Neodomestic American Fiction
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In recognition, appreciation, and love:
to my parents, Paul and Bev, my big brother, Kurt,
and my new sister, Karen
Housekeeping ain't no joke.
—Louisa May Alcott, Little Women

And feminism, with its inherently undomesticated place—neither at home nor away from—is uniquely placed to engage in productive forms of domestic deconstruction. The results will never be tidy, but they will always be different.
—Rachel Bowlby, "Domestication"

Either way, I guessed this could be called cultural progress, the new day as played out in neo-domestic neo-realism across the land.
—Frederick Barthelme, Natural Selection
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“Imagined Geographies,” from Seeds of Change: Critical Essays on Barbara

The privately owned, single-family home epitomizes the American dream. This ideal persists despite longstanding disparities in housing access and equity. For example, according to the U.S. Census Bureau only 46 percent of blacks and 48 percent of Hispanics currently own their own homes, whereas Caucasian homeownership remains steady at 75 percent (Callis and Cavanaugh 8). Homeownership rates for Asians are slightly higher than for other minorities, 59 percent, but still well below whites (Kochhar i). Black households, furthermore, have a median net worth of only $5,446, and without home equity, $1,102; in comparison, non-Hispanic white householders’ median net worth is $87,056, and without home equity, $19,079 (Gottschalck 13). Additionally, only 25 percent of female-headed households could afford a modestly priced house in 2004; in contrast, 36 percent of male-headed households and 70 percent of married couples could afford the same moderately priced home (Savage 4). Finally, the downturn in the American housing market and the rise in nationwide foreclosures since 2005 have had disproportionate effects on minorities, erasing gains made in the previous ten years: “From 1995 through the middle of this decade, homeownership rates rose more rapidly among all minorities than among whites. But since the start of the housing bust in 2005, rates have fallen more steeply for two of the nation’s largest minority groups—blacks and native-born Latinos—than for the rest of the population” (Kochhar i).
These discrepancies and the rising foreclosure rates suggest the need to remodel America’s “domestic geographies,” the multifaceted territories that compose American housing and domestic ideology. As an emblem of American success (especially in terms of financial stability) and as a prime location for identity formation, the material and ideological American home presents a critical site for feminist redefinitions and activism. *Neodomestic American Fiction* explores how novels written after 1980 responded to and shaped America’s understanding of home in the midst of the recent boom and bust housing market. In traditional American literary history, women generally write “domestic fiction,” a term that conventionally refers to nineteenth-century novels written by and for women, novels in which the dramatic action focuses on homemaking. *The Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing in the United States* clarifies that domestic fiction is “didactic and exemplary fiction centered in the ‘women’s sphere’ and focusing on the concerns of women’s lives” (Forcey 253). *Neodomestic American Fiction* explores the extent to which writing about the home remains women’s work in the twenty-first century and how the generic and political practices of contemporary American novelists are defined within the domestic sphere. This book defines and analyzes a critical mass of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century novels that renovate the ideal home’s usual depiction by positioning instability—as opposed to stability—as a key structure of quotidian American home life.

When authors, critics, and general readers label a text “domestic fiction,” political questions are in play. The genre’s shifting terms speak to its contested terrain. The collection of nineteenth-century women’s novels that are generally defined as domestic fiction may also be labeled “women’s fiction,” “family romance,” “domestic romance,” “domestic sentimentalism,” and “sentimental fiction.” Today “chick lit” joins the generic labels used to describe and define a range of texts, including domestic fictions. Looking at twentieth-century literature, Deborah Philips crafts a definition of the “Aga-Saga” that sharpens our understanding of domesticity’s gendered contours. As Philips explains, the Aga-Saga’s “generic requirements . . . are that it should center on a female protagonist (middle- or upper middle-class, and middle-aged), that the domestic is fore-grounded and, as in most romantic fiction, that the setting should be rural” (48). Susan J. Schenk’s article “Protest or Pathology: The Politics of Madness in Contemporary Domestic Fiction” likewise connects domestic fiction with women’s experiences. She defines contemporary domestic fiction as “the ‘mad housewife’ novel [that] explores the ways in which this very flexible label is applied to the female protagonists who deviate from social norms” (231).
Domestic novels authored by or focused on men are also assigned various labels (“romances,” “social novels,” and “suburban fictions”). Conspicuously absent from the men’s list is the label “domestic fiction.” While domestic genres are often divided according to the author’s and/or the protagonist’s gender, there are some exceptions. If the story—whether written by or focused on a man or a woman—features a haunted house, the narrative generally falls under the rubric of “gothic fiction.” These generic descriptors, as Michael Kowalski argues about the terms “domestic romance” and “domestic fiction,” are sometimes used interchangeably while they also describe specific genres with unique characteristics.

*Neodomestic American Fiction* sorts various genres and subgenres, selecting novels that feature domestic spaces and protagonists who are concerned with the processes of making home. Whereas traditionally only those novels written by and focused on women are labeled “domestic fiction,” *Neodomestic American Fiction* revises this custom and identifies a new subgenre, neodomestic fiction, which has distinctive spatial characteristics. I use the term “neodomestic fiction” to differentiate from earlier fiction about the home this related but distinct collection of post-1980 novels that exhibit unconventional domestic topographies.

A list of major neodomestic authors and novels is included in the appendix. I found Frederick Barthelme’s use of the term “neodomestic” in *Natural Selection* (1990) after using the term and drafting the bulk of this project. The narrator in this suburban novel remarks, “Either way, I guessed this could be called cultural progress, the new day as played out in neo-domestic neorealism across the land” (60; emphasis in original). While I do not necessarily relate neodomesticity to “cultural progress,” the narrator and I both utilize the term to mark a new age for domesticity.

Neodomesticity’s distinctive spatiality marks a new era and ideology for the genre of domestic fiction while simultaneously recognizing its dynamic connections to earlier domestic literatures and traditions. Both domestic and neodomestic novels feature a self-consciousness about the home’s physical space and the project of homemaking, highlighting domestic instability in positive and negative ways; however, neodomestic fiction—emerging after second-wave feminism and responding to a return to “family values”—marks a paradigm shift: neodomestic fiction advances a politics of domestic instability, particularly emphasized through its distinctive domestic spaces and conclusions. Neodomestic novels intentionally demonstrate the exclusions associated with the single-family, privately-owned home. While nineteenth- and early twentieth-century domestic fiction also invokes domestic uncertainty and works to elicit social change on issues as diverse as women’s
civic and private roles, slavery, and temperance, its didactic and spatial politics—which are tied to its own sociohistorical domestic culture—demand separate consideration. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis argues, “It is the project of twentieth-century women writers to . . . replace the alternate endings in marriage and death that are their cultural legacy from nineteenth-century life and letters by offering a different set of choices” (4). Post-1980 neodomestic novels continue this project in ways that are distinct from their predecessors.

Explicating neodomestic fiction’s distinct spatial narrative is especially important to establishing and understanding this neo-genre. In Henri Lefebvre’s terms, “a revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential” (54). The neodomestic novel’s spatiality specifically exhibits three features: (1) relational (as opposed to oppositional) domestic space, which self-consciously emphasizes the home’s connection to “outside” environments; (2) domestic mobility, which is the notion that home, as both an ideology and a physical space, can occupy and blur the boundaries of multiple domestic locations; and (3) domestic renovation and redesign of the conventional material and ideological model home, which refers to the privately owned single family structure that represents financial, physical, and psychological security to its owners. In short, neodomestic fiction interrogates and expands on the nineteenth-century domestic novel's legacies.

Neodomestic fictions’ distinct spatiality and frequently inconclusive endings especially revise the genre’s conventional politics. In Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel, Nancy Armstrong clarifies domestic fiction’s traditional politics: “I believe it [eighteenth- and nineteenth-century domestic fiction] helped to formulate the ordered space we now recognize as the household, made that space totally functional, and used it as the context for representing normal behavior” (23–24). Michael Kowalski agrees, suggesting that the domestic romance often worked at “cross purposes: the arousal of sentiments for change and the reassurance of cosmic justice, social criticism, and the affirmation of the status quo” (65). Domestic fiction, in other words, largely works its revolution from within the confines of what Audre Lorde calls the “master’s house.” Conversely, neodomestic fiction represents and promotes a politics of instability and heterogeneity. It is not so much situated outside the master’s house. Rather, it attempts to occupy—as I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter—an ideological and physical space defined by various contemporary cultural critics: what bell hooks calls the “margin,” what Toni Morrison describes as being “‘both snug and wide open’” and having “‘a doorway never needing to be closed’” (“Home” 9), what Homi Bhabha labels a “third space,” what Michel Foucault describes as “heterotopia,” and what feminist geographers frequently describe as “relational space.”
While Armstrong’s claim focuses on English literature and other scholars have since complicated her arguments, her analysis that the development of the ideal or model home constitutes a stable, normative, and protected location remains the dominant rhetorical model. The rise and development of the domestic novel and of conduct and household manuals in the nineteenth century supports Armstrong’s thesis that nineteenth-century domestic texts helped establish the conventional model of American domesticity as white, Protestant, middle class, and heterosexual. The reinforcement of the heteronormative aspects of home and family continues today in much domestic literature and culture; multimedia empires such as Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia continue to sell a model of American domesticity that is predominantly white, conservative, middle class, and privately owned. Today’s representations of the American home often present a narrow model that nonetheless enjoys as strong of a cultural currency now as it did a hundred years ago. The dream houses featured on *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, for example, can be read as supersized versions of the ideal cottage described in 1869 by Harriet Beecher Stowe and Catharine E. Beecher’s the *American Woman’s Home.*

Given the model’s powerful longevity, what accounts for the renewed attention to and attempts to renovate model domesticity in the 1980s? Michael A. Griffith clarifies what the revitalized interest implies: “What returned to fashion in 1984 was not the family, but ‘The Family.’ Reaganite conservatism had ushered ‘Family’ back into prominence as a political catchword, and evangelists had adopted the (presumed) disintegration of ‘traditional family values’ as a rallying cry” (94). Important novels focus on the home and homemaking in order to illustrate the ways in which the model fails the protagonists. These neodomestic stories challenge the conventional politics of American culture and the novel. While Ann Hulbert has suggested that the novel’s form itself encourages conservatism—that the novel strengthens “the bourgeois institution of the family”—neodomestic novels complicate, if not refute, Hulbert’s suggestion about the novel’s form (Hulbert 36). Homeownership is likewise associated with more conservative political practices. Richard Harris and Chris Hamnett report, “Most of the rather limited evidence . . . does indicate that an association between ownership and conservatism is the general rule” (175). The following chapters map how domestic and neodomestic fiction resolve tensions surrounding homeownership differently. Building on the domestic fiction that precedes it, neodomestic fiction recycles domestic tensions and structures to produce alternative geographies of home.

*Neodomestic American Fiction* recognizes that in the nineteenth century
a range of authors appropriated conventional domestic ideals and complicated, if not challenged outright, the model home and domestic fiction's gendered definition, broadening both to include such outsiders as men, single women, and nonwhites. Counterhegemonic spaces encoded in nineteenth-century women's fiction include Harriet Jacobs's "loopholes of retreat" (437–40), Louisa May Alcott's domestic performance spaces in *Little Women*, and Mary E. Wilkins Freeman's churches and barns. We see the appropriation of domestic space by nineteenth-century male writers in novels such as *Moby-Dick*, *The House of Seven Gables*, *Walden*, *The House Behind the Cedars*, and *Washington Square*.4 Significantly, as Lora Romero points out in *Home Fronts*, these male-authored and male-focused novels are not generally considered domestic fiction. This double standard reveals domestic fiction's gendered definitions. The spatial definition of domestic fiction mapped in this project joins Romero and other recent scholarship in questioning this literary history that largely excludes male writers and protagonists.5 Furthermore, my spatial definition opens new doors for scholars who are reconsidering the genre's earlier incarnations in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Recent modernist studies of domestic fiction also emphasize domestic multiplicity and instability: "Mobility, agency, and mutability were central to urban homes in ways that the literary historical narrative of separate spheres has obscured" (Klimasmith 8). In the modern period, writers such as Gertrude Stein, following the call to "make it new," crafted new modes of representing domesticity.6 Nevertheless, the impetus to stabilize the domestic environment—to produce a stable home or to escape a domestic trap—spans the literature through much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Betsy Klimasmith's study of urban domesticity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries reveals, for example, how the novel during that period "became a testing ground for examining relationships between urban spaces and the development of an unsettled and unsettling modern subjectivity" (5). Yet, while the urban domestic literature of this early modern period challenges the separate spheres of a male public and a female private (domestic) space and stability, the home continues to be "deployed rhetorically, linguistically, and physically to help order the potential chaos" (Klimasmith 7–8). Thus, both nineteenth- and twentieth-century domestic fictions often ultimately resolve domestic instability. Stability remains the American home's dominant, idealized feature in domestic literature, space, and culture.

Neodomestic fiction intensifies attempts to theorize or model alternatives to the stable home. The exploration of the literary and cultural significance of this shift from traditional stability to a "productive instability" is this book's central project. As I have begun to suggest, neodomestic fiction
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...does not represent a full break from its literary predecessors. Neodomestic fiction is a recycled or revised neo-genre, not a completely different form. The analysis of the literary and cultural domestic histories in the chapters that follow reveals that neodomestic novels represent an intensification and rearrangement of tensions and characteristics present at the time of domestic fiction’s inception in the nineteenth century and its continued development in the twentieth century.

