11-8-2001

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Safe at Home: Agoraphobia and the Discourse on Women's Place

Suzie Siegel

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the University of South Florida in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
Women's Studies

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November 8, 20001
Tampa, Florida

Keywords: Feminism, France, Nineteenth Century, Panic Disorder

Acknowledgements

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Suzie Siegel

(ABSTRACT)

My thesis explores how discourse and material practices have created agoraphobia, the fear of public places. This psychological disorder predominates among women. Throughout much of Western history, women have been encouraged to stay home for their safety and for the safety of society. I argue that agoraphobic women have internalized this discourse, expressing fears of being in public or being alone without a companion to support and protect them; losing control over their minds or their bodies; and endangering or humiliating themselves. Therapeutic discourse also has created agoraphobia by naming it, categorizing the emotions and behaviors associated with it, and describing the characteristics of agoraphobics. The material practice of therapy reinforces this discourse. Meanwhile, practices such as rape and harassment reinforce the dominant discourse on women's safety.

I survey psychological literature, beginning with the naming of agoraphobia in 1871, to explain why the disorder is now diagnosed primarily in women. I examine nineteenth-century discourse that told women they belonged at home while men controlled the public domain. In 1871, the Paris Commune revolt epitomized the fear of women publicly out of control. I return to Paris a century later for a reading of the novel *Certificate of Absence*, in which Sylvia Molloy explores identity through the eyes of a woman who might be labeled agoraphobic. I ask whether homebound women are resisting or retreating from a hostile world. Instead of seeing agoraphobia only as a personal problem, people should question why so many women fear themselves and the world outside their home.

My methodology includes an analysis of nineteenth-century texts as well as current media, prose, and poetry. I also support my arguments with material from professional journals and nonfiction books in different disciplines. Common to feminist research, an interdisciplinary approach was needed to situate a psychological disorder within a social context.

Chapter One: Introduction

For centuries, Western society bombarded women with the notion that they belonged at home. They could find safety, security, even identity there. Outside, they faced danger and judgment. Today, women who panic in public places are diagnosed as abnormal and dysfunctional. They may be. But their psychological disorder – agoraphobia – cannot be separated from the social order. By looking at agoraphobia in context, people can understand more, not just about the disorder, but about society, too. "A disorder tells us important things about the social world of which it is a part, just as what we know of that social world informs us of the nature of the disorder."[1] With that in mind, I want to ask the questions: How did agoraphobia become a disorder primarily of women? How has the gendering of the public and private spheres helped produce women with agoraphobia? How can agoraphobic women be understood in relation to ideas on identity and the home?

My interest in agoraphobia is more than academic. I suffered from it two decades ago, when I was an undergraduate. At its worst, I felt nauseated to step outside my front door, even to go to another part of my apartment complex. Although I identify with agoraphobics, I do not use "we" because I would not be diagnosed as one now, even though I still experience panic attacks in a few situations. I have written about agoraphobia before, but did not "out" myself until last year. Unlike some identities and experiences that lend authority to writing, a psychological disorder may reduce credibility. But I decided to reveal my connection because so few people speak from this standpoint. Agoraphobics have written literature about the experience, but I know of no analysis of agoraphobia written by someone who has or had it. It is not surprising that so few agoraphobics represent themselves in the marketplace of ideas, considering the ordeals of academia. Students often must walk some distance in public to reach classes and libraries, which, once again, are public places. Academic success brings more terror: the pressure to speak, and possibly teach, in front of people.

My methodology has been informal and unconventional at times, which fits well with a feminist project. Feminists have delighted in subverting standard methodology.[2] Feminist researchers often have described their own experiences, recognizing that their standpoints make an important contribution and perhaps even a privileged one.[3] In my case, I may see agoraphobia from a different perspective than a researcher who has not experienced it. A traditional researcher might complain that my personal involvement makes me less objective than someone who has not been treated for agoraphobia. But many feminists argue that all researchers have a personal involvement in their topics. Many reject the concept of objectivity, at least when it is defined as the idea that researchers can stand apart from that which they study.[4]

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[1] Kimberly Hoagwood, "Poststructuralist Historicism and the Psychological Construction of Anxiety Disorders," *The Journal of Psychology* 127, no. 1 (January 1993), 105-118 [on-line journal without page numbers]; available from Web Luis at www.lib.usf.edu/virtual/index.html; accessed 6 June 2000.

[2] Marjorie DeVault, "Talking and Listening from Women's Standpoint: Feminist Strategies for Interviewing and Analysis," *Social Problems* 37, no. 1 (1990), 96.

[3] Ibid., 97.

[4] Shulamit Reinharz, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 229.

One might say my research began twenty years ago. I recorded and analyzed my thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. I had been trained in the field of journalism to take comprehensive notes, not just jot down occasional thoughts. For newspaper articles and my own edification, I have interviewed and talked informally to agoraphobics, their families, and their friends over the years. I understand that the academy makes a distinction among interviews conducted according to specific policies, journalistic interviews, and conversations. As someone who has conducted thousands of interviews as well as studied formal methods, I think it is time to question interview methods that are overly formal. Good interviews share the same features as good conversations.[5] Interviews that follow a formalized system may be less productive than ones that resemble conversations.[6] Thus, I think conversations have yielded information as valuable as any obtained in formal interviews.

Another reason I chose not to do formal interviews for this thesis was because I had a wealth of texts that described the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of agoraphobics. My research for this thesis includes nineteenth-century texts as well as material from current media, prose, and poetry. These works illustrate the discourses I describe. I also support my arguments with material from professional journals and nonfiction books in different disciplines. Although much of my research is qualitative, I do interpret quantitative studies in Chapter Two. I interpret studies in Chapter Two as well as historical texts in Chapter Three through a feminist lens. Chapter Two concentrates on psychology, Chapter Three on history, and Chapter Four on philosophy and political theory. Other works come from the fields of literary criticism, anthropology, and geography.

In general, the social sciences have been divided, with economists and political scientists studying the public sphere while psychologists look at private matters.[7] Feminist scholars have tried to break this public/private binary in regard to the disciplines,[8] and their research crosses disciplines.[9] It seems particularly appropriate that a feminist thesis involving the public/private split should be interdisciplinary.

An interdisciplinary approach also was necessary to situate a psychological disorder within a social context, and I hope this approach will encourage dialogue among the practitioners of the different disciplines in regard to agoraphobia. I am disturbed that so much of psychology seems oblivious to social factors, both present and past, including gender. I rely heavily on feminist researchers and theorists, and I hope their ideas can inform the many researchers and writers who have given little thought to gender. Let me give an example of the failure to communicate: I searched LEXIS-NEXIS Academic Universe for every story in major English-language newspapers that mentioned agoraphobia, and the result was 356 articles dating to 1976. Of those articles, only 91 contained the word "women." This lack of gender consciousness stands in contrast to a disorder such as anorexia, which has been heavily analyzed in regard to its

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[5] DeVault, 99-100.
[6] Ann Oakley, "Interviewing Women: A Contradiction in Terms," *Doing Feminist Research,* ed. Helen Roberts (London: Routledge, 1981), 30-61.
[7] Linda McDowell, *Gender, Identity and Place: Understanding Feminist Geographies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11.
[8] Ibid., 93.
[9] Reinharz, 10.

prevalence among women. The number of LEXIS-NEXIS articles that mentioned both "anorexia" and "women" in that same time period was more than 1,000.

While many people who study agoraphobia seem to pay little attention to gender differences, many feminists seem unaware of agoraphobia, even when they write of homemakers, barriers to public participation, and the private/public split. They assume that women are kept out of the public realm or that women choose to stay home, but they forget or do not know that some women stay home out of fear. I hope to give these feminists enough information so that they can consider and theorize agoraphobia.

In addition to concentrating on a different discipline in each core chapter, I have chosen another structural similarity: Within each of the chapters, I use one specific example to amplify more general arguments. In Chapter Two, I pay extra attention to the arguments of the book *Women Who Marry Houses*. In Chapter Three, I examine one case history, the Paris Commune of 1871. In Chapter Four, I do a close reading of the novel *Certificate of Absence.*

I begin, in Chapter Two, with the "discovery" of agoraphobia in 1871. In the nineteenth century, most of the patients diagnosed with agoraphobia were men. Because of the restrictions on women in public places in the West, it might have seemed "normal" and "natural" for a woman to fear the world outside her home, while that same fear might have seemed pathological in men. A century later, in the early 1970s, agoraphobia was diagnosed mainly in women. By then, I claim, women who feared public places would have seemed out of step with the times.

Although I describe agoraphobia as a fear of public places, there is no simple definition upon which everyone agrees. The disorder is often associated with shopping malls, for example, but agoraphobics also may fear bridges or even being home alone. I will focus on the fear, identified by most agoraphobics, of "losing control" over one's own body and mind (rather than the fear of "losing control" by being forced to relinquish personal control to a more powerful "other"). Most feel safe at home or with a companion.

When mental health professionals note that more women suffer from agoraphobia than men, they often seek a biological cause. I look to differences in society instead. Although men seem to experience anxiety and panic in public as often as women, women have greater fears about the consequences of their feelings, especially the consequences of "losing control." To some degree, I suggest, this is a rational response in a world that punishes women more than men for their public behavior. The panic that women feel has physical reactions similar to those experienced in excitement, exercise, and anger, all of which men may experience in public more than women. For many women, these bodily reactions may be disconcerting in their unfamiliarity. If a woman labels these reactions as negative, she may exacerbate them. Thus, a few symptoms associated with panic can multiply until a woman fears she is falling apart.

In a world where women may be attacked when they are alone in their homes or in the streets, many seek companionship to feel safe. Although women face more danger at home than in public – often from those very companions – the dominant discourse has focused on the public dangers. To be safe, most women restrict their public participation. When agoraphobic women stay home or rely on a companion, they are doing what other women do, only to a much greater

extent. Because this behavior is coded as feminine, women can find much more acceptance than men if they choose to stay home for years, depending financially on someone else.

I have argued that agoraphobia has been constructed as a disorder of women. But it also can be seen as resistance to a hostile world, as described by Robert Seidenberg and Karen DeCrow in *Women Who Marry Houses.* If this is the case, one would want to do more than simply send women back into the fight.

To understand agoraphobia, one must examine discourses on women in regard to the home and the world outside. I assert that the fears of women have been tied to the control of women. Because studying this subject could be a monumental task, I decided that, in Chapter Three, I would concentrate on one time and place: France in the late nineteenth century. I chose France, in part, because the Paris Commune occurred in 1871, the year agoraphobia was named. The Parisian revolt also illustrates well the consequences of women participating in the public realm. Critics fixated on the women, whom they described as mad and dangerously out of control, and the female participants faced gender-specific punishment.

Before the Industrial Revolution, men and women often worked at or near their home. The rise of factories contributed to the separation of public and private spheres. Using laws, unions, and harassment, many men tried to keep women from competing with them in the workforce. While the men were away working, they relied on women to tend their homes and raise their children. The dominant discourse focused on the dangers that women faced in the workplace as well as the idea of home as a haven, even though women often faced worse working conditions and personal abuse at home than in public. Although the idea that women's place was in the home was strongest among the middle class, many others adopted this ideal, even if they did not or could not follow it in their own lives. This ideal also served to define women against each other, so that the woman of the home was contrasted with the woman of the streets, reinforcing the class division.

As the idea of universal rights gained ground in the nineteenth century, many men tried to exclude women, relying on the Enlightenment ideology of men as strong and rational and women as weak, irrational, and in need of control. I argue that this political ideology was reinforced with the rise of medicine, biology, psychology, and other social sciences. Women were thought to be susceptible to hysteria and unconscious impulses, which became another justification to keep them safe at home. Prostitutes, or "public women," were especially linked to madness. Men who feared or desired "public women" kept watch for them, and this surveillance led many other women to restrict their public behavior, to protect themselves or their reputation from attack. Respectable women could not enter many public places, especially alone or at night. During the day, they took great pains to preserve their status, under the gaze of men and other women. Women were not the only ones worried about their status, I suggest. By the end of the century, many men worried about their own roles, too. As Western nations saw their populations decline and women gain rights, men tried to prove their virility, separating themselves further from women.

After discussing historical discourses that tied women to the home in Chapter Three, I examine the interplay of women, home, and identity in Chapter Four. I start with Sylvia

Molloy's novel *Certificate of Absence,* whose narrator has many agoraphobic traits, including a fear of leaving her home. She needs limits and order to stave off fears of disorder and madness. She needs her own space and possessions to pull together her fragmented identity and reduce her sense of alienation and detachment. Her home, at first a refuge, becomes a prison as she understands herself better and longs to move on.

I claim that many women identify with the home because of the many hours they spend there, doing chores or raising children. Some feminists, such as Simone de Beauvoir, Bonnie Honig, and Bernice Johnson Reagon, have criticized this attachment to home. The arguments include: Women give up their identity to keep house for men. Women maintain fancy homes at the expense of poorer people. Women lock their doors against those they find threatening, not realizing that they are defined against these others. Longing for home equates to longing for a world without conflict or difference, and thus, it gives a false security. Women retreat to the home to avoid political conflict. Home represents a desire for a fixed identity, for both groups and individuals. But individuals cannot sustain a fixed identity, and groups that want a fixed identity spend much time policing their boundaries.

Some feminists, such as Iris Marion Young and bell hooks, value the home. Their responses include: A home gives at least some shelter to women who face attack and judgment. Some women stay home because they are unwelcome in the dominant society. Home can represent a temporary respite. Or, it can be a barricade, from which women resist and defy a hostile world. Having a space apart helps them shore up their sense of self. But this does not mean their identities are fixed, only that they have enough coherence and continuity to function. Their identities can still be fluid and mobile. Maintaining a home and its possessions can preserve memories, which form individual and cultural histories. As the appearance and contents of the home change, so do identities.

In my concluding chapter, I pull together these ideas in a way that I hope will benefit agoraphobics and those who research and theorize them.

Chapter Two: Agoraphobia

Carl Friedrich Westphal, a German physician, combined two Greek words to form the term "agoraphobia" (fear of public places) for a paper published in 1871 on the cases of three men in Berlin.[10] The first English summaries of his findings appeared in 1872.[11] By the mid-1880s, agoraphobia was widely accepted as a diagnosis in Europe and the United States.[12] But it did not catch widespread attention until the early 1970s, a century after its naming. Major television shows and newspapers featured it, special clinics sprang up, and new treatments were suggested.[13] The patients were no longer a handful of Berlin businessmen, however. By the 1970s, the disorder had become associated with white, middle-class housewives.

In this chapter, I want to explore how agoraphobia became a "women's syndrome."[14] I will look at the demographics of the diagnosis, and the fears expressed by the women diagnosed as agoraphobic as well as the many people who report on agoraphobia but gloss over the prevalence of women. When gender matters, however, the dominant thinking is that biology is to blame. Researchers have questioned whether physical defects or hormones make women more prone to the panic[15] that can lead to agoraphobia. Rejecting that approach, feminists theorize that how the world treats women and how women are taught to act in the world explain why more women than men fear the public sphere. I will conclude with the idea that agoraphobia can be subversive to patriarchy, by raising questions about women in the public sphere. Why would one expect women to have more fears than men in public? Why would women choose not to participate in public?

Before the twentieth century, almost all patients diagnosed as agoraphobic were men.[16] Westphal did not speculate on why he did not diagnose agoraphobia in female patients. But I can provide that speculation, based on his clients. Whether male or female, most patients of a private doctor would have had money, unless the doctor worked in an asylum or hospital for charity cases. From his writing, I assume Westphal's clientele was middle class. If middle-class women had expressed anxieties about the world outside their home, they might have seemed normal.

