

The Politics of Reality: Coextensiveness in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*

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A great deal of scholarly and critical analysis of Marilynne Robinson's Pulitzer Prize nominated debut, *Housekeeping*, focuses on themes of the domestic, definitions of home, and female relationships. Often read as a feminist novel and placed within the traditional narrative structure of a quest or Bildungsroman, the book is scaled down to a single political or literary perspective. But with the privilege of hindsight and the advantage of Robinson's subsequent catalogue of non-fiction writing, *Housekeeping* can be read as a starting point from which the rest of her non-fiction essays and lectures emanate. I argue that previous readings of the novel have been reductive because they fail to give due attention to a key concept: *Housekeeping* makes an important statement about the nature of reality.

Robinson is very concerned with how to think about, represent, and interpret reality. She cites exploration of the definitions of reality as her impetus for writing *Housekeeping* and revisits the subject repeatedly in her later non-fiction work, detailing its social and political relevance to both American democracy and global culture. In *Housekeeping*, reality is presented as intrinsically hypothetical, impossible to confine in any single definition but ripe with probability and possibility. Much of the narrative occurs in the realm of consciousness, where each character experiences reality differently. The characters are placed in a coextensive relationship with each other and the landscape, exploding assumptions about the limits and boundaries of reality. Through textual examples and comparative analysis of her non-fiction writing, I will show that, although a piece of fiction, *Housekeeping* reveals the potential of reality and is therefore part of Robinson's canon of political commentary, holding wisdom and strategies for today's world.

Taking a cue from the author herself, who is known for revisiting primary sources to bypass accepted scholarly readings of foundational texts, I focus my analysis on *Housekeeping* itself and Robinson's own statements about its place within her larger philosophy. Robinson's self-reported influences are, among others, the Bible, John Calvin, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Abraham Lincoln, and Herman Melville, anchoring her philosophical perspective in Protestant Christianity, humanism, and American transcendentalism. These influences also bear considerable weight in her frequent commentaries on the historical import and current state of American Democracy. While clearly not politically shy, as evidenced by her 1989 exposé of Britain's nuclear pollution, *Mother Country*, and her highly publicized friendship and conversations with Barack Obama, Robinson is careful to separate the purpose of politics from that of literature. As she explains in her 1994 interview with *Contemporary Literature*, politics is for the "management of the cruder aspects of existence" whereas literature is meant to "articulate feelings that are very deep and also very general." She dismisses contemporary literary criticism as being guilty of "collusion" with the media to produce "simpler and simpler models of reality" (Schaub 244), demeaning the purpose and possibilities of literature. While feminist readings of *Housekeeping* do no harm, they do fall into this same trap of reductive thinking. Robinson explains that although the book's "female consciousness" is intentional (Hedrick 7), she does not purposely "suppress the male characters" (Schaub 233). The "femaleness" of *Housekeeping* is simply indicative of Robinson's own life growing up in the American West among strong female figures and is less an intentional comment on gender roles than a homage to that experience (Schaub 233).

Robinson's fiction does not need to overtly address political issues to have social and political relevance. Literature, like all art, "is perfectly legitimate in its own terms" (Schaub 244).

A novel's true power and potential lies in its use of language to "create simulations of experience" (Schaub 235). The kind of experience a novel creates has consequences extending through the individual reader into society at large. This places quite a large responsibility on a writer like Robinson. She does not just tell a story that the reader passively experiences. She enables the reader to enter the story and emotionally interact with it to the extent that it is experienced as reality. Due to the effective nature of this interaction, the kind of reality presented in the novel is very important. Robinson has a specific idea about what kind of reality her fiction represents: reality that goes beyond what is familiar or known to what is possible.

Robinson explicitly says *Housekeeping* is not a "realist novel" (A Conversation). Instead, she believes fiction is "narrative freed from the standard of literal truth" (On Beauty 131). But she does endow fiction with the power to affect both politics and reality. In her 2006 essay "On Beauty," Robinson explains the connections among fiction, reality, and politics:

Perhaps one function of fiction is to train us in the fact of the intrinsic plausibility of narrative, that is, to practice us in acknowledging the fact that plausibility is no guarantee of truth, that plausibility can be merely an effect of intelligibility, compounded by fantasy, or fear, or worse.... I have a theory about this moment in American history. We have all forgotten what ought to be the hypothetical character of our thinking. (135)

So, fiction's job is to incite awareness of how narrative functions. It exercises the imagination, opening the possibility for different experiences. Entering into another person's life, as represented in a novel, requires temporary suspension of preconceived notions of reality and recognition of various other plausible realities. As a result, narrative enables compassion.

