southern. Last, Jean lived with, and was raising, four of her six grandchildren, all of whom are biracial and have African American fathers.

However, Jean’s plaintive utterance of my name, Allison, drew my attention. Listening to the audio, Jean’s pleading, exasperated tone comes through clearly, begging me to listen. That educated, elite, and often-moneyed white liberals belittle and bemoan the white working classes, and especially white trash, is well-documented (e.g. Darling 2009; Grindal 2011:91; Scott 2009; Williams 2017; Wilson 2002; in popular media, Hartigan 2005; Song 2006:476). In an interview with Darius James, Jim Goad, author of *The Redneck Manifesto*, describes this interclass, intraracial “discourse of redneck reviling” (Darling 2009:24) as a consequence of hypocritical misunderstandings:

The underclass hates, whereas the overclass has disdain. The overclass has this feeling of moral superiority; they have the luxury to feel disdain, to feel contempt. “Why are these *trailer trash* so degenerate, and why don’t they have the same standards that I do?” That’s contempt, which is a form of hate (James 1997:213, emphasis added).
Regardless of socioeconomic status, whiteness, even for white “Others,” confers privileges so long as white supremacy and hegemony remains, however these structural advantages are often invisible for those whose social class status is increasingly precarious (Darling 2009; Ryborg Jønsson 2017; Williams 2017; Walley 2017). Such discursive tendencies are also present within American society generally, with several scholars arguing that “political correctness” evades white trailer trash, “one of the few targets left in our cultural shooting gallery” (Rennels 2015:349; see also, Darling 2009; Hartigan 2005, Newitz & Wray 1997; Sweeney 2001).

Recognizing this does not excuse Jean’s racism, however locating these comments in a particular interpersonal encounter uncovers another layer of meaning. Engaging in racist “backstage talk” (Picca & Feagin 2007), Jean’s comments transgress middle-class etiquette and historic fact, however in doing so our shared whiteness was foregrounded. And although she did not know it, something about the way she said my name struck a chord in me, reminding me of all the times I’ve felt looked down on, or made to feel embarrassed because of who I am (lower class), and where I’m from (the country). So, while I wholly disagreed with her, Jean nonetheless was able to evoke these aspects of our identities in order to articulate her sense of (racial) loss (of belonging).

**Bad Blood as Idiomatic**

Ella, her neighbor Nora, and I met at Nora’s 1983-model home, which she and her husband bought in 2008 for $3,000 cash. Since then, Nora estimated that her husband, a construction worker, had put several thousand dollars into home repairs and renovations. Although Nora was proud of her home, and enjoyed living close to several family members, her fourteen-year-old son had unfortunately been teased at school for living in a mobile home park.
“My son had an incident at school,” Nora said, “Something like that. It was an African-American that told him, you know, ‘Only the Hispanics live in trailers, because they’re low-life’s.’” Ella, who had previously explained her belief that trailer trash is “an ethnicity thing,” nodded in agreement.

“It’s like, [for] Americans it’s the worst, you know, the hillbillies!” she exclaimed. “But to the African-Americans, I guess it’s the Hispanics that live in the mobile homes. And, you know, because they usually live in homes, mobile homes are, like, the worst thing, the worst place you can live.”

Notably, Ella’s comments conflate Americans with whites, specifically “hillbillies,” while also identifying further interracial conflicts materialized through housing types (see Hallet 2012). Yet her response illustrates how the racialization of mobile housing flexes and shifts between ethnoracial contexts. Ella asserted that trailer trash “is an ethnicity thing,” but for middle- or upper-class white Americans such housing retains its (marked) white associations, whereas the African American children who teased Nora’s teenage son had come to identify “trailers” with Latinos/as. Here, the “reordering of whiteness” (Buck 2012) materializes in housing discourse. Historically, the United States’ racial order relied on binary categories, “White” and “Black,” to identify population groups (Bourgois 1989; De Genova 2005), however the influx of additional ethnoracial minorities, which has accelerated since the 1970s, has forced a reconceptualization of America’s de facto racial order. In Durham, North Carolina, for example, McClain et al. (2006) describe “racial distancing” behaviors among recent Latino/a migrants vis-à-vis Black Americans, wherein respondents emphasized their strong work ethic and stressed perceived commonalities with white Americans (see also, Bonilla-Silva 2004; Twine & Gallagher 2008).
Interethnic relations between Latino/as and “white trash” further complicate how raciality is understood, lived, and experienced within the sociospatial and economic margins. Since “trashiness” is both racialized and conflated with immorality (Dick 2017), Latino/a mobile-homeowners can distance themselves from accusations of being “trailer trash” by stressing their own propriety and care, evidenced through their “beautiful homes.” Indeed, few Latino/a mobile-homeowners I spoke with worried about the stigmas associated with mobile home park residence. Similarly, Kusenbach’s (2015) study of Latino/a mobile-homeowners in Florida found that residents typically rejected or altogether ignored trailer stigmas when discussing their housing “because this view was incompatible with their self-perception as owners of beautiful homes, as hard workers, and as upwardly mobile participants in American society” (15). In contrast to white mobile-homeowners, who struggled to distance themselves from “trailer trash” figurations through normalizing discourse or symbolic boundary work such as fencing and bordering, Latino/a mobile-homeowners’ occupation of manufactured housing and “trailer parks” sans “trailer trash” stereotypes (among white Americans, at least) might potentially redeem MHCs as respectable places to live. However, as growing Mexican and Central American populations in MHCs gradually unsettles dominant perceptions that these places are largely white spaces, interethnic conflicts, such as James’ belief that he has become a “minority” in Crown Court, alludes to the “bad blood” that is brewing in these contested zones.

Socioeconomic class meaningfully intersects with, and can inform, racial categories. We have seen how naming “white trash” effectively marks poor or lower-income white mobile-homeowners as “trailer trash.” However, even absent socioeconomic security, Harris (1993:1758) maintains that merely possessing whiteness (as property) represents a “consolation prize” through its symbolic and cultural valorization. Yet, as Harris (and others, e.g. Bonilla-
Silva 2004; Buck 2012; Krause 1998) also notes, the fluid boundaries of ideological whiteness reinforce white privilege and supremacy via selective interpretations of inclusion and exclusion, of which religion, national identity, and class are taken into account.

Class, therefore, can functionally “whiten” individuals. Racial “re-ordering” in the U.S. is, according to Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2004), shifting toward a more nuanced, yet highly fluid racial order, a *tri-racial system* “comprised of ‘whites’ at the top, an intermediary group of ‘honorary whites’ […] and a nonwhite group or the ‘collective black’ at the bottom” (932). In Cuba, Kaifa Roland (2011) describes this as the “race-color continuum” (34-5) characterized by liminal, sub-racial *de salir* (“advancing”) stages that mark individuals’ upward class mobility as *blanqueamiento* (whitening) them. Whether or not this is (yet) the case in the United States, it should be noted that in the 2010 Census, 53 percent of Hispanic/Latino respondents identified as “White,” a decision often tied to middle- or upper class status (Dávila 2008:14, Buck 2012:112; Hartigan 2005:7). By contrast, I argue that poor- and working-class Latino/a mobile-homeowners engage in purposeful self-Othering to distance themselves from harmful “trashy” stereotypes. That is, rejecting a marked white identity, like Ella’s attribution of “trailer trash” to ethnic “hillbillies” (poor whites), allows Latino/a residents to reframe their homes, and by extension, themselves, as respectable, moral, and worthy of belonging (*see also*, Hallett 2012; Vega 2012).

Latino/a mobile-homeowners further reinforce “good” mobile-homeownership with distancing behaviors that are distinct from their white neighbors. Eliza (32), another of Ella’s

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17 Since the 1970s, the U.S. Census has recognized Hispanic/Latino as an ethnicity, rather than a racial category. According to Nicolas De Genova and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas (2003:3), characterizing Latinidad as an ethnicity rather than a racial category encourages Latino/as to identify as anything but Hispanic/Latino. However, given the fluidity of ethno-racial classifications as social constructions, it is often the case that individuals identify as “white” in their home country, but as “Latino/a” or “Other” in the U.S. due to the latter’s dominant bifurcated system (Roland 2011).
neighbors whom I met in early October 2015, exemplifies one alternative approach. Together with her husband and two children, Eliza, a Latina housekeeper, lived in a 1966-model singlewide purchased from Crown Court in 2010 for $600 cash. Despite its age, I was impressed by all the improvements Eliza’s husband, a painter, had made in the intervening years, particularly in the kitchen. Embarrassed by my fawning, Eliza murmured that they had put a few thousand dollars into repairing the home, their first in the United States. Despite these improvements, Eliza told me that she hoped to purchase a conventional home in the future.

“We’ve talked about getting a bigger home, because of the girls,” she said, referring to daughters. “They’re growing up, so they would like their space.” Eliza’s plans to buy a (traditional) home “later on” typifies a common tendency among the Latino/a mobile-homeowners surveyed, who were 2.75 times more likely than white mobile-homeowners to express an intention to leave Crown Court in the next five years, with 83 percent hoping to purchase a conventional single-family home. Just as previous generations of white mobile-homeowners lessened the stigma of “trailer living” by emphasizing the temporariness of their current housing as they waited for their “real” suburban homes to be constructed, so too are Latino/a MHC residents able to distance themselves from stereotyping by adopting conventional perspectives that view manufactured housing as impermanent transitional housing until a traditional dwelling is obtainable.

Tradition and family values are, according to Williams (2017), central to white working-class identities, however these same principles are also frequently attributed to Latino/as, especially among political and social conservatives (Dávila 2004, 2008; Hayden 2015; Pader 1993). In Crown Court, most Latino/a mobile-homeowners have several close family members, often siblings or adult children, who also reside in the park. Ella, for instance, first lived with,
then later purchased her doublewide from her sister, while Eliza followed her two brothers to the neighborhood. This, together with Latino/as reported desires to eventually move into conventional housing produces significant turnover, however most residents I spoke with indicated a preference to sell or rent to other Latino/as, generally friends, relatives, or employees.

“Maybe I’m going to be the one bringing all the Hispanics in here?” joked Luna (34), a Crown Court leasing agent and resident. In 2011, she and her husband began renting in Crown Court, however by 2015 the couple had purchased four homes (and counting) in the park. “I’m planning on buying another [home],” Luna explained, “and bringing other people that don’t have a bank account. We’ll do payments and work with the people that are not able to pay all the money upfront. Just do that for now.” The practice of investing in (mobile) homes in anticipation for new (im)migrant populations represents “social cushioning,” which Faranak Miraftab (2016:65) describes as an inclination among an initial group of “newcomers” to help meet the housing needs of later arrivals (see also, Benson 1990).

Yolande, introduced in Chapter One, also adopted this perspective. When I met Yolande in June 2013, she had just bought her third mobile home in Crown Court. Like many Latino/a mobile-homeowners, Yolande did not view her mobile home(s) as long-term housing; rather, she considered each home an investment and, as with Luna, hoped to sell to immigrants in need of affordable housing, with no questions asked.

With her elbows propped up on her new kitchen table, and hands clasped underneath her chin, Yolande described a typical arrangement to me. “Pretend you are looking for a rental,” she began, gesturing to one nearby home as an example. She continued:

Pretend you are illegal. You work in a hotel. You make enough money to live. And I say, “Eh! I have a mobile home. $20,000. And you can make a payment for $200 each month. What do you say?” Of course! Of course, because it’s in payments. There’s no interest. Social Security? No? No big deal. If there’s enough money to pay, that’s it.
As mentioned above, personal social networks have been a significant factor in the explosive growth of Latino/a mobile-homeowners in Lincoln MHCs since the 1990s. Of the residents surveyed, Latino/a homeowners (62.5%) were more likely than white homeowners (38.8%) to find a home through contacts within their social circle. Yolande’s example regarding undocumented residents is further supported in recent studies which reveal how interpersonal contacts, paired with limited alternative options in the regulated housing market, often direct recent immigrants into informal rent-to-own arrangements in MHCs (Miraftab 2016:65; Nelson & Hiemstra 2008).

In contrast to white residents’ normalizing behaviors meant to prove that their mobile homes were “no different” from conventional “stick-built” units, Latino/a mobile-homeowners’ mitigation strategies, citing Kusenbach (2009) more aptly describe passing, or “efforts members of stigmatized groups undertake to be viewed as affiliates of more privileged groups” (418). Such passing behaviors include both distancing oneself from a marked white identity, as well as adopting dominant views that frame manufactured homes as temporary, short-term housing or as an investment for (future) non-residents. In rural Arkansas, Miranda Hallett (2012) observes similar mitigation techniques among Salvadoran migrants, who alleviate social exclusion and perceived “illegality” by refiguring themselves as “hardworking immigrants” (85; see also, Dohan 2003; Hayden 2015; Vega 2012:208). Doing so, Hallett contends, allowed her Salvadoran subjects to situate themselves “in a favorable moral position, a space of dignity” (94) vis-à-vis “white trash.”

“My goal is to tell, I’m sorry to say. I’m selfish,” Yolande continued. I scoffed at her; how could a woman who invited a stranger into her home, offered refreshments (Diet Coke, my
favorite), and let said stranger pepper her with incessant questions on her *one* weekly day off characterize herself as *selfish*?

“Yes, I *am*,” Yolande insisted. “I’m going to do to someone what people do to me, because if I sell my mobile home to you, you’re going to have the headache.” The *headache*, according to Yolande, included anything to do with the structured impermanence of MHC residence, plus the added (potential) threat of sudden eviction and displacement. “But you see the point? We survive. It’s the only way we can survive.”

Survive maybe, but by “passing” as respectable—that is *temporary*—mobile-homeowners, Latino/a resident strategies inadvertently reaffirm manufactured housing’s assumed impermanence, thus perpetuating the “headache” which Yolande anguished over. As publics slowly recognize MHCs as immigrant spaces, assimilating dominant expectations regarding “trailers” reinforces nationalist beliefs that immigrants, too, figure as a temporary population with limited (or non-existence) rights or protections. Hallett (2012) cautions how “the functioning of this contingent belonging is embedded within the reproduction of economic inequalities and social hierarchies […] through racial and class formation” (86; *see also*, Hayden 2015; Hiemstra 2010). In other words, as hegemonic whiteness remains tied to middle-class, or elite, whites’ interests, any “whitening” behaviors, including assimilating dominant perspectives regarding (mobile) housing, will necessarily reproduce hierarchical social-structural relations that disadvantage *all* mobile-homeowners.

One consequence of Latino/a mobile-homeowners’ adoption of commonsense attitudes toward mobile housing, as opposed to white owners’ normalization techniques meant to situate their homes as equal to conventional dwellings, is their invisibilization (Poblete 2006) in the public consciousness where “trailer parks” are concerned. The social exclusion of erased groups
is often reinterpreted as an indicator of *not belonging* within a particular setting (Galemba 2013; Hayden 2015; Nelson & Heimstra 2008). Moreover, Latinos/as penchant for renting or selling their (mobile) homes to immigrants, including undocumented persons, conforms to nativist discourses identifying immigrants, as well as those *suspected* of being undocumented, as engaging in criminal, or “illegal” activities (Galemba 2013; Hallett 2012; Hayden 2015; Hiemstra 2010; Nelson & Hiemstra 2008).

Just as the racialization of whiteness categorically excludes specific groups, *illegality* similarly flexes and shifts in response to social, national, and economic demands via immigration laws, drafted and enforced by elite, dominant groups (De Genova 2002; Galemba 2013). Recent studies on residential integration in poor- or working-class communities has shown how the circulation of nativist, nationalist rhetoric concerning “illegal aliens” circumvents social cohesion and threatens a sense of belonging (see De Genova 2005; Hayden 2015; Miraftab 2016; Nelson & Hiemstra 2008). For instance, Latinos/as preference to sell to friends and family members perpetuates beliefs among some white mobile-homeowners that all, or most, Latino/a households are “illegal.” This idea often extends to rule-breaking more generally, with (white) residents suspecting that the park’s regulations were not being equally enforced. James, feeling dismissed, ignored, and unwelcome following his second consecutive Halloween disappointment, blamed “Hispanics.” Other white mobile-homeowners confided to me similar suspicions:

F (63): I don’t have anything wrong with Mexicans, or any other nationality, but when they don’t think they have to obey the rules? We used to have a white couple over here.

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18 In the United States, immigration law proves a useful guide for unpacking the historical contours and connotations of ethno-racial fluidity. For instance, as Karen Sacks (1994) argues, before anti-immigrant restrictions in the nineteenth century meant to limit the flow of immigrants from Eastern Europe (and elsewhere), all European immigrants were included categorized as “White”; however, following the passage of these laws, specific nationalities (Polish, Irish, Slavic) and religious identities (Jewish) were racialized and deemed “undesirable” (see also, Baker 1998:88; Rafter 1988:47).
We had white people back here. Now they’re all Mexicans, and none of them obey the rules.

M (67): Life is just not fair anymore. It’s not fair. The thing that gets me, if you’re going to put out a book of rules, then you must enforce them rules or otherwise why waste the paper? But they don’t.

F (71): You file a complaint, if it was against a Hispanic [management] would throw it away. It isn’t gonna do any good, and that means we haven’t got a fighting chance. White people don’t have a fighting chance in here. The whole park is turning into Little Mexico.

These white residents, like James, believe Crown Court staff gives preferential treatment to Latino/a mobile-homeowners, in effect practicing “reverse racism.” Studies on white victimization, of which reverse racism is frequently cited, highlights how white participants’ feelings of apprehension, fragility (DiAngelo 2011:64), and the loss of (presumed) racial belonging within broader multiculturalism movements reframe whiteness as “under threat,” due in large part to so-called “political correctness” (Cabrera 2014; Kusz 2001; Maskovsky 2017; Walley 2017). Nolan León Cabrera (2014), for instance, identified among his white, male college student respondents a tendency to downplay systemic racism against ethnoracial minorities, stressing instead how, per one subject, “white males, I think, get a really raw end of the deal because nobody sympathizes with us… I mean pretty much the only racism that’s all right is against white males” (45, emphasis added). Among the white mobile-homeowners I surveyed, several described similar feelings of marginalization and victimization, which was further exacerbated by their proximity to damaging trailer trash stereotypes identified with “white trash.”

Traci, mentioned above as selectively distancing herself from white (trash) identification while later launching a racist tirade against her Sudanese neighbors, further illustrates how anti-immigrant rhetoric functionally positions white mobile-homeowners, widely viewed as disreputable trailer trash, as rightfully entitled, or belonging, to mobile home neighborhoods.
Before renting from Crown Court MHC, Traci and Trent, her husband, lived in an apartment and experienced problems with their neighbors.

“The neighbors upstairs spoke no English,” Traci remarked, and added that they were “probably Pashtun. I know for sure they were Muslim. And they would run the damn floors at three in the morning, screaming, and hooting, and hollering, and carrying on.”

Trent interjected, “We had a much better ethnic blending in the apartment house, though.”

Chuckling, Traci said, “Oh, there was lots of ethnic.”

As before, I was unsure how to respond to the direction the conversation had taken, and as such remained silent as the married couple recalled the “Chinese, Indian” and other nationalities represented in their former apartment complex. Perhaps sensing my discomfort, Traci tried to explain herself.

“I’m not anti-immigrant,” she reassured me. “I look at it this way. My people are Irish, and Scottish, and a nice frickin’ blend of Heinz 57.” Notice how Traci, again, complicated her heritage, going so far as to describe herself as “a blend” of (European) immigrants. Positioning herself as such, she felt, granted her the authority to pass judgment on more recent newcomers:

They came here and they learned how to speak English, and they learned the cultures and they learned the customs. I see a lot of people that make excuses […] English as a Second Language classes are absolutely free […] and I have little respect for those who aren’t willing to pick up the cultures and the languages of the country they’re in and expect me to pander to everything that they do, but don’t want to give that same leeway back. I have no problem if you want to come here and make your way and learn the language and assimilate the culture and contribute to it. I’m all good with that. But if you’re going to come here and do nothing but work a job where you don’t have to pay taxes and spend all your money somewhere else and you refuse to learn any language and you refuse to do anything to help yourself, you should be your own problem, not mine.

Studies elsewhere have found that, despite not having an official language in the United States, the presumed association between English and “American values” permits (white) native
speakers to fault immigrants with limited English proficiency for communication barriers (De Genova 2005; Hill 1998). Further, expectations for English language acquisition as an assimilationist approach privileges hegemonic whiteness by placing conditions for belonging on immigrant populations (Miraftab 2016; Nelson & Hiemstra 2008; Vega 2012). Last, Traci failed to acknowledge that while her Irish and Scottish ancestors did learn English, it was not overnight, rather likely over several decades if not generations.

Illustrating yet another iteration of racist and nativist language, Traci’s diatribe also conforms to dominant anti-immigrant rhetoric framing immigrants as parasitic aliens whose “refusal” to assimilate dominant (read, white) cultural norms forces existing citizens, like Traci, to “pander” or support them (Buck 2012; Hayden 2015; Nelson & Hiemstra 2008). Ironically, as I argued above, Latino/a mobile-homeowners have, in fact, widely embraced popular attitudes regarding “trailers,” however as this technique also relies on socially positioning as “better than white trash” (Hallett 2012) it is unlikely mobile-homeowners like Traci would recognize it as “proper” acculturation, thus perpetuating the “bad blood” between these groups within contested sites like Crown Court MHC.

Latino/a and white mobile-homeowners’ competing stigma mitigation strategies each figure, albeit differently, into dominant beliefs that either manufactured housing (passing) or its residents (bordering, fencing) are “second-class” in comparison to traditional, conventional homeowners. Located within broader sociopolitical contexts, these practices additionally reinforce normative, and exploitative, narratives that further marginalize both white (“trailer trash”) and Latino/a mobile-homeowners, and indeed, all MHC residents as occupants of sociolegally precarious landscapes. With limited social cohesion, which is undermined by “t/races” of racial anxieties and managerial negligence, most mobile-homeowners instead adopt
individualistic perspectives that (might) alleviate short-term concerns but leave underlying power inequalities unaddressed. For Traci, James, and Jean, such techniques materialize through racist speech blaming ethnoracial minorities for their own precarity, whereas Ella, Nora, and Eliza functionally erase themselves from portrayals of mobile-homeownership, passing their housing insecurities onto the next set of (mobile) home buyers.

“*It’s Just How it Is*”

Recent debates between anthropologists call into question to what extent biological essentialisms remain embedded, however unacknowledged, within our “racial” frameworks and analyses (e.g. Baker 1998:7; Ifekwunigwe et al. 2017; M’Charek 2013; Mullings 2005; Rosa & Bonilla 2017). Even so, ethnographic research deftly illustrates how folk interpretations of “race,” as lived everyday by individuals, are imbued with naturalistic, biologizing discourse (Roland 2013). Within the contested space of Crown Court MHC, these residual “t/races” manifest around questions of belonging to an otherwise stigmatized, precarious place.

Following Kusenbach (2009), this chapter described various mitigation strategies used by mobile-homeowners (*distancing, bordering, fencing, normalizing,* and *passing*) to avoid identification as “trailer trash.” As both an historic and contemporary figure, trailer trash is simultaneously racialized and morally condemned. Thus, I have approached this specific figuration through the popular phrase “bad blood,” which attends both to essentialist attitudes regarding degeneracy and “racial” inheritance, as well as present-day conflicts stemming from the (re)production of racializing “t/races.” White and Latino/a mobile-homeowners differently engage with negative “trailer trash” figurations as a direct consequence of their ethnoracial identification. For white residents, asserting respectable (mobile) homeowner identities often
entails claiming unmarked white identities associated with the middle-classes. Episodic *racial longing*, including interclass racist speech, means to affirm shared racial identities, but inadvertently reproduces specific “trashy” stereotypes. Erased from the mobile home landscape within popular consciousness, Latino/a mobile-homeowners by contrast position themselves as “better than white trash” (Hallett 2012) by adopting dominant attitudes which regard manufactured homes as temporary shelter until something better (i.e., a traditional single-family home) is attainable. However, this approach reinforces both mobile homes’ “second-class” status while exposing Latino/as, in particular (undocumented) immigrants, who represent the majority this population within Crown Court MHC, to heightened risk of exploitation and sudden eviction by landlords (Chapter Seven).

