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Piper, FL

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Frances Piper

## Spatial Parody, Theatricalisation and Constructions of 'Self' in Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* and Carson McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Café*.

This essay considers the ways in which Highsmith and McCullers use theatricalisation of space to suspend the distinction between public and private as a defining trope in gender construction. Both texts, I argue, explore 'transit' as space/place that both resists and reinstates that public/private binary, through the use of what I term 'spatial parody'. In *The Price of Salt* (1952) numerous cafes, restaurants and hotels provide a backdrop for the unfolding of a forbidden (lesbian) romance. In *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1943) McCullers foregrounds the café itself and interrogates the relationship between ownership of space, gender performance and selfhood.

Key words: Highsmith; McCullers; lesbian; perform; parody; gender; 'third sphere'.

### **Playing at 'Home': Theatricalising the Domestic**

In *The Sexual Contract* Carole Pateman suggests that 'the private womanly sphere (natural) and the public masculine sphere (civil) are opposed but gain their meaning from each other' (11). Certainly this has been the dominant discourse that has helped to prop up what Laura Levine Frader refers to as 'a historical fiction that failed to describe social reality.' She further suggests that 'public and private are means of communicating and of enforcing ideology' (1480-81). Both texts discussed in this essay interrogate the essentialism of a simply demarcated public/private binary, most particularly in their destabilising of that binary through acts of performance and self-transformation. As I will suggest, the theatre as a space of transit offers multiple possibilities for (self) transformation, and it is this space that provides a template for the reconfiguration/repositioning of the self within one's environment. Highsmith's novel overtly uses the theatre as a concrete location that resonates beyond itself, through the mobility of Therese, an aspiring theatre set designer. McCullers' text evokes performance through the parallel transformations of Miss Amelia from androgyne to 'woman' and her home/business from farm-store to café. What binds the two together is the interrelationship between the transitory space, its 'theatricalisation', and the transgressive possibilities it offers: these three features, I argue, operate triangularly to subvert (but concomitantly to reinscribe) largely accepted versions of the inevitability of the public/private binary.

In this sense both texts illumine what Teresa Gómez Reus and Aránzazu Usandizaga describe as, 'the intrinsic ambivalence of the relationship between gender and space, and the difficulties involved in the neat distinction between the public and the private sphere' (23). In *The Price of Salt*, the collapsing of these spheres, and the attendant creation of what I term a 'third sphere', operates to liberate the central protagonist, enabling her to rewrite her 'self' in context of her (forbidden) lesbian desire. Conversely, in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, Miss Amelia *begins* as a woman who has already constructed a 'third sphere' (her farm-store), a space/place that is subsequently threatened by her desire to conform to a normative gendered model of 'the feminine'. The 'third sphere', I will also argue, is a space of transit precisely because the women within those spaces *define* the spaces, as opposed to being defined by them. In this essay, then, I conceive 'in transit' in terms of the ways in which (transgressive) women construct spaces as 'transitory' through their own presence within them.

First though, why might the theatre/performance space be a useful metaphor through which to rethink the relationship between the spheres? As Kevin Hetherington suggests, ‘identity...is about spatiality...identity involves an identification with particular places [and] certain spaces act as sites for the performance of identity’ (105). Further, as Josette Feral observes:

it [the performance space] is transitional, a space of passage and crossing, *rather than* a place of identification. It is a representation of those undefined zones, reterritorialized sites inhabited by individuals without point of reference. (59, emphasis added).

What Feral suggests here is that the performance or ‘playing’ space can be said to evoke *journey*, rather than ‘destination’. In turn, this quality of performing/journeying/being ‘in transit’, she implies, functions to make available alternative models of identification. So whilst, as Hetherington suggests, we identify with, and are often constructed by, ‘place’ or the environment we occupy, the fluidity of the performance space, offers a way of subverting this model if we think of it, as Feral does, as a site of ‘passage’: in other words, a space/place of transit.<sup>1</sup>

