

RHETORICS OF THE SMALL: THE EVERYDAY PHENOMENA OF THE HOME

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ABSTRACT

This project investigates the experience of the home as both personal and socio/cultural phenomenon through creative-critical inquiry into the lives and homes of three generations of women in my family. Using a method I developed called “sensory interviewing” – an auto/ethnographical and reflexive form of video interviewing, I focus on capturing the intimate, lived experience of place and how material and everyday encounters shape our individual sense of “home.” By exploring the relationships between bodies, space, and time, I center the three unique stories of my sister, mother, and grandmother to gain insight into their embodied and sensory experiences of the home in how they come to ‘make’ a home, form a sense of place, and actively construct memory through engagement with the materiality of their daily lives. Building on scholarship in feminist theory, memory studies, phenomenology, multimodality, and cultural rhetorics, I theorize “rhetorics of the small” as an embodied practice of attunement to the everyday objects, stories, and practices that create meaning and memory across generations, most especially in sites not traditionally studied as rhetorical (e.g., the domestic/private sphere). The home, while not public, is rhetorical in how it serves as a starting point, as a place from which we go out from, in how we begin to make sense of our lived worlds. I argue that this entanglement of the senses, of memory, and the impressions we leave and are left on us by others serve as a necessary framework for understanding the reverberative e/affects of the small, everyday practices and actions as starting points for change.

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For my son, who made me a mother.
For my husband, and all the walks we took to get here.
For my mother and sister, who gave me their time, their stories, their very hearts.
And, most especially, for Alice.
May your memory be what guides us home.

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Home is all of you. Every word, every memory, every story – the things I carry with me and the people that make them matter, make them last. Thank you all.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2023, I went home.

I packed a bag to spend a month in Texas, with a video camera I rented from the Michigan State University videography lab. I've lived in Michigan for almost 4 years now while pursuing my PhD in Rhetoric and Writing at MSU. I met my now husband here only a month after moving and, at the time of writing this, we're expecting our first child. I adore Michigan – the lakes, the trees, even the winters with the way the snow looks piled over the cars, on the roofs of the buildings.

But Texas will always be home.

It's where my entire family is from – aunts, uncles, grandparents. We're spread out across the entirety of the strange state, in all of its variety of terrain, weather, and cultures. Visiting my parents in Lubbock, Texas still puts me 5 hours away from the nearest large city, Dallas, where my dad's mother lives. My younger sister lives between the two cities in a tiny town called Wichita Falls, near the Oklahoma border, which still puts her 3 hours away from Lubbock.

And so, for the month of June, I found myself traveling across the expanse of the state, seeing family I hadn't seen for months or years, filming every step of the way. I stayed in Lubbock for the



Figure 1: My grandparents, in their kitchen in Lubbock, Texas



Figure 2: Our old house in Celina, Texas

majority of the time, driving around, hanging out with my younger brother who is still in high

school, sitting with my mom in the kitchen. My mother's parents also live in Lubbock, they moved there within the past couple of years, all the way from East Texas – and I would go and visit them, sitting on their back porch or on the plaid couch that they've had since before I was born. My parents and I at one point drove to the Dallas area to visit my dad's mother and got lunch with my uncle's family while we were in town. While we were in the area, we drove about 45 minutes north outside of town for the anniversary party of some old family friends to Celina, Texas where we had lived from when I was 8 to right after I turned 15. We drove by the house my parents built when we moved there to see if it had changed. To me, it looked about the same.

On the way back to Lubbock, my parents dropped me off at my sister's house in Wichita Falls to stay with her for a week. I followed her around to different parties her friends were hosting, or to the coffee shop where she worked part time baking pastries and cookies on Monday and Tuesday mornings. Every time we would drive by the apartment complex she lived in when she first moved there, I'd get such vivid flashbacks of the weirdness for both of us moving during a pandemic, and what it was like to drive away when we got her moved in. We had never lived in different cities before.

And as I made my way back to Lubbock, I found myself staring out the window watching the sheer nothingness of the expanse of West Texas. Perfectly flat, for miles and miles and miles. A place made up only of sky.

What a strange place to call home.



Figure 1: A map of Texas (cities listed from right to left: Lubbock, Wichita Falls, Dallas, Gladewater)

A strange beauty, a strange collection of memories, of feelings, of people – beautiful in their familiarity,
beautiful in the way
these small things start
to add up, form
patterns that I seem to
see in the land itself as
if it's calling to me,
beckoning me to return.



Figure 2: Lubbock, Texas

I told anyone who asked about the project I was working on. It's about home, I would say. The experience of home, what home feels like, to you – almost like, the senses.

"The senses?" people would say. And then, they would start talking.

"You want to talk about senses," said an aunt that I happened to be able to catch up with at the beginning of the trip, "when I was a kid, we moved constantly. I think we must've lived in I think 27 houses before I turned 18." She paused.

"But I always had the same shampoo."

She described how she could create a sort of safe space in the familiarity of scents – soaps and oils, she could take the scents with her. I pointed out with a smile the essential oil diffuser she had sitting next to her while she talked. "Ah," she said, "See I didn't even notice, it's like second nature at this point."

My uncle at this point chimed in, "I always think of the smell of the linen closet. At my mother's house, at my grandmother's house. It was just... fresh..." he trailed off. Clean bed

sheets, freshly washed towels – this connection point between two generations in his family, the smell of fresh linens.

And then, weeks later, at my dad’s mother’s house, we call her Nonnie, a different set of aunts and uncles were around, listening to my explanation of the sensory experience of the home and my uncle perks up.

“Oh, so you mean like the cookie jar?” He points across the room of my Nonnie’s house to a white cookie jar in the shape of a dog on the kitchen counter. “I think I could recognize that sound anywhere” – the sound of the cookie jar opening and closing. And



Figure 3: The cookie jar

what’s so interesting to me is that he’s right, that cookie jar has been sitting there in that exact spot in my Nonnie’s kitchen for my entire life and it would have never occurred to me that this would be my uncle’s first thought when he considered the sound of home.

When we were visiting family friends, the large group’s conversation turned more to the question of “what do you see?” What do you picture when you think of home?

The answers ranged from a family around a dinner table, setting up a Christmas tree, the way the furniture would always be in a new configuration – a constant state of fluctuation, of movement. People talked about their relationships with their parents, all the good and bad and complexity of family and memory and growing up.

When I had asked this same question to my friend Jeanetta in preparation for this trip, testing out my thoughts, my interview questions, what I was going to do and say and film while home in Texas, she thought back to the multiple states and cities and houses and apartments she’d lived in throughout her younger life.

“I see... plants. I see my mom. My dogs running around.” She paused. “It’s kind of weird, it’s like the people, the living things in the space.” Growing, moving, changing – life.

The sights, smells, sounds of life. What does it mean to be at home?

To *be*, in every sense – what does it feel like? To live, to grow in different spaces over time? What do we notice? Because I feel as though there might be something to this idea of home as something we feel, something we touch, taste, smell, hear through our lived bodily experiences of place, our relationships with others, our relationships with the things around us that are so familiar it’s as if they’re engraved in our skin, in our very bones.

The stories, spaces, places, memories, feelings, sights, sounds, smells of... home.

In this dissertation project I chose to investigate the daily, lived experiences of “home” by exploring the relationships between bodies, space, and time—the material and everyday encounters that shape our sense of place and sense of self. Drawing on phenomenological theory, cultural rhetorics and feminist scholarship, I situate the home as both personal and socio/cultural phenomenon and a site of rhetorical inquiry into the individual and embodied realities of how we come to know and experience the world around us. Our homes, from the small scale to the large scale, from specific houses to the neighborhoods, cities, states, countries that we come to know intimately over time, have a propensity to intrinsically shape our sense of identity as individuals, but also have deep e/affects on our sense of belonging and our larger socio-cultural positionality.

While “home *is* a fundamental and universal concept,” says Fox (2016) in the book *Home: A very short introduction*,¹ “...it has multiple associated and layered meanings for

¹ As a part of Oxford University Press’s “Very Short Introductions” series, authors cover a wide range of topics and attempt to give an overview of those topics for a general audience. I find this type of overview helpful in situating how I come to understand the extremely broad topic of home as a site of inquiry.

different people in a great range of circumstances,” ultimately surprising us “by turning out to be a restless, shifting, somewhat elusive notion” (p. 1). It is many things to many people. Even within our own lived experiences, the question of home and its meaning in our life is likely in a constant state of fluctuation. As I’ve begun this study, I’ve noticed a strong correlation between home and memory, for example – the way the home invokes the past. For family I haven’t seen in years, for old friends and new, when I ask them to consider their idea of home (sights, smells, sounds), it brings forth things from all stages of our lives, a rich tapestry of their own stories, the stories of the people close to us. Home is our childhood, our families, our past, present, future.

I came to be interested in the topic of home *because* of its fluidity -- home as not static or fixed, but rather entrenched in interrelated issues of culture, memory, space/place, power relations, and lived experience. Home is not and cannot be one thing for all people. Therefore, the *phenomena* of the home, as seen in this dissertation project, is just that, a multitude of phenomena in and of the home – experiences, senses, places, objects, people, relationships – interrelated and interconnected, unable to be separated from each other. Home is a part of who we are, as human beings, it is where we’re from and to where we will return.

This dissertation will take a fluid approach, blending the personal and the theoretical, the creative and the critical in order to tell the stories of how things come to matter in our lives. And how, if we pay attention, the ‘small things’ – the everyday details, practices, and repeated actions of our lived worlds – will begin to help us make sense of our surroundings by bringing to the surface what *matters* to us. As individuals, in our relationships, and in our larger cultural and societal contexts. For me, this is an intrinsically rhetorical practice, drawing on a definition of “rhetorics” given by Powel et al. (2014) in *Our story begins here: Constellating cultural rhetorics*, in which rhetorics “refers *both* to the study of meaning-making systems and to the

practices that constitute those systems.” I find that a broad understanding of what ‘counts’ as rhetorical practice is a key underlying argument of where we look to find rhetorical meaning and what it means to ‘make’ theory.

Therefore, in order to theorize what I call a “rhetorics of the small,” I begin with an overview of how I came to this project by introducing the phenomenological concept of *life-worlds* as an example of how I am theorizing the home as way of situating us in the world – a place from which we go out into the world around us. Drawing on the feminist notion of situated knowledges,² I argue for the importance of the project itself being based on my own situating and how the personal, the embodied, and the stories that matter to us give us rich insight into larger socio-cultural theory – including, I argue, the history of the home as gendered space, and of home-making as gendered labor. The home as a representation of the private sphere, the domestic, as a site for “women’s work,” is often underrepresented as rhetorical in its own right, in the way that theories of cultural rhetorics situate “everyday practices” as intrinsically rhetorical.³

My next chapter features my methodology and begins to introduce the stories behind the three interviews I conducted during the month I spent at home in Texas. The next three chapters focus on these interviews and the nuanced narratives of the relationships between objects, bodies, space, and time as they are seen in and through the home. My conclusion focuses on a “rhetorics of the small” as attunement practice that calls us as scholars and as humans to look closely and carefully into the uniqueness of the everyday, and the impressions we leave and are left on us by our homes and the people who make us feel at home.

² See Haraway (1988) as well as Harding (1986) and Collins (1997)

³ See “Our story begins here,” Powell et al. 2014

So come with me as I return to the places I come from, the people that made me who I am, the stories and memories that shaped me as I have shaped them – a circular making, a pattern, a tiny moment that sticks in the brain, telling us to pay attention.

I step outside my door.

The door to my apartment in Holt, Michigan, where I live with my husband; the door of the studio space I lived in in downtown Lansing; the front door of my parent’s house in Lubbock, Texas; the door to the house I lived in with my sister before the pandemic, or the crappy apartment before that. The old house I lived in with roommates, the different houses my parents rented before they bought their current one. The apartment in Belize. The house in Celina, Texas. The houses I can barely remember when I was a child and my parents lived in the suburbs of Dallas, Texas.

I step outside my door.

Leaving, just for a while, until my inevitable return, where I walk back through the door, right back the way I came, and step through the threshold into what is, at least for now, home.

In phenomenology, the home is seen as, according to Bachelard, “a privileged entity” in the way it emphasizes the intimate – the spatial relationships, in all their complexity, within the home and between the home and the outside world (1964/1994, p. 3). Phenomenology would indeed be interested in these relationships, because phenomenology, as I have come to understand it, is about relationships – or, more specifically, the relationships between bodies, space and time. Much like Sara Ahmed in her introduction to *Queer Phenomenology*, my interpretation of phenomenology as relationships is likely “not properly phenomenology” (2006,

p. 2). Ahmed's book, for example, is specifically *queering* phenomenology, taking cues from feminist and queer theory to emphasize how:

“Phenomenology can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as it emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds” (2006, p. 2).

So, while not being a more traditional understanding of phenomenology, Ahmed draws on phenomenology as a resource to better emphasize the relevance of lived experience, intentionality, nearness, repeated and habitual actions. Our lived lives matter, the way we make sense of the world around us matters, and how what is close to us – familiar, proximate, near – affects our daily lives, the lived repeated actions of what it is to be human directly shapes our bodies, minds, and perspectives of the world. This in turn, shapes the world itself.

In this, I see relationships. I see home.

The relations and relationships we have as embodied beings *experiencing* and perceiving the physical, the spatial, and the temporal are what it is to dwell in our life-world – our lived world, the world of experience. In phenomenology, *life-world* is a term coined by Husserl, the understood “founder” of phenomenology, to refer to the foundational grounding for shared human experiences. “[T]he life-world,” he says, “for us who are wakenly live in it, is always already there, existing in advance for us, the ‘ground’ of all praxis...” as a sort of “backdrop for our perceptual experiences...” (Husserl, 1954/1970, p. 142, Moran, 2012, p. 188). For Husserl, whose establishment of phenomenology was embedded in a concern for knowing and how we come to know – questions of science, objectivity, and truth – it was crucial to establish the idea of a lived world, a world of perception, that serves as a base in which we all stand, experiencing our own, inherently subjective, lives. “The life-world,” according to Moran, “has to be understood as including everything that is experienceable, the horizon of all experience” (2012,

p. 189). Thus, the lifeworld, according to Husserl, consists of how we ‘come to know’ “through seeing, touching, feeling, hearing etc., [...] through ‘repetition’ of the experiences” (p. 343). It is through our senses that we come to know – our lived, bodily experiences – and the daily, repeated actions of those experiences in the everyday, that make up the composition of our life-world.

I wonder, then, if the home as a concept could be understood as a miniature life-world; life-world on the small scale. If home is where we’re from, where we live, is it not its own type of backdrop? A location of living, a “horizon” from which we go out and experience the *life* part of life-world?

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed discusses Husserl’s writings on his experience at the writing table – in his home, at his desk – and how this serves a starting point for his perceiving experience. He sees first the paper, the wood of the table, the room, the window to the backyard where his children play.

She says, “It is from here that the world unfolds.”

I was struck by this quote – dropped in italics in the midst of Ahmed’s discussion of Husserl’s writing study.

It is from here that the world unfolds... I step outside my door.

The home is place – a “here” from which the world unfolds – a location, in which we dwell, a base in which we build off of and make sense of the world around us. It *situates* us, orients us, and shapes us as we shape it.

In feminist scholarship, Donna Haraway (1988) discusses the importance of *situated knowledges* – a concept of “limited location” that helps us consider how knowledge is made as an inherently embodied experience. In addressing the objectivity of science, she argues that

“Feminists don’t need a doctrine of objectivity that promises transcendence, a story that loses track of its mediations just where someone might be held responsible for something, and unlimited instrumental power” (Haraway, 1988). Essentially, it is an inherently feminist notion to call into question that which rises above our experiences, promising objectivity in its transcendence of body (and therefore, transcendence of responsibility). Instead, she calls for a “particular and specific embodiment” that grants us partial vision to ground us in the reality of our limitations, allowing us to “become answerable for what we learn how to see” (Haraway, 1988).⁴

We are *limited* to this one experience, this one body, location, background, home. But also how beautiful, to be limited. It calls us to be situated, to have a grounded sense of place and space, of what is around us, of our embodied experiences of the world as the medium through which we make sense of and make knowledges within, the lived and living world around us.

It is from here that the world unfolds.

For this dissertation project, I focus on the lived experiences of three women in my family. My younger sister – an interior designer, who brings to the table really interesting thoughts on how the home functions and we function within it; my mother -- an artist who paints customizable maps on Etsy that tell people’s individual stories of place and home; and my grandmother – described by my mother as the ‘super homemaker,’ my grandmother was

⁴ Though it’s a bit beyond the scope of this project, it should be noted that this ‘situatedness’ as an acknowledgement of embodiment, is a crucial foreground for feminist concepts such as positionality, which call us to acknowledge *where we come from* in our research, teaching, and other work, and intersectionality, which calls us to acknowledge how intersecting identities lead to unique positionalities and experiences of discrimination and privilege (see Kimberlé Crenshaw 1989 work “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex”).

diagnosed with Alzheimer's in the past couple of years, forcing her and my grandfather to move out of the home they had lived in for almost 50 years.

I feel it is necessary to enter into this conversation of the phenomena of the home through my situating – through my own experience. This project is an exploration into the lives and thoughts of three specific women in my life who have all three in some way, inspired my original interest in home. It is through this personal experience that I feel I am able to do the most interesting work in my own theorizing of home. To focus on the personal is a way of grounding home as a personal phenomenon, situated and lived, in order to make connections to the home as a larger cultural and social phenomenon.

Ahmed in *Living a Feminist Life*, begins with this idea:

This book is personal. The personal is theoretical. Theory itself is often assumed to be abstract: something is more theoretical the more abstract it is, the more it is abstracted from everyday life. To abstract is to drag away, detach, pull away, or divert. We might then have to drag theory back, to bring theory back to life. (p. 10).

I love this concept; I think it's crucial. Ahmed identifies the relationship between the personal and theoretical as a type of grounding, a way of situating theory in the lived world, an embodied, story-based theory. She specifically talks about how reading works by black feminists and feminists of color including Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Gloria Anzaldúa was incredibly inspiring. She says, "Here was writing in which an embodied experience of power provides the basis of knowledge. Here was writing animated by the everyday: the detail of an encounter, an incident, a happening, flashing like insight" (p. 10). It is through the personal, through the embodied that we come to know, but how often are these ways of knowing specifically and systemically undervalued in Western notions of "what counts" as theory?

It brings to mind the seminal article by Barbara Christian (1988) in *A race for theory*, that clearly questions what we count as theory as tied directly to western-centric, male, white, dominant cultural construction. Christian argues the following: “For people of color have always theorized – but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic” (1988, p. 68). It’s the “in forms quite different” that stands out to me. Christian’s conception of these different forms is revealed to be ‘often narrative forms’ – “in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, because dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking” (1988, p. 68).

Christian, and other black feminist, anti-racist, and decolonial scholars argue for how story and storytelling work as a site through which research, theorizations, knowledge-making, and rhetorical practice take place. In the seminal article, “Our story begins here: Constellating cultural rhetorics,” the authors argue for the importance of story and storytelling as a primary methodology for understanding and making rhetorical meaning, taking cues from indigenous scholars such as Thomas King’s (2003) theorization of the power stories and storytelling have in shaping our sense of self and our connection to the world around us. King (2003) begins each chapter of the novel with the following statement: “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are.” In an article by White (1980), he situates narrative as an almost inevitable aspect of the human experience despite the “domains of contemporary Western intellectual and artistic culture” who “programmatically refuse” to acknowledge its profound power *in the construction of reality itself* (p. 5).

Story and storytelling have the unique ability to serve as both personal *and* cultural, to be about identity *and* society. Our identities and sense of the world are deeply and intrinsically tied to the stories we tell, the stories we are told, and our relationships with others. Relationality is an

idea situated in indigenous and cultural rhetorics scholarship – specifically as noted in Shawn Wilson’s *Research is Ceremony* (2008), as "relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality" (p. 7, emphasis original). Here we see another reality claim – stories and relationships are valued here as a type of worldmaking. They shape the way we see the world, the way we shape the world, and the way the world is shaped around us – this is cultural practice, this is rhetorical practice. As noted in “Our story begins here,” “All cultural practices are built, shaped, and dismantled based on the encounters people have with one another within and across particular systems of shared belief. In other words, people make things (texts, baskets, performances), people make relationships, people make culture” (2014).

The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.⁵

Therefore, for this dissertation project, I sought to conduct video interviews that told the stories of the three women who have shaped me and shaped each other – mother to mother. A maternal lineage that makes it way down through the home itself, through objects passed down, through memories and moments that have lasting e/effects on what it is to be at home, what it is to know and be known in the places that make us who we are. Each chapter is meant to celebrate the stories, theories, and homes of my sister, mother, and grandmother as sites of rhetorical and embodied knowledge-making. By attuning to repeated patterns and actions embedded in the daily, lived experiences of these three women I hope to tell their stories in order to better tell mine, and to gain some type of insight into their experiences of home *as theory*.

In each chapter I explore in more detail our embodied relationships with objects (my sister), place (my mother), and time (my grandmother). I am interested in the daily, lived

⁵ King, T. (2003). The truth about stories.

experiences of these three women – what they feel, experiences, sense, remember. How do they think about home? The materiality of home? Home as place? The way home changes over time?

This dissertation is for them; it is by them. It is my sister's confidence, my mother's precision, my grandmother's loss. Their stories matter, their relationships to me and with each other matter. The places they come from matter – their homes, their lives, and the everyday sense making between the people, places, and objects in which they interact.

There are knowledges weaved into the construction of the houses I grew up in... I see a grandmother sitting at a table with her young granddaughter, snapping peas for the meal – I see her showing her the specifics of her needlework. Do you see how her fingers move? Do you see the precision and delicacy, the skill and the beauty? Were they not building knowledges?

In the book, *Women's ways of making*, Goggin and Rose (2021) begin their introduction with the idea that “making as embodied knowledge has been, in a word, gendered, rendering it as ostensibly inept,” and that embodied knowledge itself has been “overlooked, ignored, or disparaged as inferior to other forms of expression or thinking that seem to leave the material world behind” (p. 4). Women's makings, as a type of embodied knowledge, are an attunement to a type of knowledge making in rhetorical studies that goes beyond words, something found in the daily objects and practices of women throughout history. The field of rhetorical studies often tends towards an emphasis on *logos*, as in the way language, the written word, and other ‘abstract forms of logic’ to quote Christian (1988) again, shape knowledge and knowledge making. Arellano's (2022) article on “Quilting as a qualitative, feminist research method” begins her argument with a challenge given in Goggin's 2004 chapter on “the visual verbal divide” in

the field by identifying two main questions in Goggin's argument that still remain relevant to the field today: "(1) How does a logocentric approach limit the field by limiting what counts as rhetorical practices and who count as rhetoricians, and (2) how do we study the rhetoric of those who do not have access to dominant spaces and resources?" (2022).

I remember vividly the experience of reading a work on the history of women in rhetoric where the author talks about different methods for 'locating' women or alternative voices in rhetorical studies, because unfortunately, according to the author,

"...the hope to recuperate alternative voices has long been abandoned: there are simply no oppositional texts awaiting to be recovered, no extant papyri to be retrieved, no manuscripts by women or slaves to be reclaimed. (Poulakos, 1994, pp. 59-60)

No more texts?