Neodomestic fiction’s revisions rearrange domestic fiction’s conventional boundaries. Consequently, this book remaps the generic study of domestic fiction in three ways: (1) it extends the genre’s time period through the twentieth century and establishes a significant revision of and resurgence in domestic fiction beginning in the 1980s, (2) it includes male as well as female authors, and (3) it provides a primarily spatial rather than plot- or character-based analysis. Utilizing a spatial analysis more readily extends domestic fiction through the twentieth century and to authors and stories focused on men as well as women. Domestic fiction particularly concentrates on the home’s geography and homemaking processes—“spatial narratives” that focus on place and the practices that define location. This analysis of domestic geographies, thus, includes the home’s material and nonmaterial borders and the processes involved in establishing and maintaining this space. Following the lead of cultural geographers such as David Harvey, I read domestic space as a social process. This methodology allows me to address not only what constitutes a “house,” but also what practices and social forces make a “home.”

In addition to covering expanded territory, this study of neodomestic fiction also reveals entrenched boundaries. Men especially constitute the subject matter of this contested terrain. This revised map of domestic fiction adds to recent separate sphere scholarship that questions the strict boundaries between private/public and feminine/masculine spaces. While significant research has been completed that problematizes the so-called separate spheres, little discussion has taken place about how such reevaluations of gendered, classed, and raced space influence the construction and evaluation of literary genres. Domestic fiction in particular continues to reflect a strict separate spheres mentality—there is women’s fiction and there is men’s fiction. According to this conventional generic definition, men in particular do not write domestic fiction or serve as domestic fiction’s protagonists.

Upon closer examination we see that two distinctly gendered traditions exist in both contemporary and nineteenth-century domestic fiction. Briefly, the distinguishing characteristics include discrete views of the home’s spiritual geography and distinctive homemaking habits, or the particular prac-
tices deemed necessary to keep the home functioning within the domestic novel. *Masculine* domestic fictions, for example, frequently build their narratives from property relations and disputes and focus on a male protagonist. *Feminine* domestic fictions tend to de-emphasize ownership or property disputes and focus on a female protagonist. Masculine and feminine domestic fictions also frequently carry distinct social currencies in the public sphere.

As much as these two gendered traditions clash, they simultaneously produce what Jennifer Haytock has described in relation to modernist domestic and war fiction as “a system of literary interdependence” (Haytock xviii). Romero makes a similar point in reference to the nineteenth century's celebratory and antidomestic cultures (1–8). Neodomestic fiction contends with America's gendered domestic contexts and frequently mixes these gendered literary and cultural traditions, reflecting both changing gender roles and longstanding gendered divisions in American culture. Milette Shamir describes this split in nineteenth-century fiction in terms of “divided plots.” Shamir argues, “The example of the domestic division plot shows the romance and sentimental traditions to be competing over the same space [the home], albeit from different angles and perspectives” (431). Shamir's description of the romance (masculine) and the sentimental (feminine) novel offers another way to characterize the gendered spatial tensions among the masculine and feminine domestic fictions that I map in the following chapters. However, I do not use these frequently gendered literary traditions (the romance and the sentimental novel) as synonymous with domestic fiction because not all romances and sentimental novels are spatial narratives. For example, a romance might not qualify as a spatial narrative to the same degree as a work of (neo)domestic fiction, which sustains an intense focus on the physical home and homemaking. As a result, geography—particularly feminist geography—provides the crucial mapping tool for this highly spatial literature.

Geography, like literary studies, wrestles with the interpretation of the economic, racial, and gendered forces that produce America's inequitable domestic geographies, such as those outlined at the beginning of this introduction. This project also takes seriously Harvey’s suggestion in *Spaces of Hope* that the novel provides a valuable space for exploring social change and his recognition of the significant number of female authors doing this work (189). Cultural geography helps us to gauge literary constructions of domestic space by providing tools to (re)design literary discourse so that it moves between fictional spaces and the real worlds that men and women inhabit. It is particularly helpful in narrowing the range of novels that fall under neodomesticity's rubric.
While I am interested in a range of domestic geographies, I am not suggesting that every contemporary novel that features the home and homemaking could be or should be labeled neodomestic fiction. The spatial novels included in this study posit the home as a key location for narrative action and feature homemaking as a central component of the plot. As the following chapters explore in greater detail, neodomestic fiction’s three characteristics (mobility, relational space, and renovation) frame a distinctive neo-genre. In subtle and obvious ways, neodomestic fiction emphasizes that place shapes the characters as much as the characters shape place. The home in neodomestic fiction may speak or otherwise interact with the characters, as in the haunted house in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and the talking island at the conclusion of Gloria Naylor’s *Mama Day* (1988). Such elements emphasize that domestic geographies are not neutral or mere reflections of characters’ traits or desires. In feminist geographer Doreen Massey’s terms, neodomestic space is relational; its identity “derives, in large part, precisely from the specificity of its interactions with ‘the outside’” (Massey 169). As Sister Salt describes in Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Gardens in the Dunes*, walls do not define a house (438). Home is a space determined by the interaction between “inside” and “outside.”

Like the neodomestic novels that we will encounter in the following pages, feminist geographers do not insist on an isolated, stable definition of home. That is, rather than studying home as a place that is *not* public, feminist geographers understand the private home and public space in “relational” terms, where public and private space interact and are not mutually exclusive: “Rather than a static site, home may be conceptualized in relation to other places (for example, offices), and the social relations appropriate to different places analyzed in terms of power and authority” (Al-Hindi 154). Relational space rejects “negative counterposition” (Massey 169) and “forces us to recognize our interconnectedness” (Massey 170). Neodomestic fiction likewise uses relational space to present a distinctive architecture of the American home.

Feminist geographers’ argument for a relational understanding of space parallels in many respects the questions that historical and literary studies have posed about whether the public and private spheres are actually separate. That is, a relational view of space sees that a home may be physically separate yet not discursively isolated. Feminist geographer Linda McDowell clarifies in *Gender, Identity, and Place* how relational space specifically affects the domestic sphere: “a focus on the social relations within a domestic space crosses the boundary between the private and the public, between the particular and the general, and is not, as often incorrectly asserted, a focus on the
‘merely’ domestic or the private sphere” (72–73). For instance, Loida Maritza Pérez’s *Geographies of Home* (1999) subtly highlights the neodomestic home’s unique physical and ideological structure with passages that describe the home’s physical state and the characters’ psychological connections and reactions to the home’s changing structure and appearance.

Iliana’s mother in Pérez’s *Geographies of Home* observes that her home, fashioned after the middle-class ideal, actually embodies instability, not stability:

> Stepping from the couch, she noticed that one of the floor’s marble tiles had cracked. She then imagined that the slightest disturbance might topple furniture, collapse shelves, detach the chandelier. That she and her husband had managed to purchase all these things as well as their own home had often been offered as proof to their children of the stability in their lives. Only now did she concede that nothing was stable—nothing. The earth itself might give out under their feet, their house burn down, madness take root, evil unfold into their lives. (Pérez 293)

The home’s cracked tile provokes this reverie. Iliana’s mother concedes in this passage that the American dream, which is represented by material possessions and especially the home, hardly provides stability for her Dominican American family: nothing is secure. This instability is home.

Possessions, in particular, do not assure solidity. In an age when Americans are told by their president to go shopping when faced with national tragedy and insecurity, *Geographies of Home* exposes the instability of America’s consumer culture.\(^{11}\) How the characters arrive at and cope with this realization in *Geographies of Home* composes much of the novel’s plot. Thus, *Geographies of Home* provides one example, with a particularly appropriate title, of late twentieth-century neodomestic writing that destabilizes the conventional home, questioning and refashioning its economic and social worth. Its politics also distinguishes neodomesticity from neoliberalism, which has developed during the same period but thwarts rather than advances the “downward redistribution of economic, political, and cultural resources” (Duggan 40). Unlike neoliberalism, neodomesticity seeks “A sustainable opposition . . . [that] connect[s] culture, politics, and economics; identity politics and class politics; universalist rhetoric and particular issues and interests; intellectual and material resources” (Duggan 41). Neodomestic fiction engages in this project by exploring rather than quelling domestic instability.

The novels included in this study survey a range of genders, sexualities, ethnicities, races, and classes. These neodomestic novels literally and/or
symbolically remodel the conventional home's material and social structures, incorporating instability and individual and social histories as part of the fictional homes' physical designs. The home's (in)stability, specifically in regard to the model white, middle-class, Protestant home, is a central concern. This criterion for neodomestic fiction is key because, although they are not the focus of this study, more traditional versions of domestic fiction continue to be written. Contemporary conventional domestic novels, such as Robert Morgan’s *Gap Creek* (1999), are not included in the following chapters because they frequently reproduce and romanticize the traditional domestic geography of the single-family, heterosexual, patriarchal home rather than attempt to redesign and destabilize its singular dominance within the American landscape. I have intentionally selected fiction that represents a wide range of domesticities in order to explore this shared instability while recognizing historical, material, and social differences among the narratives and the cultures from which they emerge.

While domestic fiction’s extensions, migrations, and transformations since 1980 form my primary focus, this investigation of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century domestic fiction still addresses key concerns that Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher’s edited collection *No More Separate Spheres!* raises in regard to moving “beyond the separate spheres,” apprehensions relevant to nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century studies of American literature and culture broadly and domestic and women’s fiction in particular. Specifically, my analysis demonstrates how opening the genre to both male and female authors and protagonists still provides “a potent organizing metaphor” and “a source within the dominant culture for legitimizing” interest in women’s history and literature, while it simultaneously “complicate[s] the binary model of men versus women” (Davidson and Hatcher 9; 11–12). While female protagonists and such women writers as Toni Morrison, Barbara Kingsolver, and Leslie Marmon Silko dominate neodomestic fiction, male protagonists and authors are increasingly—even if, as Jonathan Franzen demonstrates, sometimes reluctantly—redefining our understanding of the domestic sphere and literature.

Although *Neodomestic American Fiction* focuses on the American home’s post-1980 fictional geographies, physical homes play a key role, too. Like Nancy Armstrong, I “regard fiction . . . both as the document and as the agency of cultural history” (*Desire* 23). Grounded in an awareness of America’s twentieth-century housing discrepancies and histories, *Neodomestic American Fiction* addresses literature’s presentation of and intervention in this crisis. Following the model of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the literature, in other words, serves representational (aesthetic),
political, and theoretical ends. My methodology draws specifically from David Harvey’s paradigm described in *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference*, in which an understanding of spatial tactics necessarily involves two basic assumptions: categories like the home are social constructions and thus unstable, and the politics of space involve three equally interrelated spheres—materiality, representation, and imagination (320–24). As a result, the following chapters analyze the interrelated realms of material history, the home’s representations in fiction, and domesticity’s physical manifestations and theoretical models. Thus, this feminist literary and cultural study of the American home seeks to accomplish what domestic fiction’s didacticism and much interdisciplinary work in American literature and women’s studies aims to do: revitalize individual disciplines and gain support for initiatives that can affect American’s lives, especially the lives of American women.

**Key to Neodomestic American Fiction**

Chapter Overviews

Chapter 1, “Remapping Domestic Fiction: Neodomestic Geographies,” outlines the project’s theoretical and historical parameters: it traces and extends domestic fiction’s time period into the twenty-first century; it identifies the spatial lens with which to define and interpret this genre, providing an alternative to the plot or character-based definition of the fiction; and finally, it redefines the genre to include male as well as female authors and protagonists. This chapter also explains a shift in the politics of home from stability to instability. I locate this shift in the 1980s, pointing to the threshold neodomestic novels *Housekeeping* (Marilynne Robinson) and *The House on Mango Street* (Sandra Cisneros) as landmark works that mark neodomestic fiction’s emergence out of both the feminist movement and significant housing changes.

Chapter 2, “Recycling Feminine Domesticity: Rewriting Conventional Domestic Fiction,” features neodomestic novels that self-consciously rewrite nineteenth-century domestic fiction and what Amy Kaplan terms “manifest domesticity.” The chapter includes extended close readings of Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Gardens in the Dunes* and Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*, which I have chosen for their extensive revisions of the genre. I open the chapter with *Gardens in the Dunes* to explore neodomestic fiction’s three primary characteristics: mobility, home renovation or redesign, and relational domestic space. The section that follows examines how neodomestic novels self-consciously invoke and revise nineteenth-century domestic fic-
tion’s tropes, particularly those of mobility, the stable home, and the selfless woman.

Chapter 3, “Remodeling Home: Redesigning Conventional Domestic Space,” demonstrates that rather than ultimately constructing the home as a trap or a haven, neodomestic fiction deconstructs, recycles, and finally explodes the conventional house-home dichotomy, enacting neodomestic ideology through its experimentation with an elusive but productive domestic instability. I examine various homes’ geopolitics, especially residents’ gendered and raced housekeeping styles and renovations. African American spatial politics as defined by bell hooks and John Michael Vlach ground my spatial analysis of several representative domestic locations in Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Paradise*.

The next two chapters focus more exclusively on domestic masculinity in fiction by writers such as Michael Cunningham, Richard Ford, and Jane Smiley. Chapter 4, “Mapping Gendered Genres: Domestic Masculinity, Suburban Fiction, and the Antidomestic,” continues the argument presented in the introduction that masculinity has always been and remains a key component within domestic fiction. This chapter primarily focuses on the antidomestic tradition, in which suburban literature frequently falls, and on the neodomestic novels that are especially engaged in recycling these conventionally masculine features. The chapter briefly defines conventional domestic masculinity vis-à-vis Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” and William Dean Howells’s *Suburban Sketches*. Mark Twain’s portrayal of “lighting out for the territory” in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* also provides a key trope for defining conventional domestic masculinity’s “beset manhood” (Baym 130). This largely antidomestic tradition is compared and contrasted with several contemporary suburban novels, such as John Edgar Wideman’s *Homewood* trilogy, Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*, Ford’s *Independence Day*, and Andre Dubus III’s *House of Sand and Fog*. While the antidomestic tradition is still very much alive in contemporary fiction, this chapter focuses on the novels attempting to rework the complexly gendered structures undergirding the domestic novel.

