Sunset Trailer Park
WITH FLORENCE BÉRUBÉ

In this expanded version of a talk he presented in 1997 at an academic conference called “The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness,” Bérubé continued his autobiographical exploration of class and race as categories that shape our daily experience. In dialogue with his stepmother, he recalls his family’s years living in a New Jersey trailer park, including the gradations of status within that community. The essay also provides insight into the origins of Bérubé’s aspirations for class mobility, which included his parents’ hopes for their children and the chance opportunities that entered his life. Here and elsewhere in his personal writing, Bérubé locates himself in a borderland between classes. He continues to try to balance his nostalgia for the past with the recognition of the painful realities of working-class life.

“I cried,” my mother tells me, “when we first drove into that trailer park and I saw where we were going to live.” Recently, in long-distance phone calls, my mother—Florence Bérubé—and I have been digging up memories, piecing together our own personal and family histories. Trailer parks come up a lot.

During the year when I was born—1946—the booming, postwar “trailer coach” industry actively promoted house trailers in magazine ads like this one from the Saturday Evening Post:

TRAILER COACHES RELIEVE SMALL-HOME SHORTAGE THROUGHOUT THE HOUSE-HUNGRY NATION

Reports from towns and cities all over the United States show that modern, comfortable trailer coaches—economical and efficient beyond even the dreams of a few years ago—are playing a major part in easing the need for small-family dwellings. Returning veterans (as students or workers), newlyweds, and all others who are not ready

for—or can't locate—permanent housing, find in the modern trailer coach a completely furnished (and amazingly comfortable) home that offers the privacy and efficiency of an apartment coupled with the mobility of an automobile.

When I was seven, my parents, with two young children in tow, moved us all into a house trailer, hoping to find the comfort, privacy, and efficiency that the "trailer coach" industry had promised. But real life, as we soon discovered, did not imitate the worlds we learned to desire from magazine ads.

Dad discovered Sunset Trailer Park on his own and rented a space for us there before Mom was able to see it. On our moving day in January 1954, we all climbed into our '48 Chevy and followed a rented truck as it slowly pulled our house trailer from the Sunnyside Trailer Park in Shelton, Connecticut, where we lived for a few months, into New York State and across Manhattan, over the George Washington Bridge into New Jersey, through the garbage incinerator landscape and stinky air of Secaucus—not a good sign—then finally into the Sunset Trailer Park in Bayonne.

A blue-collar town surrounded by Jersey City, Elizabeth, and Staten Island, Bayonne was known for its oil refineries, tanker piers, and navy yard. It was a small, stable, predominantly Catholic city of working-class and military families, mostly white with a small population of African Americans.
When we moved there, Bayonne was already the butt of jokes about “armpits” of the industrial Northeast. Even the characters on the TV sitcom *The Honeymooners*, living in their blue-collar world in Brooklyn, could get an easy laugh by referring to Bayonne. “Ralph,” Alice Kramden says to her husband in one episode, “you losing a pound is like Bayonne losing a mosquito.” My mom was from Brooklyn, too. A Bayonne trailer park was not where she wanted to live or raise her children.

Along with so many other white working-class families living in fifties trailer parks, my parents believed that they were just passing through. They were headed toward a *Better Homes and Gardens* suburban world that would be theirs if they worked hard enough. We moved to Bayonne to be closer to Manhattan, where Dad was employed as a cameraman for NBC. He and his fellow TV crewmen enjoyed the security of unionized, wage-labor jobs in this newly expanding media industry. But they didn’t get the income that people imagined went with the status of TV jobs. Dad had to work overtime nights and on weekends to make ends meet. His dream was to own his own house and start his own business, then put us kids through school so we would be better off and not have to struggle so much to get by. My parents were using the cheapness of trailer park life as a stepping-stone toward making that dream real.

As Dad’s job and commuting took over his life, the trailer park took over ours. We lived in our trailer from the summer of 1953 through December 1957, most of my grade school years. And so I grew up a trailer park kid.

Sunset Trailer Park seemed to be on the edge of everything. Bayonne itself is a kind of land’s end. It’s a peninsula that ends at New York Bay, Kill Van Kull, and Newark Bay—polluted bodies of water that all drain into the Atlantic Ocean. You reached our trailer park by going west to the very end of Twenty-fourth Street, then past the last house into a driveway where the trailer lots began. If you followed the driveway to its end, you’d stop right at the waterfront. The last trailer lots were built on top of a seawall secured by pilings. Standing there and looking out over Newark Bay, you’d see tugboats hauling barges over the oil-slicked water, oil tankers and freighters carrying their cargoes, and planes (no jets yet) flying in and out of Newark Airport. On hot summer nights the steady din of planes, boats, trucks, and freight trains filled the air. So did the fumes they exhaled, which, when mixed with the incinerator smoke and oil refinery gasses, formed a foul atmospheric concoction that became world-famous for its unforgettable stench.

The ground at the seawall could barely be called solid earth. The owner of the trailer park occasionally bought an old barge, then hired a tugboat to haul it right up to the park’s outer edge, sank it with dump-truck loads of
landfill, paved it over with asphalt, painted white lines on it, and voila!—several new trailer lots were available for rent. Sometimes the ground beneath these new lots would sink, so the trailers would have to be moved away until the sinkholes were filled in. Trailers parked on lots built over rotten barges along the waterfront—this was life on a geographic edge.