It depends, greatly, on what we count as texts in the first place. Gaillet and Bailey (2019) in *Remembering Women Differently: Refiguring Rhetorical Work* ask us to consider "Beyond *who* is left out historically and what version of her life is preserved [...but rather] *what* is left out: which rhetorical acts are valued, investigated, and remembered and which are not and, as a result, which women continue to be silenced" (p. 13). Who is left out? What is left out? And for me, most importantly, *where do we look?*

Therefore, as seen in Bizzell's 1992 on feminist research in the history of rhetoric, "...to find women in the rhetorical tradition, we must look where those women were speaking and writing, even if those venues deviate from the traditional public sphere." The home, as the domestic sphere, as the private sphere, has continually been known as the "woman's place" for "women's work," and as being so gendered, reduces and devalues it as a type of space in the background of society, taken for granted as a source of rhetorical meaning-making and knowledge production. However, as seen in Jessica Enoch's work in *Domestic occupations:*

Spatial rhetorics and women's work (2019), “domestic spaces function in our patterns of life and our patterns of thought,” according to a review by Walden (2020). The domestic space is a rich source of rhetorical theory in terms of spatial rhetorics, gender politics, generational knowledges, and the rhetorical decision-making power of everyday makings.

For home itself is not just a neutral site in which meaning-making might take place, but a complex spatial narrative that is often specifically rhetorically constructed. Spatial rhetorics, as defined by Enoch (2019), are “the multimodal ways through which spaces gain meaning” – this includes “the material elements that create the space, as well as the pictorial, embodied, displayed, emotive, and discursive understandings that define what a space is and what it should be,” suggesting the purpose of the space, how different people move through different spaces, and how different places become significant to us for different reasons. The home itself, the space, the rooms, and what those spaces and rooms do and occupy, are *made*. They reveal much about our lives, our values, our daily structures, and, for some, the construction of these spaces can often serve as a type of self-expression. Women, throughout history have been attributed to the practice of “home-making” – the set-up, maintenance, and care for a home – the daily tasks that we associate with what it is to be at home. In considering, then, the home as something that is made, often of everyday care practices, we can begin to see how the home is rhetorical, in the sense that “rhetorics are made through everyday practices,” according to “Our story begins here” (2014).

However, in considering the home as gendered space, we also must consider the deeply complex histories of women and other marginalized groups within these spheres and the ways in which power, privilege, and oppression have shifted in the relationship between gendered labor and issues of race, class, sexuality, etc. There is nothing simple about the perceived relationships

between the societal structures of gender, space, and labor. Issues of intersectionality and power have and will continue shape our collective, embodied interactions with home and hopefully further complicate how we think about the home historically.⁶ The way we think about our own mothers, and their mothers, and their mothers, and the complex dynamics that were communicated to us in different ways will continue to change, but also help us understand the richness of history, memory, and the relationships between the personal and the cultural.

My grandmother's life and the societal/cultural expectations put upon her in the 1950s and 60s differ greatly from my mother's experiences growing up in the 70s and 80s. My understanding of my grandmother's mother, and her mother, are vastly different in how they worked and lived and functioned within societal structures, and what, through this process, they passed down to their children. An interesting point of inquiry, for me, however, is by examining and thinking about how each of these women conceived and interacted with the home. Many of the women in my life care deeply for their homes, in many different ways, no matter their differing conceptions of gender and gendered labor as it relates to the home and home-making.

So, if rhetorics are made through everyday practices according to Powell et al. (2014), cultures, then, "are made up of practices that *accumulate over time* and in relationship to specific places" (emphasis added). It is over time that we begin to make sense of the practices that make up what it is to be in relationship with others and in relationship with place. It is over time that knowledges are passed down, over time that we begin to notice the repeated patterns in what it is to know, learn, grow, and be. In this dissertation I want to focus on this notion of time, the

⁶ I'm thinking specifically about Betty Friedan and *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) as often credited as the spark of second wave feminism, was specifically about women's relationships to motherhood, the home, and home-making. However, Friedan's argument is focused specifically on white, middle-class women, without consideration of the intersectional realities facing working class women and women of color.

e/affects of time and memory, as it relates to our relationships with the material realities of our world and our embodied experiences of the things in a space. How are embodied knowledges passed down over time? How are material knowledges passed down over time? What are the relationships between time and the physical space and physical objects we encounter in our daily lives? How do we come to know and experience these material encounters through our lived bodies? And how does all of this (bodies, space, time) e/affect the way we interact with others? What stories do we need to tell?

I don't anticipate answering these questions, I anticipate sitting in these questions – sitting in the complexity of the things overlooked, and what they might reveal about the questions of time and bodies and space. The way my sister engages with the objects around her, the way my mother comes to know and have a sense of 'place,' the way my grandmother's body and mind slowly fade with time, as the memories she helped create in us entangle themselves into our very being. How, by looking closely, we find the meaning embedded in the rhythms of our daily lives and what those patterns reveal about ourselves and how we move through the world.

What might it mean, to *see*?

In Husserl's discussion of life-worlds, he clarifies a term he uses to describe what it might be to experience, to notice, the life-world as this foundational background to what we know and experience. The term is "wakingly," which he defines as "being awake to the world, being constantly and directly 'conscious' of the world and of oneself as living *in* the world, actually experiencing and actually effecting [...] the world" (p. 142-143).

This is a core tenet of phenomenology – a sort of conscious attunement to one’s world, one’s body – what it means to actively *pay attention*.

Notice how your body feels – are you sitting? Standing? What sounds are around you? What does the light look like where you are? What objects are in your reach? What emotions are you feeling?

I’ve always loved the preface of Engelland’s 2021 book on phenomenology, where he compares the first time he wore glasses at the age of 16 to the story of Sherlock Holmes’s attention to the ‘invisible details’ -- “not invisible but unnoticed, Watson” (p. xi). The world in high definition, suddenly seeing, for the first time, individual blades of grass. Engelland summarizes, “Like good detective work, phenomenology enhances perception so that we notice all that is important in what seems to be small” (p. xi). The unnoticed, the ordinary, the everyday.

This is cultural rhetorics practice, this is feminist historiography, this is phenomenology – what can we learn to see in the small?

I think I am made up of all of the places I've ever slept, of all of the places I've longed to return to, of all of the times where I've sat underneath some random blanket that I never knew was either painstakingly homemade or bought at Walmart for \$15 dollars, but it didn't matter. Because in that moment I was the safest I've ever felt. Wrapped in an old quilt, a cheap throw, a knitted masterpiece with stains on the back from numerous coffee spills. Someone is beside me, I am alone. The TV is on in the background, it's perfectly silent. Light flickers through the window. And I am home.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

It must've been a couple of years ago now, but I remember working on some big project in my office in Bessey Hall at MSU – it could've been my concentration exam or a seminar paper for one of my classes, just something big enough to where I felt like I lived in that office, at that chair. And my officemate and fellow grad-student-in-arms, Jeanetta, and I spent an evening laughing with a giddiness that only comes from project-based sleep deprivation about how often I was using the phrase “taking cues.”

“Taking cues from such and such book...”

“Taking cues from such and such scholar...”

This had, apparently, become my go-to phrase. I had to stop and go back to reword some of the sentences to better convey that same idea without relying on too much repetition. The phrase “taking cues” had started to lose all meaning... why did that phrase, that writing move specifically, seem to convey in my sleep-addled mind something poignant, something scholarly or profound. What does it mean to take cues?

The idea of “cues” can be taken from the stage – a signal for a performer to enter or begin their performance. It can act as a prompt for memory, a prompt for action, an indication of how to move forward. It is, to me, a starting point. A place from which to begin, while still acknowledging and establishing a long history, a time before this moment. Where thoughts already existed – we don't exist in a vacuum. We come from somewhere. Our ideas are situated in a complex world of interconnecting people, objects, and places.

Therefore, I often find myself using that qualifier “taking cues” when establishing scholarship that is extremely influential to the work I'm doing. I use it like a phrase that says, “I want to do what they're doing.” It's almost like... gratitude. A citational nod to ideas of the past,

as our work does not, and should not, ever exist in isolation. We are *always* building off of (taking cues) from numerous other works, ideas, theories, and writings that came before us. In what Sara Ahmed calls an “intellectual genealogy,” she argues that, “citation is feminist memory. Citation is how we acknowledge our debt to those who came before; those who helped us find our way when the way was obscured because we deviated from the paths we were told to follow” (2017, pp. 15-16). It is through citation that we build knowledge, and through citation that we can trace back to ideas that came before, and, in doing so, have the opportunity to make specific moves and arguments for who and how we cite. We can forge new paths, new lines, that have the potential to go beyond and outside of disciplinary boundaries, that bring to light scholars that are often overlooked or ignored in specific fields.

This idea is important to me as I attempt to situate myself and the work of this dissertation within a larger intellectual history – within the field of rhetoric and writing, within feminist scholarship, and work in cultural rhetorics, phenomenology, multimodality, memory studies, etc. This work is inherently interdisciplinary in its call for questioning where we look for meaning-making and how we ourselves become situated as lived beings who ‘come to know’ through our embodied, sensed experiences. I *take cues* from a wide array of scholarship – my own intellectual genealogy, as well as the knowledges and practices from the data I collected through interviews with my family – my familial genealogy. I am able then to situate myself as a researcher, but also as a daughter, granddaughter, and sister, to people who have known me long before I had any sort of scholarly responsibility to uphold. My positionality as a researcher, daughter, granddaughter, sister, and scholar all become slightly blurred in this work, but in that blurring, I think I am surprisingly able to better understand my positioning. As a cis-het white woman from the south, I think it is important to acknowledge the limitations of my embodied,

lived experiences, and what acknowledging those limitations can afford me as I seek a deeper understanding of *how* we each come to know and be positioned to move through the world with a unique type of embodied perspective.

The way we position ourselves, then, I see as a type of family tree – our experiences, past, present, and future, all working together to tell a larger story of connection. Where we come from, where we are now -- an acknowledgment of those who have contributed to developing my own consciousness and a way of navigating my way through the interconnections of ideas, people, places, theories, that have brought me to where I am now, and will continue to shape where I go from here. So come with me as I follow the cues of those before me, the scholarship and the stories that shape me and shape this dissertation. There are paths and places I have already been and those I still have yet to reach, let us trace back to a type of beginning, a starting point on a map, a place from which we start to see a story begin to unfold.

In the summer of 2023, I went home.

When originally planning the idea for this project, I knew that I wanted to spend at least a month back in my home state of Texas in order to have enough time to conduct interviews with my sister, mother, and grandmother, but also to simply *be* in those spaces -- I needed to somehow capture a sense of the *place*, the cities, the specific houses, the way it felt to drive down the road. I needed to be at home (in the state of Texas, in the city of Lubbock, in my mom's house), how it felt to be at home, in my body, see what memories it brought to the surface. And I needed to see if I could find a way to capture those same feelings with the three people I wanted to center in this dissertation project. My sister, having moved to Wichita Falls, several years prior, how she made a home in the small town three hours from Lubbock; my mother, with her house in

Lubbock that she and my dad were so proud of owning outright after years of renting; my grandmother, having been almost forced to move to Lubbock to be closer to my mom and how her and my grandfather were slowly but surely making their new house feel more like the “grandma and grandpa’s house” that my siblings and I grew up with.

So, with a rented video camera in tow, I spent the month of June 2023 filming everything I could think of -- my sister and I driving to the grocery store, a shot of myself sitting outside on my parent’s back porch, the drive into Lubbock, Texas in all of its flat desert-like nothingness. I filmed the houses, the trees, my grandmother’s bookshelf. I shakily filmed my grandparents and I going through a tin of old buttons that I had played



Figure 4: driving to the grocery store, a Lubbock landscape, a table covered in buttons

with as a child. I needed to capture the people, the place, the objects, the stories. I needed to capture their *movements* – their bodily, sensed experiences of their daily lives, how it felt to sit with them, to watch them while they moved through space, interacted with the things around them. And I needed to capture their *memories* – the way they told stories, the way the objects and artifacts around them elicited story, brought them back into the past, helped them make sense of the present.

I wanted to capture what it was for each of them to *live*.

Though it wasn't required, I made the decision to pursue approval through the Institutional Review Board at Michigan State University for this project. As I was conducting interviews and going into people's homes, even if those homes were the homes of my own family, I wanted to seek specific ways of ethically engaging with the research process as dictated by the university. In this review, I identified "the objectives of the study" as threefold: 1) to interview three female family members to document their sense of and experiences with "home," 2) to analyze the data to articulate trends and themes across the three cases and 3) to offer recommendations for how "home" can be considered a rhetorical, culturally situated site of inquiry.

I suppose this sounds pretty, this description of the project using the language of more traditional notions of research, of methods, of what it means to produce knowledge. I would not go as far to say that it is even inaccurate – these are indeed the moves I am making in the project. I did interview my sister, mother, and grandmother; I did seek to identify themes within these interviews – patterns and theories and stories that carried their way across the experiences of these three women. I do indeed see this project as a way of offering the notion of "home" as rhetorical, as cultural, as a site of inquiry that has been deeply undervalued historically, academically, societally; and what this affords us as we consider how we make meaning in the world. And yet, there is a sense of something missing – a story that isn't being told in the IRB description, a reduction, a lessening that brings us to something that falls short of what I feel this project is doing or seeking to do. It lacks certain nuance, which is something I was advised not to try and include in the IRB review in the first place, as nuance is, apparently, 'not what IRB is

for.’ In the context of university policy and other legal requirements, the goal of IRB is truly just to make sure that some type of objective harm is not being caused by the research we do, and is not as interested in the complexities of what it means to tell stories, to engage with human beings in dynamic ways that consider their inner feelings and lived bodily experiences, in a way that is often messy and strange and changing constantly.

And I think I see this most clearly in the second aspect of the IRB review – my description of my interview questions. I broke my interview questions up into 2 sections – the first for a more traditional interview of each participant sitting in front of a camera, and the second for walking around their homes with them.

The first set of the interview questions were as follows:

- 1) What does "home" mean to you?
- 2) Can you describe the feeling of "being at home"?
- 3) What comes to mind when you think of your childhood home? Is it one specific house or place? Or is it multiple places? What do you picture/see?
- 4) Where did you feel most at home when you were a kid? What were some of your favorite places to be?
- 5) Can you describe the different homes that you've lived in throughout your life?

These questions were extremely helpful in giving me a sense of direction for my project. They worked extremely well for conducting interviews with both my mother and sister, though I occasionally worded some of the questions differently in the moment, based on how they each might have answered a previous question. However, in the interview with my grandmother I started to see the cracks appear in the straightforward script of my interview protocol. I found that I needed to switch strategies slightly and do a less formal interview with my grandmother –

for example, I didn't use my wireless clip-on microphone with her like I did with my sister and mother, I had her sit with my grandpa in her living room and interviewed them together with just a camera set up in the background.

And I only ended up asking her the first question on the list, directly. Many of the topics posed by the other four questions were still covered with my grandmother during her interview even if I didn't end up posing the exact questions, but it was much more conversational. I made these changes in consideration with her struggle with Alzheimer's disease – I didn't want her to be anxious or confused by the camera or technology, I didn't want her to lose track of the conversation by



Figure 5: from the top down, my sister Olivia, my mother, and my grandparents

constantly switching interview questions, and I knew she would want my grandpa there with her to fill in the gaps of her stories and that it would in general help her feel more secure.

I wanted to just sit with her, see what she remembered and wanted to tell me. I wanted to hear whatever she had to say, even if for the most part she sat quietly in her chair, looking to my grandpa to tell me the stories that she once knew by heart.

And this, for my grandma, transitioned more naturally into the second section of the interview that I had designed where I planned to ask everyone to show me around their homes. My grandpa began walking around and showing me pictures and objects and the stories of different furniture in their house before I could even get my camera set up. For my sister and mother, I did have more traditional interview questions prepared, though I actually rarely used these prompts in the moment, instead relying on these ideas to guide any discussions we had while walking around the home.

The interview questions were as follows:

- 6) Tell me about your current home -- how you've arranged the space, how you move through the space, feelings associated with certain spaces. We can get up and walk around if you want!
- 7) What areas in here do you spend the most time in?
- 8) Describe your most recent time coming home, walking through the front door – what did you see, feel, hear, touch, smell?
- 9) Is there an object or several objects in your home that have special meaning to you? What stories or memories do these objects bring to mind? How do these objects remind you of home?

For my mother, I did specifically ask her about questions 7 and 8, but for my sister, she addressed those ideas without being asked. I loved how each person went room by room, telling stories, giving details, holding up each object, touching things without much prompting. I didn't

end up truly needing these questions to guide what I felt they were already doing – reflecting on the sensory, the material, the lived experience of the home.

And then, after the second section of the interview, I usually had specific ideas or questions I wanted to address with each interviewee that weren't included in the original interviews. For my sister Olivia, for example, I asked questions specifically about her work in interior design; for my mom I asked about her work with maps as an artist on Etsy; and for my grandmother I asked specifically about the story of the family sourdough bread. These three topics were topics that I had had in mind for each interviewee since I originally developed the idea for this project. Often, these ideas were referenced vaguely in the original interview, but I wanted to spend time with each person to really emphasize a specific theme and/or idea I saw emerging in their stories.

And it's this, this movement and adjustment to each person, to each story, to their needs in the moment that I didn't feel was captured by the original description of the project in the IRB review, that isn't named in the interview protocols – it is something felt, and lived, and embodied. The questions I posed to each of my family members were about their feelings, their memories, their sensory experiences – and I wanted the interview practice itself to be dictated by these same ideas, an interviewing practice led by the senses, by our embodied experiences of memory and story, our feelings in the moment.

I've named this practice *sensory interviewing* – taking cues from Sara Pink's (2015) sensory ethnography, phenomenological methodologies, and Esther Ohito's (2021) conception of embodied reflexivity, I articulate sensory interviewing as an interviewing practice that seeks to explore the affordances of multimodal ways of gathering data that capture the lived, embodied,

and storied experiences of space and place. In Pink's (2015) book *Doing sensory ethnography*, she identifies the principles of sensory ethnography as that of perception, place, knowing, memory, and imagination – heavily drawing from theories of lived and embodied experience as deeply tied to the way we understand and interact with cultural and social knowledges. Pink articulates how, in most simple terms, “sensoriality is fundamental to how we learn about, understand and represent other people's lives” (2015). It is through the senses that we perceive the world, create a sense of place, form knowledges, understand memory, and imagine new meanings.

At several points during the book, Pink (2015) draws on phenomenological methodologies in their emphasis on the senses and the body as our “primary medium,” through which we perceive the world, as stated by phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty. “Our phenomenological experience,” Pink states, “is not of disjointed sensory sensations but is instead of a coherent multisensory world, where sounds, smells, tastes, lights, and touches amalgamate” (2015). This multisensory nature of human experience lends itself to the necessity of phenomenological methodologies, as identified by Eyles (1985) in *Senses of place*, where he articulates phenomenology as method is “an attempt to isolate and clarify that which we experience and how we experience it” (p. 33). I see sensory interviewing as an inherently phenomenological practice, a way of bringing our lived experience to the surface of our consciousness and emphasizing the value and importance of the senses as how we come to know and make meaning in the world.

By emphasizing the relationships between phenomenology and ethnography, Pink's emphasis on the *sensory* aspect of ethnography brings together the relationship between the individual lived experience and the larger social/cultural aspects that we are situated within. Pink

specifically defines sensory ethnography as departing from “the classic observational approach” to instead argue for “a reflexive and experiential process through which academic and applied understanding, knowing and knowledge are produced” (2015). Pink attributes this “classic observational approach” as promoted by the work of Atkinson, Delamont and Housley (2007) which argues that more recent approaches to ethnography have “devalued systematic analysis of action and representations, while privileging rather vague ideas of experience, evocation and personal engagement” (2007, p. 35). Pink instead argues that an increased emphasis on “experience, evocation, and personal engagement,” is not vague, but rather strengthens the work of ethnography. Ethnography, as it relates to the study of cultures, allows researchers to articulate how narratives and practices are shared across groups of people, often through immersion into the cultural context itself. Similar methodologies such as autoethnography, which draws on personal experience to understand cultural experience, and life history research, which draws on individual or collective narratives as part of a life trajectory to better understand larger social and historical contexts over time, also emphasize the connection between experience and cultural knowledges.

See this description of life history research for example:

Life history research [...] aims to unveil the rich interplay between personal experiences and broader social, cultural, and historical structures. By interweaving individual narratives with social constructs, life history research can reveal how macro-level phenomena affect micro-level experiences and vice versa (Stewart).

This relationship between the small, daily practices and experiences and larger socio-cultural theory is a crucial foundation in understanding how narratives are co-constructed over time and how patterns reveal meaning and have reverberative effects on our understanding of life, time, and complex systems of power. As I take cues from these larger methodological

practices, I want to emphasize how reflexivity, embodiment and experiential knowledges bolster this understanding of our situatedness within larger contexts.

This concept is what brings me to Esther Ohito's (2021) conception of embodied reflexivity as a methodological practice that “must be seen as a dialogue” with ourselves and with the social/cultural assumptions embedded in everything we do as researchers, taken in the form of “explicit and introspective analysis of [our] relationship to social constructs” that are relevant to the research topic. Ohito’s focus on *embodied* reflexivity more specifically emphasizes a researcher’s attunement “to her body in the present moment” as a way to give precedent to “the knowledge generated by our bodies” and the ways in which our positionalities as researchers are e/affected by our bodily experiences (2021). “Embodied reflexivity,” she states, “is about being wholly conscious of one’s own feelings and emotions in order to be fully immersed in the here and now” (Ohito, 2021).

Ohito’s emphasis on “the knowledge generated by our bodies” in her conception of embodied reflexivity, directly reminds me of a crucial article by Ramírez and Zecena (2019) in the cultural rhetorics journal *constellations*, titled, "'The dirt under my mom's fingernails': Queer retellings and migrant sensualities." In it, Ramírez and Zecena describe their specific theory of 'rhetorics of the flesh' as "a strategic writing act rooted in the assumption that *el cuerpo sabe*, *the body knows*, and it is through the senses and embodied knowledge wherein one remembers and can retell stories" (2019, emphasis added).

The body knows.

And it’s this deep attunement, this bodily knowledge, that is so central to the methodological theory of sensory interviewing and how I, as the researcher, sought to center myself in the feelings and movements and senses of what was happening around me. As I asked

my “participants” to consider their sensory experiences, as I attempted to capture part of their sensory lives through video recording, I also was in tune with my own sensory experiences and emotions – what it felt like to engage with their stories, what it felt like to be in their spaces with them; spaces that, to me, were also deeply familiar. These interviews were with three women I am extremely close to, whose experiences intersect with my own, and it is important to acknowledge this sense of intertwining in what it means to capture and reflect on the bodily experience of the home.

At the coffee shop where my sister Olivia works as a part-time baker, I film her hands as they move expertly across the counter of the kitchen – reaching for the flour, or the spatula, or to add a splash of vanilla to the dough in the industrial-sized mixer. She doesn’t have a recipe, and she sings along to the radio as if she forgot I was there.

I sit with my mother and film as she makes precise movements with her paint brush to make a perfect clean line on the painting of the map in front of her. I can tell she’s making a decision about what color to use for the next section in order to create the perfect balance.