With regard to *The Price of Salt*, I will suggest that the engagement with the theatre space that Therese feels so comfortable in, is reproduced in her movement through a succession of cafes and restaurants which themselves are performative, or what I term spatially parodic, in that they present a consciously constructed domestic, and so gendered, *mise-en-scène*. Cafes, bars and restaurants serve a practical function, yet are dressed up in the same way that a stage set might be dressed for performance. Checked cloths cover tables, symbolising homeliness whilst suggesting impersonation; vases hold plastic flowers, decorative symbols whose effect is to draw attention to the space’s parodic nature; the aproned café-owner/waiter provides sustenance, mimicking the maternal role within the home. These spaces are triply constructed: to emulate the domestic, to offer a public version *of* the domestic, and to offer sanctuary *from* the domestic; they impersonate and so critique the cultural metonym for ‘home’ that is ‘kitchen’. In so doing they operate to critique the valency of the private/domestic as essentially ‘female’. The parodic qualities of these spaces, which draw attention to the private/public boundary as a construct, mirror the resistance of Therese and Carol to the performance of their prescribed gendered roles as girlfriend and almost-fiancée (Therese) and wife/mother (Carol).

The café as a place of performance is at the centre of McCullers’ *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, and it is that ‘space of transit’, that in the end effects the unravelling of the life of its central protagonist, Miss Amelia Evans. Whilst the story is ostensibly one of unrequited male love and his ultimate revenge, the real tragedy is in the ‘domestication’ of Miss Amelia, a process that is inextricably bound up with the transformation of Miss Amelia’s farm-store into a café. I ask whether this mutable space, through its parodic re-presentation as a public ‘version’ of domesticity, reinstates the domestic environment (the home) that the farm-store has been designed to efface, or whether its recreation as a place of transit represents a resistance to the domestic/private. This opposition is echoed in Miss Amelia’s shift from androgyne to feminised, which, I argue, functions parodically to expose the absurdity of both conscious and unconscious modes of articulating gender.

As noted above, the café is a theatricalised space and in drawing attention to itself as a public version of the heart of the home – the kitchen/parlour – it falls into the realms of parody.

Space, when thought of through the lens of 'gender parody' is always potentially other – take away the bed and the wardrobe (or the dress and the high heels), add a desk and computer (or a suit and a moustache) and, hey presto, the bedroom becomes the study (or 'she' becomes 'he'). So, can an interior 'space' (just like a theatre stage) only ever parody its supposed function, in that it exposes the imitative structure of spatial definition (and with it the rigidity of the private/public division)? As Judith Butler argues, 'parody is of the *very notion* of an original' and that, in particular, 'gender parody reveals that the original identity after which gender fashions itself, is itself an imitation *without an origin*' (2003: 209, emphasis added). In this sense, Butler continues, parody, by its very nature, constitutes 'an openness to resignification and recontextualisation' (2003:209). Miss Amelia and her café are perfectly placed to illumine the ways in which 'spatial parody' might be modelled closely on this notion of gender parody.

### **Playing Away: Carol, Therese and Café Culture**

Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* (1952) was published under a pseudonym, and was later republished as *Carol* (1990). In her article exploring the growth of the lesbian 'pulp' novel in America during the nineteen-fifties, Yvonne Keller notes that 'Claire Morgan's [Highsmith's pseudonym] *The Price of Salt* had more than half a million copies in print by the arrival of the 1958 Bantam paperback edition'. It is also significant to remember that, as Keller notes: 'The 1934 Hays Film Code's ban on any depiction of homosexuality continued until 1961, and the nascent television industry of the 1950s did not show homosexuals' (404). In short, representation of lesbians was confined to a small genre of works that Keller terms 'lesbian pulp', within which the dominant construction, in line with socio-cultural fears of difference, was of the lesbian as the ultimate transgressor. The cultural context then, for Highsmith's novel, was one in which lesbians were cast as 'active and maniacal figures who sought to spread their depravity by victimizing otherwise heterosexual women' (Abate 238).

*Salt*, however, does not conform in any way to the often reductive, though occasionally provocative, models of lesbianism articulated in 'lesbian pulp'. It is a complex love story, culminating in a dangerously liberating road-trip that adumbrates texts as diverse as Nabokov's *Lolita* and Ridley Scott's film, *Thelma and Louise*. Therese falls in love with Carol and determines to win her. Therese is nineteen, Carol in her early thirties, and in the process of divorcing from her husband, Harge. Carol has a young daughter, Rindy. Therese's great passion is the theatre (in many ways the quintessential mutable or transitory space), and she is hoping to find work as a stage designer. However, she is currently employed in 'Frankenburg's', a large department store, symbolic of commerce, of the public, of the masculine

