Mapping Lived Spaces and Spaces Between 'Good' and 'Bad' Girls in Margaret Atwood's 'The Robber Bride'
Shelley Kulperger, Department of English, University of Queensland

'Transgression', 'cartography', 'deterritorialization' and 'nomadism' are just some of the 'spatial' metaphors and critical models that have come, recently, to dominate cultural and critical theory. These invocations of spatial poetics and politics give us a reason to consider what the poststructuralist celebration of what functions, metaphorically, as a non-fixed, domestic, outside might mean to feminist concerns over gender, subjectivity and space. Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride provides a 'map' for exploring some of these concerns through the protagonists of her text who are crudely characterised and stereotyped as 'good' and 'bad' girls and through the particular emphasis on domestic and urban space. In a critical examination of essentialised female subjectivity, much of Atwood's recent work looks to the historical foundations of 'good' and 'bad' femininity, of 'Angels-in-the-House' and femmes fatales, of malicious Medusas and drowning Ophelias. In The Robber Bride, these models of femininity carry their historical references but also emphatically arise out of routine spatial practices and belongings.

Typically Atwoodian, The Robber Bride is a curious generic mix. Part Gothic, detective and romance, it is mostly pure, unadulterated Soap Opera. A tale of deceit, jealousy, betrayal and revenge, (not to mention catfights), The Robber Bride is undeniably pleasurable. The narrative shifts from each of the three 'good' girl's perspective (Tony, Roz and Charis) and tells each of the woman's history with Zenia, the 'bad' girl, who befriends the women at various times, 'steals' their men and shatters their domestic happiness. Despite the 'good' women's desire to 'other' Zenia and see themselves as innocent victims of her wiles, their unfolding narratives underscore not only their reliance on Zenia but their collusion, and thus resemblance, with her. This attempt to distance the 'other' woman from the self is metaphorised largely through the different relations Zenia and her 'victims', Tony, Roz, and Charis, have to space. Mapping and spatial boundaries dominate much of the story. Apart from it being set in Toronto and referring to 'real' places within the city, the text focuses on distinctly differentiated homes and workplaces. The differentiation between public and private spaces informs the women's different productions of self and encodes a rigidly conservative line between transgressive (non-domestic, public) and licit (domestic, private) female identities.

Each of the 'good' girl's sense of self is forged in domestic space and routine. The location of each woman's home keys into the way the city itself divides spaces and identities. Charis (previously known as Karen) the New-Age hippie resides in the pastoral setting of the Toronto Island, home to 'alternative' hippy denizens and communities; Roz (also known as Rosalind) lives in the affluent, WASP, old-money locale of Rosedale, an area of the city that she imagines Charis will get picked up in as a bag lady; and Tony is part of the historical and elite university community with its turreted Gothic buildings and homes. Significantly, the main crisis of each woman's life is the invasion of her domestic space. Of no fixed address, present on balconies, in windows and doorways (and breaking through them), Zenia is the literal homeless fringe-dweller and explicit transgressor while Roz, Tony and Charis are 'homebodies' (1).

The 'difference' between 'good' and 'bad' femininity is therefore reinforced in each woman's practice as flanêuse of the city streets. The flanêur, as epitomised in the writing of Baudelaire and Benjamin, has long made 'tricky' woman's presence in urban space. Elizabeth Wilson's extensive work on nineteenth century London has demonstrated how, as a labyrinth to be discovered and penetrated and with its indeterminate masses, representations of the city have long conjured female corporeality, sexuality and subjectivity. The transcendent gaze and aloof stroll of urbane, modernist flanêurs like Benjamin and Baudelaire marked, exclusively and unmistakably, the desire of a masculine voyeur and wanderer. And as Wilson points out, "prostitutes and prostitution recur continually in the discussion of urban life, until it almost seems as though to be a woman in the city, is to become a prostitute - a public woman" (282). The intertwining of city space and female subjectivity fixes a stratified notion of Woman and ays the foundations for the specific performance of proper and improper femininity.
With her "long white throat, [...] dark, electric hair, [...] left eyebrow quirked, [...] mulberry-coloured mouth curved up in that maddening, secretive smile" (95), Zenia fulfills most conspicuously a nineteenth century vision of the femme fatale. Unlike Roz, Tony and Charis, she belongs to the city space. Calling her a "street fighter," Roz remarks that "the chattering voices, the smoke and wine fumes, the thick breath-filled city are all working for Zenia" (101, 66). Both street fighter and streetwalker, throughout the text Zenia is connected, implicitly or explicitly, to the city and to prostitution. As Wilson stresses: "Woman is present in cities as temptress, as whore, as fallen woman, as lesbian, but also as virtuous womanhood in danger, as heroic womanhood who triumphs over temptation and tribulation" (283). It is a historical formulation very much at work in the spatial politics and practices of The Robber Bride. Against the 'public' womanhood of Zenia, the three women's inscription of cityspace as unsuitable marks their 'selves' as domestic, chaste and private or heroic, endangered womanhood.