Robinson states that "the more generous the scale at which imagination is exerted, the healthier and more humane the community will be" (When I was a Child 29). But it in its most profound

application, Robinson's idea about narrative as hypothetical reality goes beyond compassion. She zooms out even farther. Robinson invites readers to, not only accept other versions of reality, but to recognize the inherent limitations of all prescriptive notions of reality, no matter how seemingly accommodating or inclusive. She reveals the fluidity of reality in general. She questions whether reality is knowable at all, then surpasses even that obstacle to address the value of the unknowable, grounding perceptions of reality in individual consciousness instead of external definition.

Housekeeping captures this template for thinking about reality. In a 1989 radio interview with Rebekah Presson for "New Letters on the Air," Robinson states: "At the time I wrote *Housekeeping*, I felt as if the conventions of the novels that were being written at that time were just simply far too restrictive in terms of what kind of reality was represented, what kind of attitude was taken toward ordinary experience." Here Robinson clearly identifies her desire to explore an unhindered reality in *Housekeeping*. This intention is crucial to understanding the novel. It marks *Housekeeping* as an instructive piece of fiction, a book that presents the kind of reality that can have a tremendous effect on the consciousness and actions of a society.

For Robinson, reality is defined more by the "unnamed" than by what is known or observable (When I was a Child 20). A true understanding of reality must recognize a "penumbra of ignorance and error and speculation" far exceeding what is known (On Beauty 121). A penumbra is neither entirely hidden nor entirely visible. It exists at the margins of a shadow, in partial shade and partial light. This goes beyond the familiar adage: you don't know what you don't know. Robinson's emphasis is not on what is not known, but on the basic fact that much is unknown. Further, opportunity resides in this unknown. The penumbra is "beautiful in its own way... because it is the action of the human consciousness" (On Beauty 121). Admitting the

limits of knowledge and perception of reality is a starting point, an open field awaiting the fruits of consciousness.

In *Housekeeping*, this act of consciousness is embodied in the idea of coextensiveness. In one of the central scenes of the novel, Ruth and Lucille spend a night alone out in the woods at the edge of Lake Fingerbone. During the night, Ruth crawls out of their make-shift shelter to sit by the lake. In the complete darkness, Ruth experiences an epiphany that informs her sense of self: “the darkness in the sky become[s] coextensive with the darkness in [her] skull and bowels and bones” (116). Robinson’s word choice here pinpoints a very specific experience of reality. It is not just that Ruth feels at one with nature, or coexistent with it. She recognizes no difference between the extent of her self and the sky, her self and the lake, her self and the darkness.

Coextensiveness is different from *coexistence*. Things coexist by sharing the same space or happening at the same time. Things are coextensive by “extending over the same space or time” and “coinciding in limits” (OED). Ruth discerns the potential of darkness to dissolve the limits of her lived experience, limits imposed by observable boundaries detected by the eyes or behaviours deemed acceptable by society. Freed from those limits, Ruth experiences reality differently. Here, Robinson marries the penumbra of the unknown with an intuitive feeling of coextensiveness to create an expanded reality that is the foundation of *Housekeeping*, informing the internal lives of the characters and the external parameters of the landscape and setting.

Reality in Housekeeping

The book’s title suggests that the action of the story will take place in a house, a traditional domestic sphere (the kitchen, the bedroom, the garden). But, the narrative actually occurs in the interaction between the house and the wider landscape. From the outset, Robinson alerts the reader that Fingerbone, *Housekeeping*’s hometown, cannot be pinpointed at any single time or location. It is a place with “puzzling margins,” defined just as much by its current landscape of

mountains and lakes as it is by the shapes these have taken in the past (4). Future transformations are also anticipated by the annual flooding and receding water. Fingerbone is in seasonal flux between the lake, “the old lake” located deeper within it, and “the water suspended in sunlight” (9). There are no limits between the lake and the land because the water is constantly moving, sometimes literally overrunning the boundaries of the lake by flooding, but always engaging in the regular process of evaporation, moving from lake to sky to land and back again.