"'Normal' women have for centuries accepted oppression and imprisonment within their houses, making a virtue of their confinement."[17] Today, most women have a little agoraphobia,[18]

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[10] Terry J. Knapp, *Westphal's "Die Agoraphobie" with Commentary: The Beginnings of Agoraphobia,* trans. Michael T. Schumacher (Lantham, M.D.: University Press of America, 1988), 22. "Agora" was the name for the ancient Greek marketplace, which also included public buildings and religious temples, p. 2.

[11] Ibid., 28.

[12] Ibid., 33.

[13] Ibid., 1.

[14] Marrie H.J. Bekker, "Agoraphobia and Gender: A Review," *Clinical Psychology Review* 16, no. 2 (1996), 129.

[15] Iris G. Fodor, "The Agoraphobic Syndrome: From Anxiety Neurosis to Panic Disorder," *Personality and Psychopathology: Feminist Reappraisals*, eds. Laura S. Brown and Mary Ballou (New York: The Guilford Press, 1992), 189.

[16] Knapp, 34.

[17] Robert Seidenberg and Karen DeCrow, *Women Who Marry Houses: Panic and Protest in Agoraphobia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1983), 213.

[18] Seidenberg and DeCrow, 47.

in the sense that they are more likely to fear participation in the public sphere than men do. Agoraphobia is not diagnosed in places such as Saudi Arabia, where women are discouraged from leaving the house alone.[19]

Although Westphal remained silent on gender, the founder of psychoanalysis did not. Sigmund Freud thought agoraphobia arose in men who were repressing various anxieties. He was more specific in his theory on women. In 1896, he wrote that women who had agoraphobia envied or identified with prostitutes, or "public women," and they were repressing the desire to have sex with the first man they met in the streets.[20] In the next chapter, I will explore in greater depth the idea that respectable women were encouraged to stay home.

Agoraphobia grabbed headlines in the 1970s as second-wave feminism swelled. Feminists, most notably Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*, aired the unhappiness of homemakers and fought for women's rights in the workplace. For some feminists, agoraphobia fit well with these issues. Currently, about 5 percent of the population suffers from agoraphobia.[21] But it is diagnosed three times as often in women as in men,[22] and the rate of recurrence is nearly double for women as for men.[23] According to the World Health Organization, this gender disparity holds true across many different countries and cultures.[24] On average, the symptoms arise between ages eighteen and thirty-five,[25] and they persist nearly two decades.[26] The great majority of agoraphobics are homemakers.[27]

Psychologist Iris Fodor calls agoraphobia "a quintessential women's issue"[28] but questions why it gets less attention than, for example, eating disorders.[29] By the 1990s, agoraphobia rarely made news anymore, and in professional journals, it became subsumed under

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[19] Fodor, 200.

[20] Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887-1904,* ed. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 217-218.

[21] Lyse Turgeon, André Marchand, and Gilles Dupuis, "Clinical Features in Panic Disorder with Agoraphobia: A Comparison of Men and Women," *Journal of Anxiety Disorders* 12, no. 6 (12 November 1998), 539-553 [on-line version without page numbers]; available from Science Direct at www.sciencedirect.com/science/journals; accessed 13 September 2001.

[22] American Psychiatric Association, "Panic Disorder," *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,* Fourth Edition (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1994), 397-401 [book on-line]; available from APA Web site at http://www.algy.com/anxiety/files/panicdms.html; accessed 4 June 2000.

[23] Kimberly A. Yonkers, Caron Zlotnick, Jenifer Allsworth, Meredith Warshaw, Tracie Shea, and Martin B. Keller, "Is the Course of Panic Disorder the Same in Women and Men?" *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 155, no. 5 (May 1998), 596-602 [on-line journal without page numbers]; available from Web Luis; accessed 11 June 2000.

[24] Richard Gater, Michele Tansella, Ailsa Korten, Bea G. Tiemens, Venos G. Mavreas, and Michael O. Olatawura, "Sex Differences in the Prevalence and Detection of Depressive and Anxiety Disorders in General Health Care Settings: Report from the World Health Organization Collaborative Study on Psychological Problems in General Health Care," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 55, no. 5 (May 1998), 405-413.

[25] Knapp, 51.

[26] Kathleen A. Brehony, "Women and Agoraphobia: A Case for the Etiological Significance of the Feminine Sex-Role Stereotype," *The Stereotyping of Women: Its Effects on Mental Health,* eds. Violet Franks and Esther D. Rothblum (New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1983), 114.

[27] Bekker, 143.

[28] Fodor, 189.

[29] Ibid., 200.

more fashionable diagnoses, such as panic disorder. One reason that agoraphobia has always received less attention than other disorders is that women who suffer from it are unlikely to speak out; even those who have "recovered" may still dislike drawing any attention to themselves. Agoraphobics often must depend on others, and that may prove distasteful in cultures that enshrine independence. Philosopher Iris Marion Young notes that people who are dependent get marginalized.[30] Conservatives who celebrate homemakers and liberals who champion women in the workplace may both dislike talk of women who stay home out of fear. Agoraphobia has been associated with white, middle-class homemakers, and their complaints may seem passé these days, a relic of second-wave feminism.

Although agoraphobics often are described as white and middle-class, research indicates that the symptoms may be just as prevalent, if not more so, in poor women, women of other ethnic backgrounds,[31] and women in other countries and cultures, as documented by the World Health Organization.[32] But these women may lack money for therapy. Or they may doubt its efficacy, for cultural or historical reasons. Or they may have difficulty getting to a therapist's office, especially because agoraphobics may have fears about transportation or need someone to accompany them. Or they may live in a place less likely to be surveyed by professionals.

Defining Agoraphobia

Shopping malls and grocery stores are often the examples cited of "public places" that agoraphobics fear. The original definition of agoraphobia (when the patients were male) was the "fear of an assembly of people or a place to meet, that is, a fear of spaces open to the public,"[33] which had more of a political connotation. The latest definition (when the majority of patients are women) from the American Psychiatric Association is: "The fear of being alone in any place or situation from which it seems escape would be difficult or help unavailable should the need arise."[34] Agoraphobia is not a fear of social interaction, as in social phobia, a condition that has been in the news lately.

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[30] Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 125.

[31] Steven Friedman, Cheryl M. Paradis, and Marjorie L. Hatch, "Issues of Misdiagnosis in Panic Disorder with Agoraphobia." *Anxiety Disorders in African Americans,* ed. Steven Friedman (New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1994), 128-133. The authors note that few studies have been done on African Americans with agoraphobia, but those that have been done indicate that African Americans seemed just as likely to experience panic disorder as whites. Other studies found blacks had more phobias than whites, but they are less likely to seek psychiatric help. Sandy Rovner, "Anxiety and the Inner City," *The Washington Post,* 11 May 1984 [on-line newspaper article]; available from LEXIS-NEXIS Academic Universe at web.lexis-nexis.com/universe; accessed 13 September 2001. This reports research that more poor black women may suffer from agoraphobia than white women. Gater et al., referenced above, notes agoraphobia in cultures outside the United States.

[32] Gater et al.

[33] Knapp, 1.

[34] American Psychiatric Association, "Let's Talk Facts About Phobias," a Web site of the American Psychiatric Association; available from http://www.psych.org; accessed 14 September 2001.

The current understanding of how the disorder progresses is close to the original understanding. *The Harvard Guide to Women's Health* describes how fear can lead to agoraphobia. A person has a panic attack, which the guide defines as an unexpected and unexplained episode of intense fear. This may lead to a phobia, or irrational fear, and the woman who suffers from it may begin to avoid situations or places associated with that fear. The phobias may multiply until the agoraphobic is afraid to leave her house.[35] Agoraphobics who continue to venture into fearful situations may continue to feel panic. Westphal did not think patients had a fear of public places per se, but rather, they feared the anxiety or panic they felt in those places.[36] In other words, a person may feel panic when she drives across the Sunshine Skyway bridge even though she thinks it is safe. She cannot explain why she feels panic, but it is so unpleasant that she stops driving over the bridge. She does not actually fear the bridge, but the feeling that arises in her. Because of this, some have called agoraphobia a "fear of fear."[37]

Agoraphobics often worry about being crazy or "out of control" in public.[38] Many talk about the shame this would bring. Ann Seagrave, who created a program for agoraphobics with Faison Covington, describes her first panic attack: "I felt totally out of control of myself and my body; I ended up becoming hysterical. … We [agoraphobics] stay on the alert for fear that the very next reaction will be the one that causes us to make fools of ourselves, go totally crazy or drop dead."[39] While researching a newspaper article, I interviewed a woman that I identified only as "Joyce" (she wanted anonymity) who said: "You worry about everything. You think, 'I'm losing my mind.' It got to the point where I was afraid to go into unfamiliar areas."[40] Writer Nancy Mairs describes the panic that led to her agoraphobia:

> I felt suddenly as though I couldn't breathe; I was chilled to the bone yet clammy with sweat; I couldn't swallow; I thought I would throw up. This last sensation was the worst, since I have a horror of vomiting. I'd experienced such symptoms before, I think, but that night they came together in a nexus of panic so engulfing, so crippling, that my life congealed around the fear that they would recur. And they did. Unpredictably. Then predictably. I could no longer go to restaurants or theatres. If anyone but George [her husband] were around, I could not eat. I could not stay in the supermarket long enough to buy a week's worth of groceries. I quit my job. I stopped leaving my apartment building, then my apartment. Finally I stayed crouched in one corner of my livingroom couch, my thoughts reverberating inside my skull as though it were an iron bell, their ringing so loud that, terrified, I would call George at work and beg him to come home.[41]

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[35] *The Harvard Guide to Women's Health*, eds. Karen J. Carlson, Stephanie A. Eisenstat, and Terra Ziporyn (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 458.
[36] Knapp, 52.
[37] Seidenberg and DeCrow, 139.
[38] American Psychological Association, "Panic Disorder," *APA HelpCenter*, a Web site of the American Psychological Association; available from http://helping.apa.org/therapy/panic.html; accessed 4 June 2000.
[39] Ann Seagrave and Faison Covington, *Free from Fears: New Hope for Anxiety, Panic, and Agoraphobia* (New York: Poseidon Press, 1987), 16.
[40] Suzie Siegel, "Nothing to Fear but Fear Itself," *The Tampa Tribune*, 27 August 1992, BayLife 1 [on-line newspaper article without page numbers]; available only from Tampa Tribune computers; accessed 5 June 2000.
[41] Nancy Mairs, "On Keeping Women In/Out," *Plain Text* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 1986), 98.

Joyce calmed herself in public by imagining a safe haven, a cottage in a peaceful glen. Most agoraphobics have a place they consider safe, almost always their home. But "home" may be any place they claim as their own space, from a dormitory room to a mansion. It may be the only place where they feel in control.[42] The feeling of safety and control may extend to the homes of friends or relatives or their car. For agoraphobics, home may represent both prison and protection. Yet they often fear being trapped in public places; they want to be able to escape from the situation if they begin to "lose control."[43]

Many have one or more people with whom they feel safe, even if these people are not understanding or supportive.[44] In other words, they may go to the grocery store with a disapproving husband, but not alone. Some agoraphobics cannot even stay home alone because they fear how they may react. "We are constantly confronted with what we fear most: our own minds and bodies."[45] These fears have led psychologist Janice Yoder to describe agoraphobia as a fear of "solitary and anonymous situations."[46]

Mental health professionals consider emotions and stress to be important factors in anxiety disorders and phobias, while biology is considered the basis for panic. Researchers explore biological differences among people to see why some people are more likely to have panic attacks than other people. Panic can be measured by such symptoms as sweaty palms, dizziness, nausea, and a pounding heart. *The Harvard Guide to Women's Health* lists agoraphobia under all three categories: anxiety, phobias, and panic. But the dominant view is that agoraphobia is a subcategory of panic disorder; that is how the American Psychiatric Association lists it. In other words, a person who has panic disorder also can develop agoraphobia as a result of their feelings of panic. This categorization emphasizes the biological causes of agoraphobia,[47] with researchers rarely examining women's social and cultural experiences.[48]

One might say the thinking on causation has gone full circle, because Westphal also was interested in the biological roots of agoraphobia. But Westphal did not see agoraphobia as a gendered disorder of men even though his patients were male. In his patients, Westphal examined gender-neutral causes, such as vertigo. Today, when gender is noted, the focus seems to be: What biological differences make women more prone to agoraphobia?[49] Blaming biology is reminiscent of the construction of hysteria as a condition of women in the 1800s,[50] which I will discuss in the next chapter. Once again, women are presumed to be more emotional than men by nature.

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[42] Fodor, 201.

[43] Ibid., 196.

[44] Seagrave and Covington, 20-21.

[45] Ibid., 55.

[46] Janice D. Yoder, *Women and Gender: Transforming Psychology* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1999), 277.

[47] Fodor, 178.

[48] Ibid., 187.

[49] A good example is Lesley Mcdowell, "Feel the Fear," *The Scotsman* (Edinburgh), 5 May 2001 [on-line newspaper article]; available from LEXIS-NEXIS; accessed 13 September 2001. Scientist Helen Saul speculates on hormonal differences that may aggravate agoraphobia.

[50] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 104.

A Difference in Fears

I do not mean to imply that everyone researching agoraphobia today is focusing on biological differences between men and women. Many continue to ignore the gender disparity or write it off as a mystery. Ann Seagrave and Faison Covington, for example, never mention that there are different gendered expectations of men and women, even though their examples – even their own lives – indicate that. But some researchers, most notably feminists, have looked at social context.

In examining the gender disparity, one of the first questions asked is: Is it possible that men experience the symptoms of agoraphobia at the same rate as women but are less likely to be diagnosed with it? Some people think that men do not want to admit to irrational fears, panic, or a fear of leaving the house, lest they appear weak.[51] But men have been forthcoming about anxiety and panic[52] and other phobias.[53]

Some think men cover their anxiety by getting drunk or losing their temper.[54] Agoraphobic men are more likely to drink alcohol,[55] but women find other ways to deal with anxiety, such as taking tranquilizers.[56] Thus, men do not seem to have a monopoly on masking anxiety.

Although men and women may both experience anxiety in public, their thoughts differ on the consequences. According to a study by psychologists Norman Schmidt and Margaret Koselka, women worried more that they would experience panic, this would have negative consequences physically or socially, and they would be less likely to cope with what happened. A typical statement was: "I may become completely hysterical."[57] The greatest gender difference arose when patients were asked about "losing control." Women greatly feared it; men did not.[58] In general, men better understood the physical reactions to stress, while women were more likely to "catastrophize,"[59] to think that their panic would lead to some sort of catastrophe. Let me explain the terms used: "Anxiety" has the common definition of a state of unease, discomfort, and worry. "Panic," as I have noted earlier, is an intense reaction with strong physical symptoms. Someone who is anxious may go one step further and feel panic, but a person can have anxiety without panic and a person can experience panic without being anxious beforehand. "Losing control" is not a clinical term; it is a fear often expressed by agoraphobics, who define it in individual ways. For one woman, "losing control" may mean crying and screaming. For another, it may mean vomiting. This would be her perception, not necessarily the

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[51] Norman B. Schmidt and Margaret Koselka, "Gender Differences in Patients with Panic Disorder: Evaluating Cognitive Mediation of Phobic Avoidance," *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 24, no. 5 (2000), 544.
[52] Ibid., 545.
[53] Bekker, 130.
[54] Nancy Kassam-Adams and Ann Booker Loper, "Feminist Analysis of the Reasons Behind Anxiety Disorders and Why They Are More Prevalent in Women," *Iris – A Journal About Women* 31 (1994), 29-34 [on-line journal without page numbers]; available from Web Luis; accessed 7 June 2000.
[55] Turgeon et al.
[56] Bekker, 131.
[57] Schmidt and Koselka, 540-542.
[58] Ibid., 543.
[59] Ibid., 546.

perception of people around her. Agoraphobics may never actually behave in this manner, but they fear it nonetheless. "Fear" has the common definition; it is considered a "phobia" when it is irrational.

