MA in Construction and Representation of Cultural Identities

Queering Motherhood: An Exploration of Maternal Ambivalence and Queer Spaces in Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park*

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5 IGUALTAT DE GÈNERE

For my mother.

And for my mother's mother.

And for hers.

And hers.

And hers…

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To them, I dedicate this little work of mine in the hope they like it.

Abstract

Title: Queering Motherhood: An Exploration of Maternal Ambivalence and Queer Spaces in Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park*

This study aims to explore the huge influence that maternal ambivalence plays in Rachel Cusk's novel, *Arlington Park*, and analyse how the experience of moments of disorientation in space – or epiphanies – leads each female protagonist to re-define her identity. Maternal ambivalence is "the experience shared variously by all mothers in which loving and hating feelings for their children exist side by side" (Parker 1). The conception of maternal ambivalence as the ugly, forbidden face of motherhood even led Erica Jong to be "booed of the stage by a feminist audience" (Berlant 237) during a conference in which she read "a series of poems that celebrated pregnancy and birth." (Berlant 39) Thus, Cusk's focus on maternal ambivalence offers a queer perspective of motherhood that forces the "[destabilization of] the existing social relations, institutions and discourses" (Gibson 6). Simultaneously, Cusk's introduction of epiphanies, a series of disorientating moments experienced by her female protagonists, offers them the chance to re-orientate their life paths and opens the door to a new reading of *Arlington Park*, using Sara Ahmed's concepts of disorientation, queerness, and re-orientation. In order to analyse the viability of these two interpretations, a close exploration of the main novel is carried out by referring to several secondary sources, such as: Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (2006), Andrea O'Reilly's *Matricentric Feminism: A Feminism for Mothers* (2020), Margaret Gibson's introduction to *Queering Motherhood: Narrative and Theoretical Perspectives* (2014), Lauren Berlant's *The Female Complaint* (2008), or Rozsika Parker's *Mother Love/ Mother Hate: The Power of Maternal Ambivalence* (1996), among others.

Keywords: feminism, motherhood, maternal ambivalence, space, queer domesticities.

Index

Introduction

Recently I read a quote by Nicola Jane Hobbs that said: "Growing up, I never knew a relaxed woman," and after reflecting on it, I found it to be unfortunately true. When, some years ago, we found out about my father's cancer, it all fell on my mother's shoulders. It wasn't that my father didn't want to help, he simply couldn't. His body rebelled against him; it wouldn't let him do anything. At that time, at the very beginning, I had just started university and my parents did everything in their power to let me live a "normal" existence, so I grew up, matured so to speak, never knowing a relaxed version of my mother, or a guilt-free version of my father. After his demise, however, I became the main "caretaker" – a word commonly used by the general medicine practitioner which I have come to furiously resent – of the house. Being an only child, my mother, whose body now had no reason to constrain its physical and emotional pain anymore, in my eyes assumed the shape of the baby whose health I need and must look after. Perhaps this was the main reason why I became so interested by maternal ambivalence. Of course, I am not a mother, but I do feel like one, sometimes. Having to take care of my mother, like Maisie Carrington and her children in *Arlington Park*, I feel as if the roles have reversed and, as much as I love my mother, there are certain moments in which I cannot help but abhor her. I guess that is why I understood the concept of maternal ambivalence right away, why it pulled me so intensely towards it, why I feel the demanding urge to defend and bring forth its existence.

Maternal Ambivalence, however, was not what first draw me to Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park*. If anyone is to blame for this is one of my best friends who, knowing that I had just read – and thoroughly enjoyed – *Winter* by Ali Smith (2017), recommended me "anything written by Rachel Cusk." I went to the book shop and started looking at her work, a title stood out immediately: *Arlington Park*, I liked the sound of it. I searched for

the plot on Goodreads and *BAM!* Virginia Woolf was mentioned; apparently, *Arlington Park* is considered to be a sort of rendition towards Woolf by the author, who also wrote an article about her in *The Guardian*. Well, that settled it. I would buy *Arlington Park* and give it a try. Before exiting the Goodreads app, however, I noticed a review – with lots and lots of "likes" – in the comments section. The person who had written it declared that Rachel Cusk, the author, must hate her female characters because "the novel is a prolonged rant against motherhood as experienced by the well-off" whose protagonists are "well-educated, wealthy women, with husbands who provide for their every need, living in a leafy suburb. They have choices." *They have choices*. That last part has stayed with me since then. I got angry with the person that wrote that comment, I still am. It is probably the main reason why I decided to focus my master's thesis on *Arlington Park*. I want to reply to that comment with strong, proven arguments, to declare that everyone, no matter their circumstances, has the right to complain. Choosing something or someone does not necessarily entail *knowing* that which is chosen. For instance, one of the main problems that *Arlington Park*'s female characters face is their realization of having unconsciously chosen an inherited way of living or, as Sara Ahmed calls it, a *lifeline*. That is something my father taught me: the importance of following one's own path, the indispensable need to question everything and re-orientate oneself when one's ground quivers, the vital essence of *turning* and *looking* at what is, not only reachable and in front of us, but that which, due to the path we have taken, has been made unreachable. To my father's teachings I owe the idea of analysis how the diverse female protagonists of *Arlington Park* try to re-define their identities by queering the spaces they inhabit. Therefore, the main object of this thesis is both to analyse the role of maternal ambivalence in *Arlington Park*: how mothers are subjected to violence when their state of ambivalence is not only rejected by society but thoroughly denied, and how they

manage to re-define their disintegrating identities by going through moments of disorientation – or epiphanies – which offer them the chance to queer their lifelines; that is, to deviate from what they had chosen or inherited and follow their own, unique path.

Both topics of maternal ambivalence and spatial disorientation have been studied before, but I have yet to find an article that analyses *Arlington Park* under those perspectives. Evidently, Rachel Cusk's work is haunted by motherhood and its effect on women. Several of her novels not only touch on the topic but treat it as one of its main points. *Second Place* (2021), for instance, is a novel in which, among other things, Cusk analyses the relationship between a mother who reconnects with her daughter after having abandoned her. Many excerpts of *Second Place* (2021) capture perfectly Cusk's conception of motherhood. There is a moment in which the protagonist realizes how her daughter, Justine, has become "somewhat of a stranger to [her] in her time away" (*Second Place* 71) and how "change is also loss, and in that sense a parent can lose a child every day, until you realize that you'd better stop predicting what they're going to become and concentrate on what is right in front of you." (*Second Place* 71) Another excerpt declares that true love cannot exist between parent and child because "true love is the product of freedom, and [she is] not sure a parent and a child can ever have that kind of love, unless they decide to start over again as adults." (*Second Place* 119) There are other instances of how much the subject of motherhood preoccupies Cusk, of course. But perhaps, the one that stands out the most is her most controversial work up to date: *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother*. First published in 2001, *A Life's Work* is an autobiographical account on Cusk's experiences with pregnancy, giving birth and taking care of her first daughter. Cusk's portrayal of motherhood in this memoir aroused severely polarized reviews: people either loved it because they had had a similar experience or hated it and called Cusk a narcissistic, bad mother. *A Life's* Work, serves as a clear inspiration for *Arlington*

Park. In fact, there are several episodes depicted in *A Life's Work* that appear reproduced almost exactly in *Arlington Park*. Such is the case of the chapter entitled *Loving, Leaving*. In order to illustrate this, I will reproduce a whole fragment, which describes Cusk's reaction to her daughter's crying after not having slept for many hours:

> For perhaps the twentieth time in ten hours I feed her and put her down in her cradle. I am not asking for a solid stretch: I merely require a few minutes to myself gluing part of my face back on and saying things aloud in front of the mirror to see if I've actually gone mad. At this point I don't just *want* her to go to sleep. She *has* to go to sleep otherwise I don't know what will happen. My position is at once reasonable, utterly desperate, and non-negotiable. I put her firmly in her crib. I remove myself to the bathroom and close the door. There is a long moment of silence that is both blessed and threatening. It is filled with my command, and with the possibility that her requirements will not yield to mine, that she continues to exist beyond the limit of my patience, my love, my ability to own her. Then, next door, she cries. I begin to shout. I don't quite know what I am shouting, something about it being unfair…GO TO SLEEP! I shout, now standing directly over her crib. I shout not because I think she might obey me but because I am aware of an urge to hurl her out of the window. She looks at me in utter terror. It is the first frankly emotional look she has given me in her life. It is not really what I was hoping for. Her withdrawal from me fills me with shame; the sleep itself, so longed for, is unbearable. I want to wake her up, proffering love. Now that she is still and quiet my love is once more perfect, and she is not even awake to see it. I drag myself to the telephone and sob. *I shouted at her*, I confess. In the end I confess it to several different people, none of whom gives me the absolution I am looking for. Oh dear, they say. Poor baby. They do not mean me…As a mother I do not exist within the forgiving context of another person. I realize that this is what *being in charge* is. (*A Life's Work* 56-57)

This fragment, though replaced with fictional characters, appears in both Amanda and Maisie Carrington's chapters in *Arlington Park*. Maternal ambivalence is, thus, still the ugly, unacceptable face of motherhood. Although it has recently received a bit more of attention (Lucy Jones, for example, publishes *Matrescence: on the metamorphosis of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood* later this year), the concept of maternal ambivalence appears to have remained curiously static, as there seems to be a severe lack

of contemporary fiction and non-fiction on the topic. Such is the main argument of Rozsika Parker, whose works, *Torn in Two: the experience of Maternal Ambivalence* (1995) and *Mother Love / Mother Hate* (1996), which have been immensely useful in the elaboration of this thesis. Although Parker's books do not focus on any literary work, she writes about her real-life incidents while working as a psychoanalyst and uses her patients' experiences to illustrate her theories. Seeing how real-life women suffer maternal ambivalence has created in me a sense of community that has calmed down many of my own private worries.

On the other hand, in terms of the analysis of the role of space, *Arlington Park* has awakened a bit more of interest. Armelle Parey's "Space Matters in Rachel Cusk's Arlington Park" (2013), for instance, focuses on the role that space plays in Cusk's novel. However, rather than analysing the potential disorientation offered by the diverse epiphanies that each female protagonist goes through, Parey focuses on the similarities between *Arlington Park* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), such as the Victorian separation of the private sphere and public spheres. There is no link, therefore, to how these epiphanies can be read as moments of disorientation or how the text can be interpreted through the perspective of Sara Ahmed's work. Consequently, by connecting both maternal ambivalence and queer spaces, I believe that this dissertation contributes to the further elucidation of the meaning behind Cusk's work, and particularly *Arlington Park.* The main focus of my thesis, then, is to explore the huge influence that maternal ambivalence plays in the development of Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park,* and the diverse ways in which each female character, through their different experiences of disorientation – or epiphanies – try to re-define their identities by seeking possible, queer spaces or alternative lifelines to anchor their existences to.

After investigating on these topics, I have become thoroughly invested in them. I find myself wanting for more, looking for more. There are infinite perspectives yet to delve into in this novel. Many aspects of my analysis of Cusk's novel have suffered cuts due to a lack of sufficient space and I have been forced to summarize theories which I otherwise would have liked to delve into. The evident link between violence and the rejection/denial of Maternal Ambivalence, for instance, was a major topic in a previous version of this thesis. However, despite how relevant and essential this topic was to my study, I decided to cut it out because, in my opinion, it deserves an analysis of its own. Therefore, if the possibility arises, I would have like to continue my study of violence and Maternal Ambivalence, as well as its links to the concept of the body, the construction of gender and, their social and political relations. Really, when one truly likes something, the possibilities are endless.