It was life on a social edge, too—a borderland where respectable and “trashy” got confused.

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“Did you ever experience other people looking down on us because we lived in a trailer park?” I ask my mom.

“Never,” she tells me.

“But who were your friends?”

“They all lived in the trailer park.”

“What about the neighbors who lived in houses up the street?”

“Oh, they didn’t like us at all,” she says. “They thought people who lived in trailers were all lowlife and trash. They didn’t really associate with us.”

In the 1950s, trailer parks were crossroads where the paths of poor, working-class, and lower-middle-class white migrants intersected as we temporarily occupied the same racially segregated space—a kind of residential parking lot—on our way somewhere else. Class tensions—often hidden—structured our daily lives as we tried to position ourselves as far as we could from the bottom. White working-class families who owned or lived in houses could raise their own class standing within whiteness by showing how they were better off than the white residents of trailer parks. We often responded to them by displaying our own respectability and distancing ourselves from those trailer park residents who were more “lower class” than we were. If we failed and fell to the bottom, we were in danger of also losing, in the eyes of other white people, our own claims to the racial privileges that came with being accepted as white Americans.

In our attempt to scramble “up” into the middle class, we had at our disposal two conflicting stereotypes of trailer park life that in the 1950s circulated through popular culture. The respectable stereotype portrayed residents of house trailers as white World War II veterans, many of them attending college on GI loans, who lived with their young families near campuses during the postwar housing shortage. In the following decades, this image expanded to include the predominantly white retirement communities located in Florida and the Southwest. In these places, trailers were renamed “mobile” or “manufactured” homes. When parked together, they formed private worlds where white newlyweds, nuclear families, and retirees lived.
in clean, safe, managed communities. You can catch a glimpse of this world in the 1954 Hollywood film *The Long, Long Trailer*, in which Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz spend their slapstick honeymoon hauling a house trailer cross-country and end up in a respectable trailer park. (The fact that Arnaz is Cuban American doesn't seriously disrupt the whiteness of their Technicolor world—he's assimilated as a generally "Spanish" entertainer, an ethnic individual who has no connection with his Cuban American family or community.)

A conflicting stereotype portrayed trailer parks as trashy slums for white transients—single men drifting from job to job, mothers on welfare, children with no adult supervision. Their inhabitants supposedly engaged in prostitution and extramarital sex, drank a lot, used drugs, and were the perpetrators or victims of domestic violence. With this image in mind, cities and suburbs passed zoning laws restricting trailer parks to the "other side of the tracks" or banned them altogether. In the fifties, you could see this "white trash" image in B-movies and on the covers of pulp magazines and paperback books. The front cover of one "trash" paperback, *Trailer Park Woman*, proclaims that it's "a bold, savage novel of life and love in the trailer camps on the edge of town." The back cover, subtitled *Temptation Wheels*, explains why trailers are the theme of this book.

Today nearly one couple in ten lives in a mobile home—one of those trailers you see bunched up in cozy camps near every sizable town. Some critics argue that in such surroundings love tends to become casual. Feverish affairs take place virtually right out in the open. Social codes take strange and shocking twists. . . . "Trailer Tramp" was what they called Ann Mitchell—for she symbolized the twisted morality of the trailer camps. . . . This book shocks not by its portrayal of her degradation—rather, by boldly bringing to light the conditions typical of trailer life.

This image has been kept alive as parody in John Waters's independent films; as reality in Hollywood films such as *Lethal Weapon*, *The Client*, and *My Own Private Idaho*; and as retro-fifties camp in contemporary postcards, posters, T-shirts, and refrigerator magnets.

I imagine that some fifties trailer parks did fit this trashy stereotype. But Sunset Trailer Park in Bayonne was respectable—at least to those of us who lived there. Within that respectability, however, we had our own social hierarchy. Even today, trying to position ourselves into it is difficult. "You can't say we were rich," as my mom tries to explain, "but you can't say we were at the bottom, either." What confused things even more were the many stan-
ards by which our ranking could be measured—trailer size and model, lot size and location, how you kept up your yard, type of car, jobs and occupations, income, number of kids, whether mothers worked as homemakers or outside the home for wages. Establishing where you were on the trailer park’s social ladder depended on where you were standing and which direction you were looking at any given time.

To some outsiders, our trailer park did seem low class. Our neighbors up the street looked down on us because they lived in two- or three-family houses with yards in front and back. Our trailers were small, as were our lots, some right on the stinky bay. The people in houses were stable; we were transients. And they used to complain that we didn’t pay property taxes on our trailers but still sent our kids to their public schools.

On our side, we identified as “homeowners” too (if you ignored the fact that we rented our lots), while some people up the street were renters. We did pay taxes, if only through our rent checks. And we shared with them our assumed privileges of whiteness—theirs mostly Italian, Irish, and Polish Catholic, ours a more varied mix that included Protestants. The trailer park owner didn’t rent to black families, so we were granted the additional status of having our whiteness protected on his private property.