Chapter 5, “Performing Domesticity: Anxious Masculinity and Queer Homes,” primarily examines Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections*, Michael Cunningham’s *A Home at the End of the World*, and Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* for the unique ways they recycle the domestic novel. The chapter features the cultural and literary reception of *The Corrections* in order to examine the role of white, domestic masculinity in the American public sphere. An extended reading of queer domesticities, both literal (as seen in such novels as *A Home at the End of the World*) and figurative (as seen in such novels
as *A Gesture Life*), concludes this chapter, bringing home my argument that neodomestic novels do not erase gender distinctions but rather attempt to “trouble”—in the Judith Butler sense—their stability.

Chapter 6, “Conclusions: The Territory Ahead,” provides more in-depth commentary on (neo)domestic texts other than the novel, such as artwork by photographer Clarissa Sligh, innovative design work by the Rural Studio at Auburn University, and the popular ABC reality television program *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. This chapter connects literary representations of American domesticity to other types of houses and attitudes about home and family that have appeared in the late twentieth century.

Thus, this study maps the development of American domestic fiction written by women and men after 1980 and its resonance with earlier domestic novels. Following Cathy N. Davidson and Jessamyn Hatcher’s model from *No More Separate Spheres!* I seek to demonstrate “how domesticity is saturated by and dependent on a range of factors, terms, and agents imagined to lie outside its domain” (18). Masculinity, including male-authored and male-focused novels, along with the ideological and physical constructions of the “nation” and the “foreign,” are key agents generally considered outside American domestic fiction. Therefore, my work also contributes to the conversation about American domesticity as set out by Amy Kaplan’s essay “Manifest Domesticity” and her larger work *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (2002). Neodestic fiction seeks to avoid reproducing “manifest domesticities.”

The following chapters emphasize the intimate connections between “foreign” and “domestic” as well as between “masculinity” and “femininity.” The individual chapter divisions reflect American domestic culture’s gendered structures while the chapters simultaneously relate to and bleed across these physical and ideological distinctions. The chapters, like relational space, converse with one another, demarcating physical and ideological boundaries that are in constant negotiation. This relational methodology and organization seeks to underscore my overall argument about the study of neodomestic fiction: the key to understanding neodomestic fiction and its radical project of recycling and reinventing American domesticity is to recognize such seemingly separate, “foreign” entities—like masculine and queer domesticities—as members of the family.
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The Territory Ahead

_Just as Jonathan Franzen claims in “Why Bother” that good literature resists closure, Toril Moi suggests that serious scholarship poses questions that demand constant work. Domestic scholarship likewise requires endless housekeeping. Just when we think we have finally caught up, another pile of novels appears, and we must start the process over again. Dust, laundry, and novels accumulate. Before outlining the territory ahead, let me first briefly review the terrain covered in the previous chapters. I will then summarize what this literary map of domesticity suggests for lived experience._

_Neodomestic American Fiction’s contribution to the study of American literature is threefold: first, it traces and extends domestic fiction’s time period into the twenty-first century; second, it redefines the genre so it includes male as well as female authors and protagonists; and finally, it adds another lens with which to define and interpret this genre, providing a spatial rather than an exclusively plot- or character-based analysis of the fiction. This analysis defines a new subgenre, which I call neodomestic fiction, and demonstrates a shift in the politics of home from stability to instability. I locate this shift in the 1980s, pointing to the threshold neodomestic novels _Housekeeping_ and _The House on Mango Street_ as landmark texts that mark neodomestic fiction’s emergence with their revised conception of model domesticity. The preceding chapters identified and analyzed the three primary characteristics_
that define neodomestic fiction: mobility, home renovation or redesign, and relational domestic space.

(Neo)domestic fictions share intense attention to the domestic sphere and self-conscious homemaking. The geographic lens focused on domestic space and the processes of homemaking plots neodomestic fiction’s queer, recycled, and unstable domestic territories. Understanding these changes in the context of nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century fiction and culture reveals that neodomestic fiction does not represent a radical break but rather a recycling and reordering of domestic tropes, practices, and spaces. Particularly complex are the ways in which neodomestic fiction recycles and queers raced and gendered spaces. Neodomestic fiction intervenes in what Cheryl I. Harris describes as “Whiteness as Property,” or “the legal legitimation of expectations of power and control that enshrine the status quo as a neutral baseline, while masking the maintenance of white privilege and domination” (1715). Like Harris’s legal analysis, my analysis of (neo)domestic fictions demonstrates that the “origins of whiteness as property lie in the parallel systems of domination of Black and Native American peoples out of which were created racially contingent forms of property and property rights” (1714). Neodomestic fiction addresses and remolds the resulting “race house,” as Toni Morrison labels it.

Neodomestic fiction also complicates the distinctly gendered binary between domestic fiction’s gendered strands. This aspect of my analysis places my own study in a potentially awkward position. I frequently emphasize gender distinctions in my chapter divisions while simultaneously explaining how neodomestic fiction blurs such boundaries. At first glance, I may appear to reproduce the very discourses that neodomestic fiction and my research questions. In other words, the gendered map that my chapters create seemingly participates in the disciplining of gender. However, rather than disciplining gender, the chapters embody gender’s relational dynamics. In Janet R. Jakobsen’s terms, the gendered chapters aim “to queer . . . [or] rely on and trouble norms” (530). Domesticity emerges from this gendered binary and has developed along two distinct but related tracks; maintaining gendered chapters represents the norm’s power and clarifies masculine and feminine domestic fiction’s distinct and common tropes and politics. Furthermore, while neodomestic fiction troubles these gendered traditions, it does not eliminate them or present a postgendered genre. Neodomestic fiction heightens rather than erases gendered spatial awareness. My “queer” analysis, thus, seeks “to engage the complex of uneven relations among norms” (Jakobsen 520). Gender performances in the fiction and in my analysis operate across a spectrum of masculine and feminine behaviors.
The analysis of these gendered fictions reveals that both strands offer viable neodomesticities because of their shared emphasis on domestic instability. However, I also want to be clear about how difference—differences that are often grounded in gendered notions about spiritual geography—functions. Neither difference nor sameness is constructed on neutral ground. American culture and literature suggest that masculine and feminine spaces and genres are different but certainly not equal. They espouse distinct politics, and feminist geography makes a case for why a relational (feminine) spatial politics might serve us better than an oppositional (masculine) spatial politics. My analysis of the literature contributes to arguments against oppositional spatial relationships and spaces that deemphasize, if not attempt to erase, the past.

Here we might keep in mind what Homi Bhabha explains in “DissemiNation” about how nation formation emerges from a violent forgetting. A conventional strand of masculine and feminine domesticity follows this forgetful course. Neodomestic fiction—particularly those novels that emphasize “historically conscious recycling”—attempts to construct different routes to home and nation (George, “Recycling” 2–3). As we saw in The Poisonwood Bible, Paradise, Gardens in the Dunes, and A Gesture Life, in its most intense forms, this historically conscious recycling process materializes the past in the form of a spiritual geography. Domestic fiction’s literary history demonstrates that the novels engaged in this project tend to emerge out of the feminine tradition, whereas masculine domestic fiction, following an oppositional and patriarchal spatial organization, tends to break with history. As we saw in Suburban Sketches and Independence Day, masculine domestic fiction’s most intense forms reject the past in favor of the present and the future.

This project demonstrates that there are historical drives, gendered/raced/classed incentives, and political consequences related to the rejection or embrace of a spiritual or a historically relational domestic geography. Neodomestic fiction that espouses an incorporation rather than a rejection of ghosts—who function in much of the fiction as “specters of history”—more clearly and consistently aligns itself with a feminist and antiracist politics. Feminism, in this sense, agrees with Gaston Bachelard’s statement, “An entire past comes to dwell in a new house” (5). Neodomestic fiction finds ways to reintroduce funk—those “problematic” eruptions from the past—into American housekeeping and homemaking and to craft relational rather than oppositional bonds to the past and/or other “foreign” entities. It espouses the critical, historically grounded queer foundations that feminism demands.
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Consequently, to argue that fictions that reject ghosts and fictions that embrace ghosts are simply different types of fiction fails to consider seriously the politics inscribed in these distinct spatial narratives. If scholars, like myself, who further a politics of difference, hybridity and multiplicity, want to be heard, we also need to clarify the politics of the difference that we seek. In other words, like Homi Bhabha, I believe that the critic has political responsibilities: “For the critic must attempt to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present” (Location 12). Novels such as Gardens in the Dunes, A Home at the End of the World, and Beloved represent neodomestic fictions of strong persuasion—fictions in which a spiritual geography becomes an integral part of the narrative. DeLillo’s White Noise and Franzen’s The Corrections provide a more realist, hybrid presentation of spiritual geography, shifting between (feminine) sentiment and (masculine) irony. For instance, Wilder’s wild ride across the highway in his tricycle at the end of White Noise perhaps confirms a force larger than ourselves: “[Wilder] began to pedal across the highway, mystically charged” (DeLillo 322). Or his survival may simply be dumb luck or even a testament to “lame-brained determination” (DeLillo 323). As Ann Douglas argues, “Sentimentalism provides a way to protest a power to which one has already in part capitulated” (12). The suggestive strength of masculine neodomestic novels such as DeLillo’s White Noise, Franzen’s The Corrections, and Ford’s Lay of the Land lies in the possibility that their irony counters this capitulation. While my own analysis suggests that there is little to gain from embracing a forgetting of history—an analysis that other feminists share—future research in literary and cultural studies may seek other routes to answer the question: does killing such ghosts necessarily reproduce patriarchal logic?

As such, my research, like neodomestic fiction itself, seeks—as Elaine Neil Orr describes in Subject to Negotiation: Reading Feminist Criticism and American Women’s Fiction—“to contribute . . . to a progressive shift in feminist discourse,” a shift

from a criticism of subversions—the dominant mode of American feminist criticism from Judith Fetterley’s The Resisting Reader to Alicia Ostriker’s poetics of theft—to a criticism of negotiations, a form of work that emerges where feminist readers and intellectuals argue for productive relations at the crossroads of difference and opposition. (Orr 2)

Rather than argue for women’s subversive domestic powers—powers that merely allow Enid to punish her husband by cooking bad meals—neodo-
mestic fiction encourages domesticity’s unstable, productive differences that consider normativity’s “interrelational complexity in the hope of establishing a different type of network” (Jakobsen 529). It aims to “engage” domestic norms’ “complex field rather than . . . reverse or oppose the norm” (Jakobsen 518). It places in dialogue or in negotiation the past, present, and possible future constructions of and theories about home. It aims, as Hortense J. Spillers writes in regard to the “female social subject,” to construct an “insurgent ground” (80; emphasis in original).

The architect Aldo van Eyck aptly describes neodomesticity’s goal: “Architecture need do no more, nor should it ever do less, than assist man’s [and woman’s] homecoming” (qtd. in Hertzberger, Roijen-Wortmann, Stauven 65). Eyck directs us to another fundamental implication of my project—the influence that such narratives have on or reflect for lived experience. Until now, this aspect of my research has remained, for the most part, at the margins of my analysis. Census statistics, architectural design, and historical research ground my readings of the fiction, but what does the fiction suggest about lived experience? How does neodomestic fiction’s architecture, to paraphrase Eyck, facilitate homecoming? I will now look more closely at what neodomestic fiction and its politics reveal about lived American domestic experience.

To Be Really Domestic
Lived American Neodomesticity

_Domestic architecture mediates social relations, specifically those between women and men. Houses are the spatial context within which the social order is reproduced. . . . The history of American housing design indicates a gradual reduction in the gendered spaces creating, and created by, gender stratification. . . . The home is now indicative of more egalitarian gender relations._

—Daphne Spain, Gendered Spaces

There are numerous encouraging examples of lived neodomesticity, suggesting, as Daphne Spain writes, that “the home is now indicative of more egalitarian gender relations” (140). For example, the innovative program CoAbode refashions conventional domesticity’s geography by connecting single mothers who are in search of other single moms to share housing; such programs help widen women’s access to housing. Indicative of American domesticity’s changing and unstable legal definition is the fact that gay
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marriages began being officially recognized in 2004 in Massachusetts and San Francisco, albeit they were also immediately contested. Also apropos of Spain’s conclusions about contemporary American housing design is the fact that today’s American women are fastening around their waists the traditionally masculine tool belt more than ever before.

American Demographics reports that women currently favor home improvement projects over shopping or cooking as their preferred leisure activity (Gallop-Goodman 14). Additionally, according to Home Improvement Research Institute’s product purchase tracking study, “Women’s fix-it-yourself purchases jumped from 32 percent in 1997 to 37.6 percent in 1999” (Gallop-Goodman 14). The percentages quantify changes in America’s domestic arrangements. Home improvement and do-it-yourself projects, traditionally men’s forte, now find women their fastest growing market, indicating that American (heterosexual) homemaking is undergoing fundamental changes.