As the novel opens we find Therese, sitting in the workplace canteen, wondering who she 'is' and how 'she happened to land here' (Highsmith 13). She reflects upon her fear of 'living on an entirely wrong plane, so that the meaning, the message, the love, never could find its expression' (13). She is aware of the dangerous paradox of wanting to 'belong': whilst eating, she is reading the company booklet 'Welcome to Frankenburg's' for the second time, as if the words might give her the means to perform her 'proper' role of 'shop girl'. Therese, though, can find no useful script, has no stage directions, only knows that she is a girl working in the 'doll department' who is terrified of repeating and repeating the 'pointless actions' of the women she sees around her (13). She is aware, then, of the identificatory models that are on offer in the store (the dolls, the other female workers), models which instantiate the public/private by heightening expectations of the 'feminine' within the public environment.

However, as we shall see, she chooses instead to bring to bear the mutability of the theatre space upon this public/commercial environment, in the same way that she creates alternative spatial possibilities through her set designs.

As Martha Acklesburg points out, 'There is no typology...that will allow us to draw a line between public and private that will be appropriate for all times and circumstances' (85). In other words, the public/private binary is always in flux, never stable. Moreover, if the female is always-already constructed as 'private', however much she may try to shake off the mantle of the private/domestic in her pursuit of the public, she actually has the potential to collapse that binary, so transforming the public space into what we can term a transitory space: whilst 'she' is within it, it is *neither* masculine/public *nor* feminine/private. In this sense, it is the woman who has the potential to effect 'transitoriness': wherever 'she' is will be in danger of becoming what I will call a 'third sphere', a neither/nor threat to the fragile opposition that predicates the public/private dichotomy.

Highsmith, I think, senses this neither/nor paradox, with all its dangerous potential, and interrogates it through a narrative of breathless mobility. In that opening paragraph of *Salt*, where Therese plays out motifs both of displacement and belonging she is a neither/nor kind of girl. This is echoed back through Therese's observation of the way in which the canteen is organised: 'There was *no room* left at any of the long tables...People ...*wandered about* between the tables in search of a spot they could squeeze into...but there was *no place*' (Highsmith 1, emphasis added). People squeeze into 'no place' so desperate are they to belong. The urge to find identification with the other store-workers, with the institution that is the great department store 'Frankenburg's', leads Therese to reflect that 'the store was organized so much like a prison, it frightened her now and then to realized she was a part of it' (Highsmith 2). Therese's reaction to this is to resist the impulse to belong, through an imaginative transformation of the space: 'the great square window across the room looked like a painting by – who was it? Mondrian. The little square section of window in a corner open to a white sky. What kind of a set would one make for a play that took place in a department store?' (2). *She* shapes and moulds the environment in which she finds herself, the better to suit her own sense of mutability and liminality.<sup>2</sup> This public space, one that defines (most of) its inhabitants, has its power minimised through its evocation as a stage set, as a transitory space, and as a parody of the idea of space as self-defining. Therese has an alertness to the operation of spatial parody as it might be marshalled to redefine the spaces she inhabits.

Therese, has, even in childhood, interrogated the relationship between private/public: she is, in many ways, emblematic of liminality. Unwanted by her mother, she is sent to a boarding school where most of the girls 'have no parents' (Highsmith 69), thus existing in a place between private and public: the family exists, there is a 'home' and her mother occasionally visits her, but she is brought up by 'the state' in what she later refers to as a 'Home' (Highsmith 68). She is neither/nor daughter/orphan. Nor does she ever stay still – within the text she is constantly mobile, passing through countless different spaces, sometimes with little more than a nod to individual appearance or function. In the first section of the novel, a series of cafés, bars and restaurants act as a backdrop to the love that is developing between Therese and Carol, who meet whilst the latter is shopping in the doll department. The precise qualities of the locations in which Therese meets Carol are deliberately anonymised: the first café/bar has 'wooden rafters and white tablecloths' (Highsmith 48), the second is just 'a place that sold sandwiches' (Highsmith 81). It is as though the cafés are a series of stage sets waiting

to be brought to life by the characters that inhabit them. They represent possibility and even freedom. No description of their interior look is necessary.