The owner did rent to one Chinese American family, the Wongs (not their real name), who ran a Chinese restaurant. Like Desi Arnaz, the presence of only one Chinese family didn’t seriously disrupt the dominant whiteness of our trailer park. They became our close friends as we discovered that we were almost parallel families—both had the same number of children, and Mrs. Wong and my mother shared the same first name. But there were significant differences. Mom tells me that the Wongs had no trouble as Asian Americans in the trailer park, only when they went out to buy a house. “You don’t realize how discriminatory they are in this area,” Mrs. Wong told my mother one day over tea. “The real estate agents find a place for us, but the sellers back out when they see who we are.” Our trailer park may have been one of the few places that accepted them in Bayonne. They fit in with us because they, unlike a poorer family might have been, were considered “respectable.” With their large trailer and their own small business, they represented to my father the success he himself hoped to achieve someday.

While outsiders looked down on us as trailer park transients, we had our own internal social divisions. As residents we did share the same laundry room, recreation hall, address, and sandbox. But the owner segregated us into two sections of his property: left courtyard for families with children, right courtyard for adults, mostly newlyweds or retired couples. In the middle were a few extra spaces where tourists parked their vacation trailers over-
night. Kids were not allowed to play in the adult section. It had bigger lots and was surrounded by a fence, so it had an exclusive air about it.

The family section was wilder, noisier, and more crowded because every trailer had kids. It was hard to keep track of us, especially during summer vacation. Without having to draw on those who lived in the houses, we organized large group games — like Red Rover and bicycle circus shows — on the common asphalt driveway. Our activities even lured some kids away from the houses into the trailer park, tempting them to defy their parents' disdain for us.

We defended ourselves from outsiders' stereotypes of us as lowlife and weird by increasing our own investment in respectability. Trashy white people lived somewhere else — probably in other trailer parks. We could criticize and look down on them, yet without them we would have been the white people on the bottom. "Respectable" meant identifying not with them, but with people just like us or better than us, especially families who owned real houses in the suburbs.

My mom still portrays our lives in Bayonne as solidly middle class. I'm intrigued by how she constructed that identity out of a trailer park enclave confined to the polluted waterfront area of an industrial blue-collar town.

"Who were your friends?" I ask her.

"We chose them from the people we felt the most comfortable with," she explains. These were couples in which the woman was usually a homemaker and the man was an accountant, serviceman, or salesman—all lower middle class, if categorized only by occupation. As friends, these couples hung out together in the recreation hall for birthday, Christmas, and Halloween costume parties. The women visited each other every day, shared the pies and cakes they baked, went shopping together, and helped each other with housework and babysitting.

"There was one woman up the street," my mom adds, "who we were friends with. She associated with us even though she lived in a house."

"Who didn’t you feel comfortable with?" I ask her.

"Couples who did a lot of drinking. People who had messy trailers and didn’t keep up their yards. People who let their babies run around barefoot in dirty diapers. But there were very few people like that in our trailer park." They were also the boys who swam in the polluted brine of Newark Bay and the people who trapped crabs in the same waters and actually ate their catch.

When we first entered the social world of Sunset Trailer Park, our family found ways to fit in and even "move up" a little. Physical location was important. Our trailer was first parked in a middle lot. We then moved up by renting the "top space"—as it was called—when it became available. It
was closest to the houses and farthest from the bay. Behind it was a vacant housing lot, which belonged to the trailer park owner and separated his park from the houses on the street—a kind of "no-man's-land." The owner gave us permission to take over a piece of this garbage dump and turn it into a garden. My dad fenced it in, and my mom planted grass and flowers which we kids weeded. Every year the owner gave out prizes—usually a savings bond—for the best-looking "yards." We won the prize several times.

Yet the privilege of having this extra yard had limits. With other trailer park kids we'd stage plays and performances there for our parents—it was our makeshift, outdoor summer stock theater. But we made so much noise that we drove the woman in the house that overlooked it crazy. At first she just yelled "Shut up!" at us from her second-story window. Then she went directly to the owner, who prohibited the loudest, most unruly kids from playing with us. After a while we learned to keep our own voices down and stopped our shows so we, too, wouldn't be banned from playing in our own yard.

My mom made a little extra money—$25 a month—and gained a bit more social status by working for the owner as the manager of his trailer park. She collected rent checks from each tenant, handled complaints, and made change for the milk machine, washers, and dryers. "No one ever had trouble paying their rent," Mom tells me, adding more evidence to prove the respectability of our trailer park's residents.

Our family also gained some prestige because my dad "worked in TV" as a pioneer in this exciting new field. Once in a while he got tickets for our neighbors to appear as contestants on the TV game show Truth or Consequences, a sadistic spectacle that forced couples to perform humiliating stunts if they couldn't give correct answers to trick questions. Our neighbors joined other trailer park contestants who in the fifties appeared on game shows like Beat the Clock, Name That Tune, You Bet Your Life, and especially Queen for a Day. The whole trailer park was glued to our TV set on nights when our neighbors were on. We rooted for them to win as they became celebrities right before our eyes. Even the put-down "Bayonne jokes" we heard from Groucho Marx, Ralph Kramden, and other TV comics acknowledged that our town and its residents had at least some status on the nation's cultural map.