Additionally, the term “metrosexual” has emerged to revise our understanding of men who engage in traditionally feminine activities like shopping and paying careful attention to grooming. The term attempts to craft a positive word for a “feminine male.” According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the term “metrosexual” refers to “a man (esp. a heterosexual man) whose lifestyle, spending habits and concern for personal appearance are likened to those typical of a fashionable, urban, homosexual man” (def. A). Mark Simpson coined the term in 1994, according to the online dictionary The Word Spy, to refer to a “gay, straight or bisexual” man who is “not afraid to embrace his feminine side” (“Metrosexual”). While it is unclear what effects the metrosexual has had, if any, on domestic relationships, it has clearly influenced the marketplace. Jean-Marc Carriol, director of the fashion company Trimex, goes so far as to suggest that feminism directly brought about this change for men: “The feminist movement has been the biggest contributor to the men’s market since it has developed. . . . The success of that push has fundamentally altered the way men and women interact within the workplace. Appearance and grooming are really important” (qtd. in “Rise of the Metrosexual”). Fashion is an opening, though clearly not an end point, for feminist intervention. As Janet R. Jakobsen points out, even “non-normative” terms like “lesbian . . . can become a specific regime of the normal” (521; emphasis in original). The metrosexual challenges male heterosexual norms evens as it affirms norms scripted for homosexual men and a feminized American consumer culture.

Material spaces also engage the norm of the single family, privately owned home while actualizing new architectures. The Rural Studio, Auburn
University’s community architecture program founded by the late Samuel Mockbee, provides one of, if not the best, material examples of neodomestic architectural standards. The Rural Studio asks its students to cross the threshold of misconceived opinions to create/design/build and to allow students to put their educational values to work as citizens of a community. The Rural Studio seeks solutions to the needs of the community within the community’s own context, not from outside it. Abstract ideas based upon knowledge and study are transformed into workable solutions forged by real human contact, personal realization, and a gained appreciation for the culture. (“Mission”)

As the mission statement begins to explain, the Rural Studio seeks to provide livable, sustainable designs for low-income families and communities. The buildings use local and unique materials to keep economic and environmental costs low (by making houses out of recycled carpet tiles and hay bales, for example). Recently, they have also begun to recycle buildings for new purposes. At the same time that they aim to keep initial construction and long-term maintenance costs low, the Rural Studio’s designs also seek “to raise the spirits of the rural poor through the creation of homes and community facilities that aspired to the same set of architectural ideals and virtues as those buildings which have substantial budgets and prosperous clientele” (King 50; 52). For example, one particular challenge that the Rural Studio tackles is the design and building of “20K” homes, or dwellings whose materials and labor cost no more than twenty thousand dollars.

The Rural Studio’s attention to smaller living and community spaces, local materials, economic and environmental sustainability, and vernacular architecture clarifies its differences from the extreme dream homes and the portrayal of the American dream in renovation shows like Extreme Makeover: Home Edition and This Old House. Additionally, while the Rural Studio has enjoyed its share of the media limelight, Mockbee advised architects to “help those who aren’t likely to help you in return, and do so even if nobody is watching!” (qtd. in Polter 42). Krista Tippett’s radio show, Speaking of Faith, featured a segment on the Rural Studio, “Rural Studio: An Architecture of Decency.” The segment explores the material and spiritual ways that Rural Studio designs affect their communities. The Rural Studio emphasizes (like the neodomestic fiction I have defined and analyzed) the sense of cultural history embedded in the local geography, particularly the history of slavery. Mockbee, in fact, hoped that the Rural Studio would help complete the unfinished reconstruction of the South.
Not Living the American Dream
Failures to Change

As suggestive as these changes are for how neodomesticity emerges within lived experience, there are also problematic aspects to these popular hybrid constructions. Who has access to the egalitarian homes Spain describes and to the neodomestic ideology explored in this book? More specifically, to what extent is the “metrosexual” man the same person packaged in a different, albeit Armani, outfit? Carriol’s suggestion that feminism has brought fashion to men carries dubious egalitarian politics. For example, attention to grooming and vanity perpetuate a youth- and body-obsessive culture that feminism has long fought against. Furthermore, while the term “metrosexual” increases attention to men’s “lifestyles,” it does not dramatically or explicitly challenge the unequal division of domestic labor. The metrosexual does not, for good or bad, foster an interest in laundry, childcare, or eldercare. Fundamental feminine domestic roles (as caretakers and house cleaners) do not enjoy this same “sexy” hybridity, which is primarily available to middle- and upper-class single or childless men. Until real changes occur in the hours that men and women devote to domestic labor, the home will remain women’s special domain.

Women’s embrace of do-it-yourself projects also carries as much predicament as promise. One positive aspect of this trend is its reflection and encouragement of women’s independence and confidence. Barbara’s Way markets their Barbara K! line of tools, for example, as “a comprehensive lifestyle brand whose mission is to provide solutions for women through innovative products that help eliminate the fear factor in areas where women may lack confidence or knowledge.” Companies like Barbara’s Way and Tomboy Tools market tools and do-it-yourself services that are designed for women. Some of the tools offer colors intended to appeal to female consumers as well as grips and other features designed to fit women’s smaller hands; some work gloves, for example, “accommodate long fingernails” (McCann G07).

These tools for women suggest more about the enforcement of gender differences and an anxiety about women taking on these new roles than they suggest about a fulfillment of women’s need for speciality tools. For instance, Herbert G. McCann reports the “Wisconsin-based RotoZip Tool Corp. introduced the Solaris, a bright red power saw, a smaller version of the company’s original black model” (G07). According to the company’s spokeswoman, “many women found the original too big and heavy. The new model is one pound lighter and has less power, which gives the user more control” (McCann G07). Tools designed for gender differences in hand size or upper
body strength hold merit, but companies seemingly ignore the fact that men will also benefit from a wider range of tool sizes.

Consumer remarks about these products designed for women confirm deeply entrenched ideas about femininity, masculinity, home improvement, and domestic roles. For example, one woman commented that she was not sure if she would buy power tools, even if they were designed for women, because “a lot of men won’t let you use it. They say it’s too dangerous” (qtd. in McCann G07). Another woman, while shopping with her husband for “drywall, flooring and a book on wiring” remarked that “she wasn’t sure about the tools either, especially if they were more expensive. As a woman, I’d probably be more likely to adapt to what he wants. . . . It’s true, I’m more used to adapting” (McCann G07). The women’s remarks suggest the appearance of these products and services does not necessarily indicate radical changes in gender roles. Whether a marketing trick or an attempt to recognize that “universal” tools do not fit the needs of all, these tools and services designed for women do not clearly measure up to more egalitarian gender roles.

Building companies’ marketing to single women also confirms that the more things change on the domestic front, the more they stay the same. Julie V. Iovine, for example, describes an advertisement produced by a Colorado builder that targets single female homebuyers. The advertisement’s visual and verbal rhetoric, which features a young woman and her dog, recycles a familiar fairy tale, Cinderella. According to Iovine, “The message is clear: Why wait for your prince to come? You can afford a home now—and ‘Woof! woof!’ surely beats a husbandly whine” (3). Owens Corning also reuses the fairy tale Sleeping Beauty to market its products: the “Chicago-based manufacturer of building materials, introduced a television ad campaign called ‘Siding Beauty’ in which a damsel awakens after 100 years to find that the vinyl siding covering her palace has outlasted them all. Subliminal message: Men may come and go, but good siding is hard to find” (Iovine 3).

These advertisements suggest that even as women take on different roles, there are clear attempts to recontain and repackage these changes in old narratives. Conversely, the advertisements’ humor suggests that they consciously recycle the old narratives to appeal to a new generation of women who increasingly do not wait until after marriage to buy a home: “Thanks to delayed marriages, profitable careers, higher divorce rates and longer lives, the number of women living alone has increased by more than a third in the past 15 years” (Iovine 3). Along these lines, another recent trend involves older women who are increasingly planning their retirement with their female friends: “This friends-helping-friends model for aging is gaining momentum among single, widowed or divorced women of a certain age.
The census does not tabulate households like these, and experts say it would be too early to see large numbers of older women living with friends, since few baby boomers, born from 1946 to 1964, have retired yet. But sociologists and demographers say the interest is growing” (Gross A). What discourages older single men from developing similar strategies? Men clearly also have much to gain in the revision and recycling of domestic roles, but as the Franzen Affair suggests, the troubling of domestic masculinity’s norms releases powerful anxieties.

Therefore, while the twentieth and twenty-first century’s “new normal” indicates some transformations in men’s and women’s roles and domestic settings, other domestic statistics encourage considerably less optimism about the emergence and establishment of more egalitarian domestic relations. For example, where male householders have a median net worth of $16,346 ($7,375 excluding home equity), female householders have a median net worth of $14,949 ($4,400 excluding home equity) (Davern and Fisher xvi). Such numbers indicate that women rely more on their homes for economic security than their male counterparts do: home equity composes about 70 percent of women’s median net worth, where home equity comprises about 50 percent of men’s median net worth. And, while neither married households nor female householders experienced a significant change in household net worth between 1993 and 1995, the median net worth of male householders rose from $14,219 to $16,346 during this same period (Davern and Fisher xvi). Men continue to hold distinct economic advantages over women. It follows, therefore, that gay male households would be better off financially than lesbian households. Gentrification’s association with the gay male community furthers this hypothesis. However, more data collection and research needs to be done on gay households and homemaking.7

One positive aspect of America’s love affair with the single-family, detached home is the fact that the “abundant supply [of privately owned housing stock] makes it relatively easier for American families to adjust their housing circumstances to changes in needs than is true of most European countries with larger social housing sectors” (Stegman 86). However, as we have seen played out in the fiction, the questions of access and material impact become especially significant when one considers homeownership differences among a range of gender, class, and racial groups. Black and Hispanic homeowners remain economically disadvantaged. And those individuals and families who rent are truly left out in the cold—especially when one considers that homes account for an average of 44 percent of household wealth (Luckett 1). Thus, masculine domestic fiction’s focus on property and economics remains an important area of inquiry.
homelessness, such as Marge Piercy’s *Longings of Women* (1994), Nami Mun’s *Miles from Nowhere* (2009), and Helena Maria Viramontes’s *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007), and fiction addressing migrant families, such as Helena María Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), also contribute to the widening awareness and understanding of the domestic sphere’s uneven geographic development.

**Extreme Makeover**
Sponsoring Faith in the Bankrupt American Dream

The persistent problem from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century with the popularization of a limited vision of American model domesticity is that such popularizations effectively impede alternative models from gaining larger visibility. In the twenty-first century, the American dream’s corporate sponsorship in the popular ABC television program *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* powerfully illustrates the amount of capital needed to keep the American dream alive in the public sphere. The weekly reality program chronicles the renovation of a needy family’s home. In most episodes, the old residence is demolished and the crew has only a week to build the family an entirely new, fully furnished and landscaped home. The experience of watching *Extreme Makeover* teaches viewers what the model home looks like in its extreme and resuscitates a narrow vision of the American dream in the face of harsh ownership realities and increased obstacles in the road to homeownership.

While its title does not explicitly invoke a nationalistic focus, *Extreme Makeover*’s storyline frequently uses the American myth of exceptionalism. This familiar European-based story places America as a New World where immigrants find a wealth of opportunities unavailable elsewhere, including private home ownership and upward mobility. In season 3, episode 25, of *Extreme Makeover*, for example, a family of immigrants—the Peter family—encounters troubles that are juxtaposed with the familiar narrative that hard work will bring success in the United States, regardless of religion or social status. This aspect of the American dream, the host Ty Pennington admits in this episode, is what he loves most about America. Pennington’s claim, however, exists in tension with the fact that all the families featured in *Extreme Makeover* are hard working and yet still have fallen on hard times that merit extreme measures.

The repressed subtext is that hard work alone is often not enough to keep or maintain your own home. While American exceptionalism, espe-
cially regarding homeownership, remains a central part of our contemporary American identity, “the relative advantage of the New World has declined: ownership levels are now much the same in North America and Britain” (Harris and Hamnett 184). Although the research conducted by geographers Richard Harris and Chris Hamnett does not consider the relative advantages for modern non-European or non-first-world immigrants, the material advantages that lead to more opportunities in the New World are largely gone: we no longer enjoy the “higher incomes, abundant land, and early suburban growth, [that] gave working families a real economic advantage in the New World” in the late nineteenth century (Harris and Hamnett 185). Not surprisingly, given this context, the show frames the families’ problems as a kind of “bad luck.”

Therefore, the Peter family is both representative of the American dream and unique because the family’s “special” circumstances interrupted the “normal” course of achieving the dream. *Extreme Makeover*’s Web site explains that this poor Hindu family from Guyana falls just short of “achieving the American dream, when tragedy struck” (“Peter Family”). Had the house not caught fire, the family would have been okay. The program, furthermore, reinforces and capitalizes on the American dream by condensing its achievement into a seven-day miracle makeover.

The critics agree that *Extreme Makeover* is more than just another reality show: it is a miracle that creates a new world for a family in seven days. Unlike God, though, the staff and volunteers usually need the full seven days to complete the project. *Extreme Makeover* also employs Christian-style rhetoric and philanthropy to elevate its goals. Ann Oldenburg, writing for USA Today, emphasizes the program’s religious power. She writes, “What may have seemed at first to be an updated version of *This Old House* has become a spiritual happening, more revival meeting than TV taping. With its charitable sensibilities and ability to mobilize entire communities with a single episode, *EM: HE* is setting a standard for a new genre: Good Samaritan television” (E1). Stephen Johnson, who received an *Extreme Makeover* house, tellingly remarks, “It was a gift from God and ABC” (qtd. in Oldenburg E1). While a few families express concerns about construction practices and their ability to pay taxes and upkeep costs after appearing on the show, almost all of the families profusely thank the volunteers and businesses who helped. Many businesses, furthermore, continue to volunteer their services and supplies. *Extreme Makeover* masks the corporate privatization of the American dream by invoking Christian charity as a key element to the American dream’s achievement.