1. PART ONE: Contextualising Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park*

1.1. Violence and Maternal Ambivalence

In 1986, prominent figure of the second-wave feminist movement Erica Jong was booed out of a stage by a feminist audience during a reading in which she quoted poems that "celebrated pregnancy and birth while affirming a woman's strength and power." (Berlant 237) To say anything positive about motherhood was to push every one of their emotional buttons. I left the stage devastated and confused…This experience plunged me into one of the deepest depressions of my life (and did, by the way, end my career as a nursing mother). (Jong as qtd. in Berlant 237)

Reflecting on this event, Lauren Berlant defines feminism as a "vital space of communal political consciousness," (238) where women can express themselves without reserve, but which also includes the "colonizing effect that patriarchal fantasies have imposed on the female self-consciousness" (238). These fantasies have led to a generalization and reduction of women into the construction of "woman," even in spaces where women were supposed to feel safe and free of judgement, such as feminist circles. Therefore, it is unsurprising that, during Jong's reading, women felt outraged and horrified when confronted by the discovery that "not all of them are alike," that one's version of feminism may differ from that of another's. Up to that moment, it had never occurred to them how, in their sameness, they could still be different; how their understanding of motherhood could include different interpretations or *ambivalence*. Women should not be repelled by those who define their relation to "masculine modes of authority" (Berlant 253) in terms that make no apparent sense to them. It is essential to remember that, while feminism is a "vital communal space" where women must feel free express their relationship with reality, not "all women have the same 'imaginary relations

to the real'." (Berlant 253) When feminism was supposed to act as a space where female expression happens without fear, the movement revealed its capacity to be yet another way of exclusion. To solve this, Berlant proposes that feminism should be led away from understanding women as a constant, unique identity and assume the deconstruction of the patriarchal invention of the female essence: "what we share is a history of oppression by patriarchy," declares Berlant, "what we do not share is our relation to these systems of oppression." (253) It is crucial that feminism allows the existence of ambivalence if it intends to become the "vital space of communal political consciousness" that Berlant describes.

While it is true that feminism seems to have allowed certain flexibility in the identity of femininity over the past decades, motherhood is still somehow a taboo topic, and the acceptance of maternal ambivalence has "remained curiously static." (Parker 21) Certainly, ambivalence is not an idea that is easily understood nor accepted. It implies embracing contradictory feelings at the same time, and if it is extrapolated to motherhood, an already conflictive topic, it becomes positively difficult. In her work *Mother Love / Mother Hate* (1996), Rozsika Parker defines maternal ambivalence as a condition characterized by "mixed feelings, a complex and contradictory state of mind, shared variously by all mothers in which both loving and hating feelings for their children exist side by side." (17) Although controversial, maternal ambivalence is a recurrent theme in literature, even if the concept is not termed as such. Sylvia Plath's tendency to reflect her biographical experiences in her writings, for instance, parallels Cusk's autofiction style, making Plath a perfect example of how maternal ambivalence has silently besieged women for a long time. Plath's work is marked by her ambivalence towards motherhood after her daughter's birth. In her journals, before getting married and becoming a mother, young Plath frequently expresses her absolute fear of infertility, her terror of not being

able to bear children. Poems such as “Barren Women,” or “The Munich Mannequins,” both published in Plath’s poetry collection book *Ariel* (1965), illustrate this period. “The Munich Mannequins,” for example, shows Plath’s fear through its famous line: “perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.” All these poems, explains Alice Braun, are variants of the exploration of her terror and fascination for infertility. Once Plath becomes pregnant, motherhood “becomes associated with creativity,” (Braun 5) but her poems also express Plath’s fear of “delivering deformed (‘Thalidomide’) or stillborn (‘Stillborn’) babies” (Braun 6). After becoming a mother, although her marriage ultimately did not lead her to abandon poetry, she often lamented how deeply her life has changed. Marriage, which “she conceived of as a creative alliance,” however, has turned into “domestic partnership (…) burdened with caring tasks” (Braun 7). Now, in her journals, Plath finds herself discovering how her “mental space had shrunk” (Braun 7) since becoming a mother. In her poem “Child,” she expresses this ambivalence: while, as a mother-poet, she would like her child to be a “source of beauty and creative inspiration,” (Braun 7) Plath feels stuck “alone with [the child] in a desperately closed room from which she cannot escape.” (Braun 7). Plath’s ambivalence, thus, becomes clear with the poem’s structure: it starts with evident optimism, but as it progresses, “the lines become shorter, and the poetic voice seems to trail into nothingness.” (Braun 7)

However, even though Plath’s work has been analysed from the perspective of her relationship with her daughter, issues related to childbirth or (early) motherhood have often been regarded as not “serious” enough and best “addressed behind closed doors, as belonging to the feminine and therefore the domestic space.” (Braun 4). It seems, then, that the separation of spaces according to one’s gender is still prevalent nowadays, despite the temporal gap between Plath and Cusk. In her study of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), Toril Moi highlights how Beauvoir already identified, back in the

1940s, the ambivalence to which women were and are still subjected to regarding motherhood. This fundamental contradiction is "specific to women under patriarchy*"* (Beauvoir qtd. in Moi 75) and is invariably accompanied by a particular form of violence that strangles mothers into silence. Patriarchy, thus, subjects mothers to a covert sort of violence in the guise of the ideal mother; that unreachable being who radiates love and forgiveness. In Linda Zerilli's analysis of Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Zerilli argues that it is not women's biology that which entraps them, but "what has been made [of it] and the meanings that it carries in patriarchal society." (138) The image of the maternal ideal constructed by patriarchy causes a violent split in the mother's identity: while she experiences feelings of ambivalence towards her children and domestic life, she is confronted with what a good mother is supposed to feel. The violence generated by the clash between external reality and inner, psychological reality assaults the mother's subjectivity, breaking her in her effort to *become* the maternal ideal. The assumption that her feelings of ambivalence are unnatural to motherhood cause the mother to suffer from guilt, shame and/or depression, among other highly distressing emotions.

In the 1940s, psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott famously coined the supposedly reassuring term of "the good enough mother." According to Winnicott's theory, the capacity of being a "good enough mother" was given by nature or not, it simply could never be acquired: "Mothers who do not have it in them to provide good enough care cannot be made good enough by mere instruction (…) There are those who can hold an infant and those who cannot." (Winnicott qtd. in Parker 58). Winnicott's philosophy appears to be rather in line with the Victorian understanding of motherhood: the "natural" is associated with mother love, not mother hate. Ambivalence, according to Winnicott, cannot be "natural" to mothering, then, making it the "unacceptable face of motherhood." (Parker 58). According to Zerilli, Beauvoir's conception of maternity is that of a

patriarchal fantasy that builds maternity in a way that "limits and constrains women's freedom: The images of invasion and resistance that mark Beauvoir's account of maternity should, thus, be seen as a graphic depiction of this enforced [patriarchy-defined] maternity." (138) As a consequence, Beauvoir's imagery of violence is the depiction of "mother" as a subject fighting against the imposition of "mother" as an object. Beauvoir's understanding of motherhood, then, implies that women will live their lives in constant tension if their feelings of ambivalence are not accepted as natural to motherhood, rather than unnatural. In *Arlington Park,* Cusk's interest lies with action and choice, and how they limit women's freedom in ambiguous and contradictory fashions. *Arlington Park*'s female characters suffer from the aforementioned split in their subjectivity which, under Cusk's command, will be challenged and brought into light.

1.2. Queering Motherhood, Queering Space.

In her book *Queering Motherhood in Narrative, Theory and the Everyday* (2014), Margaret Gibson begins her introduction by quoting Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2006):

> Heterosexuality as a compulsory orientation reproduces more than "itself": it is a mechanism for the reproduction of culture, or even of the "attributes" that are assumed to pass along a family line, such as whiteness. It is for this reason that queer as a sexual orientation "queers" more than sex, just as other kinds of queer effects can in turn end up "queering" sex. It is important to make the oblique angle of queer do this work. (Ahmed 161-162).

Some twenty years ago, Michael Warner formulated a similar theory: "Het[erosexual] culture thinks of itself as the elemental form of association, as the very model of intergender relations, as the indivisible basis of all community, and as the means of reproduction without which society wouldn't exist" (xxi). Thus, queering turns things we usually take for granted and flips them upside down. It makes them unpredictable and uncooperative. Of course, as Ahmed explains, queering is related to sex and gender, but

it is also deeply related to disruption. It "questions any notion of faithful reproduction (…) or even of predictable notions of variation (…) [it] brings the political and the social into a self-conscious connection with the intimate." (Gibson i). When we "queer" motherhood, then, reproduction, culture, sexuality, and embodiment are turned upside down, re-defined, re-observed, re-imagined.

"Motherhood," explains Gibson, "is such a closely monitored and prevalent identity that there is ample territory for 'queering' it". (5-6) In this case, "queering" not only focuses on an individual's identity, but also moves towards a re-consideration of other ways in which relationships, communities, sexualities and genders might work. "Queering motherhood can therefore start where any of the components of 'expected' motherhood are challenged." (Gibson 6) The elemental nature of the social construction that is motherhood, as well as its understanding as an "institution", implies that many – if not all – of its alternative versions are promptly dismissed. Therefore, as Andrea O'Reilly highlights, maternal ambivalence is "often judged in diametric terms, as either good or bad," (18) readily discarding it. However, contemporary mothers seem to be demanding a reinvention of the definition of motherhood, one that does not "sanitize" it, but treats it genuinely, resting on "thoughtfulness and authenticity" (O'Reilly 18).

Parker suggests that the mother's "complete engagement with all her feelings," including frustration and suffering, may promote a "more authentic connection with her child," (154) contributing to her proposal that maternal ambivalence is a way of creation in that it allows new ways of defining and living motherhood. In this context, Parker's term "creation" may very well serve as a synonym for "queering" motherhood, since the object of both actions is to unsettle and challenge the inveterate construction of the mother. Therefore, by directly tackling maternal ambivalence in her work, Cusk might be trying to bring it to the public sphere, to public knowledge, so that the construction of

motherhood is finally seen as what it is: a narrative, a construction, an ideal. By bringing ambivalence to light, Cusk is attempting to *queer* motherhood. To do so, Cusk relies on what Keith and Pile refer to as "spatiality; that is, the ways in which the social and spatial are inextricably realized one in the other." (Keith and Pile qtd. in Parey 6) She starts the novel by introducing the reader to a stage-like world: at the closing paragraph of the first chapter – wholly dedicated to the description of Arlington – the rain that falls is said to make a thunderous noise, like "the sound of uproarious applause," where a "dark audience (…) clapping their hands" awaits the beginning of the play (*Arlington Park* 5). It is a circular description of space: it begins and ends in the same place, with people sleeping while the rain falls. This circularity emphasizes the relevance that space has in Cusk's novel. Parey remarks on the importance of Cusk's decision to "anchor her novel at the periphery," (3) in a neighborhood from which men leave to go to work and the women and children stay behind. By choosing to stay with the wives, Cusk deliberately "elects to remain in the margins with the ones who are left behind," (Parey 3-4) not only in literature, but in space. Through her decision, Cusk manages to stress the separation of Arlington Park from the rest of the world, as if Arlington Park was the "feminine" sphere and the surrounding space, the "masculine" sphere. In this sense, Cusk is revisiting the Victorian doctrine of the separate spheres, according to which men belonged to the public sphere whereas women were relegated to the private, domestic sphere. This also allows Cusk to introduce her protagonists as a far echo of the Victorian female characters whose sole purpose was to get married. Through marriage, these women obtained a *place* in society, a *house* which was to become their whole perception of the world and their own value. The Victorian heroine *had* to get married to gain access to a space, although, in most cases, it belonged to her husband. In calling back to the Victorian period with her distribution of space, Cusk is linking her protagonists' lives with the Victorian

understanding of woman, femininity and motherhood. In a sense, she seems to be telling the reader: look how outdated our current understanding of motherhood is! It hasn't changed since the Victorians!

In order to represent the tragic dimension of her protagonists' ordinary lives, Cusk emphasises their acute perception of space in reference to their sense of identity. She allows them to move *only* around a fairly restricted number of places: their homes, shops, a park or on their way to or back from delivering their respective children to school. If such restriction of space were not enough, her female characters are almost always accompanied by their children, so that their subjectivity is further put into question. These spaces, by simply being within the limits of Arlington Park – which, as has already been explained, represents the private, domestic, feminine sphere –, are already embedded with the meaning that the heteronormative society has given them. Arlington Park embodies that which society has declared is the correct way of living. Correct can also be referred to as "right." In other words, Arlington Park is the *right way of living*; that is, it is orientated towards the right direction, or the "straight" one. Therefore, according to this analysis, those who inhabit Arlington Park share, by extension, unknowingly share its orientation. They have been unconsciously directed, or given a direction, in life.