My dad wasn't the only trailer park resident who gained a little prestige from celebrity. There was a musician who played the clarinet in the NBC orchestra. There was a circus performer who claimed he was the only man in the world who could juggle nine balls at once. He put on a special show for us kids in the recreation hall to prove it. There was a former swimming champion who lived in a trailer parked near the water. Although he was
recovering from pneumonia, he jumped into Newark Bay to rescue little Jimmy who'd fallen off the seawall and was drowning. He was our hero. And there was an elderly couple who shared a tiny Airstream with twenty-four Chihuahua dogs—the kind pictured in comic books as small enough to fit in a teacup. This couple probably broke the world's record for the largest number of dogs ever to live in a house trailer. You could hear their dogs yip hysterically whenever you walked by.

Trailer park Chihuahua-dog collectors, game show contestants, circus performers—lowlife and weird, perhaps, to outsiders, but to us, these were our heroes and celebrities. What's more, people from all over the United States ended up in our trailer park. "They were well-traveled and wise," my mom explains with pride, "and they shared with us the great wealth of their experience." This may be why they had more tolerance for differences (within our whiteness, at least) than was usual in many white communities during the fifties—more tolerant, my mom adds, than the less-traveled people who lived in the houses.

Dangers seemed to lurk everywhere. To protect us, my parents made strict rules we kids had to obey. They prohibited us from playing in the sandbox because stray cats used it as their litter box. We weren't allowed to walk on the seawall or swim in Newark Bay, in which little Jimmy had nearly drowned and whose water, if we swallowed it, would surely have poisoned us. And they never let us go on our own into anyone else's trailer—or house—or bring any kids into ours.

"Why did you make that rule?" I ask my mom after wondering about it for years.

"Because there were lots of working couples," she explains, "who had to leave their kids home alone with no adult supervision. We didn't want you to get into trouble by yourselves."

But I did break this rule. Once the Chihuahua-dog couple invited me inside their Airstream to read the Sunday comics with them. I went in. But I was so terrified by the nonstop, high-pitched barking, the powerful stench, and my own act of disobedience that I couldn't wait to get back outside.

At other times I visited schoolmates in their homes after school. One was a Polish kid who lived two blocks away in a slightly nicer part of town. His house made me think his family was rich. They had an upstairs with bedrooms, a separate kitchen and dining room, a living room with regular furniture, doors between rooms, a basement, and a garage. I fantasized about moving into his house and sharing a bedroom with him as my brother.
When I visited an Italian boy who lived in a downtown apartment, I learned that not everyone who lived in buildings was better off than we were. Their smelly entry hall had paint peeling from the cracked walls and a broken-down stairway. I was afraid to go upstairs. I visited another schoolmate who lived with his grandfather and a dog inside the Dickensian cabin of a deserted barge on the docks at Newark Bay. They heated their cabin with wood scavenged from the piers and vacant lots nearby. I felt sorry for him because he seemed like the orphans we prayed for in church who had something to do with “alms for the poor.” I visited a boy who lived in another trailer park. He was an only child who was home alone when his parents were at work. I envied his privacy and dreamed about us being brothers, too. At times, I’d even go down to the seawall to watch the bad boys swim in Newark Bay.

 Alone like that with other white boys in their homes or by the water, I sometimes felt erotic charges for them—affective desires that moved up, down, or across our class positions in the form of envy, pity, and brotherliness. Only years later did I learn to identify and group all these feelings together as a generic “homosexual” attraction. Yet that “same-sex” reading of those erotic sparks erased how they each had been differentiated by class and unified by race during my disobedient excursions around Bayonne. Even today, a predominantly white gay identity politics still regards race and class as nongay issues, refusing to see how they have fundamentally structured male homoerotic attractions and socially organized our homosexual relationships, particularly when they’re same-class and white-on-white.

 I wasn’t the only person around who was a little queer.

 “Did I ever tell you about the lesbian couple who lived in the trailer park?” my mom asks me.

 “No, Ma, you never did.”

 I’m stunned that after all these years, she’s just now telling her gay historian son about this fabulous piece of fifties trailer park dyke history coming right out of the pages of her own life!

 “They were the nicest people,” she goes on.

 Grade school teachers. One taught phys. ed., the other taught English. Military veterans. They lived in a trailer bigger than ours over in the adult section. I forget their names, but one dressed like a woman and the other dressed like a man. The woman who dressed like a woman had a green thumb. She kept her trailer filled with house-plants and took good care of them. She did all the housekeeping—the inside work. The woman who dressed like a man did the outside work—waxed the trailer, repaired their truck. In their yard she built
a beautiful patio with a rose arbor and a barbecue—did all the cement work herself. They threw barbecue parties there in the summer—with finger food, hamburgers, and wine. They were lots of fun.

I’m as intrigued by Mom's description of a “woman dressed like a woman” as I am by her description of a “woman dressed like a man.” The logic of seeing the butch partner acting like the man led to Mom seeing the femme partner acting like the woman, rather than just being a woman. Yet this female couple created a domestic relationship that was familiar enough for my parents and their friends to accept as normal. And like the Wongs, their class respectability—in the form of good jobs, large trailer, and well-kept yard—seemed to make up for differences that in other neighborhoods might have set them apart.