Whether attempting to cash in on the psychological wages of whiteness, or trying to symbolically “whiten” oneself by embracing hegemonic beliefs, these strategies all fail to challenge the sociolegal precariousness all land-lease mobile-homeowners experience vis-à-vis their corporate park operators and landlords. Note how similar, and defeated, both Ella (Latina) and Traci (white) sounded when describing stigmatization in mobile home parks across the United States:

(Ella) It’s just an ethnicity thing. Just like if you go to a Mexican place and you ask other questions, white people might not see it as offensive as a Hispanic person. *It’s just how it is.*

(Traci) Take a look at how things go, it’s the same carbon copy cutout. Maybe a different backstory, but there’s always a trailer, there’s always somebody with a mullet, and somebody missing teeth. *It’s just how it is.*

“It’s just how it is.”

Leaving unaddressed the issue of lower- and working-class exploitation, or prioritizing racial or ethnic identities and solidarity over shared concerns fosters an environment of
resentment and blame between neighbors. That is, aspiring to achieve the American dream of “normative,” or “respectable,” homeownership is itself an instance of boundary work (Hallett 2012; Hartigan 2005; Newitz & Wray; 1997; Wray 2006) which retains white and/or trailer trash as a social position, the “worst” possible. And, so long as this despised category remains, considered disadvantaged due to personal behavior and (ir)responsibility rather than structural forces, unequal power relations between these “trailer trash” and their landlords will persist.

“If you’re shaking your head like that, then you don’t see it,” James scolded, instructing me to “look inside right now, and tell me we’re not the minority.” Later, once the Halloween festivities ended, Crown Court’s exhausted staff and I shared a round of drinks in the community clubhouse. Pulling Carol aside, I told her what had happened with James and asked for her perspective.

Scoffing, Carol explained that James had not experienced “reverse racism,” but that the Halloween Yard of the Month contest was not prioritized among the staff. In 2014, for instance, Carol had spent only ten minutes judging over 800 homes, “and I missed James’ for some reason. But whatever, it’s Yard of the Month in a trailer park. Who cares?”

Clearly, James did. However, by focusing his anger towards his Latino/a neighbors rather than the leasing staff, James’ concerns lost all credibility in their eyes (and admittedly, mine). Intentional or not, Crown Court’s staff and corporate owners’ inconsistent application of the park’s rules and guidelines, including violations resulting in evictions, heightened residents’ anxieties and perpetuated conflicts, which too often assumed racial (and racist) overtones. In Beardstown, Illinois, Faranak (2016) describes similar tactics employed along meat-factory production lines, specifically by placing workers who speak different languages next to one another on the line, what she refers to as the “linguistic choreography of the production line”
Limiting workers’ ability to communicate with one another heightens interpersonal tensions, thus preventing worker solidarity while exacerbating interracial and interethnic tensions among employees. Accepting existing conditions as “just the way it is” and adopting antagonistic, essentialist viewpoints of the “Other” neighbors limits Crown Court residents’ ability to come together to contest unfair or illegal managerial practices, a necessary first step toward protecting communities from further ruination or redevelopment.

Without strong social cohesion to buttress residents against corporate malfeasance, mobile-homeowners’ claims to (racial) belonging, whether normalizing or passing, inadvertently validates their displacement by reaffirming either popular debasing stereotypes or the assumed impermanence of manufactured housing. Yet, the structured, sociolegal risks appended to mobile homeownership subjects all MHC residents to rapid property devaluation, and the risk of dispossession and eviction regardless of their ethnoracial (or any other) identities. In the next chapter, I explore the consequences of mobile-homeowners’ “second-class citizen” status in further detail by examining how legal impermanence directly affects individuals’ financial, mental, and physical wellbeing.
CHAPTER SIX

Death and Taxes

*But in this world nothing can be said for certain, except death and taxes.*

- Benjamin Franklin, 1789

Prelude: A Haunting in Crown Court

Several weeks into my yearlong stint in Crown Court saw a frustrated novice fieldworker. Although I’d made some progress in obtaining a volunteer position shredding old documents and files at the leasing offices, I felt stymied in my efforts to fully embed myself in the community. I was struck by how similar my experience was to all the previous times I’d lived in Lincoln. To me, it felt as though I had not yet truly encountered the reality of *living* in Crown Court MHC.

However, when that first moment came it was not what I expected.

It was after several drinks when, in January, Carol told me of a murder in the neighborhood the previous year. Mere months into her stint as a Crown Court leasing agent, Carol had personally interacted with the perpetrator, who she described as a “bully,” and the victim, his wife and mother of three. Carol went on to describe the gruesome details, which I will not elaborate upon here, save for the fact that the murder took place in the couple’s home, a chartreuse, 1985-model singlewide.

“We are going to burn the house down to the ground soon,” Carol then promised me, adding, “sage the land, and never put anything there again.” Horrified, I returned home that evening and described our conversation in my daily fieldnotes, writing, *I think it is unlikely I will write too much about it.*
Then, in late February, my first breakthrough: Terri, Crown Court’s retiring manager, invited me to attend a “lock-out.” As part of the eviction process, the lock-out is when a mobile home is repossessed by the landlords. First, County Sheriffs arrive and carry out the seizure, ensuring that the occupants have vacated the premises. Then a Crown Court staff person changes the locks to prevent former tenants from reentering the home. Altogether the process usually takes less than ten minutes. Terri, aware of my research project, encouraged me to tag along with Leo, from maintenance, to a scheduled lock-out along Crown Court’s southern perimeter as a “learning experience” of sorts.

 Shortly after one in the afternoon, I drove to the address Terri had given me. Neither Leo nor the Sheriffs had arrived yet, so I parked in a vacant lot across the street and waited. With a matte gray sky and a light dusting of snow on the ground, the home I’d been sent to stood out as one of the few bright spots in an otherwise colorless landscape. In my scratch notes, sloppily written against my steering wheel, I remarked on the unsettling stillness that punctuated the scene. Buttressed against the perimeter fence and a four-lane highway beyond, most of the lots at that end of the court were vacant, systematically removed over the years as part of Crown Court’s rebranding initiative. With the exception of the vehicles speeding past on the freeway, the place seemed devoid of life.

 Soon, Leo and the Sheriffs arrived. We greeted one another before letting the Sheriffs proceed with their walkthrough. Leo and I huddled against his work truck, with Leo muttering, “Come on, man! It’s freezing out here!” Teeth chattering, and with nothing better to do, I surveyed the property. Littered across the yard were all sorts of different decorations, including a smiling frog wind-chime hanging from a nearby tree. A small sandbox, shaped like a green turtle, sat uncovered near the driveway, and in front of the home was a modest garden overrun
with weeds. However, what *truly* grabbed my attention was the fluttering yellow EVIDENCE and POLICE tape woven around the fenced stairway (Figure 31).

I asked Leo if the police tape was normal. “Didn’t *anyone* tell you what happened here?” Leo responded, surprised. That is when I realized exactly where I was and which house we were about to lock-out. Just then, the Sheriffs returned and Leo, eager to get out of the cold, darted into the house. One of the Sheriffs hung back to ask, too, if I knew what had happened inside the home. Further, he explained how *luminol*, a chemical compound used by law enforcement to detect blood after it is wiped away, leaves a dark purple stain behind. “So you know what you’re looking at,” he clarified, before joining his partner in the patrol car.
Nervous, yet not wanting to squander my first real opportunity (I thought) to see inside the park operations, I headed up the stairs after Leo. Armed with anthropological vigor, as well as a digital camera, I took stock of the messy living room surrounding me. Dozens of wine bottles were piled on the floor and covered by a crumpled Confederate flag. My first time in a 1980s-model manufactured home, I analyzed the layout, standard for the era: a front-end kitchen that led into a living room, then a narrow hallway which, after doorways to a small bedroom and guest bathroom, culminated in the master bedroom and bathroom.

As I snapped a few photos, I heard Leo’s voice drift over from the back of the house. “You’re going to want to get a picture of this for your research.” Wandering towards the master suite, I noticed that while the bedroom was as disheveled as the living room, the mattress was conspicuously absent. Before I had fully processed that piece of information, Leo called out again from the bathroom just ahead.

From here, my fieldnotes are quite vague, but regrettably, I do not need any textual reminders of what I saw in that bathroom. (Quote: Not wanting to dwell on what I saw too much; it’s not especially relevant to my research, and personally? I don’t want to fucking think about it.) After a few moments, I turned on my heel, said to Leo, “Nope. I’m good,” and left the bathroom. The murder scene. Practically sprinting back into the bedroom, my gaze was unconsciously drawn to a shattered, engraved mirror hanging crookedly on the far wall. Stenciled into the glass were the names of both the victim and her murderer, enclosed in a heart. Averting my eyes, I left the room, and moments later, the house. Back in my car, shivering (and not from the cold), I mechanically deleted every. Single. God. Damn. Photograph. I’d taken inside that place. Silently, I drove home.
That afternoon was a first for me, in all my years in Lincoln and on this earth. It is an experience I never want to repeat again.

**On Death, and Taxes**

Is there such a thing as a “haunted” mobile home? The paucity of such in major Hollywood films suggests not, however what I experienced in that home, which I refer to as Crown Court no. 41 (CC41), as well as the drama that unfolded throughout the remainder of my fieldwork hints that the notion is not far-fetched. Carol’s promise that management would “burn it to the ground” never materialized, and in the three years it took the park operators to remove the property, CC41 garnered a reputation among residents and staffers alike as the infamous “murder house.” Yet, CC41 was hardly unique; as I met and interviewed more and more mobile-homeowners, a macabre topography of pain, loss, and death started to unfold before me, with CC41 as just one in a constellation (Gordillo 2014) of ghostly specters.

In Chapters One and Two, I introduced João Biehl’s (2005) concept of *zones of social abandonment* to illustrate how symbolic and material ambiguity functionally unmapped, or “erased,” Lincoln MHCs from the collective social memory save for periodic moments of controversy. Here, I build on this approach by showing how urban land-lease communities signify a type of *void*, defined by Gastón Gordillo (2014:25) as a space that “defies representation,” obscuring invisible figures and signaling obvious absences. Emptied, yet brimming, the void is a haunting reminder of failure, loss, or the inability to impose dominance. Designed to be anomalous and liminal, I argue that MHCs like Crown Court are, too, a type of void, one which haunts neighbors, planners, and municipalities as lingering remnants of an earlier era which *refuses* to die, that is, to redevelop.
Situated on private lands and operated as for-profit communities comprised of “mobile” (i.e., impermanent) low-income housing, the ruination of Crown Court MHC was widely considered inevitable (Marcuse 1986). Yet Crown Court, as well as other Lincoln MHCs, persisted throughout the decades; with notable exceptions like Arrow MHC (Chapter Two), park closure rates have slowed dramatically since the mid-1970s, a period concurrent with the implementation of the HUD Code as well as the collapse of the MH industry (Figure 32). Despite this, long-term comprehensive planning such as the LPlan2040 make no mention of mobile homes or communities, indicating Lincoln planners’ continued presumption regarding MHCs’ futurelessness.

![Figure 32: This figure charts the opening and closure dates for 77 MHCs in Lincoln, NE, from 1935 to 2015. Records for each community were obtained from annual city directories. Colors indicate the decade of opening dates, 1930s to 1980s.](image)

Here, I explore how failing to recognize “trailers” as “homes” symbolically transfers material devaluation (of the structure) onto its occupants, whose attempts to normalize their...
“improper” housing are believed to further substantiate their “second-class” social status. Upending traditional material culture studies, which explores how human-object identities are co-constitutional, this analysis considers the reverse: how owning devalued or negatively-valued—that is, “voided”—property dehumanizes and objectifies mobile-homeowners as ungrieveable (Butler 2006) “trash.”

It is due to the hyper-symbolic, affective significance attributed to the familial home in Euroamerican cultural traditions that accounts for its capacity to become “haunted” (Gordon 1997; Marcoux 2001). By contrast, mobile homes’ unfavorable comparison to conventional, single-family dwellings produces and subsequently justifies their sociolegal exclusion from standard definitions; categorized as a car, or chattel property, manufactured “homes” cannot conceivably be possessed by ghosts. Rather, it is the mobile home resident, and not the home itself, who are (or become) cursed.

In her 2016 review of cultural anthropology, Lucia Cantero (2017) observes a telling growth in “dark” ethnographies, “research that matched the times: urgent and macabre, often about death or dying, and with pronounced disenchantment about the failures with our contemporary order and conditions” (310). In a provocative article, Sherry Ortner (2016) further elaborates on the rise of what she refers to as dark anthropology, an “anthropology that emphasizes the harsh and brutal dimensions of human experience, and the structural and historical conditions that produce them” (49) fostered through critical (re)examinations of power and relational inequalities throughout global populations. Thematically, a number of these “dark” studies share an attention to stasis and stillness, often punctuated by an abrupt cessation of forward progress, upward mobility, and other (failed) promises of modernity (Adams 2013; Allison 2013; Berlant 2011; Biehl 2005; Walley 2013). Populating these vast, anxious
landscapes are ghostly remnants. Yael Navaro-Yashin (2012) depicts northern Cyprus as a “phantomic space” (13) strewn with material remnants of former occupants whose ghostly presence is felt, and is therefore very real, for the present Turkish residents. In Chiang Mai, Thailand, Andrew Alan Jackson (2013) similarly notes how ghosts, apparitions whose violent deaths are attributable to urban progress, are depicted as “caught and unable to progress beyond their traumatized state [and] threaten to cause others to remain in stasis as well” (308).

Altogether, dark anthropologies focused on contemporary haunted ruins bridge recent scholarship on materiality and affect, an intersection to which this dissertation is deeply attuned.

That said, the anthropological dark turn has been critiqued for sensationalizing subjects’ pain and anguish, or as Joel Robbins (2013) characterizes it, cultivating the “suffering slot.” Considering the ethics and challenges inherent to depictions of violence, E. Valentine Daniel (1996:3) asks how “to give an account of these shocking events within giving in to a desire to shock,” in other words, to resist writing a “pornography of violence” (ibid:4). Indeed, once I decided to write up and analyze my experiences that bitter February afternoon in CC41—a fraught process in and of itself—I struggled over how to capture the account in writing without embellishing violent crime for its own sake. Specifically, I worried how this decision could inadvertently endorse stereotypical beliefs of Crown Court MHC’s, and all MHCs’ for that matter, innate violence and criminality.

Counteracting anthropologists’ fascination with pain, violence, and suffering has been a broad turn towards happiness, wellbeing, and “the good life,” research concerned with subjects’ meaning-making practices in spite of overwhelming precariousness, uncertainty, or trauma (e.g. Fischer 2014; Allison 2013; Walker & Kavedžija 2015). Thus far, I have focused on mobile-homeowners’ consumptive and discursive normalization techniques as producing “housepride”
(Kefalas 2003) despite widespread social condemnation and devaluation as “trailer trash.” Yet, I feel it is necessary to illustrate in this chapter how “trashing” manufactured housing creates profoundly negative material, economic, and physical consequences for mobile-homeowners occupying land-lease MHCs. As such, recounting my initial (and continued) interaction with CC41 as a particular representation of violence reveals, as Marnie Thomson (2016) points out, how violence reverberates throughout collective memory and physical embodiments and environments.

Landscapes are imbued with deep social meaning and memory, oftentimes carried over untold generations (Basso 1996; Feld & Basso 1996; Garcia 2010; Gordillo 2014). Such meaning is produced, either through direct action or commemorative discourse, thereby adding another layer of symbolic significance which, more often than not, comes to define how particular places are understood (Lefebvre 1991). The “trashing” of MHCs exemplifies this process in the United States and, through its mediated representations, globally as well. So far I have shown how dominant discourse and popular media excludes manufactured housing (communities)—liminal, and therefore aberrant—from the ideological American dream of homeownership, despite mobile-homeowners’ efforts to normalize their homes as “just like” traditional site-built structures. Meant to reify the differences between mobile and conventional housing, restrictive zoning ordinances and sociospatial relegation to commercial or substandard parcels instead reveals deep societal anxieties concerning non-standard housing, whose mere existence defies powerful cultural beliefs concerning meritocracy and upward mobility secured through homeownership. From this perspective, MHCs embody painful social reminders that the American dream is, for some, a nightmare (MacLeod 2009) or unattainable hallucination. And if, as Kathleen Stewart (1996a) argues, “In the ruin that remembers, history and place, culture and
nature converge in a tactile image that conveys not a picture-perfect reenactment of ‘living pasts’ but the allegorical re-representation of remembered loss itself” (90, emphasis in original), we should expect to uncover remnants of the violence, both structural and physical, enacted upon abandoned voids like Crown Court MHC.

Whereas discerning physical violence, as CC41 exemplifies, is comparatively simpler, structural factors “cursing” mobile-homeowners are less immediately apparent. As such, I return to economic exclusion as the primary arena in which mobile-homeowners encounter sociolegal precariousness. In Chapter Four, I argued that major financial institutions’ failure to recognize manufactured “homes” as such affords mobile-homeowners alternative arenas in which to claim identities as respectable citizens and community members through selective (informal) market participation. However financial tools, despite their presumed immateriality, actively ruin mobile housing by reinforcing these units’ impermanence through unfavorable and arbitrary comparisons to conventional, site-built housing. That MH manufacturers, investors, and industry leaders do not share their consumers’ cursed precarity further underscores how powerless mobile-homeowners are in proving the value, however defined, of their homes and lifestyles. Thus, approaching mobile-homeowner narratives of dispossession, loss, and violence as symbolizing death and taxes illustrates how the immaterial qualities of (manufactured) housing creates its material state, and by extension, the objectification of its occupants.

If one solely considers construction materials used, there is little to distinguish between conventional and manufactured housing; for example, the single feature discerning manufactured (HUD) and modular units is the latter’s attachment to a metal chassis. Then, why is it that site-built and modular homes enjoy classification as “real” property, and manufactured homes are relegated to financial categorization as “personal” property (like personal vehicles)? Even
acknowledging the arbitrariness of this distinction, why then are mobile-homeowners, like their conventional counterparts, so keen to hold onto an object so poisonous and cruel?

This question also haunts financial advisors, including the author of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau's (CFPB) White Paper on Manufactured Housing (2014), who asked me pointblank why manufactured homeowners often choose to finance their housing with such disadvantageous, often predatory, financial arrangements? Or, as one Lincoln municipal employee put it, “Do people have to live in a mobile home?” (Personal communication, 24 July 2013). Interwoven throughout these narratives and inquiries is moralizing discourse, one that, as we have seen, too often assigns blame to those who suffer poor outcomes resulting from sociolegal exclusion.

With haunting as an analytic device, the following sections illustrate how social, economic, and legal structures functionally entrap mobile-homeowners living in land-lease MHCs. Like Brett Williams (2011), whose research on credit card debt in the United States reveals how financial institutions profit from exploiting lower- and middle-class aspirations to obtain (or maintain) the American dream, I show how MH manufacturers and park operators selectively adopt idealistic rhetoric regarding homeownership in order to press mobile-homeowners into disadvantageous financial and legal arrangements. I am especially interested in showing how, in contrast to the “objectivity” attributed to financial and legal discourse, such apparatuses are deeply influenced by widespread sociocultural contempt for “trailer parks” and mobile-homeowners as “trailer trash.” Crown Court no. 41 exemplifies how this twisted calculus of personal and material value, or worth, operates in a manner that is distinct from, yet not wholly unrelated to, how the home has been commodified, or financialized, over the past century in the United States.
“The Last House You’ll Ever Need to Buy”

In March, a couple weeks after my first encounter with CC41, I asked Terri what steps park management would take with the home, now that it was in their possession. First, she corrected me; it would be a month before everything was finalized on the Sheriff Sale for CC41, after which, assuming no one else bid on the house (and they did not), Crown Court would take ownership.

“It’ll be demo’ed then,” she explained, hauled away “to the trailer park in the sky.”

Terri’s words, the trailer park in the sky, captivated me, because although she pointed fun at the idea of a heavenly trailer park, her comments nonetheless imbued CC41, like Crown Court’s other demo homes, with a (sort of) life, the “life after death”: an afterlife.

Reworking classic Marxist critiques, Arjun Appadurai (1986; see also, Kopytoff 1986) compellingly argues that recognition as a “commodity” is but one of several phases in the “social life” of an object. A biographical perspective offers the benefit of temporality to researchers, which is particularly valuable for those whose objects of study have (or are expected to have) “fallen” into ruin, failure, and decay. As Mélanie van der Hoorn (2009) writes, these architectural “eyesores” signify either their irrelevance, obsolescence, or inherent corruption in their material ruin. Yet, landscapes also “remember” (Basso 1996; Stewart 1996b) previous occupants through the material remnants left behind (Navaro-Yashin 2012). Like undisturbed lands, commodities begin their “lives” replete with potential; put otherwise, neither uncultivated earth nor brand-new objects are typically regarded as inherently cursed. Rather, failing to pass on into the “afterlife,” haunted places and things are created and persist through violence, whether symbolic or physical. My initial experience of CC41, that “haunted (mobile) home,” nonetheless failed to grasp the longer series of events contributing to its ruined and cursed present.
This section explores the commodity phase of manufactured housing from its construction to its initial placement in a land-lease MHC, at which point asset devaluation almost always begins. Attending to the broader network wherein manufactured housing is socially devalued, this analysis follows Bill Maurer’s (2006) call for broadening our scope of inquiry on commodity production, where he suggests that if “one were to study a commodity chain today, for example, one would also want to understand the networked processes and subjects/objects that constitute the commodity as well as the perceptual apparatus warranting its stabilization as such” (25, emphasis in original). Viewed, or indeed protected behind factory walls, it is in the construction stage where the hopeful potential of manufactured housing is best realized.

In June 2015, I toured the Bonneville “custom homes” facility in Aurora, Nebraska (pop. 4,000, located approximately 75 miles west of Lincoln). I had met my tour guide, John, at the annual Nebraska Manufactured Housing Association meeting the previous month, during which he had encouraged me to visit their factory to witness firsthand how manufactured homes are produced.

With our hardhats and goggles safely secured, John led me out onto the floor, a cacophonous space where dozens of employees assembled the homes, which John reported takes about a week each to complete. (This, compared to the average three to six months needed to construct a site-built unit.) Opened during the 1970s mobile home boom, at present the Aurora plant is the sole remaining producer of Bonneville homes. However, in recent years demand has shifted toward modular models, which John estimated accounts for 85 percent of the plant’s orders; the remaining 15 percent are HUD manufactured homes.

Where park residents and staff refer to mobile, manufactured, and trailer homes interchangeably, on the factory floor terminology matters. Although any unit built off-site in a
factory is *prefabricated*, or “prefab,” depending on what is constructed and assembled where effects the ultimate legal designation of any given structure. Figure 33, for instance, features a “pod” hotel built at the Champion Home facility in York, Nebraska, before being assembled on-site; each individual room was built separately. Akin to their “tiny” cousins (Conclusion), “prefab” homes are a cultural trend, unless of course the “prefab” in question is a *manufactured* house. Both Carol Burns (2001) and Rick Polito (2009) shrewdly observe that while architectural innovation flourishes in sectional, more expensive “prefab” models, far fewer designers consider manufactured housing. Furthermore, units built in the same factory fall under different regulatory codes depending on their destination; HUD for manufactured, IRC for modular, RVIA for park models, and so on. Regardless, the majority of the construction process is the same for both modular and manufactured homes.

![Figure 33: A photo of a "pod" hotel assembled from individual units constructed at a Nebraska modular and manufactured home plant. (Photo by author.)](image)

First, the home begins its assembly on a flat base and not, as I had assumed, “the trailer,” or the chassis that (for better or worse) sets the legal definition of a “manufactured” home (Figure 34). John explained that the chassis and hitch are added later, thus preventing the metal from bending under the home’s weight and potentially failing during final transport. Once the
base floor is complete, the unit is moved to the next station, where plumbing, air ducts, and electrical wiring is installed. While this is being done, the walls and roof are simultaneously constructed, using either 2x6 or 2x4 boards (depending on the model, as well as its cost) padded with thick insulation. The continuous *popping* noise from nail guns sounded from inside the homes at this stage, as workers first glued, then secured, sheetrock and drywall to the walls.

Figure 34: A factory-built home in the first stage of production. After wiring the floors is completed, the unit is wheeled to the second stage (right), where the walls are installed. (Photo by author.)