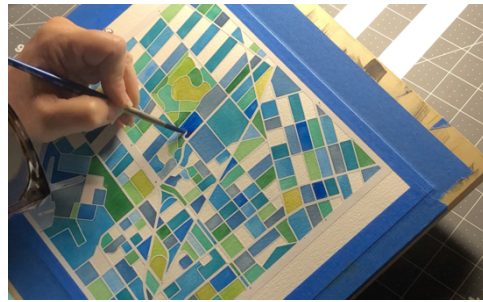


Figure 6: my sister's hands, making scones; my mother's hands, painting; my grandmother's face just barely illuminated in the dark room

I ask my grandparents if I can come over and film us watching what our family calls “Big Pictures” – an old slide projector with over 50 years-worth of slides that was always one of our favorite family past times when I was a child. We turn off all of the lights in the sewing room once my grandpa sets up the projector, and I watch as the flickering light from each photo passes over my grandmother’s face.

This, to me, is sensory interviewing. It is the lived experience of place, of home – the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches of what it is to be in a place, and of what it is to experience the world around us. Sensory interviewing is where we are right now and the ways that often, where we are right now is tied so deeply to where we’ve been – where we come from.

It is movement, it is sitting still. It’s the weather and the knickknacks on a shelf. It’s the feeling in my body when I look at a certain picture on the wall, when my mother puts her hand on the table as she walks by, when my sister sits for hours playing the piano and the way her hands move while she’s baking, and how they look the same and different from my mother’s hands as she expertly moves her paint brush. It’s how my grandmother doesn’t bake anymore, doesn’t sew anymore, how quietly her hands sit in her lap as she looks at me and smiles.

Steph Ceraso’s (2015) “A tale of two soundscapes,” describes “how the use of digital audio can tap into affordances that are simply not possible in strictly textual academic work.” Ceraso uses this medium of digital sound to create an experiential narrative that explores the one sensory aspect of what it is to be in a place as a ‘listening body’. This idea is further articulated in the introduction to Arola & Wysocki’s (2012) edited collection *Composing (media) = composing (embodiment)*, where, in her discussion of McLuhan, Wysocki states, “technologies and media enable us to extend what we can do with our given sensory apparatus” (2012, p. 4).

Media and technologies can serve as extensions of our bodies, and these relations allow for shifts and affects both ways – “our senses reflex and shift in response to these mediated engagements, and in further response we then modify our media toward our shifting ends” (Arola & Wysocki, 2012, p. 4).

There are deep affordances to the multimodality of the practice of sensory interviewing – how I am able to capture the sensory experience of the home (visuals, sound, movements) through video recording each individual’s experience of the things around them (touch, taste, smell). This process is extremely back and forth, shifting constantly to not only capture what is around me but also reflexively process my embodied experience and the embodied experiences of my family members. And so, when I go back to look at the footage, I don’t notice when the audio gets a little off, or when the video feed gets a little shaky as I follow my mother into the dining room or when I have to shift my camera to my other hand in order to take something that my grandma hands to me. Instead, I see how much there is, in each woman’s life, in their homes. How complex are their stories, how intricate their lives as they weave in and out with the stories of others, how they weave in and out with the stories of objects – family history, the memories of all the places they’ve lived, all the people they’ve met.

Ohito (2021) discusses specifically how photographs and other “personal archives” can be used to provoke and evoke memory – which she specifically uses to explore her own grief after the sudden loss of her father. “All in all,” she says, “the wide spectrum of human emotions triggered by the time-traveling process of re-viewing my father’s likeness in family photographs produced periods of weeping that were punctuated by surprising moments of laughter” (Ohito, 2021). She describes how these emotions were an important part of her grief, quoting Douglas Harper’s (2022) article, “Talking about pictures” which states how “images evoke deeper

elements of human consciousness [than] do words' (p. 13).” For this project I heavily rely on the use of images and visual storytelling – not only in the chapters of the dissertation itself, but in the way I initially gathered data, asking each person to engage in looking at photographs, videos, and daily household objects with me in order to see how these things provoked memory and story. Multimodal methods, whether in engaging with each person’s stories through multimodal means, like with images and archives, or in the gathering of the data itself, as in the capturing of footage through video recording, offer complex and rewarding affordances in specifically thinking about the home as itself a phenomenon that is more than words. It is something spatial, something embodied, something concerned with the emotion of place and how, so often, our stories are tied to objects, places, and people that surround us in the everyday.

My grandma tells me a story of the house she lived in as a little girl, her words seem to come to her more easily than they did when we spoke yesterday. I have the camera set up in the corner of my mom’s kitchen and my grandma and I sit close to each other at the kitchen table with a family history scrapbook in front of us. My mom had made the



Figure 7: my grandmother and I, looking at a scrapbook

scrapbook when I was in 8th grade as a part of a school family history project. Though it was a school project for me, I think she wanted an excuse to put together a visual history of our family – the stories and memories that might one day be lost to time. There are quoted stories from me,

my parents, my grandparents; old black and white photos; family trees. And on the page dedicated to her “Alice Albright Tucker,” she sees the photo my mom had found of the house she grew up in Longview, Texas.

“Do you remember it?” I ask.

“Of course,” she says.

When I get up a while later to check on the camera, I realized the memory card had become full at some point during the filming and had stopped recording. I had only captured about half of the stories she told me, as we looked at the scrapbook together.

What does it mean to remember?

While working on this project, I often reflected on Erin Anderson’s (2011) multimodal piece that I feel makes similar moves to what I want this project to do and to be. Her project is “devoted to the memory” of her grandmother, saying that “It is at once her life story and not a story at all. In a sense it represents the product of an intimate family collaboration and of the close journey we shared in collecting and preserving her oral history.” However, the interface for the project, Adobe Flash Player, is no longer supported by Adobe as of late 2020, leading to broken links and error messages when attempting to access the video content; and I can’t help but think of the sort of tragic irony behind the loss of accessing this content, and the unreliability of technology to serve as a perfect tool for capturing and archiving the stories we want or need to tell. She states in her introduction to the online archival article, “this project is not a product” but is rather “about *process*, and at its core it is also about *you*, about your encounter with it, and about your participation in the ongoing process of composing memory” (Anderson, 2011, emphasis original).

The ongoing process of composing memory. Is a part of this process a failure of technology? A loss of something tangible? An inability to access what we once knew? For me, this was specifically poignant as I reflected on my own irony of my memory card running out of space as I was filming a story about my grandmother's own experience of memory loss. The technological logistics of the process of videoing in general came with its issues with all three interviews – for example, I noticed a sort of hyper-awareness of the camera that doesn't always allow for true authenticity. I think about how my mother insisted I never show her her own footage, not wanting to know what she looked like on film. Or, in my grandparent's case, there was sometimes an un-awareness of the camera, moving in and out of the frame as I hurriedly followed each of them around their home, oblivious to when my camera battery died, and I had to shift to using my old iPhone 8 camera to record shaky clips of my grandpa handing me more and more old family photographs.

There was a vulnerability brought on by the video camera, and what I was asking all of my interview participants to do and engage with. It was their words, their stories, their homes, and I was asking them to share it with me, to capture it on film, to tell their stories with them.

Alexandra Hidalgo's (2017) discussion of the complexities of filming memoir identifies three processes within this practice: "remembering together," "creating together," and "editing together." The process of filmmaking, according to Hidalgo, is an inherent group project, one that allows for a constellated effort of people, relationships, and potential conflicting memories as a part of the storytelling process. I'm so interested in how interconnected my own embodiment behind the camera became to the process of filming my family. And how, at the end of the day, *they were my family* – not just my 'research participants,' but rather people who were and are deeply tied to my own sense of identity. There is an embedded relationality in this

process of engaging with my family's homes and stories that not only shaped how this process was mediated by digital and multimodal ways of meaning-making, but what it meant for me, as a sister, daughter, granddaughter to begin to tell and retell these stories of my family's lived experiences as so entangled with my own.

There were stories I felt I knew by heart.

Something already embedded within me, in my bones, after years of hearing the same ones, over and over – I asked them to once again share the words already stitched into the skin.

Tell me the story of the chair.

Tell me the story of the table.

Tell me the story of the cabinet.

You don't know these stories, not yet. But I do. I hear them in my sister's voice, my mother's voice, my grandmother's voice. I see them laid out before me, a pathway forward to... something just over the horizon, right on the edge, on the tip of my tongue.

Home.

Ramírez and Zecena (2019) describe the writing act they engage in through the stories and lives of their Latina migrant mothers and the embodied knowledges passed down through generations as a 'rhetorics of the flesh' poiesis. This poiesis they define as "a poetic and embodied way of knowing and being. It is a collision between poetry and rhetorics, and of bodies communicating in space" (Ramírez and Zecena, 2019). Not having heard the term 'poiesis' before, I initially assumed that it was related to poetry and how poetic expression and language can be used in conjunction with rhetorics to further theorize what it means to be and know.

However, while poiesis and poetry share a root word – the Greek word poiein, “to make” – poiesis is best defined as “the process of emergence.” The bringing into being something that did not previously exist. Formation. Creation.

It is more than poetry, it is an act of becoming.

The stories of my grandmother, mother, and sister are a type of generational knowledge, a type of becoming, a poiesis that allows me to start to see patterns emerge – patterns in their language, in their stories, in the way their bodies move through space. These patterns create and form meaning as a rhetorical creation process of emergence through the small, repeated, daily actions of what it means to be a body in a space.

In this dissertation I engaged in my own type of “strategic writing act” as described by Ramírez and Zecena – my own embodied experience colliding with the footage I collected, my memories, the blurry photographs on my phone, and what it felt like to write out these stories and put them in conversation with the intellectual and scholarly genealogy of the interdisciplinary scholarship of home and phenomenology and rhetorical, cultural, and feminist theory. I seek to blend of the creative – in both sense of the word, drawing on creative writing strategies of storytelling, poetry, and memoir, as well as *creation* in the way I allow patterns to bring meaning to the surface – and the critical in how I make theory from this creative work to draw conclusions for the field of rhetoric and writing in arguing for memory as scholarly, the personal as theoretical, and the everyday, mundane, forgotten things of our daily lives as rhetorically significant.

I remember the first time I encountered the term “creative critical” scholarship, through Ames Hawkins’ book on love letters sent from their father to their mother years before the two divorced, and their father’s ultimate passing from complications related to AIDS. The book is

genre-bending and ultimately brings to question where the line is between scholarly, critical work and creative writing and storytelling. As I further researched the term, I stumbled across a video “manifesto” for creative critical scholarship by Emily Orley and Katja Hilevaara, who argue: “We want to destabilize the boundaries between the critical and the creative, and in so doing enrich them both and discover a communal practice – one that relies on another (one another) for inspiration and energy, both critically and creatively.” They quote an idea from Karen Barad, who says that “it is through specific intra-actions that phenomena come to matter – in both senses of the world” to ultimately argue for this destabilization of boundaries, leading to the mantra they repeat multiple times throughout the video: *boundaries do not sit still*.

In this dissertation, I attempt to take up this mantra as I flit between poetry and scholarship, block quotes and photographs, the stories and voices from my interviews and my own questions and reflections. I seek to take cues from a wide variety of scholarship as I attempt to situate myself and the stories I want to tell within the larger field of rhetoric and writing, to build off of the work and stories that came before me. Because the boundaries of what counts as research, the boundaries of what stories matter and are worth telling, the boundaries of a discipline – they do not sit still. The critical, the creative... they are connected, like you and I are connected. Like my mother, grandmother, and sister are connected. Allowing us to make something new. It is messy at times, but hopefully conveys the sense of the importance of the stories we might sometimes look past, the stories hidden in the little things in our daily lives.

This is a rhetorics of the small.

Taking cues, sensory interviewing, embodied storytelling, multimodal theory, phenomenology, relationality – these are calls for us to pay attention. This is my methodology.

To look to the small things that might go unnoticed, the patterns that emerge when we're able to bring them to the surface of our consciousness, our very being.

The chair in the corner of the room, faded by the sunlight. The table by the window, with a crack through the center from the wood adjusting to new climates. The cabinet you pass by on your way to the kitchen, full of knickknacks and napkins.

Are you paying attention?

CHAPTER 3: THE CHAIR

There's a big blue chair in the corner of the room that looks smaller than how I remember it as a child.

It always used to sit next to the back door with a navy-blue leather ottoman at its feet. Grandma would read us books, us all piled around her, and I thought it was a chair meant for a king, a huge engulfing thing where one could stack numerous cousins on the arms, in the seat, in grandma's lap. Her voice trilled as she read; Berenstain Bears, Dr. Seuss. I can still hear it.

When my grandparents moved across the state in 2019, the big blue chair was added to the massive spreadsheet my aunt made of all of the things to be claimed by the family before selling the rest. Over forty years' worth of items, small and large; and I suppose it was only right to downsize to a more reasonably sized chair for Grandma to sit in their new home. There were no more grandkids small enough to pile into it, and Grandma didn't read us books anymore.

But we all wanted it. Every single one of the cousins that had piled into Grandma's lap since we were too small to remember added their name to the spreadsheet, staking their claim. As if the memory was calling us, carrying us, to hold, to keep, to continue. To share it with our own families, make something new.



Figure 8: The big blue chair – in Olivia's house (top), in Grandma's house (bottom) while my mother tries on her wedding dress

Grandpa put everyone's name in a hat, drawing out the name of one of us to hold onto this megalith, this monument of memory. And it was Olivia.

And I thought to myself, it's perfect. Olivia – the interior designer, lover of chairs, something about it seemed right that she should be the keeper of the chair, the one to hold the memory for us as we all grow and change, that it might be a place to come back to.

And as I walk through the fourth home she's lived in the three years she's been living in Wichita Falls, the blue chair remains.

And it sits in the corner of the room. And it looks smaller than I remember.

But it's perfect. Covered in throw pillows, faded by the sun.

It's perfect.

I think it's interesting that I don't have pictures of my grandma reading to us in the actual chair.

I automatically link the two: Grandma reading equals Grandma reading in



Figure 9: Time Travel

From left to right: Grandma (middle) reading to me (right) and my siblings, Olivia (left), and Nathan (middle). Grandma (middle) reading to me (middle) and my cousins, Rachel (left) and Naomi (right). Grandpa (left) holding a baby doll, with a young Olivia (right) in a red Teletubbies costume. My brother, Nathan, as a baby, sitting with books and stuffed animal.

the chair. But I don't have photographic evidence of it. Of course, that doesn't mean that it didn't happen, but I wonder how we know for sure.

There is a word in memory studies in philosophy called *autonoesis*, defined as a self-awareness of one's own existence in time.⁷ *Autonoesis* is used in memory studies to describe the phenomenon of a type of mental time-travel through the experience of episodic memory, through the act of recall. I'm interested in this dissonance between present, physical realities and knowledges, and the experience of shooting backwards through time, through memory, to arrive in a blurry, fluid world of half-baked images that you can't fully trust. They could easily be inspired from a photograph you saw when you were young, or a conflation of multiple different experiences, not adding up exactly to equal what you see now. The chair being smaller than how I remember it is a rather jarring sense of time-travel, as I mentally teleport to a sense of a different body, a smaller body. One whose brain is not developed to create true autobiographical memory, where sometimes it's like watching myself in 3rd person, a strange tint over my vision like I'm in a living photograph from the mid 1990s. And I wonder if my memory is created by others' stories, others' voices, that have become attached to my sense of self, in the same way I attach these memories to the objects. Did my mother tell me once that we would pile onto Grandma's big blue chair to read books? Did it become folklore, a familial legend with grandchildren piled eight high, the blue chair standing tall and proud, welcoming us in?

Did it become bigger than it itself could hold? And with time, it became weathered, frayed, faded – the inevitability of change. It sits somewhere new, now, and I want to latch onto that feeling -- the feeling like the ground shifted slightly beneath my feet as I tried to reconcile

⁷ Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Autonoesis. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/autonoesis>

my memories with the physical, material reality of my vision. My perceptions, past and present, met, crossed, converged into some new sense of reality. Where both are true at once, true in their contradictions and inconsistencies as we time travel through what it is to change. To grow up, to outgrow, and to figure out what it is to remember.

My sister sits at an old piano, her back toward me in her newest house in Wichita Falls, Texas – a strange green oasis close to the Oklahoma border. She has a tattoo of a hand on the back of her arm – a drawing inspired by Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* in the Sistine Chapel – and I liked her explanation for why it was just *inspired* by it instead of a true depiction. She wanted the hand to be a little more active, unlike Adam's original limpness, as if it had already been imbued with the gift of life, as if it were reaching.

The piano is her roommate's, handed down from a grandmother, and it was the first thing she showed me when I walked through the door, out of the Texas heat. Unlike her last house, this newest move includes air conditioning that actually works, which we both breathe in as we walk inside, somehow already sweating from the few steps it took to walk from the car to the front door.



Figure 10: Olivia, playing the piano

The piano is a warm brown, the bench seat is upholstered with a faded striped fabric, and Olivia's hair is catching the sun from the huge front windows, making it look almost blonde. Her

voice carries through the melody of the song she has pulled up on her phone, finding her way to the chords, and I can't help but remember when she could only play one song on the keyboard our parents got her for Christmas when she was ten. I didn't know she was relearning to play.

Olivia moved to Wichita Falls in the summer of 2020, exactly one month before I moved to Michigan, in the middle of quarantining for COVID-19. I remember driving into town to help her move into her apartment and realizing that she and I had never lived in different cities from one another before. We both were truly striking out on our own for the first time in our lives, at the same time. Our poor mother, two-thirds an empty nester in one go.

And I think she found a home there.

It took a while, no doubt. I remember when the winter storm took out the power grid throughout the entire state of Texas, only a couple of months after she had moved, and my mom said that Olivia called my dad crying because she realized she was alone. She couldn't go anywhere, do anything. Olivia had never been much of a crier, had always been the more stoic of the two of us, unlike me who would cry at the drop of a hat. I think my dad had to physically stop himself from getting in his car during a blizzard to drive 3 hours to get to her. To be alone, in a dark apartment, miles away from the people that love you. She just wanted to go home.

But now she sits at her roommate's grandmother's piano, and we're waiting for her friends to arrive for a Tuesday night get together, and there are brownies in the oven. The song she's singing is about home.

I want a house with a crowded table

And a place by the fire for everyone

Let us take on the world while we're young and able
And bring us back together when the day is done.⁸

Olivia has always had a different way of moving through space, a different type of vision. To this day I don't think I've ever met anyone who sees the world the same way she does, with a type of clarity I could never seem to possess. She could always look at things and see their whole and move them into place like a puzzle. When we were children, we would play with Barbies, and the homemade doll house handed down from my mother was always immaculate, the furniture placed just-so. We would boss each other around over whose room was whose, and she would always seem to win even though I felt my status as the older sister should've held more weight. Still to this day if she tells me to do something I'll do it, some part of me trusting implicitly in what she's able to see.

When she and I spoke about our memories of our various childhood homes, she talked about the floor plan of the house, about how the curtains were arranged, sights and sounds buried deep within the back of my mind. The sound of our brother's hot wheels in the hallway, the exact shade of green in the dining room we never used.

I think of our house in Celina and I picture really the dining room, which is weird because we never spent time in there, but I picture the first room when you walk in the front door [...] I picture the table and the color of that room, a brownish-greenish [...] those are the things I see, the colors of our childhood home – the reds and the greens and the browns, and the fabric that was on her kitchen chairs that were striped.

...Basically the space, I picture the space. And honestly, if I really thought through it, I could probably walk through in detail what every drawer held, where like, all this stuff is. I know what color the cabinets were, what this looked like, where Nathan sat, where the TV was, what Christmas tree went... Almost in great detail of where everything was kept. [...] the fabrics, the colors, the space, the who sat, where, when we ate, like, because you we were consistent about it, right?

⁸ Song title: Crowded House, by the Highwomen

I totally can picture the space. I don't know if it's like, bigger in my head too, since I was a kid, but I'm like, I could draw the floor plan and, like, tell you where everything was and, like, what color was, the doors and the long hallway. The sound of the hallway... the sound of the hot wheels raising down the hallway...

She paid attention.

She knew how to cook when she was seven, just from watching our mother, when I still didn't know how to turn on the stove. We would joke about her being a chef when she grew up, a ballerina, a CEO, a doctor, a spy. And so when she decided on her major in college, I was honestly surprised by her choice of interior design. I shouldn't have been, it made sense when you looked at the whole picture, but I expected something more exciting, maybe – something that felt bigger, something where she could change the world with the wave of her hand. But then one evening I was home while we were in college, and she had just started her first classes and she started talking about chairs. And I was never able to get it out of my head how she talked about them – the history, the complexity to this everyday thing I take for granted.

There was this one assignment, which she described to me as both her favorite and least favorite assignment from her entire college career that asked the students in her class to draw accurate depictions of historical chairs throughout the centuries. And that there was this moment where something clicked, when she realized that the point of the assignment wasn't actually about chairs at all, in the sense that it was *only* about chairs – just chairs. She recently explained to me what she meant.

She said, “We were looking at all of this furniture, and there was this chair from, I don't even know what era, so long ago, that was really tiny because women wore hoop skirts so they

would put their whole skirt over it and then perch.” She even sat up from the couch to demonstrate, her hands held up by her chest as if she were a bird about to take flight. She continued by referencing chairs from Ancient Egypt, Federal America, saying how they each functioned “based on the culture and the space.”

She continued,

And then moving into midcentury, you get more comfortable chairs based off of the ergonomics of the human body. And desk chairs that are comfortable for people for the first time. And even just a wing backed chair versus a comfortable sofa, a lounge sofa. Versus a La-Z-boy compared to le Corbusier’s chair that looks so uncomfortable until you sit in it, and it feels right. Based off of human proportions, based off of function, *and* style.



Figure 11: The classic La-Z-boy versus le Corbusier's chair

And essentially, for Olivia, to see these chairs laid out, in order, sprawling across the page, you could visually make connections, you could actually *see* how a chair could represent where we were in human history. How every famous chair has a story, some reason it was designed for some specific purpose, and how those needs and purposes changed over time. How we’ve evolved to understand the body, how our bodies move, how we use a space, and that we’ve been doing that since the beginning of time. And that with all of these purposes, all of these stories, and evolutions of what we need our chairs to do and be, their function now is the same as their function was thousands of years ago, to sit.

They’re just chairs. But by being just chairs, we’re able to tap into a whole world of culture and history and bodies and how bodies function in space, and how interior design is

meant to enter into this intersection and make intentional, conscious moves based on what is there, and what is needed and how, exactly, to make a change.

From interview with Olivia, June 2023:

When you're doing a design project, the first thing that you should do is get to know how they function in the space. Not the goals of what this looks like, but what do you want your house to *be* like, thinking spatially.

Is your living room where you sit? Or is that where you host? Is your bedroom where you spend your time? Do you have a long makeup routine, where you'll want a vanity? Do you have kids? Do you have animals? Do you have family in town or only out of town? Because then that matters if you'll maybe need a guest bedroom. Does your family cook together, or do you just cook? Do you want your kids to play in their rooms, or the living room? Do you have young kids and need to be able to see them when they're outside? That's where we would put a window, with a chair facing it.

You have to know how they function; you have to know the goals of what they want their home life to be like.

Then you ask, what's your favorite color?"

Within interior design studies there is a design principle born out of the industrial design and architecture movement of the 19th and 20th centuries, which states that "the shape of a building or object should primarily relate to its intended function or purpose." This design principle is titled, simply, Form Follows Function. The maxim, coined by Louis Sullivan in 1896, was a part of an article titled *The tall office building artistically considered*, which ended up being a fascinating article to read in consideration of the ideas in this dissertation.

