

# PERFORMING DREAM HOMES

## THEATER AND THE SPATIAL POLITICS OF THE DOMESTIC SPHERE

*Edited by  
Emily Klein, Jennifer-Scott Mobley  
& Jill Stevenson*



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Emily Klein • Jennifer-Scott Mobley  
Jill Stevenson  
Editors

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Domestic Sphere

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*Editors*

Emily Klein  
Department of English  
Saint Mary's College of California  
Moraga, CA, USA

Jennifer-Scott Mobley  
School of Theatre and Dance  
East Carolina University  
Greenville, NC, USA

Jill Stevenson  
Department of Theatre Arts  
Marymount Manhattan College  
New York, NY, USA

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## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Lourdes Arciniega** is Adjunct Assistant Professor of English at St. Mary's University in Calgary. Her PhD dissertation on representations of reproductive rights in modern and contemporary feminist drama was sponsored by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) grant. She was invited to give a plenary paper at the American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR) in 2013, and to date she has presented her research in over a dozen conference papers at the Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE), the Canadian Association for Theatre Research (CATR), and the Association of Canadian College and University Teachers of English (ACCUTE), among others. She has published in *Theatre Survey*, *Theatre Journal*, the *Canadian Comparative Review of Literature*, and the *Canadian Literature Review*.

**Chase Bringardner** is Associate Professor of Theatre at Auburn University in Auburn, AL, USA. Bringardner has published in *Theatre Topics*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Performing Arts Resources* and has contributed a chapter in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*. His dissertation, entitled "Popular Entertainment and Constructions of Southern Identity: How Burlesques, Medicine Shows, and Musical Theatre Made Meaning and Money in the South, 1854–1980," uses modernity as a guiding historical, social, and cultural context to examine three specific performance events in three different Southern cities at three different historical periods to analyze how popular theatricals provided a space for the discussion of what it means to be Southern. His current research projects include a manuscript on regional identity in musical theater as evidenced through the "Southern" Musical as well as a sociocultural performance history of the Fabulous Fox Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia.

**Jocelyn L. Buckner** is Assistant Professor of Theatre at Chapman University and a professional dramaturge supporting productions and new play development. Her research focuses on materialism, affect, and the intersections and representations of identity constructs in US theater and popular entertainments from the nineteenth to twenty-first centuries. She is the editor of *A Critical Companion to Lynn Nottage* (2016), the book review editor for *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, and has published peer-reviewed chapters in edited collections as well as articles, book reviews, and performance reviews in *African American Review*, *American Studies Journal*, *Ecumenica*, *Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, *HowlRound*, *Popular Entertainment Studies*, *Theatre History Studies*, *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Survey*, and *Theatre Topics*.

**Amanda Clarke** is Advisor on Strategic Initiatives and Special Projects at Concordia University. Her research centers on the performative elements of national politics. In particular, she focuses on the development of national theaters and their canons, the politics of scenography, transnational and diasporic performances, and public performances of cultural identity. Her work has appeared in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, *Theatre Survey*, and *Theatre Research International*, among others.

**Iris Smith Fischer** is Professor of English at the University of Kansas, where she teaches modern American drama, avant-garde performance, and biosemiotics. Among her publications are *Mabou Mines: Making Avant-Garde Theater in the 1970s* (cloth 2010, paper 2012), *Interrogating America Through Theatre and Performance* (co-edited, Palgrave Macmillan, cloth 2006, paper 2009), and *American Signatures: Semiotic Method and Inquiry* (1991). From 2007 to 2010, she edited the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. In addition to writing articles, Fischer's current book project investigates the significant role nineteenth-century theater and performance played in the shaping of modern science-based semiotics and biosemiotics.

**Jessie Glover** is Adjunct Assistant Professor of Theatre at Otterbein University. Glover teaches courses in theater and community-based art in the Department of Theatre Arts and Dance. She is also a founder and board member of Wild Goose Creative, a multidisciplinary, community-run nonprofit arts space in central Columbus. She is a collaborative theater artist and community arts education advocate. She holds a PhD in Theatre Historiography from the University of Minnesota.