This pattern continues until the occasion on which Richard, Therese's boyfriend, takes Therese and Carol to 'Rumpelmayer's' and Therese notes that 'she did not care for the place. Its bright lights gave her a feeling of nakedness, and it was annoying not to know if one were looking at a real person or at a reflection in a mirror' (Highsmith 150). This is the first sign from Therese that she is not entirely comfortable in a given location and is a pivotal point in the novel. The space that feels so alien to her suddenly conjures, in a mirror, the unwanted *image* of Carol's husband, Harge, and, of course, it *is* him: his reflection is the 'real person'. The café and bar as an in-between space for the women, is violated by this intrusion. Equally, after Richard has observed Therese and Carol in the bar he rants at Therese that she is 'lovesick...in a trance...a person gone so crazy, you think you're saner than ever' (Highsmith 154-155). Her desire for Carol is articulated, by Richard, in terms of 'a paranoid cultural logic that conflates lesbianism and madness' (Coffman 113). The transitory potential of the café/bars, which has thus far allowed the women to play out a different kind of relationship from that possible in the domestic arena is firmly redefined as 'public' by the intrusion of Harge and Richard. Concomitantly, their romance has, through the insertion of patriarchal law into that 'neither/nor space', become categorized as subversive 'insanity'.

Therese's movement through the first 'set' of cafés is interwoven with scenes from her professional life as she creates her first professional theatre set. Therese has a passion for constructing fictive environments, or 'boundary crossing in image-making' (Green 901) which finds fruition in her work as a theatre set designer. Therese is offered her first professional job, designing a stage set for *Small Rain* to be performed very much off-off-off Broadway at The Black Cat Theatre. She begins her work with the drawing of 'a line, with a pencil, on a piece of paper. And another line, carefully, and another. A world was born around her, like a bright forest with a million shimmering leaves' (Highsmith 74). However, when the director of the play, Mr Donohue, looks at her cardboard model he is 'adamant against anything unusual' (Highsmith 111). Therese constructs a new model that 'hadn't the movable section she had put into the first, which would have permitted the living room scene to be converted into the terrace scene for the last act' (Highsmith 111). As a result, the essence of the play itself has to be changed, with many of the 'cleverest lines' being lost. In response she creates a single set, one that is 'lifelike down to the last ashtray' (Highsmith 112). The irony implicit in Therese's perception of this modification bespeaks her understanding of the metaphorical possibilities offered by spatial parody: she sees space in context of its alterity; her director needs to impose single function, single meaning: no transformations, no possibilities of surprise or difference. Therese, in other words, sees the value of transforming space to suit one's own purpose/desire, rather than simply becoming whatever the space demands.

The second section of the novel sees Carol and Therese take a holiday, driving out from New York towards Wyoming and the corn-belt. They move from town to town, staying in a series of rather anonymous hotels. It is in Waterloo – the next port of call after Chicago – that they finally make love for the first time. Afterwards, Therese's description of their room is poetic, and she says that she will 'remember every detail of this room forever' (Highsmith 191). Her sophisticated powers of observation, until so recently focused upon creating imaginative, theatrical worlds are now used to notice the particularity of each hotel they pass through: these are no longer anonymous versions of each other, they are invested with specificity and

individuality. One is cold and the ‘winds had taken possession of the room, were seizing Carol’s cigarette smoke and tearing it to pieces’ (200), whilst another is ‘like a lodge...with a row of deers’ horns above the mantel’ (Highsmith 203). In all of this Therese feels ‘like an actor, remember[ing] only now and then her identity with a sense of surprise, as if she had been playing in these last days the part of someone else’ (203). This moment of realisation – that she is Therese, that the collapsing of public/private that the hotel room, the ‘third sphere’ makes possible, has liberated her ‘real ‘self’ – coincides with her suspicion that they are being followed. She identifies the man with the ‘colourless eyes and the long creases on either side of his mouth’ alone at his table against the wall of the dining room, as the very same one she saw in the hotel lobby at Waterloo (203). Whilst the places through which she passes begin to spring to life, their vivid descriptions echoing the joyful intricacy of Therese’s set designs, that control over ‘space’ that she has previously enjoyed comes under threat, precisely echoing that moment in Rumpelmayer’s where she both does and doesn’t see Harge.