But, what is this "direction"? According to Henri Lefebvre in *The Production of Space* (1974), "we are concerned with what might be called a 'sense' (…) a direction that may be conceived, and a directly lived moment progressing towards the horizon." (423). In consequence, if space has a direction, that is, if space is orientated, then what one sees depends on one's point of view. In other words, what is visible is what lays within the scope of vision of a certain orientation. This direction, however, is generally received as "a gift," and concealed in the very moment it is given. It is, in a sense, inherited. Such as the case of those living in Arlington Park. Space, then, results in something that is shaped

and shapes at the same time, showing things to be "in line" or "out of line," here or there, left or right. According to what Ahmed explains in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), if space is always orientated, then "inhabiting spaces 'decides' what comes into view" (14). The essential thing here is that such "decision" is not consciously made, but inherited, given "as a matter of what happens to be 'in front' of us." (Ahmed 14) What is "in front of us" – or "in line" – automatically excludes what is not in front of us, "out of line." Therefore, direction or orientation makes things available while, simultaneously, making other things unreachable. Therefore, if Cusk wants to queer motherhood by bringing it to the public eye, that is, to make it *visible*, then what she must do is force moments of disorientation upon her protagonists. When disorientated, bodies see and perceive space from another angle. It is as if the ground they stood in had turned and now, instead of being straight, is oblique or, as Ahmed says, queer. "To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things," (161) she declares. The protagonists' disorientation, therefore, will make visible other lines of existence – or lifelines – which may or may not include the acceptance of maternal ambivalence within its reachable objects. Disorientation is vital because it shatters the body's confidence in the lifeline it is inhabiting and prompts the possibility of change. Under this situation, there appear to be only two possible outcomes: "The body might be reoriented if the hand that reaches out finds something to steady an action. Or the hand might reach out and find nothing and might grasp instead the indeterminacy of air. The body in losing its support might then be lost, undone, thrown." (Ahmed 157) Cusk sets traps for the different characters which cause them to question things, to enter a sort of life crisis, so to speak. When these little crises happen, they lead to moments of revelation or "epiphanies" which, in turn, may help the protagonists to resolve their disorientation by either reaching for a new lifeline or not.

2. PART TWO: Exploring Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park*

Despite all female characters experiencing their own versions of maternal ambivalence and disorientation, I have decided to divide the five protagonists into three main sections: the first one focuses on those female characters whose epiphanies are more preoccupied with violence, maternal ambivalence, and domesticity; whereas the second one focuses on those whose epiphanies appear related to space and how women identify with space. The third and last section focuses on Christine, whose unique perspective is particularly complex to pin down and categorize, and whose exploration deserves its own section.

2.1. Violence and Maternal Ambivalence in *Arlington Park*

This section explores Juliet and Maisie's chapters, which focus on their definition of identity through domesticity, motherhood and the violence that these two concepts generate on their sense of self.

2.2.1. Juliet

When reading Juliet Randall's chapter, I cannot help but wonder whether the choice of the character's name was intentional. Did Rachel Cusk decide to name Juliet after Shakespeare's doomed heroine, murdered, one could say, by her male counterpart who famously climbed up her balcony to woo her? Is their similarity one of the reasons behind Juliet's affinity with literature, fairytales, books? Is that what makes Juliet call men "murderers"?

We first meet Juliet at night, in her sleep. We enter her psyche through her dream, her nightmare: she us grappling her hair desperately, searching for something living in it, embedded in it: a cockroach. She is horrified by its presence, by "the terrible knowledge that there [is] no way of getting it out" (*Arlington Park* 6-7). She asks her husband, Benedict, for help, but there is no reaction. Then, she wakes up. The "crawling feeling of

infestation" is still present, though there is no cockroach to be found. She studies her hair with care, but, still, there is nothing there. "Oh, the way it had greedily moved its legs!" she remembers. During the first hours of the night, before the dream of the cockroach, Juliet had woken to the thundering sound of the rain falling down Arlington Park. "It had made a sound like the sound of applause," and, for some reason beyond her understanding, Juliet felt terribly afraid: "she had felt the fear of something it was too late to prevent" (*Arlington Park* 7-8). Later, she dreams of the cockroach. Clara Hanson interprets Juliet's dream as a sort of Kafkian manifestation and identifies the cockroach with her status as mother (4). And yet, during her dream, Juliet explicitly asks her husband to help her, to relieve her of this *infestation* whose legs are stubbornly embedded in her scalp, and, like a fat tick, is *greedily* consuming her blood, her psyche, her essence through its disgusting moving legs. When recalling the nightmare, Juliet remembers how, instead of helping her, Benedict "had pitied her, but he had accepted her fate (…) He was glad it hadn't happened to him" (*Arlington Park* 7-8).

Juliet had been "a scholarship student and at one time Head Girl," (*Arlington Park* 8) she has a PhD., she is a teacher, just like her husband. And yet, the sensation of the greedy cockroach still infests her being during her woken reality. What has happened to her so that she feels infested, conquered, dominated like this? We are told that, since childhood, Juliet has had very long hair. She still has it, now, in the morning. She has "defended [it] against her mother's punitive, twice-yearly appointments with the hairdresser (*Arlington Park* 23)." She has shouted that she *liked* it, when her mother insists that it has nothing special about it, that its color is common, mouse-like. But then, it is not so much a matter of liking rather than defending her identity. She regards her long hair "as a kind of a symbol, a sign: it [is] the outward growth of the inner conviction she h[olds] about herself, that she [is] exceptional." (*Arlington Park* 23). Apparently, her

future husband loved her hair when they first met. He still loves it, Juliet says: her outward sign of her inner exceptionality. Several times in the chapter, we are told how he fingers her hair even though she tries to withdraw from him. His hands entwined in her exceptionality. Yes, he likes it alright, admits Juliet. He likes it so much that, slowly but surely, since they met and, later, got married, "he ha[s] climbed it, like the men in the fairy tale (…) to the top of the tower, *to Juliet's place,* and somehow he ha[s] made it more his place than hers." (*Arlington Park* 23, emphasis added) In this concise but incisive metaphor, Juliet tells us how her exceptionality has been slowly taken away from her, stolen from within her own psyche. Like Juliet, Benedict is a teacher. He works at a high school with problematic students who, thanks to Benedict's classes, attained remarkable results in their exams last year. Whereas Juliet, the exceptional, works part-time in a private school for girls. She did not detect him as a threat at first, but now, embedded in her hair as he is, sucking her exceptionality out of her scalp with his long, insistent fingers, Benedict feeds of her "future as a host of a giant cockroach." In Juliet's own words, Benedict "ran off their joint life as if it were a generator fueled by Juliet (…) All men are murderers…They take a woman, and little by little they murder her." (*Arlington Park* 11)

Why, then, would Juliet *choose* to marry and have children, one would think. In her novel, Cusk intentionally focuses on the ambiguity of life. She plagues her female characters' lives with ambiguities, "which lead them paradoxically to *choose* that which oppresses them," (Tang. 1) which splits their subjectivity and, thus, makes them feel alienated by the public rejection of ambivalence, of hating that which one loves, that which one has (apparently) voluntarily chosen: "That was how it had got her, this strange life; that was how it had reeled her in. She had forgotten she was a woman." (*Arlington Park* 36-37) Woman, Simone de Beauvoir once told us, *is not born* but rather *becomes*.

"A woman hundred years ago knew her life would be over the moment she got herself pregnant," (*Arlington Park* 36-37) says Juliet, almost laughing with acritude. In Virginia Woolf's famous long-form essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), she explains how women function as mirrors to men, as looking-glasses that are "essential to all violent and heroic action." (Woolf 28) That is why, according to Woolf, the inferiority of women is so essential to men, because women enlarge men's image by constructing them as the Other. If women – mirrors – were to tell the truth, if they were to show men their real dimensions, the figure in the looking-glass would "shrink," and how could they go on "civilizing natives (…) dressing up and speechifying at banquets," (Woolf 29) unless they see themselves "at least twice" the size they really are every morning, afternoon and evening, with their inferior reflection at home? How could Benedict go on "civilizing" his unruly students with their good marks, had he not occupied Juliet's place and diminished her exceptionality? If Juliet were to tell her truth, Benedict would shrink, like he does when she withdraws her hair from his touch. It is not, therefore, a completely voluntary choice that which leads Juliet to "get married and have children." As Beauvoir explains, "our body is both our grasp on the world, and it is an object in the world that subordinates us to species demands." (137) Thus, it is not biology what constitutes the problem for women, but rather "the meanings that it carries in patriarchal society." (Beauvoir 138) In the face of social pressure, who can throw the first stone and sincerely declare not to have done something because it is what was expected of them? "Maternity," argues Beauvoir, is not a biological destiny but a "patriarchal myth that posits women as fulfilled and completed through maternity." (138) Beauvoir's depiction of maternity as invasion and resistance portrays women's experiencing the rejection of their status as subjects, showing how the "reproductive destiny is constructed in patriarchal societies." (138) Therefore, it is not maternity in itself that asserts women as the fundamental Other, but

rather what patriarchy has constructed it to be: the myth of the "ideal mother." This causes friction and violence towards Parker's concept of maternal ambivalence, making it the "unacceptable face of motherhood." (Parker 49)

Cusk illustrates Juliet's ambivalence towards her domestic life through her feelings for her children: Katherine and Barnaby. This phenomenon, according to Parker, is called "projection." (65) Given that ambivalence is a complex concept to understand and explain in our culture, even by those who experience it, Parker suggests that, in many cases, individuals tend to "project" aspects of oneself onto other individuals. This, of course, is not limited to one's subjectivity, it also serves to identify elements of another person that we like or dislike and "place" them onto another being. According to Parker's theory, then, Juliet projects her own feelings onto her own children. Thus, the feelings of frustration, anger and violence she feels towards herself, or her situation, can be safely expressed.

In her book *Mother Love/Mother Hate* (1996) Parker writes that projection "provides a benign means of unconscious-to-unconscious communication between mother and child" (65) Indeed, in projection, mothers find a way to communicate their unconscious feelings towards themselves. A mother may, for example, ascribe characteristics to her children which she enjoys or admires in herself. Such is the case Juliet's daughter, Katherine. While she is a child, Katherine delights in her femaleness without restrictions nor boundaries of any kind. But as she grows older, the knowledge of being a girl/woman has, no matter how hard Juliet tries to protect her, to fall upon her. "Juliet had wanted to keep Katherine for herself," she explains when she recalls how it has "grieved her…to clothe Katherine's unfinished little body in uniform." (*Arlington Park* 27). Instead, Juliet is forced to surrender her daughter, "as though called upon to make a sacrifice to her own implacable gods." (*Arlington Park* 27)

> It was hard…to take the vigorous, joyful, wild body of Katherine and clothe it in school uniform. Until that moment the possibilities for Katherine had seemed endless. Katherine's femaleness had seemed like a joyful, a beautiful thing. It had seemed invincible, even in its half-formed fragility. She had not realized what she was. She had only delighted in it, in her female being. Now, thought, she was different. She knew she was a girl… Her soul was in training. They had told her what she was and now she knew. (*Arlington Park* 27-28)

In this case, Juliet projects her desired features – freedom, invincibility, joy, vigor – onto her daughter. And, being a Woman, she does not desert her when Katherine is forced onto knowledge, for Juliet too went through that process of taming and she knows can sympathize with her. Barnaby's case, though, is different. "One crucial factor in relation to the dynamics of maternal ambivalence," explains Parker, "is the mother's response when a child reminds her of its father." (80) Being Juliet's son, she inevitably projects onto him her husband's attributes. Therefore, her resentment, her anger, her frustration towards Benedict take form in her relationship with her son. Cusk even establishes a clear parallelism between father and son. When we first meet Benedict, he is naked and, later, reappears with a dressing-gown. When Katherine tells her mother that Barnaby refuses to get dressed, Juliet finds him "standing on his mountain, naked, with his dressing-gown cord tied around his head." (*Arlington Park* 28) Even their names are similar, both beginning with the letter B. "How punitively she yearned to have [Barnaby] in uniform, to have him straitjacketed!" admits Juliet, "when he played (…) it felt as if he were stealing something from her," (*Arlington Park* 29) just like Benedict steals her exceptionality from her. Melanie Klein writes that mothers experience so much dread in themselves that they are forced to employ "one of our strongest measures of defense…to project it. Hence perhaps the moments when mothers perceive their children as their malevolent opponents." (85) Juliet's anger towards Benedict is thus projected onto her son and she cannot help but see him as her opponent in every way.