The opening chapters of the text recount each woman's difficult history with Zenia and detail the events of the morning leading up to a lunch date between the three at the 'Toxique' where they encounter the 'reincarnated' Zenia. Of course, this is a 'bad' part of town - beyond each of the 'good' women's normal habitat; it is Zenia's turf... (2). Roz, Tony and Charis understand their rendezvous to 'The Toxique' - subtly named - as exotic, dangerous and adventurous. Their route to the café exhibits similar dangers. For example, Tony keeps to the outside of the sidewalk, away from the walls and the ragged figures who lean against them. Ostensibly they want small change, but Tony sees them in a more sinister light. They are spies, scouting the territory before a mass invasion; or else they are refugees, the walking wounded, in retreat before the coming onslaught. Either way she steers clear. Desperate people alarm her, she grew up with two of them. They'll hit out, they'll grab at anything. (26)

Charis "heads out onto the street, trying not to breathe too much" (61). Meanwhile, Roz "parks the Benz in an outdoor lot off Queen and hopes that nobody will flatten her tires, jimmy her trunk, or scratch her clean, recently polished dark blue paint" (97). Darting across the street to meet Tony and Charis, Roz is "conscious of a dozen shadowy forms, out there on the sidewalk, huddled, cloth-covered shapes, undernourished red eyes sizing her up, calculating whether she's good for a touch" (98). Not only is the reader amazed that they made it - (and residents of Toronto will recognise the hyperbole) - but these encounters establish the city as an inhospitable, threatening place for women - or at least women of a certain class. Sharon Marcus argues that there are "rules and structures which assign people to positions within a script" (392). For Marcus, a "gendered grammar of violence" ascribes women as "subjects of fear, [...] precipitates all violence and agency outside of its subject" and "entails a complete identification of a vulnerable, sexualised body with the self" (394). Indeed Roz, Tony and Charis are totally disempowered in the city and, in their classed fear of homelessness, demonstrate how their mobility in the city produces discrete subjectivities: struggling heroically through the morass of decay, desperation and danger, they are neither homeless nor are they the Zenia model of 'public', street-fighting, walking woman.

Because the three protagonists produce themselves as prey in the city, they continually work to separate themselves from the 'otherness' of cityspace. Against the mastering overview of the transcendent figure, Michel de Certeau has quarantined 'egalitarian' space for the 'wandersmänner' who, down below, "follows the thicks and thins of an urban text without being able to read it"(93). Throughout The Robber Bride, the three 'good' women miniaturise and distance the city and its bodies. Charis "would rather look at the city than go there, even at dusk" because once "she's in it she can no longer see it; or she sees it only in detail, and it becomes harsher, pockmarked, crisscrossed with grids, like a microscopic photograph of skin" (43). Marvelling at the city-at-a-distance, Charis thinks:

From here on the Island, the city is mysterious, like a mirage, like the cover on a book of science fiction. A paperback. It's like this at sunset too, when the sky turns burnt orange and then the crimson of inner space, and then indigo, and the lights in the many windows change the darkness to gauze; and then at night the neon shows up against the sky and gives off a glow, like an amusement park or something safely on fire. The only time Charis doesn't care to look at the city is noon, in the full glare of the day. It's too clear-cut, too brash and assertive. It juts, it pushes. (43)
Tony is likewise more comfortable walking in Chinatown where she feels she is the right height and she spends her spare time making three-dimensional models of battle sites in order to "see the world from above" (113). Roz too maps the world from a transcendent view. From her office, she looks down upon Charis's island house and, looking north, surveys the university, picturing Tony's turreted home behind it. Enforcing her singular vision from the centre, Roz notes that "seen from the air the three of them form a triangle" with her "as their apex" (289-290).