I want to suggest the fears held by agoraphobic women are rational, at least in a larger context. It is not surprising that many women are preoccupied with controling themselves, since society has done so much to control women.[60] They do face greater consequences for "losing control" in public than do men. Because "losing control" is not measurable in the same way as, say, "cardiac arrest," control becomes a matter of perception. A woman may think she has "lost control" even when others do not perceive her that way. Conversely, others may perceive a woman as being "out of control" even though she does not. Women have faced such penalties when they were perceived to be "out of control" that it behooves them to appear "in control," even when they are angry or panicked, even when their hearts are racing and their thoughts are jumbled.

Women are expected to "lose control" in certain circumstances, such as the death of a child, but their actions only reinforce the belief that women are emotional. Men are not supposed to act "hysterical" or cry "like a woman" in any circumstance because it lowers their status to that of a weak woman. Depending on variables such as class and ethnicity, men may have the option of anger, while women often have no acceptable way of "losing control." To put it another way, men can reinforce their masculinity (and their higher status) with some emotional displays. Women either reinscribe their femininity (and their lower status) or they are considered to be acting like a man, and thus, unnatural. I will discuss this at greater length in the next chapter, but in the meantime, think of all the movies in which men "lose control" and do something heroic, from telling off their boss to slaughtering evildoers. Think of a college campus, in which a young man can get drunk, vomit on his date, have sex with a stranger, and come away with a reputation as a bon vivant. A woman who does the same may be scorned as a drunken slut, or worse: Men may target her as easy prey. Think of the workplace, in which powerful men can "lose control" with few repercussions, while women who do the same are considered bitchy or hysterical. Gendered words like "slut," "bitch," and "hysterical" illustrate how language condemns women out of control.

Not only do men face fewer consequences for "losing control," but they also may be more familiar with the feeling. Panic is a rush of adrenaline, similar to that felt during excitement, exercise, and anger.[61] People who understand their body's reactions to adrenaline do not fear those reactions, and thus, do not develop agoraphobia.[62] Men may be more likely to understand what happens when adrenaline kicks in, since they generally get more encouragement in childhood to explore the outside world,[63] and they often play and exercise harder. In sports and military training, for example, they learn how to use the adrenaline rush.

A woman who does not understand her reactions may find reassurance in a companion who can help her, if her body or mind seems to fail her. Among agoraphobics, women are more

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[60] Seidenberg and DeCrow, 115.
[61] Seagrave and Covington, 16.
[62] Ibid., 17.
[63] Bekker, 141.

likely than men to avoid fearful situations when they are alone.[64] Another reason for this gender difference is the societal discourse about a woman alone. In many situations – from jogging in the evening to going out on the town – women are urged not to go by themselves, lest they encounter trouble. Well-to-do women of the nineteenth century had to have chaperones in order to leave the home. Some say agoraphobia replaces these codes of conduct, with women needing a companion to keep them in check.[65]

Because agoraphobic women fear the reactions of their own minds and bodies, they also may panic when they are home alone, when no one is home to help them. But then, women are warned about the dangers of living alone, and they do get attacked in their homes. In fact, agoraphobic women are more likely to have been sexually abused than agoraphobic men or women who are not agoraphobic.[66] Thus, it makes sense that they experience panic when alone in places where they consider themselves vulnerable.[67]

For women in general, public spaces have been "a landscape of fear."[68] Although they face greater danger in the home, the media focus on "public" crimes.[69] For example, marital rape rarely gets prosecuted or discussed. In surveys, women have been more than five times more worried about safety in public than have men. Because women can be attacked in different places and times, many have at least some unease whenever they are in public.[70] Many restrict their activities, such as not going to certain places, not going alone, or not going at night.[71] Thus, the prevalence of rape and harassment teaches most women to modify their behavior in public.

> The fear of rape acts to control all women. … Women guard themselves and their female children from the ever-present threat, confining their activities to those that reduce vulnerability. The woman who locks her door at night, who is fearful of the dark, who cannot go into the street, may be deemed neurotic, or "agoraphobic." But in a society where a woman who walks abroad is deemed to be fair game because she is providing sexual stimulus to a man, can we blame her? Perhaps it is misogyny she is a victim of, not agoraphobia.[72]

Although agoraphobics, like other women, may fear attack, I do not mean to imply that that fear constitutes agoraphobia. As I have explained earlier, agoraphobics fear the panic they feel – and the possible consequences of that – in certain situations. But sexual abuse can contribute to agoraphobia. People abused as children may learn to hide their feelings, and they may feel shame.[73] They may panic at the thought of "losing control" and blurting out their

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[64] Schmidt and Koselka, 543.

[65] Bekker, 134.

[66] Murray B. Stein, John R. Walker, Geri Anderson, Andrea L. Hazen, Colin A. Ross, Gloria Eldridge, and David R. Forde, "Childhood Physical and Sexual Abuse in Patients with Anxiety Disorders and in a Community Sample," *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 153, no. 2 (February 1996), 275-277.

[67] Turgeon et al.

[68] Rachel H. Pain, "Space, Sexual Violence and Social Control," *Progress in Human Geography* 15 (1991), 415.

[69] Ibid., 423.

[70] Ibid., 416.

[71] Ibid., 420.

[72] Jane M. Ussher, *Women's Madness: Misogyny or Mental Illness?* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1992), 32.

[73] Seagrave and Covington, 25.

feelings in front of people who may consider them shameful, dirty, or crazy. During abuse, victims "lose control" over what is happening to their body. This may contribute to later fears of "losing control." During abuse, they may learn to dissociate from bodily and emotional reactions. Later it may be frightening to feel these reactions under different circumstances. Abuse, or the fear of it, also can add to a person's general anxiety.

Panic attacks are often described as "unexpected" and "unexplained." But that is true only if a therapist ignores the anxiety in a patient's life.[74] Agoraphobic women are more likely than agoraphobic men to suffer from stressful lives.[75] In general, research has tied fear and anxiety to feelings of powerlessness. Since many more women than men feel powerless, it is not surprising that women feel more fear and anxiety than men.[76] The more anxiety that people have, the more they may feel as if they will go crazy or "lose it," just the sort of fears that keep agoraphobics indoors.

The Emphasis on Avoidance

Staying home is one factor that often sets men and women apart. To study this difference, Schmidt and Koselka surveyed patients with panic disorder. Some simply had panic; in others, the panic had led to agoraphobia. When the researchers looked at panic disorder without agoraphobia, they found about as many men as women suffered from it. But when panic disorder was combined with agoraphobia, there were two or three times more women patients. The proportion of women increased as the agoraphobia worsened.[77] Thus, agoraphobia is not just more prevalent among women than men, but more severe.[78] To put it another way: Men suffer from feelings of panic at the same rate as women. But many more women will choose to stay home to avoid that panic, and women make up nearly all of the worst cases of agoraphobia.

In the past, agoraphobics have been defined by their avoidance of the places they fear. But the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-Fourth Edition* has changed the diagnosis of agoraphobia to include people who endure their anxiety, either alone or with the aid of a companion.[79] This diagnosis would apply to many more men, obscuring the difference between the men who feel anxiety in public and the women who stay home for 20 years.

Why are women more likely to avoid places they fear? Some researchers argue that women are taught to avoid fearful situations, while men are taught to confront them. Agoraphobics score lower on tests for "masculine" behavior, such as confronting situations and being assertive.[80] In fact, the characteristics often attributed to agoraphobics sound like descriptions of femininity: Patients fear being aggressive. They avoid danger. They are dependent, helpless, emotional, excitable, and house-oriented. They need security and

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[74] Seidenberg and DeCrow, 132-133.

[75] Turgeon et al.

[76] Pain, 424; Kassam-Adams and Loper.

[77] Schmidt and Koselka, 533-534.

[78] Turgeon et al.

[79] Schmidt and Koselka, 547.

[80] Turgeon et al.

protection.[81] As a therapist, Fodor has seen more agoraphobia in women whose families have traditional beliefs about femininity.[82] Considering the messages that women receive, psychologist Kathleen Brehony suggests it is surprising more are not agoraphobic.[83]

Other researchers challenge the idea that women, because of their socialization, are less likely to confront their fears. Schmidt and Koselka used the Courage Scale to survey patients. Although they acknowledge the need for more study, they found no difference in courage – or the willingness to confront fearsome situations – between men and women who suffer panic attacks.[84] Instead, the gender difference seemed to result from the greater fears and worries of the women.

To recap what I have discussed: Men and women get diagnosed with panic disorder at the same rate. The Schmidt and Koselka study indicates that men and women have the same rates of courage. I agree with them that the difference seems to be that female patients have more fears and anxieties. As a result of these greater fears and worries, women may choose to stay home more often than men.

Even in a society with mixed messages about homemakers, women who stay home receive much more approval and face much less scrutiny than do men who stay home. Although men feel more pressure to leave their home to work, psychologist Marrie Bekker argues that women who stay home are still expected to leave on various errands.[85] Nevertheless, homemakers have more flexibility in what they can avoid. They do not need to spend eight hours away from home, and they may find ways to make forays acceptable, such as shopping with friends. As a result, homemaking gives many agoraphobic women an acceptable way to avoid that which they fear in public.

Agoraphobia often strikes young women after marriage or motherhood.[86] Women who must do all the housework and childcare may feel overwhelmed. But they do not have to be assertive; they may just stop being capable of chores outside the home.[87] Women who have been independent and held outside employment may feel reassured to adopt the more traditional role of homemaker, a role with which they are familiar.[88] In the past, some therapists urged agoraphobic women to become better wives, mothers and homemakers,[89] and these messages may linger among women who have been agoraphobic for years. Husbands tend to be satisfied with agoraphobic wives, as long as the couple believes in traditional gender roles. The men may enjoy feeling strong and rational, in relation to wives beset with irrational fears.[90] This fits the

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[81] Fodor, 193.
[82] Ibid., 191.
[83] Brehony, 124.
[84] Schmidt and Koselka, 547.
[85] Bekker, 131.
[86] Fodor, 177-178.
[87] Kassam-Adams and Loper.
[88] Ibid.
[89] Siegel.
[90] Kassam-Adams and Loper.

concept of the patriarchal marriage, in which a woman accepts limits on her freedom to serve the needs of her husband and children, and, in return, her husband protects and supports her.[91]

Mairs became agoraphobic after she traded writing for marriage and motherhood.[92] Seagrave and Covington describe a number of women who tried to conform to notions of traditional femininity, only to become housebound by their anxieties. They also talk about how agoraphobia can benefit a woman's husband. Seagrave gave up work outside the home when she married. Her husband benefited from her agoraphobia in that he took control of everything and she and their children worshiped him.[93] Covington describes herself as meek and dependent, qualities that charmed her husband. When she started to recover from agoraphobia, she became more independent and assertive, and her husband worried that he would lose control of her.[94] Agoraphobics are often described as very dependent.[95] That may be, in part, because professionals devalue work done in the home. It is possible that the breadwinner depends a great deal on an agoraphobic woman to keep house and raise the children.

Although agoraphobia may make them more dependent on others, it is important to underscore that some women, such as Seagrave, exhibited independent traits beforehand. Martha Cadden, a former agoraphobic who started a treatment center in Largo, Florida, saw many women who tried to take care of others, not just themselves. They were "the classic good girls," trained to put others first. She was one, as was Joyce, the woman I interviewed. Joyce had spent 17 years at one of the nation's largest banks, working her way from a clerk to a vice president, before agoraphobia forced her to take early retirement. The oldest of six children, she had taken charge of her siblings after the death of her mother.[96] With so much responsibility, these women fear the consequences if they "lose control." But this can make them vulnerable to the panic attacks that can lead to agoraphobia.

A Radical Revisioning

Most mental health professionals discuss agoraphobia in terms of avoidance. Robert Seidenberg, a psychiatrist, and Karen DeCrow, a former president of the National Organization for Women, offer a radical alternative. They see agoraphobia as resistance:

> Agoraphobics may well be the most completely uncompromising feminists of our time. They will not be placated or bribed by small favors or grants of limited access. Sensing that they are not welcome in the outside world, they have come to terms with their own sense of pride by not setting foot on land that is deemed alien and hostile.[97] … We perceive agoraphobia as a very personalized sit-in strike.[98]

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[91] Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 41.
[92] Mairs, 101.
[93] Seagrave and Covington, 72.
[94] Ibid., 76.
[95] *Harvard Guide to Women's Health*, 458.
[96] Siegel.
[97] Seidenberg and DeCrow, 7.
[98] Ibid., 35.

Seeing agoraphobia as protest follows feminist thinking on other psychological disorders diagnosed primarily in women. Psychologist Jane Ussher says feminists have equated madness with oppression. "As women are powerless, they cannot express their discontent in any way other than madness, hysteria or anorexia."[99] Resistance points to the failure of the system.[100] It raises questions of why so many women refuse to participate in the public sphere.

Seidenberg and DeCrow compare agoraphobic women to communities that isolate themselves. They note that some ethnic groups remain in enclaves, for fear of hostile people in other neighborhoods. In occupied countries, some people comply with the regime but remain separatists at home. They remain alienated from the larger society around them. "The retreatist separation of despair is the mode of the agoraphobic."[101]

I relish Seidenberg and DeCrow's analysis and want to explore their ideas, with caveats. For example, they fail to make important distinctions between the intent and the result. Women do not choose agoraphobia to flout society. But their agoraphobia may serve as subversion, nonetheless. It can lead people to look at ways the public sphere remains hostile to women.

Agoraphobia allows some women to pursue their interests apart from the world, Seidenberg and DeCrow say. They cite Emily Dickinson, who might not have had the opportunity to write if she had married and raised a family.[102] But she makes a strange example, since so many agoraphobics do marry and have children. It is not clear whether Dickinson would have been diagnosed as agoraphobic today. But it is clear that some people express the desire to stay home while others express a desire to leave the home, but fear the consequences. Society has helped shape their fears, desires, and options. Nevertheless, I want to draw a distinction between a woman who says, "I need to stay home and write" and one who says, "I fear that I will have a heart attack if I step outside my door."

Women often are relieved to be diagnosed as agoraphobic. If they are ill, they can be cured.[103] It is harder to try to change one's life or the world in which one lives.[104] But that is what Seidenberg and DeCrow expect. They recommend therapy that will help a woman understand her life within the limits of a patriarchal world. They compare drug and behavior therapies to strike-breaking,[105] because these therapies deal only with the symptoms, not the causes of agoraphobia. "What firefighter rushes to destroy the alarm system or smoke detector?"[106] They question if agoraphobics "are disturbed or disturbing."[107] In other words, professionals would rather drug women or change their behavior than see that behavior as a rational response to the world. I agree, but it is naïve to think that once people understand their

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[99] Ussher, 90.
[100] Trinh T. Minh-ha, "Write Your Body" and "The Body in Theory," *Feminist Theory and the Body,* eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999), 262.
[101] Seidenberg and DeCrow, 177.
[102] Ibid., 53.
[103] Ibid., 15.
[104] Ibid., 32.
[105] Ibid., 33.
[106] Ibid., 171.
[107] Ibid., 130.

problems, the problems will disappear. Many women may want and need therapies to get them out of the house, while they work on bigger issues.