A state of instability permeates the events in *Housekeeping*. But it is a specific kind of instability: not random or chaotic but contained in a cycle where things may change states of being, but nothing is ever lost. The amount of water on earth never changes. It is finite, but it constantly changes form. Robinson connects this water cycle to the human experience of loss. “It seem[s] to me that what perishe[s] need not also be lost,” Ruth says (124). She imagines a “net” (91) that catches all the “fallen buttons and misplaced spectacles” and reclaims lost “neighbours and kin” (92), suggesting that no person or thing ever truly disappears, they simply enter a realm less comprehensible, invisible to the eye. What bonds Ruth and her aunt, Sylvie, and differentiates them from Lucille and the general society of Fingerbone, is their ability to feel “the life of perished things” (124).

Robinson expresses this seemingly paradoxical idea – the “life” of the “perished” – by continually dissolving the natural boundaries between things and playing with their relative scale and perceived value. The house slowly becomes overtaken by the landscape. Large features of the physical landscape are described as interchangeable with small domestic tools. Primary characters are deceased but never lose presence in the story. The narrative perspective itself shifts seamlessly from present tense to memory to stream of consciousness, never distinguishing “between thinking and dreaming” (215).

Sylvia, *Housekeeping's* quintessential figure of domesticity, takes great pleasure in the “ordinary” tasks of housekeeping even after her husband’s and daughter’s tragic deaths (10). For the five years between her daughter, Helen’s, suicide and her own death, Sylvia expertly mothers her two granddaughters, Ruth and Lucille. She maintains the house according to typical standards and follows the natural schedule that motherhood and housekeeping requires, “breakfast time, supper time, lilac time, apple time” (13). But after her death, Ruth and Lucille are left in the hands of their aunt. Under Sylvie’s supervision, the house virtually becomes part of the landscape because she does not follow the same rigorous schedule of domestic maintenance Sylvia did. She relies only on natural light, never turning the lamps on so that they must eat dinner in the darkness of “boundless evening” (100). She “open[s] doors and windows” and leaves them open, making the house “attuned to the... particularities of weather” (85). They end up with “crickets in the pantry, squirrels in the eaves, sparrows in the attic” (99). She moves furniture into the front yard to air out and then leaves it there (86). She fails to maintain the boundary between indoors and outdoors until the house becomes so integrated into the watery landscape that it appears it might “begin to float” (125).

Robinson applies ambiguity to the characters as well. *Housekeeping's* characters are not separate entities but an “array of the aspects of a single personality” (Belles Lettres). Each person is just a “spirit passing through the world” and can be placed on a continuum or cycle of similar people who have come before or will come after (Housekeeping 73). This is clearest with Sylvia and Sylvie, as the similarity of their names suggests. While they appear to be opposites in their home-making processes, they occupy the same space in Lucille’s and Ruth’s lives: mother, caregiver. So does their biological mother, Helen, whom Sylvie begins to “displace” in Ruth’s memory (53). The rotation of mother figures mirrors the cyclical presence of water in the

landscape. Helen exists beneath the surface as the lake within the lake does (she commits suicide by driving her car off a cliff into it), Sylvie, as the current caregiver, is on land in the house, and Sylvia, the ultimate maternal symbol, is floating above, like the evaporated water in the air. In an effort to place herself somewhere along this spectrum, Ruth describes herself as “invisible” (105) and “ghostly” (106), rejecting a stable, individualistic self-definition for a far more malleable relationship to her biological and adoptive mothers, Helen or Sylvie. But, even that form of definitive characterization is denied. Sylvie does not grant her the comfort of telling her she is like herself or her mother. Instead, Sylvie says: “Pretty soon you’ll be as tall as I am” (106). Sylvie anchors Ruth’s lineage in the most generalized terms, reinforcing the ambiguity that both separates and binds the family members.

Because so many of the important people in Ruth’s and Lucille’s lives are deceased, memory plays a role in maintaining their relevance to the story, but also in skewing firm definitions of each character. Ruth’s thirst for a connection with her mother is obstructed by memory, which is “fragmented, isolated, and arbitrary” (*Housekeeping* 53). Ruth and Lucille argue over their differing memories of their mother, creating two people out of one. For Lucille, their mother is an “abandoned” widow who died in an accident. For Ruth, she is an “abandoner” who tended to them with indifference (109). Emphasizing the amorphous nature of memory, Ruth remembers the face of a stranger she sees through the window of a passing train “neither less nor differently” than she remembers her own mother (55). Because memory is ambiguous, it cannot be relied upon for qualitative evaluation of the importance of one memory in comparison to any other memory. Just as water exists in various states without qualitative difference, people and things exist in pieces and fragments of memory that are not more or less important than each other.