Known as the Father of Skyscrapers, Sullivan (1896) provides the following context from which this maxim is born:

Whether it be the sweeping eagle in his flight, or the open apple-blossom, the toiling workhorse, the blithe swan, the branching oak, the winding stream at its base, the drifting clouds, over all the coursing sun, form ever follows function, and this is the law. Where

function does not change form does not change. The granite rocks, the ever-brooding hills, remain for ages; the lightning lives, comes into shape, and dies in a twinkling.

It is the pervading law of all things organic and inorganic, of all things physical and metaphysical, of all things human and all things superhuman, of all true manifestations of the head, of the heart, of the soul, that the life is recognizable in its expression, that form ever follows function. This is the law.⁹

Life is recognizable in its expression. What a fascinating concept. We are shaped by what we do, and we shape the world based on the needs around us.

I don't want to take Sullivan too out of context here, but his style of writing necessitates almost philosophical thought on what it is to be and do and to make – theories of things as a precursor to theories of design, and of art. Strangely enough, I don't know if I agree with the maxim itself. I find the "following" aspect of form and function to inspire a type of hierarchy between the two concepts that I doubt was originally intended. In my brief research on the history of the phrase, it seems as though it was eventually taken to mean a rejection of the ornamental as superfluous, as without 'function' – almost utilitarian in its emphasis on work and usefulness. The reason I believe this to be a misinterpretation of the original idea is that Sullivan's designs heavily feature ornamental elements – his designs speak to his belief in the value in beauty, in detail, in art. So what, then, does this mean for form following function?

Sullivan's (1896) final paragraph of the article ends with a call for architects, as artists, to find in themselves an art of individual expression and to accept 'Nature,' as in the living, natural world around us, as that which "suggest[s] to us so much that is rhythmical, deep, and eternal in the vast art of architecture, something so deep, so true, that all the narrow formalities, hard-and-fast rules, and strangling bonds of the schools cannot stifle it in us." The thesis, therefore, of the

⁹ To be clear, his perception of this concept as "law," I assume means a type of "law of nature" which I find to be bit beyond the scope of what I'm talking about in this section. Does form always follow function in nature? This is a bit beyond me.

article is not so much about form and function, but about what the outside world has to teach us as artists, as creators, and how this allows us to push past the boundaries put upon us by societal pressures. He asks readers to look to the things around us and gain a sense of their essences, or, the "essence of things," as he puts it – what we see when we peer beneath the surface.

The relationship between form and function was central to the ideas in Olivia's discussion of interior design. She articulated function as an issue of how we live our lives, how we use space, our habitual behaviors. That there is something *more* to design than simply "liking how it looks," rather, "liking how it looks" is a way of enhancing these experiences, by enhancing aesthetic. Good design, for Olivia, takes all of it into consideration. In her words, "Function meeting beauty is where you find the sweet spot. I think we lose a lot of quality when we just look at beauty, and we lose a lot of quality when we just look at function." She is concerned with the *how* of home, thinking beyond mere appearance.

For example, when we were talking about why chairs have been such a focus for her in thinking about larger ideas of interior design, she drew this parallel between chairs and the home itself:

It's like a house. It tells you so much more about somebody, I think, than you realize. Because it's... 'oh, I don't sit there, I just look at that one' versus, 'I sit in that one,' you know? To me, it's really weird when we have chairs that we don't sit in, because why do you have a chair? Literally, the function of a chair is to sit in it.

So I love chairs more than other types of furniture, I guess there's so much more going on. Like a sofa, realistically, they're all kind of the same. But a chair, it matters how high the seat is and how deep it is and how heavy it is. Does it stay there, or is it supposed to be able to move around?

Me: You like the form and function.

Olivia: Right? I like the form and the function. And to me, the big scale of that is the space of the home and the little scale is the chair."

Though "form" as a term can be in reference to beauty and external appearance, it is also defined as the shape and structure of a thing, the nature of a thing, a kind of thing, and a mold from which something is made. As a verb, it is to shape, to construct, to combine, to arrange, to come into existence. Function, on the other hand, is simply synonymized as 'purpose,' or rather, "the action for which a person or thing is specially fitted or used or for which a thing exists."¹⁰ With this definition in mind, it is easy to see how both Sullivan and Olivia find themselves enamored with function – a purpose that dictates why a thing exists. For Sullivan, this comes down to the very nature of life itself, that purpose is discoverable, accessible, if we look beneath the surface to see the truth that form can tell us about the function of a thing. For form *ever* follows function, this is the law. For Olivia, function is linked more directly to action – what we do, what things do. Function is concerned with life – the function of a home is to live in it, in the same way the function of the chair is to sit in it. Form, for Olivia is concerned with appearance, often beauty, with how things look to us, with how things look to others. But I'm interested in this deeper aspect of form – of how things are made, are shaped to be a certain way.

And I think it's here, in this entanglement of form and function, where Olivia's theories of the home really start to take shape – the home as a site of living, of tangible objects that affect us while we affect them, and the people with whom we're with creating a mutual construction of memory, story, and what it is to *matter*.

Me: What does "home" mean to you?

¹⁰ Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Form. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/form>
Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Function. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/function>

Olivia: Home is where I live. It's where I sleep, it's where I eat. It's where I cook, where I go to the bathroom, it's where all of my stuff is. But I also think it's where I'm most free to be myself, have my rhythms and my routine. It's where I include people and make them welcome into my life. Like, I think someone doesn't really know you, like *really*, if they haven't been to your home.

Home is where I relax, but in other ways it's also where I work (because you don't have to do chores at other people's houses).

It's... it's where I live, that's how I would describe it. But living in your home includes all parts – you do everything about your life in your home in some aspect. Like, I *live*. I sleep, I eat, I drink, I work, I play, I rest, I hang out, I'm alone, I think, I don't think. It's where you're at your best and at you're worst, probably. It's a lot of things, it *holds* a lot. Physically and emotionally.

[Interview with Olivia, June 2023]

In phenomenological studies, there is a concept called ready-to-hand that allows for an entrance into the discussion of form and function as a phenomenological issue and is central to the idea of home as phenomena. Coined by Martin Heidegger in *Being in Time*, ready-to-hand refers to that which is in reach, the daily objects that serve their purpose in a way that makes them fade into the background of our perception. Ahmed elaborates on this concept, "the nearness of the hammer, the fact that it is available to me, is linked to its usefulness; it is near as it enables me to perform as specific kind of work. [This] is interesting to Heidegger, insofar as it is something to do with what the hammer 'is.'" (Ahmed, p. 47). I find ready-to-hand interesting in the same way Ahmed does, in analyzing Heidegger's example of the hammer – the nearness of objects and the purpose of objects are thereby linked, but most importantly this reveals how the concept of ready-to-hand is most chiefly concerned with the relationship between us and objects, and the function of the objects telling us something about the form of the objects – what the hammer *is* is linked to what the hammer does.

The hammer as an example, in my opinion, is a bit overused in discussions of ready-to-hand, though it makes sense as the simplest version of what Heidegger is focused on in this particular section of *Being in Time* – equipment. Thinking about tools, where their intrinsic function is to be useful, to be used, makes for an interesting discussion of the nature of function itself, and how it relates to our perception of that usefulness. But what if instead of the hammer, we looked at ready-to-hand through the lens of the chair? Though 'ready-to-hand' in this case might take a slightly more indirect meaning (would it be more like ready-to-sit?), I do think chairs symbolize the most important aspect of readiness-to-hand – they are within reach. This consideration of the relationship between proximity, nearness, and familiarity is a necessary discussion within the topic of home as a site of living, and the everyday objects that make up what it is to be at home. The chair is a pinnacle of this everydayness, while also representing the ready-to-hand concept beautifully – it's as if they wait to be sat in, to be used – built for our bodies, the chair makes a space for us to be, if we only move towards it with the intention of doing the thing for which it was made, and we take a seat.

Ready-to-hand is often used in comparison with its counter idea – present-at-hand. When I first encountered this term, I was confused as to how "present-at" is in opposition with "ready-to." I was, however, missing a crucial aspect of what distinguishes ready-to-hand as a concept. "Readiness-to-hand" involves transparency – when use becomes so routine that it falls out of our sight and awareness. To break this down further, let us look to Heidegger's actual words in describing "readiness-to-hand:"

The less we just stare at the hammer-thing, and the more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is—as equipment. The hammering itself uncovers the specific ‘manipulability’ of the hammer. The kind of Being which equipment possesses—in which it manifests itself in its own right—we call ‘readiness-to-hand’. (*Being and Time* 15: 98)

Though there is much to unpack in this quote, the key for me here is within the first sentence – the less we stare; the more we use. The function of the chair becomes more apparent when we actually use it, when we sit, and less when we take the time to fully examine the chair itself. This, then, is in contrast to present-at-hand, which comes into being often when the thing is broken, or when the chair is not able to perform its function. And suddenly, we notice. We become hyper aware of the thing's function and are forced to look intently at the thing in order to fix it, or, in the case of a chair that was meant to be comfortable, we perhaps buy a new one, hoping that it will better shape itself to our bodies.

The best example of this idea I've heard did not come from an article about 'ready-to-hand,' specifically but rather Olivia's descriptions to me over the years of what interior design can and should aim towards. The example she always gave was of a light switch – when you walk into an unfamiliar room that is dark and you fumble for the light. Is the switch where it 'should' be? If it is, if your hands will go to where you think it should be, and you find it – the lights are on, you move on with your day – no real thought goes to the light switch, to what a light switch does, so that the room may be illuminated and you are able to see and do the things you are wanting to do. If the light switch is not where you think it should be, oh how aware we are of our need for light. Your hands skim the walls near the door thinking it must be up, down, further to the left. You eventually give up, walking across the room, hands outstretched, thinking it must be on the opposite wall somewhere. Once you eventually find it, wherever it ended up being seems positively ridiculous to you, why would it be *there*? The light switch, therefore, is present-at-hand – we are more aware now of where it is and what it does than we *should* be. According to Olivia, the design of the placement of the light switch should be thoughtless to the

user, practically invisible. If you notice, you're doing it wrong. If you notice, it's not ready-to-hand.

I attribute this invisibility to more than just good design, rather, I see it as just as much an issue of familiarity and the act of inhabitation. Ahmed does interesting work in describing the process of moving homes – how her body moves through the rooms of the new house, as if to stretch herself to fit into every unfamiliar corner. She says, "In stretching myself out, moving homes for me is coming to inhabit spaces, coming to embody them, where my body and the rooms in which it gathers – sitting, sleeping, writing, acting as it does, in this room and that room – ceases to be distinct" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 11). It's this 'ceasing to be distinct' that I want to emphasize – what is the process over time in which space becomes routine? Ahmed discusses the feeling of walking blindfolded into a familiar vs unfamiliar space – "in a familiar room we have already extended ourselves" allowing us to reach out, touch the corner of a table and know which way we are facing. The question of orientation, therefore, is ultimately concerned with "how we come to 'feel at home'" (2006, p. 7). Familiarity and inhabitation are linked – Ahmed claims that familiarity is an *effect* of inhabitation, the effect of "reach[ing] out toward objects that are already within reach" (2006, p. 7). This 'already in reach' seems to put an emphasis not only on the concept of everyday objects, like the chair or the hammer, but also the way the spaces we are in can themselves influence what is proximal and near.

As an example of this, I spoke with Olivia regarding the way in which design decisions are directly influenced by the ways people move through space, but also serve as a way to dictate this same movement. Or rather, in her words, "intentional choices can really affect what you do in a room." She gives the example of her and her roommate not having a TV in their living room.

...not having a TV in a living room changes how you use your living room, right? My TV lives in my closet because I don't have a spot in here that I feel like, 'oh, that's where the

TV would go.' And for me, when people come over, if there's a TV in the room, you turn the TV on. And if there's not, you have to choose to watch a movie, because you're like, 'Well, I gotta go get the TV.' But these choices... if you don't have a big kitchen table, you're not going to eat in the kitchen, you will eat in the living room. And some of that is you choos[ing] houses that have these things, but the design of a home: where a light switch is, where outlets are, determines where you put lamps. So that determines where you sit to read, that is significant.

Though the living room itself necessitated them pausing to consider if there was anywhere for a TV to go, they made an intentional choice to store the TV in the closet and bring it out only when they wanted to watch a movie with friends or catch up on a TV show. This simple change has directly affected the way that they think about watching TV, it's never just 'on' as background noise, as a default activity. This has shifted the way in which Olivia and her roommate function in the space itself, and I can't help but think about how many small instances of this back and forth – the space affecting people, people affecting space, the space affecting people – took place within this one example. The location of the object in question, the TV, and its proximity to the living space, determined the human response to and interactions with this object. However, the initial setup of the space was what led them to the decision to locate the object in that particular way. Therefore, I would argue that the TV in this instance falls more under the category of present-at-hand rather than ready-to-hand, as it is located in such a way as to be farther away from the space where it is typically used, creating the need for intentional decisions leading to its use. This lack of 'default' as Olivia put it, of picking up the remote to turn on the TV without thought, creates a hyper-awareness of what the TV is for, its function.

Therefore, this back and forth of shaping and being shaped by is key to understanding how form and function are perhaps meant to be understood together in tandem – to the point where I wonder if the 'ever' in form ever following function implies an almost cyclical relationship between the two terms, instead of a hierarchical perception of form ever trailing

behind the superior function. Ahmed (2006) articulates this back and forth, "the actions performed on the object (as well as with the object) shape the object. The object in turn affects what we do..." (p. 43). Action to object, object to action. It implies a series of complex relationships between space, objects, bodies, actions/interactions, and the intentionality of human choice (or consciousness, as it is often referred to in phenomenology) and the way that encounters between these things leave impressions on the others.

A chair is a chair because you sit in it, a chair is a chair when you sit in it. A chair is shaped, sometimes literally, to your body, to the action of sitting. The way the cushion is indented on your favorite chair, tailored to the way *you* sit, and yet, it is your favorite chair for a reason – some form of extra comfort that it brings, or even where it is located, allowing you the perfect view out the window. This affected you sitting there in the first place, often enough for you to leave an impression. In one example, Ahmed (2006) uses tables to introduce this same idea – "what we do with the table, or what the table allows us to do, is essential to the table. [...] Doing things 'at' the table is what makes the table what it is and not some other thing" (p. 45). This idea rang in my mind as similar to something Olivia said in reference to how it is that she remembers our childhood homes.

All of the memories attached to all of the homes she's lived in are, she says "more people-based than they are house-based." Even though, Olivia says, space has such influence, "it's way more about what you *do* in the space, how you use the space. What it sounds like, what it's full of."

She says:

The memory of the table is important but that's because of what we *did* at the table – it's not about the table. It [the table] is *literally* meaningless. Unless you're talking about this crazy piece of art or something really special *because* it's special – things are holding

meaning because they hold meaning, not because they are a thing. And even home is doing that -- home vs house.

She gestured when saying this last line as if to indicate the commonality of the phrase -- house vs home. Like she was acknowledging the cliché baked into the discussion of home as a topic -- that a house does not equal a home, that a 'home' means something *more*. And what Olivia seems to indicate here that this more-ness is about what we *do* in the home, what we do at the table. We give the things their meaning by using them, by existing with them, and sometimes by the simple act of giving them meaning because we say they do. A home has meaning because we lived there -- *we* lived there, together. It's interesting then, that Ahmed (2006) continues her discussion of the table to say that "the people who are 'at' the table are also part of what makes the table itself," implying the importance of the 'who' in addition to the 'what' (p. 45). What are the people doing at the table, what are they doing with each other? What kinds of interactions between people are shaped by the shape of the table, and how do these interactions, in turn, shape the table? I'm thinking about the scratches on the surface, stains, pen marks, evidence of life. The impressions that we leave and are left on the spaces and objects around us tell a story.

To quote Ahmed (again):

This table, you might say, has a story. What a story it could tell. What we need to recall is how the 'thisness' of this table does not, as it were, belong to it: what is particular about this table, what we can tell through its biography, is also what allows us to tell a larger story: a story not only of 'things' changing hands, but of how things come to matter by taking shape through and in the labor of others. (2006, p. 45)

I'm interested in this larger story -- *how things come to matter by taking shape through and in the labor of others*. So often are the histories, memories, and stories that come to matter for us in objects a result of the labor, care, and effort put into either the making or upkeep of the objects, or the labor done in, around, and with the objects. I think about my Grandma's old blue chair, that now sits in Olivia's newest house. I think about how she would sit with us and read. I

think about how her story matters, I think about how the chair being passed down – finding a new home, how these histories matter. I think it matters because of the photographs I have of us sitting in it – playing, reading – how it triggers memory in me, how it triggers memory in Olivia. And we share that, together.

"So the story of the chair is... Grandma's house is home, right?"

She turns away from me to look at the chair in the corner. "And it's a big chair, so we could all snuggle up in it – all the grandkids could kind of pile around. And she would read us a book. Or whenever we would watch a movie or do Big Pictures on the projector at Grandkids camp, or just with family, everyone fought over this chair. So then when Grandma and Grandpa were moving and downsizing, there was the list of things they were going to get rid of – the list of things they were going to sell or give away. And this made it on the list, which was a shock to me. It blows me away. But it's because Grandma wanted a recliner."

"So, it came time, and the whole thing with the spreadsheet was that you put your name on the stuff want and then whoever put it there gets it. And every single grandkid put their name next to this chair. And so it was either raffle style or choose a number between 1 and 10, I don't remember, but I won the chair.

"And every person that sits in it is like, 'where did you get this chair? This chair is awesome.' And it's my grandma chair. And I plan on keeping it forever.

"It's kind of gross now, and so faded on one arm, but it's also still really comfortable. And a great place to like, have a cup of coffee there..." she points. "Snuggle up there, while the sun comes in the window in the morning."

I can picture it.

"And the memory... just, all of it. And I feel victorious, like I won the chair – I win, I'm the best grandkid." She holds up her arms in victory, and I laugh.

"That's how it *feels*," she explains. "Even though I know it wasn't a choice, it was a raffle. But it feels really good."

Olivia says home is a breath, like the deep breath she takes as she walks through the threshold.

Olivia says home is kicking off your shoes when you walk through the door.

Olivia says home is meant to be shared, meant to be welcoming, meant to be lived in. She says she hopes that she would still "invite people to my home even if it didn't look the way I wanted it to... It doesn't always have to be put together."

To go back to Sullivan and his 1896 article that sparked the industrial motto of form ever following function, back to his argument for the need for 'tall office buildings' before the term skyscrapers ever was coined, the final line seems to be an argument for why this work matters – why the work of the architect might be something that lasts, how we push towards "an art that will live." And why will this art be an art that lives? Sullivan gives an answer – "because it will be of the people, for the people, and by the people."

It's about *relationships* – between people and stories, actions, interactions, and what it is to live and be with others. There is complexity in the relationships between people, and the way that these relationships are shaped by the space in which we are, and how we in turn shape those spaces. The objects around us show evidence of the impressions we leave, of how our bodies intersect with these tangible things. And that through these impressions, through these

relationships, with others, with space, with objects, we can start to see how stories and memories are wonderfully entangled with the tangible.

Did you know that it matters how heavy a chair is? The weight dictates how the chair is used, its size, its shape – it dictates if the chair is meant to be moved. The portable versus the permanent. The portable chair - ready to be brought out at a moment's notice, ready to be picked up or brought out when the need arises, or even the chair around a table, always ready to rearranged, ready to welcome someone in; versus the permanent chair - the chair planted in the corner, meant to last, meant to stay, meant to always be there for you to fall into after a long day, always familiar.

When Olivia told me this, it's like something clicked – my understanding of why form and function are so endlessly tied. And for me, it always came back to the Grandma chair.

Olivia: It's a comfy chair that stays where it is. You can't move it, it's hard to get in and out of rooms, for sure. But you can sit two people in it. And you stay for a long time, you talk in that chair.

Me: And when we were little that's where Grandma read to us.

Olivia: That's where Grandma read to us. So it matters.

Me: Because we could all fit.

Olivia: Because we could all fit.

CHAPTER 4: THE TABLE

The table was born in East Texas, deep in the green woods of the small town of Gladewater, where my mother spent her childhood roaming through the forest, behind the barn where the blackberry bushes once tore at my arms as a child, next to the chicken coup, by the fire pit where we would sit for hours, watching the smoke go up towards the stars. The trees were tall and thin, and the leaves would crunch under your feet as you walked back behind the garage, past the tree swing, past the zinnias and tomatoes in the garden, towards the workshop where my grandfather turned these trees into tables.

My mother had requested the biggest table she could get, one that would fit as many people around it as she wanted – one that would fill the empty space of the dining room at the entrance to our house in Celina, Texas that we never used. And so my grandpa planed and sanded the table into perfection, just before my mom took hammers and chains to beat dents into the surface for a more distressed look, as was popular at the time – my grandfather looked on in horror. But she wanted it to look lived in, like it had already lived a full life before we took it home.

She built it tall enough to accommodate my dad's 6'4" frame that couldn't usually fit his knees under most tables. She built



Figure 12: The table in my grandpa's workshop

it wide enough so that, in her words, "you could fit a whole bunch of food in the middle, and still have enough space for your plate."

She built it to fit, to fill, to stay.

And it did.

I remember crafts, I remember birthday parties, I remember long late-night talks with my dad. I remember growing and changing and moving in and around this massive piece of my mother's childhood home that she brought home to us, made it ours.

And then I remember leaving.

We packed and sold and cried – at least my mother did – yet I remember being ecstatic, a feeling like being set free, unleashed into a world that was different and new. The house was empty, and I remember my mom looking back with a pain that I didn't understand, not yet. I remember only looking forward.

The table, meanwhile, went to live back with my grandparents, in the same workshop where it was made. And there it sat for three years, waiting.

And waiting.

While we had other tables, other stories, other surfaces that housed the crafts and the parties and the long late-night talks with my dad.

But it knew, because my mother knew, that we would always always be back.

And now it sits here in Lubbock, Texas, with a crack through its center from the warping of East Texas wood in a West Texas climate. And yet it fits in this house just like it did in the carousel of rent houses we lived in before my parents bought this one – it fits like it was built for the space. The scratches on the surface are familiar, like a map of what we did, where we've

been, who we've brought in to sit around the table with us – holding us now just as it held us then, with just a different view through the window.

Is place in our bones?

In forensic science and anthropology, studies have revealed that the isotopic composition in skeletal material can reveal "the geographic region that an animal or human inhabited" throughout different stages of an organism's life – our movements, our birthplace.¹¹ We can look back throughout history and learn about the movements and changes of groups of people, we can trace living things back to what they ate and where they lived.

So, yes. In a true, embodied sense, where we are from, our movements and migrations are a part of our material make-up – our bones are like maps of where we've been and where we are, logging 'place' in our bodies.

But does place also do more than that? Does it live inside us through the stories we tell? Do we carry it with us in memory, in the way your stomach feels when you drive by the old house you used to live in? Do we *feel* it in our bones, this knowledge, this memory of place? Is it what causes this call to return, in the same way we sometimes feel the call to leave in the first place?

Me: What does "home" mean to you?