Shouting over the din, John described each team’s role as they worked simultaneously on a single home; for instance, employees working from high-hanging catwalks above installed the roof while others, working inside, placed large fixtures like bathtubs and sinks. The emphasis here, John said, “is on speed.” With an unofficial motto of “one home per day,” each week the
plant produces six or more completed units. The impressive rate is reminiscent of the Levittown developments, the quintessential embodiment of American suburbia which, too, boasted a one-home-per-day rate of construction (Hurley 2001). While efficient, John added that the facility struggled to keep up with all its orders. “People want these homes **yesterday,**” he said as we left the first staging area.

While assembly line production is not foreign to conventional home construction, the sort of mechanical ingenuity displayed at the Bonneville plant, as with most manufactured and modular factories, is a remnant of the MH industry’s automotive origins (Hart et al. 2002:8). In 1930s Lincoln, autocamps quickly appeared alongside car dealerships, a trend that continues to the present as many remaining MHCs, especially the oldest parks, are sited adjacent to commercial car lots. Maintaining this partial material connection to the automotive industry perpetuates the exclusion of mobile housing from conventional definitions of real estate (Beamish et al. 2001; Wallis 1991), yet manufacturers cite the cost-savings, speed, and efficiency of their factory construction techniques as offsetting these concerns.

John surprised me by insisting that, unlike their competitors, Bonneville’s consumer base “doesn’t want a cheaper house,” and thus sought out the “mid- to high-quality and price” of their modular and manufactured units, which, he assured me, range in price up to $400,000. Allan Wallis (1991), in his investigative and historic study of manufactured housing in the United States, also felt pushback against the idea that the sole benefit of, or reason to purchase, prefabricated housing was cost-related: “Affordability,” he writes, “is a consideration constrained by acceptability. People do not settle for the cheapest housing, but for housing that gives them the greatest satisfaction for the part of their income they dedicate to housing” (15). While nearly all of the mobile-homeowners I interviewed insisted that **affordability** was the
primary reason for choosing to occupy manufactured housing, their rationale does not preclude, as illustrated in Chapters Three and Four, agentive, houseproud behaviors meant to normalize their housing as more than just “affordable.”

Interiors and home possessions, like Mark’s custom in-drawer knife organizer, imbue value, whether symbolic or exchange, into an individual home, however even fancier features can be installed during construction for a price. At Bonneville, most “extras” are built and mounted in the second staging area (Figure 35). Wooden cabinetry, ceramic or laminate counters, and stainless steel sinks are all made custom for each available layout.

Figure 35: Installations and featured amenities like sinks, cabinetry, and countertops are built on-site in a second warehouse. Once the home exterior is completed, these custom pieces are installed by employees working simultaneously in multiple rooms to meet production deadlines. (Photo by author.)
While the placement of high-end fixtures into a manufactured home adds to its initial sale price, such features hardly negate the sociocultural devaluation the home experiences once leaving the factory. In fact, after the home has all-but depreciated in (economic) value, such features are often scavenged, either for sale or as replacement parts for another home. Even Crown Court’s employees participated in this practice, as Carol admitted to me when I first toured my rental unit in December 2014.

“If some of these hillbillies knew how much the scrap metal in their houses was worth, who knows if they’d sell them to us?” she joked, referred to Crown Court’s then-policy allowing residents in older, pre-HUD homes to surrender the title to their homes in lieu of paying relocation costs. (This “scrap metal fund,” which paid for the employees’ after-work drinks, was stolen in July during a break-in.) Altogether, these competing perspectives, from the factory floor to Crown Court’s leasing office, reveal complications and contestations in valuing manufactured housing, as behaviors that seemingly produce value for some—such as adding expensive fixtures and fittings—nonetheless baffles those who resist attributing “trailers” any worth. (Remember, Carol once joked how, “I could sell you a roller skate! It’s better than that. You don’t own anything when you buy a trailer.”)

For Appadurai (1986), the commodity phase, or “situation,” of an object’s social life is defined “as the situation in which its exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature” (13, emphasis added). Insofar as value is determined and stabilized vis-à-vis a social apparatus (Maurer 2006), manufactured housing offers a compelling case study for the uncomfortable, awkward financialization of the home as a highly symbolic and culturally treasured object. Carol’s bemusement over scrap metal, Bonneville’s pricey “extra” features, and the arbitrary sociolegal distinctions between “manufactured” and “modular”
indicates a fracturing of valuation that is more constituent than totalizing. Yet, as each new home completes its construction phase and is prepared for transport, I argue that its *bundled* properties, that is, the accumulated material, symbolic, and social qualities subjectively read as constituting the (manufactured) home, are as tightly bound as ever (Hodder 2012; Keane 2005). Put otherwise, when finished on the showroom floor, new manufactured housing is at the height of its commodity phase, where its social and economic value is the greatest and, as such, illustrates the point of greatest comparison to conventional, site-built housing.

Yet unlike conventional housing, whose (believed) value appreciation is thought to be inevitable, for *manufactured* homes the opposite holds true. Thus, coinciding with assumptions regarding a factory-built homes’ limited lifespan, measured by its exchangeability, is the widespread expectation of *who* chooses to purchase such risky assets.

“Our clientele are mostly retirement age,” John explained as we finished the factory tour. “These are people looking for the last house they’ll ever need to buy.” This remark immediately reminded me of the catchy jingle popularized during the 1960s and 70s MHC boom describing “trailerites” as either “newlywed or nearly dead.” With shorter “lifespans,” pre-HUD homes better complemented the transitory characteristics attributed such populations, however the same cannot be said for current (HUD) manufactured homes. For instance, although Bonneville offers a 10-year structural warranty on new homes, my 2014 Solitaire model carried a 90 to 100 year warranty, virtually the same as modern conventional construction. Like the MH industry overall, whose consumer base disproportionately serves older clients (Brown & Sellman 1987; Genz 2001; Jeong et al. 2006), John’s comments implying that the majority of his buyers are at or near retirement age highlights a contradiction in terms originating from modern manufactured housing’s ever-increasing lifespan.
Since the mid-twentieth century, the United States’ mean retirement period has grown significantly, as life expectancies have risen one year per decade, on average (Moore 2018). As such, a “retirement” home can easily become long-term housing. Moreover, as prefabricated homes have risen in construction standards, durability, and price, so too have the financial mechanisms by which units are purchased altered and adapted. As Jim Clayton (2002) recalls, the expectation that mobile-homeowners would “trade in” for newer models every five to ten years was typical during the mid-century mobile home heyday. However, the gradual transition from automotive to conventional markets alongside increased layout size, as well as cost, signaled the MH industry’s shift away from transportability, thereby creating the substantial “used homes” market that dominates land-lease MHCs like Crown Court.

While modern manufactured (and modular) home production retains certain automotive features, in particular its assembly-line construction process, manufacturers, retailers, and other key stakeholders have progressively aligned “mobile” homes with more conventional, presumably permanent, domiciles. “What we’re making is a new breed of houses,” John confidently assured me, yet without the cooperation of major financial institutions, manufactured homes persist in sociolegal limbo as both (or neither) homes and (nor) vehicles. Consequently, even brand-new (HUD) homes valued at upwards of $75,000 will, upon leaving the construction lot, immediately begin to depreciate even before its first mobile-homeowners have had the chance to step foot inside the structure. More alarming still, as I show in the next section, is how this process of financial devaluation progressively extends to the residents as well.
Buyer Beware

Figure 36 illustrates the rapid asset depreciation of manufactured housing when calculated using the Lincoln-Lancaster County MH valuation tool (p. 136). Although the initial assessment accounts for construction and material quality, as well as manufacturer brand, in determining the original assessed “grade,” or price value, in practice there are few rules governing mobile home resale prices. Informal pricing systems can benefit some mobile-homeowners, particularly those occupying older units, however residents occupying newer, more expensive units, like Evette, Karen, and Charlie (Chapter Four), can never hope to recoup their investment. Moreover, taxation values are inconsistent between similar year makes and models; for example, although Amy (Chapter Three) and Andrew and Tricia (Chapter One) both owned 1974-model, pre-HUD homes, Amy’s was valued at $3,400 in 2015, whereas Andrew’s was assessed at just $600. Likewise, 1985-model units’ 2015 depreciation ranges from 85 to 99 percent of their original value. At $4,300, CC41’s assessed value was greater than average among same-age models ($4,113). As such, its (after)life was prolonged at the direction of Crown Court’s corporate owners, who thought to recoup some of its remaining economic value despite the horrible tragedy that had occurred there.
Once sited, over ninety percent of manufactured homes are never moved again, including those in land-lease MHCs (Sullivan 2014). However, as these properties age and traverse the commodity phase of their (social) lives, the sociocultural devaluation of “trailers” becomes ever more tangible. Put otherwise, this transformation is best described as the moment(s) in which a manufactured “home” is symbolically, and legally, identified as more like an automobile. As soon as a new home leaves the lot, its economic depreciation begins, and once consigned to the used-homes market—of which 94 percent of the mobile-homeowners I surveyed purchased their home from—each subsequent cycle of sale, eviction, abandonment, and resale further diminishes
the value of the manufactured home until it is either uninhabitable or deemed too unattractive to remain in the park.

Yolande described this process to me as follows:

Pretend that the mobile home I own, I got it for $5,000. Okay? And I don’t want it, so I’m gonna leave it here. I go to the office and say, “I’m leaving, I’m gone. Bye.” Nobody can take care of the mobile home, so the office decides, “For sale!” So then you get it, try to fix it up. You give up, leave, and another sign: “For sale!” But if I sell it to the office, maybe they’ll only give me, like, $3,000.

Here, economic valuation is informed by the somewhat-arbitrary calculus of County Assessor charts as well as “best-guess” pricing based on the home’s condition and how desperate either the seller or buyer is to complete the deal. In any case, this period of dilapidation and advancing decay preceding destruction, as the commodity situation gives way to rubbish (Thompson 1979), portends the expected afterlife of a mobile home when it is, to borrow Terri’s words, relocated to “the trailer park in the sky.”

Another factor determining either a land-lease home’s valuation, or whether management will allow the property’s resale, is the park’s economic viability. In MHC operations, physical occupancy describes the number of occupied lots, regardless of who owns the unit (resident- or park-owned) and/or if lot rent is currently charged to that site. This is contrasted with economic occupancy, or the number of occupied lots charged rent. In 2014, for instance, while Crown Court’s economic occupancy ranged from 94 to 99 percent, its physical occupancy varied between 69 and 74 percent. However, Terri and Roger, another former Crown Court manager, both confided to me just how much these numbers had improved since the mid-2000s, where physical occupancy frequently dipped below 60 percent. Thus, land-lease MHCs are caught in a perpetual bind wherein corporate profits are dependent on assets of ever-diminishing value; indeed, no matter its age, each single- and doublewide unit produces the same amount of
monthly lot rent. Or, at least that was true prior to Crown Court’s “rebranding” campaign, which reset this basic calculus of MHC economics. How then, given the complicating factor of corporate and sociolegal influence in private land-lease communities, is the economic and social value of manufactured housing determined?

Classic Marxism attributes two forms of value to commodities: *use-value*, or an object’s utility, and *exchange-value*, its abstracted worth determined through market equivalency (Marx 1867). Per Marx, a commodity is, by definition, “a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort or another” (199). Within capitalist logics, *commodification* results wherever exchange-value overtakes use-value, or as Appadurai (1986) summarizes, “a commodity is any thing intended for exchange” (9, emphasis in original). The commodification of housing, for instance, entails the privileging the exchange-value of private property over its utilitarian use-value (Birdwell-Pheasant & Lawrence-Zúñiga 1999:11), as evidenced by the unending fluctuations in asset valuations in the American housing market.

Although best conceived as parallel markets, manufactured and conventional home construction and finance notably intersect at or near moments of crisis. Preceding the 2008 collapse of the American housing market and subprime mortgage crisis was a similar manmade catastrophe in MH financing. From 1991-98, new manufactured home sales tripled; one company, GreenTree financial, the company that financed Stefan’s late mother’s house (Chapter Four), originated forty percent of these loans (Williams 2011:111). Relaxing credit restrictions as well as offering more thirty year repayment plans widened the prospective buyer pool, a lucrative prospect as over forty percent of all subprime MH loans carried interest rates greater than ten percent (Salamon & MacTavish 2017:24). However, by the early 2000s the percentage of borrowers defaulting on MH loans soared, which led to significant numbers of repossessed
units that in turn flooded the market with pre-owned units (CFPB 2014; MacTavish et al. 2006; Williams 2011:111). Loosened restrictions in traditional mortgage lending throughout this period further devastated the MH market as its primary consumer base, namely lower-income families or those unable to access traditional financing, were able (and encouraged) to buy conventional, site-built units.

Unsurprisingly, then, the Great Recession saw phenomenal growth in manufactured housing, in particular investment in land-lease MHC as regulations were once again tightened and foreclosed homeowners, alongside lower-income households, were locked out of the conventional market. As I argue in Chapter Seven and the Conclusion, investment in MHCs in the post-recession period has slowed MHC closures as investors scramble to buy up existing properties; this, as well as the deep interrelationship between the MH and site-built markets, has prolonged the mobile home (park) era far beyond planners’ expectations. However, unlike MHC investment, which is presented as a sensible, if unusual, financial strategy, commonsense financial logics still consider investing in an individual mobile home as a primary residence as foolish and irrational. It is, to use economic language, a moral hazard, which describes a tendency toward risky behaviors among either ignorant or safeguarded consumers (Hertz & Leins 2012; Jefferson 2013:99).

Economists typically regard consumer financial decision-making as ideally objective, rational, and future-oriented (see Ho 2009; Kalb 2013; Zaloom 2004). Lacking both long-term securitization as real estate and the consumer protections guaranteed in the “traditional” mortgage market, MHC mobile-homeownership is, at first glance, a textbook example of an economic “moral hazard.” Similarly, in her research on defaulting and foreclosed homeowners in Michigan, Anna Jefferson (2013) writes how borrowers were reframed as “too stupid” or ill-
informed to understand the conditions of their toxic subprime loans, thus conforming to a master
narrative wherein defaulters were blamed for losing their homes, as well as everything they’d
invested in those assets. Facing (potential) dispossession through either eviction or
redevelopment, Crown Court mobile-homeowners’ precarious circumstances were naturalized
through the language of finance as the commonsense outcome for choosing to occupy socially,
and economically, devalued housing.

“People buy mobile homes because, in their mind, it’s a cheap way to own real estate,”
argued Carol, once again, over a few beers towards the beginning of my primary fieldwork. With
her background in real estate, Carol adamantly maintained that under no circumstances should
mobile housing be viewed as real property (despite her tenants’ penchant for doing precisely
that). “But you don’t own real estate. You own absolutely nothing.”

“Except for the building?” I asked.

Carol demurred. “You’re buying a car! It’s a car. It’s registered at the DMV [Department
of Motor Vehicles]. It’s a car.” That is partially true, insofar as Nebraskan mobile-homeowners
are required to obtain their Certificate of Title from the DMV, as is the case in several other
states.\(^\text{19}\) Regardless, insofar as mobile-homeowners are seen as rejecting “rational” financial
advice, which conceptualizes their property as chattel or “a car,” any negative outcomes
residents suffer as a result of their housing circumstances is reinterpreted as rightly deserved.
This is especially true for mobile-homeowners, like James, Jean, and Traci from Chapter Five,
whose behavior conforms to dominant expectations for racist “trailer trash.”

\(^{19}\) Nebraska titling law does allow MHC residents to cancel their titles at the DMV and certify their property as real
estate, however in order to demonstrate “ownership interest” lessees must be under contract to remain on site for at
least twenty years, a provision no Lincoln MHC offers (http://dmv.nebraska.gov/dvr/title/mobilemanufactured-
homes).
By rethinking economies as relations of *debt*, as Annaliese Riles (2013:559) suggests, inherent contradictions and irrationalities emerge, highlighting how arbitrary and subjective conventional financial wisdom regarding homeownership as an investment is. With respect to manufactured homes, the dominant perspective holds that, as depreciating chattel assets, whatever debt accrues from financing a “trailer” is comparatively “bad” in relation to the “good” debt a traditional mortgage confers. This, in contradistinction to MHC investment, described by author and investor Brandon Turner (2017) as a safer, less expensive, and more lucrative investment opportunity due to limited competition and high demand.

Carol, too, espoused this view. Perturbed, she explained to me what she believed to be a common mistake among some mobile-homeowners, who wrongly (she felt) viewed their properties as both “investments” as well as a means to realize the American dream:

> It’s a car. It’s personal property. You buy it, and when you drive it off the lot it’s negated in value, it’s *gone*. He [a resident] bought it for five-thousand bucks. It’s a *stupid* investment, but at the time we [the MH industry] convinced people it’s a great investment. And it’s not, it’s a *horrible* investment. Horrible. So, anyway, [the resident] owns his home. […] The only problem is, if you’re buying a home for $5,000 that’s because you don’t have any money, and so you can’t fix it.

Although Carol expressed some semblance of guilt for misleading consumers into assuming that their mobile home purchase was an investment, her underlying tone remained highly critical of anyone who believes that manufactured housing holds any *real* economic value. Ruminating on ambivalence in familial relationships in Laos, Holly High (2011) juxtaposes two contradictory subject positions, “the idealized versions of care and nurturance and the dystopic ones of the abandonment of rightful obligations” (218), roles that can also be applied to MHC park operators and residents, or financial agents and borrowers. In California, Noelle Stout (2016a) recalls fraught encounters between defaulting borrowers and their lenders wherein borrowers felt
entitled to aid and reciprocal support from financial institutions and, failing such expectations, homeowners “more willingly abandoned debt obligations altogether” (159).

The morality of debt is unavoidable in housing studies, as few households in (post-) industrial states can obtain a home without it. The 2007-08 housing market collapse elicited untold accusations of corporate and individual greed, the latter perhaps best epitomized in Rick Santelli’s 2009 “rant” on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange: “This is America! How many of you people want to pay for your neighbor’s mortgage that has an extra bedroom and can’t pay their bills?” (As several social commentators later observed, this rant—broadcast on CNBC—is widely credited as starting the Tea Party Movement.) Whereas speculative ventures reward investors’ risky behaviors (Ho 2009; Riles 2011; Zaloom 2004), “unsophisticated” consumers are instead condemned for being too risk-adverse (Weiss 2015) or for their “greediness” in taking out “bad loans” (Jefferson 2013; Reid 2017), such as manufactured home loans. Like Stout’s informants working foreclosure centers reported, Carol described one specific resident whose “irresponsible” behaviors, such as panhandling across the park, was also evidenced in the physical condition of his home. Described as “one of those, I want you to do it for me, types of people,” Carol reiterated how she and her colleagues had repeatedly gone out of their way to provide him with assistance, only to be rebuffed. Consequently, given the poor condition of his home, Crown Court management had cited the homeowner for violating the community guidelines, although Carol continued to stress how lenient they’d been:

This guy has broken windows on his home, so we went over, as a courtesy, and put plywood on [them]. We told him, it says in our guidelines, you can’t have plywood windows. You have to have glass windows. It’s a health and safety issue. So, we put plywood on the windows saying, you know, according to our guidelines you have to have that fixed in fourteen days […] We do shit because people have families. And he’s panhandling! So, his water pipe broke underneath the house the other day. Well, that’s on you, it’s not on me.
Here, Carol compared his circumstances to her own previous experiences as a conventional homeowner when the water main on her property failed. Plaintively asserting (and reasserting) that “we’re not makin’ this shit up,” she explained how, should a water line or sewer collapse underneath her home, “I’m sorry it costs me $2,500 to replace my sewer, but I own a house. That’s on me.”

Admittedly, I never met the person Carol described, so I cannot speak directly to their situation. However, the set of circumstances Carol outlined including a cheap sale price and near-total depreciation due to age on top of several major, necessary repairs costing several hundred (if not thousands) of dollars were issues commonly facing mobile-homeowners. Often, the cost of repairs alone exceeded the assessed value of the home. Further, this calculation does not include monthly charges including lot rent and, if warranted, late- and attorney fees. An examination of the debt incurred by another mobile-homeowner, evicted from Crown Court in 2014, shows just how quickly (and just how much) a precarious household can fall into insurmountable debt (Figure 37).

While some debt is regarded as “good” (i.e., mortgages), debts that accrue from late payments or “irresponsible” spending, including for most the purchase of depreciating chattel property like manufactured housing, is socially condemnable. In the traditional home market, the moral significance of the mortgage as the primary means by which homeownership is achieved in the United States extends to the mortgage broker; as Constance Perin (1977:66) noted, “the role of the banker is unmistakably that of the gatekeeper to social personhood.” Beyond merely citing health concerns, Carol stressed how she and Crown Court’s other leasing agents served as intermediaries between the residents and the bureaucratic operations of the park.
“I have a strong maternal instinct,” Carol told me one evening in February 2015 over dinner. Although she felt that many mobile-homeowners “ought to know better” regarding the legal status of their homes, she nonetheless expressed sympathy for those who had been “screwed over” and bought “crappy homes.” For example, she’d had one family from California
come to her, asking if she knew of any “trailers” for sale. Originally, the father had heard from a friend-of-a-friend that a home was selling for just $500 in Crown Court; with a stay-at-home wife and two young children, his $9/hour salary at a local gas station could hardly afford anything more. However, after Terri had hesitantly approved the unit for resale pending repair, Carol said the sellers “came to their senses” and turned the title over to management for demolition instead, leaving the Californian family with few options.

“So, anyway, I go back to the wife and go, ‘okay, so, I guess you’re not gonna buy that one […] Just out of curiosity,’ I said, here’s the point of the story, ‘how much were you going to spend on that house?’” Carol’s voice dipped to a whisper. “She said, ‘well, five hundred dollars.’” Shaking her head, Carol went on: “And I said, ‘okay, I know I’m not your mom or anything, but never ever, please, don’t buy a house for five hundred dollars!”

“But see, in their head that’s okay to buy a house. Because in their head,” she stressed, “and remember we’re talking about the concept of owning real estate, you know, the Great American Dream? In their head they were buying a house for five hundred.”

A pause, then Carol continued:

Well, I’m sitting there talking to her, and I said, “Are ya sure you don’t wanna look at one of my rental homes?” ‘Cause I told her, you can get a house for $625. We fix all this stuff. It’s got brand-new carpet in it, it’s little, but they’ve got little kids. And it would be way better than where they’re staying now […] That’s not your friend that wants to put you in a death trap from hell with the floor falling in. Like I pointed out to her, in a $500 house you’re risking things like water heaters actually going out in the home. And I said, “How would you fix that?” Just, uhm, uhm, oh, I guess I didn’t think about that. I go, okay, I’m just throwing it out there. I get them a calculator, and long story short, he’s sitting there, calculating out his wage, and now they’re coming in to tour the home tomorrow.

Ultimately, the family rented one of Crown Court’s cheapest units; ironically, that 2006-model singlewide was from the same batch of post-Katrina FEMA trailers mobile-homeowners like Joe and Jerry (Chapter Three) bought from Crown Court for over $20,000 years earlier. And, even
though she was no fan of the unit herself—“My least favorite house, hate ‘em, I have a hard time selling them”—Carol much preferred it to the “POS” they’d meant to purchase. “Because I’m like, where would you think, in your head, that you could buy a five hundred dollar house and you’d be good?” She shuddered. “That scares me.”

Unlike mortgages, which Maurer (2006) equates with “contracts in faith” premised on the promise of future repayment, typically with interest (see also, Halawa 2015; García-Lamarca & Kaika 2016), the informal, “friend-of-a-friend” system typical of used mobile home sales delegitimized such transactions for seasoned mortgage industry veterans like Carol. Arguably, adopting a caretaker, or “maternal,” role with respect to their tenants enabled Crown Court leasing agents to both directly and indirectly safeguard mobile home residents by managing the neighborhood’s “curb appeal,” and thus protect some of the (land’s) value.

Yet, such “bonds of care and affection,” observes High (2011:220), in reference to familial ties, are often “the bonds of unfreedom too,” which in this instance represents how one leasing agent’s dismissal of a $500 home sale limited both the buyer and seller’s ability to engage in trade. As with markets where the introduction of mortgages and mortgage debt disrupts less formal, or rather informal, modes of (auto)construction and (home)ownership, as Georgia Hartman (2017) describes among low-income workers in Cancún, Mexico, any semblance of real ownership is undermined; or, as several Warsaw (Poland) informants jokingly told Mateusz Halawa of their mortgaged apartments, “Well, it’s not really mine, you know” (2015:716).