**Emily Klein** is Associate Professor of English at Saint Mary's College of California. Her first book, *Sex and War on the American Stage: Lysistrata in performance 1930–2012* (Routledge, 2014), traces a feminist history of twentieth- and twenty-first-century American adaptations of Aristophanes' most popular comedy, and has been featured in *The New York Times*, *Ms.* and *Vice*. Other recent publications include "Failure to Adapt: Affect, Apathy, and Doomed Reenactments in American Theatre's Militarized Dystopias" in *Performance in a Militarized Culture* edited by Sara Brady and Lindsay Mantoan (Routledge, 2017). Her work has appeared in *Frontiers*, *Women and Performance*, *American Quarterly*, *American Literature*, and *Theatre Journal*.

**Jennifer-Scott Mobley** is Assistant Professor of Theatre at East Carolina University. Her book, *Female Bodies on the American Stage: Enter Fat Actress*, was published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2014. She is co-curator of the Jane Chambers Feminist Playwriting Contest sponsored by the Association for Theatre in Higher Education and the Women and Theatre program. Her work appeared in the inaugural issue of *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* for which she will be a guest editor of a themed issue on Fat in Performance to be published in 2019. She has published reviews in *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Survey*, *Ecumenica*, and *Shakespeare Bulletin*. Mobley is also co-editor of a dual volume anthology of award-winning plays from the Jane Chambers prize; the first volume, *Lesbian & Queer Plays from the Jane Chambers Prize*, is available through No Passport Press.

**Ursula Neuerburg-Denzer**, PhD, is an Associate Professor at Concordia University, and teaches acting, directing, and performance creation. Born in Germany, she has a strong background in performing and directing, and her research centers on the performance of extreme emotion. After a decade of independent theater work in Berlin, she co-founded Richard Schechner's East Coast Artist in New York. She is a certified rasabox instructor, and volunteers regularly at the Bread and Puppet Theater. In recent years, she has investigated indigenous drama and performance. She is collaborating with Floyd Favel and other indigenous artists, such as Emilie Monnet, on a cycle of plays concerned with Indigenous housing: *Attawapiskat Is No Exception* (2014), the SSHRC-funded project *Dwellings* (2017), and Favel's adaptation of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* (2018). Neuerburg-Denzer has published several book chapters and journal articles.

**Ann M. Shanahan** is Associate Professor and Chair of Theatre at Purdue University. A scholar-artist, Shanahan explores the relationship between gender and space on stage, both in theory and in practice as a director. Recent directing projects include *A Doll's House*, *Machinal*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Trojan Women*. Her work has been published in *Theatre Topics*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Text and Presentation*, and in *New Directions in Teaching Theatre Arts* (Palgrave, 2018). She is volume editor of *Landscapes of Consciousness*, on directors Meredith Monk, Robert Wilson, and Richard Foreman for *Great North American Theatre Directors* (2020), and is the founding co-editor of a peer-reviewed section of the *SDC Journal*, the official publication of the Stage Directors and Choreographers Society. She is an ensemble member of Room(s) Theatre, a company founded on the central metaphor of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Shanahan served as Vice President for Conference 2018 of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education.

**Jill Stevenson** is Professor of Theatre Arts at Marymount Manhattan College. She is the author of *Sensational Devotion: Evangelical Performance in 21st-Century America* (University of Michigan Press, 2013; paperback, 2015) and *Performance, Cognitive Theory, and Devotional Culture: Sensual Piety in Late Medieval York* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). She also co-edited the collection *Thresholds of Medieval Visual Culture: Liminal Spaces* (Boydell and Brewer, 2012). Her primary research interests are medieval and contemporary devotional performance, and she has published essays on those topics in a variety of academic journals and edited volumes.