Mom: That is a big one. So home is... is just where you live. Like a physical place. But I suppose it's really more than that, because it's where you hopefully feel safe, and you're with people that you love and love you. And you make memories. And you perform the functions of life – eating, sleeping, bathing, but you also laugh and grow and become who you are.

¹¹ Beard BL, Johnson CM. Strontium isotope composition of skeletal material can determine the birth place and geographic mobility of humans and animals. J Forensic Sci. 2000 Sep;45(5):1049-61. PMID: 11005180.

[Interview with my mother, June 2023]

Gladewater, Texas

My mother was born in Houston, Texas on July 15th, 1970. Her father had a job with Case, an agricultural machinery company, and they moved several times in the first four years of my mother's life, once in Memphis, Tennessee where her little brother was born, until they finally settled in Gladewater, Texas on a street called Iris Drive.



And it was in this house that she lived until she moved away for college at 18, and where her parents, my grandparents, stayed until just a few years ago when they moved to Lubbock to be closer to my mother. It's this house that I remember from my childhood too – the trees, the barn, the ivy-covered walls leading to the big back porch.



Figure 13: My mother in her childhood kitchen, my mother at her desk in her room

And as we sat, far away from that childhood home, I asked her to remember how it felt to be in that place – where she liked to *be* when she was growing up – her favorite place, her comfort place. I asked her what she saw – what did she picture when she pictured that house, what came to mind? And her answer, somehow, always came back to tables.

Me: Tell me about your childhood home.

Mom: I was there from age four, until I went off to college. So I count that as my whole life because that's what I remember. And I'm grateful that we lived in one place for all of that time. Because yeah, it you truly make it your own. I mean, my family, we lived out in the country. We had a garden. We had animals, dogs, cats, chickens, a cow. Lots of

things. We had land so it was more than just a home on a city lot. It was larger. And it was a lot of work for my parents, I know to maintain all of that. But it was kind of an idyllic place to grow up as a kid.

Me: What do you picture? What do you see?

Mom: Probably the kitchen table. Like within the home, the kitchen table. We always had dinner as a family around the table. And so even if we had been playing outside all day or off at school or work, we would try to all be home and have dinner together around the table.

Me: What was your favorite place to be?

Mom: In my room, I'm an introvert. And I was the only girl in our family so I spent a lot of time at my desk in my room and I would draw or paint. I had no problem being by myself. I would also play with my brothers outside and with neighborhood kids. But yeah, within the home, probably my room and then just probably in the kitchen with my mom would be the other spot.

Like up on the counter. Yeah, I had like a spot I would sit on the kitchen counter. Unless she had me doing something. Chop this or do that.

What did she see? The kitchen table. Her favorite place to be? Her room, but not just in

her room... at her desk, where she would draw and paint and craft for hours on end. And she loved being in the kitchen with her mother, sitting up on the surface of the kitchen counter, or being given task after task. And isn't a kitchen counter its own kind of table? A surface in which we *do* things, make things, move in and around.

For as long as I can remember my grandparents have had the same table – one that could

be shortened or lengthened with leaves depending on how many people needed to be seated. I remember when one of the leaves went missing at some point, and my grandpa had to make a custom replacement to fit perfectly into place. Growing up, the table would always be at its longest in order to accommodate the numerous grandkids and aunts and uncles, but I imagine



Figure 14: My mother and father at the table on my mother's 25th birthday, with zinnias from the garden as a center piece

when my mother was a child, it was probably much smaller. There are numerous pictures over the years at the table, of the grandkids, of birthday parties, holidays. There was always fresh sweet tea, the room was alight with the huge windows on three of the four walls, with red and blue stained-glass pieces hanging from each one.

I knew the table itself was old, as most things were in my grandparents' house growing up, full of heirlooms and antiques, but when I was talking with my grandpa about this project as we walked through their new home in Lubbock, we stopped at the old cabinet in the kitchen which my mom had always called 'Grandma's cabinet.' I had always assumed this meant that it had belonged to *her* grandmother, but my grandpa corrected me to tell me that it had belonged to *his* grandmother. Then he pointed at the table in the other room, the one I grew up with, the one my mother grew up with, and said, "it went with that table. That was her kitchen table, and this was her kitchen cabinet." My mom and I later tried to do the math, and though we don't know when the table was originally bought or made, we can say with certainty that it is at *least* 100 years old, if not 150. Imagine the places it has been, the things it has seen – even before it sat for so many years in Gladewater before it moved all the way across the state to now sit in Lubbock.

Lubbock, Texas

My mother moved to Lubbock for the first time in the late 80s for her freshman year of college. My dad was the first boy she met on campus, and she always said she knew immediately that he was the one, even if it took a little longer for him to come to the same conclusion. She said she didn't exactly *want* to move 500 miles away from home – it was 500 miles exactly, she checked – from the driveway of her parent's house to the dorms. She knew the route by heart, which gas stations had the best prices, what shortcuts to take. And when she arrived that first

semester to move into the dorms, her mother helped her decorate to feel more at home, even going so far as to sew pillows so that everything would match.

Moving from this family home into half of a dorm room... and of course my precious mom, we decorated – she sewed pillows and everything matched and it was just... we made the most of it. But yes, leaving home and starting somewhere new, that was a big deal. And I had just turned 18 when I did that. [...] I don't even really know how I did that, emotionally. It was pretty scary because I didn't know anyone. But yeah, I do remember setting up that space and making it a little cute and organized. In college, you know, you go out and you go to class and you meet people but then you still have that space to come back to at the end of the day where you feel comfortable.

[Interview with my mom, June 2023]

She said the first time she visited Texas Tech University she knew it was where she had to be, there was just something about Lubbock, about the campus – the Spanish architecture, the spring winds, the crystal-clear blue sky that only seems to happen in the desert. And, it was the school that had the best program for what she wanted to do – graphic design.



Figure 15: My mother in her dorm room in Lubbock, Texas

My parents were both art majors, but my mother never felt like she truly fit in with the other art students – she wasn't 'artsy' enough. They were all more like my dad with big emotions and abstract thoughts that spewed themselves onto the canvas – or the ones with a talent for hyperrealism, bringing our known world to life through drawing or paint or sculpture. She always felt stuck in between, which is why the graphic design concentration always stood out to her and fit so well. As a child she would sit for hours in her room with cut paper and put together

landscapes and pictures and drawings, but all with a bright graphic style – bold shapes with strong lines.

There's a term I recently learned about that could work as an accurate description of her style, 'flat design' – described as a design style that "uses simple, two-dimensional elements and bright colors."¹² It is a more recent term, likely not one discussed in her graphic design classes in college, as it is often used to refer to user interface design, popularized originally in responsive web design. But I am fascinated with the term 'flat' in this context – such a strange, almost negative



Figure 16: My mother, approximately 10 years old, putting on an art show

connotation to the word, and yet here it is used to describe bold, colorful art – 'flat' as in two-dimensional, as in a level surface, monotone in its depth. Though the design style is minimalistic, it is not true minimalism, but rather emphasizes a simplicity in its lack of 3-D elements. Flat design is also "often contrasted to the skeuomorphic style that gives the illusion of three dimensions through copying real-life properties."

Skeuomorphism was another new term for me, referring to a trend in digital design that serves as a callback to three-dimensional real-world items in digital spaces, like 'sticky notes' on your laptop screen designed to look like paper. The term can of course also be in reference to other types of call backs in design – light bulbs designed to look like candles, etc. But I think the

¹² Interaction Design Foundation. (n.d.) *Flat Design*. https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/flat-design?srltid=AfmBOoznE_Tdu64eTBO-bF6wLNvrOpfFk1u10WOFWtWyIRJyR5YLf9m

important part of putting flat design and skeuomorphism in opposition is what it reveals about the nature of abstraction, about how art, design, and digital spaces all together deal with how humans recognize and experience the things in front of them – how we make meaning.

Skeuomorphism relies on memory and literal comparison between what is known and what is new, even if the thing that is 'known' is derivative in its cues toward the familiar. Flat design, by contrast, simplifies and abstracts, allowing for something that emphasizes color and visual appeal. From what I've seen, the design world has pretty unanimously agreed that a middle ground between the two is likely best, but I'm still stuck on the word flat – I'm drawn to its simplicity.

A flat surface, a flat landscape – a plane, a page, a table.

I think there's something interesting to the art of turning the 3-D to 2-D, and what this does to us as humans making sense of the world.

One summer in college, as my mother flew home from Lubbock (a rare occasion that she would fly) she found herself staring down at the flat, West Texas landscape. She was drawn to the lines, the shapes formed by fields and crops and roads. This birds-eye-view allowed for a new perspective, something zoomed out at a large scale – with shapes you wouldn't be able to see from the



Figure 17: a plateau, a tree stump, a hurricane, a snail

ground. And she thought about how a similar phenomenon occurs when you look at something in a microscope, a new perspective, a zoomed in lens, a small scale – new shapes. Sometimes, these small-scale and large-scale versions of things can even look like each other – like atoms mirroring the planets in the solar system – the shapes of a huge plateau looked like the shapes of a cut-off tree stump. The swirls of a huge storm looked like the swirls of a tiny snail.

This, she always said, was the only 'original art idea' she ever had in college, though she didn't know exactly what to do with it once she had it. I remember being struck by this idea with her when she first told me this story – the idea of the big things being like the small things, and vice versa. A testament to scale, the changeability of size and our perception of it.

And it's only within recent years that I feel we're starting to see this idea come to life for my mother, over 30 years since that plane ride, since she looked at the world and saw something more, patterns and meaning and art.

My mother moved to Lubbock for the second time in 2014, this time with her family in tow and it wasn't even a full year later before she began her Etsy shop. We didn't know what it would turn into then, how her business would explode 5 years later during the COVID-19 pandemic. Her shop was, at the beginning, scattered – no clear theme, other than her colorful style that permeated the painting and sewing projects she sold on the website. The important factor at the time was not the content, but the fact that it existed at all. She made the decision to *be* an artist, to call herself one for the first time in her life. She just wanted to make things, to paint – for it to be her job, her calling, her identity.

But what to paint?

It was like a revelation, maps as the subject matter. Something clicked. In her words, "the first time I ever drew a map and saw it as an abstraction of something... where the roads crisscross, they create shapes in between." She held up her arms as an intersection to demonstrate, before continuing, "I basically switched positive and negative space, so I see the spaces in between the roads [... as] positive space, instead of the roads. Does that make sense?"



Figure 18: My mom's map of Lubbock, Texas. Titled, "Dirt and Big Sky"

I said it did, but I also had seen her maps before. I liked her description though, of switching positive and negative space – the abstraction of space, how shapes revealed themselves to her in the relationships between land and human being's impact on it – the roads we build, the cities that pop up in the desert, or by a river, or on the coast of the ocean.

She sees the lines. The 3-D becomes 2-D, the big becomes the small. The world and our place in it become abstracted and simplified, scaled down onto the page yet representing something larger.

A city like Lubbock becomes captured on the page – its roads, its curves, the sprawling farms outside of town. Where are you within the shapes? Where am I? I can pinpoint my family home, all the houses I lived in with roommates during undergrad, my favorite coffee shop, the park where I would walk when I was sad. The shapes turn into something I *know* – how my body moved in and around with these lines as roads, these shapes as houses and neighborhoods and gardens and shopping centers.

The patterns of the land start to come together into something recognizable, the abstraction that only becomes grounded once we know where we are, where someone else is, a path from point a to point b.

The first time I ever wrote about my mom's maps, I began with the phrase: "My mother has always loved color. She sees in bright shapes and strong lines. She is abstract. She is practical."

I never explained what I meant... I don't think I knew what I meant.

I clearly saw these concepts of abstract and practical at odds with each other – my mother a representation of two competing ideas that led her to her 'maps as art' business – the abstraction of art, the practicality of maps as tools. And it felt true, how she could be both of these things – a graphic design major through and through, art *in* the world, rather than separated from it.

But as I think of home, my mom's maps, her story, I think it goes deeper than that – the way she thinks in both abstraction and practicality, and how it is this fact that ties her and I together and is what, however rarely, puts us at odds.

The term 'abstract' does interesting things – it can refer to a summary of something (an abstract of an article), a theory of something (abstract ideas like love and beauty), or a separation of an idea from its physical form – a focus on the intrinsic nature of a thing, something simplified or broken down to get at the core of what it is. This simplicity requires effort, however, on the creator, on the audience. By that I mean that abstraction asks us to look deeper, to make meaning out of the version we have, and how it speaks to something larger, something familiar that we can just start to feel on the tip of our tongue. Practicality, on the other hand, is

not concerned with the theoretical but rather what is here – the actions and practices that ground us in the world – usable, feasible, realistic.

Maps are a great example of both of these principles at work at the same time – they are both abstract in their representational quality, and practical in their use in the world. How then can this same logic be applied to my mother herself? What does it mean to be both abstract and practical? To see the world and its meaning, what it *could* mean, to look beyond the surface, while still staying very much grounded in the world – in tune with the realities, and severities of life here on earth. She has always been an anxious person, someone focused on security – wanting to be financially responsible, always focused on the day-to-day. This is why she didn't start her art business until she was in her 40s, because it was never practical to do so. This is why, when she did start her business, half of her focus is on just that... the business side of things. I look at her work and only want to see the symbolism, the meaning, the artistic implications of the maps. And though she does love those things, she is also focused on the simple fact that people also just like to buy them. The business needs to be sustainable.

She tells this one story that always stuck with me, that for me, represents this conflicting nature of abstract and practical. It was while she was in college, where she describes the expectations for art students – the work *has* to be about self-expression, commentary about the world; something *deeper*, something that pushes at the boundaries of what it means to create.

And my mom decided to paint something that matched her sofa.

She says:

In my watercolor painting class, I remember this vividly, I did this set of two or three paintings, and they were just abstract... like different shapes and colors and stuff. And I painted it to match my college apartment – the furniture and colors that were already there. But you don't dare do that in art school. So, when I had my critique from my professor – when you have to put up all the things you've painted that semester – I just completely made up a story about this piece. Because I couldn't tell him I painted it to

match my sofa. Like, that's so *wrong* in the art world. But I... I kind of started down this boloney description. And he was standing there, and he was like, 'Yes, I see... It's about movement... and change.' And I was like, 'Yes, exactly.'

...But yeah, I really did pick the colors that I just liked and that would look good in my apartment.

This for her, is the perfect example of this conflict, this balance between something just simply *not having a deeper meaning*, it was just supposed to be pretty, it was just supposed to make her new apartment look good – make it feel more like home. But she made something up for her professor, who 'saw' what she was talking about, even though it wasn't true. And I can't help but think that there might be something to this idea – are things created for simple reasons somehow less valuable? Or is there actually deeper meaning in the simple things, even if we're not consciously aware of it?

Because I asked her if she ever wonders if maybe, somehow, subconsciously, the paintings *were* about movement and change. She had just moved apartments, and our subconsciousness is a pretty powerful force in shaping how we see things around us. *What if it was actually about change?*

She shrugged in response to this question, as if to give me the point, but I didn't get the sense she actually believed it.

But then she told a story about how something similar happened with my dad in school, what we, to this day, call his 'blue period.' His professors apparently,

"just read into that, you know, all this deeper meaning of sadness or gloom or whatever. But really all it was, was that he was a broke college student and he had three tubes of paint, blue, white, and black – so everything he painted that semester was a mixture of those colors. And we love to laugh about that. How it's like, no, I just didn't have any money to buy red or yellow or green.

But then she continued, in considering what I had asked her about subconscious deeper meanings, "...but he also was kind of a moody art student... Maybe that's why he picked blue if

he can only buy one color. He picked blue for a reason. And it was this... giant tube of oil paint. It was like the biggest cerulean blue ever created.”

Do you think every place has a color?

Since moving to Michigan, I’ve always felt like the air here is blue – like everything is covered with a blue/green hue. And I know that the trees and clouds are the main contributors of this feeling, but sometimes I feel like it goes beyond that. Like, the light is different here, different than any other place I’ve lived.



Figure 19: Lubbock is gold

I think Lubbock is gold – a warm tint covers the open skies, the red dirt. The city feels almost hazy in its warmth, like you can see the air, feel the sun reflect off the buildings.

When my mom and I were talking about color theory, we were discussing how she chooses colors for maps. Sometimes it’s about the place – the color the place *feels*, like the geographical or architectural phenomena that give place color – the trees, the rivers, the sky, the colors of the buildings, the color of the dirt.



Figure 20: Budapest, one of the first maps in her shop

The colors of her Budapest map are based on a famous bridge that had turned a coppery turquoise color, while Paris is pastels – muted colors that match the greys and tans of the streets,

of the old buildings. New York, on the other hand, is “a million different colors. And yes,” she says, “it’s also a city with concrete everywhere. But then you have this swash of green with Central Park, and it’s surrounded by water. It’s very interesting...”

But for some maps, it’s not so much about the place itself but how the place is for a specific person – their own perception of the place, their own experience with it. Some of her customers on Etsy send her pictures of their living rooms, or paint swatches from the walls, with specific requests for making things fit, making the map match – be a part of the home they are creating. One customer sent her a picture of a series of travel posters in her dining room, asking she could make a map to fit. My mother says she found this process to be really beautiful, that she doesn’t “feel bad about doing that,” especially in thinking about the experience she had in college of painting something to match her home.

She says:

I mean, good design is good design. And it just made me happy that she trusted me to do it and that I could make something that would make her dining room beautiful. And her family will sit around that table, and they’ll have this artwork from a bunch of different artists. And mine is just one of them. And it represents something special for their family.

A map can show your family’s favorite vacation spot or where you got married, or where you went to college. They take a snapshot of that moment.

I feel like they kind of show you where you are in the world. With a map, you can zoom in or out as much as you want -- so if you think about when you’re on your phone navigating, you can zoom in, within blocks, or you can zoom out and see the entire town and where you are on the road in that town as you go. So, home could be your street, your neighborhood, your city, your country, your state, your county, and where *you* are, among all those things around you. Like, is there a river? Is there a mountain range? Is there the ocean?

Just like, this is... this is my place. This is my spot on the planet, you know?"

[Interview with my mother, June 2023]

My mother must've painted Lubbock at least twenty separate times – zoomed in, zoomed out. A large loop circles the city with a highway shooting diagonally across the center – the university campus is towards the middle of the circle, and the road curves oddly on Quaker Ave, I can picture how that curve looks from when I used to drive up and down it for doctor's appointments. The map itself is distinctive – there are patterns and shapes that are unique to this place, recognizable. In my mom's words, "you would know immediately it was Lubbock even if it wasn't labeled."

I thought her choice of the word 'you' here was interesting in the sense that it sounded as if she was using a more general, plural you. You – a human, a reader – *you* would be able to recognize this map of Lubbock, Texas on sight. And I thought it was interesting because... no you wouldn't – not if you've never been there before, not if you had never seen a map of Lubbock before, or heard it described. For most of *you*, Lubbock, Texas might as well be a non-city, a place you never plan to learn about or visit, just a town like any other town that exists whether you know about it or not.

But for those of us who do know, it's different.

I do realize that my mom was referencing the fact that many cities don't have such distinct markings, such a clear differentiation between it and other places. And I agree, I can't think of any other maps that are quite like Lubbock. But most places do have some sort of distinguishing factor, no matter how small, that makes it *that* place instead of some other place. The fact remains, however, that you're still only likely to identify those aspects if you have some type of relationship with that place.

Relph (1985) in his chapter in *Dwelling, place, and environment*, speaks of the importance of our relationship to place as a key part of understanding the field of geography. Our associations with 'place' "do not need to be strong and positive" but are rather "set apart in time and space because they have distinctive meaning for us" (Relph, 1985, p. 27). This distinction of meaning is directly linked to the place itself, *for us* – it looks different for someone else. Rather, our sense of place is essentially a construction of "memories and affections through repeated encounters and complex associations" (Relph, 1985, p. 26). Place becomes meaningful because of lived experiences over time, these encounters create a nuanced sense of place in our minds, often tied to our sense of self.

As an example of this, bell hooks describes her relationship with Kentucky in *Belonging: A culture of place* – "Kentucky hills were where my life began. They represent the place of promise and possibility and the location of all my terrors, the monsters that follow me and haunt my dreams" (1990). What a stunning description. "Kentucky," she says, "is my fate" (hooks, 1990). hooks describes something almost repetitive in how often she ends up back where she started from, how she pictures herself dying 'here,' on these same hills. (As I write this, it has been less than two years since she did pass, and I noted with beauty and sadness the sentence on the Wikipedia page, how she passed "at her home in Berea, Kentucky.") This repetition, circular pattern of moving in, around, and back to is what gives place its meaning. Or, as hooks puts it, "...returning to my home state after all the years that I was living away, I found there essential remnants of a culture of belonging, a sense of the meaning and vitality of geographical place" (1990).

Relph quotes Eric Dardel in *L'Homme et la Terre*, French for "Man and the Earth," written in 1952:

Before any choice there is this 'place,' where the foundations of earthly existence and human condition establish themselves. We can change locations, move, but this is still to look for a place; we need a base to set down our Being and to realize our possibilities, a *here* from which to discover the world, a *there* to which we can return. (p. 27)

In this quote I see several different key ideas – 1) "Before any choice" – this struck me. It made me reflect for a moment about the strange inevitability of place, the lack of agency in regards to choosing our starting point – we do not choose where we are born. We do not choose where we come from. At a certain point, however, we are all faced with the choice of *where to go from here*. Which brings us to the next part of Dardel's idea: 2) Movement – the lived experience of moving from one place to another, whether by choice or necessity, or by going somewhere near or far away. But it is always a search for a 'here' – I like Dardel's use of the word 'base.' Somewhere to go out from, somewhere to be able to return to.

My mother spoke a lot about this concept – having a base, having a place to come back to. This was, in many ways, how she defined home. She gave me a description from when our family had been living out of the States, about how she would walk out of the house to go grocery shopping and have no idea where she was going, what she would encounter, how to navigate the different languages and cultures in this new town, this new country that she had never been to before. But home, she said, was the feeling afterwards, when she had all the things she needed, all the errands were complete and she would walk up the stairs to the third floor where our apartment was, and finally *finally*, walk back through the door.

She paused.

"And now this is my... this is my space. Does that make sense? Like it's about the physical walls in a way, but it's more about... this is what I know. This is what I'm familiar with. This is what I have control over. And I'm a person that comfort and control are kind of my go-to's, the things that I longed for. As so... to feel so out of control out in the world and then to be able to come back."

For Ahmed, this question of place, belonging, and the phenomenon of leaving and returning, is ultimately a question of orientation. "The starting point" she says, "for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the 'here' of the body and the 'where' of its dwelling. Orientations, then, are about intimacy of bodies and their dwelling places" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 8). As a term of directionality, orientation is concerned with which way we are turned and what (and who) we are turned towards. Because for Ahmed, she came to the term through a discussion of sexual orientation, a *queering* of phenomenology, and I came to the term through thinking about maps.

Because though maps do work in the world – they hold incredible rhetorical power, they make arguments, they work to help us navigate from point a to point b in the present, and help us make sense of the past – I have always been interested in the way they are tools of orientation. And not just as a 'you are here' point of view on a map in an airport or in the mall, but in the ways in which we see ourselves in maps – how we locate the relationships between bodies, space, and time, and how this manifests in a feeling of familiarity. For example, Ahmed asks,

"How do we begin to know or to feel where we are, or even where we are going, by lining ourselves up with the features of the ground we inhabit, the sky that surrounds us, or the imaginary lines that cut through maps? How do we know which way to turn to reach our destination?" (2006, p. 6)

How do we *know*?