Notably, *Extreme Makeover* airs on Sunday evenings. While not overtly
Pentecostal, the program’s religious “spiritual” aspects explicitly play into the show’s format. Julie Polter, a writer for *Sojourners Magazine*, observes, “I find something almost biblical in the abundance the crew pours out on families and the genuine delight they appear to take in bringing some fantasy and lushness into modest spaces” (41). In one episode, for example, not one but two subzero refrigerators outfit a gourmet kitchen to help support a mother’s burgeoning catering business. The gifts keep coming in every episode in the form of new vehicles, family entertainment and workout rooms, and lavish, if not outlandish, decors, courtesy of *Extreme Makeover* and Sears (as well as other national and local sponsors). This commercialized spiritual geography contrasts with the historically and culturally grounded spiritual geographies that are central to many neodomestic novels.

The numerous material gifts overwhelm the family members and the audience. In some cases, the families are literally overwhelmed—teasers for the program frequently play and replay family members ecstatically collapsing on the ground when they see their new home for the first time. Hands are thrown in the air and clasped in prayer. The recipients invoke God. In the words of the Koepke family, “You are all a blessing from God.” The hosts graciously give the new home to the family, receive their thanks, and share hugs and tears. The show’s format emphasizes the extreme contrasts with “before” images juxtaposed against the dramatic new results. And, to ensure that the results are dramatic, the homes selected for the program are never larger than two thousand square feet. Once lost, but then found by *Extreme Makeover*, the participants are truly saved. Thus, (Christian) faith legitimizes and elevates the volunteers’ call to action, and families attest that their faith has been rewarded through their appearance on the program.

Like the nineteenth-century texts that precede it, *Extreme Makeover* highlights society’s duty to help the needy. In fact, Beecher and Stowe’s chapter entitled the “Homeless, Helpless, and Vicious” could very well be a subtitle for *Extreme Makeover*. A leaked March 2006 memo written by Charisse Simonian, *Extreme Makeover*’s director for family casting, acknowledges the show’s emphasis on sensational tragedy. The memo, sent to several ABC affiliates, contains a specific “wish list” of diseases and tragedies that *Extreme Makeover* would like to feature, including families with members who have Down syndrome, skin cancer, muscular dystrophy, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Simonian). The memo also expresses interest in families who have lost children to a drunken driving accident and families who have been victims of hate crimes (Simonian). The memo placed the show’s sentimental politics under close scrutiny, at least for a few days. The mainstream media quickly picked up the story; CNN’s *Showbiz Tonight*, for example, featured
an interview with Tom Forman, executive producer of *Extreme Makeover*, and Andrew Goldberg from *The Smoking Gun*, the Web site that initially published the leaked memo. Forman defended the memo and emphasized the program's goal of helping people. Goldberg reminded viewers that reality television “looks to exploit people in order to commercialize people's woe in order to sell ads and make money” (*Showbiz Tonight*). The incident raised questions about the show's primary motivation: does it aim to help people or to market products?

*Extreme Makeover* piques audience interest by invoking foundational American myths, featuring sensational family tragedies, and subconsciously playing on our fears of homelessness. After all, stuck families seeking a way out of their American nightmares are increasingly more the norm than the exception. The suspense and relief that we participate in as viewers hits home during a time of record foreclosures and falling home prices. *Extreme Makeover* provides a fantasy of domestic security for our post-9/11, post-Katrina, and credit card debt-infused age.

Not all viewers and reviewers of *Extreme Makeover* celebrate the program's philanthropy. Paul Farhi points out that the “designers and builders call constant attention to their own act of charity, as if the whole exercise were really about enhancing their self-esteem” (C1). Farhi goes on to quote host Ty Pennington and to provide context for Pennington’s remark: “‘It’s been said a million times—‘it’s better to give than to receive’—but I never thought about that more than I did this week.’ . . . Amid sad piano music, another crew member adds, ‘They [the featured family] didn’t have anyone to turn to, and that’s why we’re here’” (C1). Farhi sarcastically adds his reading of *Extreme Makeover*'s presentation of their purpose, “Oh, thank you, kindly millionaires at ABC. Thank you” (C1). Farhi's remarks emphasize that America's streets may no longer be paved with gold (if they ever were); the United States is now a country where *Oprah, Extreme Makeover*, and any number of media outlets and corporations sponsor a few American dreams.

Also like its white nineteenth-century predecessors, *Extreme Makeover* privileges middle-class heterosexual whiteness. For example, while *Extreme Makeover* has featured a variety of blended, single-parent, multiethnic, and multigenerational families, the show has yet to feature an openly gay parent. When the program came under fire from gay rights groups for allowing the antigay, Christian group Focus on the Family to sponsor an episode aired on October 2, 2005, “ABC denied any bias and said it would ‘absolutely’ consider featuring a gay family on the show” (Allen 18). The roots of *Extreme Makeover*'s conservative vision of the American dream and the origins of its
philanthropic hypermaterialism that keeps the dream alive can be found in this exclusionary but powerfully conservative vision of the model home.

*Extreme Makeover* reveals how the achievement of the American dream remains tied to a conservative, middle-class whiteness. A family’s “uncivilized” dwelling becomes a tasteful dream home. While the children in *Extreme Makeover* often receive extravagantly themed rooms—designed with the individual interests and dreams of each child in mind—the living areas and master bedroom uniformly conform to mainstream notions of “good taste.” The new landscaping lacks such folksy touches as an old tire filled with dirt to create a raised flowerbed. The interiors include new furnishings of largely classic and contemporary design—no mirrored headboards, hula girl lamps, or velvet artwork. Valuing or representing ethnic diversity becomes a design challenge. Ethnic touches, such as those designed for the Native American Piestewa family, reflect “a decorator’s delight . . . if it can be done in time” (“About the Show”).

In fact, one of the tips included in the show’s application packet suggests that family members not chew gum while taping their application video (*Extreme Makeover* 19). Editors need to select tape that will encourage the audience to sympathize with a family’s plight. If families smack gum or display other such “distasteful” habits, the editors’ task becomes more difficult. To put it bluntly, while these families may be poor or while they may have fallen on hard times, they should not exhibit “trashy” or “low-class” habits or tastes. Rather than overtly claiming that the designers civilize the needy homeowners, the program reverses this rhetoric by explicitly emphasizing how the family makes the volunteers more human. When we take into account the burdens associated with the gifts, we see that the half-million-dollar homes help the sponsors and perhaps even the volunteers more than the recipients.

Perhaps the vernacular architecture significant to projects like Auburn University’s Rural Studio or the green building practices that create both sustainable and ecofriendly structures are not regularly implemented in *Extreme Makeover* because they would eat into too much of the seven-day time limit. But this seems unlikely considering all of the other technological innovations and design elements each home includes. While more recent episodes often emphasize green options, any focus on a real reduction in size and consumption goes against *Extreme Makeover*’s formula of more is better—even when
the resources to support the excess are not readily available. *Extreme Makeover* replaces Beecher and Stowe’s call for thrift with a call for extreme excess.

As the economic downturn plays out, it will be interesting to see whether the program adjusts its rhetoric and practices, whether its popularity continues because of its appeal to fantasy and sentiment, or whether the show’s sponsors and viewers withdraw support. For our current moment—just as in the late nineteenth century—building a handful of lavish homes certainly does not address America’s housing crisis. Little wonder that *Extreme Makeover* receives more than fifteen thousand applications each week (“FAQ” 80). In this light, both *Extreme Makeover* and neodomestic fiction ultimately fail us. We have yet to popularize the domestic models that truly fulfill this extreme need and live up to the promise of the American dream.11

Historian Andrew Wiese celebrates the positive changes in suburban space for African Americans during the course of the twentieth century. However, he concludes his history, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*, on a somber note, emphasizing “the persistence of racial inequality” and the challenges that disenfranchised populations still have to overcome:

As Nobel laureate Toni Morrison has remarked, a central issue facing African Americans in the modern United States is how to overcome racism without losing or denying racial identity, how to build a ‘race-specific yet non-racist home’ from the building materials of a race-troubled society. For black suburbanites, this challenge was always more than figurative. In making places of their own in the margins of the city, they negotiated not only the hurdles of building homes and communities, but lines of color, class, and power embedded in the world around them. (Wiese 292)

Neodomestic fiction like Morrison’s *Paradise* interrogates exactly these questions. While the fiction does not necessarily provide solutions or answers to these issues, it demonstrates the advantages of relational spatial politics and helps us frame alternatives to the conventional model home within the arguably more manageable space of the novel.

Neodomestic fiction carves out spaces for alternative domestic geographies that both reflect and theorize lived realities. Americans’ lived domestic experiences provide clear material evidence—if there was any doubt in the first place—that sexism, classism, and racism remain lodged in the domestic geography of American culture. In other words, not everyone lives within and benefits from the contemporary egalitarian homes that Daphne Spain praises and from which she draws her conclusions. Masculine domestic fiction
significantly emphasizes this frequently overlooked aspect of the American dream. Additionally, feminine domestic fiction frequently emphasizes that the material house is only part of the equation. Like the dwellings designed and built by the Rural Studio, neodomestic fiction provides a “vernacular architecture” engaged in “dreaming, moving forward and beyond the limits and confines of fixed locations” (hooks, “Black Vernacular” 400).

A Woman’s Work Is Never Done
Conclusions and Remaining Chores

Women—from Jane Addams, who devoted her life to Hull-House, to Jane Jacobs, who reconceptualized how we view the city—are frequently at the forefront of alternative housing initiatives. My analysis of feminine and masculine (neo)domestic fiction reflects this trend as well. Women’s leadership in this area is not surprising given that women’s identities are still more strongly associated with the home, that their time investment in the home tends to exceed that of men, and that their economic well-being is more fully invested in their homes. A focus on instability and hybridity alone does not mark radical changes in cultures and everyday domestic space. Domestic fiction may be experiencing another renaissance, but we are far from a domestic revolution. Neodomestic fiction and American lived experience suggest that feminist politics still have much to do with home.

Thus, this study indicates that the long view is necessary. “Careful and effective reversals” take steps forward as well as steps back (Martin and Mohanty 306). Changes in the dominant, conventional politics of home—whatever “foreign” bodies it attempts to incorporate or exclude—come slowly. Unlike the popular home makeover show Trading Spaces (aired on the Learning Channel), where dramatic changes are achieved in a matter of days (and on a limited budget!), domestic fiction and culture cannot be renovated over the course of a few novels, even with expert designers such as Toni Morrison executing the task. Therefore, the chores ahead for domestic scholarship include more analysis of novels engaged in redesigning the home as well as those engaged in conventional constructions. As the housing crisis and foreign investment in American real estate continues to develop, writers will also continue to craft art that reflects and attempts to shape the shifting geography of the American dream.

Furthermore, remapping American domesticity involves the critics as much as the literature and culture. The novels surveyed here emphasize that the study of domestic fiction should occupy a more central position
in American literary history. While a spatial redefinition of the genre more readily includes a range of writers and homes, this remapping of the genre does not eliminate domesticity’s taint within critical spheres. Hawthorne’s oft-repeated curse against such fiction continues to set the tone for its critical analysis. Mary Kelley points out in “The Sentimentalists: Promise and Betrayal of Home” how “Leslie Fiedler’s ridicule of ‘the purely commercial purveyors of domestic sentiments’” extends Hawthorne’s complaint into the twentieth century (434). The now infamous remarks made by Jonathan Franzen about Oprah’s selection of *The Corrections* for her book club further suggests that the labels “women’s fiction” and “domestic fiction” continue to pack a negative punch. As long as domestic fiction continues to occupy territory outside the realm of serious literature and scholarship, our criticism normalizes women’s marginality and men’s dearth of domestic responsibility.

While scholars have made some progress in complicating the “separate spheres,” such divisions still seem to function in the production of American literary histories. Dana Heller, for example, explains how men’s writing about domesticity occupies a separate sphere within American literary history:

> Such irony is compounded by the recognition that a reification of the American literary tradition has occurred, in this century, largely in accord with a critical tendency—most impressively demonstrated by Eric Sundquist’s *Home as Found*, Richard Chase’s *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, and Leslie Fiedler’s *Love and Death in the American Novel*—to concentrate on the male American writer’s ambiguous, yet powerfully romantic attachments to this domestic space and the concept of origin. (226)

Neodomestic fiction challenges us to revise such gendered mapping of American domesticity. As projects like the Rural Studio indicate, this remapping need not be confined to literature. We can find instructive examples in other art forms, including the visual arts.

Photographer and multimedia artist Clarissa Sligh in particular interrogates what constitutes normative gendered and raced family roles and domestic space. Her book *What’s Happening with Momma* (1987), for example, is shaped like a house. Lisa Gail Collins describes another series, *Reading Dick and Jane with Me*, as a project that “captures the pain and contradiction of poor African American children internalizing the American Dream” (50). Sligh’s work addresses domestic violence, incest, and colonialism and is also deeply engaged in the relationships between the present and the past: “From the perspective of the artist as participant-observer, Sligh
considers the voices of the past and uses them to create imagery that is both provocative and historically introspective” (Willis 11). Collins goes on to explain that Sligh’s approach
criticise[s] the ideal. She incorporates pictures from her own family albums and school yearbooks to dramatize the gap between the world represented by watercolor illustrations in the [Dick and Jane] primers and the one represented in her black and white photographs. Drawing from her own photographic archive, she sets the mythic vision of the reader against the material reality of the children who lived in her neighborhood and attended her segregated school. (50)

Her neodomestic visual images (which often incorporate text) blur the lines between the past and the present as well as the personal and the universal, questioning and repositioning cultural norms and taboos.