Writing in the early 1980s, when fewer women held positions of power, Seidenberg and DeCrow thought mental health professionals would help women enter the public sphere only to do errands associated with their gender, such as shopping. They could not imagine a therapist treating a woman who feared a Wall Street office or a library.[108] But that has not been the case, as evidenced by the fact that the former banker I interviewed received treatment in hopes that she could return to her office and I received treatment to enter libraries, classrooms, and other public areas of a college campus. Women who are not homemakers also develop agoraphobia and receive treatment. Seidenberg and DeCrow think women will stop being agoraphobic when society values their work outside the home and removes barriers,[109] but they do not give details on what they mean by this or how it will be accomplished. Removing barriers is easier said than done.

Like Seidenberg and DeCrow, Young also criticizes the unrelenting focus on the individual in therapy. She uses the ideas of philosopher Michel Foucault in relation to drug addicts,[110] but her analysis works with agoraphobics as well. Their "situation is one of dependence, vulnerability, and need," and therapists may respond with paternalism.[111] Patients may be encouraged to dissect their life, behavior, and needs in the clinical language of the therapists. "The normalizing language of therapy defines her history and the particular attributes of her situation as a 'case,' that is, as a particular instance of generalized concepts of norm and deviance, health and disorder, self-fulfillment and self-destruction." Treatment is designed to change behaviors so that the patient fits the norm.[112] But this does not address the political nature of the patient's situation or what political action can be taken. Seeing people only as individuals "obscures oppression."[113] As an alternative, Young suggests consciousness-raising talk in which individuals can see themselves in society and discuss collective political action.[114]

Ussher would retain therapy, but continually interrogate it. She suggests that therapists "listen to the women."[115] I like her suggestion and Young's, but I am concerned that agoraphobics may talk in the way they have been trained. In other words, it may be hard for them to break from the societal discourse in which they have come to understand themselves and their situation.

In the next chapter, I will discuss that discourse.

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[108] Ibid., 26-27, 30.
[109] Ibid., 6.
[110] Young, 87.
[111] Ibid., 85.
[112] Ibid., 86.
[113] Ibid., 17.
[114] Ibid., 90-91.
[115] Ussher, 306.

Chapter Three: Fears of Women in Nineteenth Century Discourse

Women entered the public sphere with a vengeance in the Paris Commune of 1871 – and they paid for it. Not only did the female participants in this revolt experience worse treatment than men, but their participation also became a cautionary tale of the social disorder that arises when women want an active role in the world outside their home. In this chapter, I explore the nineteenth century discourse on women in the home and women in public, with the Commune as an example. I look at work, politics, science, health, and social changes in the nineteenth century.

Throughout much of the written history of the West, women were supposed to tend the home, while men held the political and economic power. As the philosopher Xenophon said in ancient Greece: "The gods created the woman for the indoors functions, the man for all the others."[116] This was an ideal, of course. Poor, enslaved, and lower-class women often worked outside the home, and that work might have been seen as a positive among their peers, but it also served to define them against higher-class women. Lower-class women often were expected to do the chores inside their own homes, too.

In the West, the nineteenth century saw a strengthening of the gendered separation of the private and public spheres. By the dawn of the twentieth century, however, much of this ideology had been thrown into question. My particular concern is the role fear played in controlling women. Men feared what would happen if women no longer tended the home or if women could no longer be controlled. Women, too, feared a "loss of control," the ruination of the home, and the risks of the public world. I do not mean that fear ruled their lives. Imagine it instead as a shiny ribbon that ran through their lives, like the ribbons in the hair of the women condemned for their role in the Commune.[117]

I focus on France in the late nineteenth century for three reasons. First, I chose the Commune as my historical example because it occurred in the year that agoraphobia was "discovered." But to talk about the Commune, I need to discuss other discourses of that place and time period. Second, I want to focus on one country because it would not be feasible to explore the historical discourse throughout the West. For example, all the Western nations experienced industrialization, but they did so at different times and in different ways. Third, the discourse and events of modern France have had a great impact in the West. As historian Joan Landes puts it: "French developments are everywhere discussed as paradigmatic of the specifically political determination of modern society."[118] I will mention developments elsewhere that echo the experience in France, or place it in a larger context. When I write without mention of France, I mean to indicate trends throughout the West, even though I will be using French sources for the most part. I will mention France specifically when speaking of statistics, laws, etc., that were peculiar to that nation.

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[116] Fodor, 177.

[117] Gay L. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 206.

[118] Joan B. Landes, *Women and the Public Sphere in the Age of the French Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1988), 8.

Depending on the place and time, the separation of the private and public realms might not have involved much physical separation for men and women. These days, people speak of home and work as if that separation were natural.[119] In the past, however, many people worked in or near where they lived. The family might have lived on its farm in the countryside or above the cobbler's shop in town, for example. A woman might have brewed beer in her house or taken in laundry. Both husband and wife might have worked hard to maintain family farms and home businesses. There also was little separation in politics, at times. Under monarchy, men and women might have attended a public function, such as an execution, but the average man had few political functions to attend on his own. Although elite men held most political and economic power, women in their same class had more access to this power than would a lower-class man.

Labor Separates Men and Women

As the trades organized, men cut women out of the competition. The Industrial Revolution solidified the gender segregation, with men predominating in the factories of the 1800s.[120] In France, large-scale industrialization began to grow in the 1850s, and "work" increasingly referred to something performed for money outside the home.[121] A divide widened between women who stayed home and men who went to work. Many women did do work, such as sewing or knitting, in their homes for money, but they were still expected to do household chores. As men worked long hours outside the home, they depended even more on women to keep house and raise children,[122] whatever other work the women did. Work outside the home became associated with masculinity, and men felt they had a right to such work.[123]

But the male claim to jobs did not keep women away. Philosopher Jane Roland Martin describes women as immigrants in the workplace, "given that our country of origin is the private home."[124] By 1866, women made up 30 percent of the industrial labor force in France.[125] Men feared competition from women, who were sometimes hired because they were considered more docile and because they could be paid less than men. This might occur when the work became mechanized and thus was no longer a skilled craft. Even socialist men argued against women in the workplace.[126] The International Workingmen's Association, composed mainly of English, French, and Swiss artisans, passed a resolution in 1866 that women's place was in the home.[127] In the latter part of the nineteenth century, middle-class men felt increasing competition as

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[119] McDowell, 123.

[120] Ibid., 77.

[121] Elinor A. Accampo, "Gender, Social Policy, and the Formation of the Third Republic," *Gender and the Politics of Social Reform in France, 1870-1914*, eds. Elinor A. Accampo, Rachel G. Fuchs, and Mary Lynn Stewart (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 4.

[122] Accampo, 13.

[123] An example of the construction of work as a masculine right can be found in Alfred Naquet, *Collectivism and the Socialism of the Liberal School,* trans. William Heaford (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1891), 55.

[124] Jane Roland Martin, *Coming of Age in Academe: Rekindling Women's Hopes and Reforming the Academy* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 95.

[125] Marilyn Boxer, *Socialism Faces Feminism in France: 1879-1913* (Riverside: University of California, 1975), 76.

[126] Boxer, 76.

[127] Marilyn Boxer and Jean Quataert, "Women in Industrializing, Liberalizing, and Imperializing Europe," *Connecting Spheres: European Women in a Globalizing World, 1500 to Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 141.

well.[128] Some men did more than pass resolutions; they harassed women. Business owners and supervisors forced themselves sexually on women, out of romantic notions or to make the women compensate for poor work.[129]

Working conditions could be worse at home than in the factories.[130] But men concentrated on the physical and psychological toll taken on women in the workplace. Philanthropists urged women to stay home.[131] This was the typical thinking: "By entering a workshop, a woman undertook an unnatural, unfeminine role, effectively destroying her innately fragile constitution. Physically and emotionally undone, she fell prey to the ultimate feminine disorder: hysteria."[132]

The public sphere was perceived as less caring than the home.[133] Some men who felt alienated from their labor longed for a refuge, where they could imagine themselves in an earlier, simpler, more natural time.[134] Religious movements gave the home an aura of spirituality and virtue.[135] Home also was seen as a site of nurturing, with women doing the nurturing. "The home became an idealized centre for emotional life, where feelings that might be disguised elsewhere were allowed full rein."[136] Jules Michelet, a nineteenth-century historian, described women's duty to provide a home away "from the weariness of worldly things," the world of work.[137] Jenny P. d'Hericourt, a writer who challenged Michelet and other misogynists of her day, retorted that "sequestration" gave a husband more power over his wife than if she were allowed more rights in public.[138]

Home did not provide the same haven for women as it did for men. As I have mentioned, women often did hard and dangerous work there, sometimes for money, sometimes not. Under the Napoleonic Code, husbands could take their money, and beat or rape them, with few repercussions. For much of the nineteenth century, divorce was not an option, and even when it was, divorcing or prosecuting a husband with more money and power was quite a gamble. Although women were (and still are) more likely to be harmed in their home by an intimate than by a stranger on the street, this was rarely discussed until recent years. Instead, writing focused on the dangers – and the subsequent fear and anxiety – facing women in the public sphere.[139] To

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[128] Edward Berenson, *The Trial of Madame Caillaux* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 112.

[129] Alain Corbin, *Women for Hire: Prostitution and Sexuality in France after 1850,* Alan Sheridan, trans. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), 137.

[130] Tessie P. Liu, "What Price a Weaver's Dignity?" *Gender and Class in Modern Europe,* eds. Laura L. Frader and Sonya O. Rose. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996), 75.

[131] McDowell, 77.

[132] Carolyn J. Eichner, "'To Assure the Reign of Work and Justice,': The *Union des Femmes* and the Paris Commune of 1871," *Osterreichische Zeitschrift fur Geschichtswissenschaften* 9, no. 4 (1998), 535.

[133] Kittay, 139.

[134] Berenson, 110.

[135] McDowell, 77-78.

[136] Ibid., 75.

[137] Jules Michelet, *Love,* J.W. Palmer, trans. [1860], in *Women, the Family, and Freedom: The Debate in Documents, Volume One, 1750-1880*, eds. Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1983), 339.

[138] Jenny P. d'Hericourt, *A Woman's Philosophy of Woman, or Woman Affranchised: An Answer to Michelet, Proudhon, Girardin, Legouve, Comte, and Other Modern Innovators* [1864], in *Women, the Family, and Freedom*, eds. Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen, 343.

[139] McDowell, 148-151.

write or speak about abuse inside the home would have diminished the cult of domesticity and indicted men. Writers and speakers were mostly men, and it often suited their purposes to warn women of the dangers outside.

Like their male counterparts, women who worked in factories and workshops sometimes idealized the home,[140] especially if they had never done domestic production.[141] Even if they had done grueling work at home, they might still accept the rhetoric that they, their family, and society would be better off if they could stay home. Although this began as a bourgeois value, working-class families felt pressure to conform by the late nineteenth century. "Indeed the leisure of its women, even more than the occupation of its men, served to validate a family's claim to middle-class standing. Increasingly the desire for respectability made work outside the home unacceptable for working-class women as well."[142]

By the turn of the century, the idea that woman should stay home had little connection with reality. More and more women worked outside the home, whether or not they liked or approved of it. Even conservative women who had the money to stay home spent much of their time doing charity work, such as organizing schools and feeding the poor.[143] Many entered the political realm as well. They "attended worker congresses, joined socialist organizations, and founded feminist groups from the mid-1870s."[144] The term *"féminisme"* was coined in France and was in wide use there by the 1890s, as well as spreading to many other countries around the world.[145]

The Universal Man Takes Over Politics

Although patriarchal, France's Old Regime allowed women to participate in public. Most men and women were excluded from power, but some elite women assumed powerful roles that had nothing to do with domesticity, similar to their male counterparts.[146] After the Revolution, republican men talked of individual rights applied universally. They either had to include women or explain why women differed from men. They chose the latter route.[147] Republican men ended up devaluing "women's contribution to public life to a degree rarely matched in earlier periods."[148] In general, women had fewer rights after the Revolution than before. For a while, it was even a crime for them to appear in public.[149] Next came the Napoleonic Code, with various laws to remove women from the public sphere.[150]

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[140] Charles Sowerwine, *Sisters or Citizens?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 10.

[141] Ibid., 12.

[142] Boxer and Quataert, 145.

[143] Berenson, 92.

[144] Accampo, 6.

[145] Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 14, no. 11 (1988), 126-127.

[146] Landes, 17.

[147] Ibid., 105.

[148] Ibid., 203.

[149] Berenson, 106.

[150] Berenson, 107.

In many ways, republicanism mirrored older Christian views on women. The Church had spent centuries teaching that women needed to be controlled, lest their weak and animal-like natures lead them to wickedness. They might harm or even kill people, destroy crops, or cause other mischief. "The rampant persecutions of women for witchcraft in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries may be viewed as an expression of a male-dominated society's intolerance of 'uncontrolled' women."[151] The idea of women as more sexual, emotional, manipulative, and devious persisted into the Enlightenment, becoming part of philosophy and science. Men were considered strong, rational, civilized, and in control. Women were weak, emotional, closer to nature, and in need of men to control them. As d'Hericourt put it, woman is seen as "a perpetual invalid … always wounded."[152] Historian Edward Berenson gives his view of women at the turn of the century:

> As long as women remained insulated from worldly stimulation they were subdued, sweet, and loving. But because their nervous systems were so fragile, so vulnerable to the least upset, their serenity readily gave way to waves of passion that took charge of them, body and soul. A woman could be sweet and composed one moment; depressed, anxious, even violent another.[153] Whether for biological or psychological reasons, women were regularly described as hypersensitive, nervous, volatile, irrational, and lacking in self-control.[154]

In the ideology of republicanism, women were supposed to control their passions, presenting themselves as modest and chaste. They were to remain virgins until married, but marriage and children were expected. Women who stayed single and celibate invited scorn. But motherhood, with its implication of sexuality and the physicality of birth and breastfeeding, was dangerous because it involved a loss of bodily control.[155] "Domesticity was … the solution to the problem of the unruly woman."[156] Keeping women home would protect both them and society. Think of it as a controlled burn: Women could have passion and "lose control," but only under male supervision. Even after the turn of the century, in 1914, a "real woman" was supposed to stay home. "She did not make a spectacle of herself."[157]

The writings of philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the late eighteenth century contributed greatly to this cult of domesticity. He wrote in *Emile:* "The genuine mother of a family is no woman of the world; she is almost as much of a recluse as the nun in the convent."[158] Although he saw much weakness in women, their sexuality terrified him. If women

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[151] Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen, *Women, the Family, and Freedom,* 3.
[152] d'Hericourt, 342.
[153] Berenson, 98.
[154] Ibid., 100.
[155] Accampo, 12.
[156] Gullickson, 217.
[157] Berenson, 92.
[158] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile,* trans. Barbara Foxley and Grace Roosevelt [1762], available at the Web site of Columbia University's Institute for Learning Technologies at projects.ilt.columbia.edu/ Pedagogies/ Rousseau/ em_eng_bk5.html; accessed 30 September 2001; 1358.

did not feel shame and timidity, if they gave free rein to their desires, "the human race would perish."[159] If women had sexual freedom, they would tyrannize and eventually destroy men.[160]

In the mid-nineteenth century, philosopher Pierre-Joseph Proudhon lashed out at women as physically, intellectually, and morally inferior. Women who defended themselves against such claims were "impure" and "rendered insane by sin."[161] Writer Juliette Lambert [Adam] responded to him, conceding "an element of moral corruption and disorder" in women. But she said it was worsened, not helped, "by obliging women to shut themselves up in the family."[162] At the turn of the century, anarchist Louise Michel, who fought in the Commune, also challenged Proudhon. If a woman is not duped, if she has courage, if she becomes educated, men will consider her "pathological."[163] Michel acknowledged that women do not always act in commendable ways, but their misbehavior arises from their situation, not their natures. Concerning Proudhon's assertion that women could be either homemakers or prostitutes, controlled by the home or the brothel, Michel responded that men had made women dangerous by giving them little education or rights.[164]

In my discussion of political ideology, the reader may have noticed some references to psychology and biology. The rise of medicine, biology, psychology, and other social sciences in the late nineteenth century provided "evidence" for philosophers and politicians who wrote on the need to control women. Behaviors associated with men and women became innate characteristics.[165] "Madness became associated with womanhood," with hysteria as the catchall diagnosis for female maladies.[166] The diagnosis of hysteria was used to force women to become more passive. Being vocal in public was often enough to be considered hysterical. For example, women who worked for women's rights were labeled as hysterics.[167] To cure hysteria, doctors often recommended that women marry and bear children, or spend more time tending the ones they had. In other words, they were to be confined to the home.[168]

In the past, there was talk of people possessed by demons or overcome by emotions. At the turn of the century, the concept of the unconscious arose to explain how almost anyone could commit the most heinous crime – against her or his will.[169] The unconscious was seen as so

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[159] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile,* book 5, ed. Michel Launay [1762], in *Women, the Family, and Freedom,* eds. Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen, 44.