Celina, Texas

We were supposed to live there forever.

The house we built had our writing in the walls, on the framing of the house – a bible verse over the doorway, prayers for sleep in my room (I always had nightmares). Every room was a different color – blues and greens and yellows. It had a big



Figure 21: Pages from the Celina house scrapbook -- the floor plan, on writing on the wood framing

yard, where my siblings and I played. It was where we grew up, it's where my brother was born. My dad was the high school principal of the high school, and the town had just gotten its first red light.

My mother made a scrapbook of the process of building the house – she took pictures of every stage of the process, kept records of what we wrote on the walls, talked about the floor plan, the design of each room. Everything was



Figure 22: Pages from one of my mother's first scrapbooks, "Our First Apartment," "My First Job"

documented, lovingly pieced together, carefully recorded for us to take with us, for us to look back on. She had always loved scrapbooking – our entire childhoods are documented in colorful books that she now keeps in a cabinet. She loved it before it became popular in the early 2000s,

back when she drew everything by hand, decorating each page to tell a story of where we were, what we did, who we were. When pictures went digital she slowed down a bit, so my brother is only in a couple of the books in comparison to my sister and I. But every once and a while we'll go through them, laughing at silly pictures and remembering things that might've been forgotten if I wasn't looking at a picture of it happening.

The book of the Celina house is painful. You can feel it in every page. *We were supposed to live there forever* – we knew it when we moved there from the Dallas area – out of the big city, into the country where we could spread out, where we would know everyone in town, where we could really settle, dig in.

We only lived there for six years.

When we left we sold everything, there was only a couple of pieces of furniture my mom kept at my grandparents' house. We each got a keepsake box to fill with our memories and special items that we just couldn't get rid of. How do you even begin to pick? Which things matter more than others? What do you keep, when the evidence of your entire life is laid out in front of you?

It is difficult to explain my mother's mindset during this time. I think I get my sentimentality from her – my father has never been attached to things. But for my mother and I, we feel the story of things when we look at each object. We feel the larger sense of connection to the past. And yet, when we were packing to move, I was on a one-track mind to simply *get there*, to move away, get out from this one way of living when I looked at the direction of my life. I didn't want to live in that house forever, I didn't want my life to look like my friends' lives, my mother's life – born and raised in one town. I wanted out.

And I didn't understand my mother's hesitancy, her fear. My 14-year-old-self looked at her and judged her for her fear, I wanted her to understand my need for adventure, I wanted her to feel it with me. *I wasn't scared of moving out of the country, why was she?* And we left. We drove away from the house we built, left it empty, with all of our things in 17 suitcases, straight to the airport.

I didn't look back.

Do we only know what home is when we leave home?

As I've opened up myself to writing about home as phenomena, I have continuously encountered this idea in the stories of the people I talk to about my project. My mother talked about this concept – how she came to understand her childhood home on a different level after she had gone away to college. But how leaving Celina didn't necessarily feel like it gave us a deeper appreciation for Celina *as home*, but rather a deeper sense of what home is and can be – how homes themselves “can move, as we do” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 9).

hooks discusses this idea, saying:

Living away from my native place, I become more consciously Kentuckian than I was when I lived at home. This is what the experience of exile can do, change your mind, utterly transform one's perception of the world of home. The differences geographical location imprinted on my psyche and habits of being became more evident away from home. (1990)

Our sense of place becomes deepened, nurtured, as we move – as we leave and return. We are disoriented and reoriented, our bodies both “‘move away' as well as 'arrive,' as they reinhabit spaces” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 9). New places leave new impressions.

“...the air, the smells, the sounds, which accumulate like points, to create lines, or which to accumulate like lines, to create new textures on the surface of the skin. Such spaces 'impress' onto the body, involving the mark of unfamiliar impressions, which in turn reshapes the body surface” (Ahmed, 2006, p. 9).

Are there places that change us, fundamentally? Go underneath our skin to live forever, inside our very bones, changing the way we see the world, change the way we move?

San Pedro, Belize

I remember the sand. The heat that washed over your body, the dust on the road. The buildings were typically made of concrete to withstand hurricanes, painted every color you could imagine. The palm trees overhung the cobblestone roads that our bikes bounced across on our way into town. I remember the strange calm of the beach, the waves crashing into the coral reef a mile from shore, never really allowing waves to reach land.

I don't think my mother will ever go back.

All of the things she had ever cared about – how she thought about herself, her role as a mother, everything that made her who she is was put to the test on that island. Our finances, our food, our home – it was more out of control than it had ever been. There weren't so much grocery stores as there were markets and overpriced shops for tourists. My sister and I did school online, my father worked at a local school, and my introverted mother was forced to go out and meet people, in order to figure out how to get us medical care if we got sick, or to go to the immigration office and make sure all of the paperwork was still in order.

She couldn't get comfortable – there was nothing known to latch onto, nothing solid or sure. The ground was constantly shifting beneath her feet, a constant sense of disorientation.

I, for all my 14-year-old bravado, quickly discovered that my expectations for living abroad did not quite meet my reality. It was difficult to have moved somewhere where I didn't know anyone and making friends while doing school online proved difficult. I had the realization at a very young age that the desire for adventure did not automatically alleviate the very real

effects of culture shock. And I looked to my mother with new eyes, seeing her fears as not something to be pushed past, but rather as a necessary tether to the practical. Though it was my dad, the dreamer who had ultimately brought us here, it was her who ensured we survived.

It took me about a year to become oriented to life in Belize, when I was finally able to start to see light again – the sun felt brighter, the sand didn't feel oppressive against my shoes. And though my mother joined a women's sewing group, started painting for a local artist, and figured out her rhythm for shopping in local markets and cooking with local ingredients, I don't think she herself ever felt solid.

She said Belize was “pivotal” in her life, how she wrestled with her need for security, how difficult it had been to sell most of our possessions, what it felt like to sort of reconcile this moment of being forced to let go. As she said this to me, she knocked on the beat up, green painting table she was sitting next to, “this table right here actually has some meaning. It's kind of silly, but this table was in my dad's woodworking shop when I was a kid. And it's all beat up and it's really ugly. But he gave it to me and it's my painting table. And so like selling or giving away things that have a family history to them can be challenging, but in the end, it's just wood.”

She said she was learning to “release” these things, learning that what was really important was “our family and that we're together, and we're going on this adventure together. So, what table we have or what dishes we have or what home we live in is really secondary...”

It doesn't matter what table we have – if what she's saying is that meaning is put onto objects by people, then what matters is the people themselves, not the objects. If we need a table, we will get a table, and in Belize, we did just that.

The apartment we were renting did not have space for a table, it was originally designed as a vacation rental, not meant to be lived in long term, and all the furniture that came with the space barely fit into the 10x12 living room area. But my mom had a solution.

“I don't know if you remember this,” she said. “We rearranged the furniture and put masking tape on the floor with the space that would work to fit a table and then we hired a local man to build a table that exact size. And it was a game changer.”

“Now,” she said. “it was crowded. We had to shimmy around sometimes. We had a sofa in our bedroom instead of the living room to make it fit. But that table ended up being like the center of our home because we had so many conversations and meals and it just... changed everything for our family.”

And when we left Belize after 3 years to move to Lubbock, the table we built there didn't come with us. Instead, we came back to a different table that had been built for us – one that my mom had beaten with chains to give it life, one that had been built tall enough for my dad to fit, that was made for East Texas humidity, and had a hard time adjusting to the West Texas dry heat. And now there are new people who move in and around it, as my sister and I both graduated college and moved away, as my parents make new friends, new patterns and rhythms that feel so different as we look back at the places we've lived.

And for my mother, it was like coming home.

Lubbock, again

The discussion of an innate ‘sense of direction’ has always fascinated me, as it is not something I ever seem to be able to gain for myself. I move through the world only with the memory of the routes I have taken a million times before, a muscle memory while I drive that

helps me recognize and contextualize the roads and streets and directions. I do not know which way is north, but I know which way campus is from my house. For my mother, she apparently first gained her sense of direction in Lubbock, by doing the thing I just described. She said:

When I came to college here, there were no GPS directions on your phone – we didn't even have phones, you had to have a paper map. And you had to have a street address and you had to know which way the street numbers went. But because the Texas Tech campus is kind of in the middle of the city, that was how I learned my north, south, east, west. Like I can tell you right now, I'm facing east, because I know that our street is out here," she points, "and then Indiana Avenue goes north, and the campus is over there, north of us.

But that ever since then, ever since college in Lubbock, Texas, she's been able to figure out what direction she was going. She became 'oriented' here – a starting point from which to go out into the world, a sense of context and perspective of space and how to navigate it.

In phenomenology, the table is often discussed as a key example of embodied perspective, of orientation in space. Husserl talks about the table from which he writes, the place from which the philosopher looks out at the world, the starting point, simply because "the table is the object nearest the body of the philosopher" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 3). By bringing the table to the front of the discussion, therefore, Ahmed argues that we are able to "show how 'what' we think 'from' is an orientation device" – the places from which we do work and think are orientations devices that help us make sense of the world around us (2006, p. 3). As we move around the table, our perception shifts, "Keeping this table steadily in view as I go round it, changing my position in space all the time, I have continually the consciousness of the bodily presence out there of this one and the self-same table, which in itself remains unchanged throughout" (Husserl, qtd in Ahmed, p. 35). This emphasis on our bodies moving in and around objects and places, and how this movement changes our perspective on things that themselves don't change is interesting to me, but I have to wonder – how unchangeable are they though, really? Yes, we

might leave and come back, but there are shifts and changing shapes that happen in the interim. The weathering of time, the weathering of being moved from place to place leaves its mark.

It's like the table is a map, helping us orient, a point from which we go out from, and a point to come back to. I think of my mother saying that her family growing up would always 'come back together' to eat at the table together. I think of how it welcomes us back in, all the chairs lining up around it, inviting us to a surface in which to share a meal, do a puzzle, draw, talk, play, write.

In my mother's life there are many tables, many surfaces on which things are made – the kitchen countertop that she agonized for years over before finally replacing from the old tile counter tops that never got fully clean; the little kitchen table that we sit at when it's just a couple of us, that she got from her parents from when she was a little girl; the dining room table, that same one that she built with my grandpa, making it her own, making it fit for us. But I keep thinking about her painting table, the old green one that her father gave to her, that sits in her art studio. I think about how she'll sit in there for hours on end, painting maps until the light from the big window makes it hard to see. I think about how my dad sits in there with her, watching TV or talking, and that when I visit home, it's where I sit too.

Because then I can watch her, both abstract and practical, paint her stories of place. Sitting at her art table, every color of paint sitting on the shelf, zooming in and out, in and out, in and out.

CHAPTER 5: THE CABINET

Here

but not here

Not gone

but forgotten

All that was left was

love

But it was a love

trapped

With no words

to speak it

The room is dark, and the carpet is thick, allowing you to pad softly through the living room in the gray morning light. The old clock on the wall ticks loudly, a sound that is foreign and familiar in the way it only seems to sound in these early mornings. As you hit the wood floors of the kitchen, the sound of your feet against the ground changes to be more high-pitched, but you see the light of the dining room ahead.

You enter the room full of windows. Past the table, built out long with added leaves for your visit. And past the old cabinet with a million compartments that you and your cousins would spend hours searching through every drawer.

And you would arrive at your destination -- the first one awake to sit in your grandmother's lap in her chair by the window. She wears the same purple robe. She sees you coming and sets down her bible that is ripping at the seams. You sit and watch the hummingbirds at the red feeder outside the window, behind the stained glass, in a world of deep green.

What does time feel like?

In our bodies? In our minds?

Is it something we can sense?

I can't decide if I love or hate the sound of a clock. There's something that feels nostalgic to me about it, something quiet and comforting -- like the sound of a grandfather clock in the early morning hours.

I don't have one in my house now, a ticking clock. I think there would probably be a point where it would start to feel claustrophobic -- time as moving, moving, moving. It does not stop for you, for me. Movement shouldn't feel claustrophobic, but this feels, sometimes, like a

movement you can't escape from, without a break or pause in its steady, consistent ticking.
Forward, forward, forward.

I both love and hate it, like I love and hate the gray hairs that popped into my hair this past year – just like they did for my mom, just like they did for my grandmother. Can I look to them and see, with some certainty, my own face with time etched into the surface of our very skin?

We are as within time as we are within our bodies, steadily moving, (growing?),
changing, in one moment and onward towards the next. Forward, forward, forward.

There is a house on Iris Drive that still exists. It's still standing, there are people who live there who might've added new fencing or new flooring, upkeep the garden or let it go. It exists in time, in space, but I can't access it there – because the house on Iris Drive, for me, exists only in memory.

And what a strange memory it is. For example, I know that my grandparents replaced the carpet in the living room years before they moved away, but in my mind there is this in between, where the carpet is what it was when I was a child – a large dark green stripe along the periphery of the room where my brother would set up toy cars to drive along the edge like a road.

There is a big blue chair in the corner with its blue leather ottoman, the fireplace is crackling – it must be around Christmas time. Someone is sitting at the old piano that's always out of tune, playing Christmas carols – it's probably Olivia.



Figure 23: Grandma and Grandpa dancing on the old carpet with the green stripe.

My mother is in the kitchen with my grandma – they’re making pies, but my grandmother insists my mother sit down when she asks what she can do to help. There are usually more pies than people because grandma wants to make everyone’s favorite even though she knows we can’t eat them all. We still try.



Figure 24: My sister Olivia and I helping Grandma make my favorite Christmas pie.

My dad and grandpa are outside chopping firewood and Olivia and I are playing with the colorful piles of leaves (is it fall?). We race down the steep driveway on bikes or wagons or the toy cart we called a go-kart that had no engine and that my grandfather found in a dumpster one year and fixed it up in his shop. We swing on the tree swing until grandma calls us in for dinner by ringing the bell on the porch that sits on a tower of ivy. We sit at the long dining room table



Figure 25: The bell

always with a new tablecloth and matching napkins and drink sweet tea.

When it was time for bed, Olivia and I would go to the room we usually slept in, we called it the Princess Room, that was my mother’s growing up. What would we do the next morning? Would we go on a walk in the forest, build a fort, visit the chicken coop, pick blackberries? Or would we sit outside on the porch swing with grandma and drink lemonade, and later we

convince grandpa to take us for a ride in the back of the old blue truck. He would fill the bed of it with quilts and we would drive to go watch fireworks. (Is it summer?)

...It *is* summer, it is spring, it is fall. It's Christmas morning, it's a random weekend trip, it's the week during the summer where my grandparents would host all the cousins and called it Grandkids Camp.



Figure 26: My aunt Dana and my cousin Milo with my grandparents and I, sitting in the back of the old blue truck

I am there, I am not there. And all at once I'm small enough to sit in grandma's lap and a teenager reading in the back room, tired of all the noise. My sister still wears glasses, and maybe I'm wearing the orange sweatshirt from my hometown's high school football team. My mom honks the car horn as we pull into the long driveway and we see my grandmother come running out of the back door, up the wooden pathway, past the berry bushes, past the bell, and up to the car where I open the door to be hit with the humidity of green, the overwhelming scent of pine trees.

And the feeling that seems to be located behind my lungs is that of calm and that of a type of relief. Perhaps it's that we've arrived after a decently long car trip across the expanse that is the state of Texas, perhaps it's that the scent of pine is so unique that I am automatically connected to that same feeling I've had in my chest at least once a year for as long as I have the capability of remembering.

You're here! shouts Grandma.

I'm here.

Before I could press record on the video camera sitting in my lap, I sat with my grandparents in their living room in Lubbock, Texas. We are far away from the house on Iris Drive, far away from the tiny town of Gladewater, deep in the woods of East Texas.

I sit on the same plaid couch, grandpa in his maroon recliner, grandma in her new blue chair. I'm telling them about my project, nervous about the way my grandma's eyes don't quite settle on me fully. But she seems relaxed, which is both good and slightly disconcerting. I'm more used to her offering me a glass of water every couple of minutes like she did last summer when I visited.

But before I finish telling them what I'm doing, that this interview is about what home is to them, before I set up my camera on its stand, my grandmother speaks.

"Home is where you are."

She doesn't repeat it in the next couple of days as I am in and out of their house, stopping by to look at old pictures or record different parts of their home in Lubbock, but it sticks with me. Because I knew, even then, that this would be one of the few things I have from her – these tiny little moments that the camera doesn't catch – where she looks me in the eyes and is there.

I remember thinking, over and over, as I set up my camera to hit record, "*don't forget, don't forget, don't forget.*"

My grandparents moved to Lubbock, Texas in 2019 – 2 full years after my grandmother had been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Her father had passed away from the disease a year after I was born, and so we knew it ran in the family. My mother and her siblings knew long before her diagnosis, hushed conversations taking place about the way my grandma would ask the same question too many times or would get turned around when driving on streets she had

driven for almost 50 years. I think both my grandparents were nervous for my grandmother to actually get diagnosed. I remember my mother coming home from visiting them frustrated because she felt like they were in denial, that knowing would help them prepare, make decisions, make the most of the time they had.

But I know for my grandpa, at least, knowing sooner rather than later didn't change much. His own health was up and down, with multiple heart surgeries affecting his ability to care for such a large piece of property. They already knew they had to move.

From Gladewater, the nearest family was at least a 6-hour drive, and my grandparents couldn't afford to hire any help around the house, what with my grandpa's fixed social security income after retiring in his 60s. So, years and years before my grandma was diagnosed, years before they even hired a realtor to look at their property, they had already decided to move to Lubbock, Texas. My grandpa was a big fan of the college town's football team and my grandma just wanted to be closer to my mother. But with this decision came quite an overwhelming reality – my grandparents had lived in the same house since my mother was 4 years old. Every closet, every cabinet, every shelf was full to the brim with *things* – objects and memories and pieces of themselves, their children, their grandchildren. How do you pack up and move a full life 8 hours across the state of Texas?

There were arguments, there were spreadsheets, there were long weekends where my mom would drive down just to help go through one closet. My grandmother alternated between wanting to get rid of everything and not being able to let a single thing go. My grandparents were both so overwhelmed by the task – they knew they didn't want to (couldn't) take everything with them, and, more morbidly, that all of it would eventually have to be sorted through when they both were gone. But how do you sell an antique or something that has been in the family for

years – both emotionally and practically? Do you host an estate sale? Do you sell them online? How can you sell them online when my grandma can barely log into a computer?

Every item must be accounted for. Every item required a decision. Keep, sell, give away, throw away. Keep, sell, give away, throw away. The dresses my grandmother sewed for my mother on her first day of school, directly next to the dress she herself wore on her first day of school, handsewn by her mother. The coloring books from when we were children. The scraps of fabric from different sewing projects. Jewelry, artwork, candles, dishes, Christmas decorations. My grandpa went through his massive woodshop and sold most of what was years of equipment, sorted through the garage, sold the white jeep that had driven them through the mountains in northern New Mexico almost every summer. They left behind the swing set, the fire pit, an empty barn. They took the porch swing, the old blue truck, and a garage full of projects that my grandpa still insisted he was working on.

It took years, with my grandma slowly losing her ability to remember what was where, what belonged to who, and what they had already talked about doing. And I remember one of my aunts worrying out loud about if it was a good idea for them to move at all – what if throwing grandma into a completely new environment was too much for her? What if it all became too much to process, what if she never got her bearings in Lubbock, or ever again? She had seemed excited to move most of the time, I vividly remember sitting on the porch with her, it must've been one of the last times I was there with them, and her sighing and saying, "I can't wait to just... go." It felt to me as though she was saying she was ready for it to be over – the house had become too much, the moving process was too much – how freeing, how safe, to just be done.

They had stopped attending the church they had gone to for my mother's entire childhood a couple of years back, citing religious differences. They didn't go into town much, they weren't

as close with their neighbors. Their health continued to decline; the yard started to become overgrown.

It was time.

Last Pictures

On my mother's computer is a collection of pictures of my grandparent's house that can only be described as 'last pictures' – last pictures taken before everything was packed away to be moved, last pictures taken before they drove away. An empty garage, the back porch with the swing still attached, a shadowed shot of the house from the road, my grandparents on the porch the day they drove to Lubbock.

One of the last times I was at their house in Gladewater, my grandma insisted that we take a trip to the holly tree. It was just around Christmas time, and the tree was located in the pasture behind their property – owned by the Prince's, we always called it Prince's pasture, but when I was young, I misheard the possessive and thought we would go on walks together as a family in Princess Pasture. My grandma liked



Figure 27: Last Pictures

to go to the holly tree and get fresh greenery for her mantle, making everything special, making everything beautiful just as she had every year since before I was born, and every year since.

But there was something about that walk to the holly tree – us climbing through the fence between the two properties, just like we always had, walking with purpose with a bag and scissors for my grandma to take her holly clippings.

Leaves covered the ground, and I sensed, as they sensed, that this was some type of last. A last Christmas, a last visit to the holly tree, a last visit for me and my siblings.

My mother, in her wisdom, took a picture and was able to capture... something. A moment in time? Something about place? I look at it and feel, somehow, a mixture of a strange type of grief and an overwhelming peace. I think it might be the way they're standing. What are they thinking about? Are they feeling the last-ness? Or are they simply being there – the sound of the wind through the trees, the crunch of the leaves beneath our feet as it breaks through the heavy quiet of the East Texas woods.

My mother still maintains that this is her favorite picture of them she ever took.

What a strange thing memory is – so deeply interconnected with our sense of selves, our sense of place, the people and things around us. The way it is housed and/or experienced so uniquely in our bodies, in our



Figure 28: in the woods

brains – muscle memory, sights, smells, sounds, the way our hippocampus lights up as it works to store long-term memories through different groupings and connections between neurons. It's so... physical. And yet I often think about how most neurological diseases and disorders and diseases feel almost... invisible.

In 2017, the same year my grandma was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, I was diagnosed with an anxiety disorder that required me to take medication to balance a chemical issue within the synapses and receptors of serotonin in my brain. But before the medication did work, I was convinced that there was some other issue, that the medication wouldn't work for me because it really wasn't a problem in my brain at all. It was just... me. So, it wasn't just as if the chemical imbalance I was experiencing was invisible to others, it was also, somehow, invisible to myself. I had a hard time connecting what I was feeling in my body to the idea of my brain experiencing a physical affliction that could be helped by medication. And this made sense, as I later learned, because the brain affects every part of my body – my behavior, my thinking, my emotions. And if the brain is the thing being affected, it becomes very difficult to sense that experience as a physical issue.

This became clearer still as I observed my grandmother struggle to sense her own disease. I remember so vividly her sighing in frustration as she couldn't remember the name or the word she was looking for in her story.

"I'm just dumb," she'd say.

We'd react strongly, "no, Grandma!" we'd say. "You're not dumb, you have a memory disease."

This, however, didn't seem to help, since she would later forget the conversation, and call herself dumb, or stupid, or forgetful all over again.

I learned with Alzheimer's that the brain literally shrinks over time. There is such intense damage to all parts of the brain, but often beginning in the memory center, long before people are diagnosed. Even early on in understanding the disease, researchers noticed the physical effects on the brain. Identified as "plaques" and "tangles," research shows "abnormal clusters of protein

fragments, build up between nerve cells” – plaques; and “dead and dying nerve cells [that] contain tangles, which are made up of twisted strands of another protein” (Alzheimer’s Association). And while scientists still don’t understand what causes this cell death and tissue loss in patients, they are able to clearly identify consistent patterns in those who suffer from the disease. In doing so they have been able to identify the type of protein that forms the plaques, and form two treatments that remove this protein to temporarily slow cognitive and functional decline.