“Did you know then that they were lesbians?”

“Oh yeah,” Mom says. “We never talked about it or used that word, but we all knew. They were a couple. Everybody liked them. Nicest people you’d ever want to meet!” The protection of not having their relationship named as deviant allowed these women to fit into our trailer park world.

It was another woman from the adult section who helped nurture my own incipient queerness. On one of the rare nights when my parents splurged by going to the movies, this woman babysat for us. An expert seamstress, she spent her time with us sewing outfits for my sister's Ginny Doll. I was jealous. “Boys can have dolls, too,” she reassured me. Sitting on our sofa with me right next to her eagerly watching her every move, she pieced together a stuffed boy-doll for me (this was years before Ken or GI Joe appeared), then sewed him little pants and a shirt. When my parents saw this present, they let me keep him. For a while I cherished this peculiar toy—a handmade gift that acknowledged my own uniqueness. But before long, “unique” evolved into “weird” and even “queer.” My boy-doll embarrassed me so much that I threw him away.

My parents’ protective rules were based on an important truth. Whenever I went into other people's houses and trailers, or when they came into ours, I did find myself getting into trouble—queer trouble, too.

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Let's Look Inside . . .

No one who has not actually BEEN INSIDE a modern trailer coach can fully appreciate the roominess, convenience and downright comfort to be found there. (A 22-foot trailer is longer than most BIG living-rooms!) Study the illustrations on this page. Imagine yourself seated on that soft couch . . . using that efficient kitchen . . . hanging
your clothes in spacious closets... going to sleep on that well-sprung bed. Here is good living, coupled with freedom from unnecessary obligation and expense—in a Home of Your Own!

—1946 Trailer Coach magazine ad

House trailers were a lot like cars—metal shells built on wheels, manufactured on assembly lines, that varied by price, style, width, and length. As companies produced new models, old ones grew outdated and depreciated in value. If you lived in one trailer for a long time, you lost status, like driving around in an old, run-down car while this year’s newer, shinier, spiffier models passed you by. The older your trailer got, the more important it was that you did what you could to “keep it up.”

Living in our house trailer was like living in a big car. Ours was an eight-by-thirty-six-foot Pacemaker that had been manufactured around 1950. Post-streamline in style but predating the fifties “popu-luxe” fins, it was enamel-painted in a two-tone design—maroon body and top with a cream band around the middle at window level. In the summer it felt like an oven as the sun beat down on our metal roof, until we bought an air conditioner to save us from baking to a crisp. In the fall we were terrified of hurricanes and tornadoes. Like schoolyard bullies, these windstorms have an uncanny ability to seek out all vulnerable trailers in their path so they can turn them over, tear them apart, or crush them under fallen trees.

Inside we had three “rooms.” At the front was a living-dining-kitchen area; in the middle, the bedroom; and at the back, the kids’ room with two bunk beds and a tiny bathroom. There were no real doors separating these areas, because each was a passageway to the next. We had a small TV set in the front room. The rest of our “furniture” was built in: beds, dressers, couch, cabinets, lighting. Freestanding furniture was a status symbol we didn’t enjoy—except for our Formica dinette set and a plastic-covered rocking chair. Stored in the closets, under the beds, and behind things were folding items—a spare chair, a card table—that we brought out whenever company came. Everything was tiny, compact, multipurpose, and convertible. Even today, the lavatories at the rear of jet planes give me an eerie sense of déjà vu.

We quickly adjusted to the restrictions of our cramped living space. Before my mom married, she had made extra money as a piano teacher, so she wanted to teach me piano, too. But no piano would ever fit in our trailer. So she rented a small accordion—we pretended it was a little piano—and sent me to the Police Athletic League up the street to take lessons from a retired policeman. On rainy Saturdays our parents made us go to the all-day kid-
die matinee at the local movie theater, which we loved. This was to get us out of the trailer so we wouldn't drive Mom crazy in that small space. One Christmas my parents gave me a plastic toy house trailer as a present. The roof came off, and inside the layout was identical to our own. It contained a little white family of four, just like ours. This toy was the logical extension of the miniaturization of our lives. And it was small enough to fit in the tiny, tightly packed space under the bunk beds that was reserved for our toys.

In 1955 my mom gave birth to a baby girl. When the baby outgrew her crib, our trailer developed its own housing shortage. My parents' solution was to put my new sister in my bunk bed and put me in their own bed. When they were ready to go to sleep, they moved me to the couch in the front room. Before long, I could wake up in the morning with no memory of having been moved. That's how I started sleepwalking. One night I got out of bed, walked into the front room, and told my parents, who were watching TV, that I had to go to the bathroom. "So go," they said. I turned around, walked over to the refrigerator—which was only slightly smaller than our bathroom—and slowly opened the door. "No!" my parents yelled as they jumped up to stop me from peeing all over the food in the fridge.