The commodification of (mobile) housing reveals disparate classificatory assertions that are related to, yet are also distinct from, the sociolegal exclusion of manufactured housing from conventional financial, development, and planning tools. Consider Carol’s repeated claims that
mobile homes are, in fact, “cars.” Dale Maharidge (2011) describes another telling instance of MH social devaluation witnessed at a Michigan foreclosure auction during the height of the recession:

The crew goes through a mock auction to show the crowd how things work. They pretend to “sell” the California home owned by one of the crew. It goes for just over $1 million.

“Oh, I didn’t tell you that it’s a mobile home,” announces an auction official. On the big screen appears an image of a Great Depression-era wooden shack perched on the bed of a rickety truck.

Laughter—but it is muted (20).

While engaging in houseproud behaviors, as Maria Kefalas (2003:14) argues, means to transform empty “space” into a significant “place,” mobile-homeowners are nonetheless devalued, both economically and socially, for believing or behaving as though any real (monetary) value could ever be imbued into a “trailer home.”

Whereas mortgage borrowers may question the extent to which they truly own their homes, mobile-homeowners instead experience housing precarity through general abandonment by traditional finance capital. Ergo, the continued valorization of traditional homeownership in the United States and elsewhere solidifies the “second class” status of manufactured and other nontraditional housing. The contradiction for MHC mobile-homeowners is obvious, as residents are expected to resist (distance, border, or normalize) negative stereotypes via consumption and houseproud behaviors, but are then condemned as “foolish” (or “irresponsible,” “immoral,” or “uninformed”) for doing precisely that.

Transforming “mobile” housing into more durable and long-lasting “manufactured homes” hardly eliminated “trailer trash” stigmas. Rather, existing legal and financial structures were adapted to retain the symbolic boundaries distinguishing “trailers” from “traditional” homes. Further, the financialization of all types of housing produces logics and discourses through which economic devaluation becomes personal devaluation insofar as residents’
circumstances are thought to result from individual (ir)responsibility rather than structured disadvantage. Or, as Anne Allison (2013:5) writes, “In the acceleration, and spread, of a market logic that has privatized more and more of life and deregulated more and more of capitalism’s engine for extracting profits, the struggle—and often failure—of everyday life has become an all too common story for all too many people around the world” (emphasis added).

For mobile-homeowners trapped in devalued “death traps,” what are the consequences of financial and social abandonment? How does privatization intensify feelings of isolation? Where, or to whom, can residents turn when few, if any, means to realize the “good life” remain?

**Trapped**

Ironically, for an industry conceived from the desire for freedom and adventure through mobility, the presumed impermanence, or unfixedness, attributed to manufactured housing is what materializes its precarity in social, legal, and economic structures. Further, since the 1970s mobile-homeowners and their families move, on average, less frequently than their conventional home counterparts. This trend in part stems from broader shifts toward larger, less mobile, and more expensive models built to be “the last home you’ll ever need to buy,” that is, models built to last. A more sinister explanation for mobile-homeowners’ decreased mobility is traceable to their home’s sociolegal ambiguity which, among other things, entraps owners in assets of diminishing social and economic value. Perceived thusly, there is a certain futility that all the mobile-homeowners I spoke with shared; the understanding that, as Karen (Chapter Four) put it, “I feel like we’re just kinda stuck. Our bill goes up, and we’re just stuck.”

I, too, sense this omnipresent foreboding where mobile home financing is concerned. Naturally, I have been asked time and again whether or not I’d recommend purchasing a
manufactured home, or park living generally. For instance, in late October 2015 I had a chance encounter with a prospective resident, a man in his mid-60s who was interested in purchasing a “retirement” mobile home for him and his wife. As usual, the leasing office was inexplicably closed when I arrived early in the afternoon, so as soon as I had parked my car he waved me over.

“Ted” (a pseudonym), as the nametag on his farm equipment manufacturer’s uniform read, asked if I worked for Crown Court. Despite informing him that unfortunately, no, I was not a leasing agent, Ted nonetheless shared some of his story with me and asked for my advice. Having never lived in a “trailer” before, he and his wife were interested in renting a unit as a “test run” of sorts. Like many residents I spoke with, he had no interest whatsoever in renting an apartment and was too skeptical of the post-recession housing market, even in Lincoln, which he described as a “relatively safe” place for homeownership, to even consider delving into conventional markets.

“The way it’s goin’, I wouldn’t touch real estate with a ten-foot pole,” he said. Also, neither he nor his wife wanted the long-term commitment of a mortgage, instead hoping for something to last for the next ten years or so. As I explained both Crown Court’s rental and lease-to-purchase (LTP) policies, I warned Ted that obtaining financing could be difficult, especially for newer, more expensive models. By contrast, I cautioned him against purchasing an older unit, including pre-HUD, for both financial and safety reasons. Nodding contemplatively, Ted thanked me for my time and assistance before getting into his own vehicle and leaving the park. Later, in my fieldnotes, I expressed guilt over possibly sugarcoating the realities of MHC lifestyles: I might as well be working for Crown Court, I wrote, but as a caveat, the idea that I’m
promoting the community and its “products” makes me feel as though I am partially misleading people about what this place is like.

In time, I learned that my unease arose from the knowledge that too often, what was being sold to (prospective) mobile-homeowners was not the American dream, but rather a financial, psychic, and physical trap. “To pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness” (cf. Robertson 2006:365). So noted the preeminent sociologist Emile Durkheim in his 1897 study, *Suicide*, whose central thesis held that suicide, and suicidal behaviors, result from compromised psychological states brought on by society’s failure to provide for its populous. Although critiqued for his dismissal of mental health as significant (Kushner & Sterk 2005; Robertson 2006), nonetheless his conceptualization of suicide as a social behavior is useful for this analysis, particularly his assertion that social integration, or a lack thereof, directly impacts an individuals’ mental and physical condition (Berkman et al. 2000; Pinker 2015). Mobile-homeowners in land-lease MHCs, whether sold on the promise of realizing the American dream or simply up against disadvantageous legal and financial structures, epitomize an isolated cultural figure whose entrapment in devalued structures and spaces can be fatal.

Among the mobile-homeowners I interviewed, many were keenly aware how their devalued housing contributed to their own sense of personal stigmatization. Karen, a disabled, part-time custodian, prided herself on the beautiful doublewide home she lived in with her husband, Charlie, however she also repeatedly told me how ashamed she felt to be living in Crown Court MHC, especially how it affected her family.

“I felt really bad for my kids,” Karen said, responding to a question I’d asked about experiencing “trailer trash” stigmas. “My daughter came home one day from school, and she was
absolutely in tears. She did not want to have her birthday party at our house, because somebody had said this [trailer trash], and she wanted to know what it meant.” She sighed. “I didn’t know what to say to her.”

Karen, too, felt judged by her friends and husband’s colleagues. “My husband and I were sitting in a restaurant,” she recalled, “and we were talking in a group of friends that were all together. Somebody said something about, ‘yeah, people living in trailers, that’s just trailer trash, and we wouldn’t have anything to do with that.’”

“Oh, no,” I groaned, causing Karen to smirk sardonically.

“They didn’t know where we lived,” she explained. “We were both sitting there thinking, ‘Oh my gosh. Here, we live in a trailer. Do you guys not like us, because we live in a trailer?’

That was hurtful, and we never really did invite the particular people that said that to come to our house, but all of our other friends have found out since then.” Quickly, she added, “They do know that our home is very nice, compared to a lot of what was here before.”

While in previous chapters I have shown how mobile-homeowners variously resist “trailer trash” stereotypes through distancing, normalizing, blaming, or upstaging (Kusenbach 2009), these mitigation strategies may have limited effects. In other words, as Karen aptly illustrates, MHC residents often internalized some of the negative stigmas popularly identified with them. Studies have shown how occupying stigmatized neighborhoods and feeling socially marginalized has compounding effects, particularly with regards to physical and mental wellbeing (Cahaus 2011; Wutich et al. 2014). Although some evidence suggests that strong social networks offers some protection (Jones et al. 2015; Owens 2014), among MHC tenants MacTavish and Salamon (2006) and Notter et al. (2008) argue that these relationships can instead entangle vulnerable mobile-homeowners in risky, extractive, or dangerous affairs.
Indeed, several mobile-homeowners with whom I spoke stressed their preference to keep to themselves; typically, these respondents were older and more likely to be disabled and living alone than the average interviewee. However, as Susan Pinker (2015) argues, chronic loneliness and limited social interactions can exacerbate existing health conditions, which in turn reduces overall wellbeing and life expectancy. Notably, while these mobile-homeowners were older than most residents I surveyed, among Lincolnites they hardly stand out as being elderly. As Figure 38 shows, significant disparities in life expectancies persist across Lincoln despite its claim to being among America’s “happiest” and “healthiest” cities. According to available census and demographic data, Crown Court MHC residents’ life expectancies are over twenty years shorter than Lincolnites living less than three miles away. That this is the case, I argue, is a consequence of the symbolic devaluation of mobile-homeowners, concretized in existing legal, zoning, and financial structures. Following João Biehl (2005), altogether these systems perpetuate the social abandonment of MHC residents as well as precondition a particular melancholic subjectivity among the most vulnerable, isolated individuals so that, according to Biehl, the abandonados—the abandoned—are “unable to anticipate anything but death and [have] no purpose but to die” (60).

This state of abandonment, I argue, denotes how the devaluation of manufactured housing transfers from financial, or asset-based, to a symbolic value attributed to the mobile-homeowners, themselves. In other words, by occupying devalued, precarious housing, over time mobile-homeowners are thought to be “worth less” as well. Being precarious eludes to a sense that the future, or “the good life,” has been lost (Allison 2013; Butler 2006). Thus, the timelessness often ascribed to precarity also figures a melancholic subject, described by Angela Garcia (2010) as someone locked in an unending state of grief, incapable of moving forward
with their lives. Citing Sigmund Freud, High (2011:229) further conceptualizes the melancholic as exhibiting guilt, “as though he [sic] had committed a serious crime.” The widespread social disparagement of “trailer trash,” to which some mobile-homeowners are more sensitive than others, can likewise engender feelings of guilt.

In June 2016, I followed up with Karen. Although that summer was particularly hot and humid, it was still cool enough in the morning to enjoy the couple’s front porch, and so we did. However, the bright and cheerful surrounds hardly seemed to cheer Karen much.

“I hate to say this,” she told me, “but my son-in-law, just this last week, mentioned that their property used to be worth $200,000, but because they have four mobile homes [parks] around their home, we bring down the cost of their value. And it’s true, unfortunately.”

Like many Crown Court mobile-homeowners I’d met, I had always been impressed by Karen’s pristine, airy, and colorful doublewide. Relaxing on her porch, watching the bumblebees and hummingbirds attracted dozens of blooming flowers Karen had planted, I struggled to understand how her home could have such an effect on neighboring property values.

“Does he know that for sure?” I asked, unconvinced.

Grim, she nodded. “The city says that. The north side, because of all the mobile homes, the value is worse.”

“Okay,” I conceded, yet persisted with my questions. “But the mobile home parks were here before those homes were. So, I don’t understand how, because these homes were here first, how that would really affect those homes’ value going down?”
Figure 38: Map highlighting the geospatial distribution of life expectancy in Lincoln, Nebraska, according to the Community Health Endowment of Lincoln (CEH). This map was presented publicly at the 2015 CEH annual meeting as part of the broader “Place Matters” initiative. Graphic credit: http://www.chelincoln.org/placematters.
Karen shrugged, and explained her belief that sometime in the recent past Lincoln had redistricted the area, incorporating conventional single-family dwellings into neighborhoods dominated by mobile home parks. Still, I remained skeptical; to my knowledge, aside from the 2013 partial rezoning of Crown Court as mixed-use commercial and residential, since its incorporation in the early 1960s the entire region had always been zoned for residential land- uses. So, to summarize, I asked, “I see what you mean, it’s not that the house itself lost value, it’s that the land underneath the house has lost value? And, your son-in-law thinks it’s because there’s trailer courts nearby?”

“He knows it is,” Karen said, disagreeing. “They [the city] said that.”

Distraught by Karen’s defeated tone and body language, I opted for another line of questioning. “How does that make you feel, then, to have your son-in-law sit there and say, you know, ‘because of you guys, my house lost value’ or something?”

Karen chuckled. “Well, I don’t think he meant to say it. It just kind of came out that way when he was having a conversation. But he knows that we take care of ours, but there are a lot who don’t.” Soon, however, her tone sobered again. “We’re just trash,” she added, “both to the city and to other people.”

The home, whether conceived as an investment or familial inheritance, nonetheless often assumes gift-like properties transferred from one generation to the next. As such, Karen’s assertion that in its mere existence, her home stole value from her daughter and son-in-law’s house runs counter to this prevailing logic. In Japan, Allison (2013:24) describes similar intersections between “home” and the intense guilt “non-productive” youth, hikikomori, experience, which ultimately induces individual isolation within the home. However, rather than offering respite, for hikikomori the home instead becomes “suffocating,” or as one former

hikikomori told Allison, withdrawal into the home produces the feeling of being “homeless inside of home” (73). For mobile-homeowners like Karen, occupying culturally devalued housing compounds feelings of shame, particularly that she had failed to achieve the “proper” American dream, which is in part realized through legal and financial structures such as mortgages. While not ubiquitous, the prevailing aura of melancholic futility weighed heavily on many mobile-homeowners I came to know. Feeling isolated, unwanted, and looked down upon—in addition to struggling with financial and physical burdens—these pressures coalesce into what Lauren Berlant (2011:96) refers to as a slow death, “the physical wearing out of a population that points to its deterioration as a defining condition of its experiences and historical existence.”

Although demographic statistics, including gross disparities in health outcomes and life expectancies, prove how social neglect and abandonment begets the “slow death” of vulnerable MHC residents, further evidence emerged from residents’ qualitative and ethnographic narratives. In her ethnographic study of Hispano heroin users in New Mexico, Garcia (2010) writes how addicts described their lives to her as suffering sin termina (without end). Similarly, Jefferson (2013) recalls several “suicide stories” among her informants, foreclosed homeowners left in agony following the subprime mortgage crisis of 2007-08. Insofar as “slow death,” per Berlant, figures a moment of extended, unending crisis, it should come as no surprise that I, too, recorded numerous “death stories” (Garcia 2010:36) from residents across the precarious MHC landscape. These “stories,” including tragic accounts of elderly tenants passing away alone and remaining undiscovered in their homes for weeks:

F (56): We mow her [our neighbor’s] lawn. She passed away Mother’s Day, and they found her a week later. She had no will, she had no next of kin except for a long lost niece. Her husband, he’s long gone. So, if it gets too bad, then we go over there and mow,
and every once and awhile I’ll go over and water her little plants. ‘Cause I just thought, it’s just sad. That little rose bush needs watered.

or indifferent recollections of distressed neighbors’ suicides:

F (53): Just like the kid in this trailer, this one right here, that shot himself. Just sat on the floor and shot his brains out. And this was just last year. He was sitting in the living room and had a gun, *boom*.

and the occasional reference to murdered residents:

M (49): Yeah, I’d feel nervous to be along [Crown Court’s] backside. If you notice, they never put new trailers in that side. Why? Don’t know. Yeah, near the green one that lady got killed in?

altogether depict a particular macabre geography in which the measurable effects of mobile-homeowner abandonment, dispossession, and isolation becomes a body count.

The morbid “constellation” (Gordillo 2014) formed by these “haunted houses” tellingly reminds mobile-homeowners of their socially devalued and abandoned status. Absent the potential for, or having lost, the “good life” characterized by hope for the future, anthropologies of social precarity often identify an omnipresent sense of social isolation and lack of belonging among precarious populations (Allison 2013; Berlant 2011). Whereas emergent social movements borne out of shared uncertainty have been observed elsewhere, myriad factors undermine the formation of resident solidarity in land-lease MHCs, including the politics of distancing and bordering, discursive racialization, and, as I describe in the next chapter, corporate malpractice that pits residents against one another. Yet so long as “trailer trash” stigmatization persists, the dominant interpretation of MHC resident misfortune will remain fixated on blaming symbolically and culturally devalued mobile-homeowners.

Trey, a third-party vendor responsible for hauling *demo* homes to the landfill, once admitted to me his belief that CC41 was “cursed.” While not the worst home he’d ever had to
work on, which was a singlewide in Florida where—like CC41—a husband had murdered his wife in the home, the chartreuse 1984-model was “in my top five, definitely.”

Near the one-year anniversary of the murder, I helped Trey pick up debris at a nearby doublewide he was contracted to demo. From our position, you could just make out CC41 two blocks south.

Pausing, Trey asked me, “Have they still not figured out what they’re doing with that place yet?”

“I think they want to try and sell it again,” I said, adding that Crown Court’s operators planned to first relocate the unit to Grand Island, a small city ninety miles west of Lincoln where they owned another MHC.

Trey snorted, and shook his head. “Won’t survive the trip,” he replied, adding that the floor had been buckling the last time he’d moved it from Crown Court Northside to its fateful location at CC41.

As an unintended consequence of manufactured housing’s categorization as a type of automobile, MH dealers are not required to disclose deaths in-unit. This is distinct from standard disclosure statutes in conventional real estate, which vary by state but generally require realtors to divulge violent, tragic, or psychologically harmful details to prospective buyers in addition to other details such as planned redevelopments, nearby environmental hazards, or a home’s structural integrity. “Thank god,” muttered Lisa one afternoon after work. Were CC41 a community-owned rental property, “we’d have to disclose that to the next residents.” This legal consequence of manufactured housing’s sociolegal ambiguousness, however, does not prevent individuals, whether residents or managerial staff, from casually disclosing unsavory details.
Pat, my neighbor and Crown Court’s head maintenance man, was particularly invested in CC41’s fate. Like his coworkers, Pat had his fair share of run-ins with the former tenants, however his were far more contentious. The couple had even attempted to sue Pat for removing the street barricades they’d put up without permission the final Fourth of July they lived in the park, but the judge had thrown out the case.

“If just feels wrong inside. It’s got bad vibes,” he once recalled. Looking down, he then asked me, “You ever feel when someplace just isn’t right?”

I assured Pat that nothing about CC41 felt “right” to me, and confessed being claustrophobic while there, something I’d never felt before when inside any unit regardless of its size. Relieved, he perked up. “I hear ya,” he said. “I could see where the kid [previous tenant] [died], and just knew something wasn’t right about that place.”

I still remember my surprise. “What do you mean?” I asked, prompting Pat to tell me how the tenant before that last couple had committed suicide in the home. Although Trey and Pat’s accounts differed on the previous tenant’s manner of death, both nonetheless agreed that there was something off about CC41. “They should just dump the place,” Trey said to me, months earlier, after we’d finished clearing the doublewide lot. However, “I’ll do whatever they ask me to do,” he added, though, “I don’t think it’s right.”

Over time, I realized that Crown Court was teeming with “death stories,” and that despite the allure (and horror) I felt toward CC41, it was hardly the only “haunted house” Crown Court possessed. Mark, too, discovered after he’d purchased his home from Crown Court that the previous occupant had committed suicide inside the home. “We fell in love with this place right away,” he said during our first interview in May 2015. “I mean, the history of this place is not the greatest, but—”
Intrigued, I interrupted him. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” he chuckled. “After we signed the contract and everything, that weekend when we were moving in we found out that someone died in this house. And not on good terms, either.”

“Oh no,” I replied, grimacing. “Who’d you find that out from?”

A neighbor, Mark responded. “Terri was supposed to kinda disclose that, that he killed himself.” I asked for some clarification, as by then I understood that in fact, it was not necessary that mobile home dealers disclose that type of information to prospective residents. Mark, however, explained to me that, “She figured since it was a suicide, it didn’t matter. But I went up to her the week we moved in and I said, um, I keep seeing big flies on the window stills. Big flies! Now, where the heck are these flies from?”

Mind, as Mark said this he gestured to the living room windows which, of course, were in the same room as us. Luckily, the flies he described—“cadaver flies”—were no longer present. Sensing my sudden uncertainty, Mark laughed and assured me, “I don’t feel no bad evilness here.”

**Conclusion: What Remains**

One morning in early April, Carol pulled me outside shortly after I’d arrived at the leasing office. Hands shaking as she pulled deep drags from her cigarette, Carol told me how the previous day she unexpectedly bought CC41 at the County Sheriff’s Sale.

“It was supposed to happen next week,” she explained, however Lisa mistakenly switched up the dates, resulting in Carol being there for CC41’s auction. “I told Lisa, I told her
that I wanted *nothing* to do with that house,” yet once the sale began there was nothing Carol could do; per usual, she purchased the unit on behalf of Crown Court for one dollar.

Against the wishes of local Crown Court staff, once CC41 was repossessed the corporate office requested the team complete a *manufactured home Major Expenditure Request Form* (MERF) to decide whether to sell, rent, or *demo* the “cursed” property. Like the County Assessor’s devaluation table, the MERF process calculates the “economic value” of a home based on its National Automobile Dealers Association (NADA), or “blue book,” value weighed against the estimated cost of repairs to determine whether or not it makes sense to “rehabilitate” repossessed homes.

This crux in the social life of a manufactured home reveals the extent to which these chattel properties are financialized, often to the detriment of their socially devalued former occupants. Don Kalb (2013:259) defines *financialization* as the moment where capitalist expansionism falters, prompting frantic disinvestment and liquidation to eke out any remaining profits. However, in the context of housing Weiss (2015:506) observes that “the hallmark of financialization [is] the insinuation of finance, and financial risk management, into household economics.” Anthropological studies on financialization have shown how financial behaviors are moralized, particularly high-risk practices which are alternatively condemned or celebrated (e.g. Hertz & Leins 2012; Ho 2009; Weiss 2015). As previously argued, mobile-homeowners’ decisions to purchase depreciating assets without land titles confounds conventional economic wisdom and, as such, they are excluded from and/or compared negatively to conventional homeowners. That this occurs despite the recent surge in, and celebration of, mobile home *community* ownership and investment is analyzed in the following chapter, yet as with any speculative financial maneuvers these risks, too, can fail; however, as the next chapter contends,
mobile-homeowners are disproportionately affected by these “failures” due to their precarious and sociolegally ambiguous status. The transformation of MHCs like half-abandoned Crown Court Southside from bustling communities to vacant, weed-filled lots is testament to that fact.

For Carol, the tragedy at CC41 and Crown Court’s unwillingness to divest from the property, to “do what’s right,” deeply unnerved her. After purchasing CC41, one County clerk asked Carol what the park planned to do with the infamous home: “Are you going to rent it out?” Carol lied, said no, and—handing the title over—the clerk responded, “That’s probably a good thing.”

Distressed, Carol promptly burst into tears upon returning to the leasing offices. What set her off, she told me the following morning, was Lisa’s lighthearted, singsong teasing, “Didja get yerself a moe-bile home?” This commonplace joke, exaggerated Southern accent and all, was usually said to staffers returning from the Sheriff’s Sale, however on that particular day Carol experienced a visceral reaction to the implied dehumanization of CC41’s former tenants. And, although she promised me that with its sale CC41’s removal was a “done deal,” the property lingered on for nearly three years, visible from the highway along the MHC’s southern edge. It was unceremoniously demo’ed sometime during the summer months of 2017, subsequently replaced by another brand-new rental unit. Yet as it sat unoccupied, CC41 became a grotesque reminder of how the compounding effects of vulnerable mobile-homeowners’ “slow death” (Berlant 2011)—of profiteering exploitation, cruel optimism, mental health crises, domestic abuse, and eerie abandonment—materializes “hauntings” across the physical environment which, according to Christina Schwenkel (2017:404) depicts “a violent history of ruination.” By chronicling the social life, or biography (Appadurai 1986) of manufactured housing as it proceeds through its commodity phase, this chapter has shown how first financial, then social
devaluation transfers from the (mobile) home to its occupants. That is, despite attempts to “liquidate” manufactured homes’ economic viability or value, what remains are the ghostly specters of former residents, whose “exorcisms” (from eviction, death, or otherwise) nonetheless manifest material remnants—primarily, abandoned and repurposed homes—across the MHC landscape.