My grandmother has been taking this medicine now for 6 years. Within the past year or two I have witnessed a pretty severe decline in her ability to communicate and function with day-to-day tasks. I remember vividly when my mom called me about a year and a half ago to tell me that grandma had apparently come into the room where my grandpa was, crying, to tell him that she couldn’t remember how to make the bread anymore – the bread that she had made every week for as long as I could remember, the bread that had been passed down for generations by way of an ancient sourdough starter that family legend tells came over on a boat from Germany in the late-1800s. Muscle memory. Something engrained in her very being – gone.

Time became her enemy; her own brain became her enemy – a physical decay, a physical loss that is tied so directly to her experience of her own mind, her own body, her own sense of self – what it is to be a “me” or a “you.” Things known become, over time, things unknown – like some type of horrific, violent *reversal*. And as physical as Alzheimer’s is, its effects clear as scientists study brain scans and families watch loved ones lose themselves, scientists are still searching for what sparks the damage itself, some invisible force with these all too visible e/effects.

...As my grandma's hand hesitates once again as she reaches for the door to the kitchen cabinet, wondering if she will, this time, find what she is looking for.

In Maurice Merleau-Ponty's posthumous book *The visible and the invisible* (1968), Merleau-Ponty makes a very interesting connection between things seen, things experienced (the visible), and things felt, things thought (the invisible) through the mediation of the body. The book itself is a strange thing in its inherent incompleteness – we have four chapters, and the rest of the book is made up of working notes. The untimely passing of Merleau-Ponty in the midst of writing this book, changes, for me and others, the experience of the book itself and how I come to understand the ideas within it. One of his other works, *The phenomenology of perception* (1962), also is an important book within phenomenological thinking, especially in the way it has worked to establish an *embodied* phenomenology – a phenomenology that is situated by an understanding of ourselves as sensing bodies that are both perceived and the way in which we perceive the world around us. This both/and of the body as sensing and sensed is most clearly described in the final (complete) chapter in *The visible and the invisible* as an example of a chiasm, or intertwining.

According to Scot Barnett (2015) in his article on “Chiasms: Pathos, phenomenology, and object-oriented rhetorics,” Merleau-Ponty, in his discussion of chiasm, “no doubt had in mind the rhetorical figure of the chiasmus. A reference to the Greek letter *X* (*chi*), chiasmus performs a literal “crossing” in language in which one phrase doubles over and intertwines with another. [C]hiasmus,” he says, “draws different parts together while at the same time coiling them back over again” (2015).

A tangling. A reversal.

Stanford Encyclopedia's section on Merleau-Ponty, describes that in English and French, chiasm also has meaning in reference to "anatomical or genetic structures with a crossed arrangement (such as the optic nerves)." For how Merleau-Ponty uses the term, they go on to describe the idea of a chiasm as "a crisscrossing or a bi-directional becoming or exchange between the body and things that justifies speaking of a "flesh" of things, a kinship between the sensing body and sensed things that makes their communication possible." In other words, the fact that we have bodies allows us to sense the world – we sense our bodies, we sense through our bodies, and we both make and sense *meaning* with and through our bodies. The lines between the sensing and the sensed are thus, blurred, there is an inherent back-and-forth nature to the bodily experience of the world.

I think this understanding of the way our bodies sort of chiasm-ically mediate our senses has helped me make sense of the relationship between memory and body and between memory and self. The visible and the invisible. The relationship between what we can see and what we can't see is incredibly important to the limitations and affordances of being in body.

I can see my hand reaching, I can sense whatever it is that I touch. I can see my desk, I can see the light from my lamp overhead. I can see the way my grandma struggles, I can see the changes in her behavior, mood, language, I can know the disease is directly affecting each of these visible factors. But, for her, the physical (her brain) has hindered her from experiencing the reality of that physical phenomenon. The truth of the disease has precluded her bodily experience of the disease itself, causing her to experience loss while also losing the very sensation of that loss. What is left, I would imagine, is emptiness.

This, to me, is chiasmic. This is visible and invisible. It is tangled in its own back-and-forth, in the crisscrossing of what it means to be able to sense what is around us and make sense of it as human beings, with bodies and minds so fragile.

When interviewing my mother and sister, I was left often going back to the footage to find meaning in their words, to sort through hours of footage, hours of stories, and dive into the meaning I found in how they told their own stories, how they conceptualized the home, the things around them, and themselves.

With my grandmother, there were simply less words.

I had the words of my grandfather and many others, and I had the few words she did say, but locked in my mind, almost at the tip of my tongue were the words of my own memory. As Grandma would begin a story, in a way that felt halting and unsure, she would always eventually pause to let my grandpa fill in the pieces. But there, in some of those stories, I too wanted to fill in the pieces, but with the words I had heard her speak what felt like a million times before. It's like I can still hear her, telling me the story of her mother and father during Christmas time – how her mother would put things in lay-away before her father got his once-a-year Christmas bonus. And how they would get everything they needed, every little thing in one day on that Christmas bonus – socks, shoes, razors, fabric, kitchen supplies.

I can hear it.

And yet, her words are hidden from me. Hidden, perhaps, from herself. Hidden away in her own fading memory, hidden by language, tucked away in cabinets. But not gone, I don't think. Not truly.

Because I can still hear it.

In my grandparent's house there are many cabinets. Kitchen cabinets, antique cabinets, a TV cabinet, a cabinet for sewing, for my grandpa's collection of antique guns, for old records. Sometimes, like with the antique cabinets, the meaning for my grandparents is in the cabinet itself instead of what is kept tucked away inside. For instance, there are two cabinets that seem to always be kept next to each other in my grandparent's kitchen. One is, and has always been, called "Grandma's cabinet" – this was my grandfather's

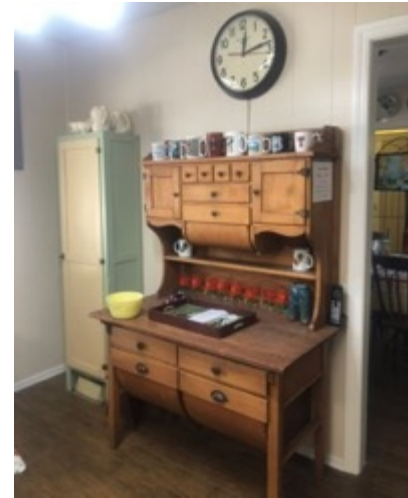


Figure 29: Grandma's cabinet, next to the jelly cabinet

grandmother's kitchen cabinet, with different cupboards and compartments for flour and sugar and spices, for dishes and utensils. According to my grandpa it always came as a pair with the dining room table that they still have today. As a child, this cabinet almost always served as a catch-all cabinet – a place for scissors and pens and knickknacks, with one drawer hosting a million types of colorful paper napkins – themed for every holiday: Christmas, 4th of July, birthdays, Thanksgiving. I remember one summer, during the week we affectionately called Grandkid's camp, where all the cousins would stay at Grandma and Grandpa's house with *no parents*, my grandma assigned us a creative writing activity. She dumped out the contents of one of the drawers and told us to write a story about something we found. I have such a clear memory of the feeling of staring at all of the objects on the table, deciding where I might find a story and what that story could be, but I can't for the life of me remember what any of the objects were. I don't know what I wrote about, but I wonder if she kept those stories somewhere written in all of our child-like handwriting.

And next to Grandma's cabinet, there is a tall and skinny green and yellow cabinet that my grandpa called the jelly cabinet. I don't remember referring to it like that growing up, I just remember that it is what held all of Grandma's million different tablecloths – there were plastic ones themed for different holidays, there were plaid ones perfect to serve as a picnic blanket outside, there were antique, hand-embroidered cloth ones handed down over generations. My grandpa told me though that this cabinet also belonged to his grandmother and was where she stored her jellies after canning the fruit of the season. Apparently, my mother had painted it white at one point when it had belonged to her, but when my grandparents got it back (maybe when we moved to Belize?) they decided to paint it the original colors. Or, close to the original colors. The inside of the cabinet shows a different color green than what is on the outside – a much brighter, almost fluorescent lime green than the muted green they chose.

This cabinet became the inspiration for the color scheme for their new kitchen cabinets in Lubbock. I remember them moving into their new house in West Texas

and my grandmother being absolutely horrified by the color of the kitchen cabinets – she had seen them in pictures, but in person, it seemed, they were much worse. They were somehow both a dark and bright shade of blue and did not align with my grandparent's antique style. When they



Figure 31: my grandma on moving day, with those "horrible" blue cabinets



Figure 30: Green and gold

decided to paint them green and gold, my mother tried to argue they just pick one color, or something more neutral, but they insisted, and green and gold it was.

I don't know why cabinets come to mind when I think of my grandmother. For one, when I picture my grandma, it is often in the kitchen. She always seemed to have such mastery over it – opening and closing cabinet doors with ease, always making everyone's favorites, along with an ever-present side of fresh baked bread. It's why it broke my heart to hear my mom tell me the story of my grandma not being able to make the bread anymore. It was the end of an era. My grandma rarely sets foot into the kitchen now.

Or maybe it's that, when I think of their house on Iris Drive, there were always... things. Things stacked, things stored, things tucked away in, you guessed it, cabinets. There might be some type of mystery to me in the opening of an unfamiliar cabinet – what is hidden behind that door. What will I find when I open it? What is kept here, stored safely away, invisible to me until I reach out to pull open the door and make something, anything, visible. Before closing it once more, leaving its contents accessible to me only in memory, or until I reach out again.

There is a jar that lives on a shelf in my refrigerator – the sourdough jar. The same jar she gave me almost three years ago when my husband, then boyfriend, and I visited Lubbock and asked her to show us how to make the bread.

We watched together as she took two jars out of the refrigerator, both labeled with sharpie on masking tape, “1” and “2”. She added sugar, and we drank lemonade on the back porch while the jars came up to room temperature, but once they were ready, she poured the jars into her mixing bowl along with flour and salt and water – showing us each step, talking about when to know if you need more water or flour. She didn’t measure the salt – just a pinch. Not too much, not too little.



Figure 32: Grandma teaching me to make the sourdough... the first time

And it felt different even then, watching her. I remembered then what it was like to watch her in her old kitchen, the one with white cabinets with red handles – how confident her movements were, how she reached with ease for a bowl, for a spatula to scrape the dough off the sides. And now, in this kitchen, where the cabinets are green and gold, her movements are noticeably hesitant, not remembering where she put the spatula once she sets it down.

We come back to their house that evening to try the finished product, and she laments about how it didn’t turn out correctly – issues with the oven, Lubbock’s altitude – but we all happily ate it, as small and dense as it was – nothing like I remember it as a child. And it is there that she hands me the jar labeled “2” that still sits in my refrigerator, that we somehow got through the Lubbock airport on our way back to Michigan, using a sugar packet from the coffee bar on the plane to keep it fed.

And now, every week, just like I watched her do every week, I take my jar out of the refrigerator, feed it different sugars and flours to get it bubbling to life, filling the whole jar. I add flour and water and salt, kneading it together, doing the steps in a slightly different order than

what she had shown me, but still following the basic concept. And after a couple of hours, the dough fills the bowl and it is at that point that I always *always* take a piece of the dough, about the size of an egg, and put it back in my jar labeled “2” with a little bit of water at the top. Just like my grandma did, just like my great-grandma did, and on and on and on.

I asked my grandparents to tell me the story of the bread. My grandmother, who I had heard this story from a thousand times, turned to my grandfather.

He began:

My great-grandmother immigrated from Germany in about 1885. I’m... not sure about the year but I know it was the mid 1880s. And the story is that when they came from Germany, she brought a sourdough bread starter with them. They came over in steerage on a steamship, and they brought the bread starter because in steerage you had to cook your own food... that’s what we were told. I have semi-verified this with some from the Smithsonian Institute, but I don’t know for a fact. But the story is that my great-grandmother, her name was Lena Barfknecht, and my grandmother was maybe seven or 8 years old when they immigrated. And so, when she married my grandfather, she got the sourdough starter and she made the bread. Then my mother got the starter, and she made the bread. And when Alice and I got married, Alice got the starter and now she makes the bread. And we’ve given you a starter and you and your husband, Chayce, make the bread. So, it’s been handed down generation to generation.

So, this bread is like, 150 years old or more. I don’t know how far back it goes. We know it’s prior to 1885, but how far back it goes I have no idea.”

I responded at this point in the story, reflecting on how if the story is true, we don’t know if his great-great grandmother was the one to begin the starter. “Maybe it was handed down from her mother,” I said.

“And from her mother, and her mother...” my grandpa trailed off.

The story of the boat is not ‘legend’ per say – my grandpa and mother have both done some extensive family history research and have found the passenger list of a ship called the Hohenzollern going from Prussia to Galveston, Texas in 1885, clearly listing my great-great

grandfather, Wilhelm Lunow with his mother and stepfather, who came across the sea when he was 10 years old. But the way my grandpa tells it, it was his great-grandmother who brought it over on a ship, who he named as Lena Barfknecht. But as I looked at the family tree, it was his grandmother, not his great-grandmother, who was named Lena, and it was her who came over by boat at 7 or 8 years old. His great-grandmother was named Louise.

But we know Lena Barfknecht and Wilhelm Lunow eventually were married, and we know they had my great-grandmother, Herta Helene (Helen) Tucker, who lived to be 104 years old, and would occasionally sing Christmas songs in German when the mood struck her. And we know my grandpa grew up eating the bread every week for his entire life. And I grew up with my grandma making it every week. And now it is passed to me.

In my grandpa's words, "And when you think about how many years and how many millions and millions of loaves have been baked from that original starter... and it's still alive."

It's still alive.

Engelland, in his 2021 book *Phenomenology*, begins his chapter titled "Life" with the following quote:

To taste a slice of freshly baked bread crowned with a pat of butter is not only to taste the bread and the butter but to taste oneself as alive and the recipient of that experience. [...] Right there in the tasting [...] there is an implicit, background experience of oneself. And were it not for this self-experience we would not relish the experience of these other things; we would not avidly seek them out to enjoy them. Our motive to experience would evaporate.

Is this not both beautiful and tragic? How our experiences are not just experiences of a moment or a thing, but of ourselves. And without this ability to process ourselves as experiencing a thing, we are not truly alive, are we? To eat the bread is not just about the eating, but about the *being*

while eating. To *be* here, to *be* you, and no one else, at this moment in time, with this specific slice of specific bread.

My grandmother was born in 1945 to Edgar Elbert Albright and Maize Kathryn Ledbetter. She was the youngest of three sisters. Her mother, who went by Kathryn, was a harsh woman. She wasn't ever described to me as gentle, or kind, or even loving. She died before I was born. In a "family history" scrapbook my mom and I worked together for my 8th grade family history project, my grandma wrote about her mother. Kathryn Ledbetter was born in 1920 as the 7th child, raised on the Ledbetter farm. According to my grandma, she didn't graduate high school because she had to pick cotton in the fall, but she later took her GED and passed because having a diploma was important to her.

She wrote:

She married my daddy, Edgar Elbert Albright on September 3, 1938. He was a day laborer making \$1.00 a day for a long time. They moved from farm to farm looking for a better deal or house or something. In November 1952 we moved from Coppel to Lewisville. I was in the 2nd grade. We rented a little house on Edwards Street. We heated only the kitchen and Mother and Daddy's bedroom. Many times my room (shared with my 2 sisters) was cold enough to make jello! We built a new home at 653 Milton Street when I was in the 5th grade. I had my own room for the first time ever!!! We were so proud of it! My mother worked all the time. She sewed for 3 girls and herself. She canned and froze untold amounts of food every summer. She cooked yummy meals.

She cooked yummy meals. I think about this line a lot. My first memory of hearing about my great-grandmother was about what an amazing cook she was – a truly talented woman – but that when she died, according to my mother, this seemed to be the only thing people could say about her. What a great cook, what a talented cook. When my parents were naming my sister, they gave her the middle name Catherine, specifically spelling the name differently as to not be naming

Olivia directly after a woman who did not, or could not, foster a legacy that went beyond what she could do to who she really was.

It always seemed to me that my grandma was almost adopted into my grandpa's family's traditions and legacies. My grandma would always speak very fondly of the experience of coming into my grandpa's family when she was a young woman, as my grandma and grandpa were high school sweethearts and lived just down the street from each other. And I always loved hearing about what it was like for her to come into a family that seem to genuinely care for each other. There was something calm and peaceful for her about watching my other great-grandmother, Helen Tucker, another talented cook, bake bread or make fried chicken with her secret recipe that turned out to be just straight bacon grease.

But I think the way my grandma was raised matters. In the same family history scrapbook, I found the section she wrote about her father:

My Daddy was away almost all my life. After years as a farm laborer, he started driving a truck for Shovel Supply company in Dallas. My sisters and I could hear the sound of his truck coming home before it was in sight. "Daddy is home," we squealed as we ran out the front door. He would blow the air horn announcing his arrival to all within hearing distance. I would crawl up the big truck steps into Daddy's arms.

Probably my best memories of Daddy were while I sat on the ice cream freezer and he cranked. He was close to me and talked to me then. We girls rotated this daddy time until we thought we were too big.

The years were hard on Daddy. For a while he rotated between the houses of us three girls. His mind began to blur with Alzheimer's disease. Once while visiting us Daddy took Lesley to Gladewater to buy minnows for fishing. When it was time to come home, he could not remember how to get back. He told 12-year-old Lesley to drive home.

Once while Daddy was in the hospital he recognized me and smiled in that recognition. We held hands and sang "Amazing Grace," his favorite hymn. That was the last time on earth he knew who I was. But someday up yonder, we will sing together again.

To be honest, I sobbed for an hour after reading this. I don't know why it hit me so hard – maybe it was her use of the word “yonder – the most quintessential East Texas term I can think of, or fact that it wasn't until I read it that I remembered that her father had died of the same disease she now has, or the idea that she wrote this, all of this, and it's beautiful. I love to see her words laid out on the page, her memories of her father, her memories of her mother.

She doesn't write this way anymore. She doesn't write at all.

I remember my mom saying that my grandmother should've been an English major. She worked in libraries her whole life, saving books that were being thrown out and bringing them home. She helped my mother with her English homework, helping her find meaning in the poetry they were assigned. And while I was getting my own English degree she would look at me and tell me how her biggest regret was never finishing college.

When we looked at this scrapbook together last summer, and we got to the page about her father, she looked at the picture and smiled.

“That's my daddy. He was always gone.”

All of her words, all of her stories, boiled down to the bare bones of meaning, to just four words. Her life, her parents lives and the impact they had on her, reduced to these key phrases – “she cooked yummy meals,” “he was always gone.” So much complexity buried in these few words, and I can hear all of it, just underneath the surface, the emotion that carries through these things we know by heart.

For as long as I can remember, my grandparents have had a rather large collection of projector slides. The back closet of their home was filled with reels of slides that my grandpa would bring out on certain nights when we were all at their house.

We called them Big Pictures because of the way we would all gather around in the living room with the big projector screen – bigger than any TV I had ever encountered as a child. We would turn out all of the lights and my grandpa would sometimes just choose a reel at random – with labels going all the way back to the 70s. We would see trips to the mountains in my grandpa’s jeep, my mom when she was around 9 or 10, birthdays, the births of the grandkids, more pictures of the mountains. And every time my grandpa would narrate, with others chiming in – “oh I remember this! This was the trip where...” and so on.

And I loved it, sitting in the dark, turning to my mother to see the spark of recognition in her eyes as pieces of her whole life would pop up on screen. How it felt when we would watch new enough slides that had me as a baby or my sister. The way it felt to be on the big screen, a slightly blurry glow on the faces of everyone around me.

But what stuck with me most, I think, was the sound.

The faint whirring of the machine, almost as if the beam of light itself coming from the bulb, shining through the dust of the dark room has a sound, then there’s a shifting noise, and *click*.

The next slide is in place.

Then again, the hum of the machine, a shift, a click.

Hum, shift, click.

Hum, shift, click.

I watched some big pictures with my grandparents this past summer – their newest goal is to get the slides digitized – over 100 reels, with each reel holding about 100 slides. The work is overwhelming, and I decided to help them research – trying to find deals online for places working with projector slides for less than something like \$1.00 per slide. But we also just

watched a couple of reels, for old times' sake, being brought back to watching the light flicker across my grandma's face, the sound of my grandpa's voice as he told each story with crystal clear recall – going back over 50 years.

A picture of my grandma came onto the screen. Her face was young, my mom had yet to be born.

“That’s me!” she said, sounding almost surprised.

Grandpa nodded, “Yes, that’s you.”

Hum, shift, click.

I asked her what the word ‘home’ means to her.

Without hesitation, she responds. “Love.”

She pauses then for a moment, considering her words. But then she nods.

“Love.”

"Love lets us see what is there to be seen; it lets us succumb to the very being of the beloved. [...] love lets us receive things as they are." -Engelland, 2020, p. 120

“...And maybe that's where I learned it from, from watching my mom.”

I’m sitting with my mother, and we’re talking about home. This ended up being one of my favorite conversations from the entire time I was in Texas last June, we had started talking about what it meant to make a home, and how various home-making skills are often referred to as “care tasks” – daily practices that constitute *caring* for a home or *caring* for others. And my mom started talking about her mother.

All she did was care about others. She cared for the home, she cared for the garden, the children, she fed us, she made all of my clothes, she sewed. She volunteered at the school and church, she made everything beautiful and special. Like, remember when you were little and she had all those paper napkins and it was just to make you feel special – oh here's a napkin with polka dots and here's a napkin with little baby chicks, here's a napkin with stars and stripes. Just always trying to make things special and nice. That's what she did. And that's what I wanted to do for my family.

I had forgotten about the napkins until she said something. Those same napkins kept in the drawer of the Grandma Cabinet in the dining room growing up.

And as we talked more, we started to reflect on these care tasks, this way that Grandma seemed to almost run herself into the ground with caring, but how it felt different, maybe, than her own mother where those care tasks almost started to feel like performance more than anything. And while we both think that there might have some skewed moral standard that affected my grandma's constant strive to do and do and go and go and care and care, there was something deeper going on.

I remember saying, "It's about love, isn't it."

I think it may truly be about love.

When I was over at their house this last time, when I did the interviews and everything went wrong – the memory card ran out of space halfway through and so I started recording on my phone, with terrible audio, my grandparents going in and out of frame – I found this shaky footage where I talked about my memories of being in the sewing room as a child and how I would play with buttons. For hours and hours I would sit on the floor and sort them and organize them like different pieces of candy and how I remembered one specific button that looked like a peppermint.

As I told this story, I could tell my grandma didn't remember what I was talking about. She found a tin filled with other sewing supplies and offered it to me – is this it? Grandpa said no before digging through the cabinet behind him to pull out the exact tin I remember from when I was a kid, full to the brim with buttons.

I don't sew anymore, said Grandma.

We opened up the tin and there they were, all the same buttons I remembered. As if no time had passed, the collection hadn't changed, untouched.

Dump it, said Grandpa, indicating for me to pour them out onto the table for me to see better. I went through and touched all of them, the feeling deeply familiar as I ran my hand across the pile.