It appears, then, that the novel is performing a horrible U-turn: having set up all these possibilities of ‘difference’ through the mobility and creative imagination of Therese, we now face the prospect that when she attempts to apply that model of self-construction to her real world, she is not transformed, but undone. The man with the colourless eyes is a private detective and he has been employed by Carol’s husband Harge to accrue the evidence that will ensure that, in their divorce, he gains custody of their daughter: a divorcée will likely win custody of her child; a lesbian divorcée almost certainly will not. The detective has bugged the hotel room in Waterloo; he has recorded the sounds of their lovemaking, so acquiring, through his intrusion into what they believed to be their private space the means to humiliate Carol, publicly, in a court of law. It appears that the women’s appropriation of these many spaces of transit has backfired on them: they have played out an erotic relationship in apparently transitory places (hotels) that contain, beneath the public façade, the means of privacy, of intimacy (beds, showers). This blurring of the public/private sphere (the creation of the third sphere) proves too much for Harge’s sense of ‘proper’ wifely behaviour (despite his own infidelities) and, by extension, for broader social and cultural propriety.

The recordings of course ensure that Harge has his way and gains ‘complete custody’ of Rindy (Highsmith 253). Far worse, the recordings identify the nature of Carol’s sexuality in no uncertain terms. She must give up Therese (‘and others like [her]’) if she is to be allowed ‘the privilege, the wonderful reward’ of seeing her daughter for the precious few weeks each year that she has been granted (Highsmith 254). On this basis, as Carol explains to Therese by letter, she had no option but to ‘tell the lawyers’ she ‘would not see her again’ (254). Yet only a week or two later Carol resists the control placed on her intimate, private life by ‘Harge and the lawyers’ and rescinds agreement to these demands. The two women meet and talk in yet another hotel bar and as Carol speaks, we feel her greatest outrage is reserved for the way in which,

“they made that recording in Waterloo. They drove a spike into the wall... I remember hearing somebody hammering...a spike that picks up sound like a Dictaphone.” Therese [however] didn’t remember the hammering, but the violence of it all came back, shattering, destroying... (Highsmith 277).

The liberating ambivalence of the hotel as a space where public and private could be collapsed has been penetrated in the most invasive way possible: the sounds of their first

lovemaking are 'spiked'. This phallic insertion into their most intimate moments has, it would seem, worked its patriarchal magic: it has reinstated the public/private boundary, ensuring that the public façade of the hotel has effaced the intimate possibilities it offers.

So when, now, Carol offers herself to Therese, we are not entirely surprised when she is rejected. Whilst the transitory quality of the spaces in which they have loved has enabled a suspension of the demarcation between public and private, the 'spiking' has, both literally and metaphorically, reinstated that demarcation. Therese walks away, to attend a 'theatrical' party where she is introduced as a 'set-designer'; she meets an actress, who, she intuitively, 'is like Carol'; the actress invites her to an 'inner circle' party in her hotel suite, and Therese accepts; then 'suddenly a feeling of *tragedy*' sweeps over Therese (Highsmith 283-5, emphasis added). The theatrical metaphor is no accident here. She is reminded that she 'designs sets', that the world is mutable, full of possibility. Thus, she will not allow her final scene to be a 'tragedy': she 'plunge[s] down the wide stairs' and out of the party, to '[fly] across the streets... Towards Carol' (Highsmith 286). To Carol she goes. Therese, as space-shaper, responds to the liberating potential of 'spatial parody', and so enacts the possibilities that are implied in the very idea of 'theatre' and particularly 'performance site', the site that most understands the nature of mutability and that provides the 'space' to explore and inhabit alternative versions of the 'self'.

#### **Imposing the Domestic: Miss Amelia's Problem of 'Possession'**

Unlike Therese, Miss Amelia Evans is a woman of means. She has mobility, though this is largely limited to the spaces and places she owns. Rachel Adams has observed that 'McCullers's freaks are figures of possibility whose queer transgressions of ... gendered boundaries enable a productive reconsideration of normative social relations' (553). Melissa Free talks of McCullers in context of the operation of the grotesque, noting that it is in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* that its effect is most 'fully embodied' (427). Miss Amelia Evans, the androgynous central character in *Ballad*, in her masculinised self-presentation, resists the idea of the private body as 'an object and target of power' (Foucault 136): she will have no truck with that 'docile body' that conforms to societal requirements. Paradoxically, though, she does not quite conform to the expectations demanded of the freak/grotesque, particularly in terms of what Sarah Gleeson-White describes as her 'femininity, for Amelia is at times, at crucial times, feminine. And it is these moments that, I suggest, are paradoxically her most freakish and her most dangerous' (51).