Both tangible and deeply affective, these “hauntings” were felt by Crown Court’s staff as well. Indeed, some readers may be surprised to learn that, in my experience, Crown Court staff’s frequent defense of, and loyalty to, their residents highlights the complex, intangible systems of social valuation. One evening after work over a round of beers, the leasing team and I were joined by Jack, Trey’s employer and Crown Court vendor. Despite our relaxed mood and raucous laughter, Jack managed to abruptly derail the festive mood with a single callous remark; specifically, that he regretted selling CC41 to the woman who’d been murdered there, as he’d be unable to recoup his financial investment and resell the home. This off-hand comment had all of us—Roger, Terri, Monica, and Carol, who openly sneered at Jack—stunned.

Jack, who either did not notice (or did not care), continued: “I could sell that green house... Too bad she paid it off before what they did.”

“What he did,” Carol stressed, to which Jack shrugged.

“At least I still owned it when the kid did himself [in].” He paused, then shrugging, added, “Managed to get something for it.”

I selected Benjamin Franklin’s oft-quoted statement on the inevitability of death and taxes to open this chapter. While itself paraphrased from earlier English dramatizations, to me this phrase aptly expresses how coldly reductive human lives become within financial calculations. For Jack, his own regret stemmed from his inability to profit in the wake of tragedy;
likewise, on a grander scale Lincoln Councilmembers expressed sympathy for mobile-homeowners who might come to be dispossessed by proposed redevelopment plans, while nonetheless voting for its passage. These are not equivalent moral standpoints, certainty, yet placing these scenarios alongside one another I hope to illustrate the tangible effects of mobile-homeowner devaluation as they are expressed across legal, financial, and sociocultural framings. Palpable reminders of this violence, of ruination, are strewn across Crown Court: an odd cluster of tiger lilies here (Figure 39), a cracked meter there (Figure 40). These ruins, per Stewart (1996a:90), remember otherwise-forgotten occupants long after both they and their homes are removed to the “trailer park in the sky.” Thus, in the next chapter I propose a methodological approach that recenters dispossessed mobile-homeowners via the archival, material, and digital remnants they left behind. Such an ethnography of absence, I argue, offers a significant intervention for the growing scholarship on America’s “hidden” housing crisis: eviction.
Figures 39, 40: Absent homes, Crown Court’s vacant lots nonetheless retained physical remnants of previous occupants. Most often, these markers were utilitarian, such as unused water, gas, or electric meters (below), however sometimes these artifacts were more personal, such as planted flowers and trees, like the tiger lilies lining the sidewalk of an empty lot (above).
CHAPTER SEVEN

“A Better Class of Losers”

Rumor Has It

Although Crown Court MHC’s rebranding, or “revitalization,” ultimately became the event that I followed throughout my primary and follow-up fieldwork, when I first learned of it I was perplexed. While serving as a VISTA Americorps volunteer for Lincoln Public Schools (2011-12), I had coordinated a needs assessment of 14 MHCs, including Crown Court, for a proposed grant initiative, the Lincoln Promise Neighborhood project. This work not only began my research with mobile-homeowners, it also led me to connect with several key interlocutors throughout Lincoln, from planners to partnering agencies and MHC management staff. As I completed my term of service, I left Lincoln with the sense that most of the parks I’d studied were protected, albeit in need of public intervention and reinvestment.

Therefore, it came as a surprise to me when, in late 2012, the Lincoln-Lancaster County Planning Commission declared Crown Court MHC “blighted” based on the results of the Blight & Substandard Determination Study (2011) commissioned by the park’s corporate owners. Within the development process, blight declarations are the first step towards redevelopment. The second step, the redevelopment proposal, was approved a handful of months later. The West Lincoln Redevelopment Zone (WLRZ) outlines plans to transform Crown Court into a mixed-use commercial and residential district sans manufactured housing. While closing Crown Court would reduce Lincoln’s MH homesites significantly, WLRZ is not the sole project proposal intending to permanently shutter a Lincoln MHC; another two projects, approved in 1998 and 2005, would eliminate approximately 120 homesites in at least five MHCs, not including the 27
lots lost with Arrow MHP’s closure in August 2015. Last, according to the 2040 Lincoln-Lancaster Comprehensive Plan (2011), the “anticipated use” for all remaining parks is mixed residential and commercial; indeed, mobile homes are not mentioned once in the entire plan.

Remarkably, many Crown Court staff, most of whom had worked for the company for less than a year, had never heard of the WLRZ or the 2011 Blight and Substandard Determination Study ordered by their corporate employers. “We’re not doing anything here, we’re not,” Carol assured me in late January. “We redid all the water, we spent $100,000 on a sewer project.” Later, she would revise that estimate to over $1 million, financed by the $93 million investment Crown Court’s corporate office obtained in 2012, which launched their rebranding efforts. Crown Court management assured me that any redevelopment plans (that they were aware of) were long-range, to be expected sometime in the next ten or twenty years.

This, however, put their timeline at odds with Lincoln city officials and non-resident stakeholders, many of whom trusted that Crown Court, as well as all Lincoln MHCs, were going to be redeveloped sooner rather than later. Once WLRZ was approved, rumors of Crown Court’s imminent destruction flourished. One nonprofit organizer informed me in 2015 that redevelopment would happen “soon, maybe in the next two or three years.” During the annual meeting of the Lincoln Community Health Endowment, three Department of Health and Human Services employees tried to persuade me that Crown Court had already been redeveloped. When I assured them that the mobile home park was still around (I was living there, after all), one retorted, “Then it must have gone away, and now it’s back.”

Untangling the jumbled web of (mis)information, as well as my own (mis)adventures attempting to resolve the riddle of responsibility for Crown Court’s ruination, offers a case study on the affective and tangible strength rumors possess. Significantly, the anthropological
scholarship emphasizes how the circulation of rumors reveals particular social anxieties framed in local contexts, as opposed to merely assessing whether any given rumor is “true” or not (Kroeger 2003; Paz 2009; Samuels 2015). Here, I follow Annemarie Samuels’ (2015) framing of rumors as “subjunctivizing” (Good 1994; c.f. ibid 230-1) narratives that create an open-endedness which simultaneously accepts multiple, often competing, realities. As Samuels observes in post-tsunami Aceh, Indonesia, parents whose children had been lost in the disaster and were never recovered or identified in the aftermath, endured disparate affective states—grief, faith, and even tentative hope—in response to the uncertainty of their children’s fates and lingering rumors of child trafficking. Thus, Samuels writes, within the specific social circumstances of post-disaster Aceh, ambiguity lends credence, or “truthfulness,” to certain rumors.

Similarly, Stoffle et al. (1991) find that merely discussing rumors of future radioactive waste disposal facilities in public in several American states resulted in immediate economic and social ramifications as land values dipped and grassroots organizations sprung up in protest. Arguing that rumors are affective, and therefore powerful, I approach local actors’ narratives of Crown Court MHC’s proposed closure and redevelopment as grounded in “expert,” that is, firsthand, knowledge or experience that contextualizes, validates, and perhaps even materializes each rumor. It is the crafted ambiguousness and uncertainty of mobile-homeownership in land-lease MHCs that allows for radically divergent possibilities for future and anticipated land-use. By tracing how this assortment of MHC-related rumors, which belie arbitrary yet targeted desires for “trailer park” erasure, circulated and flourished, this chapter outlines the process by which ruination rumors are wielded as tools to justify the destruction of any neighborhood, even those whose downfall seems unimaginable.
And yet, viewing my interlocutors as experts in their own right does not negate the fact that power relations between these actors are anything but equal. Chapters Four and Six illustrated how excluding manufactured housing from conventional financing and legal definitions of real estate functionally entraps mobile-homeowners in rapidly devaluing assets. While those chapters were concerned with showing how the sociolegal precarity of mobile-homeowners in urban MHCs affects economic, physical, and mental health outcomes, including life expectancy, this chapter adds an additional factor—eviction—as part of an ethnographic analysis of mobile-homeowner social abandonment and dispossession. Described as America’s “hidden housing problem” (Sullivan 2017:243), eviction is a vastly understudied phenomenon (ibid; see also, Desmond 2012:89; Patillo 2013). Following Erik Harms (2013:345), who argues that eviction produces a “liminal state of ruptured time,” this chapter illustrates how contentious viewpoints regarding Crown Court’s present and future status from both corporate and municipal standpoints creates permanent precarity for residents, whose displacement—whether sudden, through “No Cause” evictions, or eventual, via redevelopment—appears, and feels, inevitable.

“They wanna keep people on their toes,” reasoned Peggy, the retired doublewide owner described in Chapter Three. Like many of their neighbors, Peggy and her friend Hilda had attended one of the public meetings Crown Court management was required to hold with concerned residents once the WLRZ was approved. Of corporate, Peggy told me, “The thing is, they’re scaring those people, these older homes. They’re gonna sell those junkers, and try and find something else. Or corporate’s gonna…” Trailing off, Peggy’s gaze wandered across her own living room, filled to capacity with various personal treasures and keepsakes she’d collected throughout her life.

Defensively, she snapped: “I don’t know what corporate’s gonna do. Okay?”
“But, if they close the park?” I asked, hesitant. Although Peggy refrained from including herself in her descriptions—relying on “them” rather than “I” or “we”—both of us knew that Crown Court’s closure would impact her just as much as her worried neighbors.

Shrugging, all Peggy said in response was, “Then you’re shit outta luck.”

“No Tresspassing”: Eviction as (Il)Legal Appropriation

In August 2015, Monica and I were sent to Crown Court co. 72 (CC72), a 1976 Bellevista singlewide sited on a prominent corner near the main Crown Court leasing offices. The previous occupants, a retired teacher I refer to as “Isabel,” along with an adult child and several grandchildren, had been evicted for “No Cause” in June. Although the Sheriff Sale did not finalize Crown Court’s repossession of Isabel’s home until September, after the mid-July lock-out park staff were the only persons authorized to enter the premises. However, Lisa, the manager, noticed that a window had been broken out (Figure 41) and asked Monica and I to inspect the unit to make sure no one, including the former tenants, were staying there. Additionally, we were tasked with determining whether it would be more cost-effective for Crown Court to resell or replace the unit.
Under our weight, the sagging front porch creak ominously, and as Monica unlocked the front door my gaze was drawn to a handwritten notice: “No Tresspassing” [sic] (Figure 42). Written in shaky cursive and dotted with a star, the misspelled message was, to me, the obvious work of a child and an uncomfortable reminder of the family who used to call this dilapidated trailer “home.”
As the front door swung open, a wave of rancid, stale air rushed out towards us. The perishable food left behind had quickly rotted in the triple-digit summer heat, attracting an assortment of insects that swarmed in response to our intrusion. The sole source of illumination was our cellphones as we shuffled forward into the dark and threatening interior, our shirt sleeves fisted against our faces in a futile attempt to avoid the stench.

Although it was clear that no one was currently living there, Monica nonetheless whispered to me, “I don’t think it’s safe to be in here.” I agreed. The floor was crawling with cockroaches and beetles, and our cellphones cast frightening shadows behind overturned furniture and ajar interior doors. In that moment, it was hard to imagine that the mobile home
had ever been habitable. Turning back to the entrance, Monica shook her head. “Forget it,” she said. “This has got to be a demo.”

Figure 43: Guideline 6, which appears in the Crown Court “Guidelines for Living” handbook, describes the home approval policy in a satirical manner.

According to Crown Court’s “Guidelines for Living: The Art of Being a Good Neighbor,” a copy of which all residents (supposedly) received, Rule Six states that “residency may be rejected because the quality of a home does not meet Community Standards” (Figure 43). Ostensibly, this included the “crappy” homes that the leasing agents so often spoke of, or the “junkers” Peggy figured Crown Court would ultimately sell off. And, by the time Monica and I “trespassed,” Isbael’s (former) home then also fit these criteria. Although the Guidelines goes on, for three pages in fact, to describe their “Manufactured Home Standards,” no specific details beyond City-mandated ordinances regarding skirting, wiring, and building materials, as well as
allowable deck dimensions, are provided. Rather, residents are simply informed that whether or not their home meets “community standards” is left to managerial discretion: “2. Management has the right to reject a home because appearance, age, or size does not meet Community standards.”

Homes may be “rejected” either upon move-in or, more often, while occupied and already on-site, as Isabel’s case exemplifies. In June 2015, the afternoon before Crown Court’s revitalization event was scheduled to take place, I accompanied Lisa as she performed a spot inspection of the neighborhood. Our final stop was lot CC72, located next to the main office.

“Oh no. No,” Lisa uttered, staring at Isabel’s home with something akin to horror. “That house needs to go,” she said decisively. Obviously, this was not the first time she had seen Isabel’s house; sited on a prominent corner, everyone on staff had referred to the tan-and-green house as a “piece of shit trailer” numerous times. But on this particular afternoon, what had once been a semi-profitable nuisance transformed into an agent of disaster for Crown Court’s rebranding efforts. With its sagging and cluttered porch, bent or missing skirting, and children’s toys strewn across the lot, Isabel’s home had become intolerable. Lisa stormed into the office and shouted for Monica to immediately send a “No Cause” eviction notice to “whoever lives at CC72, because I want that house gone!”

Here, a “No Cause” eviction can be interpreted as “No Legal Cause.” Legally, eviction refers to the removal, or expulsion, of a person (or persons) from a property, including property owned by the evictees. For conventional homeowners, eviction often occurs months, if not years, after a foreclosure (Jefferson 2013; Stout 2016a). However, for mobile-homeowners living in land-lease MHCs, being categorized as tenants occupying personal, or chattel, property severely reduces the period in which an eviction happens; for evictees like Isabel, displacement happens a
month after a No Cause eviction is served. Furthermore, according to the *Nebraska Mobile Home Landlord-Tenant Act* (NMHLTA) any land contract may be terminated with just thirty days’ notice. While this applies to redevelopment plans like WLRZ, Roger, Crown Court’s former district manager assured me that corporate policy was to alert residents to impending closure at least ninety days, or three months, beforehand. Still, considering the average cost to relocate a manufactured homes varies between $5,000 and $10,000 (Clark 2017:1121; Sullivan 2014), not to mention other complicating factors like meeting other MHC standards (which is difficult, if not impossible, for older, pre-HUD homes), three months is hardly enough time for evicted mobile-homeowners (Sullivan 2014, 2017).

Whether by eminent domain or land-use (re)development, evicting homeowners is widely viewed as an egregious violation of individuals’ private property rights in the United States (Nadler et al. 2008). In the U.S. Constitution, the Fifth Amendment prohibits the seizure of private property, “taken for public use, without just compensation” (emphasis added). For mobile-homeowners, however, the categorical exclusion of their property as real estate, and thus, its rapid asset depreciation, means that should plans like WLRZ move forward as public, tax-supported (TIF) developments, *just compensation* would likely be the current assessed value based on the County Assessment Tool described in Chapter Four (p. 136). Using 2015 valuations, Peggy, for instance, would receive just $16,700 for the 1998-model doublewide she purchased in 2004 for $47,200 (including ~$7,700 at 10% interest over 7 years). Worse yet, should Crown Court’s operators elect to sell and/or redevelop the park without tax-increment financing, nothing in Nebraska or Federal law would require them to compensate displaced

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20 The timeframe with which mobile-homeowners can be legally displaced varies by state. For instance, Florida law mandates a six-month notification period (Sullivan 2014). By contrast, Louisiana, one of 15 U.S. states without special legal protections for MHC residents, requires only a 14-day written notification for eviction (Clark 2017).
mobile-homeowners like Peggy for anything; Peggy, however, would still be responsible for covering the costs to relocate her unit elsewhere.

Based on archival data and general estimates, Isabel’s No Cause eviction ultimately cost her over $17,000 after accounting for sale cost and renovations (at least $15,000), unpaid attorney fees and lot rent for the month following her official eviction ($445), and removal fees, which Crown Court received at a discount unavailable to nearly all residents ($1,500).

While Americans generally disagree with governmental seizure of private property, especially for commercial or unspecified uses (Atuabene 2016; Nadler & Diamond 2008), the eviction of mobile-homeowners like Isabel are viewed more complexly, primarily because in such cases both park operators and mobile-homeowners own property. However, existing legal structures prioritize land rights over (personal) property rights, and thus, No Cause evictions are deemed acceptable, even just. As “halfway” (Sullivan 2014) or “quasi” (Salamon & MacTavish 2006) homeowners, MHC closures nationwide typically pit residents against landlords in a legal battle over the meaning of ownership. In Palo Alto, California, a five-year legal battle took place as to whether or not the owner of the Buena Vista Mobile Home Park had the right to sell the property to redevelopers, in effect displacing over five hundred low-income residents; in 2017, Santa Clara County reached a settlement with the park operators for $40 million to preserve the property for mobile-homeownership (Kurhi 2017). Indeed, the question as to whose rights—home or land owners—remains unsettled within the debates over MHC closure. Even D. Landis, the Director of the Lincoln Urban Development Department and a former state legislator who sponsored the NMHLTA agreed with legal precedents favoring landowners; as he candidly told me during our interview, “The property owner owns the property and they should be able to sell it. By God, it’s the Fifth Amendment!”
For Isabel, this choice was left up to Lisa, who almost nonchalantly decided that her home no longer adhered to Community Standards and, therefore, was subject to removal. (Months later, Monica confessed that Lisa had evicted Isabel simply to free up her lot; if she had lived elsewhere in the park it is possible that Isabel would still be there.) Yet no one protested her ouster, even as it was subsequently revealed to have been borderline illegal according to the NMHLTA. Whereas public outrage has muted the obvious visibility of state- or corporate-sponsored displacement elsewhere (see Chu 2014; Dávila 2004; Shear & Lyon-Callo 2013), the same cannot be said in the context of MHCs. Rather, deep animosity towards “trailer trash,” paired with sociolegal categorical ambiguousness exposes all land-lease MHC residents, like Isabel, to multiple forms of displacement pressure.

So-called “No Cause” evictions best illustrate MHC owners’ legal (and extralegal) power over mobile-homeowners in land-lease communities. As the NMHLTA (76-1475) stipulates:

(4) Rental agreements shall be from month to month unless otherwise specified in writing. (a) A rental agreement may be canceled by at least thirty days’ written notice given by either party. (b) A landlord may not cancel a rental agreement solely for the purpose of making the tenant’s mobile home space available for another mobile home unless otherwise agreed in writing.

To summarize, while (a) park operators and/or tenants may terminate any land contract for No Cause with a thirty day written notice, (b) MHC landlords may not terminate a lease for the sole purpose of replacing an older unit with a newer model. Moreover, given the expense associated with removing a manufactured home, mobile-homeowners rarely, if ever, exercise this right. As such, it is almost always the MHC owners who initiate a No Cause eviction as an extension of their “quasi-governmental power” (Miller & Evko 1985:702) over mobile-homeowners. As Terri, Crown Court’s former manager, described the practice to me:

It’s kind of a beautiful thing, ‘cause you can give [residents] a thirty day No Cause for a bunch of reasons that you don’t want them to know, and they don’t have to know. They’ll
call Laurie, our lawyer, and she will say, “Well, that’s a No Cause. They’re just telling you, you have thirty days to leave.”

No Cause evictions tangibly illustrate how sociolegal precariousness naturalizes and justifies mobile-homeowners’ dispossession, particularly within urban MHCs like Crown Court. To be fair, unsafe and substandard living conditions pose inherent risks, especially to occupants’ health. Parallel with my primary fieldwork, in 2015 Lincoln enacted a series of new ordinances targeting neglected, or “problem” properties. Although these policies impose fines on property owners, under these guidelines owners cannot lose their home to Sheriff Auction in less than two years. Moreover, the Lincoln Department of Urban Development offers an Emergency Repair and Home Improvement Loan Program for to assist primary residents living these “problem” properties. However, mobile-homeowners, recognized as renters due to the land-lease arrangement of the MHC, are ineligible to receive aid through these programs. The exclusion of mobile-homeowners from assistance programs, alongside disadvantageous legal structures that hasten their removal, altogether reveal how these systems are predicated on the sociocultural belief that “trailers” and “trailer parks” are, by definition, undesirable (van der Hoorn 2009).

“Normally,” Terri continued, “we issue those [No Cause evictions] to people that just don’t abide by the rules. Maybe we get constant complaints [about them]. Or their house is a piece of crap.” However, as I described in the previous chapter, managerial rule enforcement during my time at Crown Court MHC was inconsistent at best. More alarming, though, are Terri’s concluding remarks, which justify residents’ removal because of their “crap” homes.

Being familiar with NMHTLA, I pressed Terri on this point. “There is actually a provision in there,” I told her, “that says you can terminate within thirty days, No Cause, no fault, whatever, either side. Written notice. But,” I added, “a landlord cannot, or may not, remove a home simply to put a new home in.”
Eyes wide, Terri immediately drew back. “Oh my god,” she whispered. “They’ve done that with a ton of them.” Like Isabel, I unconsciously thought. However, Terri provided another example of this having happened, one which I was later able to corroborate with documents I reviewed as part of my “volunteer shredder” position at the leasing office.

In 2012, as Crown Court prepared to initiate its rebranding campaign, the park acquired thirty new manufactured homes meant for rentals only. In a letter dated March 2012, Terri wrote to a resident whose older pre-HUD was sited near the office and community clubhouse, and informed him of their intentions to site a model home on the lot he currently occupied. “We would like to see if you would be interested in having your home moved to another lot of your choice in the community with all the moving, tear down and set up costs paid by us,” the letter went on to state, adding an additional incentive of a free month of rent should the resident agree to the deal.

The mobile-homeowner, a bachelor in his mid-60s, was given less than two weeks to make a decision, however in a handwritten note attached to the office’s copy of the letter, Terri added, “Does not want to move, 3-19-12.”

In September 2015, Terri recalled how, ultimately, “We made a guy move out of his home.” She paused. “I mean, it was a piece of crap home, but we gave him a thirty-day [notice]. But he had been there forever. And, um, he came [into the office] and he says, ‘Well, is there something else I can rent? Can I buy another home?’” Eventually, they reached a deal with the resident, who moved into a property Crown Court had recently acquired from a Sheriff’s sale, another repossessed unit of an evicted MHC tenant. As for his original lot, within a year the “model” home was rented out as newer, nicer units were brought in.
While upset to learn that she had frequently, however inadvertently, violated residents’ rights per the NMHLTA, Terri nonetheless justified her actions by reducing this man’s residence to “a piece of crap home.” Although, unlike Isabel, this mobile-homeowner was given the opportunity to have his home relocated at Crown Court’s expense, his refusal to surrender his prime location near the leasing office eventually resulted in the same outcome: a No Cause eviction. However, in recounting these events, readers may wonder why this resident did not make the “rational” choice, that is, take the deal in order to avoid losing his home.

As Chapter Four shows, by financializing or extending neoliberal logics into the realm of “the home,” homeowners become enmeshed in contradictory worldviews which simultaneously encourage them to view their home as an economic investment and a symbolic treasure of incalculable worth. As sociologist Bernadette Atuahene (2016) writes, this inconsistency becomes highly visible in the context of involuntary property loss as economic, or exchange, value (as “just compensation”) vies with broader sociocultural systems of valuation in order to determine whether an involuntary taking is considered just. The scholarship on eminent domain, especially the concept of “holdins,” whose subjective, affective, and sentimental attachments to their property creates an unwillingness to sell at any price (Nadler & Diamond 2008:721; Parchomovsky & Siegelman 2004) offers a handy explanation for this conundrum for mobile-homeowners whose properties rapidly lose most, if not all, their economic value.

Perhaps, as someone who had “been there forever,” this resident’s attachment to his home and his neighborhood where he was specifically located was potent enough reasonably turn down Crown Court’s offer? As I never met this individual personally, I cannot say for certain. Likewise, it is unknown who and under what conditions someone, likely a child, decided to write out “No Tresspasing” on Isabel’s porch at CC72. However what is clear is that, ultimately, this
directive was not followed, an act justified by existing financial and legal structures that categorize manufactured housing as distinct and worth less than conventional homes; by extension, these beliefs come to include mobile-homeowners as well. Insofar as housing sited in land-lease MHCs almost always experience rapid asset depreciation, I argue that all such mobile-homeowners to varying degrees become “holdins” simply by attaching symbolic, subjective value to their housing in spite of societal and state desires to render MHCs invisible or remove them altogether. And, like other “holdins” forcibly removed by the state (e.g. Brown 2010; Nadler & Diamond 2008), mobile-homeowners’ personal attachments to their property, their homes, are not enough to prevent a more powerful entity, in this case the “quasi-governmental” authority of park management (Miller & Evko 1985), from taking that away from them.