As previously described, the scene that solidifies all these forms of ambiguity occurs when Ruth and Lucille stay out overnight alone by the lake. Here the boundlessness of landscape, shelter, character, selfhood, and memory collide. The landscape is described as simultaneously extraordinary and ordinary, close up and endless. The lake appears to be “spread over half the world” but is also as “ordinary as any puddle” (112). It is “in league with the moon” (112) at the same time as it is “distinctively domestic” (113). The mountains are as big as a “dam” and as small as a “pot” (112) and the lake’s shallows are compared to the “unswept corners of a house” (113). Similarly, the horizon is both “film” like (112) and “calligraphic” (113), contrasting a large production with an intimate and handmade form of communication. These dichotomous descriptions of the landscape serve both to contain the vast lake and mountains and to disassemble the borders between the domestic and the geographic. Robinson moves back and forth between intimate spaces and global spaces as though there is no difference in their scale, importance or meaning. These spaces are all on one borderless continuum from house to sky to beyond. As soon as boundaries between these spaces are asserted, they automatically fail.

As night approaches, Ruth and Lucille build a shelter out of driftwood, fir limbs, and stone. It falls over twice while being built and can only be inhabited “cautiously” (114). Lucille, attempting stability or ownership, writes her name in pebbles in front of it. Of course, the structure fails, physically by collapsing and metaphorically by proving insufficiently definitive of the boundaries between human space and the great outdoors. Notably, Robinson describes this failure as “human boundaries” being “overrun” (115). She places the burden of proof on the “human,” implying that the boundaries are not preexistent or predetermined, but humanly constructed at best. Lucille sees the failed shelter and the uninhibited approach of wildlife as an assault on her rightful human domain, but Ruth accepts the inevitability of their cohabitation. For

her, as for Robinson, the nighttime accentuates a truth she already knows: “everything that falls upon the eye is apparition, a sheet dropped over the world’s true workings” (116).

In darkness, observable boundaries disappear as the eye no longer detects lines, space, distance. Other senses take over and release the constraints sight imposes. Here, Ruth experiences the aforementioned coextensiveness. Ruth discovers that, although her childhood has largely been defined by loss, she can connect to a definition of her self that is not labeled as unfortunate by society or inhibited by the uncertainty of memory. If the lake is at once a puddle and the size of the moon, then she too is as small as her individual body and as large as the darkness. Feeling invisible then becomes a powerful connection to the people of her memory instead of a form of alienation from society. Ruth realizes that reality exists far beyond what is visible and this understanding helps heal her sense of loss and build her identity.

Recall that the landscape is measured in terms both intimate and universal, domestic and global. Robinson’s use of scale not only plays with the relative size of things, it also comments on their relative value. When a large object is brought down to human scale, as when a mountain is described like a pot (112), it may be interpreted as a devaluation of the large thing, a demystification of the universal. But the opposite is also true, if not more important in this case. The pot is raised to the level of the mountain. The ordinary becomes universal and valuation becomes irrelevant, particularly when it comes to an object present in memory.

Ruth’s experience in the darkness leads her to believe that “relic,” “remnant,” and “memory” need not be clung to if the kind of perception that exists in darkness is permanent (116). Relics only hold value to those who cherish them and memories are unreliable, as Lucille’s and Ruth’s frequent arguments over what their mother looked and acted like illustrate. But in coextensiveness of the kind Ruth feels in the darkness, nothing is devalued or lost. Death

is acknowledged because the passing of Ruth's and Lucille's grandparents and mother is traumatic in their lives, but loss is reevaluated.

Ruth describes her memories as things she can "hold in [her] hand" like a china cup or an apple (124). Consider those analogies. A china cup is made from clay and perhaps bone, then hardened with fire, materials that are elemental and timeless in their use and application. An apple is as basic as the ABC's but as emblematic as Adam and Eve. Robinson's apple has "an affinity with the deep earth" and "a trace of the perfume of its blossoming" (124). The apple is placed within its own genealogy in a circular reference that points from the apple to the seed to the blossom and back to the apple. Although the apple is an object that can be held in the hand, it is inseparable from its origin and its future, containing both the scent of its blossom and the seeds for its progeny. Similarly, people move from life to death but remain somewhere along a continuum of existence far more completely than relics or memories indicate. Robinson calls this the "life of perished things" (124) and the "presence unperceived" (122), both of which rely on feelings and sensation, not material objects or visible observation.