During her first epiphany, Juliet feels heavy, like "she was full of the deposits of wasted days" (*Arlington Park* 36). She realizes that she has always been waiting for the promise of something exceptional to happen all her life. "She had expected to find it carefully, patiently, by a system of reward." (*Arlington Park* 36) When she met Benedict, she saw him as a prize, her first in her brilliant career of exceptionality. Her long, mousy hair promised it. It was inside her, this exceptionality, so, inevitably, it must come. "But when Benedict returned to work a week after Barnaby's birth, she realized she would be looking after him alone…With her sense of justice she expected that at some point the outrage would be detected and addressed, but of course it was not." (*Arlington Park* 37) Juliet's realization takes hold of her and cuts off her hair. At first, I was tempted to read this as an act of complete surrender. And yet, like Juliet, my sense of justice tells me that this is her ultimate act of resistance. While it is possible that the realization of her non-exceptionality has finally dawn upon Juliet, and, like the Brontës' mother, she hopes it is her daughter who succeeds, I also read her cutting of her hair as getting rid of the cockroach's means of domination. If there is no hair, the scalp is unprotected and there is nothing more to feed on.

Juliet's second epiphany comes at the end of her second chapter. On Fridays, such as the day in which the novel takes place, Juliet relinquishes her mothering and "wifing" duties to Benedict in exchange for an hour at her Literary Club. It is an hour in which Juliet chugs into "a siding of time" and gets to display her whole self, "in all her textured humanity," to her female pupils. She feels like, in her regular class hours, they see her partially. But during her Literary Club, it is as if she says "look at me," I am an "artefact of human drama, a sculpted piece of life, (…) I am what one day you might become." (*Arlington Park* 20) It is also during this hour that she makes her pupils read books like *Madame Bovary* or *Wuthering Heights*, as if preparing for the monster with a princely

figure that may come for their hair. During a discussion about this last novel, Juliet prompts her female pupils to be "different," to do what is not expected of them. At the end of the class, a girl named Sara asks her about freshly cut hair. Juliet replies: "you realize you're waiting for something that's never going to happen (…) Then in the end there isn't a next stage. This is all there is." (*Arlington Park* 166) Then, she tells Sara she hopes she does not end up like this, to which Sara, completely convinced, answers that she is not even going to have children, that "marriage is just another word for *hate*." (*Arlington Park* 167) Juliet smiles to herself, feeling her silent pain finally recognized. Outside the school, she suddenly feels filled with a sense of possibility. "All she needed was the chance of her Friday afternoons," (*Arlington Park* 167) a space of her own to step aside and re-orientate herself to who she really is. She considers her anger and wonders whether she could bend it a little, together with the rules of marriage, and tell Benedict that she cannot go on following the path they are making. She realizes she "has to love someone to say that. You had to be prepared to give, in order to ask for something in return" (*Arlington Park* 168). Finally, in the last stage of her epiphany, she sees a pair of swans, rising suddenly "from the dark folds, from the trees." (*Arlington Park* 168) She watches their glimmering, unearthly, while forms fly through the dark. Like a version of herself and Benedict, she watches them fly together, "side by side, beautiful and alive, exulting." (*Arlington Park* 168) In her last epiphany, knowledge comes to Juliet in the form of beauty. It is an ambiguous epiphany because, although she seems to take it as a chance for change, we do not know whether it does actually result into something new or not.

2.2.2. Maisie

In Maisie's chapter we see a reversal of roles in the relationship of mother-child, in which her two daughters occupy the role of the mother/parents and Maisie becomes the child. It

is also this infantile version of Maisie who, at the beginning of the chapter, still clings to her idealized memories of the "young love" that flourished between her and her husband, Dom, and mourns its decline through time. As the chapter advances, we witness Maisie's crisis and consequent epiphany, in which she seems to "grow up" and adopt a more adult version of love and life.

As Parker remarks, maternal ambivalence is intimately related to the mother's "capacity to know herself" and accept or, at least, tolerate those traits of herself that "she may consider less admirable" (17 -18). However, the acknowledgment of hating that which she loves is "acutely painful" and requires a certain level of maturity, as it implies the acceptance of an ugly aspect of oneself. Klein studies this phenomenon in her book *Love, Guilt and Reparation* (1998). Maternal ambivalence, then, according to her theory, is related to the "experience of adult love relationships" and describes how the "urge to put right" situations in which loved people have either been the inflictors of pain and destruction or have suffered them. "Reparation," thus, plays a "crucial part in the experience of being a parent." (Klein qtd. in Parker 18). According to Klein, parents – mothers, in this specific case – tend to repair their infantile grievances against their parents for frustrating their desires, together with feelings of hate and need for revenge. "All these," explains Klein, "we may undo in retrospect (…) by playing at the same time the parts of the loving parents and loving children." (Klein qtd. by Parker 18)

Early in Maisie's chapter, we learn that, while her husband is away, Maisie feels a sense of "paralysis" in time and compares herself with a fetus, feeling that the continuous awareness of her existence envelopes her "and hold[s] her suspended, like a fetus in its fluids." (*Arlington Park* 170) When Dom arrives, delivered from the world's "viscera," she experiences a vertiginous and "strange uprushing of time." (*Arlington Park* 170) This first parallelism sets the scene in which we are to read Maisie as completely

confined within her house and engulfed by the presence of her children, only to be relieved by the arrival of her husband. She herself admits that, although she suffers, she does pity her husband when he arrives: "he steeped in her presence, [the house] gave off its strongest atmosphere of sordid confinement." (*Arlington Park* 172) This imprisonment, however, is rapidly linked to her two daughters who, at certain times, embody her parents (who chastised her with a spatula) and, at others, embody her child self, whom she tries to compensate for all the suffering she endured. There is a specific scene in which Maisie seems to regress to her child self in her reaction to her daughters' behavior: "Earlier in the afternoon Maisie had thrown Elsie's lunchbox at the kitchen wall (…) Elsie and Clara watched her do this with a certain confused admiration, until she shouted at them: 'you're ruining my life! You're ruining my life!'" (*Arlington Park* 173)

She inevitably conjures the image of a frustrated teenager whose parents have forbidden to go out, or a little girl projecting her fury onto the first object within her grasp. According to Parker, a mother's regression into her child self or infantile state is activated "through the frustration of her needs and wishes (by her recalcitrant offspring)," but also because of how mothering mobilizes women to "re-experience in adulthood aspects of her own experiences in infancy" (168) After throwing Elsie's lunchbox at the kitchen wall, Maisie analyses her actions and confesses the sort of violence that her parents constantly inflicted on her:

> Maisie did not recall her own mother coming out with accusations of this sort: rather, her parents had organised their resentments into scheduled episodes of authorised violence, of a dispassionate, patronising kind. Maisie had frequently been chastised with a wooden spatula (…) she had been told that she was rude, or lazy, or naughty, or spoilt (…) levelled without a quiver that there was anyone to blame for it but herself. (*Arlington Park* 173)

Although it is not the kind of furious explosion that Maisie has enacted, her parents' conditional, selective love persecutes and tortures her to the point of regression.

Therefore, her throwing things at the wall can be another manifestation of her repressed furious child. There are times in which Maisie finds herself compensating her daughters for all the pain she had suffered as a child, as if she were projecting her child self onto them and caring for it, like Klein[1] suggests when she refers to the undoing of harm in retrospect. There are, however, other more dangerous times in which Clara and Elsie, Maisie's daughters, appear to her as "small, reincarnated versions of her parents;" people who had come to "constrain and criticize her." In those moments, Maisie feels besieged by the injustice of life, she perceives herself as a prisoner for life, constantly being the victim of her parents, and "violent feelings pour from her in a righteous torrent" that seeks an object "on which to make the mark of catastrophe." (*Arlington Park* 173 – 174) In this case, Elsie's lunchbox. Of both her daughters, Clara, the eldest, seems to be the one Maisie resents the most. In a scene in which the little sisters stuff one of Maisie's tights with their knickers to frighten her, once again it is Maisie who, by believing it is a snake, reacts like the child, and Clara, going down the stairs, naked, to retrieve the stuff tight, acts like the calming, almost accusing mother: "Is this the snake?' she said. She looked disappointed. In her hand she held a pair of Maisie's tights. One of the legs was strangely swollen. There was a knot tied high in the thigh (…) Clara came back up the stairs. 'I thought there might have been a real snake as well," she said despondently." (*Arlington Park* 184 – 185)

In that moment, Maisie is going up the stairs, ascending heavily, "like a penitentiary road," (*Arlington Park* 175) feeling that she will have to endure this punishment forever. It is in these moments in which her daughters seem to embody her parents, that Maisie feels like they seem both to "disregard her feelings and to accuse her of something," (*Arlington Park* 174) like she felt when she was hit with the spatula. She

[1] See Parker 18.

describes her parents' love as "limited and discriminatory," (*Arlington Park* 174) which in her view crushed any possibility of becoming anything she would have wanted to become, instead of leaving her guessing who she really was. Parker quotes Harold Searle's particular concern with the mother's impulse to regress to her child self in front of her children. According to Parker, he believes it is good that the children witness their mother's feelings as well as "their agency and capacity to repair." (Searle qtd. in Parker 178) However, as Parker remarks, the love of a child is different from the love of an adult – or at least its manifestation. Therefore, it is of crucial importance that the mother's regressions towards childhood does not become malign. In other words, real "damage is done if [the parent] denies the child's perception that [they] are furiously angry." (Parker 178) In her description of her parents, it seems that this is precisely what they did to Maisie when she was a child. However, given their rejection to "be put on trial for things that happened long ago," (*Arlington Park* 188) Maisie is left to believe that if an adult blames her parents, it is *her* problem, not *theirs*. Still, Maisie does blame them. "Whenever she saw greed and carelessness and monstruous self-will she blamed them." (*Arlington Park* 189) She blames them for the damage and wreckage they had done in parts of herself, but also for any sort of damage she sees in the world: like the shopping mall in Merrywood or the melting snows of Mount Kilimanjaro. Echoing Juliet's "*murderers!"* Maisie calls them "'*Destroyers! Wreckers!*" (*Arlington Park* 97)

Therefore, it is not only her children who make her regress towards her child self, but any show of greed and selfishness. When she goes away for two weeks to care for her ill sister, she has the feeling that, in a way, she is "rushing to her own bedside, much as she sometimes cared for her child self through her children." (*Arlington Park* 178) Even her husband seems to have taken on the role of mother or "nurse" since their move from

London to rural Arlington Park. This becomes evident with Maisie's rejection of cleanliness and order, both traits that, according to Parker, characterize mothers:

> Mothers stand for order; children create chaos. Nowhere is this more evident than in the feelings generated by cleanliness and tidiness (...) The orderliness of her house is somehow assumed to be an index of her capacity to care for her children. But while it must be tidy, it must not be oppressively neat. Mothers are ideally expected to maintain an environment characterized by cheerful, warm, childish chaos. They are expected to tidy up and thrive in anarchy. (169)

Maisie likens her relationship with her new kitchen to that of a "a person with whom she ha[s] tried to get on and failed: barely tried, so impatient was she to settle into her enmity" (*Arlington Park* 175). In the kitchen, the children seem to be in charge of "nurse" Dom, who hangs his jacket on a chair and starts his shift once he gets home. In her regression to her child self, Maisie's "appetite for cleanliness and order" is simply something she does not feel any more in her "penitentiary circuit." (*Arlington Park* 175) In her discontent, she tries to show her imprisonment to Dom during her stay in her sister's house, making him responsible for everything that she feels constrains her. But when she comes back, Dom is in "possession of the map of her unhappiness," (*Arlington Park* 180) so that any complaint would be refuted and disregarded, like with her parents'.