Failing to recognize any value, subjective or otherwise, in mobile-homeownership, the sociolegal devaluation of MHCs extends to the regulatory apparatus meant to safeguard residents and park operators alike. Yet, privileging landlords (the “real” property owners) over mobile-homeowners essentially permits operators’ exploitative and illegal behaviors vis-à-vis their culturally maligned tenants. For example, referring to Crown Court’s corporate office evicting residents for No Cause in order to free up a desired lot—a direct violation of the NMHLTA—Terri admitted to me, “They’ve done that with a lot of them.” She looked down, and shook her head. “That’s interesting, ‘cause I didn’t know that. I thought a thirty-day No Cause, once they’re out of there, it’s [the park’s] lot. You can do what you want with it.”

Terri’s uncertainty regarding existing MHC law in Nebraska mirrored my own frustrated confusion as I attempted to uncover what had happened throughout the years that allowed Crown Court and other Lincoln MHCs to become so blighted and substandard as to warrant total closure and redevelopment. The next section delves deeper into these connected processes of ruination
which allowed for both Isabel’s unjust eviction as well as Crown Court’s operators’ broader absolution for allowing their “real” property, their land, to deteriorate so profoundly in spite of (supposed) regulatory protections.

“I have lived in this neighborhood for three years,” Isabel said, according to testimony archived from a public hearing with the Lincoln Planning Commission in early 2013. “I had to retire from teaching because I am disabled, but I have been working hard to fix up my mobile home. My home is old, and I don’t know if it will be able to be moved anywhere else.” The WLRZ, as well as the possibility of losing her property, deeply worried Isabel. “I am sick to my stomach because I have put $15,000 into my home. This is not right.”

“**Well, There’s a Mobile Home Park There**”

Despite the clear, objective language Nebraska statutes utilize to declare an area to be blighted and/or substandard—“whenever existing deficiencies inhibit private investment” (18.2101-54), the blight declaration process is both subjective and arbitrary. Exemplifying this, a Lincoln planner once told me that some of his favorite college instructors would routinely boast that, “I can blight anything I want to, because the statutes are so loose.”

“To be perfectly clear, [the blight designation] had nothing to do with infrastructure,” Roger candidly confessed during a follow-up interview in October 2015, several months after he’d left Crown Court. “The blight study was done so that TIF [tax-increment financing] money would be allocated for a grander scheme idea.”

Perplexed, I flipped through the printed version of the blight report that I’d brought with me. “I’ve read the blight study,” I said, “I mean, they do have certain factors that are—”
Roger interrupted me. “I agree. But you notice they didn’t do a blight study for the entire park?”

He was right. Only half of Crown Court, the oldest sections, were included in the blight report and proposed redevelopment area. Summarized in Table 3, that study identified numerous criteria for a blight and substandard declaration, in addition to multiple “deficiencies” hampering development for “higher and best uses.” As it happened, my rental home was situated in one of newer blocks excluded from the proposed redevelopment area. However, this hardly meant that the infrastructure where I lived was any better than those that were.

Weeks later, as the telltale sirens blared outside, signaling that due to another mainline rupture my water would shut off for what felt like the umpteenth million time, I wondered (for the umpteenth million time) what had allowed Crown Court’s underground utilities to become so corrosive and unsafe when the NMHTLA clearly states that it is the responsibility of the park operators, the “real” property owners, to maintain these vital services:

76-1492, (1) A landlord shall: (a) Make all repairs and do whatever is necessary to put and keep the mobile home park in a fit and habitable condition; (b) Keep all common areas of the mobile home park in a clean and safe condition; (c) Maintain in good and safe working order and condition all facilities supplied or required to be supplied by the landlord; (d) Provide for the removal of garbage, rubbish, and other waste from the mobile home park; and (e) Furnish outlets for provided utilities.

Further, Chapter 76 Section 1498 decrees that should a landlord fail to comply with the aforementioned section, a tenant may terminate their rental contract in thirty days as well as receive compensation from the landlord for any and all damages related to material negligence.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Substandard Factors</th>
<th>Strong Presence of Factor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dilapidated/deterioration.</td>
<td></td>
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(3 of 4 factors found)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Presence of Factor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age or obsolescence.</td>
<td>Reasonable Presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inadequate provision for ventilation, light, air, sanitation or open</td>
<td>Strong Presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>spaces.</td>
<td>of Factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existence of conditions which endanger life or property by fire and</td>
<td>Strong Presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>other causes.</td>
<td>of Factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Blight Factors</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>(10 of 12 factors found)</em></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>A substantial number of deteriorated or dilapidated structures.</td>
<td>Strong Presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Existence of defective of inadequate street layout.</td>
<td>Strong Presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faulty lot layout in relation to size, adequacy, accessibility or</td>
<td>Strong Presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>usefulness.</td>
<td>Factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insanitary or unsafe conditions.</td>
<td>Strong Presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deterioration of site or other improvements.</td>
<td>Strong Presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity of Ownership</td>
<td>Strong Presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tax or special assessment delinquency exceeding the fair value of</td>
<td>Little or No Presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>land.</td>
<td>of Factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defective or unusual condition of title.</td>
<td>Not Reviewed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improper subdivision or obsolete platting.</td>
<td>Strong Presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The existence of conditions which endanger life or property by fire</td>
<td>Strong Presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or other causes.</td>
<td>Factor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other environmental and blighting factors.</td>
<td>Strong Presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The area has had either stable or decreasing population based on the</td>
<td>Strong Presence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>last two decennial censuses.</td>
<td>Factor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Summary of results from the 2011 Blight and Substandard Determination Study of Crown Court MHC. Per Nebraska state law, while the presence of a majority of either “Substandard” or “Blight” factors may signify the presence of deteriorating conditions, in order to receive a “Blight and Substandard” declaration these factors must be present to such an extent so as to warrant public intervention (https://lincoln.ne.gov/city/urban/redev/pdf/blightdef.pdf).
Undoubtedly, no regulatory apparatus is perfectly and completely executed, yet where Crown Court and other Lincoln MHCs were concerned, I suspected there was more to the story than could be explained by budget cuts, understaffing, and bureaucratic mismanagement alone. Rather, I argue that it is the popular social desire for mobile home (owner) absence that enables MHC deregulation, negligence, and ruination. Indeed, in lieu of direct or frequent interactions with MHCs, non-residents typically view the dilapidated material conditions of these homes and neighborhoods as proof of their devalued symbolic significance. In other words, as the targets of widespread contempt as undesirable “trailer trash,” urban MHC residents’ association with unkempt “trailer parks” is discursively naturalized as the product of their supposedly inferior housing stock. As Roger went on to explain, “because of the common perception of mobile home communities on top of the blight, and the resident perception that, ‘Oh Lord, we’ve been hearing rumors of sale and destruction for years,’ all kind of hit this perfect storm where everyone…” Roger clapped his hands together, startling me, “went bam!”

If, as Samuels (2015) contends, rumors tell us more about competing social realities rather than the absolute truth of the matter, then it should come as no surprise, given the incalculable ambiguities and uncertainties pertaining to mobile-homeownership and MHC residence, that particular narratives promising Crown Court’s closure gained traction amongst MHC residents and non-residents alike in the years following the public announcement of the WLRZ.

“Again, the perception,” said then-State senator K. Haar, whose district included Crown Court and several other area MHCs, “Although some people choose to live there, and they’ve lived there a long time, most people still think of mobile homes as a place where poor people live and ‘trailer trash.’ I think that’s maybe one of the reasons we tend to overlook ‘em.” Along with
Lincoln Councilman C. Eskridge, who voted for portions of Crown Court MHC to be rezoned to mixed-use commercial in 2013, we spoke at length about the confusion surrounding the WLRZ and the factors contributing to the gradual degradation of the neighborhood.

“But,” I asked, “whose responsibility is it to ensure that property owners and managers are maintaining the infrastructure and anything related to the basic health and safety of residents living in these parks?”

Eskridge responded, “I think there are a couple pieces to this.” First, the road signs, which he pointed out to me were blue, indicates that the property is privately owned. “That’s a possibility, that all that infrastructure”—roads, utilities, water and sewer mains—“is owned by the park.”

“With your own home,” Haar cut in, “like, if there is a breakage and it’s, you know, on the street, then the city would have to do something about it. If it’s coming into my house, that’s my responsibility.” Crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair, he added, “And I’ll bet you anything, I don’t know the answer, but I’ll bet you it’s the mobile home park.”

“I’m thinking it probably is,” Eskridge agreed. “But, if there are problems with it, then, uh,” he stammered, “Well, certainly, they… the City would oversee that, even if it was private. Uh, for the public safety and welfare of residents in the community.” As the two continued to debate, back-and-forth, which municipal, county, or state department was responsible for overseeing the various infrastructural issues plaguing Crown Court MHC, I realized that both men, like many of the leasing and maintenance staff I’d grown close to, were generally uninformed regarding MHC legalities, even though both had sizeable MHC populations in their respective districts.
Although I believe that they, as with most (if not all) Lincoln’s public servants and housing advocates, cared about what happens to mobile-homeowners at present and in the uncertain future, these communities’ limited visibility and precarious legal structures hampers most efforts to upend the status quo. As urban zones of social abandonment (Biehl 2005), the infrastructural degradation of MHCs like Crown Court results from active neglect, reframed as natural processes, which further justifies park redevelopment and resident displacement.

Alongside land appreciation, infrastructural disrepair is a primary contributor of MHC closures across the United States. Broad scale efforts to privatize, or attract private investment and partnerships—the defining characteristic of whether or not lands in Nebraska are declared blighted and substandard—ultimately produce “regulatory voids” that effectively un-map exceptional or atypical urban zones (Fairbanks 2013:549; see also, Rodgers & O’Neill 2012; Schwenkel 2015; Wacquant 2016).

As objects, infrastructures are substantive and tangible in their own right, yet we also recognize them as a connective apparatus between other objects (Larkin 2013). In the past decade anthropologists and social scientists more generally have increasingly acknowledged how infrastructures, whether functional, failing, or nonexistent, are also loaded with deep symbolic significance concerning citizenship and claiming belonging in urban landscapes (e.g. Anand 2012; Chu 2014; Rodgers & O’Neill 2012; Schwenkel 2015). Tellingly, Crown Court, like most MHCs across the United States, is serviced by private utilities and infrastructure that connects to, yet is distinct from, municipal mainlines. In addition to exemplifying another instance of exclusionary governance vis-à-vis MHCs, that these utilities are private affords city regulators and officials an excuse, or explanation, for its decrepit state despite existing laws. Such policies of benign neglect illustrate a type of passive infrastructural violence, which Dennis Rodgers and
Bruce O’Neill (2012:407) describe as a condition of infrastructural decay and resident suffering “that results from being disconnected from, or entirely left out of, infrastructural networks.” Altogether, the compounding effects of social abandonment, benign neglect, and infrastructural violence manifest particular “territorial stigmatizations,” or “taints,” that effectively naturalize neighborhood blight as a consequence of intractable poverty rather than its contributing factor (Wacquant 2016:1082).

Social abandonment, like ruination, is an active and destructive political process of disposal that attempts to negate the existence of unwanted persons or places (Biehl 2005; Dawdy 2010; Stoler 2008). However, in a collection of essays titled Risk and Blame (1992), Mary Douglas held that contextualizing risk as a condition borne out of social design does not negate acknowledging the reality of danger and risk; rather, she argued, considering risk-states in relation to broader cultural and political contexts reintroduces uncertainty and disagreement into what and who is considered to be “at risk” while displacing the notion that experts unanimously agree on how risk out to be measured and mitigated (see also, Button 2010; Petryna 2004; Reno 2011). Conceivably then, we can approach blight and substandard declarations as comprising a multivariate “calculus of risk” (Beck 1992) reliant on overt “objective” language and covert “subjective” beliefs to justify the removal of precarious, abject populations.

While reminiscent of the “shouted” and “whispered” framework Susan Chernoff (1983) uses in relation to the restrictive zoning ordinances commonly applied to MHCs, my analysis builds on this idea by drawing from the ethnographic literature on environmental pollution and toxicity, which has shown how risk mitigation technologies are wielded as depoliticization techniques by either the state or private enterprises (e.g. Button 2010; Little 2012; Petryna 2002; Reno 2011). Taking on the pejorative label “trailer trash” as signifying the widespread belief that
mobile-homeowners and their housing is literally polluted or contaminated allows for a more nuanced interpretation of how, and why, Crown Court’s blighting was permitted and rationalized.

“Based on my own, I don’t know, bigotry or whatever,” one legislative staffer remarked to me, “I’ve always seen these areas as nothing but poor, white trash.” Although few government representatives or non-profit employees would use such blunt language to describe Lincoln MHCs, the prevailing discourse concerning MHC (re)development was generally negative. Prior experience with undesirable architecture, van der Hoorn (2009:118) argues, typically informs how individuals perceive its relative value and inherent qualities. As such, non-resident MHC stakeholders with limited firsthand interaction or familiarity with the “trailer courts” in their own proverbial backyards are expected to view the material conditions of mobile homes and their communities as an extension of their devalued symbolic significance. Indeed, the ethnographic and questionnaire data I collected in Lincoln seemingly validates this assumption (Table 4), as most envisioned an alternative future for Lincoln MHCs, however expressed difficulties in describing the necessary steps towards achieving such a goal.

The total devaluation and objectification of mobile home(owner)s eventually holds MHC residents responsible for their own exposure to physical, financial, and reputational risks, regardless of whatever mitigation efforts individual households attempt (e.g. Lemke 2002:58; Owczarzak 2009; Petryna 2002). For instance, the 2011 Blight and Substandard Determination Study acknowledged that although “the City does not maintain records on the private system, it is generally understood that the private water system is in poor condition and is not suitable for public water main use.” That Crown Court residents, myself included, were meant to accept unsanitary water conditions despite living in one of America’s healthiest cities particularly
frustrated me. However, in my fruitless attempts to request a site inspection to report “unsafe” conditions which, per the 2011 blight declaration, Lincoln officials already knew existed, I faced several dead ends, such as one instance when, after having been transferred between three departments, a staffer at Building & Safety curtly informed me, “We only work with homes. That’s a private issue between the residents of the trailer court and the property management. Once it hits private property it’s out of our hands. It’s just like an apartment building.” Then, she hung up on me.

Survey response (n = 20)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Option</th>
<th>Count (Percentage)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4 — devise another option</td>
<td>9 (45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 — redevelop altogether</td>
<td>4 (20%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 — reduce</td>
<td>1 (5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 — preserve &amp; maintain</td>
<td>6 (30%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Median (IQR) 3.0 (1.0 – 4.0)

Table 4: Ordinal responses to survey question, “In your opinion, should long-range planning in Lincoln (1) preserve and maintain; (2) reduce; (3) redevelop altogether; or (4) devise another option for mobile home communities in the next 10 years?” Surveys were conducted at three public talks with non-resident stakeholders in Lincoln, Nebraska in June 2016 and April 2017.

Altogether, these examples illustrate MHCs as a type of infrastructural void or absence that is literally hidden in plain sight. That is, for non-resident stakeholders including elected officials and non-profit staff, a functional, working MHC confounds all logic and expectations. Consequently, as a dysfunctional state is considered the norm, under-regulation and passive neglect makes MHC ruination all-but inevitable. Then, once its decrepit state is established and recognized, do these communities emerge from obscurity, if only to be closed and demolished. For example, after discovering worrisome disparities in health and wellbeing in Lincoln MHCs when compared to city averages (Chapter Six), one non-profit leader admitted to me, “When we
were first looking at these, someone would say, ‘well, there’s a mobile home park here.’ We never thought about it beyond that.”

Assumptions such as these are abundant throughout the archived minutes from the Lincoln City Council and Planning Commission. In the initial blight hearing, it was noted that mobile homes do not have the same lifespan as site-built units, however the reality is far more complicated than that. As I discuss at length in the Conclusion, in Boulder, Colorado, mobile-homeowners have been successful in obtaining the right to sell their pre-HUD homes, many of which have been almost entirely renovated throughout the intervening years. Certainly, while there are many homes in Crown Court that fit the criteria of dilapidation, the report and Commission’s accepted metric of 40 years to calculate the percentage of deteriorated structures distorts reality.

While “lamentable,” as one Councilman described it, the Lincoln Planning Commission found that the numerous physical, environmental, and financial risks identified in the West Lincoln Redevelopment Zone were incontrovertible. While another Councilwoman remarked, “I feel torn on voting for displacing people that are trying to do the right thing by investing in their own homes that they can afford,” she added that, “A lot of the fears can be helped by better communication in the future and explaining in detail what could happen in this [land] redevelops and that there is assistance available.” As other studies of risk mitigation and perception have shown (e.g. Brown 2010; Little 2012; Reno 2011), state and/or private agencies adopt “community education” approaches as a means to invalidate resident claims and evidence of misconduct. Such techniques often rely on establishing a “factual” narrative based on scientific evidence, or “statements” (Latour & Woolgar 1979:106), however as Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar (ibid) observe, establishing such “objective realities” typically involves
decontextualizing and dehistoricizing certain “facts” in order to accept their validity (see also, Althaus 2005; Beck 1992; Douglas 1992; Little 2012).

For mobile-homeowners, prevailing commonsense “facts” figure their homes as toxic assets, whose rapid devaluation matches their physical deterioration. Thus, the impermanence of mobile-homeownership is remade, time and time again, despite the inescapable reality of MHC persistence. Even Terri, a MHC manager herself, saw Crown Court’s demise as inevitable. Recalling the publicity surrounding WLRZ, Terri explained how redevelopment rumors distracted residents from seeing how the proposed redevelopment, as well as the blight declaration, offered future benefits:

It was a big deal in the paper. People thought, “oh god, great. They’re gonna condemn all the homes and they’re gonna condemn the area and we’re gonna have to leave.” Well, the only reason they [corporate] did that was an ulterior motive. They declared it a blight area so that if ever they are to redevelop it, beings as it is a blight area, the government would help these people relocate and pay for them, or pay their costs of relocating. I’m sure they [the residents] didn’t see it that way, but it was a benefit to declare it a blight area.

The passive, deregulatory environment created by popular desires to see MHCs ruined and redeveloped thus afforded Crown Court’s operators the opportunity to reframe the narrative away from their own illegal negligence towards responsible “due diligence.”

“From my perspective,” said one Lincoln planner, “the owner is doing due diligence in setting him- or herself up for a future choice that does not exist right now. There is no harm or foul in that.” This reflected the majority opinion of the Lincoln Planning Commission, which said of Crown Court’s 2011 blighting and 2013 rezoning that the park operators “should be commended on the foresight to look into the future” (emphasis added). Implied within these statements is a future-oriented gaze, one which omits MHCs from Lincoln’s imagined landscape. This, I argue, demonstrates how the social desire for MHC disappearance not only becomes real,
but is consequently depoliticized as a natural, rather than manmade, outcome. Objectifying MHC ruination further absolves any state or corporate complicity for immoral or unethical behaviors. As Ulrich Beck (1992) writes, perceiving scientific facts and risk-states as calculable, knowable, and “uncontaminated” by cultural or political influence is “[exemplary of] a type of ethics without morality, the mathematical ethics of the technological age” (98). Similarly, Michael Brown’s (2010) ethnographic analysis of three building projects in the northeastern U.S. shows how “due diligence” becomes embedded within broader risk-management discourses. Throughout the planning process, he describes how the desire for regulatory transparency and verification resulted in highly formalized and impersonal reports and memos, which, like the production of “scientific” facts outlined above, leaves little room or consideration of ethical dilemmas for planners.

Likewise, although members of Lincoln’s Planning Commission, and later the City Council, expressed concern for how their votes would impact the affected mobile-homeowners, it was stated that it was not up to the Commission to rule on a moral or ethical stance. Further, deferring to constitutional law, many members agreed that it was well within the rights of Crown Court’s owners to do as they wished with their property. However, both who is considered a “property owner,” and what is regarded as “property” is hardly unequivocal. From passive infrastructural violence to “diligent” obsolescence, this case study exposes the consequences of sociolegal devaluation for precarious mobile-homeowners, whose dispossession is not merely enshrined in existing legal statutes but whose very wellbeing is considered secondary to protecting the property rights of their corporate landlords.

As Roger explained, “We asked for the blight study because we wanted to prove how bad the homes, how bad the infrastructure was, so that we could get free money for upgrades.” Of
course, later I would learn that this is not actually how TIF works; rather, taxpayer financing only applies to projects that will benefit the public and, as private property operating on a for-profit basis, Crown Court MHC does not constitute a public benefit as a land-lease community.

“The problem is,” Roger went on, “once you do a blight study, now everybody’s under the impression that it [Crown Court] sucks, which is true. But the reason they did it had nothing to do with truly believing the infrastructure was horrible. It had everything to do with trying to find money so that they could get the city to give them money to do upgrades to make the parks fancier and nicer. And that backfired.”

**Highest and Best: Revitalization, Redevelopment, and Planning Uncertain Futures**

Blighting Crown Court “backfired” in part because it appeared to validate negative stereotypes of MHCs as rundown “trailer parks.” Insofar as the general public, including officials and business leaders, felt that wholesale MHC redevelopment remained the ultimate goal, the WLRZ seemed like another step in the “right” direction. In their efforts to trick the city into providing “free money for upgrades,” Crown Court’s management instead unwittingly renewed public debate as to whether or not the era of Lincoln MHCs had run its course.

Meant to celebrate Crown Court’s “revitalization,” the June 2015 ribbon-cutting ceremony with the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce starkly highlighted the narrative disjuncture between municipal and corporate agendas. As visitors mingled in the main leasing offices, Isabel’s fresh eviction notice flapping in the breeze and plainly visible to all attendees, Ken, the event emcee, welcomed the gathered crowd:

I think you [all] saw the sign on the way in, “Community Revitalization Celebration,” and it’s a very appropriate branding view they’re bringing to Lincoln. Every place goes through its ups and downs, and right now this area of Lincoln is going through a revitalization phase […] We’ll have a new project in the West Lincoln Redevelopment
Area that’s really going to make this area look different and feel different in the coming years. So we’re happy to have Crown Court come in with what they’re doing to this area and making it better.

Although “making the area better” included dispossessing mobile-homeowners like Isabel of their “crappy” homes illegally, this off-hand comment nonetheless reminded the audience that the WLRZ was coming; perhaps not right away, but soon enough.

A casual luncheon followed the ribbon-cutting and, fatigued from shaking hands and hobnobbing, I joined Lisa and Carmen, the district manager, for a quick snack.

Cheerfully, Lisa told me that “we might be losing south Crown Court,” the oldest area of the park where both CC41 (Chapter Six) and CC72 were sited. My jaw dropped. She can’t mean the West Lincoln Redevelopment, I remember thinking, and, shocked, I asked for more details. “There are plans,” she clarified, “to turn the area into a shopping center since it’s in a prime location near downtown.”

Utterly deadpan, I replied, “That’s the West Lincoln Redevelopment Plan.”

Carmen interrupted. “Should we even bother finishing the water project?” she asked, referring to the same (million-dollar) project Carol had, months earlier, offered as an assurance that Crown Court’s owners had no intention of redeveloping anytime soon.

“If it takes us five years to finish it, I don’t see why we should,” Lisa responded, however she added that ultimately the decision would be up to the corporate headquarters. Frozen, I sat seething as the pair continued to nonchalantly munch away. “Hmm, what is it when the city takes over?” Lisa asked me.

Expressionless, again: “Eminent domain.”

Carmen smiled. “Oh, good, that means we’ll get money to move the rentals then.” As I sat, stunned (and yet, not) at the blatant disregard towards the residents on display, the managers
continued to discuss the proposed redevelopment. Notably, their timeline was significantly hastened after Lisa’s brief conversation with an outgoing elected official, who’d told her that the plan was going into effect “soon,” sometime between 2018 and 2020. “If it’s beyond our five-year plan, who knows,” Carmen shrugged, adding, “We’re already on year two.” (Recall, Crown Court operators were commended for their fortuitousness and “due diligence” in planning ahead in the 2013 public debates on WLRZ, Chapter One). Then, the district manager left to chase out two teenaged boys, both Crown Court residents, who had snuck into the office hoping to snag some free lunch.