Her series The Men examines men’s relationship to the domestic sphere and masculinity. The domestic masculinity in The Men provides a visual representation of what neodomestic fiction such as Nava’s Rag and Bone accomplishes. For example, Ron Ironing, Dallas, Texas, 1986, which serves as the cover image for the book, provides an instructive visual image. In the portrait the man is barefoot and ironing in a garage or some other space full of bicycles. Three bicycles appear in the background; two hang on the wall and one stands just behind the subject—on the right side of the image—in front of what appears to be a metal filing cabinet. A closed window also appears in the background. The subject is placed in the center of a triangle produced by the right and left walls and the length of the ironing board. The crossed ironing board’s legs reproduce the triangle shape. The circles (repeated with the bikes’ wheels) and the window’s rectangle fill out the composition’s visual depth and interest.

The photograph is particularly interesting for the ways it juxtaposes the stereotypically feminine (completing domestic chores while barefoot, if not pregnant) and the stereotypically masculine (working in a garage among symbols of athleticism). The feminine chore transforms the masculine space and vice versa. Rather than reinforce gender norms, the image blurs them. The subject’s steadfast gaze challenges the viewer to see him as an embodiment of a nonanxious, domestic masculinity. The other images in this series similarly ask the viewer to engage with images that destabilize our conventional understandings of masculinity and femininity. Sligh’s oeuvre, like neodomestic fiction, “is an ongoing investigation and reinterpretation of our perceptions of normality and the role of the individual within the various
frameworks that shape her or him, such as the family, society, one's gender group, and one's ethnicity” (Williams 3).

Thus, the work ahead will continue Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty’s project of determining “What’s Home Got to Do with It?” Undoubtedly, the heart of such inquiries will require a discussion about the relationships among power, place, and history. Jane Tompkins writes that “domestic fiction is preoccupied, even obsessed with the nature of power” (160). My own work confirms her statement. Determining the various incarnations and meanings of domestic power constitutes the territory ahead.

WHILE ENGAGED in the process of remapping the study of domestic fiction, I was reminded of how my brother teased me in high school after I became president of my high school’s local chapter of the Future Homemakers of America. He poked fun that I was actually leading the charge of the Future Home-Wreckers of America. As much as it pains me to admit, but in the best possible ways, I hope this project proves that he was right. From the model’s fragments may we continue to seek ways to recycle ecologically and socially viable homes and homemaking practices. We have only begun to scour the range of America’s domestic geographies.
Major Neodomestic Authors and Novels—Chronological Order

Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1981)
Joy Williams's *Breaking and Entering* (1981)
John Crowley's *Little, Big* (1981)
John Edgar Wideman's Homewood trilogy:
   - *Damballah* (1981)
   - *Sent for You Yesterday* (1981)
   - *Hiding Place* (1983)
Sandra Cisneros's *The House on Mango Street* (1984)
Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985)
Richard Ford's *The Sportswriter* (1986)
Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)
Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988)
Michael Cunningham's *A Home at the End of the World* (1990)
Anne Tyler's *Saint Maybe* (1991)
Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992)
Cristina Garcia's *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992)
Toni Morrison's *Jazz* (1992)
Marge Piercy's *The Longings of Women* (1994)
Louise Erdrich's *Tales of Burning Love* (1996)
Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997)
Toni Morrison's *Paradise* (1997)
Barbara Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998)
Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998)
Loida Maritza Pérez's *Geographies of Home* (1999)
Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999)
Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* (1999)
Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000)
Ernesto Quiñonez’s *Bodega Dreams* (2000)
Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* (2001)
Richard Russo’s *Empire Falls* (2001)
Michael Nava’s *Rag and Bone* (2001)
Jane Smiley’s *Good Faith* (2003)
Chang-rae Lee’s *Aloft* (2004)
Richard Russo’s *Bridge of Sighs* (2007)
Helen María Viramontes’s *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007)
Marilynne Robinson’s *Home* (2008)
Toni Morrison’s *A Mercy* (2008)
Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland* (2008)
Nami Mun’s *Miles from Nowhere* (2009)
Eric Puchner’s *Model Home* (2010)
Gabrielle Zevin’s *The Hole We’re In* (2010)
Introduction

1. In geography, the terms “space” and “place” have distinct histories. See their respective entries in *A Feminist Glossary of Human Geography* for a brief overview of the various ways in which these terms are used and debated in geographic literature. Unless otherwise noted, I use “place” and “space” relatively interchangeably, though “place” tends to refer to a more specific location; for example, gendered, raced, and classed space may be used to describe the home (“place”). As this and the next chapter outline in greater detail, my use of these terms is informed by feminist geography that understands place as relational and space as inextricable from time. See Doreen Massey’s *Space, Place, and Gender* for arguments against place’s bound nature and discussions of space’s relationship with time and gender.

2. For a reconsideration of Armstrong’s arguments, see Leila Silvana May, “The Strong-Arming of Desire: A Reconsideration of Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction*.”


4. I would like to thank an anonymous reader for helping me identify many of the counterhegemonic examples from the nineteenth century.

5. Rethinking nineteenth-century texts’ domestic politics constitutes a growing and exciting field of scholarship. For example, Elizabeth Moss’s *Domestic Novelists in the Old South: Defenders of Southern Culture* (1992) discusses the “ideological warfare” produced by southern women writers in the nineteenth century. The *Cambridge Companion to Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Writing* (2001), edited by Dale M. Bauer and Philip Gould, provides an overview of recent (re)appraisals of nineteenth-century American women’s writing. Recent scholarship by Claudia Tate, Lora Romero, and Amy Kaplan read alongside earlier work by Susan K. Harris, Nina Baym, and Judith Fetterley were most influential in my characterization and understanding of nineteenth-century domesticity.

6. Recent modernist studies of domesticity and domestic fiction include Guy Reynolds, “Re-making the Home, 1909–33” and “Modernist Geographies,” in *Twentieth-
Notes to Introduction


While not focused on the contemporary American domestic novel specifically, Sara Blair’s “Cultural Geography and the Place of the Literary” and Rosemary Marangoly George’s The Politics of Home: Postcolonial Relocations and Twentieth-Century Fiction, as well as her edited collection, Burning Down the House: Recycling Domesticity, influenced my research and approach to contemporary domestic fiction.

8. I first encountered the phrase “spatial narrative” in Mary Pat Brady’s analysis of Chicana literature, Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies.

9. For a more detailed introduction to reading space as a social process, see David Harvey, Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference, especially pages 316–24.

10. This idea—that a place can shape its inhabitants as much as inhabitants can shape a place—should be distinguished from nineteenth-century theories of architectural determinism, which emphasize a “top down” power hierarchy. Proponents of architectural determinism worried about the ways that places, especially urban places, could shape inhabitants. Architectural determinists did not explore the potential of the inhabitants to influence the spaces in which they lived and worked.

11. The post–September 11 “credit-card patriotism” has undergone some analysis (Solomon 43). Theda Skocpol, for instance, reminds us of the context and content of the Bush administration’s “managerial coordination” after September 11:

President Bush did not launch any big new civic effort [after 9/11], such as mandatory national service for young Americans. Instead, for weeks after 9/11, his most prominent appeals were commercial rather than civic. The Travel Industry Association of America estimated that two-thirds of Americans saw the President starring in a television advertisement calling for people to express “courage” by taking more trips. And the president repeatedly asked people to go shopping to stimulate the economy.
While distinct from the civic responsibilities demanded of, for example, the World War I and II eras, these domestic-commercial attitudes have a long history, at least as long and deep as nineteenth-century American domesticity. For instance, Ellen's mother in *The Wide, Wide World* takes her daughter shopping to prepare her for their tragic separation. The exquisite details of the shopping trips with her mother allow the reader to enjoy vicariously the successful procurement of new goods. When Ellen shops by herself, as is the case when Ellen looks for muslin, the reader experiences the unease associated with a young girl shopping alone in the masculine public sphere (Warner 44–52). While Catharine E. Beecher promoted thrift, she also encourages her readers in *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, to purchase “superfluities” in order “to spend for the welfare of mankind” (Beecher 182). Furthermore, “The link between retail therapy and warfare is not as incongruous as it sounds. After Hiroshima and Nagasaki, stores on Fifth Avenue sold atomic jewellery, the Atomic Undergarment Company took off, a cereal maker offered atomic trinkets in return for 15 cents and a breakfast flakes box top and Lowell Blanchard released his popular country single, 'Jesus Hits Like an Atom Bomb'” (Riddell). See Simon J. Bronner’s edited collection, *Consuming Visions: Accumulation and Display of Goods in America 1880–1920* for an overview of the development of American consumer culture.

Chapter 1

1. Both Amy Kaplan and Rosemary Marangoly George point out the genre’s imperial origins and influence to reinforce imperialism. Carolyn Vellenga Berman explores the genre’s role in both abolishing slavery and establishing the nuclear family in her study *Creole Crossings: Domestic Fiction and the Reform of Colonial Slavery*.

2. See Dianne Chisholm’s *Queer Constellations* for a more sustained definition and discussion of queer (urban) space.

3. Just as I am engaged in rethinking domesticity and domestic fiction, other scholars have asked us to reconsider our understanding of the sentimental and sentimental fiction. See, for example, June Howard’s “What Is Sentimentality?”

4. Dana Heller’s “Housebreaking History: Feminism’s Troubled Romance with the Domestic Sphere” discusses in greater detail, and in a literary context, post–World War II feminism’s reluctant relationship with the home. Her essay analyzes “a convergence of discursive trajectories driven by American feminism’s anxieties about its historical relationship to the ideology of separate social spheres, the family romance of classical psychoanalysis, and the semiotics of popular culture’s focus on the domestic” (219). For a more detailed exploration of the feminist movement’s reluctant embrace of home, see
Judith Newton’s “Feminist Family Values; or, Growing Old—and Growing Up—with the Women’s Movement” and Rachel Bowlby’s “Domestication.”

5. See Edward W. Soja’s Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Social Theory for a discussion of how time is being replaced by space.


9. President George W. Bush made these remarks in regard to gay marriage’s legality.

10. While the Breedlove apartment in Morrison’s The Bluest Eye (1970), like the Puente home in Dreaming in Cuban, recycles a commercial space for domestic use, it unsuccessfully crafts a neodomestic home. The Breedlove’s “abandoned store” apartment is a serviceable structure in the sense that it provides shelter, but the apartment fails to provide a home because it lacks comfort: “Without it [comfort], our dwellings will indeed be machines instead of homes” (Rybczynski 232). As a recycled structure that has housed gypsies, a real-estate office, a Hungarian baker, and a pizza parlor, the apartment is a versatile “machine” but ill adapted for family home life. The apartment and rooms, for example, are not cozy. Described as an eyesore that is “both irritating and melancholy” (33), the “unimaginative” (34) living quarters consist of only two rooms (Bluest Eye 34–35). “Festering together in the debris of a realtor’s whim,” the Breedlove family decays rather than flourishes in this destructive environment (Bluest Eye 34). Unlike the Puente family’s warehouse home, the home in The Bluest Eye (re)produces a domestic trap rather than recycling a new route to home.

11. Sian Mile and Jean Wyatt have also argued that Housekeeping presents an ambivalent view of the characters’ potential liberation.

12. Cisneros discusses the inspiration for Mango Street in an interview with Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock (301–2).


14. During an interview on National Public Radio conducted by host John Ydstie for “All Things Considered,” Natalie Pace, a CoAbode client, gave the motto “until better times do us part,” referring to her arrangement provided through the nonprofit service (qtd. in Ydstie).

15. To flesh out this discussion more completely, I would need to look closely at the nineteenth century’s “Boston marriages,” which carved out a socially acceptable space for women to live together for mutual economic benefit. See Shannon Jackson’s Lines of Activity: Performance, Historiography, Hull-House Domesticity (2000), which provides a fuller discussion of queer domesticity in the nineteenth century.

16. While walled cities have been around since Roman times, “gated communities remained rarities until the advent of the master-planned retirement developments of the late 1960s and 1970s” (Blakely and Snyder 4). See Fortress America: Gated Communities in the United States (Edward J. Blakely and Mary Gail Snyder) and Behind the Gates: Life, Security, and the Pursuit of Happiness in Fortress America (Setha Low).
Chapter 2

1. Sarah A. Leavitt also underscores conventional domesticity’s racial and class implications in her chapter “Americanization, Model Homes, and Lace Curtains.” Leavitt writes that at the turn of the century, immigrant women were the primary targets of much domestic advice (75). She also notes that “most domestic-advice texts left out black women. For domestic advisors, black women existed only as servants” (Leavitt 75).

2. J. K. Gibson-Graham deploys the term along these lines in The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy (see 139–45). For additional discussion of queer space, see Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s scholarship, especially “Sex in Public,” and Judith Halberstam’s In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives.

3. Little Women begins by revealing each of the March girl’s flaws, which they in turn plan—as in John Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress (1678)—to resolve. Little Women, in this sense, narrates the March girls’ journeys toward recognizing, accepting, and correcting their burdens and flaws. See chapters 1 and 2 in Little Women, “Playing Pilgrims” and “A Merry Christmas.”