At the beginning of her epiphany, Maisie revises her life and considers what it could have been had they stayed in London instead of moving to Arlington Park. She pictures herself in a succession of endless purple sunsets, with, perhaps, even Clara, who would not have "disturbed the symmetry." But then, she could not possibly live without Elsie. Elsie, her second daughter, who "was her root, her past self!" (*Arlington Park* 192) And yet, it is precisely this past self who makes her feel "strangulated, almost overcome by fear of falsity and death" when Elsie tells her she looks beautiful. She cruises down the stairs like a "great ship of war" (*Arlington Park* 191) and is arrested by Dom's suitcase

and the memories that come with it. Once, though, she had loved Dom. She had loved him deeply. Like a teenager remembering her first infatuation, Maisie recalls how Dom had flung his briefcase down as if like a sign of himself and embraced her in the "warm violet light" of a summer evening in London. She weeps next to Dom's briefcase because she realizes she does not love him anymore. Now, every time Dom comes home, they are like strangers who need to make great efforts to communicate with each other. She feels like they are in a theatre stage, like "people in an advertisement, or a play," (*Arlington Park* 170) a "penitentiary loop," and that she has a role to play which she refuses to comply with. She wonders why Dom keeps returning home when he could just leave. During a conversation with Dom, Maisie, like an angry child, feels the impulse to "lift her shirt and reveal to him her soft, mounded stomach and her mottled breasts." (*Arlington Park* 182) But instead, she decides to say her "next line in the play," despite her attempts to shut it down.

Now, completely disorientated by her epiphany, her realization that her infantile love for her husband can no longer be kept alive, Maisie unconsciously enters the kitchen and sees her reflection in the black window. As Claire Wrobel states, "the novel stages women aspiring to 'knowledge' or 'truth', whether it be freedom, self-expression, love, purity or their inner selves."(8) Cusk illustrates this when she describes Maisie's reflection: "the light adhered bleakly, slickly to the folds of her face and clothes and then lost itself in a background of fathomless darkness (…) It was like a portrait of death." (*Arlington Park* 194 – 195) When confronted by her reflection, Maisie comes to understand that "she [is] only what she strove to be, what she had the guts and the good sense to go after" (*Arlington Park* 193) After this realization, Maisie seems to have re-orientated herself. She has suddenly grown up into her adult self and repositioned herself into the world that surrounds her, aligning with it while sacrificing her childhood

fantasies. Upstairs, Maisie feels Dom's tread and sees him come down, "remade for her, manufactured again ang again out of his absences." (*Arlington Park* 198) It is then, with her new, adult perspective, that she realizes what love is: "keeping these representations of him together, making them continuous (…) to bear witness to something in its entirety, that was love" (*Arlington Park* 198). She goes upstairs again and sees her children asleep and, like an adult, she feels their existence makes her "manifest, visible," taking her "away from anonymity." (*Arlington Park* 199)

Finally, after leaving the house with her husband to attend Christine Lanham's dinner party, she looks at the sky, already purple, and then at her shoes. The parallelism Cusk establishes with Maisie's shoes and the couple is evident and essential in Maisie's re-orientation. She sees the ground her shoes were making in the street, "little gains they made together, one after another in their merry servitude." (*Arlington Park* 200) Maisie then intertwines her fingers with her husband's, putting her hand in his pocket, as if finally accepting her role in this absurd play of adulthood. While walking "together along the dark, deserted tunnel of the street" towards a junction, Maisie tells Dom about her visit to the park and how she felt every dog was called Maisie. "Mai-sie! Come on, Maisie" Come here, Maisie! Good girl!" (*Arlington Park* 200) she says, laughing out loud. Another parallelism Cusk uses to show us how Maisie has grown up and now, in her acceptance of things, she is a "good girl."

2.2. Disorientation, Queer Angles and Alignment in *Arlington Park*

In this second section, as mentioned above, I focus on those female characters whose epiphanies appear related to space and how they define their identity according to it. Such space can be understood as a physical room or a house, but it is not limited to buildings. Space, as I see it, can very well be a body and how one occupies this body. Therefore, Woolf's assertion that a woman needs a room of her own can be interpreted through yet

another perspective: apart from an actual, physical room within a building, a woman needs her own body if she wants to preserve her self.

2.2.1. Solly

Like Amanda, Solly primarily experiences life through space. In her case, however, the space is her own body. And she has been slowly losing possession of it. Parey explains this process of dispossession as a consequence of a lack of space to call her own: "[Cusk's female characters'] original self has been taken over by marriage and motherhood." (6) Being pregnant for the fourth time, Solly continuously stresses how dissolved she feels into her family, how "aerated, overblown" she perceives herself in contrast to her husband, Martin, who appears more "hardened into a lean, vertical masculinity." (*Arlington Park* 113) In Cusk's constant use of vocabulary related to the flesh, the fat, the hugeness of one's mass, and numerous adjectives to convey Solly's state of gigantic dissolution, Solly appears to the mind's eye as an enormous plum, ripe, and overflowing with juice. She calls herself "formless and dissipated," (*Arlington Park* 113) whereas Martin, in his untouched masculinity, and the children appear to her as "flat." (*Arlington Park* 121)

But Solly was not always shapeless. She insisted on hyphenating her surname from Martin's when they got married, years ago, instead of letting it replace hers. She defended her identity and offered a state of shared equality, of mutual respect for both Martin's and her sense of self. "That was what she thought marriage should be: the state of hyphenation." (*Arlington Park* 123) And yet, as her pregnancy advances, Solly cannot manage to locate her self anywhere. She looks into the past and cannot detect a continuous sense of self. At one point she realizes that "Martin was continuous with his child self," (*Arlington Park* 121) and she envies him. For her, Martin's conception of her body is that of a village "that over time ha[s] sprawled and grown until it became a bustling centre,

cut through with new roads and modern developments." (*Arlington Park* 121) Like Juliet's hair-head, Solly's body is where her husband lives. He has made it his place, his space, and left none for her. Even in her sleep she is unable to "find non-being." As the birth of her child approaches, Solly feels merged with Martin, "unshielded, indistinct." She cannot wait to expel from her this "great, mounting force of debris." "In this state she did not feel hyphenated with Martin. (…) She had no protection from him. It was the worst kind of terror really, to live in a body and yet it offered you no protection." (Cusk132) All along her pregnancy, in her unending diffusion, Solly burns to "make contact with some kind of restraining surface," (*Arlington Park* 113-114) and make contact with the world before she disappears completely. It may be precisely this urge which leads Solly to rent her spare room.

She does not feel at home in her body, she experiences discomfort and alienation in a space that, long ago, used to be hers. Therefore, in order to "retain" her self, she turns to an extra, empty room, to retrieve her identity, to experience the world, however vicariously. (Parey 5) When she sits in the spare room, empty as it is, she feels like she "could see what her intentions had been" in her life. The spare room appears to her as a "fold in time" which, like a fold in an old carpet, has "retained its true colours while all the rest had faded" (*Arlington Park* 113) This space offers her a contact with the exterior. Like Alice in Wonderland after eating one of those mushrooms that make you grow, Solly is confined in her body, almost disabled, and the room opens a door to the world. A succession of women start, then, to occupy Solly's spare room and, for the first time, Solly experiences what Ahmed would call a slight case of "disorientation".

> Solly would feel not that her life had changed exactly but that it had altered its course, that it had turned a little, away from what was fast and easy and irresistible into a slanting, sideways trajectory (…) Then she decided that it was like taking a different route to

> somewhere you went every day, you got to the same place in the end but saw other things along the way. (*Arlington Park* 115)

The possibilities this disorientation brings come with Solly's epiphany and the arrival of her last guest: Paola. Solly is out in the garden with her son Joseph when, suddenly, she is besieged by "a crisis of the flesh," in which the reality of her son's yellow plastic tricycle appears to her as excessively real. A terribly inhospitable reality. Out of the blue, she notices a "little clump of primroses" under a tree, in the far corner of the garden. She studies them and, like a lighting, a memory strikes her:

> Her recollection lit its own instantaneous path down the twisted ways into the cavern of memory. She remembered a boy, a boyfriend she had for a while who player that song on his guitar. She was eighteen or nineteen – she remembered wearing jeans so threadbare her slender knees showed through, sitting cross-legged on the floor. She remembered (…) the taut, ravenous feeling of her young body. How strange that she should have forgotten it! How strange that it should have been there all along, this memory, alive and intact but buried, hidden, like the child in her belly was hidden! (*Arlington Park* 122-123)

Paola's arrival coincides with Solly's reverie, so that her ringing the doorbell pierces Solly's memory of her young self and, as if giving birth to a still born child, Cusk uses parallelisms to show the past-present lifeline that Solly could have taken but did not. So that, just when Solly brings forth her "naked recollection" into the light, the doorbell's sound flies "like an arrow" and "pierce[s] its flesh," as a "jet of hot sensation" comes flooding out, like blood (*Arlington Park* 123). Solly stand there, possessed by a sort of spectre of her youth, thinking how beautiful it was and yet "so lost, so utterly lost and unavailing!" (*Arlington Park* 123) Just then, Paola introduces herself and Solly, still in her naked youth, shakes her hand: "the sensation of (…) a stranger's hand, passed into Solly as if through an open vein. The guttering image of the girl in the threadbare jeans flared into life again." (*Arlington Park* 123)

In her epiphany, Solly, utterly disoriented and even unconscious of her physical dimensions, experiences one of those chance encounters that Ahmed explains as accidental and which might "redirect us and open up new world." (19) These "sideways moments" might present themselves as "a gift of lifeline [that] might generate new possibilities, or they might not" (Ahmed 19) In Solly's case, her meeting with Paola brings her the possibility, the hope, of a new lifeline. With her bath oils, when white, stylish clothes and her philosophical way of thinking life, Solly starts feeling that "her word had been twitched to the side, like a curtain that was obscuring the view" (*Arlington Park* 127) and she does not particularly mind the change. In fact, she is quite intrigued. When discussing the origins of her name, Solange, Solly explains that her mother would have liked to live in France, but never did, although she could do it now, "there's nothing to stop her now," she says. When Paola replies: "maybe it's too late (…) you have to save up some life for that. Maybe she spent it all," (*Arlington Park* 126) Solly considers how much of her life has she already spent. Intrigued as she is by Paola's apparent lack of children, husband and house at the age of thirty-odd, Solly suddenly sees her life "as a breeding ground…under a rock" and wonders at her stupidity: "How could she have stayed there, under her rock, down in the mulch, and forgotten to take a look outside and see what was going on?" (*Arlington Park* 128) Solly is seeing, for the first time, the lifeline she has been following and those objects and spaces that had been "in front" of her all her life. Now, however, angled as she is, her perspective has been "queered."