[160] Rousseau, *Emile,* 1762, 45.

[161] Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, "*De la Justice dans la Revolution et dans l'Eglise,*" [1858], in *Women, the Family, and Freedom,* eds. Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen, 326.

[162] Juliette Lambert [Adam], *Idees Anti-Proudhoniennes sur l'Amour, la Femme, et le Mariage* [1861], in *Women, the Family, and Freedom,* eds. Susan Groag Bell and Karen M. Offen, 332.

[163] Louise Michel, *The Memoirs of Louise Michel, the Red Virgin*, trans. and ed. Bullitt Lowry and Elizabeth Ellington Gunter (Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1981), 139.

[164] Michel, 142.

[165] Boxer and Quataert, 150.

[166] Ussher, 64-65.

[167] Eileen Janes Yeo, *Radical Femininity: Women's Self-Representation in the Public Sphere* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 5.

[168] Janet Beizer, *Ventriloquized Bodies: Narratives of Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), 51.

[169] Berenson, 20.

powerful that it could seize control of the individual, at least for a short time.[170] Women were seen as weaker and more susceptible to these unconscious impulses than were men. Adding to the danger was the growth of the cities, and psychologists warned that the urban stimuli were "creating a population of emotional time bombs." Poverty and the frustration of factory jobs were thought to add stress to the lower classes.[171] This discourse was constructed in tandem with the idea of home as a haven.

According to theories tempered by colonialism, the more civilized a society became, the greater became its division of labor. The evolution of the public and private spheres and their division by gender were seen as a mark of civilization. This was not just the evolution of the society, but it was considered to be biological evolution as well. Women became suited for the home, and men for economics and politics, as humanity advanced biologically.[172]

Problems for the "Public Woman"

The interest in biology fed fears about the most public women – prostitutes. Historian Alain Corbin writes of the "venereal anxiety" and "hygienic terror" of the late nineteenth century, inspired in part by the prevalence of syphilis, then incurable.[173] Just as syphilis could lead to madness, many people thought that prostitution and licentiousness could drive women crazy. "The links between prostitution, madness, and hysteria were a fundamental theme in contemporary writing on prostitution."[174]

Seeing prostitution as a necessary evil, officials devised ways to regulate it. Alex Parent-Duchatelet, a pioneering French regulationist of the first part of the century, wanted to inspire a "permanent terror" in prostitutes. They would always be under surveillance, and could be imprisoned or hospitalized whenever they got out of line.[175] If arrested, a woman might have to spend the night in a police station and submit to a gynecological examination, which many women considered "an assault on their modesty, if not actually rape."[176] In addition to law enforcement and health care workers, prostitutes also were watched by pimps, brothel owners, and clients, although for different reasons.

Many poor women who had other trades had to occasionally seek money for sex, the "fifth quarter of the day," in order to survive. These working women, along with women who did not follow sexual mores, independent women, women who performed in public, and even traditional women caught in the wrong place at the wrong time might be labeled as prostitutes. In many French towns, a woman caught with a man who would not answer for her was registered as

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[170] Ibid., 30.
[171] Ibid., 31.
[172] Joan Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 96-97.
[173] Corbin, 251.
[174] Ibid., 298.
[175] Ibid., 13.
[176] Ibid., 31-32, 88.

a prostitute.[177] After all, a "public man" was a citizen, while a "public woman" was a prostitute.[178]

Some women were (and still are) tricked into sexual slavery, and newspapers warned that young virgins were being snatched up and sold in foreign countries as part of the white slave trade.[179] These stories contributed to the idea that women faced dangers in the outside world, especially without a male protector. Women were not the only victims of crime, of course. Men faced many dangers in public, and one could argue that they were much more likely to come to harm in public than in private, unlike women. But men had no choice. They were supposed to operate in the public arena, and there were few ways to escape it.

Men claimed public spaces, especially at night, and women were not welcome, unless they were there to serve men. Many women had to venture onto the streets at night, including those who worked late shifts. But they risked their reputation as well as physical attack. If they dared to go alone into a public establishment, such as a bar or restaurant, they might be seen as a prostitute. "Much of social life was closed to unescorted women."[180] It is important to draw the link between reputation and rape. "Women who did not conform or keep to their place were constructed as wicked or fallen, subjected to abuse or vulnerable to physical danger, forcing them to reconsider their decision to participate in the public sphere."[181] Rape was rarely prosecuted because it was believed that a truly moral woman could prevent it. A woman who said she was raped might be blamed for inciting the man's action, and she would certainly establish her loss of virginity.[182] As historian Eileen Yeo writes in the first line of her book: "Public space has been dangerous territory for women."[183]

Women could go out alone during the day, but those with money were careful in their dress, to ensure respectability and status. In Victorian England, Cambridge students wore gloves and hats to differentiate themselves from women of loose morals.[184] Respectable men expressed outrage at flamboyant prostitutes seeking bourgeois clients on the grand boulevards of Paris. "The fiction of the period provides rich testimony to what was a veritable phobia and a repressed desire for contact."[185] The boulevards, built in the 1850s and 1860s, led to "woman as spectacle."[186] Strolling the boulevards, eyeing women, was a popular pastime for men.[187] By the 1870s, however, most bourgeois and upper-class women did not venture out even in open carriages. Many felt insecure of their social standing, and they were afraid of meeting women who might complicate their husband's business or politics.[188]

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[177] Ibid., 32.
[178] Yeo, 1.
[179] Corbin, 277.
[180] Boxer and Quataert, 146.
[181] McDowell, 149.
[182] Ibid., 151.
[183] Yeo, 1.
[184] McDowell, 154.
[185] Corbin, 205.
[186] Ibid., 205.
[187] Albert Dresden Vandam, *My Paris Note-book* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Co., 1894), 141-142.
[188] Ibid., 143.

By the late nineteenth century, people were no longer locked into what had amounted to castes, with no hope of change. There were more working-class people who aspired to the middle class. I already have mentioned that many working-class families adopted the bourgeois idea that women should stay home, even if they could not manage that themselves. After the Paris Commune, there was social confusion, with aristocrats and royalists hanging on to prestige while republicans boasted of high government positions and the bourgeoisie struggled to rise in the ranks.

Mary King Waddington noted how women of different social standing spoke angrily of each other.[189] An American, she had married a delegate to the French National Assembly in Paris in 1874. She commented on how the French bourgeois women lived "cramped" lives, with little knowledge of the outside world. They feared making mistakes in public. Unlike men, they were scrutinized for every detail of their dress and manners.[190] Although feminists talk of the male gaze, it is important to underscore: Women were watching and judging each other as well. A woman of higher class was defined in opposition to a lower-class woman, and women preserved their status by showing disdain for women below them.[191]

Women were not the only ones worried about their roles. In the 1880s, many bourgeois men questioned, if not their own masculinity, then the manliness of their contemporaries. They adopted an "aggressively masculine lifestyle."[192] Many turned to duels to protect their honor and prove their manhood.[193] Some expressed distaste, or at least a lack of interest, in the lives of women. They frequented male-only clubs, meetings, political chambers, etc. The gender gulf grew so wide that some men and women had little idea how the others lived.[194] Women had less informal influence on politics because they were so seldom around the men in power.[195]

Virility was celebrated, in response to the declining population.[196] Birthrates were falling faster in France than in other European countries or the United States.[197] France had been the first European country to experience a decline in births, beginning in the late eighteenth century, but it did not become a public issue until the defeat by Prussia in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871.[198] Men were needed to fill the ranks of the army, lest France lose again. In addition to declining births, "depopulation" was tied to feminism and "degeneracy," such as alcoholism,

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[189] Mary King Waddington, *My First Years as a Frenchwoman 1876-1879* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 188, 246.
[190] Ibid., 185-186.
[191] Boxer and Quataert, 154.
[192] Judith F. Stone, "The Republican Brotherhood: Gender and Ideology," *Gender and the Politics of Social Reform in France, 1870-1914*, eds. Elinor A. Accampo, Rachel G. Fuchs, and Mary Lynn Stewart, 46.
[193] Berenson, 207.
[194] Stone, 46.
[195] Vandam, 156.
[196] Stone, 39.
[197] Rachel Fuchs, "France in a Comparative Perspective," *Gender and the Politics of Social Reform in France, 1870-1914*, eds. Elinor A. Accampo, Rachel G. Fuchs, and Mary Lynn Stewart, 158.
[198] Karen Offen, "Feminism, Antifeminism, and National Family Politics in Early Third Republic France," *Connecting Spheres: European Women in a Globalizing World, 1500 to the Present,* Marilyn Boxer and Jean Quataert, 207.

disease, and crime.[199] These fears continued the drumbeat for women to stay home and raise children in France, as well as in other Western countries.

Lack of political control also contributed to the crisis of masculinity in France. While other European countries grew in power and stability, France struggled between monarchy and republican governance. It lost a war, and in the same year, the bourgeoisie lost control of their capital during the Commune. The depression of the 1880s led to fears of another revolution.[200]

Commune Women and Social Disorder

In 1871, the Commune became a turning point for women's participation in the public arena. In the Franco-Prussian war, Napoleon III was captured, but many Parisian workers had their hopes for a republican government dashed when the new leaders proved conservative. Prussian troops laid siege to Paris for five months, and Parisians joined the National Guard to defend their city. Instead of being rescued by the French army, however, Paris was surrendered to the Prussians by the French government in Versailles. On March 18, when the French army tried to remove cannons from Paris, the National Guard and other Parisians fought back. Paris set up its own government, the Commune, and was besieged by the French army. The radicals who ran the Commune started rewriting laws, giving more rights to workers, including women. The Commune held out for ten weeks, until the army entered the city and killed up to thirty thousand people.[201]

Women played critical roles from the first day of the Commune.[202] They organized parades, demonstrations, and a citywide union. They entered skirmishes, sometimes as combatants but more often to provide food, water, and medical care. They fought on the barricades, and they spoke to political clubs, which had taken over churches.[203]

Although the Commune often is seen as a rebellion of the working class, its critics became fixated on the female participants, who were generally described as lower class. "Bourgeois journalists, essayists, and historians were drawn to the fierce, beautiful female warriors of the Commune and were convinced that they were man-hating, independent, dangerous, and mad."[204] One example is historian Maxime du Camp's four-volume *Les Convulsions de Paris,* which first appeared in 1878. Sometimes he explicitly compared the Commune to a woman; other times, his language implied the feminine. Crazed, animalistic, and sexual women dominated his account.[205] These were women who had stepped out of their place, and thus, threatened social order.[206] A year later, Jules Simon wrote his account, juxtaposing the women who wanted peace, the "guardians of their homes," with those who wanted war. The warlike women were more frightening than men and incited the bloodbath when the army retook

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[199] Fuchs, 176.
[200] Ibid., 177.
[201] Gullickson, 2, 14-16.
[202] Kathleen Jones and Francoise Verges, "'Aux Citoyenne!': Women, Politics, and the Paris Commune of 1871," *History of European Ideas* 13, no. 6 (1991), 712.
[203] Jones and Verges, 717.
[204] Gullickson, 87.
[205] Beizer, 209.
[206] Ibid., 210.

the city, asserted Simon, who had served as education minister under the Versailles government.[207] Writing at the turn of the century, historian Elizabeth Latimer underscored the psychological disorder that led to social disorder. She said four of the female participants were sent to an insane asylum, "but doctors declared that nearly every woman who fought in the streets for the Commune was more or less insane."[208]

A precedent had been set with the women, dubbed *tricoteuses* (knitters), who participated in the Terror. They were depicted as knitting during the most radical and bloodiest events of the French Revolution. They came to represent revolution to those who feared it. Similarly, the *petroleuses,* the women accused of setting fires during the Commune, became its most hated symbol. Men led the Revolution, as they did the Commune, and the combatants were overwhelmingly male. But to critics of both revolts, women represented disorder.[209] The *petroleuse* was "outside the bounds of rational control, a control women were incapable of exercising."[210] She was "the unruly, sexually dangerous woman, the perpetrator of irrational violence. … The Commune itself was depicted as an incendiary woman whose raging passion threatened to burn up the systems of property and government that were the bases of social order."[211] Rumors about *petroleuses* cost hundreds of women their lives, according to historian Prosper Lissagaray, who supported the Commune. "Every woman badly dressed, or carrying a milk-can, a pail, an empty bottle, was pointed out as a *petroleuse*, her clothes torn to tatters, she was pushed against the nearest wall, and killed with revolver-shots."[212]

The men who joined the Commune were punished for particular acts or for their politics, but women were penalized just for speaking or acting in public. In the fighting and in prison afterward, some were raped, stripped, or humiliated in ways that men were not.[213] "To say that these women represented disorder itself is hardly a metaphoric statement when one considers the punishment that hundreds of women received for having transgressed the gender boundary."[214] The women's trials and punishments sent the message: "Stay home or die."[215]

The Gazette des Tribuneaux, which covered the court-martial of Louise Michel, noted: "Her temperament is as excitable as it was during the first days of her captivity."[216] In similar statements, the court clerk reinforced the idea that women were more emotional than men, and that could have disastrous consequences in the public realm, leading to the deaths of others. He made Michel sound fearsome and suggested she wanted to strike fear in others.[217]

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[207] Jules Simon, *The Government of M. Thiers, From 8th February, 1871, to 24th May, 1873*, Volume 1 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1879), 462-466.
[208] Elizabeth Wormeley Latimer, *France in the Nineteenth Century 1830-1890* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg and Co., 1892), 359.
[209] Gullickson, 69.
[210] Scott, 103.
[211] Ibid., 101.
[212] Prosper Lissagaray, *History of the Commune of 1871,* trans. Eleanor Marx Aveling (London: Reeves and Turner, 1886), 348.
[213] Gullickson, 180-181.
[214] Jones and Verges, 714.
[215] Ibid.
[216] Michel, 81.
[217] Ibid., 85.