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# Introduction



## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction: Welcome Home

*Emily Klein, Jennifer-Scott Mobley, and Jill Stevenson*

For many theater practitioners and scholars, the cherished space of the stage, along with its hidden wings, narrow halls, and cluttered dressing rooms feels like a second home. The terminology of the *playhouse* alludes to these domestic affinities between the theater and the home; a well-attended show has a “full house,” a closed theater is a “dark house,” and the “front-of-house manager” oversees the public areas of the theater. In this theatrical lexicology, *house* paradoxically merges the private, intimate space of the *home* with the robust, public gathering space of the *hall*. Comparable terms deriving from contemporary British English, like “alehouse” and “courthouse,” remind us of the civic functions of this enclosed, secure space. Thus, the moment when the “house lights” go down at the start of a show, audiences are often transported

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E. Klein (✉)

Department of English, Saint Mary’s College of California, Moraga, CA, USA  
e-mail: [ek7@stmarys-ca.edu](mailto:ek7@stmarys-ca.edu)

J.-S. Mobley (✉)

School of Theatre and Dance, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC, USA  
e-mail: [mobleyj15@ecu.edu](mailto:mobleyj15@ecu.edu)

J. Stevenson (✉)

Department of Theatre Arts, Marymount Manhattan College,  
New York, NY, USA  
e-mail: [jstevenson@mmm.edu](mailto:jstevenson@mmm.edu)

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from the tangible world of the playhouse and welcomed into a myriad of homes, both performatively and materially constructed.

It was relationships like these, between house and home, private and public, safe and insecure, belonging and exclusion, that inspired us to examine how we construct and perform identity through literal and metaphorical spaces of home. More specifically, we were inspired to explore critically the ways that performances use domestic space—and specifically, the family home—to explore the past, address the present, and sometimes, to dream the future.

### “THE PROBLEM OF PLACE AND PLACE AS PROBLEM”

The study of space has become an increasingly significant focus within theater and performance studies. This scholarship uses various spatial paradigms to consider how places, landscapes, and cityscapes perform, and how our engagement with and movement through these spaces impacts the meanings they generate. Initially, this area of study focused largely on the theater space itself. As Peter Brook, Marvin Carlson, Gay McAuley, and others highlighted, the theater is a unique built space with its own semiotics and systems of social and imaginative relations.<sup>1</sup> Examining the theater as a physical framing device, these practitioners and scholars considered how the space and structure of the stage could impact a performance event. Joanne Tompkins further explored this relationship between theatrical space and cultural meaning. In *Unsettling Space*, she analyzes the ways in which the spatial politics of theater specifically “reinforce the role theater plays in cultural formation.”<sup>2</sup> She asserts:

Space is theater’s medium of articulation [...] The space of theater refracts to encompass several dimensions, including the building, which houses bodies in real space, in addition to the imagined (and performed) space(s) those bodies occupy. The venue (simultaneously no place and all places) frames that which is onstage, so that the staged locations intersect with the world offstage.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See Peter Brook, *The Empty Space: A Book About the Theatre: Deadly, Holy, Rough, Immediate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); Marvin Carlson, *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Theatre Architecture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989); and Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).

<sup>2</sup>Joanne Tompkins, *Unsettling Space: Contestations in Contemporary Australian Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 16.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

Tompkins's more recent work continues to pursue these ideas by examining the "unreal spaces" of socio-political relation that theater can constitute experientially.<sup>4</sup>

Arguably, one of the most significant works in this field is Una Chaudhuri's *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*, which inspired many of the authors in this collection. Chaudhuri argues that "a platiality of the stage, an emphasis on the particularity and materiality of each dramatic environment" is among the most significant interventions that modern realism contributed to the discourse of space. She maintains that this attention to place is essential to how dramatic realism represents the human condition: "From the experience of place as one dimensional and fully determining to the experience of place as multidimensional and creative, the stages of modern drama recount an ongoing *experiment* with place [...] that suggests an alternative account of the development of modern drama."<sup>5</sup> However, Chaudhuri also crucially broadened this field's scope of study to engage what she recognized as a "growing discourse [...] around such terms as *borders, limits, rootlessness, territoriality, nomadism, habitus, home, homelessness, and exile.*"<sup>6</sup> Identifying the "problem of place and place as problem," she coined the term "geopathology" to analyze place in modern theater and, specifically, the ways in which drama in the second half of the twentieth century responded "to the pressures of a world increasingly defined by actual dislocations of immigration and refugeehood."<sup>7</sup>