"At times," explains Ahmed, "we don't know that we have followed a path, or that the line we have taken is a line that clears our way only by marking out spaces that we don't inhabit." (19) We lose our sense of direction because we have been following that which has been given to us as the right path to follow. Sometimes, we even take it as an expression of who we are, adds Ahmed. Now, Solly feels out of place and needs to be

re-orientated. She requires a place to feel safe, comfortable in the world again. She has lost her confidence in the lifeline she was following now that she has been presented with Paola's life. Solly, in her epiphany coinciding with Paola's arrival has been "queered" and, as Ahmed declares in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006): "to make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things." (161)

In her new "oblique" position, Solly is seeing a series of lines and objects that were out of her reach before. She cannot fathom what Paola's life has been without her having children, a home, and a husband. And yet, she absorbs everything Paola represents. She goes to the spare room – now Paola's room – when she is not there and experiences Paola's life vicariously, like a girl child tries her mother's high-heeled shoes. She suddenly finds a picture of a boy in the back of Paola's wardrobe and deduces that he is Paola's dead son. At last! An explanation for Paola's existence! One that Solly can comprehend! When Solly assumes the child from the photo is Paola's dead son, she is not welcome anymore. "Like a clot next to Solly's heart! She couldn't bear it – it was too much, too much!" (*Arlington Park* 135) A woman with a dead child had come to lodge in her briming nest." Suddenly, Paola's phenomenon has been explained. Solly feels becalmed, solid, ordinary. The issue of Paola has receded and Solly feels "cured of a kind of restlessness. She felt able to distinguish herself." She goes to her and Martin's room and puts on make-up, "regarding her own reflection with a sinking feeling of comfort, as though it were a reliable boyfriend she had returned to after a hopeless infatuation." (*Arlington Park* 137)

Yet Paola is ultimately revealed as something else which completely disorients Solly and, simultaneously, re-orients her. It is a crucial scene in which the birth of a new, alternate lifeline is paralleled with the birth of Solly's child. When Paola finds Solly on the floor, paralyzed with pain, she gives her a magically soothing herbal tea to alleviate

her suffering. Solly breathes it in: “It was like a projection of her inner state, like something she had invented herself.” (*Arlington Park* 139) It is at that moment, in her most vulnerable, that Solly discovers that Paola’s son is “alive and well, living with his father in Italy and happy to be alive” (*Arlington Park* 139) Suddenly, Solly feels smaller. Again, like Alice in Wonderland, she had eaten another mushroom, and she shrinks and shrinks while Paola grows and grows. With tears running down her cheeks, Solly is “a child and Paola was a mother: large, large as a tree, in whose shade Solly felt happy to be alive.” (*Arlington Park* 139) The parallelism with the primroses here is clear: Solly has recovered her young self, with her slender knees and her threadbare jeans.

The baby is a girl. Like the spectre of Paola – now gone back to Italy – and a projection of Solly’s younger self, the girl gives her “a new, higher view of the world.” When she is with her baby girl, Solly remembers “that she had turned against Martin and the children a little.” (*Arlington Park* 140) As Judith Butler explains, “turning is the act by which a subject is constituted” (Butler qtd. in Ahmed, p. 159), so the fact that Solly has “turned” against Martin and the children a little suggests that a new subject, a new identity has been born, and that it now follows her own lifeline. After all, the point of disorientation, as Ahmed explains, is what we do with it, as well as what it can do with us: “whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope.” (Ahmed 161)

2.2.2. Amanda

The first thing we notice in Amanda’s chapter is her predilection for a martial-like understanding of life: her husband “left the house *punctually* at eight” (*Arlington Park* 40, emphasis added), her car was “clean and spacious and mechanically *discreet*, and it did her bidding…*efficiently* and with *silent approval* of her style of *command*” *Arlington Park* 41, emphasis added). Punctuality, cleanness, discreetness, efficiency, submission

are all part of Amanda's ideal repertoire of qualities in life. Control is her favorite word. Driving, she feels that "to live and to desire [are] indistinguishable" (*Arlington Park* 41). Not only that, in her car, she has the sense that the course of time does not affect her, it passes "on the other side of the windows" where she sees "people burdened by time, while she herself remain[s] free" (*Arlington Park* 41). At the beginning, we feel Amanda "cruising…while the turbid seas of Arlington Park parted before her" easily and at her command, until we meet Eddie, her infant son. After having heaved the members of her household like "sandbags…out the basket of a hot-air balloon" (*Arlington Park* 40), only Eddie remains. It is Friday and he stays at home with her; an inconvenience Amanda is forced to endure. Early in the chapter, we learn that Amanda is eagerly looking forward to September, when Eddie will start school and "their Fridays could be packed up and put away."(*Arlington Park* 41) Eddie, her husband, routine in general, she declares, are "not her true companions" like her car, but "bumps on the surface of life that fretted and jolted her as she was forced to go over them." *Arlington Park* 40)

Time and control, then, seem essential for Amanda. We learn that, generally, she is capable of commanding "perfect subjection" in the world around her, which she understands in terms of her balance on a wire: "her writ ran through the centre of the day like a single wire" (*Arlington Park* 42). But, sometimes, subjection does not come so easily or even at all. Eddie, with his Fridays and his jolts and bumps on Amanda's path seems to be one of the main elements that make her balance on the wire unpredictable. They sway her in her wire and make Amanda feel her precarious state of control.

> Destiny stemmed from her in a constant stream on that wire. There were times…when it was channeled in an orderly, forward-going current that recognized no obstructions; and time when…the oncoming stream of minutes and hours broke its banks and flooded out sideways…until she seemed to be disgorging a force of pure catastrophe. (Cusk 42)

This wire could be interpreted as Amanda's lifeline, or what Ahmed would call "orientation." It is, in short, a particular way of living which can be "inherited" or "given," but always appears "concealed in the moment of being received." This lifeline "both divides things and creates spaces that we imagine we can be 'in'" (Ahmed 14). These lines shape space and create impressions, so that if the space that Amanda is inhabiting – her lifeline, her wire – is indeed orientated, then the very act of inhabiting it "'decides' what comes into view" and what is out of reach. "The point of such decision may be precisely that we have lost sight of them: than we take what is given as simply a matter of what happens to be 'in front' of us." (Ahmed 14) Therefore, those moments in which Amanda seems to be "flooded out sideways" (*Arlington Park* 42) are moments of disorientation in which her space, her lifeline, is queered. In other words, that which is familiar appears inhospitable, inhabitable. These moments, for Amanda, are threats of "pure catastrophe." (*Arlington Park* 42)

It is precisely during an interaction with Eddie that we witness Amanda's first loss of balance. While buying some mince at the butcher's, Amanda notices the man's deformed hands but says nothing. Eddie, however, does: "Why doesn't that man have any hands?" he asks insistently. "Of all the members of her household," Amanda tells us, "Eddie [is] the one who most often…put[s] her close to the concept of failure and meaninglessness" (Cusk43) She even confesses the near-dissolution she experiences when she is with Eddie as she remarks that, while with him, she "often forgot she *had* ever been born" (Cusk46). In this case, Amanda's maternal ambivalence may not so much agree with Parker's reasonings but rather with Winnicott's declaration that "mothers hate their children from the word go." (Winnicott qtd. in Parker 57) Eddie produces a destabilizing effect on Amanda. He "disorientates" her, he puts her precarious balance on

the wire in question and constantly seems to bring forth elements that are out of reach from Amanda's lifeline.

As Clare Hanson puts it, "the undercurrent of violence that runs through [*Arlington Park*] is most evident in the story of Amanda" (5). However, her suggestion that Amanda "experiences marriage and motherhood in terms of an assault on her bodily integrity" (Hanson 5) might have been taken too literally when Hanson compares this "assault" with the actual process of giving birth. In my opinion, Amanda's identity is clearly anchored in her relation to space: first, we see her absolute control over her car, her complete expansion in the secure space of her car, where her lifeline is always "in front" of her. Later, we see her at her house, where she "likes to maintain a perfect current of anonymity" (*Arlington Park* 60) flowing through the rooms. Although anonymity may not be a word which one would normally relate to "comfort" or "home," it is, however, a way of inhabiting a space that does not accommodate one's body with ease. "Sometimes we do not feel at home," Ahmed explains, we might feel discomfort and alienation in a certain space and we "dance with joy at the anonymity of bare walls, untouched by the faces of loved ones that throw the body into another time and place." (*Ahmed* 11) According to this statement, Amanda's need for anonymity in her house implies that her identity is at stake when she is at "home." She keeps this anonymity and "sanitary cleanliness" to gain some sort of space for her own self. When she and her husband first move there, they study the neighborhood with detail, seeking the perfect spot. According to Ahmed's theory, then, Amanda might have been looking for what Ahmed calls "alignment."

> The lines we follow might also function as forms of "alignment," or as ways of being in line with others. We are "in line" when we face the direction that is already faced by others. Being "in line" allows bodies to extend into spaces that, as it were, have already taken their space. Such extensions could be redescribed as an extension of the body's

> reach. Becoming a member of such community, then, might also mean following this direction, which could be described as the political requirement that we turn some ways and not others. (Ahmed 14)

However, in Amanda's effort to create a "comforting" space that aligns with Arlington Park's community, she ends up creating "a void." Thus, the actual "assault on [Amanda's] bodily integrity" that Hanson suggests is not so much a violent act on Amanda's physical body, but rather an assault to the space she identifies as an extension of her identity: her house. Further on in the chapter, we will see how the assault is nothing else than the indelible blood red stain that an exterior element forces upon her impeccable cream-colored sofa.

After her visit to the butcher, once Amanda is back "inside the vault of her house," (*Arlington Park* 53) we learn how, "in her last month at Pembroke *Recruitment* before her marriage, she had won the firm's Manager of the Year Award." (*Arlington Park* .53-54, emphasis added) She *recruited* people as a way of living. Her previous occupation may, therefore, explain the insistent use of military jargon, as she seems, in her current life as wife and mother, to apply the same strategies that led her to become the best recruiter in her previous job. Thus, there seems to be a present-past time in Amanda's life, in which she appears to repeat a period which awarded her with *demonstrable*, material recognition. She comments that her husband, James, used to tell people that she was "evangelical" about her job, meaning her attitude was fanatical, proselytizing almost. There is a particular passage in which Amanda's understanding of her current life is perfectly illustrated: it refers to her several attempts to invite the other mothers to her house, for coffee:

> Like a settler in a new, uncharted country, Amanda was aware of movements in her terrain: of the deep habits of herds migrating and convening across the reaches of Arlington Park…She was aware of them passing and feeding and gathering in groups to

> graze or rest, but try as she might, she could not bridge their distance from her… Today the women standing in the rain outside the school had looked lost, unfocused, like a demoralized troop of soldiers in the middle of a long, obscure campaign. She had discerned in them…an exposure of flank, and she was right: for the first time, her offer of coffee aroused their interest…She said she would be back in Western Gardens by ten, and she saw this information pass into their sense of the coming day. (*Arlington Park* 56-57)

In this fragment, it becomes evident that Amanda perceives herself as a huntress, a master recruiter for her sanitary way of living, studying Arlington Park's community in order to obtain her desired alignment. She sees the other mothers as cattle, "passing and feeding and gathering to graze or rest." (*Arlington Park* 56) Still, it is not until this day that she senses "an exposure of flank" (*Arlington Park* 57), a vulnerability in her target, and she attacks. Her invitation appears to be successful as she senses how it sinks in the brains of the "demoralized troop of soldiers" (*Arlington Park* 57) that is, the mothers once they have left their children at school.

When everything seems under control, Amanda receives a call from her sister, Susannah, telling her their grandmother has died. Such news, in Amanda's world, would generally not go unnoticed, but it is Susannah's sudden manifestation that seems to trouble Amanda the most. In addition, Susannah confesses to Amanda how, just before dying, their grandmother had said Amanda had no love in her heart. This is the first step towards Amanda's epiphany at the end of the chapter. This is also Amanda's second and most potent loss of balance, her second moment of disorientation: "Mandy," her sister calls her. "Mandy Barker…had been left behind on the day Amanda married James…like someone standing on a pier waving at the departing ship…left to go her own ignorant way in the irretrievable past." (*Arlington Park* 58). Susannah's presence sways Amanda's wire dangerously with her cheerful but unfaltering way of "distinguish[ing] herself from the suburban dogma of the family home" (*Arlington Park* 59). Amanda rapidly starts

experiencing the nauseating feeling of disorientation again. And the, in the middle of her disorientation, the doorbell rings. Her precarious balance must be restored, her momentary disorientation dissolved before she resumes her existence. She looks "through the mullioned windowpanes" (*Arlington Park* 62) and sees four mothers at her door. Her attempt at aligning with the community has come at last.