I wonder though if she is at her most 'paradoxically freakish' in her resistance to traditional models of spatial division (a resistance that is, of course, echoed in her resistance to traditional gender models). She owns her own large home, which contains within it a thriving farm-store. The public and private co-exist: Miss Amelia, then, begins the narrative within a hybrid space, a space of transit, of her own construction. As we shall see, she is at her 'most dangerous' when she refuses male domination of her space (and concomitantly at her most vulnerable when she allows male intrusion). There is an intrinsic relationship between Miss Amelia's performances of gender/s and the changing space in which she enacts those performances.<sup>3</sup> Miss Amelia is a powerful figure: 'a dark, tall woman, with bones and muscles like a man' (McCullers 198). She has erotic power – unusual in one who is six foot two inches tall, cross-eyed and reveals, under her red dress, a 'strong hairy thigh' (McCullers 243). However respectful we must necessarily be of difference, and of taste, in literary terms Miss Amelia certainly goes against the grain as an object of erotic desire.



Marvin Macy is a violent and rapacious man who carries about with him 'the dried and salted ear of a man he killed in a razor fight', and who regularly 'degrade[s] and shame[s]' young and innocent town girls (McCullers 219). Miss Amelia, however, with no intention of doing so, works her magic on Macy, provoking in him a complete reversal of character: 'Love changed Marvin Macy. Before the time when he loved Miss Amelia it could be questioned if such a person had within him a heart and soul' (McCullers 217). After two years of harbouring an undeclared passion for her, Macy proposes marriage to Miss Amelia. To the amazement of all, she accepts this proposal. The wedding night is not a success: within half an hour of the couple repairing upstairs, Miss Amelia angrily returns to her shop floor, dressed in 'breeches and a khaki jacket' (McCullers 220). From here on it is clear there is to be no consummation of the marriage. After another week he is ejected from the property, and when he attempts to cross the boundary Miss Amelia seeks to have him locked up for trespass.

It is vital to Miss Amelia that she protects the space that she has constructed and which in turn defines her: the farm-store that is also her 'home', the site where public and private co-exist. The farm-store is her version of the 'third sphere': it is a space that comfortably straddles the public/private binary by interlacing home and commercial business. The farm-store is Miss Amelia's equivalent of Therese's mutable theatre sets that enable her (Therese) to reinvent the operation and 'affect' of *any* space that she inhabits. Macy makes the mistake of attempting to reinstate the opposition of public and private, so threatening Miss Amelia's carefully wrought third sphere: it is to become a place where sexual desire is enacted upstairs whilst commerce 'as usual' continues downstairs. Not for Miss Amelia however. She sends Macy packing, so 'escap[ing] from the eternal feminine cycle of reproduction to the social cycle of production' (Chaber 213). Macy never recovers: he redoubles his criminal activities, goes on the run, but is eventually apprehended and handed out a very long sentence in jail.

This co-existence of public and private (the third sphere) is ruptured a second time, by the coming of the dwarfish hunchback, Lymon Willis, some eight years after the departure of Marvin Macy. This phantasy object appears in the dark, weeping and claiming to be Amelia's cousin. Within hours of his arrival, she has dried his feminine tears, fed him and taken him upstairs to sleep. Soon afterwards this strange creature, who is only half the size of Miss Amelia, embarks upon the gradual transformation of the farm-store, a place that connotes the union of public and private activity, into a café/bar, a place that parodies domesticity. This marks the beginning of Amelia's role as 'the lover'. Her negation of 'proper' feminine behaviour, connoted most forcefully through her refusal to consummate her marriage with Macy, is now subverted by her desire to woo her hunchback cousin. This normativity is interestingly inverted, in that Lymon is the beloved, the wooed, the gazed upon, reconfiguring himself as the desired, the subject of the gaze. Under her loving gaze and 'spoiling' he becomes an 'accomplished performer of (Southern) womanhood', and is feminised further in terms of his position as 'kept woman'. (Bollobas Npag). He walks downstairs each evening, entering the space as if it is a stage, 'dressed in a green shawl' (209); he crosses to the 'exact centre of the room' (227), and proceeds to entertain the customers with his 'chattering' tales.

According to Judith Butler, the

failure of naturalised heterosexuality ...can become an occasion  
for a subversive ... parody of gender norms in which the very  
claim to originality and to the real is shown to be the effect

of a certain kind of naturalised gender mime (2006: 263).