In 2002, Elinor Fuchs and Chaudhuri advanced the discourse of geopathology with their collection *Land/Scape/Theater*, reminding scholars that the diverse ways in which space and scenography contribute to the theatrical event had largely been overlooked or even dismissed entirely. Borrowing from early authors in landscape studies, such as John Brinkerhoff Jackson, they argue that considering landscape can offer a fresh way to theorize modern theater: "ordinary landscapes and everyday habitats could be as rich in information, as worthy of rigorous attention, and as valuable to our understanding of the human relation to the natural world,

<sup>4</sup> Joanne Tompkins, *Theatre's Heterotopias: Performance and the Cultural Politics of Space* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Una Chaudhuri, *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 9, xii.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, xii, original emphasis.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

as the ‘masterpieces’ of the built and natural environment.”<sup>8</sup> This interdisciplinary scholarship offered a fresh “politically engaged discourse encompassing every conceivable form of human interaction with space: rural, urban, suburban; domestic homes and corporate office towers, places of work and palaces of leisure, memorials to the past and transparent containers of the present,”<sup>9</sup> and inspired a rich body of work in theater and performance studies.

Despite this scholarship, one of the most important and prevalent places in modern drama has not yet received sustained critical attention—the family home. Certain scholars have begun this work, exploring questions surrounding home, as well as the specific role of the family house and home in theater. For example, Mark B. Sandberg explores the metaphors commonly applied to Henrik Ibsen’s work, asserting that “the realization of written dramas onstage is always architectural, concerned as it is with the interaction of bodies in an articulated space and with the representation of built environments.”<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, studying the dramaturgy of and within plays “can bring today’s tacit assumptions about house and home more clearly into view.”<sup>11</sup>

In *Kitchen Sink Realisms*, Dorothy Chansky more explicitly examines domestic labor and performances of home in the United States, arguing that “American audiences are particularly attached to realism, and permutations of that genre are almost relentlessly marshaled to reveal relationships and problems in the domestic realm.”<sup>12</sup> Chansky’s study offers new methodologies for understanding what she calls the protean form of “realisms,” focusing specifically on dramatic representations not just of the home, but more specifically of the kitchen and household labor.

This volume aims to continue this effort through a focused examination of home as a unique category within the spatial turn. The chapters in this collection engage many of the themes noted above—dislocation, rootlessness, the ordinary—through a specific focus on performances of

<sup>8</sup>Elinor Fuchs and Una Chaudhuri, eds., *Land/Scene/Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), 13–14.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>10</sup>Mark B. Sandberg, *Ibsen’s Houses: Architectural Metaphor and the Modern Uncanny* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 3.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>12</sup>Dorothy Chansky, *Kitchen Sink Realisms: Domestic Labor, Dining, and Drama in American Theatre* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2015), 1.

house and home. Calling a place home is an act of possession as well as one of marking and making meaning. Consequently, we understand “home” as a dynamic signifier that marks the changing relationship between individual subjects and material/civic/psychic/regional/national space.

In the last two decades, the rapid expansion of a global economy and the rise of international travel, as well as the ubiquity of job displacement, and ongoing debates related to immigration, refugees, and migrant labor throughout the world have challenged ideologies surrounding home and homeland. As we have developed this collection in the shadow of Brexit, of efforts in the United States to repeal the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) immigration policy and to institute a travel ban targeting those from Muslim countries, and of the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis, the stakes of home and, to use James Wood’s term, of “secular homelessness,”<sup>13</sup> have felt more urgent and visible than ever. In a 2004 essay, Shelley Mallett asserts that “the meaning and experience of home has proliferated over the past two decades,” and argues that home

can be a dwelling place or a lived space of interaction between people, places, things; or perhaps both. The boundaries of home can be permeable and/or impermeable. Home can be singular and/or plural, alienable and/or inalienable, fixed and stable and/or mobile and changing. It can be associated with feelings of comfort, ease intimacy, relaxation and security and/or oppression, tyranny and persecution [...]. It can be a crucial site for examining relations of production and consumption, globalisation and nationalism, citizenship and human rights, and the role of government and governmentality. Equally it can provide a context for analysing ideas and practices about intimacy, family, kinship, gender, ethnicity, class, age and sexuality.<sup>14</sup>

If anything, the proliferation that Mallett describes has only accelerated in the ensuing years, aggressively (re)shaping definitions and ideologies of home(land) for people across the globe.