In a momentary instant of panic, perhaps still disorientated by Susannah's sudden appearance, Amanda looks at her car: "she could live in it, within the confines of her *provable success*" (*Arlington Park* 62, emphasis added). Seeing them now, sitting around the table, in the vastness of her kitchen, Amanda feels strange. She wonders whether "they had come or she had captured them, she wasn't sure which." (*Arlington Park* 65). Here we seem to witness an apparent reversal of roles. Is it really Amanda the hunter who set the trap, or has she been ambushed? Is this Amanda witnessing the success of her hunting trip or a strategy to let her defenses down? We sense the precariousness of Amanda's balance in the wire once more, her disorientation: "The closing minutes of her conversation with Susannah were pressing against her consciousness. They leaned against her concertation as though it were a door they were trying to force." (*Arlington Park* 67) After collecting the stained coffee cups and putting them in the sink, Amanda puts on her yellow rubber gloves again and is immediately taken back in time, remembering "how death had entered her kitchen…through the large windows." (*Arlington Park* 71). In her analysis, Hanson argues that it is Amanda's grandmother's demise that introduces death into Amanda's house. However, if we compare the fact that "death enters through the large windows" (*Arlington Park* 71) with the moment in which Amanda sees the mothers "through the mullioned windowpanes" (*Arlington Park* 62), we could argue that it is, in fact, the mothers, Amanda's intended prey, who have brought death to her house. Certainly, Susannah's presence and her news ignite the swaying of the wire that sustains

Amanda's existence, but it is the mothers and what they represent, who end up chronically "wounding" Amanda. In her disorientation, with her sister's appearance still fresh and "Mandy's" spectre dislocating her from her lifeline, Amanda reaches for Arlington Park's community's lifeline to stabilize herself, and, in the process, encounters loss. If she wants to align herself with the other mothers, they seem to say, she must relinquish some part of her identity. This becomes clear when Eddie comes running from the sitting room to tell her that the boy who had come with one of the mothers is painting the sofa.

> A big red patch like a stain of blood lay indelibly on the cream-coloured flank of the sofa. Amanda lifted the child bodily from amidst the cushions and tore the pens from his hand. 'How dare you?' she said in a savage whisper in his ear… 'I could kill you!' she whispered. 'I could kill you!' She threw him back down on the cushions…his whole being recoiled from her in its half-formed confidence…he watched her from amidst the cushions with his round blue eyes. (*Arlington Park* 71)

Like a "wounded", cornered lion, Amanda reacts. It is not her child who has committed such a crime, but someone else's, the child of one of the "exotic birds" that sit in her kitchen. Now, though, she *is* the mother, the power relation between her and the child still exists even if it is not *her* child. Winnicott's assertion that "mothers hate their children from the word go" still works here. One the one hand, he explains, there is the mother who is "inevitably in the grip of unruly, destructive impulses" and on the other, there is the mother whose "capacity for controlled, containing childcare" is mandatory and which has "fed into what is popularly expected of mothers" (Winnicott qtd. Parker.57-58). The social position of the mother, her superior role, allows her, "even forces, the denied desire to dominate to emerge in her" (Parker 81). Amanda struggles not to attack the child after he has decimated her subjectivity and frustrated her needs. In *A Life's Work: on Becoming a Mother*, Cusk recalls a moment in which, being sleep deprived for several hours, she put her baby daughter in her cradle and locked herself in the bathroom. "At this point I don't just *want* her to go to sleep. She *has* to go to sleep otherwise I don't know what will

happen" (*A Life's Work* 56) she confesses. After a charged long moment of silence on the other side of the door, her daughter begins to cry.

This episode in Cusk's real life is clearly echoed in Amanda's reaction to her blood red stained sofa. She sees the child's "whole being recoiled from her in its half-formed confidence…he watched her from amidst the cushions with his round blue eyes." (*Arlington Park* 71) However, unlike Cusk, who later calls several people to confess her behavior and seek, understanding, Amanda does not seem to regret her actions. Still, she needs recognition of some kind, understanding of the crime that has been committed against her. She is crouched on the carpet, staring at the blood red stain when Christine, one of the mothers, comes in and announces they are all leaving. Amanda notices her prey-turned-hunter has not taken of her mud-soaked shoes, but mortally wounded as she is, she wonders "what does it matter now?" Her alignment with Arlington Park's community has failed.

Liz Connelly, the mother of the child who has stained her sofa, stays behind for a while. After seeing the stain, she asks Amanda if "he" will get in much trouble for doing that. Liz assumes it is Amanda's son who has stained the sofa. As it is not Eddie who has committed the crime, Amanda replies that "he" won't get into trouble at all. And it is then, after replying to Liz Connelly, that Amanda gets her epiphany: she senses Liz's "assumption of [Amanda's] benevolence" (*Arlington Park* 73) and she is "strangely transfigured." (*Arlington Park* 73): "A sort of ghost passed through her that was both herself and not herself. It was like a momentary projection into the void of her heart, of a detailed image whose precious information she sought to store even as it faded again into nothingness." (*Arlington Park* 73) In her epiphany, Amanda's assumption that Liz Connelly sees her as "benevolent" transmutes her. It proves that, contrary to her grandmother's assertion, she has love in her heart. She suddenly perceives herself as the

person she has always liked to be and tries to preserve that "precious information" within her, even as it fades away into her inner void. She has love in her heart, Amanda seems to repeat to herself. She loves her car, so she must have it. And she loved Susannah's rabbit. She loved it so much she hugged it too hard and killed it. In that moment, "she had wanted both to have the rabbit and to be it. She had wanted to be Susannah" (*Arlington Park* 75) Amanda confesses at last. When her first child was born, a baby daughter, she had tried to project Susannah's qualities onto her. "It came around again, the possibility of transference. But there was too much disorder…for this dark, burning, jealous love to make a channel through." (*Arlington Park*75) So Amanda had projected herself onto her daughter instead. Eddie, however, is different. "He had a pure relationship with her worst self." (*Arlington Park* 45) That which she never could attain for herself; love in her heart, courage to express it, dramatism, chaos, unconformity, she unconsciously projected onto Eddie. Having failed to transfer Susannah onto her daughter, she now projects that which she envies the most of her sister onto Eddie. Amanda's epiphany offers her with the possibility of hope, however. While lost in her reveries, Eddie apparently sees the grandmother's ghost in the garden, through the windows and tells his mother. But when Amanda gets there, there is no-one to be seen. Having just learnt about his great-grandmother's passing, Eddie, suddenly aware of her mother's mortality, tells her he loves her and hugs her leg. Amanda, however, despite feeling a momentary sense of warmth, tries to get rid of Eddie's grip. She does not read the line offered to her as a possible embrace. Still completely disorientated, Amanda does not reach for the queered lifeline Eddie offers her, but chooses to remain aligned with Arlington Park's community. This decision makes Eddie's offer of love out of reach because it is no longer "in line" with her chosen orientation. Instead, Amanda reads Eddie's hug as him seeking to transfer his grief to her, to discard his worries onto her so he can go about lighter. Slowly, we

come to see how her epiphany is discarded, her chance lost, with only the blood red stain remaining as "a reminded of this day, this day of her life in which all the other days seemed to be coming together and showing themselves at last." (*Arlington Park* 77). At the end of the chapter, Amanda resumes her day as if nothing had happened and proceeds to cook the mince she bought at the butcher's.

3. PART THREE: Christine Lanham

Christine Lanham's complexity resides in her utter contrast with the rest of *Arlington Park*'s female characters. On the one hand, unlike Juliet or Maisie, Christine does not resent the performativity of her domestic life, nor does she exhibit any particular feeling of ambivalence towards her children. And, on the other, unlike Solly or Amanda, Christine does not appear to feel trapped or slowly disintegrating in space. Quite the contrary, she relishes in the delights of Merrywood, the shopping mall, and defends Arlington Park's neighborhood as if her life depended on it. And, indeed, it does. What strikes the reader from Christine's personality, what separates her from the others, is her absolute honesty and acceptance of the performativity implicit in the society she is living in. A society she has striven to belong to, deviating her inherited lifeline towards a new, "queer" one: her desired one. Christine, with all her faults, simply understands and accepts that, in order to keep aligned with the lifeline she has chosen, there are certain elements she must "perform." Rather than, like Maisie, resent the feeling of being in a play, Christine has assumed that "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (Butler 108) and has no problem with it.

In her study of the role of space and its influence on the characters of *Arlington Park*, Armelle Parey argues that the female protagonists are "represented through direct

relationship to the spaces around them," (4) spaces which, in their number and nature, are fairly "restricted and restricting: their own homes, shops or shopping centers, or [taking] children to school." (Parey 4). This acute perception of space serves to capture the ways in which "the social and spatial are inextricably realized one in the other" (Keith and Pile qtd. in Parey 6). It is precisely in this inextricable relationship that Christine's difference from the rest of the female characters becomes evident: she is in love with Arlington Park, she delights in its representation of her "climbing up the social ladder." (Parey 5) During her visit to Merrywood, a shopping mall three miles away from Arlington Park, Christine is forced to drive past "the lesser suburbs of Redbourne and Firley" (*Arlington Park* 78). In her own words, "there [is] nothing like going to Redbourne to remind you why you live in Arlington Park." (*Arlington Park* 79) This reassurance in her chosen lifeline comes from Christine's "black, private fear" (*Arlington Park* 80) that she might lose her gained territory and go back to her old, inherited line, her parent's line. "We were the sort of family that had all our meals in front of the telly," (*Arlington Park* 93) explains Christine at one point, "My mum used to go to the bingo on Thursday nights." (*Arlington Park* 93) That is the sort of life Christine is terrified to go back to and Arlington Park – in contrast to Redbourne or Firley – represents her success. During her visit to the shopping mall, we see Christine marveled by everything she sees. The building itself, with words like "portico," "atrium" or "dome", is described as a sort of temple where people go to worship the god of consumerism: "it [is] like an illustration of the chambers of the heart: where people [are] carried upwards (…) eventually to re-emerge, oxygenated by shopping." (*Arlington Park* 87). Maisie, who accompanies Christine to Merrywood, is, in contrast, horrified by it. Maisie's coming from London makes Christine's dark, private terror resurface, it makes her want to "neutralize her [because] there [is] something in her that (…) causes her to wonder whether Arlington Park [is] to London what Redbourne [is] to

Arlington Park." (*Arlington Park* 85) She reflects on this while getting dressed for her dinner party that very same night. Looking at herself in the mirror, she remembers how, before meeting Joe, her husband, she was obsessed with social status and how "mesmerized by the sense of a hierarchy" (*Arlington Park* 214) she was because she felt she was "at the foot of it." (*Arlington Park* 214) It all changes when she meets Joe, however: "he [is] like a patch of sunlight she [has] to keep herself in" (*Arlington Park* 215) unless she wants to go back to what she was before. Parey explains how Christine sees her husband "in terms of territory" (5) in order to express her satisfaction with her current social status. For Christine, Joe, "a man who [lives] by himself, not ignominiously but well [is] uncharted territory," (*Arlington Park* 214) one in which she must perform in a certain way if she wants to stay in it. The towns of Redbourne and Firley represent Christine's "terror of her expulsion from the light" (*Arlington Park* 215) that Joe embodies. She expressed this fear when she ponders on how she would be forced to return to her parent's lifestyle if she were to be "expelled from Joe." (*Arlington Park* 215) As if her parents' inherited lifeline, "has been waiting to claim her" (*Arlington Park* 215).