Men guarded – and humiliated – the female prisoners at the Satory encampment. For example, even if a woman had a spare pair of underwear, she might have no privacy to change.[218] At Fort Boyard, women had to "perform their ablutions" under the eyes of male guards. One young woman "fainted every time she was forced to undress."[219] At the Grenier d'Abondance of the Western Railway, 800 women slept on straw, without being able to change clothes for weeks. The guards often struck them, "especially on the breasts." The governor in charge led bourgeois women to see the *"petroleuses."*[220] Was he pleasing the women of his class? Or was he showing them, perhaps not intentionally, what could happen if they got out of line?

Men may have felt they had license to harass the female prisoners, in part, because the women often were portrayed as prostitutes.[221] *Le Figaro* asserted that most were prostitutes,[222] and Latimer called them "women of the worst character."[223] Trying to defend the honor of the prisoners, Lissagaray said prostitutes were mixed with them to spy on them, but that all the prisoners were inspected, as if they were prostitutes. The women cried about being "sullied by these unclean hands."[224]

The Role of Fear

Although not planned as such, the Commune became a fight over the representation of women, picking up the themes of the nineteenth century. The century was fertile with fear. Note especially that fears of women "losing control" often were undefined fears, with no actual behaviors committed. Other people had different definitions of what it meant for a woman to "lose control." It could be anything from crying "hysterically" to fighting in the Commune.

Let me recap fears faced by women who ventured into unfamiliar territory, although, once again, I do not mean to imply that all of these fears were realized or were common. In the workplace, women faced sexual harassment, including forced sex. They might incur the wrath of male colleagues – or their own husbands – who thought they should stay home. They might hurt the status of their families or emasculate their husbands.

In the streets, or in public establishments frequented by men, they might get ridiculed, or even attacked if they were caught alone at the wrong time. They might be seduced, ruining their chance of a decent marriage. If they were at all attractive, they would feel the gaze of the men who made watching women a sport. They would feel the eyes of other women negotiating the changing social climate. They might be mistaken for a lower class, or even a prostitute, leading to great humiliation. They might be forced into prostitution. They might be captured and sold into sexual slavery. They might attempt to speak in public or take other public action, only to humiliate themselves in front of more experienced women or, more likely, the men who made up

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[218] Ibid., 78.
[219] Lissagaray, 410.
[220] Ibid., 411.
[221] Corbin, 21.
[222] Lissagaray, 397.
[223] Latimer, 359.
[224] Lissagaray, 412.

the great majority of audiences. If they participated in political conflicts, they could expect harsher punishment than men.

Some women feared their own actions. They might destroy their families or their nation by working. Their weak constitutions might fail them at work, or they might turn into manly monsters, unattractive to men. Their irrational, passionate, disorderly natures might get "out of control." Or their unconscious might seize control of their actions. They might inspire horrible acts in men, from rape to revolution.

Men feared women in the public sphere for all these reasons and more. Women who did wrong or were hurt raised questions about why their men had not controlled or protected them. Women who won jobs or rights made some men question whether their masculinity was eroding. Without women at home, men might watch their households fall apart, and their nation lose power.

Much historical analysis has focused on the maternalism of the nineteenth century. But it was not enough to praise women who stayed home with their children. Fear kept many out of the world of men. The more that men and women wrote and talked about their fears, the more the fears became embedded in the dominant discourse, lingering to this day.

The naming of agoraphobia in 1871 fit with the growing interest in psychology in the late nineteenth century. Considering how the public sphere had been gendered as male, it is not surprising that men diagnosed other men as pathological if they feared public participation. As women gained more access to the world outside their home, they encountered conflicting messages. Fears of "losing control" expressed by agoraphobic women today seem to echo a discourse that sounded throughout the nineteenth century. The discourse on women in the home continues to influence their sense of themselves. In the next chapter, I will discuss identity and resistance in relation to the home. Just as women fought behind the barricades in Paris, it is possible to imagine women resisting a hostile world from inside their homes today.

Chapter Four: The Creation of Identity in *Certificate of Absence*

For many women, home defines them. They may take their identity from the work they do there. They may turn their home into an extension of their selves. They may fill their home with possessions that represent them and their life. They may shun the world, or feel shunned, defining themselves in opposition. They may escape the travails of the world, or at least take a break at home, while they figure themselves out. At home, they may feel free to be themselves. But the identity they create also can prove stifling. They may feel confined at home, their life limited. They may feel they had little or no choice but to stay home.

In this chapter, I will explore ideas on home and identity, beginning with a close reading of Sylvia Molloy's *Certificate of Absence.* I read its fictional narrator as agoraphobic because she has many of the characteristics, most notably a fear of leaving her home. Molloy does not call her agoraphobic, however, nor have I seen any critics use the term. *Certificate* usually is described as a lesbian novel because its narrator writes of her relationships with two female lovers, even though the word "lesbian" is never used. Molloy, a lesbian literary critic, novelist, and scholar born in Buenos Aires, has said the novel includes autobiographical details.[225]

The novel was first published in 1981, and the setting seems to be contemporary. Much of the "action" occurs within the narrator's mind, as she writes within a rented room. One might say the setting is an interior space within an interior space. The narrator, who never names herself, met her lover Vera in this room, when Vera rented it. The narrator later sleeps here with Renata, one of Vera's former lovers. The room is tiny, dark, and unattractive. Such a place might indicate poverty, but there is no other indication of that. The narrator and her friends seem to come from an educated class with the money to travel. She writes, but readers do not know whether she sells her work, and no other job is mentioned. Economics do not trap her in this room. Nor does she have a partner, children, parents, or any one else who might confine her to this space.

Readers know that she has traveled between two cities, and that she grew up elsewhere. Only near the end of the novel do they find out that she grew up in Buenos Aires, and that the other two cities are Paris and Buffalo, N.Y.[226] Readers may imagine the room differently, once they discover it is in Paris, which has connotations of romance and sophistication. The narrator's descriptions of herself sound similar to those of agoraphobics. Her problems remind me especially of Seagrave and Covington, even though those two seem worlds apart from the sophisticated narrator. She longs to feel at home in physical places, as well as with herself and others. Instead, she feels detached and alienated. She seeks shelter and protection, limits and order. She struggles with her sense of self. She tries to pull together possessions, including her memories, into a coherent whole. But she finds that stability stifling, and needs to move on. Only at the end does she begin to know herself.[227]

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[225] Elena M. Martínez, *Lesbian Voices from Latin America: Breaking Ground* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1996), 164.

[226] Sylvia Molloy, *Certificate of Absence,* trans. Daniel Balderston (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), 116.

[227] Molloy, 119.

I will begin with the concept of shelter. She recognizes that people can shelter others; she has found shelter in the body of Renata,[228] and believes Renata's new lover offers Renata "shelter after leaving this room for good."[229] But the narrator does not find shelter in her own body. She is "ill protected by her ineffectual skin."[230] Agoraphobics, who are uncomfortable with themselves, often seek companions for reassurance.

Like other agoraphobics, the narrator also seeks shelter in places she can call her own. "She should feel stifled … but does not"[231] in the small room. She has "taken refuge"[232] in "the precarious shelter of these four walls."[233] Other rooms have felt like coffins,[234] but not this one, at least not at first. Perhaps it is because she is writing her life in this room. At the beginning, Molloy quotes Virginia Woolf. As Woolf advised in another essay, "A Room of One's Own," the narrator needs her room in order to write.

As a child, she also needed to be alone in small, enclosed spaces. She felt at peace, studying in her parents' dressing room, when she could close the doors.[235] She imagined turning the bathroom into a home where she would live undisturbed, and she envisioned her bed being enclosed in a little house of its own, secluded and private.[236]

Her longing to feel safe in bed was challenged by her father's practice of leaving the bedroom door half-open. She feared something scary might sneak in or someone might spy on her.[237] When she closed the door, her father would open it. Every morning, he kissed her and rearranged her bedding. She thought he was intruding, taking advantage of her, taking control away from her. But she also felt complicit, and she fantasized that they would have more dialogue, "both of them sure of their limits and their bodies."[238] She wants to control her own self and set limits for others, even ones whom she loves. The narrator uses the half-open door as a metaphor for her current situation. Writing about her childhood has "opened up a dangerous gap in her tale. Not an opening that would allow her to leave this room, but a crack through which threatening traces of the past may find their way in, are already finding their way in. She wants to go out"[239] to escape thoughts of the past.

Walls, closed doors, and enclosed spaces set limits for her as well as limiting the intrusion of others. This is consistent with an agoraphobic's desire for control and escape from others. On the first page, the narrator equates her room in Paris with limits:

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228 Ibid., 96.
229 Ibid., 89.
230 Ibid., 5.
231 Ibid., 6.
232 Ibid., 11.
233 Ibid., 36.
234 Ibid., 7.
235 Ibid., 117.
236 Ibid., 7.
237 Ibid., 55.
238 Ibid., 52-53.
239 Ibid., 55.

Shut up in this room everything seems easier because she can piece things together. By writing, she would like to find out what lies beyond these four walls; or perhaps she would like to find out what lies within them, in this closed space where she has chosen to write. She is often attracted to limits and emptiness.[240]

Part One, Chapter Six begins with one word: "limits," what she craves.[241] Renata lacks limits,[242] but that seems remedied, in part, by their conversations "within the confines of these four walls."[243] The narrator talks of them getting reacquainted "within these walls,"[244] as if the walls could define, contain, and regulate a relationship that seems out of the narrator's control. Later, she learns to force "limits: her own, those of her audience, and of the people she loves, even the limits of what she writes."[245]

Let me return to the narrator's attraction to emptiness, mentioned in the excerpted quote in the previous paragraph. Renata presents herself as empty,[246] and when the narrator meets Vera for the last time in the room, she sees Vera's emptiness.[247] Does the narrator welcome the openness, the vulnerability? Perhaps. More clearly, however, she views emptiness as a chance to claim ownership. An empty person can be filled with ideas, emotions, and stories that connect her to another, just as a home can be filled with possessions to claim the space. To ensure safety, agoraphobics claim spaces and companions.

The narrator talks about claiming space on the first page, when she says she has made the room her own by surrounding herself with books and lamps. They protect her, "marking off a space that she has always called her own without fully taking possession of it."[248] She wants "to fill it with herself in order to make it her own at last."[249] Her possessions are like masks, "from within, to free her from herself; from without, to protect her from others."[250] This seems especially apt for an agoraphobic who fears her self and others. The narrator also fills the room to disguise Renata's absence.[251] She leaves her room briefly each day, but often returns quickly, thinking she forgot something. "She feels part of her had been left behind and she needs to be in possession of her self."[252] In this line, the link between physical objects, such as misplaced keys, and their owner seems particularly strong. The possessions symbolize their owner. The narrator dreams of her own childhood home, "a house that has to be emptied" before a new family takes possession.[253] Similarly, when she leaves the room in Paris, she wants to leave few traces of herself.[254]

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[240] Ibid., 3.
[241] Ibid., 51.
[242] Ibid., 15.
[243] Ibid., 37.
[244] Ibid., 38.
[245] Ibid., 80.
[246] Ibid., 34.
[247] Ibid., 98.
[248] Ibid., 3.
[249] Ibid., 7.
[250] Ibid., 3.
[251] Ibid., 14.
[252] Ibid., 51.
[253] Ibid., 56.
[254] Ibid., 123.

In addition to metonymic possessions, experiences can tie a place to a person. To look at it another way, a home can contain or frame experiences. The narrator has chosen to rent the room in Paris to resurrect memories that she wishes to analyze. She wants to relive experiences by living where they occurred.[255] When she and Renata were lovers, they created "a space within these four walls that was only theirs."[256] To imagine Vera in Buffalo, the narrator must free "her of these four walls" in Paris.[257]

Ownership does not come easily to the narrator. In the quote from the first page, mentioned above, she talks about how she has never fully taken possession of any space. After a fight with Renata, she looks around the room at details that do not seem to belong to anyone, not even the bodies of the two women.[258] "She perceived a dark space, where things were not clearly defined from the outset and were never summed up, and told herself that one day she would try to describe that space."[259] Later, she says the walls "marked off a space that was not hers."[260]

Her feelings for her home and possessions parallel those for her body. She struggles with alienation and detachment, taking the mind/body split of the Enlightenment to extremes. She treats body parts, such as her hands, as possessions or sentient entities. She seems to view her body as housing her mind or her self, even though she does not necessarily feel at home there. As a child, she had trouble swallowing, and she had no sense of her body. She felt disconnected from it, and she felt no pleasure, pain, or sickness.[261] As an adult, she feels "uneasy in her skin, as in a tentative frame that does not fully give her shape."[262] She lacks "a stable self."[263] Agoraphobics often feel detachment and are unaware of normal bodily reactions.[264] "We see absolutely no connection between our minds and our bodies, and try to deny that our bodies even *exist* in any important way."[265] Like the novel's narrator, Seagrave also had trouble swallowing.[266]

The narrator changes near the end of the novel when she gets sick and pays attention to her body. "She wants to settle in that flesh completely, as one finally settles in a place that seems forbidden but to which one had every right."[267] She feels stable for the first time. She feels not only that this is her body, but that it is her self.[268]

For much of the book, she sees everything in fragments, including her self. If she cannot bring the pieces of her self together, she feels as if she will slip into madness.[269] Renata, too,

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255 Ibid., 6.
256 Ibid., 90.
257 Ibid., 29.
258 Ibid., 39-40.
259 Ibid., 40.
260 Ibid., 48.
261 Ibid., 18-19.
262 Ibid., 5.
263 Ibid., 9.
264 Seagrave and Covington, 28.
265 Ibid., 32.
266 Ibid., 34.
267 Molloy, 82.
268 Ibid.
269 Ibid., 16.

consists only of fragments.[270] The narrator knows her own voice only through writing, and she wants to use that voice to link the fragments of her life.[271] Both voice and skin (i.e., her body) "give shape to these fragments,"[272] but as mentioned above, her skin seems "ineffectual" until the end. Then, the narrator says she has tried to pull together her "shattered" and "lost face" by writing of herself in others, in her dreams, and in her childhood.[273]

Uniting fragments is not enough, however. For the narrator, they must be put in order. She craves order.[274] Whenever the narrator feels sick, she tidies her home, for fear that she will die and people will discover her disorderliness.[275] When she and Renata are lovers, she verbally attacks Renata at night in the room, creating a "forbidden space" that separates them, but then she restores order each morning. While Renata goes out each day, the narrator stays home, trying to order her life.[276] She eventually finds a place for all the emotions she experienced with Renata, as if emotions were physical possessions that could be put away on shelves. She tries to find a place for Vera, with enough distance to protect herself.[277] In Vera's home in Buffalo, the couch is askew, and the narrator wants to bring order to the home, and presumably, their relationship.[278] She thinks her own apartment in Buffalo mirrors the city, in its disorder and decay.[279] Agoraphobics often think they must impose rules upon themselves, and yet those rules can become overwhelming.[280]

The narrator creates order to stave off madness, or the appearance of madness. "She learned as a girl to control the foundering feeling, to deny anything that could carry her over into disorder, excess, madness."[281] "Madness haunted her as a child," most notably in the figure of her uncle Arthur, who may have "died mad." When her father exhibits panic, she fears this is a sign of impending madness.[282] As an adult, she dreams of her dead father struggling with a "huge headless woman" who embodies madness.[283] Agoraphobics often have childhood encounters with "crazy" people. Seagrave and Covington write: "The fear of insanity haunted both of us as children and we each grew up believing that losing one's mind was a fate worse than death. The fear of going crazy, being institutionalized and ostracized from society seems more ominous for agoraphobics than for less inner-directed individuals."[284]

The narrator rented the room in Paris after living in hotels. She wanted "more permanent quarters,"[285] but not permanence. The room is "a place of transit for transitory loves."[286] The

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[270] Ibid., 92.
[271] Ibid., 23.
[272] Ibid., 21.
[273] Ibid., 102.
[274] Ibid., 10.
[275] Ibid., 77.
[276] Ibid., 40.
[277] Ibid., 27.
[278] Ibid., 32.
[279] Ibid., 30.
[280] Seagrave and Covington, 30.
[281] Molloy, 16.
[282] Ibid., 15.
[283] Ibid., 118.
[284] Seagrave and Covington, 29.
[285] Molloy, 6.

original Spanish title of the novel, *En Breve Cárcel,* which might be translated as "brief imprisonment," reinforces the idea that her time in this room will be short.