In her resistance to Macy's masculinity, and in ownership of a the farm-store, her own 'space of transit', Miss Amelia refuses to 'perform naturalised heterosexuality', both in terms of her own aesthetic self-presentation and in regard to how she chooses to construct her environment. However, as Miss Amelia attempts, for love of Lymon, to embrace femininity, she becomes that parodic creature who, in Butler's terms, exposes the failures of rigid gender constructions, based as they are upon a false 'real' – normative heterosexuality, and, by extension, the instantiation of a feminine domestic. Moreover, as Miss Amelia assumes a feminine veneer, so her comfortable 'third sphere' is increasingly dominated by Lymon, and is turned into a parody of the 'domestic'. As noted earlier in this essay, the *café performs* domesticity in its scenic propensity to re-construct the 'heart of the home'. The trick, as Therese knows, is to resist that construction, to understand that space does not define, because all space is parodic: her theatre training gives her an instinctive understanding of this notion. Highsmith utilises the transitory space in order to emphasise its plasticity, and this in turn operates to liberate Therese as she acknowledges the mutability of selfhood. For McCullers the 'third sphere' is tightly bound up with the idea of agency: Miss Amelia is in possession of that 'third sphere', that 'space of transit', just as long as she defines and inhabits it on her own terms. In allowing Lymon to reconfigure the space, Miss Amelia begins to lose both her own autonomy and her selfhood.

Whilst this gradual transformation from store to café brings Amelia a mixture of 'pain, perplexity and uncertain joy' (213), we are told that '...the growth of the café came about mainly on his [Lymon's] account; it was a thing that brought him company and pleasure and that helped him through the night' (McCullers 215). The process of aesthetic and practical transformation of the space is replicated in the transformation of Miss Amelia. Whilst for the rest of the week, she is her 'old' masculine self: whistling, laughing and marching about her fields with 'the hunchback settled on her shoulders' (McCullers 215), on a Sunday Miss Amelia puts on a dark red dress, which evokes a desire to introject 'real' femininity: the dress, inevitably, hangs on her 'in a most peculiar fashion' (McCullers 214). On the one hand, we might view this as a theatricalisation of her own body, a body that has been granted hybridity; on the other, this costume foreshadows the dangers connected with Amelia's 'over-performance or, rather, wrong performance of femininity' (Gleeson-White 2003: 52). This is further encoded in her making 'red curtains for the windows' and decorating the café with 'a big bunch of paper roses that looked very real' (McCullers 239). She effects a form of spatial parody by 'dressing the set'. Paradoxically, she is being controlled by her own transformation of the space: from transgressive androgyny she has moved to a quasi-traditional model of femininity in order to conform to the space that Lymon has constructed. *His* creation of his own 'space of transit' (his café-stage) halts Miss Amelia's mobility in that it effaces the very 'third sphere' that she herself had for so long protected. Whilst her self-conscious performativity in part functions to expose the indeterminacy of the sex/gender system, it also demonstrates the ways in which her previous resistance to such models was precisely what empowered her.

Whilst Therese embraces the public/private collapse as a site of possibility and agency, fashioning 'third spheres' wherever she goes, Miss Amelia's attempts to assume and perform the feminine negate her own dynamic ambivalence that is so vitally dependent upon her own 'space of transit' – her farm store. She learns to 'compose her face for the matter in hand' and there is now 'a softness about her gray, queer eyes' (McCullers 228). This is all predicated

upon the slow but certain handing over of her space to Lymon: as 'she glance[s] from the hunchback to the other people in the café and her look [is] proud' (228) we know that she is on the verge of becoming wife and 'mother' all at the same time. Bollobas suggests that in their relationship Lymon is feminised in direct proportion to Miss Amelia's masculinisation as wooer, as possessor, as gazer upon (Npag). I think, though, that Miss Amelia's construction is more complex than this. She is *both* masculine and feminine at the same time: she is the wooer and the possessor, but also the nurturer and the proud mother/lover (the precise sexual nature of their relationship is never made explicit). Lymon, whilst willingly operating as the 'southern belle', is also inserting himself into the woman's space/ place, so emphasising his masculinity by 'taking possession'. The transformation of her familiar public/private space into one that performs domesticity, and so reinstates the difference implicit in that model, destabilises her contented androgyny.