This volume aims to begin a critical examination of how theater and performance have historically played a crucial role in these processes of homemaking. As the contributors reveal, performances of domesticity cre-

<sup>13</sup>James Wood, “On Not Going Home,” *London Review of Books*, 20 February 2004, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n04/james-wood/on-not-going-home>.

<sup>14</sup>Shelley Mallett, “Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature,” *The Sociological Review* 52, no. 1 (February 2004): 64–84.

atively critique, rupture, and sometimes reinforce culturally embedded narratives that constitute our spatial identities. The chapters in this collection analyze how the different identities we may adopt or inhabit—woman, husband, citizen, patriot, tourist, local, parolee, refugee—are constituted by our ideas about, physical engagements with, and performances of place. By interrogating the politics of space within specific case studies, the authors demonstrate not only how spaces of house, home, and hometown function within our everyday lives, our local communities, and our national conversations, but also how theater and performance are critical to that work.

### DREAMS OF HOME

From Shakespeare's storytelling around the hearth in *A Winter's Tale* to the revolutionary door slam in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* to the family funeral home in Lisa Kron's musical adaptation of Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, domestic space has often been theater's most revered and recurring domain. Home is not only where many people form their earliest interpersonal attachments, but it is also often the locale of our deepest secrets, most treasured loves, and indelible memories; it is where identity is formed and the self begins. As Gaston Bachelard wrote in *The Poetics of Space*, "the house shelters day-dreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace."<sup>15</sup>

Of course, there is an inherent contradiction in the idea of a "dream house"—a metaphorical construction of imagination filtered through culture and ideology—that makes it virtually impossible to achieve. Yet the potency of this ideologically constructed space and popular understandings of the family domicile as the first (safe) space where people interrogate, debate, and ultimately form notions of identity and community, makes it an endlessly generative site for playwrights and performances to employ.

The majority of the chapters in this collection focus on performances in the United States. The ideological implications of home are particularly fraught in the United States, a country founded in large measure on the mythology of land and home ownership as the essence of the American Dream. From adages such as "Go West, young man" to "forty acres and a mule," the promise of possessing a home—and the ways in which that home signifies citizenship—is

<sup>15</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Trans. M. Jolas (1958; reprint, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1994), 6.

uniquely ingrained within tropes of American cultural heritage. Lawrence R. Samuel asserts that home ownership is the theme that most clearly represents the American Dream:

The possibilities for anyone to own property was a big part of our breaking the shackles with the Old World, of course, the Jeffersonian ideal of a house on a private piece of land one of our most cherished and iconic images. It was thus fitting and natural that the home became the bedrock of the dream [...]. That the government essentially subsidized the American Dream by making the interest on mortgage payments tax deductible further cemented the single-family home as something to strive for, lest an individual not be considered a full-fledged citizen.<sup>16</sup>

Consequently, the “family dream house” is inextricably linked to the promise of the American Dream and, accordingly, how that promise has been institutionalized to include and exclude particular communities.

This has been particularly the case with respect to race given the ways in which the American (dream) home has repeatedly been defined and performed as what George Lipsitz might call “racialized space.”<sup>17</sup> For example, the antebellum Southern plantation home was a complicated site of cross-racial negotiation, a place in which intimate (and, at other times, violent) “familial” interactions occurred between black and white bodies. Moreover, access to and familiarity with this domestic space was used to distinguish between and create hierarchies among the enslaved. Thus, this family home became a potent image in the historical imagination, an iconic space that dramatic works such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *The Octoroon* produced and reproduced for audiences.

In later periods, black playwrights used the home to expose racial and class tensions. Plays such as *On Strivers Row* and *A Raisin in the Sun* are not only set in the domestic realm, but the family house itself becomes a visual and physical manifestation of tensions across and within communities. Moreover, many black female playwrights writing in the early decades

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence R. Samuel, *The American Dream: A Cultural History* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012.), 6.