4. Rachel Price and Amy March also resemble each other because both are guilty of misusing language; Rachel’s frequent malapropisms and Amy’s mispronunciations connect their characters.

5. Regarding Amy’s “disability,” Alcott writes, “If anybody had asked Amy what the greatest trial of her life was, she would have answered at once, ‘My nose.’ When she was a baby, Jo had accidentally dropped her into the coal-hod, and Amy insisted that the fall had ruined her nose forever” (42).

6. Domestic “faculty” is a nineteenth-century term that refers to the collection of skills that make “a housekeeper of exemplary competence” (Romines 4).

7. G. M. Goshgarian’s To Kiss the Chastening Rod: Domestic Fiction and Sexual Ideology in the American Renaissance examines domestic fiction’s “(im)piety,” complicating a straight reading of the domestic protagonists’ selflessness (xi).

8. Although beyond the scope of this chapter, The Poisonwood Bible also works a subtle critique of the African domestic sphere into the narrative. Ruth May, for example, describes a conversation she overhears about a “Circus mission,” and Leah notes how the women in Kilanga marry young (271; 107). Rachel and Orleanna record the toll the body, especially the female body, endures in part as a result of those early marriages (53–54; 126). The novel also balances this subtle critique with Mama Tataba, an icon of domestic prowess who “cursed our mortal souls as evenhandedly as she nourished our bodies” (94).

9. Kaplan’s term “manifest domesticity” plays on the term “manifest destiny” and its imperial connotations; it refers to the “pervasive imperial metaphor” in the nineteenth century, linking domesticity “to the contemporaneous geopolitical movement of imperial expansion” (Kaplan, “Manifest Domesticity” 583).

10. Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty similarly outline “the consolidation of the white home in response to a threatening outside” as the rhetoric of home’s dark underbelly (303). The series of foreign and domestic policy initiatives undertaken after September 11 add even greater magnitude to Orleanna’s, Benhabib’s, and Martin and Mohanty’s remarks. America frequently uses violence to respond to the backlash against its privileged position within the global community.

11. Kaplan suggests in “Manifest Domesticity” that “the expansionist logic of domestic-
ity . . . turns an imperial nation into a home by producing and colonizing specters of the foreign that lurk inside and outside its ever shifting borders” (602).

12. I am indebted to Kaplan’s essay “Manifest Domesticity” for first connecting nineteenth-century American domesticity to Morrison’s notion of the “Africanist presence” (602).

13. My emphasis here on the “Africanist presence” should not discount Barbara Kingsolver’s political agenda to make her readers aware of American involvement in the Congo, especially in terms of America’s role in Patrice Lumumba’s assassination.

14. The Price’s luggage symbolizes the (un)packing of their imperial burdens, or the dual predicament and promise embedded in their revised domestic pilgrimages. Whereas the March girls in Little Women take up their burdens and learn to carry them in order to establish a “Celestial City,” the Price family’s burdens initially bury them in cultural baggage. As missionaries in the Belgian Congo during the latter half of the twentieth century, the Price family ostensibly continues a tradition of cultural imperialism, furthering the “civilizing” reach of the “White House.” However, The Poisonwood Bible’s historically conscious recycling tweaks the conventional narrative of Pilgrims’ Progress.


16. To describe Rachel as both child-like and sexual may seem contradictory; however, I would argue that this paradox defines the “dumb blonde” personality.

17. My favorite malapropism spoken by Rachel is this: “He [Axelroot] has a hundred and one reasons not to marry the cow so he can buy the milk for free” (403). This section written from Johannesburg, South Africa, also notes Rachel’s fluency in three languages (402). While it is unclear what exactly constitutes “fluency,” she can at least recite John 3:16 in English, Afrikaans, and French. Clearly this novel engages language in ways that extend beyond the scope of this chapter. (Adah’s fascination with palindromes also comes to mind.) In Rachel’s case, at least, her ability to speak three languages highlights a kind of “boutique multiculturalism”—akin to bragging about how “one of my very close friends happens to be from Paris, France” (402). Thank you to Brandon Kempner and Deborah Clarke for pointing out the language connections to my overall project.

18. While beyond the scope of this chapter, a fuller reading of this passage would interrogate how African children of white and black parents fit into both African and American societies.

19. “Cultural impersonation” is Minnie Bruce Pratt’s term, as Martin and Mohanty note.

20. Baym in Woman’s Fiction does not argue that women’s fiction before the Civil War advanced the home as a separate sphere or facilitated its retreat from the world (48). But after the Civil War, Baym suggests, “the Gilded Age affirmed profit as the motive around which all of American life was to be organized. Home now became a retreat, a restraint and a constraint, as it had not appeared to be earlier” (50). My use of the term “retreat” more broadly encompasses the security sought by women’s narratives during both the antebellum and post–Civil War periods.

21. Rachel expresses a similar frustration with the Price home in “Bel and the Serpent”: “I think our house gave me the worst willies of all. That house was the whole problem, because it had our family in it. I was long past the point of feeling safe huddling under my parents’ wings” (358).

22. Orleanna expresses the most grief about the loss of Ruth May; she does not appear to suffer as much angst about her other daughters who remain in Africa. She refers to Ruth May as the baby that she can’t put down (382): “My little beast, my eyes, my favorite
stolen egg” (385). Ruth May’s eyes are the eyes of judgment: “If you are the eyes in the trees, watching us as we walk away from Kilanga, how will you make your judgment? Lord knows after thirty years I still crave your forgiveness, but who are you?” (385; emphasis in original). Orleanna conflates Ruth May with the jungle in this passage; more broadly, the “you” also refers to the Congo.

23. Although not to the same extent as Gardens in the Dunes, The Poisonwood Bible also uses bird, snake, and garden symbolism to convey its message about American domesticity’s links to colonialism.

Chapter 3

1. Domestic space in The Bluest Eye crafts a house-home dichotomy rather than deconstructing and recycling it. See chapter 1, footnote 10.


3. I was unable to locate housing figures for black households in 1940. The first housing census was taken in 1940, but the U.S. Census Bureau did not begin to collect race-specific data until 1950. According to the Bureau, 31 percent of houses in 1940 had no running water, 18 percent needed major repairs, and 44 percent lacked a built-in bathtub or shower for the exclusive use of its occupants (U.S. Census, “Tracking” 1). In Ohio—the setting of The Bluest Eye—black homeownership was at 36 percent in 1950, above the national average for blacks (34.5 percent), but still well below the total national average of 55 percent (U.S. Census Bureau, “Historical Census”).

4. Practical arguments for having an external kitchen included keeping smoke and food smells out of the main part of the home and keeping the house cooler during the summer by placing the cook stove outside the main house.

5. Strictly speaking, Morrison’s trilogy follows a chronology that places Jazz between Beloved and Paradise. Morrison clarifies the year, 1976, on page 49 in Paradise. Peter Widdowson’s “The American Dream Refashioned: History, Politics and Gender in Toni Morrison’s Paradise” describes in greater detail the various clues that place the novel’s start on July 4, 1976.

6. See Nell Irvin Painter’s Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction for additional information on the Exoduster movement.


8. See Rob Davidson’s “Racial Stock and 8-Rocks: Communal Historiography in Toni Morrison’s Paradise” and Philip Page’s “Furrowing All the Brows: Interpretation and the Transcendent in Toni Morrison’s Paradise.”

9. The novel’s most notoriously inscrutable detail appears on the first page: “They shot the white girl first.” The woman’s identity remains a mystery, despite various clues throughout the story as to the identities of the women residing at the Convent. In this vein, Philip Page suggests that Patricia Best Cato burns her papers and charts because
she finally discovers a similar false method of interpretation embedded in her genealogy. Page suggests that in Morrison's novel the "quest for facts, for closed answers" will always frustrate and thwart the reader and the characters (641).

10. See footnotes 7 and 8. The essays listed in these footnotes outline, to various degrees, the patriarchal nature of the 8-rock story. In addition to these essays, Michael K. Johnson interprets Paradise's critique of patriarchy in light of the frontier myth in Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature (see especially pages 59–68).

11. The gardens do benefit the butterflies, who "journeyed miles to brood in Ruby" (90).

12. See, for example, Katrine Dalsgård's "The One All-Black Town Worth the Pain: (African) American Exceptionalism, Historical Narration, and the Critique of Nationalhood in Toni Morrison's Paradise."

13. Peter Widdowson draws this connection in his essay "The American Dream Refashioned: History, Politics and Gender in Toni Morrison's Paradise."


15. Nell Irvin Painter writes that a significant portion of Exodusters traveling to Kansas hailed from Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, and Tennessee ("Acknowledgments").

16. For historical information on prominent all-black Oklahoma towns, see George O. Carney's "Oklahoma's All-Black Towns" and William Loren Katz's "Oklahoma: A Black Dream Crushed."

17. According to Kenneth Marvin Hamilton, the column "Come Prepared or Not At All" appeared in the Herald throughout 1891 and 1892 (104). William Loren Katz explains that the Herald printed both "propaganda and caution" (260). As the Herald was first published on May 23, 1891, Morrison does not strictly follow the historical record in having her characters be aware of the Langston City newspaper and this column in particular. The 8-rock families travel and found Haven just as Langston City itself was being established in 1890.

18. Hamilton also notes, "When the acting governor proposed assistance to a colony of five hundred poor blacks settling in Oklahoma during November 1891, the Herald deplored his proposal, asserting that it was 'a mistake for any but self-supporting people to come' to Oklahoma" (104).

19. Peter Widdowson suggests that gender ultimately trumps race as "the key defining characteristic and the crucial potential source of destabilizing change" within the novel (329). Widdowson suggests that "what the Convent women partly represent is 'Out There,' or Misner's 'the whole world' which the exclusive paradise of Ruby must perforce 'live in.' The Convent's apparent separation from, but contiguity with, the town underpins this paradox" (329). I will examine momentarily the gendered geopolitics of this conflict more specifically in my discussion of the Convent and the interactions between the Convent and Ruby.

20. The Five Civilized Tribes were so named "because they possessed more European characteristics than any of the other North American tribes. Many of them could read and write English and had a basic understanding of U.S. Institutions" (Hamilton 133, n2).

21. Carney suggests several related reasons for why many real all-black towns in Oklahoma did not survive. ("By the post-World War II period," Carney notes, "only nineteen of the original twenty-eight [all-black towns] remained" [152].) Carney suggests, for instance, that all-black towns "never totally escaped their dependence on an economic system essentially controlled by whites. Furthermore, they experienced many of the same problems faced by all small town rural market centers, black or white" (151). These
problems included being bypassed by highway networks, residents traveling farther distances for goods and services as a result of the increased mobility brought about by the automobile, younger generations moving away for better employment opportunities, and insufficient funding for schools and roads (Carney 151–52). Additionally, “Low cotton prices and the agricultural recession of the 1920s, followed by the Great Depression of the 1930s, severely affected farming communities” (Carney 152).

22. *Culture of Fear* (1999) is the title of Barry Glassner’s sociological critique of American culture. Documentary filmmaker Michael Moore draws from Glassner’s work in *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), which also argues what I am suggesting here: fear often drives American policy. As the short animated film within *Bowling for Columbine* suggests, a cursory overview of American history contextualizes this deep fear of the “foreign” and the escalating violence associated with it.

23. Gigi’s military-like attire is described on page 310.

Chapter 4

1. See Massey, 9–11, for a discussion of some common gendered understandings of place (for example, masculinity and the universal, femininity and the local).

2. Unlike Steven M. Gelber, I use the term “domestic masculinity” broadly—to refer to both conventionally feminine homemaking practices, which Gelber calls “masculine domesticity,” and to traditionally masculine domestic tasks, which Gelber defines as the practices and spaces in the suburban home “that had been the purview of professional (male) craftsmen” (73). While there is not an exact equivalent for femininity, Judith Halberstam’s *Female Masculinity* (1998) troubles femininity and masculinity just as “domestic masculinity” troubles these categories. My work examines how domesticity is not women’s exclusive domain; likewise, Halberstam questions “the privileged reservation of masculinity for men” and looks at various sites of “masculinity without men” (xii; 1).

3. Catherine Jurca notes the following authors as key to the development of suburban fiction: “Sinclair Lewis, James M. Cain, Sloan Wilson, Richard Yates, John Updike, Frederick Barthelme, and Richard Ford” (4). While Jurca does consider some women writers, her work focuses on texts in which male protagonists play a central role. The notable exception is Jurca’s chapter on James M. Cain’s *Mildred Pierce* (1941).

A list of contemporary female American authors significant to the study of suburban fiction might include Marge Piercy, Joyce Carol Oates, Anne Tyler, Jane Smiley, and Ann Beattie.

4. Gelber suggests, “One would have to go back to an even earlier time, before there were suburbs, when most people lived on farms, in order to find husbands” who had more than an economic relationship to the daily running and functioning of their households (67). I discuss in the final chapter how women are increasingly taking part in traditionally masculine do-it-yourself projects.

5. Martin and Mohanty make the opposite point about Minnie Bruce Pratt’s narrative in “Feminist Politics: What’s Home Got to Do With It?” They discuss a passage where Pratt realizes she cannot abnegate responsibility for her father’s history/privilege (Martin and Mohanty 301–2).