The Spanish title also suggests imprisonment. I have discussed above how the narrator found refuge in her room, but she also will increasingly talk of it in negative terms. It is often described as a place from which she wants to escape, but cannot. This is typical of agoraphobia, as I described in my second chapter. Early in the novel, the narrator acknowledges that entering the room involves risk, just as leaving it will.[287] She calls the room a place of penance, in which she will exorcise the past.[288] She also refers to it as a theater, where she is watched. "Besides, she herself feels that she cannot leave."[289] The fear of being watched also harks back to her childhood fear of the half-open bedroom door. She imagines the rented room becoming more like a cell, with a naked bulb hanging from the ceiling and bars all around.[290] She regrets her decision to rent this room, laden with memories.[291]

The room has a large window, and she occasionally watches the action outside.[292] Despite her fears and compulsions, she likes this outside world. "She feels different when she closes the door and leaves these four walls behind. But she does not go out, cannot go out."[293] Note the image of the closed door. As a child, she longed to close her bedroom door, to shut out others. As an adult, she wants to close the door on her inner world, but cannot overcome her fears of the outside. At the end, she starts going out more, as if she were rehearsing her departure. But she goes out at night, when there are fewer people to see her. The narrator notes that the city is empty at night, and she feels she can possess it more easily; and as I have discussed before, possessing space has never come easily to her. This refers back to her urge to make space her own and her dislike of being watched, common feelings for someone with agoraphobia. She also has grown tired of holding on to memories, again equated with "things." "She is driven only by the desire to leave these four walls that now hold so many things." In her room, she analyzes, but not in the street: There she acts on impulse.[294]

It is not enough to leave her room. She talks of destroying it, as if that were the only way to escape the thoughts that torment her. She talks "so that these four walls would crumble."[295] She discusses her writing as "her refuge and prison. The four walls that collapsed yesterday have today formed again around her as she waits and remembers. She seldom leaves the house."[296] Later she spells out why she came to this room – to come to terms with her identity, her desires, and her past. "She wants to decipher what she was and still is, wants to break out of these four walls where she has shamelessly projected her yearning and where she has ruthlessly buried her

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[286] Ibid., 3.
[287] Ibid., 7.
[288] Ibid., 12-13.
[289] Ibid., 97.
[290] Ibid., 98.
[291] Ibid., 105.
[292] Ibid., 48.
[293] Ibid., 52.
[294] Ibid., 122.
[295] Ibid., 44.
[296] Ibid., 51.

memories."[297] She recognizes the desire "to crumble and have this room with everything in it crumble with her, to destroy herself so as to achieve further destruction." She fears this path is mistaken, but does not know what else to do.[298]

Others question her seclusion. After she cuts her arms, perhaps in a suicide attempt, "someone came to take her away from this room,"[299] implying that it is not healthy for her to remain alone, dwelling on difficult memories. Later, a friend invites her to his country home, which seems a "safe" way of "breaking out of her seclusion."[300] Like a cat, she cautiously explores the new territory.[301] She decides it would have been safer to stay home,[302] even though she now finds her room "stifling,"[303] a description she denied earlier.[304] The visit leads to a dinner with Vera. To attend, the narrator "has had to tear herself from her room."[305] Later, Renata teases the narrator, imagining her shut "in a house surrounded by high walls and guarded by fierce dogs and [arranging] for her groceries to be left on the doorstep."[306] That sounds like an agoraphobic's dream house.

As the novel comes to a close, she prepares to leave, still not knowing where she has been or where she is going.[307] She says the room has fulfilled its purpose.[308] It is "now useless."[309] Similarly, she knows she will not return to her childhood home in her writing.[310] At the end, she is in the airport, a place of transit, just as she once described her room. She is alone and frightened, but she has her writing and can find herself in it.[311] She is prepared to do without a place or a person to define herself.

The ambiguity of *Certificate* allows it to be read in different ways. To me, however, the narrator writes in order to make sense of her self and her life. She secludes herself to make writing easier and to feel safe during a difficult time. As her understanding grows, so does her desire to return to the world. She learns how to do more than deconstruct; she can find herself in her writing.

Identities Tied to the Home

From my reading of the novel, I want to move into a discussion of women, home, and identity, with help from Iris Marion Young. Agoraphobic women are informally identified by their fear of leaving home. As I discussed at the end of Chapter Two, women may get labeled in

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[297] Ibid., 94.
[298] Ibid., 122.
[299] Ibid., 44.
[300] Ibid., 61.
[301] Ibid., 62.
[302] Ibid., 61.
[303] Ibid., 67.
[304] Ibid., 6.
[305] Ibid., 68.
[306] Ibid., 81.
[307] Ibid., 117.
[308] Ibid., 94.
[309] Ibid., 123.
[310] Ibid., 112.
[311] Ibid., 125.

therapy or name themselves agoraphobic, based on writing such as this thesis. But it is not surprising that many other women identify with the home, considering so many women spend so much time there. As in the past, women continue to do most of the household chores or hire other women to do the work for them.[312] "Few tasks are more like the torture of Sisyphus than housework, with its endless repetition," wrote philosopher Simone de Beauvoir.[313] Many women embrace a group identity as "homemakers" or "housewives," proud of their tie to the home. Beauvoir said the housewife eliminates disorder but creates nothing, not even her own individuality. She gives up her identity to create one for the man of the house.[314] "She ensures … the continuity of the home, seeing to it that the doors are locked. But she is allowed no direct influence upon the future nor upon the world.[315]

Feminists of the second wave talked of home as a cage, trap, prison, or site of fear and abuse.[316] In addition to the drudgery of housework, they pointed out how violence in the home has been kept quiet, because of the division of the public and private spheres. In other words, what happens in the home is often considered a private matter. The feminists' quarrel was with the patriarchal home, however, not the concept of home itself. Women did not lose their identities if they had ways to establish it other than housework. Some feminists wrote of their own homes as "shelter and security."[317] In fact, the women's movement founded "safe houses," where victims of domestic violence could go, reminiscent of the safe houses for runaway slaves along the Underground Railroad. In *Certificate,* the narrator's room serves as a safe house. It is her writing – and fears – that require her to stay home for long hours, not chores. But she recognizes that this shelter, like a safe house, is temporary.

Postcolonial feminists also have questioned the conventional home. They criticize the construction of comfortable homes at the expense of other people. This can be meant literally: To build, furnish, and maintain homes, well-off people take the labor, land, and resources of poorer people. Thus, building a home or longing for a lost one can be seen as imperialist.[318] In a metaphorical sense, people also may construct homes at the expense of those they exclude. Political theorist Bonnie Honig says home provides a false sense of safety, obtained by privilege. Women may feel safe from less-privileged people who seem dangerous.[319]

But homes do not have to be reserved only for the privileged. One can imagine a world in which everyone has a home. It is possible to feel at home, or to long for a home, that is no more than a rented room, as in *Certificate.* I agree with Honig that homes can provide a false sense of security. Certainly, women get beaten, raped, and robbed there. But Honig seems to forget gender in her discussion of class. Women may want to lock their doors, not against those with less privilege, but those with more: The men who might attack them. Other groups have experienced attacks and seek safety in their homes. For example, feminist theorist bell hooks

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[312] United Nations, *The World's Women 1995: Trends and Statistics* (New York: United Nations Publications, 1995), 106.
[313] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), 504.
[314] Ibid., 504.
[315] Ibid., 480.
[316] McDowell, 88.
[317] Ibid., 72.
[318] Young, 135.
[319] Bonnie Honig, "Difference, Dilemmas, and the Politics of Home," *Social Research* 61, no. 3 (Fall 1994), 586.

describes her terror as a child, walking through a white neighborhood to reach her grandmother's home.[320] That home could not shelter hooks from all racial strife, of course, but a little shelter is better than none. Attacks also may come from groups that are not dominant, as in conflicts between African and Korean Americans.

Not all attacks are physical. People may want to shut out those who might judge them. For the thin-skinned, a house can be "an extra skin, carapace or second layer of clothes" that "can hide and protect."[321] Or, as poet Anne Sexton said: "Some women marry houses. It's another kind of skin."[322] Think of the novel's narrator, who needed shelter, having found none in her own skin.

Belonging and Exclusion

Some people stay at home, not to exclude others, but because others have excluded them. Literary critic Elena Martínez sees the rented room in *Certificate* as central to a theme of "cultural and emotional exile," symbolizing the narrator's marginality and exclusion from a repressive society. To be inside can "be in the realm of the unspeakable," invisible.[323] The narrator's growing sense of being trapped reinforces the idea that she has been forced into exile by her sexuality, Martínez says.[324] Martínez sees the small room as a metaphor for the closet,[325] and the fact that the narrator rents, not owns, it shows her dispossession.[326] But I question whether the author intended the narrator's exile to stem only from her sexuality. In the novel, other lesbians own homes, in which they feel comfortable. There is no indication that the narrator hides her sexuality, which is the usual meaning of "in the closet," nor does her interest in women seem to trouble her or others. I agree that people may feel exiled by their sexuality, but this novel implies multiple issues, as opposed to one answer. Politics and/or her writing may have forced the narrator to leave Buenos Aires, for example. Her fears that people will judge her crazy or her inability to draw boundaries between her self and others also may contribute to her exile. People may have multiple reasons for feeling that they do not belong in society.

Being outside society can give people space to establish their identity.[327] Whether or not the narrator of *Certificate* felt forced from society or chose to remove herself, she needed to create a space for herself.[328] Honig has a different perspective, perhaps because she focuses on the privileged while Martínez writes of the dispossessed. Honig says people cannot retreat from those they exclude as other. A person is defined by others. Clinging to the idea of home may require the repression of differences, even within the person's own self. Honig wants to

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[320] bell hooks, "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance," *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 41.
[321] Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones, eds., *About the House: Levi Strauss and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 2.
[322] Anne Sexton, "Housewife," *All My Pretty Ones* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962), 48.
[323] Martínez, 36.
[324] Ibid., 50.
[325] Ibid., 47.
[326] Ibid., 51.
[327] Ibid., 36.
[328] Ibid., 50.

give up on a dream of a place called home, a place free of conflict and struggle, a place – an identity, a private realm, a form of life, a group vision – unmarked or unriven by difference and untouched by the power brought to bear upon it by the identities that strive to ground themselves in its place.[329]

Her critique applies to people of privilege, who have more freedom to forget about difference and conflict than do people with less power.

Philosopher Morwenna Griffiths offers a way to understand both sides of this argument: Individuals create their own identity, but they do so in connection with the communities they accept or reject, and the communities in which they belong or from which they feel excluded. Identity remains in flux, as individuals and communities change.[330] Thus, people may need space to understand their identity, but they cannot reach that understanding apart from their ideas of others in society. A lesbian, such as the novel's narrator, may need space apart from heterosexist society to define herself, but that does not mean she can forget that heterosexuals exist. If "lesbian" is part of her identity, she is defining herself as part of one group (lesbians) and in contrast to another (heterosexuals). The danger, as defined by Honig, would come when heterosexuals separate themselves from others, whom they render invisible.

These issues – the safety of the home, the exclusion of others, the creation of identity – have a bearing on organized political activities. Honig calls dreaming of home a form of nostalgia. It signifies either withdrawal from conflict or an attempt at order, both of which are impossible.[331] She wants resistance and agency "that resist the seductions of home."[332] But home does not have to be a permanent escape; it can be a temporary respite for people gathering strength for the next fight.[333] Home also can be a site of political resistance;[334] it can be an act of defiance to set up a household that does not conform to the dominant culture. It also can be an act of resistance when people, such as agoraphobics, refuse to participate in a world where they are not welcome, as I mentioned in Chapter Two.

Historian Bernice Johnson Reagon uses home as a metaphor for the restrictions of identity politics, specifically a sisterhood that bounds what it means to be a woman. In difficult times, people may feel the need for a nurturing and separate space. In this space, they can understand themselves and their desires for the world.[335] But problems occur in deciding who can enter and who to bar. "There is no hiding place. There is nowhere you can go and only be with people who are like you. Give it up."[336]

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[329] Honig, 579.
[330] Morwenna Griffiths, *Feminisms and the Self: The Web of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 93.
[331] Honig, 586.
[332] Ibid., 579.
[333] Young, 161.
[334] hooks, 42.
[335] Bernice Johnson Reagon, "Coalition Politics: Turning the Century," *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology*, ed. Barbara Smith (New York: Kitchen Table, 1983), 358.
[336] Ibid., 357.

Postmodernists argue that "you" cannot always be "you," either. People cannot "draw borders for the self." They cannot expect security, stability, or unity, even in their personal identity.[337] Some postmodernists see the concept of home as a longing for such a fixed identity.[338] An example is Marcia Stephenson, a professor of Spanish and women's studies, who says the narrator of *Certificate* desires a stable, unified self, but cannot sustain it. The narrator continues to pull apart fragments of her life and reconfigure them to form a provisional identity.[339] Thus, the struggle for unity and regulation takes the form of refuge and prison.[340]

Although I agree with Stephenson's analysis, I would underscore the suffering associated with this search for self, as I think Molloy does in the novel. Jane Flax, a feminist psychotherapist as well as theorist, chastises postmodernists who cast aside the notion of a cohesive self without understanding the anguish of people who have little sense of themselves. People need a core self with continuity and coherence, allowing them to establish boundaries between themselves and others, reality and illusion. Flax can critique concepts such as "reality" philosophically, but says people need to function with some boundaries.[341] She sees patients who lack a core identity and "the fragmentation of experiences" seems like "a terrifying slide into psychosis." She helps them reconcile with their self-estrangement.[342] This sounds like the novel's narrator, who seeks limits and order out of fear of madness, and who comes to feel at home in her body and her self at the end.

Political theorist Kathy Ferguson understands that people who have suffered may want "secure residence in a stable subjectivity, a home." But maintaining a cohesive self that never changes requires the imposition of limits and order. Emotions and experiences that do not fit must be discarded.[343] To resolve this problem, she suggests a mobile subjectivity, which has "continuities and stabilities" but flows among different locations.[344] Mobile subjectivity seems fitting for the novel's narrator, who has lived in diverse cities, who has held different perspectives, and who is on the move as the novel ends.

People who have traveled distances – whether geographical, temporal, or psychological – need "a solid common place" to house their memories, Molloy says. "The most frequent form of that common place of memory is of course the most obvious – the family home." It becomes "a shelter for memory."[345] Remembering becomes an act of possession, but for "the dispossessed

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[337] Young, 158.