The prevalence of passive negligence makes park closures all-but inevitable, and thus mobile-homeowner displacement becomes unavoidable. As “hybrid” communities, the regulatory voids MHCs form exemplify a type of transitional zone, whose “open and ill-defined quality,” writes Timothy Sieber (1993:170), “makes them objects of parties whose visions of them can differ radically.” Consequently, the “flexible” (Thompson 1979) (de)valuation of “trailer parks” generates mass confusion over their uncertain futures. For instance, Lincoln officials hoped that any displacement caused by the WLRZ would be minimalized by relocation to Crown Court north, as no new communities have opened in Lincoln, nor elsewhere across the United States, since the early 1980s. However, all that mobile-homeowners like Peggy needed to prove how unrealistic those plans were was a quick peak outside her home. “They promised them that, if they developed [Crown Court south], that they could move over here,” she recalled, scoffing. “They can’t move over here! It’s one hundred percent full!”

Blighting Crown Court, as Roger fretted, propelled the MHC from obscurity, however its future potential or value remained uncertain. As a disagreeable space torn between competing agendas, neither corporate (“free-standing apartment”) nor municipal (mixed-use residential)
imaginations preserved the neighborhood for *mobile-homeowners*. Indeed, as Crown Court’s lawyer told the Lincoln Planning Commission in late 2012, his client “knows that it is unrealistic that the court will remain as it exists today, and they want to plan for higher and better use at some point in the future” (emphasis added).

Cultural geographer Neil Smith, whose pioneering scholarship on gentrification I describe below, theorized that “higher and better use” describes the rent gap calculated (or imagined) based on an area’s present assessed value compared to that same value should reinvestment, or redevelopment, occur. Similar logics seemingly inform Nebraska statutes concerning blight and substandard designations as exceeding the capacity of private enterprise to redress. Here, TIF emerges as the mechanism by which MHC resident displacement is reimagined as a public good.

However, as Crown Court’s owners discovered, obtaining TIF is a difficult process, as D. Landis explained to me:

Imagine a building has a tax valuation of $100,000. It would pay $2,000 a year in taxes, ’cause our taxes are about 2 percent of assessed value. Now imagine, that instead of this building, there’s a building with a $10 million assessed value. That will pay, at 2 percent, $200,000 in taxes a year. If that property becomes this property, if we tear that building down, and build this building, taxes will go up from $2,000 to $200,000.

Yet, as Smith and others have noted (Leinberger 2008; Prior et al. 2013), redeveloping for “higher and better use” goes beyond simple economic calculations. Oftentimes, it is the imagined future residents whose “higher” social status and supposedly “better” morals who are envisioned as the real agents of change.

The extensive scholarship on gentrification provides the foundational context for grounding these observations. British sociologist Ruth Glass (1964) coined the term...
Gentrification to describe the rehabilitation of historic Victorian homes by moneyed, middle-class residents located in working-class neighborhoods:

One by one, many of the working-class quarters of London have been invaded by the middle-classes—upper and lower. Shabby, modest mews and cottages—two rooms up and two down—have been taken over, when their leases have expired, and have become elegant, expensive residences. Larger Victorian houses, downgraded in an earlier or recent period—which were used as lodging houses or were otherwise in multiple occupation—have been upgraded once again ... Once this process of ‘gentrification’ starts in a district it goes on rapidly until all or most of the original working-class occupiers are displaced and the whole social character of the district is changed (cf. Smith 1998:31).

However is it Smith who is typically credited with establishing gentrification studies as a theoretical field in the United States, primarily throughout the 1970s and 80s. Smith (1979) outlined how gentrification, as a function of urban development, is often portrayed as part of the natural, practically ecological, cycle of city transformation: (1) New construction and the first cycle of use; (2) Landlordism and homeownership; (3) Blockbusting and blow out; (4) Redlining; (5) Abandonment; and (6) Capital revaluation. By contrast, Smith (ibid; see also 1968, 1998) held that flows of capital, both out of (abandonment) and into (gentrification) specific areas produced demographic shifts, rather than so-called “naturalistic” beliefs that capital investment follows middle-class “pioneers” into blighted neighborhoods. Further, Smith (2002; see also Smith & Williams 1986) argued that the entrenchment of late capitalist, neoliberal logics “anchored” gentrification practices into larger structural frameworks concerning urban planning as advancing public-private partnerships.

Per Nebraska statutes, blight and substandard designations are made wherever present conditions inhibit private investment; as Crown Court’s Blight & Substandard Determination Study remarks, “the area, on the whole, has not been subject to comprehensive, sufficient growth and development through investment by the private sector nor would be areas be reasonably
anticipated to be developed without public action or public intervention” (emphasis added). By “public intervention,” the authors refer to TIF funding.

“What would, in this case, TIF be spent for?” Landis asked me of the West Lincoln Redevelopment project. “You’d need an entire road system for the ideas that were being suggested, which were new single-family homeownership, new rentals, and new big-box retail. There was the desire to do that, but it was not to replace the mobile home park. It was to create a place for some expanded retail opportunities and housing.” In other words, MHC redevelopment was simply an unfortunate by-product, rather than the desired outcome, of what Ken described as the area’s “revitalization phase.”

Following the blight designation, “urban revitalization” typically precedes gentrification as an area is prepared for future investment through piecemeal residential and commercial improvements (Cahaus 2011; Levy et al. 2006). However, oftentimes such projects rely on “social mixing,” or the belief that introducing middle- and higher-income residents into low-income neighborhoods will produce a “role model effect” (Cahaus 2011; Kelly 2013) for indigent populations. In Lincoln, the rationale for this is embedded in the language of the blight designation criteria, which includes areas deemed “detrimental to public health, safety, morals, or welfare” (emphasis added).

Worldwide, social mix programs have contributed to widespread displacement of vulnerable, low-income urban populations as a consequence of their cultural “rehabilitation.” Friederike Fleischer (2016) observes how, in Bogota, Columbia, subsidized mortgage programs for “unruly” low-income residents are required to participate in “social capital programs” meant to “normalize” tenants, promote social cohesion, and manage informal sector employees. In Chicago, Illinois, Catherine Fennell (2014) describes a mixed-income housing development
where one-third of the available housing units were designated “public.” There, the intention was that subsidized- and market-rate residents would form strong social networks bridging class lines. Notably, strategic normalization via “role model” effects and social mixing greatly differs from Crown Court mobile-homeowners normalization techniques (distancing, fencing, upstaging, etc.) described throughout this dissertation. Further, against the recommendations of MH advocates who argue for incorporating manufactured housing into dominant financial (Burkhart 2010; Genz 2001), planning (Dawkins & Koebel 2010), and design arenas (Burns 2001), MHC redevelopments premised on social mixing instead attempt to force abjected populations’ adherence to the same dominant systems that legitimate their exclusion, abandonment, and eventual removal. These discursive tactics contribute to broader trends that “neutralizes politics of class and race” (Kelly 2013:181), rendering low-income populations politically and socially invisible (Goode & Maskovsky 2002). Furthermore, within the social sciences general frameworks for conceptualizing gentrification tend to adopt broader perspectives which consider the processes of abandonment and gentrification as “part of a single economic transformation in the urban land market” (Smith & Williams 1986:8) often producing negative outcomes for low-income residents. Whereas celebratory rhetorics dismiss or downplay how gentrification, particularly the demolition of public housing for mixed-income residences and/or pricey condominiums, can displace long-term residents (Florida 2004; Freeman 2006; for critiques, see Williams 1986, Smith & Williams 1986), critical scholars stress how displacement operates along various levels beyond official census data collections. Peter Marcuse (1986), for example, identifies four factors of displacement due to gentrification: (1) Direct last-resident displacement; (2) Direct chain displacement; (3) Exclusionary displacement; and (4) Displacement pressure. Of these, “displacement pressure” best describes the precarious
circumstances MHC residents nationwide face as dozens of communities are closed annually without replacement.

Eviction, and displacement more broadly, is often traumatic for households. Thus, displacement pressure manifests as a lingering threat, and is often brought to the fore in conversations with resident-homeowners. Lance Freeman (2006) found in his research on attitudes on gentrification in predominantly Black neighborhoods, Harlem and Clinton Hill (New York), most residents felt that urban revitalization would result in their being “pushed out.” In Portland, Oregon, a city which, like Lincoln, is celebrated for its “livability,” Karen J. Gibson (2007) writes that following years of municipal disinvestment, apolitical planning language touting “higher and better use” attempted to rationalize the redevelopment of Albina, a historic Black community. However, where urban revitalization schemes elsewhere claim to celebrate ethnic diversity or local historic significance even as displacement pressures on indigent residents mount (e.g. Dávila 2004; Jackson 2001; Rutheiser 1997), most municipalities revel at the opportunity to be rid of MHCs. For instance, WLRZ proponents boasted how, “rarely are eighty acres available for redevelopment in the core of the city.” Likewise, Gibson (2007) observes how in Albina, conspicuous municipal disinvestment let slumlords and predatory lenders operate carte blanche, decimating whatever housing remained. She concludes that early intervention might have spared the displacement of long-term homeowners and prevented the neighborhood’s social erosion. While, arguably, TIF funds could potentially incentivize new private investment and increase the tax base as a late effort to preserve Crown Court MHC, Landis conceded that, unfortunately, this was not to be.

“There was a confluence of retailers that wanted to do the big-box notion that said, ‘We need these mobile home parks to close. We need those residents to go over here to that area,’” he
explained, meaning Crown Court north, which had few, if any, sites available for displaced mobile-homeowners. He continued: “And then, behind them, because of those services in retail, there might be an increasing demand for different kinds of housing options that would feed off that. To create an integrated plan for that area that has both retail and residential uses, that was the idea that was talked about.” That the WLRZ plan anticipated, or rather required, mobile-homeowner displacement further destabilized Crown Court’s already-uncertain future, transforming both residents and residences into expendable collateral, as this email message, sent by a member of Lincoln’s Chamber of Commerce, further underscores this: “In my opinion, [that corridor] does need to be redeveloped. I believe that the city has plans [the WLRZ] and has begun some work on their infrastructure. The majority of the commercial development along the corridor will have to be driven by the private sector. The removal/relocation of the mobile home community should and will most likely be part of that redevelopment” (personal correspondence, received 10/2/2015).

Cited as justification enough for Crown Court’s corporate owners to sell and redevelop their property, the Fifth Amendment offers fewer protections for mobile-homeowners against government seizure of their homes through eminent domain. Because private property rights are so valorized by most Americans, it is not surprising that eminent domain often provokes fierce public backlash. However, as Nadler and Diamond (2008) report, public opinion on the (im)morality of involuntary property seizures varies; for instance, property held by a single family for greater than 100 years was believed to possess greater “subjective” value than properties owned for shorter periods of time (743–4). Also, in the aftermath of Kelo v. City of New London (2005), an unpopular Supreme Court decision which found the transference of land between private owners for the purposes of economic development constitutional, Nadler and
Diamond summarize critics’ responses as “[objecting] in principle to the government taking their homes for the private use of the [developers] simply because the new owners would make more productive use of the property” (ibid:720). However, following the announcement of the WLRZ, including the anticipated relocation or displacement of Crown Court resident-owners, why was public backlash practically nonexistent?

First, mobile-homeowners’ shorter, and seemingly less permanent, attachment to their housing may reduce the subjective value non-residents attach to manufactured housing in general. While mobile-homeowners move less frequently than their conventional home-dwelling peers, existing legal structures along with poorer material conditions for most (but importantly, not all) older, pre-HUD units generally prevent long-term (>25 years) habitation for an individual or family in the same manufactured home. Remember how, per the Blight and Substandard Determination Study, 23 percent of all Crown Court units were found to be dilapidated on the basis of age alone.

Second, the widespread cultural “tainting” (Wacquant 2016) of MHCs as “trashy trailer parks” conditions those with little firsthand knowledge of these communities, including policymakers and key stakeholders, to perceive mobile home courts as obsolescent, ruined, and without positive value regardless of existing conditions. Indeed, if one takes into consideration the Lincoln-Lancaster County 2040 Comprehensive Plan, the total eradication of all Lincoln MHCs is expected. The report omits any single mention of mobile or manufactured housing (communities), instead specifying the area where Crown Court is located as Urban Residential and Commercial. Further, of these mixed-use developments, special attention is to be given towards “Strengthen[ing] design standards for commercial and mixed-use development along major travel corridors, to reflect a positive visual image that engenders community pride and
identity” (emphasis added). The implication here, I note somewhat cynically, is that the present visage of busy thoroughfares lined with manufactured housing in various states of repair is seen as neither “positive” nor “engendering community pride and identity.”

Corroborating my suspicions, few non-resident stakeholders surveyed viewed MHCs as providing long-term, positive impacts in Lincoln. Indeed, most questionnaire respondents opposed to redeveloping MHCs nonetheless tended to favor converting existing manufactured stock into more conventional units, or as one individual wrote, “and create shipping crate communities.”

“We’re behind 12,000 units on affordable housing,” K.E., my friend and planner previously described in Chapter Four, explained in December 2015, three years after Crown Court’s blight declaration and the announcement of the WLRZ plan. Adopting a more sympathetic view than his colleagues due to his own childhood spent in a rural mobile home park, K.E. noted how conflicting ideals of normalcy complicated the present and future status of MHCs and mobile-homeowners:

I will be in some neighborhoods where there’s homes now, and someone will say, “Oh, that house on the corner is not very nice.” They say it’s not very nice because it’s not normal. You know, a disorder, something that is not normal. That’s all that is. And what can we do to fix that disorder? Well, there’s only so much you can do to fix a disorder within the needs of the larger framework. If we can’t fix something, then it’s considered unfixable. But that doesn’t take away from the quality of people that live there. Just because they’re in a trailer-home court does not make them any less of a neighborhood, does not diminish how they love and care for one another.

While I agree broadly with this sentiment, insofar as most—but hardly all—recognize mobile-homeowners’ humanity, my argument is that the devaluation of MHC residents across myriad arenas (e.g. financial, cultural, legal) nonetheless justifies their precarity and expulsion from (first) residential locales and (second) the urban landscape altogether. Rather than acknowledge the structural forces contributing to the explosive growth of urban slums,
municipalities simply—and strategically—“sanitize” eyesores through the dual disappearance of residents and structures (Bayat 2012; Davis 2006; Smith & Williams 1986). Or, as K.E. grimly observed: “I really think we’re tryin’ to wipe ‘em out right now.”

A Better Class of Losers?

Mobile-homeowner dispossession, whether by illicit No Cause evictions or park closures due to passive negligence, signify a form of *dignity takings*, defined by Bernadette Atuahene (2016:178) as “when a state directly or indirectly destroys property or confiscates various property rights from owners or occupiers and the intentional or unintentional outcome is dehumanization or infantilization.” Whether through restrictive and targeted ordinances, financial and social exclusion, or having their claims of respectable belonging denied, this dissertation has repeatedly illustrated the material and psychosocial effects of mobile-homeowner precarity. With its explicit focus on neglect, abandonment, and ruination, this chapter has extended this analysis beyond the boundaries of Crown Court MHC so as to offer readers a broader understanding of how “trailer trash” stereotypes become naturalized and validated in urban planning discourse, further deteriorating mobile-homeowners’ dignity and eroding their rights as citizens and property owners.

“I had some people come into the leasing office the other day *off the street,*” Carol confessed, conspiratorially, during one of our many late-night brewery sessions together. “And, um, very generalized? But I’m going to say, they looked like homeless people. They came in, and they were like, ‘yeah, we saw your sign outside.’”

“What sign?” I asked.
“The sign at the end that says, ‘affordable homes available now,’” she clarified. Carol then went on to describe the entire encounter:

“Yes, we saw your sign out front and we see you’ve got affordable housing.” And I say, yeah, we do, you know, *blah*, tell me what your situation is, *blah blah*. So, I kept talking to them and, um, at the end of the conversation they said, “Okay, well, we’re currently homeless, we don’t have any jobs or anything but we need a place to live ‘cause we gots kids and stuff.” I go, well, how are you going to pay your rent? ‘Cause that’s what I wanna know, I wanna know how you’re gonna pay rent.

Pausing for a quick drink, Carol sighed. “If we’re going to attract, you know, a *better class of losers...*” I chuckled and jotted down *that* gem in my notepad. Carol watched, amused, before elaborating:

I said that to Roger one time, I looked at him, I go, so what you’re tellin’ me is we’re trying to attract a better class of losers? Because, I’m having a hard time understanding what we’re doing here. I thought we were providing *quality-built homes* for people in this price range, that we’re going for the apartment model as opposed to the “trailer park” model. I said, if we’re going for the apartment model we can kick some ass. If we’re going for the *slightly* upper “trailer park” model, we can still kick some ass but you’re just going to get a better class of losers. So, which are we doin’?

Analyzing Crown Court’s blighting and proposed redevelopment in 2012-13, as well as its aftermath during fieldwork stints in subsequent years, complements emerging trends in the scholarship on gentrification and urban (re)development, namely by attending to revitalization as a long, drawn-out process of contradictions, false starts and stops, and affective turmoil for impacted residents as public and private contend with one another. Counter to both “first” and “second” waves of gentrification (Smith 2002) where urban restructuring became increasingly tied to capital interests, Lincoln officials’ recent embrace of “third wave gentrification” schemes, as “a neoliberal urban strategy meant to prime cities for investment in an era of heightened inter-urban competition” (Kelly 2013:182) ties MHC futures to their profitability.

While perhaps novel for municipal actors, such strategies characterize the MHC industry, which too has adopted neoliberal “branding” discourse to revitalize their product in the post-
recession period. For Crown Court’s operators, revitalization decouples (home) ownership from park residence. Taking advantage of both the popular stigmatization of mobile home parks, and a relaxed regulatory environment that ignores (or worse, rewards) negligence, Crown Court’s owners dedicated their efforts throughout the years following the blight designation displacing mobile-homeowners in favor of higher-income renters as Lincoln officials waited (and waited, and waited) for big-box developers to signal an interest in the WLRZ project.

As Roger explained to me, their updated “vision”:

It has a different feel, a different vibe to it. You start bringing in a new level of tenant to go with it. Your old, for lack of a PC term, “trailer dog” who owns, operates their home and does whatever the heck they want… Eh, the home’s beat up, it’s this, it’s that, so that’s not the person we’re targeting anymore. We’re targeting young people. We’re targeting the group that makes $40,000 plus a year. And we bring them in and change the perception of the person that’s living in the home.

Reducing mobile-homeowners to “old trailer dogs” is an obvious discursive tactic which distinguishes unsophisticated (poorer) owners from savvy (wealthier) renters without tarnishing the manufactured housing brand itself. Furthermore, this perspective allows corporate owners to present current blighted and substandard conditions as the product of a bygone era now embodied in the figure of the mobile-homeowner.

Yet despite such efforts, Crown Court’s rebranding hardly attracted the “better class of losers” leasing agents like Carol jokingly hoped for. For instance, amid the ribbon-cutting festivities, as Carmen and Lisa wondered whether the rumored WLRZ might benefit their revised business model, Mona, another leasing agent, despaired. Later, she divulged that despite the fanfare, Crown Court had processed—and denied—eight rental applications: “We haven’t leased anything, yet. It’s like we’re doing all this [work] for nothing.”

Despite all the attention Crown Court’s 2012 blight study brought to the area, particularly its degraded infrastructure, the park operators continue to avoid censure for unlawful or negligent
activities, including illegal evictions of mobile-homeowners like Isabel. As with Harms’ (2013) Vietnamese informants, whose only recourse to measuring the passage of an endless “eviction time” is the material debris piling all around them, Crown Court residents report ongoing water interruptions and infrastructural degradation (Figure 44) as an ever-increasing number of new rental units are brought on site. Although the WLRZ remains an “active” project listed on the city website, planners tell me that the plan is a “dead project.” Yet, even “dead projects” like WLRZ nonetheless fuel ruination rumors anticipating MHC closure and mass resident displacement, consequently propagating an endless state of uncertainty affecting individual social actors. Presuming MHC impermanence, why should regulators and park operators enforce laws and policies delaying the inevitable? Why should mobile-homeowners like Isabel fight their unjust evictions?

As thus, Crown Court’s destruction goes on, and the status quo remains. However, as Allison (2013) reminds us, no matter how dire the situation, few things are truly hopeless. For Crown Court mobile-homeowners whose invested subjective value is incalculable, the objective “fact” of home devaluation is hardly settled. With either normalizing discourse or by directly appealing policymakers, mobile-homeowners use their homes, the very object signifying their devalued sociolegal status, as a site of resistance. Plans like WLRZ or Crown Court’s “rebranding” heighten MHC visibility and, subsequently, the risk of eviction, however as “critical events” such cases provide an opportunity for recognition, social action and change, however unthinkable.
Figure 44: This mass of tree roots and other vegetation was removed in August 2018 from a Crown Court mobile-homeowner’s main water line, a year’s worth of growth. For weeks, the resident went back-and-forth with Crown Court’s corporate office as to who was responsible for paying for its removal, despite that NMHLTA stating that underground utilities are to be maintained by the landowner. Meanwhile, the resident was without consistent water pressure and availability for at least three weeks. (Contributed photo.)
For more than a century, “trailer” homes have persisted in a state of (im)possibility, a condition located somewhere in the amorphous space between the unimaginable and the *unthinkable*, an event best described as “theoretically possible but empirically unrealized” (Hage 1997:652). The simultaneous existence of competing “revitalization” agendas for Crown Court MHC, *redevelopment* (municipal) and *rebranding* (corporate), portends additional “highest and best uses” like those we envisioned in 2011-12 for the Lincoln Promise Neighborhood Initiative: *preservation*. 
CONCLUSION

This Land Is My Land

How does one achieve normalcy under abnormal circumstances? Is it possible to defy imposed impermanence and imagine a better future? Using ethnographic, archival, and other qualitative and mixed methodologies, this dissertation has explored how mobile-homeowners in land-lease MHCs negotiate arbitrary discrimination within zoning, legal, and financial structures in order to cultivate respectable place-based identities despite the relentless threat of displacement. Bringing together a range of theoretical perspectives, including consumption, pollution, risk, financialization, and critical race studies, this work broadly complements the growing scholarship on identities as intersectional, that is, a simultaneously lived, interlinked set of identities each located in structures of privilege and disadvantage (Baker 2004). Furthermore, in bridging the conceptual divide between dark and positive anthropologies, my research shows how precarity is materialized in the pursuit of the “good life,” or the American dream of (mobile) homeownership. During the years of my research and writing, parallel housing phenomenon emerged in American public discourse, most famously tiny homes. Altogether, these trends resonate historically and philosophically with the origins of the mobile home. I conclude this dissertation by considering how the growing acceptance of exceptional, flexible housing reproduces and illustrates the enduring conundrum of “the home.”

Long Absent, Soon Forgotten

When I began pre-dissertation research in 2013, I assumed my primary focus would be the West Lincoln Redevelopment Zone (WLRZ), and planned Lincoln MHC closures more
generally. Yet, with a few exceptions mostly confined to the non-profit sector, by 2015 WLRZ was old news, a “dead project.” Likewise, failing to get “free money for upgrades”—as Roger put it—Crown Court initiated a multimillion dollar “revitalization” campaign that, if nothing else, impressively grew Lincoln’s mobile home population (of renters). And as more time passed, even the most concerned Crown Court residents believed that the threat of imminent displacement had passed.

“I can’t imagine that they would do it [redevelop] anytime soon,” Amy, the widow and avid collector described in Chapter Three, assured me in April 2015. “There’s a market for a mobile home court, and the utilities and the sewers are all here for a mobile home court.” She smiled. “It would take a lot of work, whoever would buy it would have to probably redo the sewer ‘cause it’s pretty old.” D. Landis, Director of Urban Development, also believed it was the large upfront investment, along with limited commercial interest, that stymied further progress on the WLRZ. “What happened ultimately,” he went on to tell me, “was there wasn’t an allure to big-box retail companies to be at the location.”

However, I learned that the biggest threat facing these urban mobile-homeowners was not wholesale displacement due to gentrification, but rather returning to “business as usual,” that is, the business of ruination and abandonment. With each water stoppage, each putrid puddle of bubbling sewage, each (il)legal eviction carrying yet another home to “the trailer park in the sky” reminded me of the threat posed by complacency disguised as normal life, or “just the way it is.”

Driving through the park one afternoon in late November 2015, I was alarmed to see the tell-tale flashing lights of an ambulance parked outside Amy’s home, the stretcher out and ready to be taken inside. For days, I kept watch, however her home remained dark, her car missing
from its usual spot in the driveway. Eventually, I mustered the courage to call and see how she was. There was no answer, and my message went unreturned.