6. While I agree that twenty-first century suburban fiction that focuses on white men may continue to reflect and generate this attitude, the fact that new American immigrants increasingly make the suburb their first entry point suggests that the long view may

7. My thanks to Jamie Ebersole for pointing out these gendered histories.


9. Fetterley and Baym go further to suggest that mobility in such cases functions not only to define masculinity but also it defines a fundamental tenant of what it means to be “American.” Therefore, as Fetterley argues, women’s domestic fiction is “not in the least American.” See Fetterley and Baym’s essays for fuller readings of the gendered logic of what gets labeled “American.” Amy Kaplan’s recent work uncovers the mobility and “foreign” spaces in much (white women’s) domestic fiction, problematizing the “limited scope” nineteenth-century domestic fiction by women presents for its audience.

10. Other novels in this diverse tradition include Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills* (1985) and Stephen L. Carter’s *The Emperor of Ocean Park* (2002), both set in affluent African American suburban neighborhoods. *Linden Hills* fictionalizes the emergence of an African American self-built neighborhood. Rather than celebrating black suburbia, Naylor’s harsh “appraisal of black mobility . . . portrays life in a black middle-class suburb as an allegory for Dante’s descent into Hell” (Wiese 287). Significant parts of Carter’s novel take place in the family’s summer home, the Vineyard House, located on Ocean Park in Oak Bluffs on Martha’s Vineyard. While Carter’s thriller does not have an intense focus on domestic masculinity, it does spend some time outlining the significance of the homes presented in the novel. The Vineyard House’s suburban history is explained in the opening prologue: “My parents like to tell how they bought the house for a song back in the sixties, when Martha’s Vineyard, and the black middle-class colony that summers there, were still smart and secret” (Carter 3). Sandra Tsing Loh’s humorous depictions of suburban life in *If You Lived Here, You’d Be Home By Now* (1997) and *A Year in Van Nuys* (2001) and Chang-rae Lee’s novels *A Gesture Life* and *Aloft* also expand suburban literature’s range beyond white suburbia.

11. Langston Hughes’s poem “Little Song on Housing” also addresses the barriers African Americans often face when buying a home. Racial and gender discrimination occurred in a range of practices involving suburban development. This history of exclusionary practices includes outright racial segregation and exclusion, redlined mortgages, unequal housing subsidies, and highway development that disproportionately destroyed low-income and minority neighborhoods. More recently, higher-priced and riskier mortgages have been connected to higher foreclosure rates among Hispanic and black homeowners (See Kochhar, Gonzalez-Barrera, and Dockterman). All of these practices continue to have long-term effects on female and minority homeownership. See Dolores Hayden’s *Building Suburbia* (68; 125; 135; 147; 166) and Wiese’s *Places of Their Own*. See also Wiese’s index, specifically the entry “housing discrimination,” for additional reading.

12. “Sweat equity” here includes the practice of self-building homes and suburbs as well as do-it-yourself home improvements. See Hayden’s *Building Suburbia* (111–114) and Andrew Wiese’s *Places of Their Own*. See also Wiese’s index, specifically the entry “owner building,” for additional reading.

13. Joan Hoff-Wilson explains in *Law, Gender, and Injustice* that after the Civil War, laws were passed that helped equalize property law for wives. The laws “ranged from the simple ability of wives to write wills with or without their husbands’ consent, to granting
feme sole status to abandoned women, to allowing women some control over their own wages, to establishing separate estates for women, to protecting land inherited by widows from their husbands’ creditors, to allowing widows legal access to their husbands’ personal estates” (Hoff-Wilson 128). Morrison’s *A Mercy* explores the anxiety around the loss of a white male homeowner and the perilous position in which his death places his female and male dependents during the colonial period. See Spain’s “From Parlor to Great Room” (137–38) in *Gendered Spaces* for a succinct overview of property control in American law.

14. See chapter 3 in *The Wide, Wide World* for the description of Ellen and her mother’s shopping excursions.

15. Recent fiction that follows the haven model includes much of Jan Karon’s fiction, especially about the fictional town Mitford, and fiction by Thomas Kinkade and Katherine Spencer, especially the “Cape Light” novels. Mitford, for example, is described as a world “you won’t want to leave” because “It’s easy to feel at home in Mitford. In these high, green hills, the air is pure, the village is charming, and the people are generally lovable.” (These quotations come from the back cover of Karon’s *At Home in Mitford*, 1996 Penguin paperback edition.)

16. Foreign buyers have played a significant role in major urban areas in the United States since 2005 and perhaps earlier. See Ron Scherer’s article “House Not Home: Foreigners Buy Up American Real Estate.” The subprime mortgage crisis, falling housing prices, and a weak dollar have made American real estate even more attractive to foreign buyers.

17. Recall, as I noted in the introduction, that 25 percent of female-headed households could afford a modestly priced house in 2004 versus 36 percent of male-headed households (Savage 4). Seventy percent of married couples could afford the same moderately priced home (Savage 4).

18. While Mosley’s novel could not be considered a full-fledged version of domestic fiction, it does contain the crucial element of homeownership driving its narrative. The novel clearly and significantly integrates the mystery form with a fundamental element of domestic fiction. Mosley’s novel *The Man in My Basement* (2004) deepens this exploration—exploring the relationship between a black man in danger of losing his home and a white man who offers a lot of money to live in—actually, to be imprisoned in—the other man’s basement.

19. See Updike’s *Rabbit at Rest* (361–85) for the description of his final flight and road trip to Florida.

20. *White Noise* is not necessarily representative of DeLillo’s oeuvre. *Underworld* (1997), for example, does not share the same intense and sustained focus on family and homemaking.

21. As the home’s changes also seem to reflect the inhabitants’ psyches, *House of Leaves* also can be seen as an American literary successor to the British novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891) by Oscar Wilde.

22. Space does not permit me to clarify the distinct ways in which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (particularly in “What Is a Minor Literature?” and A *Thousand Plateaus*) and Jean Baudrillard (in *Simulacra and Simulation*) have influenced this novel. I gesture to them here to offer a sense of the novel’s overall flavor rather than to engage their theories in any detail.

Feminism generally requires some reworking of postmodern theory. See Doreen Massey’s “Flexible Sexism” for a representative feminist critique of postmodern theory as well as Rosi Braidotti’s *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contem-
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23. See N. Katherine Hayles’s article “Saving the Subject: Remediation in House of Leaves” for a representative postmodern interpretation.

24. House of Leaves specifically discusses Heidegger’s definition of the uncanny, or unheimlich, in chapter 4 (Danielewski 24–28). A fictional Harold Bloom mentions it as well in his interpretation of the film (Danielewski 364). Also see footnote 330 in House of Leaves (Danielewski 359).

25. While I do not explore this connection, the tree can also be read as “arborescence,” given the novel’s nod to Deleuze and Guattari. See the introduction to A Thousand Plateaus for Deleuze and Guattari’s description of this concept.

26. The practice of ancestor worship appears in many African traditional religions and some form of these practices sometimes carries over into African American religious practices. See Toni Morrison’s “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation” and Trudier Harris’s entry “Ancestors” in The Oxford Companion to African American Literature.

Chapter 5

1. Publisher’s Weekly referred to the flap as “Oprahgate.”


5. Empire Falls did win the Pulitzer Prize in 2002—an award granted after the publication of Epstein’s article.

6. Not surprisingly, given the domestic novel’s use of plots involving journeys to or away from home, the prodigal son trope appears in several neodomestic novels, including, for example, Marilynne Robinson’s Home and Richard Russo’s Bridge of Sighs. The prodigal son (or daughter) trope also works well with the narrative of “beset manhood,” as it takes the wayward protagonist back home.

7. The chick lit community is very aware of its status and the Franzen Affair. (Thank you to April Kent at New Mexico Highlands University for making me aware of this fact.) For example, Candace Bushnell’s Trading Up (New York: Hyperion, 2003) lampoons Franzen’s snobbery through the character Craig Edgers, author of The Embarrassments (consult pages 187–88; 192; 202–4). Another popular chick lit author, Plum Sykes, takes a quick jab at Franzen in Bergdorf Blondes (New York: Hyperion, 2004) (consult page 208).


9. My remarks should not imply that Crichton’s novels are apolitical. His recent novel, State of Fear, for example, engages the debate about global warming.

10. R. Mark Hall, for example, suggests that Oprah’s Book Club “supports traditional female identities. In short, even as Winfrey frames reading in terms of female empower-
ment, ‘Oprah’s Book Club’ depends upon fundamentally conservative forces in the history of literacy sponsorship for women in this country” (Hall 661). Paul Street's essay “The Full Blown ‘Oprah’ Effect: Reflections on Color, Class and New Age Racism” provides a representative analysis of Winfrey's celebrity and what it represents to black and white American communities.

11. Producer Scott Rudin optioned The Corrections and David Hare is writing the screenplay. Hare also wrote The Hours's screenplay for Rudin. See Karen Valby, “Correction Dept.”

12. For a fuller reading of Rag and Bone's domestic politics, see Ralph Rodríguez’s “A Poverty of Relations: On Not ‘Making Familia from Scratch,’ But Scratching Familia.”


14. Doc Hata is Japanese by nationality and Korean by birth (ethnicity); his poor Korean parents give him away to a wealthy Japanese family. His parents entrust their son to this other family in order to improve their son's station in life: “No one of my family's circumstance could expect to change his station, at least without a lifetime of struggle” (Lee 72).

15. Although my reading here does not address this reference, one of the foundational suburban texts that A Gesture Life specifically reycles is John Cheever's short story “The Swimmer.” A Gesture Life also continues a distinct Asian American literary tradition that addresses masculinity, immigration/assimilation, and home. Novels in this tradition include Louis Chu's Eat a Bowl of Tea (1961), John Okada No-No Boy (1976), and Frank Chin's Donald Duk (1991).


17. Young-Oak Lee also connects Franklin Hata to Benjamin Franklin in “Gender, Race, and Nation in A Gesture Life”; “Because ‘Franklin’ evokes Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States and also the creation for Americans of lives loaded with the myth of success, the irony of his adoptive name foreshadows his failure to become a new person” (153).

Chapter 6

1. Another means to address this question might trace more particularly the theoretical debates invested in the relationship between haunting, memory, space, and history. Such analysis might engage Walter Benjamin’s “Thesis on the Philosophy of History,” Martin Heidegger's Being and Time, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels's invocation of a “specter haunting Europe” in The Communist Manifesto, and subsequent analyses, such as Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International and Dick Howard's The Specter of Democracy. Further exploration of Michel de Certeau’s haunted geographies or an analysis of what Michel Foucault calls in Madness and Civilization the “geography of haunted places” would enrich this understanding of place, haunting, memory, and history.

2. While the terms are not usually connected, the “metrosexual” seems to be a younger and specifically male incarnation of what David Brooks defines as the “bourgeois bohemian.” This hybrid class identity mixes the “bourgeois world of capitalism and the bohemian counterculture” (Brooks 10).

4. *This Old House* recently broke this trend. To celebrate its thirtieth anniversary, *This Old House* partnered with the affordable housing nonprofit Nuestra Comunidad to renovate “a foreclosed 1870s Second Empire in Boston's Roxbury neighborhood” (Pandolfi).


6. Metrosexuals tend to be young heterosexual men, such as soccer star David Beckham. Michael Flocker's book *The Metrosexual Guide to Style: A Handbook for the Modern Man*, in fact, specifically defines the metrosexual as heterosexual. By and large, the term “metrosexual” provides heterosexual men with an acceptable justification for their interest in fashion and grooming. It also perpetuates a double standard: men are praised for being vain, but vain women are considered “narcissistic” or “high maintenance.”

7. See Judith Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place*, Wayne D. Myslik's essay “Renegotiating the Social/Sexual Identities of Places: Gay Communities as Safe Havens or Sites of Resistance?” and J. W. Paris and R. E. Anderson's article “Faith-Based Queer Space in Washington, DC: The Metropolitan Community Church–DC and Mount Vernon Square” for an introduction to the blossoming research on queer space.

8. A 2003 U.S. Census Bureau report based on data collected between 1994 and 2002 found that minority naturalized-citizen householders were more likely than native-citizen minorities to achieve homeownership (Callis 2). There was also a correlation between place of birth and the likelihood of homeownership for naturalized citizens: “In 2002, naturalized-citizen householders born in Europe reported higher homeownership rates (74.5 percent) than those born in Asia (69.9 percent) or Latin America (61.7 percent)” (Callis 3). The housing report did not speculate why these discrepancies existed.


11. Habitat for Humanity and the six-part Sundance series *Architecture School*, which “follows a group of students at Tulane University’s prestigious School of Architecture as they submit competing designs for an affordable home in Katrina-battered New Orleans,” offer compelling “old” and “new” solutions to America’s ongoing housing crisis (“About”). Habitat for Humanity was founded in 1976 and *Architecture School* first aired in August 2008.


13. There is also an established tradition within the visual and performance arts that reconceptualizes domestic culture. The early twentieth-century American tradition includes the impressionist painter Mary Cassatt (1844–1926), the surrealist painter Dorothea Tanning (1910–), and the landscape and portrait painter Alice Neel (1900–1984). Each of these artists’ work depicts the home in conventional and unconventional ways. In addition to Clarissa Sligh’s work, other key pieces from the latter half of the twentieth century include Judy Chicago’s *Womanhouse* (1971–72), Martha Rosler’s video *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), and photographer Carrie Mae Weems’s *Kitchen Table Series* (1990).


———. “Re: Query About Domestic Fiction.” E-mail to the author. 29 June 2004.


Filkins, Peter. “All In the Family.” *The World & I* 17.2 (Feb. 2002): 231.


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