[338] Ibid., 148.

[339] Marcia Stephenson, "Lesbian Trajectories in Sylvia Molloy's *En Breve Cárcel*," *MLN (Modern Language Notes)* 112, no. 2 (1997) [on-line journal of the Johns Hopkins University Press], 253; available from Web Luis; accessed 6 June 2001.

[340] Ibid., 256-257.

[341] Jane Flax, *Thinking Fragments: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and Postmodernism in the Contemporary West* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 210.

[342] Ibid., 218-219.

[343] Kathy Ferguson, *The Man Question: Visions of Subjectivity in Feminist Theory* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and Oxford: University of California Press, 1993), 165.

[344] Ibid., 166.

[345] Sylvia Molloy, *At Face Value: Autobiographical Writing in Spanish America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 169.

… the sanctuaries of memory are tenuous."[346] In *Certificate,* the narrator can be seen as dispossessed. She feels distance, detachment, and alienation from the subjects of her writing: her childhood and her romantic relationships. These memories are sheltered, to use Molloy's words, in her family home and the rented room. The narrator often feels as if she possesses nothing and no one, not even her own body. To repeat Molloy's quote from above: "Her sanctuaries of memory are tenuous." As a child, the narrator imagined herself secure in small places not really her own. As an adult, she takes refuge in a "place of transit," a room she does not own.

The narrator uses possessions to claim space. For Young, filling a home with possessions that a person maintains is not merely the drudgery of housework, as Beauvoir described, nor is it necessarily the imperial acquisition or nostalgia that Honig decries. Instead, Young links possessions to memory, as Molloy does. Traditionally, women have preserved family and individual histories, in part, by preserving the artifacts of the home.[347] At home, hooks says, people can affirm and preserve their identity against a hegemonic culture. She talks of black women preserving black culture inside the home, creating a safe space where black people can affirm each other and heal.[348] Preservation entails remembrance, which differs from nostalgia. "Where nostalgia can be constructed as a longing flight from the ambiguities and disappointments of everyday life, remembrance faces the open negativity of the future by knitting a steady confidence in who one is from the pains and joys of the past retained in the things among which one dwells."[349]

Home materializes identity because home contains the things that support bodily habits and personal narrative.[350] Identity is a process as people acquire new things, rearrange or throw out the old, and tell and remember stories. Thus, identity is not fixed, merely anchored by home in a continuity of time.[351]

> House, body and mind are in continuous interaction, the physical structure, furnishing, social conventions and mental images of the house at once enabling, moulding, informing and constraining the activities and ideas which unfold within its bounds. … If people construct houses and make them in their own image, so also do they use these houses and house-images to construct themselves as individuals and as groups.[352] … Because both body and house constitute the most intimate everyday environment and often serve as analogies for each other, it may sometimes seem unclear which is serving as metaphor for which – house for body or body for house.[353]

Young says all people should have some space they can call their own, in which they feel physically safe, have privacy, and can safeguard the things that embody their lives.[354]

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[346] Ibid., 170.
[347] Young, 151.
[348] hooks, 42.
[349] Young, 154.
[350] Ibid., 149.
[351] Ibid., 151.
[352] Carsten and Hugh-Jones, 2-3.
[353] Ibid., 43.
[354] Young, 161-164.

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For agoraphobics, the discussion of home and identity raises questions: Have they lost their identity, are they sheltering it, or are they recreating it? Are they accumulating wealth, indulging in nostalgia, or preserving memories in their homes? Are they excluding others or have they been excluded? Do they want to escape conflict, are they resting before returning to the fight, or are they making a stand where they live? Do they want an identity that does not change or a location from which to change? Agoraphobics will have different answers, but by asking these questions, I hope to challenge agoraphobics to see their actions within a political framework.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

The question of how society has created agoraphobia in women has been threaded throughout this thesis. Intertwined with this idea of social construction has been the role of agency in agoraphobia. I discuss these two ideas more specifically in this chapter, using some examples from my life, before laying out my desires for the future.

When I say society has created agoraphobia, I refer to discourse as well as actions. In this sentence, some would lop off "actions," arguing that people understand actions only through language, and thus, it is sufficient to say that discourse creates agoraphobia. I see the logic of that argument, but I talk about actions (material practices) because I want to remind readers that it is not just that the dominant discourse has told women their place is in the home. Men also have beaten women for staying out too late, they have raped women caught alone, they have refused to hire women or paid them less than men, they have harassed women in the workplace, they have looked down upon the women of the streets, they have ridiculed women who did not know their place, they have shut them out of politics, and so on. My argument parallels philosopher Donna Haraway's idea of a material-semiotic actor who lives in the tension between the semiotic and the material. Haraway understands the power of discourse, but does not want to give up talk of material practices or agency.[355] Because of material consequences, most women learn to restrict their activities when they are alone and/or in the public sphere. Agoraphobic women represent the extreme end of the continuum – they have learned the lesson too well. Their actions have been shaped by the actions and material practices of men and male-centered discourse. "There's nothing like the symptoms of agoraphobia for keeping a woman in her place. Let me tell you. Nothing."[356]

Agoraphobic women are unlikely to say they stay home for fear of being beaten, raped, harassed, and so on. But as I argued in Chapter Two, these possible actions create a climate of anxiety that can be disastrous for women who are more prone to panic than others. As a child, for example, I was molested at a public swimming pool. As a young adult, when I feared public places, I never panicked over the possibility of rape, but I have always restricted my activities to lessen its possibility. Being on guard has become a part of my life, hardly worth comment since most of my female friends restrict their lives similarly. But I cannot imagine that these everyday fears do not contribute to my general anxiety or my fears of "losing control." Taking a rape defense class, as suggested by the commentator on a previous paper on agoraphobia, lessened my overall anxiety, at least for a while.

I support teaching women to defend themselves, enforcing laws against discrimination, providing greater economic security, preventing and prosecuting harassment and rape, and other means to make the public realm less hostile to women. But these responses are doomed to fall short because the private and public spheres have been constructed around gender. Even if tolerated and protected, women will remain outsiders in the world outside their homes. "It is perhaps less clear than at any time in the past that women can simply 'occupy' a domain so

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[355] Donna Haraway, "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies: Determinations of Self in Immune System Discourse," *Feminist Theory and the Body,* eds. Janet Price and Margrit Shildrick (New York: Routledge, 1999), 208.
[356] Mairs, 103.

thoroughly grounded in their non-residence."[357] Therefore, I argue there must be a radical revisioning of what the private and the public entail.

Central to that revisioning will be a change in discourse. I have discussed how women have been told that their place is at home, that home is a haven, that the streets are dangerous, that their bodies are weak, that they are emotional and irrational creatures who could "lose control" at any time, that their madness can endanger themselves and others, that they must be careful not to humiliate themselves or damage their reputation, that they must be attractive to men but not too attractive, and that it is risky for them to be alone. In Chapter Three, I noted how these messages strengthened in the nineteenth century in Western society, but anyone who doubts they still exist should listen to agoraphobic women, who echo these messages today. They have internalized these messages; they repeat them to themselves. Therapists no longer diagnose women as hysterical, but many women diagnose themselves that way. Male leaders rarely talk of the need to control women, but many women are desperate to control themselves. Societal discourse has created fears they now claim as their own. It has told them how to think about themselves. It has become part of their identity.

Where do male agoraphobics fit into my theorizing? I suggested reasons for the gender disparity in Chapter Two. In regard to discourse, however, societal messages are complex and, at times, contradictory. Like women, men also can be influenced by messages that home is a haven, that the outside world is dangerous, that people cannot control their unconscious impulses, and that they might lose status if they humiliate themselves. I claim that men do not develop agoraphobia as often as women or with as much severity, however, because women get hit harder with these messages, women face harsher consequences for transgressions in the public sphere, and men receive more criticism if they stay home for long periods.

The discourse must change, and it appears to be in the process, but I expect remnants to remain long after I am gone. Think of how long the association between women and witchcraft has persisted, centuries after the last woman was executed for it in the West. These days, I would argue that many women accept a gendered division of the public and private spheres, even though they suffer for it. Other women benefit, however. These women may have little work to do or they may prefer work in the home, for instance. They may enjoy high status, as constructed against lower-class women. I would assert that men also have reasons not to change the discourse. As society now stands, men face less scrutiny in public than do women, men have less competition for jobs, they can serve as escorts and protectors to women who might otherwise not need them, and they can find women to maintain their homes and raise their children. Some men do want change. They may want to help women they love, for example, or they do not want to be breadwinners or protectors. But men who fight the dominant discourse can expect attack, just as women can. "The members of dominant groups stay dominant by maintaining or colluding in structures of fear and violence. They, themselves, are kept in line, too, by the fear that such structures will be turned on them."[358]

I do not discount the possibility that biology plays a role in agoraphobia. Some people may be more prone to anxiety and panic than others. But "anxiety" and "panic" are themselves

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[357] Landes, 206.
[358] Griffiths, 142.

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constructed by language. Some people may be more likely to associate certain physiological reactions with panic than with "excitement," "anger," or "arousal." As a roller coaster makes its ascent, two people have pounding hearts and butterflies in their stomachs, but one feels thrilled, eagerly awaiting the plunge, while the other panics, desperate to get off the ride. As I argued in Chapter Two, women have less experience with these bodily reactions in public places than do men, and many women have greater fears that they will "lose control" in situations like this. When agoraphobics talk of "losing control," becoming "hysterical," or feeling humiliated, they rely on concepts constructed by their culture that they then interpret. A woman may think it would be unbearably humiliating to vomit on a roller coaster, although it is not inherently so.

Additionally, I claim there is another way that discourse has created agoraphobia: through the psychological categorization of emotions and behaviors. "Anxiety" and "panic" were used in general discourse before the mental health field appropriated them as clinical terms. But one might argue that agoraphobia did not exist until it was named in 1871. There were people who feared public places before then, but they were described in different ways. Foucault has theorized how discourses on madness have created subjects.[359] I would apply his ideas to agoraphobia. Psychological writing did not just name the disorder; it also describes agoraphobics. Thus, the diagnosis defines people. They become agoraphobics. Therapy takes the process a step further. What patients say in therapy, and what therapists say to them, builds identity over time. What they learn about agoraphobia blends with other aspects of their identity, from where they were born to what they watch on television.

In Chapter Four, I discussed identity in regard to social construction. As with all definitions, people who are diagnosed as agoraphobic are defined in relation to others. They are compared to people who share similar fears and behaviors and they are contrasted with people who do not. To put it another way, they may be abnormal in comparison to people who are not agoraphobic, but may be normative in the "community" of agoraphobics. As with many groups, the rules of inclusion change and can prove confusing. The symptoms associated with agoraphobia are diverse enough that mental health professionals have difficulty crafting an all-encompassing definition. That raises the question: What if "agoraphobia" was abolished? Getting rid of an ill-fitting category that defines so many women in terms of individual pathology might seem like a good idea.

But I would rather have an ill-fitting category, a category that people must continue to question, than to be invisible. Group identities have political utility. In this thesis, for example, I have found "agoraphobic" to be useful shorthand, as I have tried to redefine what it means to be an agoraphobic woman. In *Certificate of Absence,* the author's refusal to categorize her narrator raises questions about categories. But readers and critics seem to question only the categories with which they are familiar, such as "Latin American writers" and "lesbians." The agoraphobic aspects are reduced to metaphor, if they are mentioned at all in literary criticism. I want to be seen as more than a metaphor.

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[359] See *The History of Sexuality* and Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

Agoraphobics risk invisibility because they participate so little in the public sphere. Because they have such a strong fear of humiliation, they also are unlikely to volunteer their symptoms. As Nancy Mairs explains:

> For years I not only had no label for my disease, but I assumed that I alone experienced it. No one ever spoke of symptoms like mine. But then, I never mentioned my own symptoms. … Pierced by shame at my own weakness, I denied them, disguised them, compensated for them until most of my energy was spent on subterfuge. To this day, if I have to refuse or cancel an activity because I am having an agoraphobic attack, I will make up some excuse … rather than admit that I am gasping and sweating and shitting in terror of having to live in the world.[360]

Agoraphobics get so little attention now that I wonder what would happen if they no longer had a name. Would they disappear behind closed doors?

People can be visible, but misrepresented, especially when others control the means of representation. The women of the Paris Commune wrote and spoke publicly, for example, but the victors' depictions of the women dominated accounts for many decades. Agoraphobics who do not seek treatment may still have representations foisted upon them, such as "lazy" or "crazy." Misdiagnosis is another form of misrepresentation. In the mid-1960s, when Mairs developed agoraphobia, many mental health professionals were unfamiliar with it. She endured anti-psychotic drugs and electro-convulsive therapy in a mental institution. After she was diagnosed as agoraphobic, she received treatment better tailored to her problems.[361] Even when given the "correct" diagnosis, agoraphobics can feel misrepresented. When I was diagnosed in the late 1970s, agoraphobics were almost always depicted as dependent, a representation I resisted.

Too much of the discourse on agoraphobia has been produced by people who have not experienced it. I call for more agoraphobics to represent themselves in writing, as Mairs does, and in discussions, including group therapy and consciousness raising. I urge them to discuss, not just individual problems, but societal issues and political action. They should ask why they, and not society, get diagnosed as pathological. They must challenge discourses from earlier eras on the need to control women and to shelter them from the outside world, as Mairs does. They can rewrite their lives, as the narrator in *Certificate* does.

At the end of Chapter Four, I suggested questions that agoraphobics can ask themselves, in relation to the home. I wanted to encourage them to examine their actions in a political context. I can answer these questions for myself: I have tried to shelter and recreate my identity, using home as a location from which to change. I have used possessions to preserve memories. I have felt excluded, and I have rested at home in between battles. I can assume much of the same for Molloy and Mairs.

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[360] Mairs, 102-103.
[361] Ibid., 101-102.

The answers will vary for other agoraphobics, but I fear most are not political, and they do not want to think of identity or agency, which can be painful subjects for people who live circumscribed lives. Nevertheless, they may still be preserving their memories, histories, and cultures. Some will recreate their identities over time, but they may not realize it until they have enough perspective for reflection. Retreating to the home may keep some alive for a later fight, as it did with Mairs, who developed a feminist consciousness when she was older. Some may do nothing but survive, but the survival of oppressed people can be resistance enough.

Resistance does not seem to be a popular concept among therapists. For example, Seagrave and Covington stress acceptance, urging people to stop resisting recovery.[362] The goal of most therapy is to get the woman out of the home so that she can participate in the public sphere. She has to change so that she can bear society; society does not have to change. Although some mental health professionals study and desire social change, the majority emphasize the individual. Even those who want social change may be constrained financially. Whoever is paying the bills – an insurance company, the government, an employer, or the patient – may want the patient to become functional as soon as possible. Why worry about issues that seem beyond the patient's control?

Feminist therapists who criticize therapy, such as Flax[363] and Ussher,[364] would retain it for those who want it, as would I. I also agree with Young[365] that all people should have a place in which they feel safe. I want women to have safe passage through the public sphere. But I want more than this. I want agoraphobics to turn the tables on those who call them troubled. I want agoraphobics to trouble the rest of society. Their existence should raise questions about how the private and the public can be redefined so that no one has to seek a safe house in a hostile land. I want women to stop fearing themselves. It is time for more women to "lose control."

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[362] Seagrave and Covington, 96.
[363] Flax, 218-219.
[364] Ussher, 306.
[365] Young, 160-164.

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