<sup>17</sup> George Lipsitz, “The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape,” *Landscape Journal* 26, no. 1 (January 2007): 10–23. Also see Brooke Neely and Michelle Samura, “Social Geographies of Race: Connecting Race and Space,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 34, no. 11 (April 2011): 1933–1952.

of the twentieth century specifically set their plays in the home in order to expose the intersections between race, class, and gender that male playwrights were not addressing. For writers like Zora Neale Hurston, Mary P. Burrill, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Eulalie Spence, the family home became the ideal site for revealing entanglements between the personal and the political.

Likewise, definitions and performances of “the family home” often reflect larger social and cultural expectations related to class, many of these revolving around modes of consumption. For example, is a rented home “less” of a home than one that is owned? And is ownership of the family home established through money, possession, legal documentation, or some combination of these? Alternatively, as a performance space, is ownership of the family home ultimately determined by the rituals (daily and extraordinary) that we enact within it? In other words, can ownership ever be divorced from the embodied histories that transform a house, a neighborhood, or a natural environment into a home? Playwrights have repeatedly used the resonance between the playhouse and the family house to engage these questions and to reckon with their social, political, and personal consequences.

Additionally, the relationship between the social, political, and personal is at the core of much feminist work. It is therefore unsurprising that many feminist playwrights and performers have focused on the family home in their art. The concept of home is arguably inseparable from associations with women’s domestic and affective work. Once dubbed “the comfortable concentration camp” by Betty Friedan, the home is burdened with the baggage of what it conceals. Conceived as a space set apart from civic life, the home is the locale of work that is often undervalued (though hollowly valorized) in a capitalist economy: child-rearing, housekeeping, food preparation, and elder care. In *Welcome to the Dreamhouse*, Lynn Spigel maps the longstanding bourgeois ideology that has for centuries naturalized the gendered separation of the public and private spheres, marking the home as a protected and sentimental space of “trivial pursuit” in contrast with the “active citizenship and useful labor” of the public world beyond.<sup>18</sup> She argues,

although the lines between spheres were continually blurred over the course of the twentieth century, this bourgeois “doctrine of separate spheres” nev-

<sup>18</sup>Lynn Spigel, *Welcome to the Dreamhouse* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 4–5.

ertheless served to define the home as a feminine realm and to demonize women or men who strayed from their rightful place and respectful roles in private and public life. This domestic ideal marked out a set of procedures for everyday life that were ultimately based on class, racial, and heterosexual privileges that were accessible mainly to the white propertied classes.<sup>19</sup>

On the other hand, Dorothy Chansky asserts that (American) “[t]heatre, drama and performance played an important role in both supporting *and contesting* the idea that home is ‘naturally’ a women’s sphere.”<sup>20</sup> As chapters in this volume reveal, theater and performance have played critical roles in interrogating these complex and dynamic relationships between home and identity.

### *I: Family Homes on Stage*

We begin this collection with a chapter that examines two plays written in direct response to one of the most iconic American dramas about home, Lorraine Hansberry’s *A Raisin in the Sun*. Jocelyn L. Buckner’s analysis of Bruce Norris’s *Clybourne Park* and Kwame Kwei-Armah’s *Beneatha’s Place* demonstrates the aim of this volume as a whole—to offer a cultural materialist study of diverse approaches to performing home. Buckner considers the themes of home, hate, and history in these contemporary dramatic responses to Hansberry’s play in order to illuminate how they complicate American notions of racial identity and belonging through a political problematics of place. In the next chapter, Lourdes Arciniega examines three plays by Susan Glaspell, showing how they foregrounded feminist activism through their revisionist stagings of domestic spaces. By offering audiences female protagonist agents who did not speak from election platforms or pulpits, but from private homes as represented on public theatrical stages, Glaspell brought a domesticated form of feminism into popular view.

The final chapter in this part is by Amanda Clarke who, like Ursula Neuerburg-Denzer’s contribution in Part II, examines work from outside the United States, thereby exploring how Chaudhuri’s “problem of place” that

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Chansky, 4.