Just as she shifts seamlessly from a pot to a mountain, Robinson blurs the line between living and deceased presence. Presence is determined and evaluated by the intensity of the personal experience, not the ostensible reality of physical existence. When Ruth is having her experience in the darkness by the lake, Sylvie, who is still alive but back at the house, comes to "haunt" Ruth in her dreams alongside "ghosts" of Helen and Sylvia, who are deceased (116). At the same time, Ruth also hears Lucille "pacing and whistling" in the darkness right beside her (116). It does not matter who is deceased, alive, or physically present; Ruth's experience of their presence is what matters.

More than simply describing the experience of presence beyond the visible or knowable, Robinson ties absence and presence together. Absence opens the door to a deeper awareness of presence and it is suggested there is even more value or truth in an experience of “presence in absence” than physical presence itself (*When I Was a Child* 20). When Edmund dies, his young daughters cling to their mother not because they are “afraid she [will] vanish” as he has, “but because his sudden vanishing [has] made them aware of her” (12). Similarly, Ruth asks: “when do our senses know any thing so utterly as when we lack it?” (152). In both cases, physical absence yields greater sensitivity to other forms of presence. Ruth sees her mother everywhere, “whole and in fragments, a thousand images of one gesture” (163). Once again, Robinson deploys juxtaposition of small and large to illustrate the meaninglessness of scale and quantity. Ruth’s memory of just “one gesture” is rich enough to evoke “a thousand images” and beckon the presence of her mother without the need for intermediaries like photographs or mementos. “It is better to have nothing,” Ruth asserts (159). No thing can accurately embody the experience of feeling her mother’s presence. This heightened appreciation for the experiential over the material is a core value shared by Sylvie and Ruth, but rejected by Lucille. This shared value makes it possible for Sylvie and Ruth to leave their house behind, jump a train, and live as transients, while remaining meaningfully connected to Lucille, who stays behind in Fingerbone, and to the other family members who have died.

In detailing Sylvie’s and Ruth’s ability to remain connected, I risk missing the point entirely. It is impossible not to be connected. Robinson’s manipulations of scale, value, and meaning point to the limitations of observable reality and are meant to entirely dissolve the borders between objects or people, not merely construct alternative cross-border connections between them. This is precisely the discovery Ruth makes in the darkness. A deep

understanding of Robinson's point here renders connection unnecessary because coextension implies a far more comprehensive kind of connectivity than a line from one thing to another. The lake within the lake is connected to the evaporated water in the sky, but not through a linear connection between single water drops. The water is connected through a process, a cycle. This is the same way that Ruth is connected to her deceased mother. Not via supernatural communication, but because they are each part of the same system, part of the same substance. Their connection need not be constructed or maintained (through the limited means of relics or memory) because it always exists. Sylvie and Ruth have the ability to feel it; Lucille does not.

Without vilifying Lucille, we can use this difference between her and Ruth as an entry point to the larger implications of presence and reality in *Housekeeping*. Sylvie and Ruth are doing more than just rejecting normative domestic roles and familial relationships when they burn down their house and leave Lucille and Fingerbone behind. Their experientialism gives them insight into a reality that Lucille and the rest of Fingerbone's residents do not understand. Robinson explains that by refusing to take "the impress of society," Sylvie "expresses the fact that human nature is replete with nameless possibilities and, by implication, that the world is accessible to new ways of understanding" (When I Was a Child 92). Ruth shares Sylvie's innate ability to experience the world in this way, so she chooses to leave with Sylvie rather than stay with Lucille. In so doing, she makes a "radical choice about whose terms of reality she will accept" (Hedrick 2). What are the implications of this choice? Why is Ruth's and Sylvie's ability to understand reality in a larger way important in a political sense?

The Politics of *Housekeeping*

For Robinson, community "consists very largely of imaginative love for people we do not know or whom we know very slightly" (When I Was a Child 21). Community is shaped by the

imagination; the larger the imagination, the more inclusive the community. And, as mentioned earlier, the more “generous” the imagination, the more “healthy and humane” the community (When I Was a Child 21). Therefore, personal experiences of reality have implications beyond the individual. Comfort in a small vision of reality causes, what Robinson calls, “inappropriate certainty” which has “atrocious” societal consequences (On Beauty 135). If one’s view of reality is limited, relying entirely on what is visible or what are offered as common truths and ideas, a variety of other possible realities are erased. Robinson insists that there are “thousands of different ways of thinking about things” (Schaub 243) and that homogeneity is only a myth that “hardens and contracts” the idea of community (When I Was a Child 25).