In those days I had a recurring dream that I'd found a hidden door in our trailer that opened to a tiny stairway leading up to a space no one knew about which I claimed as my own secret room. Dreams, fantasies, and disorientation were all ways to rearrange the immovable furniture and expand the diminutive interior of our house trailer, which seemed to get smaller as our family grew in size and we kids got bigger.

Most of the trailer park's children went to Roosevelt Grade School, up the street and behind the Police Athletic League. This public school, like Catholic schools, required boys to dress up in uniforms, in our case, a white shirt and tie. But a dress code to make working-class students look respectable did not cover up other differences that were still visible among us.

It was at Roosevelt School in the second grade that I first had African American classmates. When I told my mom about these students by using the n-word, she warned me never to say that word again and to use the word "colored" instead. This is my first memory of being taught to respect people of other races. But the lesson didn't extend far enough for me to learn where the black students lived. I knew it wasn't in our neighborhood. The social distance between our white lives in the trailer park and the lives of the black students in Bayonne remained too great for me to cross, even in my disobedient visits into other boy's homes.

More than once our school used white students—including me—to ex-
tend that racial distance. One Easter week Roosevelt School decided to put on a children’s fashion show for the parents. The producers of the show, who were from a downtown department store, auditioned the students to see who they’d like to use as fashion models. I was among the chosen few because, as they said, I had “dark features” — this in a school with African American students whose “features” were darker than mine but who were not chosen to be fashion models. My school granted me fashion status for my dark features — hair, eyes, and skin — but only because I was white. When I walked down that runway in the school auditorium, I was mortified. Modeling clothes in public was stuff that sissy boys did, and to make things worse, I was wearing clothes my parents couldn’t really afford to buy. Exactly whose fantasies was our school’s fashion show acting out, anyway?

White kids from the houses, trying to position themselves as better than us trailer park kids, experimented with ways to challenge us as not “white enough” or even not “really white.” My own dark “features” made me vulnerable to their name-calling. During the summers, I ran around the trailer park barefoot and shirtless in shorts — a slip in my parents’ commitment to respectability — so my skin reached a dark tan. One day, some white boys from up the street cornered me in the alley beside our recreation hall and started pushing me around. They might have called me a sissy or a host of other names, but this time they taunted me with racial epithets. “Look at the nigger-boy,” I remember one boy saying as he hit me. “Naw, he’s just a monkey-boy,” the other mocked back. They hit me until I denied that I was either of these, then let me run home crying. My experience as the target of their racism was mild compared to what black children had to deal with at school from these same boys. Yet these bullies successfully taught me — a “dark” white child living in a trailer park — that other whites who looked down on us because of where we lived could call my whiteness into question. Ashamed, I kept these and other social injuries to myself, channeling them into desires to learn how to act and look more white and to find other ways to move up and out of this life that more and more felt like a trap I had to escape.

School seemed to offer me the best way out. When I was in the fourth grade, a white university student came by the trailer park to talk to my parents. He was doing a study for his thesis, he told them, and would like their permission to give me and my sister psychological and intelligence tests, for which they would be charged nothing at all. Was he studying the psychology and intelligence of the white working class? Did he pick us because we were in a trailer park or in a blue-collar town? No one remembers. Dad called the
university to make sure he was legit; then my parents agreed to let us be part of his study.

A few days later he came by again. I got in his car, and he drove me to a house in another part of Bayonne where we went upstairs into a dark garret. For hours I described ink blots, put blocks into holes, drew stick figures on paper, and made up stories about what was happening in pictures he showed me. As he drove me back home, we passed by a big street sign for a loan company, and he warned me, “Never, ever borrow money from those people!” I never did.

He reported to my parents that our test results indicated we would do well in school and that we were college material. “It was that young man’s tests,” my mom now explains to me, “that first got us thinking about how we could find a way to send you kids to college.”

My parents’ dreams of someday buying a house, starting a small business, and sending the kids to college were the engines that drove their lives. They pinched pennies, bought cheaply or did without, and developed such schemes for making a little extra money as managing the trailer park or entering contests for the best-looking yard. Saving to buy a house was always their first priority. Next came putting us through school and starting the small business, like our friends who had their own Chinese restaurant, that would get them where they wanted to go with some security and independence.

“It always seemed like a constant struggle,” Mom tells me. “You couldn’t take a breather long enough to feel like you were getting ahead.” She budgeted every cent. She did our back-to-school and other kinds of shopping at John’s Bargain Stores, Two Guys from Harrison, and Robert Hall—where the “values go up, up, up,” and the “prices go down, down, down,” because they’ve got “low overhead,” as their radio jingle went. My sisters wore hand-me-down clothes from each other, our older cousins, and me. We did our part by studying hard in school to get good grades. Illnesses, uninsured dental work, strikes at NBC, a broken-down car, and an exploded hot water heater periodically set their savings plan back to zero or even less.

In 1957 my mother gave birth to another baby girl. Now there were six of us in our little home, pushing our living space to the breaking point. There was no denying that the longer we stayed put, the more we were slipping down rather than moving up. We were a large family packed into a small trailer that looked older every day compared to the brand-new models that
surrounded it. These were two- and even three-bedroom “mobile homes,”
ten feet wide and fifty feet long, with chrome exteriors, screened-in porches,
even double-deckers with an upstairs sleeping “loft.”