These practices of cityspace reinforce the distinction of the citydweller from an essentially 'good', transcendent, central, private, white and middle-class model of female subjectivity. Charis makes this distinction literal in her fear of breathing in the contaminating matter of Zenia. The body as a space is imagined in Charis's sense of the permeability of her sexualised and victimised body, extending to a continual concern over the edges of her 'self'. She fears breathing in the molecules that have been "sucked in and out" of others lungs. Trying to put a new age spin on her fear of bodily contamination, Charis meditates that "we are all a part of everyone else," but then "suddenly has an unpleasant idea": "If everyone is part of everyone else, then she herself is part of Zenia. Or the other way around. Zenia may be what she's breathing in. The part of Zenia that went up in smoke that is" (55-56). Drawing on Julia Kristeva's notion of abjectivity, Judith Butler defines this safeguarding of inner and outer as an excreting process in which, literally, "Others become shit" (134). Zenia is the waste material that must be expelled from the contained, pure body and self in a technology of 'good' femininity.

It is no surprise that Zenia's body, belonging as it does to the city, figures as a space, a container. She is twice (ostensibly) reduced to an urn and she is the container for 'unruliness' for the 'good' female self. Zenia functions the same way that the names 'Tnomerf Ynot' and 'Karen' do for Tony and Charis - as both receptacle and prosthetic device. Tony declares that she "will be Zenia's right hand because Zenia is certainly Tony's left one," and it s the left hand that is the "taller, stronger, more daring" side of 'Tnomerf Ynot'. Slipping into Zenia's body forces Charis to recognise Karen, the side of her that is powerful, sexual and self-affirming. When Zenia/Karen "blends into her body," Charis desires and "instead of ministering to [Billy], she wants something back" (266-67). Zenia's glib "Fuck the Third World!" receives "an answering beat" in Roz, a "sort of echo, an urge to go that fast be that loose, that greedy herself, too" (98). 'To be that bad' could be added to Roz's desires. In othr words, it is through Zenia that each of the women experiences but mostly externalises what is characteristically denied virtuous womanhood: strength, daring, greed, sexual desire and activity - a foul mouth.

But Zenia holds more than the unwanted or repressed aspects of innocent femininity; she also holds the responsibility for each of the women's domestic, marital breakdown. Neither of the good women's partners, Billy, West and Mitch, can be blamed for their dalliances since being seduced by Zenia is, as Tony explains, like "being run over by a truck" (190). West is 'zombiefied' twice by Zenia and Mitch shows up after Zenia "looking like an empty sack" (378). This construction of the blameless male invokes a public/private split so that private and domestic relationships are beyond scrutiny and the home is an otherwise safe and contented haven until invaded by the stalking Zenia. The seductive, corruptive woman arises out of the narrative of matriarchal domestic contentedness and confirms the home-as-haven myth, the outside realm as poisonous and domestic disruption as a wholly external force. The attribution of violence onto the public, outside world works to disguise the abusive relations within the fol of the family as Karen's and Antonia's childhood narratives, explicitly, illuminate. This splitting of public and private signals the way internal and external selves are, for Roz, Tony and Charis, equally compartmentalised.