Importantly, Robinson defines the domestic sphere as crucial to the formation of a person’s view of community. She states: “The shrinking of imaginative identification which allows such things as shared humanity to be forgotten always begins at home” (When I Was a Child 26). This gives some clue as to why Robinson titled the novel “Housekeeping,” when it appears to be a book about anything but domestic duties. The home is the fundamental building block of a community structure. When compassionate imagination, respect, and love for others is not taught at home, the “institutions of society – law, journalism, education, and religion” are endangered (When I Was a Child 32).

When Lucile chooses to go live with her Home Economics teacher instead of remaining under Sylvie’s care (Robinson intends no irony here), she chooses to stay within the confines of Fingerbone, a place that has longstanding opposition to anyone who threatens its carefully guarded principles of community. Being on a rail line, Fingerbone often receives visits from “hobos” and transients who set up temporary residence in shacks and abandoned huts by the lake, before catching the next train to another such place (179). While initially given “pity or

charity” these people are never made part of the community (178). They are “terrifying as ghosts” who haunt the town (179). In fact, Sylvie’s and Ruth’s real crime in Fingerbone’s mind is showing themselves to be “unredeemed” transients through their odd behavior and alternative housekeeping habits (177). Consistent with how they treat the transient strangers, Fingerbone is not initially hostile to Sylvie and Ruth. The townspeople offer support with visits and casseroles. Even the Sheriff can be seen as a generally benign authority figure, apologetically enforcing his power with the intent to keep the children safe. But, Fingerbone is ultimately exclusionary because its notion of community is too rigid to allow room for alternative versions of family life and domesticity.

Note too that the transients are not welcomed into the center of the town but are relegated to the lake. Every event that occurs outside the socially acceptable order of Fingerbone occurs at or near the lake. The tragic train accident that takes Edmund’s life happens in the lake. Helen commits suicide by driving her car into the lake. When Lucille and Ruth skip school, they go to the lake. Sylvie spends her afternoons at the lake instead of in the house tending to traditional duties of housekeeping. When Ruth and Sylvie leave town, there is some speculation that they have fallen into the lake and drowned (213). The lake is an open space shared by the less accepted members of society and by the famously dead Edmund and Helen. With its deeper lake within and its connection to the sky, as discussed earlier, it is a template for a more inclusive society. The lake encourages imagination by both its literal scale, including its unknown depths, and its constant intrusion into Fingerbone’s order and domesticity through flooding. It embodies both presence and absence in Fingerbone, holding a history of tragic death while also supplying the town with water, a necessity for life. Regardless, Fingerbone defines itself in opposition to

the lake. All those who are othered belong to the lake, not the town. Othering is one symptom of an unimaginative and constrained understanding of reality.

Robinson contrasts contemporary ideas of the “other” with that of 19th century American writers. Whitman’s outsider is “a visionary” and Thoreau’s is a “critic” (When I Was a Child 92). But now people who are “less shaped and constrained by society are assumed to be disabled and dangerous” (When I Was a Child 93). Robinson identifies this as a “fearful and anti-democratic idea” that threatens the foundations and potential of American Democracy. Whom a nation or society chooses to include in or exclude from their community is greatly influenced by their notion of reality and the limits and boundaries they prescribe as a result. A small-minded approach to reality produces exclusion; imaginative reality on the scale that Robinson presents it engenders inclusion.

In her article about Barack Obama’s presidential legacy, “A Proof, a Test, an Instruction,” written in 2017 for *The Nation*, Robinson writes that “the idea of the organic society, united by blood, faith, language, and culture, attractive as it may sound, actually tears societies apart, since some intolerable difference can always be found” (20). Any rigid definitions of community are inherently problematic because they draw strict lines which inevitably cause othering. But imagine the potential for inclusion and equality if the broad and encompassing notions of reality that Robinson imbeds in her fiction were applied to social consciousness and politics. If the “genius of democracy” is “respect for people in general” (Schaub 238), imagine if that respect was informed by an open and holistic understanding of reality, an understanding of the importance of both what is known and what is unknown, who is known and who is unknown. Think about the power of Robinson’s ideas about the intrinsically hypothetical nature of narrative to refute Trump-era rhetoric. Or the value of coextensiveness for

defining community as an antidote to the rise of global right-wing populist movements. In all these scenarios, Robinson's fiction and non-fiction emerge as a beacon of insight with inarguable relevance to the current political climate. *Housekeeping* is most powerful when read as a study in human potential, a template of a reality that is imaginative, compassionate, and rich with possibility.

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