I found the peppermint, said Grandpa.

I exclaimed how it was my favorite, my disbelief that they still had that exact button.

Take it, said Grandma, touching my arm.

And so I did.



Figure 33: the peppermint button

Bric-a-brac

By: Dorothy Parker

Little things that no one needs—

Little things to joke about—

Little landscapes, done in beads,

Little morals, woven out,

Little wreaths of gilded grass,

Little brigs of whittled oak

Bottled painfully in glass;

These are made by lonely folk.

Lonely folk have lines of days

Long and faltering and thin;

Therefore— little wax bouquets,

Prayers cut upon a pin,

Little maps of pinkish lands,

Little charts of curly seas,

Little plats of linen strands,

Little verses, such as these.

CHAPTER 6: RHETORICS OF THE SMALL

What is a rhetoric of the small?

A feeling, a moment, a thing we can touch?

A chair, a table, a cabinet?

A peppermint button?

Is it all the little things we've ever felt in the quiet moments? The way the light comes through the window, and you're all alone, just you? And everything is still.

...And you start to notice. Notice the way the light catches the steam coming off the top of your cup of tea, notice the indistinguishable sounds the house makes around you, and what it feels like, in your body, to be in that moment.

A rhetorics of the small is to notice. It is to be attuned to the body, to the spaces that surround us. It is an intentionality in the small things we do and say and surround ourselves with. A rhetorics of the small is an argument for the power of little things, for what is near, for the impressions we leave. It is an argument for the way the small things impact the big things, our cultures, communities, and social worlds. It is tied to how memory works, how little things accumulate in our minds and become part of a whole – in the stories we tell, the way we make meaning – the details that are often lost to time, despite holding the potential for the deepest meaning.

For my sister, her ideas of form and function are tied deeply to the question of how things come to matter in our lives – the cyclical nature of objects, meaning, and human interaction. Things come to matter because people matter, our interactions with others and how we want to create spaces for others. The stories that objects hold are stories of other people, and our familiar, repeated interactions with those objects over time begin to leave impressions, on us, on the

objects themselves -- like how a chair begins to take our shape. As we shape our spaces, our spaces shape us.

For my mother, her sense of the abstract and the practical have guided her to see how place functions in our lives – from the small scale of the home to the large scale of the globe. Her process of making things beautiful and simple and practical is her way of orienting herself to the spaces and places she is in, and that her experiences in leaving and returning tell us something about what it is to become situated in the world, to have a sense of direction, and to learn to see and appreciate the simple.

For my grandmother, the visible and invisible effects of her disease on her body, brain, the people around her are important for me, as one of her loved ones, in conceptualizing the visible and invisible effects of time itself. The way time and memory function as bodily experiences, often unreliable in our experience of them, can often be put in conflict with the stories we tell ourselves and others. My grandma spent so much of her time making things beautiful, creating spaces that were special, and passing these ideas down to her children and their children. She showed us, step by step, the things she knew by heart, and now as they fade with the effects of the disease on her body, it is our turn to do the same.

Finding a definition of the rhetorics of the small is to acknowledge the specific stories, patterns, and details within each of these women's lives while specifically not being limited to these women's lives. A rhetoric of the small is for all of us, a collection of stories that make up the call for attention and attunement to the little things that so often go overlooked.

In chapter 1, at the very beginning of this project, I talk about life-worlds. A life-world, according to scholars like Husserl, is the foundational space in which we live and make meaning

– it is the background, the thing taken for granted as the horizon from which our experiences are born. I argue for the home as a small-scale version of the lifeworld – a concept that becomes background, something that shapes our individual experiences. Our experience of “home” itself differs wildly, home as a specific location or multiple locations, home as a country, state, city, or specific dwelling, home as a positive, safe place to return to or as related to negative, difficult or even dangerous situations, people, and experiences. Not all people are safe in their homes or have access to safe and livable dwelling places. But these experiences, memories, and feelings toward current or past homes have indeed directly shaped our experiences of the world and where we go from here. In the same way we as human beings were all born, we all come from somewhere, grew up somewhere, live somewhere now – this is an intrinsic part of the human experience, while the situations behind these experiences can vary drastically.

The life-world, as a foundation for human experience, according to Moran’s introduction to Husserl, “cannot be transcended” (2012, p. 181). It is innate, immanent. We are thus, limited to our bodies, limited to our experiences in those bodies, and situated in the world in a very specific way that shapes what and how we learn and grow before we begin our own process of *shaping* the world around us. Our bodies, the places we dwell, and the experience of time, all limit us in some capacity, and yet they are also the way through which we make meaning and shape worlds. It is through our sensing bodies, situated with space and time, that we come to know.

The Hand

Olivia reaches out once again, to the keys of the piano, her fingers learning more and more every time she plays. She reaches for the ingredients in the back room of the coffee shop

where she bakes a couple of times a week, knowing the correct measurements by heart now. The dough for the scones she's making are bright purple from the berries, her hands are sure. They've always been sure.

Merleau-Ponty describes habituality as “knowledge in the hands,” a primordial knowledge, something fundamental. Habits and repeated actions are therefore a primary way in which we come to understand embodied knowing and how bodies home to shape our experience of the world. Heidegger's concept of ready-to-hand exemplifies how some of this habituality and embodied knowledge is linked to our experience of the things around us – what our hands do and touch based on what is near, what is familiar. Our hands are incredibly linked to what it is to be in the world, to shape the world, to reach and touch and feel.

I asked my dad to draw a set of hands on a piece of paper while I was home in Texas. My dad was always incredible at drawing anything set in front of him, so I watched as he drew his own hand, and mine that was sitting next to his on the table. He drew quickly, his right hand moving with surety as



Figure 34: Knowledge in the hands

we chatted about his day at work. His left hand laid idle for him to catch the shapes and lines created over years, his wedding ring, the size of his hand compared to mine.

I thought of Olivia's tattoo of a hand, reaching. Reaching out for something... I don't quite know what.

The Eye

My mother zooms in once again on the tiniest of details on the map she's editing. The way the bridge goes over the river doesn't look right in the bottom right corner of the print. She

always jokes about finally working as a full-time artist right when her vision starts to fade – needing special glasses and lighting in order to properly see the painting in front of her. But she still sees the detail better than anyone I know – catching the tiniest imperfections. Knowing exactly what color should go where to make the artwork balanced, pleasing to the eye.

In Donna Haraway's (1988) *situated knowledges*, she talks about this idea of “learning to see” in an attempt to reclaim vision as an embodied, sensory act, instead of a “conquering gaze from nowhere,” or a transcendent, omnipotent view of observation in the world (p. 581). She says:

“We need to learn in our bodies, endowed with [...] vision, [...] in order to name where we are and are not... [O]bjectivity turns out to be about particular and specific embodiment and definitely not about the false vision promising transcendence of all limits and responsibility. The moral is simple: only partial perspective promises objective vision. [...] Feminist objectivity is about limited location and situated knowledge, not about transcendence and splitting of subject and object. It allows us to become answerable for what we learn how to see.” (1988, p. 582-583).

I like thinking about this idea of *situated knowledges* in conversation with Ahmed's concept of “orientation” in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), and how we come to know through becoming oriented and disoriented as bodies in space, and as social beings navigating our place in the world. The eye is a clear tool of orientation (and disorientation) in how we come to be situated in a space, and how we come to find our way through the embodiment of sight – like a sense of embodied direction when we look at and experience a map.

The Heart

There was something about her that felt like it was at the center – the lifeblood behind it all. Her imperfections and insecurities and outbursts and unspoken histories were all there, brimming and bleeding onto her children, her grandchildren. But a center, nonetheless.

Something that held together. She could make anything, sew anything. She read, she gardened, she chased cars down the neighborhood road she thought were going too fast. She was *there*.

She was. She is?

There and not there, visible and invisible.

What is at the essence of things? Phenomenology, in its origins, was similar to other philosophical endeavors in its quest for truth. And while often this quest for truth was situated in a quest for better understanding the essence of things, I find essence to be the more compelling of the two. Essence is the core property of something, often hidden from our immediate sight. It's a thing's intrinsic-ness, the heart. I find, when we look to for the essence of things, we find their heart often lies in how it connects to our own hearts, our own core. At the heart of my grandmother's house was my grandmother herself, and at the heart of my grandmother we find something that lasts beyond the singularity of her physical body/brain – something about memory, life... love? I think it might be love.

I often go back to the story in chapter 4 of my mother on the plane when she was in college, looking down on the West Texas landscape. *The big things are like the small things*.

The first time I encountered the idea of fractals was in the book *Emergent strategy* by adrienne maree brown (2017), where she uses the concept of fractals to discuss the relationships between the small and the large. “A fractal,” she says, “is a never-ending pattern. Fractals are infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales. They are created by repeating a simple process over and over in an ongoing feedback loop” (brown, 2017, p. 51). It is a mathematical term that can be seen in nature in snowflakes, the branches of trees, ferns, broccoli, lightning storms – repeated patterns, branching out at scale, over and over and over.

With a fractal, regardless of how zoomed in or out you are, every part looks similar to the whole image.¹³ My mother, in her love of maps and scale and patterns, didn't know she was thinking of fractals, didn't know about the mathematical intricacies involved in her seeing shapes in the landscape below her as a 20-something in college.

The big things are like the small things.

brown uses fractals to ultimately argue that “how we are at the small scale is how we are at the large scale” (p. 52). This is quite the argument, embedded in the idea of the relationships, connections, and connectivity between the personal and the cultural/social. She continues, “The patterns of the universe repeat at scale. There is a structural echo that suggests two things: one, that there are shapes and patterns fundamental to our universe, and two, that what we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale” (p. 52). This structural echo is what I believe my mother saw from the plane, what I believe she is encapsulating in her maps. But I like how brown takes it a step further, beyond the idea of the small and large being connected, but about how we ultimately value the effects of the small things (our daily practices, the objects and movements of the everyday), as they reverberate, echo towards the big things (relationships, culture, histories, power).

The patterns we create in our daily lives have much larger consequences, and thus, to think about large-scale transformative change we must often first start with the small. brown's book title, *Emergent Strategy*, is a concept she defines as “strategy for building complex patterns and systems of change through relatively small interactions” (2017, p. 2). This, in many ways, is the point of the book, this acknowledgement of the everyday, the small, the simple, as valuable in

¹³ Internal Technologies. (n.d.) *What is a fractal?* <https://internal.us/what-is-a-fractal/#:~:text=A%20Fractal%20is%20a%20type,many%20different%20aspects%20of%20life>.

the way they can intentionally shape, change, and transform the world at large. Emergence, she says, “emphasizes critical connections over critical mass, building authentic relationships, listening with all the senses of the body and the mind” (2017, p. 3). *Connection* is what is most valuable in this process – not only the connection between the big and the small, but our connections with each other. Thus, a rhetorics of the small is an inherently relational practice, just as it is a sensory practice, outlined by brown’s discussion of listening with all the senses. Our attunement to our bodies and sensory experiences are what allow us to ultimately connect and relate to the world around us, and thus, the other people that we come in contact within the world.

I read brown’s book while I was home in Texas interviewing my family, at a time when I had all of these ideas for this project and how I was going to interview my sister, mom, and grandmother, but still ultimately lacking a sense of real focus – what was the point of this project? It felt like something hidden, something I had to search for, dig for, that was right underneath the surface. I was searching for something that was on the tip of my tongue, right... there.

Why did it matter?

And something about what I saw in brown’s book felt like an answer, in that it was one of the few books I had read in a while that offered... action. I know plenty of books situate, theorize, and call for change and new ways of thinking in ways that are incredibly action oriented. I believe books do something, often by just being books – they are ways of creating new knowledge. But something different happened to me when reading brown’s book – one of the clearest articulations of why this, *any of this*, matters. For me, citing home as theory, home as a site of rhetorical knowledge production, the relationship between the personal and theoretical,

the feminist call for an anti-logocentric viewpoint of rhetorical meaning-making, reflecting on the importance of the relationships between bodies, space, and time – these things matter to me as they stand, but it is often difficult to simply and concisely mark the reasoning of what we might do with them. brown's discussion of emergence and scale allowed me to zoom out – the patterns we hold at the small reverberate to the large. The meaning we find in our home has direct effects on how we find meaning elsewhere, the daily practices of our lives matter, they are not simply background noise that allow us to do other things that matter more. The home, in its representation of the small, the everyday, is a starting point for change.

My husband and I received the wonderful news that I was pregnant a couple of months into writing this dissertation. I had always been fascinated by the concept of pregnancy – a true embodiment, the way our mothers carried us in their bodies, made home for us in their bodies. It always seemed larger than life to me, difficult to process the enormity of motherhood and childbearing, but while actually being pregnant, I was surprised at the... normalcy of it. It's true that when I stopped to think about the enormity of it, what it would feel like to be a parent, I was struck by the weight of the whole process, but as far as the everyday experience goes, it was rather ordinary. Nine months is a long time and change happens slowly. I read a lot about how the baby developed every week and while it was absolutely incredible, it was still just something that happens, something occurring day by day that you can't yet see or feel. Day after day.

And then, without warning, he was here.

I had just finished the first draft of this project and sent it off to my committee only a week or two before my water broke unexpectedly five weeks early of my due date, the night before I was supposed to have my baby shower. Up until that point my pregnancy had been

decently uneventful, so it was a shock to suddenly be in the hospital knowing my baby would be there in a couple of hours. And when he did arrive, crying and purple and wriggly, the first thing they did was lay him on my chest and I got to hold his tiny, tiny hand.

He ended up needing to spend seven days in the NICU and there were so many moments where my husband and I were absolutely terrified – oxygen levels and ambulances and breathing tubes and alarms and the constant beeping of machines, as we sat and watch the rises and falls of our baby’s tiny chest.

In and out.

My parents and my sister had flown up from Texas, and they were able to sit with me next to his incubator and bring us food and just take care of all the little things that we hadn’t been able to do with the suddenness of his arrival. My mother and sister, especially, took over finishing setting up our apartment before we brought him home. They deep cleaned, and reorganized shelves and took emergency trips to Target, and I realized I couldn’t imagine trusting anyone else but the two of them to set up a space that worked for us. I had so many grandiose plans of getting everything ready before his due date, but in the end, I just needed my mom. I needed the way both her and my sister share that quality that allows them to just jump into action, shaping the spaces around them to make them work, make them fit.

The idea of the “small things” took on a new meaning. My tiny boy – all four pounds of him – his tiny hands and toes. His tiny breaths, tiny sighs. The little ways our families cared for us. The little details I remember from that time – a tiger blanket, banana bread, a nurse named Stephanie, a ‘welcome home’ sign. These small things that seem to stick in my mind, as if my brain knows they’re important, somehow.

And then, flashing forward however many months later to a fully happy and healthy baby, it is still the little things that get to me. We've gotten into somewhat of a routine, though it still seems always be changing, and I'm struck by how even what once felt miraculous has started to feel mundane. He breathes, he sleeps, he eats, and then we do it all over again. Even now I hear him playing in the other room and as I write I know I'll have to stop soon to go make sure he's fed and then help get him down for a nap. My sense of time itself has changed, the way my body adjusts (or doesn't adjust) to lack of sleep, or how it's attuned to his needs (or not attuned, when I can't figure out what he needs). The back and forth of my daily life, not really getting much work done, and feeling stressed before remembering that this little human relies on me and the people around me for quite literally everything. As he grows more independent things will continue to change, but for now I will continue to simply orbit him as if gravity itself turns me towards every little sound he makes, every movement, every cry.

Is this motherhood? I've talked with some other mothers in my life about how I'm still not sure what being a mother is supposed to feel like. Many of them have expressed to me that that feeling of not knowing *is* what it feels like, especially at the beginning. There is a strange comradery in motherhood as we acknowledge the individuality of each person's experience but how that individuality is almost what brings the sense of community, the sense of acknowledgement from others who have experienced all the range of what it can mean to be a parent. I feel this sense of discovery, alongside friends and family, is what helps me feel connected to the experience of others that came before me, this continued pattern across generations as we help bring these strange little beings into this world.

And it's this that makes me feel as though this dissertation wouldn't be complete without him, this baby that made me a mother, a mere concept in my mind as I wrote my first draft but

now here, flesh and blood, little hands reaching and needing and holding. In some ways this dissertation is *about* him, how connected he is for me to what I mean when I say “rhetorics of the small” – to what it means to love across time and space, to be attuned to our bodies, to hold things close, to sit within the mundane and the everyday as significant in what sticks out, little pinpricks in our brains that tell us that *this matters, don’t forget*.

I had a conversation with my mother after completing my first draft of the chapter about my grandmother. I told her about how difficult it was to try and convey the horror of Alzheimer’s disease and what had already been lost to time, while still ultimately retaining the hope of what it is to love and be loved in homes that are gone and homes that are still here with us. And the conversation turned to something like grief hitting my mother out of nowhere – *it’s just not fair*, she said.

“She worked her ass off to make everything beautiful and special and safe – a welcoming and safe place, and I’ve lost that,” she said. “I can’t call my mom anymore, I used to call her about everything. She was the person that actually cared...”

Loss is a funny thing. We can know these truths by heart, we can know the truth of what we lost, we can feel it with every breath, but sometimes it will hit us when we least expect it. I was telling my mom about the chapter to celebrate my writing skills, to commiserate on the difficulty of the dissertation work and in that moment my mom realized that she lost the ability to call her own mother and talk about the highs and the lows of just everyday life.

“I don’t have my mom anymore,” I remember her saying.

But then she told me a story.

She explained how my grandmother comes over to my mother's house every Thursday morning while my grandpa goes to a weekly bible study meeting that my mom insists he go to in order to get out of the house. When my grandmother arrives at the door early on Thursday, my mother says she apologizes every time. "Sorry it's so early." "Sorry for bothering you."

And my mom, without fail, says, "It's no bother," or "I would be up anyway."

And on this particular morning, my grandmother made a comment about the amount of Christmas decorations that were sitting around in my mother's house – there were bins and boxes and garland strewn about the whole house – "you have too many Christmas decorations."

And my mom responded, "I get that from you."

My grandma looked surprised.

"When I was little, I would come home from school and you had transformed the whole house. The Christmas tree was up and lit, and it always felt like every inch of the house was covered in holly or snowmen or miniature Santa's."

My mother said my grandmother seemed to smile, not necessarily remembering, but as if she seemed to think the idea was nice. And my mother told me that she likes to do that when she's with my grandmother – remind her of the beautiful things.

"I think that's why I'm here," she said.

And I can't remember if I just thought it or if I said it out loud, but is that what it is to love someone? Saying something true over and over again, knowing they won't remember?

But we do it because it matters, still. Whether they remember or not.

Over and over and over.

I think my grandmother would matter if no one ever wrote about her.

I say this because it's a possible misconception embedded in my theorization of the rhetorics of the small as a call for the small to be remembered – to be archived, cherished, brought into new life through text, unlike the women in generations past who we have long forgotten. We've forgotten the way they would lean down to teach their young daughter how to do something in the kitchen. We've forgotten the words spoken in the quiet moments that no one wrote down but were still a part of shaping and changing how generations moved through space and thought and loved and wrote.

The unknown names in history, the forgotten.

But I think, for me, a rhetorics of the small is not in fact, a call of remembrance. I think about the stories that little things have, stories we tell each other, moments of the quiet and unnoticed that will be lost to time if they haven't been already – do they still matter? If no one remembers them, do they still matter?

Because I often wonder if these small things are more embedded in us than we realize. How are the small things are passed down? What if we carry them in our bodies, what if we pass them to the next generation in a way that is embodied, embedded – a type of essence? We might not remember our great-great-great grandmother's name if we don't look it up on an ancestry website, we might not find meaning in the stories we hear about her, if we hear stories at all, this woman we never met. But she matters, still. If only for the simple fact that we would not exist without her.

To quote Petra Hendry, "Memory is not mere nostalgia or sentimental reminiscence, but an interpretative, political, and creative engagement that asks us to question: what does it mean to be human? How do we know? Who can be knower? What is knowledge?" (2011, p. 4)

A rhetoric of the small is not, therefore, some idealist retreat into the falsehoods of nostalgia, but rather a call – in light of real horrors in the world, of anger and the pain, and broad sense of being overwhelmed, that we turn to the small. That we remember the importance of the everyday, the importance of breath and simply being in the world. That we let it ground us, back into our bodies, and bring to light what we value and how we make sense of the world – how we come to know.

A rhetorics of the small is ultimately concerned with love.

In brown's book she has an interesting passage where she talks about the larger function of little things that dandelions and mushrooms within the larger ecosystem as 'toxin-transformers' and 'communities of healers,' in order to ask, then, "What are we as humans, what is our function in the universe?"

This is what she says:

"One thing I have observed: When we are engaged in acts of love, we humans are at our best and most resilient. The love in romance that makes us want to be better people, the love of children that makes us change our whole lives to meet their needs, the love of family that makes us drop everything to take care of them, the love of community that makes us work tirelessly with broken hearts.

Perhaps humans' core function is love. Love leads us to observe in a much deeper way than any other emotion" (2017, p. 9).

It is love that allows us to see. It is love that calls us to pay attention, to notice, to bring forward to the surface what was once overlooked. It is love that causes the small things to matter, causes the mundane to become beautiful, become meaningful, become embedded into our very bones, a story written in our bodies. It is love in my hands as I hold my son, it is love in my voice as I talk to my mother and sister on the phone, it is love that holds the memories of my grandmother

close, as I walk through her kitchen in Lubbock (or am I in Gladewater?) and right through the front door. I am in Lubbock, East Texas, Celina, Belize, Michigan.

I am home.

Years before we got married, my husband and I went on a walk. I was writing a paper for a writing workshop class with Alexandra Hidalgo, the paper that would inspire this dissertation project, the paper that itself was inspired from papers I had written during my master's degree at Texas Tech about my mom's maps, papers written in my first semester at MSU about homemaking as cultural practice and embodiment storytelling. My husband and I have gone on many walks now, braving the cold or the wind or the sun to walk through the forested path across the street from our apartment, where I would rant and rave wildly about my vague and chaotic thoughts and ideas, and my husband would listen, asking the occasional question. This walk was one of the first, on a snowy evening in February, when the question he asked pulled something loose, made something come together in my mind, and I saw it all in that moment – why my grandmother mattered, why my mother and sister's stories mattered, how tied they were to mine. This was the moment it all clicked.

What about it makes you bleed? he asked.

It was a strange question, but I knew what he meant. We were walking in the snow; my shoe was untied. The sky looked dark pink, almost orange and the trees were a deep gray. There was an unintended violence in the question that I didn't feel – he was asking me to call to language what was already in my shoulders, behind my ears. Bring it forward.

There's a string tied around the part of my stomach, just behind my lungs. It's both pulling me and pushing me, and sometimes just... there. Anchoring me, connecting me to them, to you.

I pull just hard enough to hurt.

My grandmother, sitting in her chair. She's showing me how to pinch off the ends of the green beans from the garden. My mother is painting. Her brush swirls in the water after each stroke, creating new colors every time. My sister is playing the piano. She seems to always be playing the piano, filling the house with sound.

The sound of my feet crunching through snow, through the fading light of the Michigan winter echo this ongoing beat in my chest. Bleeding, bursting out from the very core of my heart, running freely and wildly in their warmth and in their power, they matter, the small things.

They matter, they matter, they matter.

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