Moments like these, like the ones Christine experiences with Maisie or during her episodes of terror of being expelled from the light of Joe into the shadows of her previous existence, are clear moments of disorientation, and disorientation, as Ahmed explains, is vital: "[they] shatter one's sense of confidence in the ground or one's belief that the ground on which [one] resides can support the actions that make a life feel livable." (157-158). When this happens, when bodies are disorientated, they can become defensive, as they try to recover their balance or re-orientate themselves. This is what happens to Christine when, during a conversation with Maisie, she feels her deprecating Arlington Park's comforts. "Let me tell you," exclaims Christine, annoyed, "there no bloody excuse for going to seed in Arlington Park!" (*Arlington Park* 103) According to Ahmed, when

we become orientated, when we adopt a line as a way of living, it implies the assumption of "a specific 'take' on the world, a set of views and viewing points (…) and in following them we become committed to 'what' they lead us to as well as 'where' they take us" (16-17) This explains Christine's controversial, almost sociopathic view of the group of gypsies they encounter at the shopping mall, or the refugees' situation they discuss during their lunch. When Christine and the other mothers notice a group of gypsies living next to the place where all sorts of furniture and other luxuries are collected, they pity them. All but Christine, whose lifeline of choice has led her to view certain people as objects, people who may remind her of her past, for instance. "They're *people*," says Maisie, in reply to Christine's "it's not such a bad place to put them" (*Arlington Park* 87). When the group stops for dinner and starts discussing about how a group of asylum seekers ended up dying, Christine declares that she cannot feel sorry for them. And in her lifeline, she truly cannot. Later on, she explains why: "What I can't stand is the guilt we're all made to feel about people who have as much control over their lives as we do." (*Arlington Park* 107) From her lifeline, only some objects or aspects of life are reachable or seen. Only those that are in front of her, in line with her. Like the luxurious black car that almost runs over one of the women's child (*Arlington Park* 110). Christine only sees the car and the expensive-looking woman behind the wheel (*Arlington Park* 110). She does not understand why Maisie gets so upset by this woman almost driving over some child. Christine herself treats her daughter, Ella, in an almost automatic way, "shoving" her toys at her, not even looking at her when dealing with Ella's needs, et cetera. So it is the same with the refugees; according to Christine's understanding of life, discussing over the asylum seekers' death is "pointless" because they have the same control over their lives as she does. She changed her inherited lifeline, she "queered" it, she deviated from her given route in life, so if those poor people died while trying to do the same, in Christine's

view, it was their own fault. She has assumed the performativity of her life as a consequence of her choice, just like motherhood is one of its collateral damages. She has assumed it and is *performing* her duty in order to preserve her alignment. Therefore, if those people died, it was something they had already assumed when they chose to try and change their lifelines. There is no point in discussing it. In Christine's own words: "what I can't stand is the complaining" (*Arlington Park* 107).

However, Christine's main role in the novel is that of condensing the novel's characters into a dinner party that is to take place at her house, during the last chapter of the book. In this sense, *Arlington Park* has often been analyzed as a revision of Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*. Even Cusk's writing style has been called "woolfian"[2],and Cusk's admiration for Woolf – evidenced in Cusk's article, *Shakespeare's daughters*, which features one of Woolf's most famous works: *A Room of One's Own* – contributes to the comparison between both novels. Christine Lanham has also been likened both to Clarissa Dalloway, and Mrs. Ramsay, from *To the Lighthouse*[3]. This last juxtaposition of characters is particularly interesting in that one of the most relevant parts of *To the Lighthouse* – and one of Mrs. Ramsay's primary functions – is the hosting of a dinner party. Cusk's take on this scene, however, is different from Woolf's and it parodies the role of the Victorian hostess that Mrs. Ramsay embodies so perfectly. Early in the novel there already is a hint of the upcoming failure – and thus, parody – of Christine's dinner party: unlike Mrs. Ramsay, she does not invite *all* the characters in the novel. Mrs. Ramsay's main desire is to create connections in people through her dinner party, so that "[her] dinner party 'remains for ever' in the diners' minds." (*To the Lighthouse* 91). What causes Christine's dinner party to fail is another moment of disorientation, this time

[2] See Latham 198, 201 – 202.
[3] See Onishi 19 – 29.

caused by a phone call from her mother. During their conversation, Christine's mother is drinking cheap wine while sitting in front of the television Although unconsciously, Christine's conversation with her mother makes her question things – her menu of choice of the dinner party, for instance – and causes her to regress to her previous lifeline. Mimicking her mother, Christine starts drinking wine while cooking. Her dishes, unlike those served by Mrs. Ramsay, are shown to be almost improvised and carelessly displayed on the table, which is sloppily set as well. Cusk's parody of the Victorian goes as far as the Lanham's home distribution, placing the masculine space upstairs while the feminine remains downstairs, mainly restrained within the kitchen. As the dinner party advances, Christine's disorientation seems to grow to the point in which she questions her acceptance of things, of the lifeline she has chosen to pursue: "Now she wondered whether that wasn't exactly what kept you in your place, this acceptance of things, so that you were forever going round and round in a circle and never getting anywhere. If you accepted things, where were you meant to go when it got unacceptable?" (*Arlington Park* 230) It is as if this episode of disorientation is a prelude to Christine experiencing the existential crisis that the rest of the female characters are going through. Were Christine to follow this sudden line of thought in which she questions her acceptance of the performativity of the lifeline she has chosen, she would probably end up like Juliet, Solly or Maisie who suffer the slow erasure of their identity and sense of self. However, like Amanda, Christine chooses to reject the offering of a new line of thought. Thus, she is able to continue with her lifeline and find joy in it. Christine's epiphany comes in a sudden, drunken realization that echoes Mrs. Ramsay's momentary terror that her dinner might fail. Christine chooses to reaffirm her position and when she recovers her balance, she is still in her lifeline, in the light of Joe. To illustrate this I will reproduce a whole fragment of *To the Lighthouse* and compare it to a fragment of *Arlington Park*.

> Raising her eyebrows at the discrepancy that was what she was thinking, this was what she was doing ladling out soup she felt, more and more strongly, outside that eddy; or as if a shade had fallen, and, robbed of colour, she saw things truly. The room(she looked round it)was very shabby. There was no beauty anywhere. She forebore to look at Mr. Tansley. Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her. Again she felt, as a fact without hostility, the sterility of men, for if she did not do it nobody would do it, and so, giving herself the little shake that one gives a watch that has stopped, the old familiar pulse began beating, as the watch begins ticking one, two, three, one, two, three. (Woolf 91)

Now, lets compare it with Christine's version in *Arlington Park*:

> The room rested in its destructive beauty, candlelight gilding the table laden with spoiled dishes, the smeared glasses and crumpled napkins, the scattered cutlery and discarded brown remains of food. She saw faces, intricately contoured. Darkness seemed to stand expectantly in the corners, a great expectant darkness whose relationship to the struggling, intricate light expressed itself in these faces, so that they seemed to arise from the commingling of two things, darkness and light: the faces were the manifestation of this destructive beauty: they were so intricate, so full of detail and yet so precarious. If you blew out the candles they would be gone. (*Arlington Park* 234)

In her recovering of balance, Christine sees the "colossal fact of Joe" (*Arlington Park* 234) and how she gets a feeling of certainty from him against the terror she experiences when faced with the darkness of her inherited lifeline and the questioning of the "acceptance of things" (*Arlington Park* 230). "They [are] all so lucky in the end, [aren't] they? Lucky to be alive," (*Arlington Park* 235) she reflects. Completely drunk, she questions Maisie, who she sees dressed in black, as if "having given up on life" (*Arlington Park* 222), and asks her "what is the point in worrying?" (*Arlington Park* 235). Here, by addressing Maisie who, for Christine, embodies the threat that "Arlington Park might be to London what Redbourne is to Arlington Park" (*Arlington Park* 85) which is a euphemism to say that Christine has failed in her purpose deviate from her parents' lifeline, Christine is directly challenging that which disorientates her. She addresses

Maisie and tells her that she is ok with the performativity of her life: "You've got to love life (…) You've got to love just – being alive," (*Arlington Park* 238) Christine declares. To this, Dom, sitting next to her, asks her how anyone would know she loves life. At that moment, the room "takes a great tilt. It turn[s] on its axis with all (…) its painstaking, ill-fixed record of time." (*Arlington Park* 238) Christine rights her glass of wine – the object through which her past lifeline, her mother, has entered her life and triggered her episodes of disorientation –- and replies: "Why would anyone need to know that?" (*Arlington Park* 238) In her complete disregard for what other people think and her re-orientation of her glass, Christine both challenges and parodies Mrs. Ramsay's "little shake" and ultimately reasserts herself and her life choices.

4. Conclusion

Arlington Park is a novel concerned with Maternal Ambivalence and how its lack of recognition as a natural part of women's experience of motherhood leads each female character to the slow dissolution of their sense of identity. This master's thesis has examined how each female character goes through the erasure of their self and seeks an escape through queered understandings of the space they inhabit. Through Juliet's journey, in spite of her initial surrender illustrated by the cutting of her long hair, the novel offers her resolution by giving her a little space and time to call her own during those Fridays in which she teaches literature to young girls. Solly, perpetually pregnant and fighting against the disintegration of her sense of individuality within the confines of her gestating body, finds a crevice into the outside world through the renting of her spare room. Her meeting with Paola endows her with the knowledge of different ways of mothering that allow the coexistence of each individual's sense of self. And Maisie, whose increasing sense that life has become a sort of play causes her to regress to her child-self and revisit her past traumas by turning her daughters into miniature versions of her loveless parents, ultimately reconciles with the kitchen-character and the new, adult version of marital love. However, even though the novel provides each woman with moments of disorientation – or epiphanies – which offer the chance to find balance in new, alternative lifelines, not all characters choose to accept them. Some women, like Amanda, worshiping the house-vault she occupies, do not even detect the offering; while others, like Christine, actively reject it in order to preserve their sense of security.

Cusk's contribution to the public recognition of Maternal Ambivalence as a reality for many mothers through the telling of her female character's experiences reflects the necessity to re-define mothering against the patriarchal construction of motherhood and the ideal mother. Many of the events Cusk describes in *Arlington Park* have been inspired

by real-life events lived by the author herself and, indeed, many of the scenes in the novel can be detected in her autobiographical book *A Life's Work: on becoming a mother*. The fact that this last work became so controversial proves how imperative it is to reconsider what mothering actually means and what it has been *made* to mean. Within our society, motherhood, like femininity, is a heteronormative text that, if not revised, causes cancels women's reality: it rejects the possibility of an ambivalence of feelings towards a child who, according to the heteronormative definition of mother, should be sanctified. Maternal Ambivalence has been constructed as the "ugly face" of motherhood, because it seems to imply that mothers do not love their children, or they do not love them as they should. But what Maternal Ambivalence actually represents is the violent conflict between two realities: the inner self of the mother and the external, heteronormative construction of motherhood. The former is the subject of "woman": a person who finds her life entirely changed, perhaps limited or conditioned to another being's existence and cannot help but resent her loss of individuality and the forced redefinition of her identity. Whereas the latter is a text created by and at the convenience of patriarchy that does not even consider the mother to be a subject and, as a consequence, does not grant her with a sense of self.

Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park* has proven to be a worthy collaborator in the elaboration of this thesis. Both Maternal Ambivalence and space are vital to the understanding of the novel. Cusk's decision to revise the Victorian period through her use of the domestic space, marriage and writing style has provided her with the most adequate basis upon which construct her thesis: to force public visibility upon the concept of maternal ambivalence as natural to motherhood. By bringing back the Victorian separation of spheres and orientating Arlington Park's neighbourhood in accordance to the heteronormative society, Cusk places her protagonists against a background in which

it becomes evident that the current understanding of motherhood has not evolved in decades. This allows Cusk to highlight the urgent need to bring Maternal Ambivalence to the public eye. It is imperative to accept its existence as natural to mothering, rather than unnatural, and deconstruct the maternal ideal defined by patriarchy if mothers want to preserve their sanity. Otherwise, they will continue to live under a constant tension which will inevitably result in a violent split of their subjectivity. To challenge the heteronormative orientation of Arlington Park, Cusk employs moments of crisis in which her characters experience acute spatial disorientation, thus forcing them to see their life paths from an oblique, queered perspective. Through these epiphanies, Cusk offers her protagonists the chance to re-orientate themselves by reaching for objects, bodies or paths that were not within the limits of their path before. At the end of their respective chapters and, ultimately, Cusk's novel, each character possesses the tools to resolve (or not) her conflict with Maternal Ambivalence and define her own identity against the orientation that comes with living in Arlington Park.

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