“When the new mobile homes were pulled into the park,” my mom tells me, “we’d all go over to the lot and watch them set up—not just the women, but the men, too! Sometimes they’d invite us inside to show us what they had—big kitchens, regular furniture, even a step up from the kitchen to the living room, like a split-level house. Dad would say, ‘Boy, they’ve sure come a long way since we bought ours.’ Then we’d go back to our old trailer, envious.”

On Sunday drives we’d visit model homes at the housing developments
that were sprawling all over the New Jersey suburbs in the late fifties. These
were almost as exciting as going to Disneyland. Our fantasies went wild
as we imagined ourselves living in four-bedroom homes with dens, two-
car garages, and lots of space in layouts packaged as Split-Levels, Colonials,
Ranches, or Cape-Cods. On Sunday nights we drove back to Sunset Trailer
Park. These new homes were too expensive for us to afford.

My parents wanted to buy a house so badly that they, like other upwardly
mobile working-class adults, took a real estate course to learn how to make
money selling houses. They never managed to sell any, but they did learn
how the housing market worked. One day they found an ad for a cheap, run-
down mansion at the edge of a nearby suburb. It had been on the market as
a “White Elephant” for over a year because no one wanted a big old Victo-
rian house during the fifties craze for suburban newness. Combining their
savings with a loan from a real estate broker’s acquaintance, they scraped
together enough money for a down payment, sold the trailer, and finally
moved into their own house. The whole trailer, we wrote our relatives, could
fit into our new front hallway.

Finally we’d escaped the trailer park to begin what became our brief entry
into white middle-class suburban life. The dramatic change was exciting
yet awkward for me, as I mistakenly believed that we’d arrived in the land
of the rich and famous. For my first day as the new kid in school, I dressed
up in my Sunday hat, suit, and tie, expecting to fit into the wealthy world I’d
imagined. Instead, to my horror, I became the laughingstock of the school-
yard. Hearing my foreign-sounding last name (we were “French Canadian”
in the fifties, “Franco-American” now) and seeing me in my peculiar outfit,
the other students somehow got the idea that I’d migrated to their suburb all
the way from Peru. I denied this but knew right away that to fit into this new
world, I had to keep my trailer park past a tightly guarded secret.
It took me a long time to figure out where we'd ended up. But I knew enough to take advantage of the rare opportunities that this high-caliber school system now offered me.

Our suburban dream world lasted only a few years. By 1962 Dad left his job as NBC began replacing its technical crews with automated machinery. My parents sold the house and moved back to Massachusetts to live with Dad's father on the family farm. There they tried to start a small-business bookkeeping service, but it never brought in enough money to live on. When Dad got seriously ill without health insurance and couldn't work, Mom took a job in a local mascara brush factory earning $45 a week. Although they tried very hard, my parents never did save enough to send any of us to college.

"You were smart," my mom tells me now. "Getting a good education was your way out." When in 1964 I graduated from high school with honors and did win a full college scholarship to the University of Chicago, she adds, "you kept up your part of the bargain." The bargain, I think, was that if they worked hard enough and I studied hard enough, we would all succeed. But in 1968, during my senior year, I dropped out of college. A crisis hit me in April as I started to confront my homosexuality before gay liberation, faced class panic when I was rejected for graduate school and didn't know what came next, feared for my own life as I witnessed murders on the streets during the Chicago riots following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and decided to resist the draft rather than fight in Vietnam. The world was coming apart around me, yet I blamed myself for not working hard enough to keep up my part of the bargain. "You had only one chance to get out and you blew it," I remember thinking at the time, still missing the truth that, for both me and my parents, the bargain itself had been a lie.

As the distance from the trailer park grew in years, miles, and class, I began to manipulate my memory of that world so that it carried less shame. In college I met other scholarship students who adapted to our new middle-class surroundings by working their lower-class origins into cool, competitive, "class escape" stories in which they bragged about how far they'd come. I joined in, "coming out" about my trailer park past. Having grown up in Bayonne made my stories—and my ascent—even more dramatic.

By the nineties, a pop culture, retro-fifties nostalgia resurrected and then commodified the artifacts of trailer park life, reworking their meanings into a campy "trash" style. So I unearthed my own trailer park past once again, this time learning how to take an ironic, parodic, "scare quotes" stance
toward it, even using it at times as a kind of white trash cultural—and sexual—currency. I now collect old paperback books, souvenirs, and magazine ads having to do with fifties trailer parks. I love the stuff. And I’m glad that the current fascination with white trash icons, like house trailers, has opened up a public discourse big enough to include my own queer, working-class, trailer park voice. Today I can use that voice—and its identity—to challenge the class-based stereotypes that hurt real people. And I can enjoy the pleasures of campy nostalgia along with the pleasures of cross-class sex experienced from many sides. Now that there’s a new “rock ’n roll fag bar” in San Francisco called White Trash, I get to wonder what I’d wear, who I’d want to be, and who I’d want to pick up if I went there.