The build up to the final act is as theatrical as it is tragi-comic. By now Marvin Macy has returned to the town, intent on revenge: he replaces Miss Amelia in that he now beguiles Cousin Lymon. In tandem, her shift towards domesticity is counterpoised with Lymon's erotic 'shift' towards Marvin Macy. Though she owns the space she is unable to prevent her final humiliation within that same space: Lymon gives Marvin his room in the home he has by now shared with Miss Amelia for six years. In turn, far from putting up objection to this intrusion, Miss Amelia offers her bed up to Lymon, on account of his 'developing the quinsy from sleeping on the sofa' (McCullers 244). She cannot resist the feminine position that the domestication of her space has imposed. After this intrusion (Macy is the equivalent, in many ways, of the spike in Therese and Carol's hotel room), she takes action: she brings her punching bag out into the yard and 'boxes with it every morning' (McCullers 244). The café gets busier than ever, and a new table has to be brought in to accommodate the number of customers. It is the palpable tension between Miss Amelia and Marvin that draws such a crowd: the climax of each evening is the moment when they 'double their fists, square up and glare at each other...and each night they [hold] this fighting stance a little longer' (McCullers 246).

In the end, the fight takes place on Ground Hog Day. The café space is cleared to create a stage for the long awaited clash. We have seen the shift from farm-store, to café, to 'stage set': but because Miss Amelia has allowed the space to act upon her, it cannot have the revitalizing possibilities that the same space has for Therese. Miss Amelia is, inevitably, the loser: not, vitally, because she is not the stronger, better fighter, but because just as she has victory in her sights her beloved, Lymon, leaps on her back and 'clutche[s] at her neck with his clawed little fingers'. Miss Amelia is 'beaten before the crowd [can] come to their senses' (McCullers 250). She retreats to her office, sobbing, having suffered defeat in her own space, the one-time farm-store that, through a most theatrical transformation, became a café – and finally Lymon and Macy's 'stage'. The café, in parodying a domestic environment, and so requiring of Miss Amelia a domestic/feminine persona to match, has produced her defeat. Her inadequate and humiliating public performance upon a now-masculine stage – that was once her own place of hybridity, her self-fashioned third sphere – signals Lymon's final dominance, and, of course, Macy's patriarchal triumph: this 'stage' can never be her domain again.

During the farm-store period, the domestic co-exists comfortably with the public world of the store: 'above [the store] there were three rooms where Miss A had lived all of her life – two bedrooms with a large parlour in between'. The store itself 'was bright and natural looking. To the left was the counter where slabs of white meat, rock candy and tobacco were kept'

(McCullers 209). Miss Amelia's office is adjacent to the store, 'cheerfully lighted' and containing not just the paraphernalia required to run her many lucrative businesses, but also the medical provisions used in her role as town 'doctor'. It is a perfect merging of the private and the public, the personal and the professional: it is a quintessential 'third sphere'. Lymon's appropriation of that space (and of her heart) has the effect of delimiting her ability to collapse the border between the public and the private, to occupy the liminal either/or space she has created. Her space of transit has effectively been effaced by her own desire to conform to a normative heterosexual model.

In the end, she loses her grip on what it is that defines her, or, more properly, on what allows her to remain undefined, ambiguous: Lymon has made her space his own. Unlike Therese, Amelia has not wrought transformation, magically imbuing her immediate environment with 'possibility'; rather she has become subject to it. Amelia falls prey to the notion of space as definable and so 'genderable'. As the mobility of Therese illumines, where the woman occupies the space she does not necessarily feminise it: she can imaginatively transform it into whatever space best fits the script that she writes for herself. She reminds us that we define space, it does not define us, and so can never be gendered; reminds us that spatial definition is underscored, always-already, by the operation of parody.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Feral's view chimes with Bertolt Brecht's idea that the theatre should not try to provoke identification with the 'individual' (place or performer), but should stir 'a desire to critically question the reproduction of accepted models of behaviour' (37). The journey for both Feral and Brecht is equated with the possibility of difference as a focus for identification.

<sup>2</sup> In his writing on liminality, Victor Turner describes that state or mode as 'a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise' (Turner 1967: 97). See also Miranda J. Green who suggests that 'boundary-crossing in image-making involves liminality and mutability, which can themselves be agents of empowerment' (1997: 901).

<sup>3</sup> On the problem of 'performing masculinity' by 'butch' women, see Judith Halberstram's 'Masculinity and Performance' in *Female Masculinity* in which she discusses the theatricality of all gender identity (Halberstram 1998).

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