Amy was the first resident I interviewed during my principle fieldwork, and she immediately charmed me with her warm, grandmotherly demeanor and cozy home. Her age (66) and her devout Catholicism reminded me of my own parents, who similarly scoff at my (ongoing) efforts to relocate them from their rural Nebraska acreage. “There’s something to be said for living somewhere that you know,” Amy reminded me. “I know this area of town like the back of my hand. And to think about moving somewhere else? It would make me uncomfortable.” As with my parents, I was distressed by how casually she talked about her own declining health. “Like I told you before, I know that probably, within the next few years, I’ll probably be going into a nursing home. So, why would I wanna think about going anywhere else between now and then?”

In November 2015, I spotted an eviction notice on Amy’s still-darkened home, one of the first sited in Crown Court after its grand opening. By 2018, her home, like Isabel’s, Joe and Reba’s, and those of six other Crown Court residents I interviewed, was replaced with a rental unit identical to hundreds more throughout the neighborhood. And while I acknowledge that the nature of mass production is no different today than it was in 1974, nonetheless I mourn the loss of one of Crown Court’s few remaining unique (i.e., older) homes, including the worn shag carpet Amy and I jokingly referred to as “retro” and the dated, avocado-colored kitchen appliances that looked just like the ones I grew up with (Figure 45).

If, as the old adage goes, “the more things change, the more things stay the same,” my time in Crown Court taught me that sometimes sameness is defined by change. Like Amy, who grieved the loss of both neighbors and their homes throughout the years until she, too, left, many
mobile-homeowners I met regarded Crown Court’s “revitalization” as a renewed effort to replace them, one that moved much slower, and more insidiously, than any government-led redevelopment effort.

“IT comes with the evolution of the park,” said Vicki, the Wiccan former servicewoman I profiled in Chapter Four. Her thesis, painstakingly outlined to me over several hours at a local diner, was that each progressive development in manufactured housing, such as larger models built to last, cost the previous generation their security and right to belong:

Going back to when it was really a “trailer park,” people backed it [their home] up with a pickup and put it down and lived in what we have today. This is the next evolutionary step for mobile home parks. I call it “free standing apartments.” It’s still a mobile home park or a manufactured home park or whatever you want to call it, but that’s the next
evolutionary step. How do you get to complete that step? They have houses there that are on the border line. Not bad enough that you need to get rid of them tomorrow, but two-and-a-half, three years from now? You don’t see them standing there.

Compared to mid-century “trailers” like the eight-by-thirty-two foot house Amy grew up in, modern manufactured homes are not designed for frequent transport, yet in every stage of Vicki’s evolutionary schema the potential for mobility is unchanged and unchallenged (Leivestad 2015, 2018). Without landownership, land-lease MHC residents experience unending displacement pressure, either due to park redevelopment or aesthetic obsolescence. Moreover, Crown Court’s shift toward a rental business model intensifies their power and authority over homeowners and renters alike. The blatant favoritism shown to renters, in addition to extralegal evictions and demos, undermines community cohesion and residents’ ability to confront issues faced by all residents, such as infrastructural disrepair and the misappropriation of lot revenues.

Many Crown Court mobile-homeowners like Vicki have accepted their destined and desired erasure as natural, to be expected. “I would like to live another thirty or forty years or whatever, but if I do, I’m lucky,” Vicki told me:

If I don’t, then that’s fine too, but eventually that’s what they [management] want, for every house to look the same in the entire complex. You’re going to have all singlewides, probably going to get rid of all their doublewides eventually. That will take longer than some of these other places that they’re trying to get rid of. Like I said, they have a hit list. The manager probably knows what the hit list is. After they get the park filled with these new homes coming in, then they’re to start sending people down from the front office to investigate some of these other places and help the manager out. They’re coming down to help get rid of these unsightly houses, and that’s the word they will probably use. If you do through our neighborhood and you go street by street and look around, you will find the unsightly houses that are there. They don’t like they belong anymore.

Vicki’s fear that a “Hatchet man” will soon target “unsightly” houses for removal because “they just flat-out don’t look like they belong in the neighborhood” has, unfortunately, already occurred; Isabel’s “No Cause” eviction described in Chapter Seven is irrefutable evidence of that. Just as Lincoln planners and non-profit staffers confidently assured me that
mobile-homeownership will soon end, mobile-homeowners’ internalization of their own temporariness dramatically narrows any imagined future for these communities. However, elsewhere across the United States, cities and mobile home residents have come together to envision new possibilities for manufactured housing as a viable, albeit partial, solution to local affordable housing crises.

An Alternative Future, or How Boulder Keeps its Weirdness

I have spent as many years in Boulder as I have in Lincoln, however despite superficial similarities—both college towns topping national best-of lists for resident happiness and wellbeing—comparing how these cities differently engage MHC residents and their futures reveals the extent to which “ownership,” as a concept, does and does not constitute a legitimate claim to belong in any given place. Like Lincoln, whose post-recession successes uniquely thrust its sizeable MHC population into an uncomfortable spotlight, here I briefly explore municipal MHC protectionism as both a product of Boulder’s attractive and highly-marketed “weirdness,” as well as offering an instructive blueprint for MHC preservation cities including Lincoln might adopt.

Ironically, Crown Court’s mobile-homeowners each possess a lesser legal claim to the land on which their homes are sited than their corporate landlords based hundreds of miles away in suburban Denver. Beginning in the mid-2000s, Colorado has emerged as a regional leader in the MH industry, in particular national and transnational MHC investment. Beyond Crown Court, 11 Lincoln MHCs are owned and operated by out-of-state firms, six of which are located in Colorado. One community, Sunset Acres, was purchased in 2016 by an investor affiliated with the infamous Mobile Home University (MHU) organization, another Colorado business (Chapter
One). Their business model, which they present at seminars across the United States, presents mobile-homeownership, and MHCs generally, as housing of last resort: “Remember, you don’t have to live in these homes,” Frank Rolfe, MHU co-founder, told one seminar group as they toured a park in southern California (Rivlin 2014). Such “bootcamps” instruct prospective investors on the ins-and-outs of profiting on private MHC operations, with tips including eliminating amenities like swimming pools as well as raising rents and late fees to the highest extent possible under state law (Shuey 2014).

Against this toxic backdrop, resident advocacy organizations have flourished in Colorado. In 2017, the **Coalition of Manufactured Home Owners in Boulder (C-MOB)** formed as a social and support network for Boulder mobile-homeowners, which included an inaugural fall forum for manufactured home-owners on the CU Boulder campus in October 2017. Altogether, an estimated fifty mobile-homeowners, policymakers, lawyers, and representatives from the National Manufactured Home Owner’s Association gathered to discuss and workshop issues facing Colorado’s mobile home population, which is estimated to be at least 90,000. Seated at a long folding table with around fifteen mobile-homeowners, I felt equal parts vindicated and alarmed by all the similarities the residents described. The morning sessions featured a parade of well-meaning professionals who, like many of the Lincoln policymakers I’d met, seemed more aware of what they didn’t know; “something that I’m noticing” was a common refrain from speakers as they went back-and-forth with MHC residents on the legal intricacies of park life.

However, at our table, my note-taking was matched—if not surpassed—by my tablemates as each and every word was scribbled down with accompanying questions and ideas. Predictably, lot rent increases were the main topic raised, as one older male Boulderite rhetorically asked us, “Where am I gonna live for $760 a month, plus utilities?” Later, a resident
from nearby Fort Collins told us how rude his management firm was, “up to just changing the rules as he’s going along.” Across the table, a middle-aged woman from Boulder promised him that change was coming. “It’s going to be a changed community,” she assured him. “In the name of Jesus, things are going to change.”

Unlike most Mid/Western municipalities, Boulder has long taken a protectionist stance toward its nine MHCs, which account for an estimated three percent of its total housing stock. However, these policies are more a consequence of enormous housing pressure rather than pure altruism. Where Nebraska’s population grew 5.4 percent since 2000, in Colorado that figure is 31.2; comparatively, growth in Lincoln and Boulder has been 19.6 and 5.2, respectively, during that same period. (Boulder’s Open Space policies prohibits outward growth and imposing height limitations, thereby limiting population growth substantially.) Moreover, although Lincoln has a 12,000-unit shortfall in affordable housing, a 2017 report declared such units to have “gone extinct” in Boulder. At 344 percent the national average, the median rate for a three-bedroom apartment in Boulder is $2,468 per month (2018).

Boulder’s dearth of affordable housing prompted lawmakers in 2017 to enact several policies protecting MHCs from redevelopment, which in effect saved these neighborhoods as one of the few remaining enclaves of unsubsidized, low-income residences. First, in 2004 Councilmembers designated special manufactured home (MH) zones (8043). Most cities, Lincoln included, zone MHCs as “nonconforming land uses.” By contrast, MH zones prevent rapid displacement due to redevelopment by designating specific lots for exclusive mobile home use. Second, in 2015 and 2017, the City of Boulder took the unusual step of purchasing two MHCs threatened with closure, Mapleton and Ponderosa MHCs.
Thus, when the private operator of Vista Village MHC announced a controversial new policy in 2015 prohibiting the resale of all pre-HUD units, regardless of condition, Boulder mobile-homeowners were poised to organize in defense of their rights. Residents appealed to the Boulder City Council, which in turn hired legal representation for all Boulder mobile home residents as well as passed several ordinances concerning home (re)sales, managerial intimidation, and permitting the formation of homeowner associations (HOAs). Despite their sociolegal precarity, Boulder mobile-homeowners nonetheless secured their legal rights as homeowners and right to belong in Boulder over their distant, out-of-state landlords.

These victories, I believe, offered Boulder MHC residents an alternative, and more positive, framework by which respectable middle-class identities could be made. Exemplifying this is Caroline, a jovial lifelong Coloradan in her mid-sixties, who I met at one of these events. As we idly chatted over coffee and cookies, Caroline explained that she and her husband had “downsized” the previous year, leaving their suburban neighborhood behind for a “lovely” singlewide in Mapleton MHC, Boulder’s sole resident-owned community (ROC).

“I love it,” Caroline gushed, describing her neighborhood as having a strong “built-in community” that she never would have imagined with her previous neighborhood’s homeowners’ association. Caroline’s adult children had started their own families outside of Colorado, and as such as she and her husband were thrilled by the close-knit, familial atmosphere offered by their new community. “The old place was so withdrawn,” she recalled. “Now, we can hear kids running around all over the place. It’s nice.”

Whereas mobile-homeowners I met in both Lincoln and Boulder stressed the “niceness” of their homes and/or communities as a marker of respectability and normativity, Caroline’s comments suggest a shift in focus from individual homes to her community. In contrast to Evette
(Chapter Four), who complained about her neighbor’s “trashy” kids as dangerous and threatening the security and value of her home, Caroline instead relished being surrounded by loud, joyful youngsters once more. Rather than attribute their differing perspectives as a matter of personality, I believe much of the difference can be derived from their affective attachment to, and sense of investment in, their respective neighborhoods. Indeed, although both Lincoln and Boulder mobile-homeowners generally view their homes as investments rather than temporary dwellings, in Boulder residents are afforded the political support and will to realize those ambitions.

Mobile-homeownership in most land-lease communities leaves a lot to be desired, and conditions in Boulder are far from perfect. As one Vista Village MHC homeowner told the Boulder City Council during testimony on the proposed sale ban, “Even though I’m a relatively senior city staff member, a mobile home is probably the only detached housing I could afford in Boulder… But beyond my own situation, our mobile home communities are some of our most diverse and interesting neighborhoods in Boulder, and some of the only neighborhoods accessible to people of modest means” (Meltzer 2015). Arguably, Lincoln’s “averageness” is both a gift and a curse for its mobile home population. While measured growth and development reduced external pressures for MHC closures over the decades by keeping land values low, at the same time MHC obscurity and slow ruination limited political and nonprofit interest in preserving mobile housing as a significant source of unsubsidized, low-income housing.

**Downsizing: America’s Obsession with Tiny Homes**

In the aftermath of the Great Recession, manufactured housing (communities) are at a crossroads. MHC investment, popularized by Mobile Home University and others, has slowed
MHC closures with the rediscovery of their (economic, land) value. At Crown Court, Carol told me that she got at least one call per day from a prospective buyer interested in purchasing the park; real estate agents, most notably Joanne Stevens, have also emerged as “specialists” in MHC sales and investment. Even smaller, older communities like Arrow MHC may have found redemption from an unexpected source: the growing tiny home movement.

In August 2016, I attended the second annual National Tiny House Jamboree in Colorado Springs, Colorado. With at least 60,000 attendees, many of whom visited from out-of-state, this was by far the largest gathering of “tiny house” enthusiasts ever. The festival felt like a mix of education and entertainment, with long, winding lines not unlike those found at an amusement park behind each of the dozens of model homes (Figure 46). In addition to a movie tent, where I joined a standing room only crowd later in the afternoon to watch a documentary on the related minimalism movement (Figure 47), different speakers presented each hour to hundreds of people seated on the grounds of the Air Force Academy on topics ranging from “the joy of downsizing,” to tiny home cooking, and tips on saving space and obtaining building certifications.

Like their manufactured cousins, the historical origins and legal definition of “tiny homes” is rather ambiguous; the first instance of the phrase I stumbled across in fact refers to an early model of travel trailer, circa 1916. Another similarity between tiny homes and travel trailers is the predominance of do-it-yourself construction. While manufacturers such as Tumbleweed Tiny House Co. (Colorado Springs) are gaining ground, speakers at the 2016 Jamboree estimated that over ninety percent of all tiny homes are not built under any existing code. Consequently, both the preponderance of unregulated construction as well as the propensity to build units on “trailers” limits where tiny homes can be placed under existing zoning ordinances in most municipalities and counties. In other words, the same restrictive and
Figure 46: Attendees wait in line to tour a model “tiny” home at the 2016 Tiny House Jamboree in Colorado Springs, Colorado. (Photo by author.)

Figure 47: Tiny House Jamboree visitors gather in a makeshift tent to watch a documentary on the minimalism movement associated with “tiny” living. (Photo by author.)
discriminatory codes put in place to relegate mobile homes to the sociospatial margins now prevent trendier, and ostensibly more appealing, tiny homes from placement in most residential neighborhoods.

This, in addition to widespread cultural disdain for “trailers,” led me to believe that “tiny housers” would resist comparisons to manufactured housing, however I was surprised to learn that for the most part this conflict centered on recreational vehicles rather than mobile homes. Part of this can be explained by the predominance of “mobile” tiny homes, which are more similar to RVs than modern (im)mobile homes.

“Tiny homes are a house,” stressed one speaker during a session on legal advice for current and interested tiny housers, “not a recreational vehicle.” He and his co-presenter were spearheading an effort to form a lobbying group which would set a regulatory code (à la HUD) for tiny house construction. Presently, most tiny house manufacturers are building “park model” manufactured homes; these models range in size from 400 to 800 square feet and are regulated by the recreational vehicle industry association (RVIA) code. (For comparison, HUD manufactured homes begin at 400 square feet.) Anything less than 400 square feet is unregulated, which includes many DIY tiny homes that can be as small as 200 square feet. While few rely on any code, the few non-park model builders tend to use the RVIA, which is standard in RV construction. While building to RVIA can provide benefits like insurance and financing, the speakers warned that this also restricts the placement of these units to RV parks. “Not a lot of people want to live there,” one of the men warned the gathered crowd.

Perhaps not, however the assorted RV park and MHC owners present certainly hoped to change some minds. Positioned just outside the speaker arena, I met two middle-aged women passing out flyers advertising their joint-MH/RV community located just outside Colorado
Springs: “Calling all urban professionals and those wanting to have a smaller carbon footprint!” I asked one of the ladies for more details, and she explained to me that for a lot of young professionals who are struggling to afford homeownership in the area, tiny housing is an appealing alternative to renting.

“I don’t want to bash mobile homes,” she assured me, and pulled out her cellphone to show me a beautiful new “log” home they had recently moved into the community for $57,000. However, “it’s still a stigma” to occupy manufactured homes, and she worried that the RVs parked throughout their park were creating negative perceptions of their neighborhood. Like Arrow MHC in Lincoln, as builders made ever-larger mobile homes throughout the twentieth century, older parks like hers turned to smaller recreational vehicles to keep their lots filled and profitable.

However, “the problem with RVers,” she explained, is their uncertain temporariness. “They’ll promise to stay two months, but then it’s been two years, and they’re still there. But these RVs, they’re not designed to be lived in for that long.” Rather, she hoped to replace decaying RVs with more permanent tiny homes spaced between existing single- and doublewide manufactured homes. With thirty available lots, her flyers promised adequate space and landscaping not unlike Crown Court’s original advertisements in the 1970s (Figure 48).

Although the tiny home phenomenon has boosted public opinion, however partially, toward manufactured housing, we must approach MHC preservation via tiny homes cautiously. Whereas introducing tiny homes into older properties alongside mobile homes can extend their use-life and protect communities from being closed and redeveloped, for the most part the land-lease system remains unchanged. Moreover, rather than replacing RVs, some tiny house enthusiasts would prefer it if such units supplanted mobile homes altogether.
For example, Carol, a Crown Court leasing agent, would consistently remind me that mobile homes were a toxic asset, like a car, and no better than a “roller skate,” however she gushed over tiny homes: “I want one!” Likewise, D. Landis suggested that demographic trends would see tiny and/or container housing replace manufactured units in Lincoln:

Either the container living or the tiny house phenomenon says you get to live in a house you could build for $80,000 on land inside an area that could have a [sale] control and you would avoid that problem [of park closures]. Those changes, I think, trend lines support for a couple of reasons, one being the demographics. Demographics that would support a tiny house phenomenon, which is small, not necessarily married, relationships, these survive a tiny house situation. It’s probably not an empty nester kind of location, which is the other growing population. But unmarried people living together is the fastest growing part of the population, along with empty nester seniors. All other parts, families with children, the slowest growing part of our demographics. Okay? So the demographics trend would allow at least one of those trends or something like that.

“It would make sense to have a complete housing strategy,” remarked K.E., my friend and Lincoln planner. “Tiny homes is not it, by the way.” With our degrees in history, both K. and I suspected that for all its flashiness and trendiness, the tiny home phenomenon is simply
repeating the same history already tread by the twentieth century MH industry. Already, cities like Denver, Seattle, and Portland have faced public and vocal pushback against using tiny housing as temporary shelters for homeless populations. Further, at an estimated $149 to $300 per square foot, tiny homes are the most expensive housing available based on cost for size; replacing more affordable manufactured homes with tiny homes would likely exacerbate existing shortages in units for lower-income households. Last, as K.E. noted, it is unlikely that tiny homes—smaller, lighter, and generally not built to code—would fare any better in inclement weather than manufactured homes: “We’re in Nebraska. We have tornadoes here!”

And in Colorado, a hotbed of tiny home enthusiasm, we have flooding. In September 2013, the Colorado Front Range suffered devastating flooding; Boulder County received the brunt of the damage as rivers, creeks, and tributaries swelled far beyond their banks and torrential downpours flooded residential areas. In Boulder, the non-profit MHC Mapleton, perilously located alongside Goose Creek, was primarily saved due to its joint-ownership status with the residents and City of Boulder. However, in nearby Lyons, two small MHCs near the St. Vrain River were completely washed out. Neither rebuilt nor relocated, these enclaves of affordable housing were instead replaced with an outdoor wedding photograph venue and WeeCasa, a tiny house “hotel” consisting of twenty-plus units. Consequently Lyons has no remaining MHCs, which is indicative of larger regional concerns regarding affordable housing; or, as one former Lyons mobile-homeowner told the Denver Post in April 2015, “I figured I’d spend the rest of my days here. I love it. That’s how everyone here feels. But I realized the way it was going, I couldn’t afford to live here anymore.”

Fad or not, tiny homes are inextricably linked with all factory-built housing, including mobile homes and recreational vehicles, and perhaps with their ascendancy more open-
mindedness towards nontraditional units will grow among the wider populace. Already, MH industry members have coopted the tiny house brand, boasting how “we’re the original tiny home” (Gray 2017), even as tiny house lobbyists look to manufactured housing and the HUD Code as a blueprint for creating their own niche industry. The inescapable connection between these genres was even apparent at the 2016 Jamboree, where I spotted two Air Stream travel trailers, retro remnants of the original 1950s era models, parked alongside custom-built tiny homes. Despite the cramped quarters, I listened as visitors “oohed” and “ahhed” at the décor and full-sized appliances (Figure 40), their reactions reminiscent of my first tour inside the 2014 Solitaire I rented from Crown Court.

“We felt like a good complement for the event,” the Air Stream vendor said in response to my question about whether or not “trailers” fit in at such a prominent tiny home event. “People just like to see themselves, imagine themselves in these homes.”

The Future is Manufactured

Although the economist Roger Babson’s optimistic prediction in 1936 that “within two decades half of the United States’ population would be nomads living in auto-trailers” (cf. Clark 1972:6; Hurley 2001) has not yet become reality, nevertheless the future of American housing has, for better or worse, always been imagined as “on wheels.” Hit television series like Tiny House Hunters, Tiny House, Big Living, and Tiny House Nation have popularized “tiny” homes as well as fueled more recent trends such as #vanlife, which was featured at the 2018 Tiny House and Simple Living Jamboree, however an undercurrent of insecurity accompanies these trends. Even stalwart champions of the new economies such as Richard Florida (2004) express concern
Figure 49: Tiny Home Jamboree 2016 participants tour an Air Stream model, which was parked alongside other “tiny” houses on the grounds of the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs. (Photo by author.)
with the dramatic increase of income inequality that tends to accompany the “creative” classes. Moreover, as he notes, “With no big company to provide security, we bear much more risk… suffering high levels of mental and emotional stress… We crave flexibility but have less time” (23). Like the precariat, the precariously housed may—in some cases—desire flexibility, however celebrating minimalist or eco-friendly trends also requires acknowledging that housing insecurity is an unavoidable reality for millions.

According to the Harvard Joint Center on Housing, an estimated 12 million American households currently spend over half of their income on housing. The number of these “severely cost-burdened” households is expected to rise over the next decade. Across the globe, the affordable housing crisis is soon expected to affect one in three persons living today. That is, in both the U.S. and abroad, the future of housing, like labor, will be precarious: flexible, informal, and impermanent. As I have shown, “manufactured homes,” whether factory-built or do-it-yourself, regulated or informal, epitomize the precarious American dream, capturing both the pitfalls of meritocratic untruths as well as the potential for overcoming adversity.

And so, we revisit the deceptively simple question guiding this dissertation and the actors described herein: What is a home? To be honest, I do not believe there is a definite answer to this question, nor should there be. Rather, I argue for (dare I say?) a relative conceptualization of the home, one that expands sociocultural idealism so as to extend legal, financial, and social benefits for informally—or precariously—housed populations like those described throughout this dissertation. At a deeper level, this requires a critical evaluation of how linguistic and cultural tradition constructs the home as a (physical) space and a (material) place, that is, a perspective that approaches residence and residents simultaneously.
Indeed, both “house” and “home” are at a crossroads, and manufactured housing’s cultural (re)significance and nominal acceptance, at least in its “tiny,” “recreational,” and “modular” iterations, has not been without its controversies. In April 2015, months into my yearlong fieldwork in Crown Court, Warren Buffett—the “Oracle of Omaha” and native Nebraskan hero—was embroiled in a controversy when it was revealed that Vanderbilt Mortgage, the lending branch of Clayton Homes, a Berkshire Hathaway subsidiary, targeted ethnic-racial minorities with predatory financial arrangements that disproportionately exposed borrowers to repossession (Baker & Wagner 2016; Seattle Times). Then, in 2016, MHI lobbyists successfully pressured Congress to exempt MH loans from most of the provisions of the Dodd-Frank Act, particularly those concerning predatory lending in the MH sector, a historic complaint the industry has dealt with for the past fifty years. Given this, I do not believe it coincidental that, after decades of academic obscurity, mobile home research has grown significantly in the past five years (e.g. Desmond 2016; Salamon & MacTavish 2017; Sullivan 2014, 2017). And, so long as the “good life” requires homeownership, inevitably some Americans will remain locked out of the dream while others profit. Living im/permanently—whether in a prefab home, a van, or another form as-yet undiscovered—redefines convention, and by extension materializes novel and unexpected social formations shaped by precarity and hope at the cultural intersection of respectable and “trashy.”
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