Because, as Tony laments "people like Zenia can never step through your doorway ... unless you invite them," Roz, Tony and Charis must acknowledge their complicity with and reliance on Zenia. Moreover, they need to acknowledge their own Zenia-like power and its continual deferment within the home and in the context of male-female partnerships. The work that goes into defending the home from the outside and Zenia is also an exercise in keeping their own powerful 'selves' hidden within domestic relationships. Knowing right from the start with Mitch that there were "jumpers and jumpkees, kissers and kissees, and he was to be the
former and she the latter," Roz is aware that being a woman with power means she must suffocate her desires and "diminish herself, pretend she's smaller than she is" (312). Likewise, Tony knows that her academic work as a military historian is deemed an invasion of male territory and she carefully hides this improper and invasive knowledge from West because he "likes to think of her s kind and beneficent" (14). Charis effaces her role as the breadwinner because Billy would take it as an affront to his manhood, preferring to "believe that she's like a lily of the field; she neither toils nor spins; that bacon and coffee are simply produced by her, like leaves from a tree" (217). Atwood strongly implicates men in this polarised construction of female subjectivity. Rather than endorsing a view of angelic, virginal, maternal and nurturing wifehood, Atwood suggest that men must take responsibility too and accept a sexual, strong woman within the private sphere of heterosexual matrimony. The virgin/whore, good/bad, private/public, wife/mistress dichotomy belongs to the amassing types of subjectivities which, in the Atwoodian world, explode.

The unbending boundaries of inner/outer and public/private spaces, selves and others are the primary targets in The Robber Bride. In my reading of The Robber Bride, I suggested that the way subjectivity is experienced, lived and represented relies on historically embedded formulations of gender as well as socio-spatial orderings of self. If the poststructuralist goal is towards a mobile, bordercrossing/dwelling, transgressive, unfixed subjectivity, we are left with some 'what ifs.' If the blurring of clearly delineated spaces and selves is envisaged, this presents some difficulty for academics, presently, and for feminists, perennially: the burden of squaring our 'grand' theories with our everyday lived practices is ever present. There is a problem with taking Zenia - transgressor, non-domestic and public subjectivity - as our model for poststructuralist subjectivity. We run the risk of reinstating a new set of binary pairs - a dynamic Atwood hints at in the new generation of excessively harsh daughters. Paula and Erin, Roz's twin girls, and Augusta, Charis's daughter, clearly are reacting in opposition to their 'good' mothers (3). It is a dichotomization that would (re)place the domestic, contained, interior, private, homebody in subordination to the public, non-domestic, unfixed, exterior in what becomes a newly reiterated public/private hierarchy.

The Robber Bride is good entertainment but the presence of the academic character in the text reminds us that the reach of the text is both popular and academic, beckoning me to move from a facilely occupied and heralded mobile and poststructuralist model of subjectivity towards a grounded, self-reflexive 'politics of location' imagined by Adrienne Rich (4). Doing so offers a multitude of readings of the text and of Zenia. Although I take great pleasure in the spectacular 'Zenias' of the world, and like Tony, am quietly cheering them "On! On!", I want to temper what is taken as an abstract 'model' of subjectivity with a materially and historically embedded context of identities. In other words I want to avoid a tendency to romanticise, appropriate and fetishise a Zenia-like figure of homelessness, transgression, terrorism and marginality. Donna Haraway for one warns that there is "a serious danger of romanticising the vision of the less powerful while claiming to see from their positions. To see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic" (26). And as Meaghan Morris argues, 'the view from below' does not 'emblematically' or automatically entail a liberating impulse (3). Despite the appeal of a deCerteauan faceless and fearless (male?) urban wanderer, we need to acknowledge as Morris does "that there is a need for the overwhelming gaze" in or work as academics - or aspiring ones (3). Like Tony, we still need our maps and models to both overview and unravel the strands of history and the narratives that have kept us 'in place'. That is not to say that the extreme dividing of proper and improper spaces and female selves, as seen in Roz, Tony and Charis, - and even the all-bad Zenia -is warranted but to grant that there may be times that we hold the separation of spaces and definition of boundaries as necessary, ethical and politically valid.

Notes
1. See Donna J. Bontatibus's "Reconnecting with the Past: Personal Hauntings in Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride." (Papers on Language and Literature. 43.4 (Fall 1998): 358-371) for an expansion on the idea of Zenia's liminality.
2. Once the epicentre of the 'punk scene', Queen West is gentrified somewhat although still home to ravers, artists, homeless and other 'unsavouries'; notably, the city's largest mental health institution is situated in this neighbourhood.

Works Cited
Shelley Kulperger, Mapping Lived Spaces and Spaces Between 'Good' and 'Bad' Girls in Margaret Atwood's 'The Robber Bride', Altitude vol 1, 2001.