But sometimes it’s hard for me to distinguish the camp from the painful realities around which it dances. Ironic distancing has served me as a lens through which I’ve been able to re-view my trailer park past with less shame. But it has so distorted my vision that I misremember the “reality” of that part of my life. I’ve caught myself actually believing that we and our neighbors all had fabulous plastic pink flamingoes in our yards. I am sure—and so is my mom—that none of us ever did.

Lately I’ve searched flea markets for a plastic house trailer just like the one I had as a child. Today it would be a valuable collector’s item, and my desire to find it is partly as a collector. But I also want to see it again because it once pointed this working-class boy’s way out of being embarrassed about how his family lived, showing him that their trailer park life was respectable enough to be made into a mass-produced toy.

Recently, at a gay gift shop on Castro Street in San Francisco, I bought a T-shirt that says “Cheap Trailer Trash” over a picture of a fifties trailer that’s identical to the one I grew up in—except, of course, it has a pink flamingo. I now can be both cool and authentic when I wear this shirt. When people say, “I like your shirt,” I get to say, “Thanks. And it’s true, too.” When some start telling me their own stories of growing up in trailer parks, I can feel us bond around this weird nineties identity that’s built on shared—if distorted—memories rather than on current realities. Sometimes we slip into playing the old class-positioning game. “What kind of trailer did you live in? How wide and how long? How big was your family? Did you own or rent your lot? Did you call it a mobile home? How long did you live there? What kind of trailer park was it? What part of town was it in?” In an inverted form of social climbing, the player with the trashiest past gets to be the winner of this game. We can do this because the distance from our former lives gives us room to play with old degradations as contemporary chic. But back then, actually living inside a trailer park, those who won the game were the
ones who got out for good. Nowadays, trailer park folks still try to get out by playing games—not as TV game show contestants, like our neighbors in the fifties who made fools of themselves for prizes, but as “guests” on so-called “trash” talk shows, like Geraldo, Richard Bey and Jenny Jones, who “win” celebrity, but no prizes, if they can act out the real dramas of their lives as trashy stereotypes, reassuring viewers that it’s someone else who’s really on the bottom.

The whole country looks more like a trailer park every day. As our lived economy gets worse, more jobs are becoming temporary, homes less permanent or more crowded, neighborhoods unstable. We’re transients just passing through this place, wherever and whatever it is, on our way somewhere else, mostly down.

“I get really scared sometimes,” my mom tells me, “that the old days are coming back.” She means the Great Depression days she knew in her childhood, and the trailer park days I knew in mine.

I get scared, too. Without any academic degrees, and with the middle dropping out of the book publishing world as it’s dropping out of everything else, I find it increasingly difficult to survive as a writer. As I approach fifty, I see how closely my economic life history resembles that of my parents as I’m pushed around the edges of lower-middle-class, working-class, and “new Bohemian” worlds. Lately, I’ve been having a perverse fantasy that if times get too tough, I can always retire to a trailer park, maybe in Bayonne.

A few years ago, I actually went back to visit Bayonne, which I hadn’t seen since 1957. I wanted to check my distorted fantasies against a tangible reality, to go back “home” to this source of memories that I mine for insights as I try to understand and fight the race and class divisions that are still tearing our nation apart. I asked my friend Bert Hansen to go with me for support because he also grew up white, gay, and working class. I didn’t wear my “Trailer Park Trash” T-shirt that day. We took the Path train from Christopher Street in Greenwich Village over to Jersey City, rented a car, and drove out to Bayonne.

To my surprise the trailer park was still there, along with every house, store, bar, and restaurant that used to be on our block, all still run by the same families. This was a remarkable testament to the death-defying—and too-often life-threatening—stability of this blue-collar town, despite the enormous social and economic odds working against it.

With my camera in hand, I walked into the trailer park and around both courtyards, taking pictures of the same lots we’d lived in four decades ago.
The place was run down now; many lots were empty and littered with car parts and old boards; almost no one was around. A man washing his car in front of his house up the street told me that the trailer park had just been sold to a condo developer. People who worked in Manhattan, he said, would be moving in because it would be cheaper and convenient for commuting. Up the street Roosevelt Grade School and the Police Athletic League buildings were still standing but closed. Slated for demolition, the school was surrounded by chain-link fence and barbed wire until a new one could be built.

When I walked around the trailer park one last time to take my final pictures, two white boys on bicycles suddenly appeared from around a corner. They followed us, keeping their distance, wary and unfriendly, as if protecting their territory from intruders. Watching them watching me, I realized that the distant memory of my boyhood in this trailer park, which was coming alive as I stood there, was now their hard reality. At first glance they seemed really poor. As a kid who never felt poor, did I sometimes look like they do to outsiders? Surely these boys were much worse off than I had been. They seemed hostile, but why should they be friendly toward me—a total stranger taking pictures of their trailers? I could be there to steal their possessions, or to expose their poverty to outsiders, or to design the condos that would replace their house trailers, forcing them to move against their will. Or I might be a graduate student earning an academic degree, wanting to use them as working-class subjects, like the grad student who came here so long ago to give me and my sister intelligence tests, for free, then disrupting our lives by telling us that our high scores might offer us a way out.

I can still see these two boys looking at me as if I am some kind of spy, which indeed I am. I don't belong here anymore. Their days belonging here are nearly over, too.

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