Domestic fiction seemingly hit a dead end in the late nineteenth century. Nina Baym states that the changes women’s fiction underwent “in the late 1860s and 1870s . . . signify the fact that the genre [domestic fiction] had run its course” (Woman’s Fiction 13). The rise of the new woman and modernism are often understood as launching domestic fiction’s demise. Blythe Forcey’s entry “Domestic Fiction” in The Oxford Companion to Women’s Writing in the United States clarifies, “While the genre has never died out, it became an object of near-constant disdain in the first half of the twentieth century as it was made the icon of everything that modern literature strove not to be” (253; emphasis in original). Suzanne Clark in Sentimental Modernism makes a similar argument: “Modernism inaugurated a reversal of values which emphasized erotic desire, not love; anarchic rupture and innovation rather than the conventional appeals of sentimental language. Modernism reversed the increasing influence of women’s writing, discrediting the literary past and especially that sentimental history” (1). Countering this interpretation of literary history, Susan Edmunds in Grotesque Relations argues that modernism did not ring the death knell for the domestic novel: “the cultural legacy of sentimental domesticity was not rejected, killed off, or supplanted in this period. Instead, it was rearticulated, making the sense of a revolutionary break with the past shared by modern domestic subjects an important but untrustworthy guide for later critics” (10). Whether described as a force for
reversal or rearticulation, modernist critics were not the first or the last to critique domestic fiction. From Nathaniel Hawthorne’s caustic statement in 1855 against “a d—d mob of scribbling women” to Jonathan Franzen’s disparaging remarks in 2001 about Oprah’s Book Club, domestic fiction and its predominately female writers and readers have long been pushed to the back roads of American literature and culture (Hawthorne 304).

Despite receiving sustained critical censure, the home, in all of its diverse and vibrant configurations, occupies a central position in much contemporary American fiction, confirming that domestic fiction has not disappeared or reached the end of its road. Rather, the array of novels that focus on the domestic sphere in late twentieth-century American fiction testifies to the genre’s continued, if reconfigured, importance. The assortment of domestic geographies in the late twentieth century includes the exiled homes in Lan Cao’s Monkey Bridge (1997), Cristina García’s Dreaming in Cuban (1992), and Leslie Marmon Silko’s Gardens in the Dunes (1999); the “perfect” yet unsuccessful homes in Chang-rae Lee’s A Gesture Life (1999) and David Wong Louie’s The Barbarians Are Coming (2000); the migrant home in Helena María Viramontes’s Under the Feet of Jesus (1995); the divorced father’s suburban home in Richard Ford’s Independence Day (1995); the patriarchal and matriarchal homes in Toni Morrison’s Paradise (1997) and Barbara Kingsolver’s The Poisonwood Bible (1998); the lost homes in John Edgar Wideman’s Homewood trilogy (1981; 1983; 1988); the queer homes in Leslie Feinberg’s Stone Butch Blues (1993) and Michael Cunningham’s A Home at the End of the World (1990); the stolen homes in Joy Williams’s Breaking and Entering (1981); and the postmodern expanding and contracting home in Mark Z. Danielewski’s House of Leaves (2000). These novels with their diverse domestic terrains testify to an ongoing renaissance in domestic fiction.

This chapter addresses how literature that focuses on the space of the home and the practices of homemaking reemerges in the late twentieth century to self-consciously reflect on where the genre has been and what the future may hold for this conventionally nineteenth-century genre with revolutionary as well as imperial, class-biased, and racist origins.¹ This chapter outlines a revised way to define all domestic fiction in addition to mapping neodomestic fiction’s emergence in the 1980s and its distinctive features. Until now, the pioneering scholarly works on domestic fiction primarily define the genre according to plot and character analysis; as a result, they also tend to privilege (white) women’s experiences. We might productively understand these novels as “spatial narratives” (stories that sustain a focus on the space and place of the home) in order to use domestic fiction’s geog-
raphy as a prime means for defining the genre and mapping its travel across the past one hundred years. “Queer” and “recycled domesticities” form two concepts that are central to remapping domestic fiction and to understanding neodomestic space and fiction.

**Defining Neodomestic Space**

**Queer and Recycled Domesticities**

Neodomestic fiction emphasizes queer and recycled homes and homemaking. Queer in this context defines various domestic spaces and practices rather than exclusively homosexual households. Queer domesticity refers to homemaking practices that produce “an alternative articulatory space of gender and sexuality” (Parikh 863). Like Nayan Shah in *Contagious Divides*, I define queer domesticity as a category identified by its aims and effects rather than by its sexual makeup: “Rather than viewing the term *queer* as a synonym for homosexual identity, I use it to question the formation of exclusionary norms of respectable middle-class, heterosexual marriage. The analytical category of queer upsets the strict gender roles, the firm divisions between public and private, and the implicit presumptions of self-sufficient economics and intimacy in the respectable domestic household” (Shah 13–14; emphasis in original). In this light, queer domesticity includes renting and other economic relationships outside of conventional ownership. While Willie and Liberty in Joy Williams’s *Breaking and Entering* are heterosexual, for instance, their homemaking is queer. By squatting in other people’s lavish houses, the couple upsets conventional domesticity, especially our notion of private homeownership. Their childlessness, or lack of reproductive sexuality, also marks them as queer.²

Such “alternative articulatory spaces” reform—in both senses of physically reshaping and ideologically revising—fictional domestic space (Parikh 863). In Rosemary Marangoly George’s terms, neodomestic fiction “recycles” or self-consciously reuses domestic structures. George explains,

> narratives and practices that responsibly recycle domesticity perform two tasks: first, they effect transformations that are attentive to the materials and the debris of past domestic edifices. Second, in being attentive to the material and historical factors that have enabled domesticity to flourish, such recycling narratives make the domestic a site from which counter-theorizations about seemingly “larger” and unrelated institutions and ideologies can be produced. ("Recycling" 2–3)
George posits two conditions necessary for the effective recycling of domestic fiction: historical consciousness and “countertheorization.” The first recycling protocol demands that domestic history must help determine what and how contemporary domestic fiction recycles. For example, recycling the domestic novel’s historical privileging of single-family, privately owned homes must take into account that not everyone has equal access to this type of home. In the most extreme cases, as I discuss in chapter 2, authors literally rewrite nineteenth-century domestic fictions.

George’s second tenet demands that historical consciousness produce what I have labeled a queer or destabilized domestic site—a location for “countertheorizations.” This space has been described by a range of cultural theorists and geographers. Neodomestic, relational spaces can be seen as illustrations and theorizations of Michel Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia” and a modified form of Homi Bhabha’s theorization of “third space.” Kevin Hetherington defines “heterotopia” as “spaces of alternate ordering. Heterotopia organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them. That alternate ordering marks them out as Other and allows them to be seen as an example of an alternative way of doing things” (qtd. in Harvey, Spaces of Hope 184). Neodomesticity’s emphasis on instability also marks it as “Other” and “an alternative way of doing things.” David Harvey describes heterotopia’s uses and limitations: “The concept of ‘heterotopia’ has the virtue of insisting upon a better understanding of the heterogeneity of space but it gives no clue as to what a more spatiotemporal utopianism might look like. Foucault challenges and helps destabilize (particularly in the realm of discourse) but provides no clue as to how any kind of alternative might be constructed” (Spaces of Hope 185). Neodomestic fiction theorizes—by producing fictional homes—such alternative spaces.

Bhabha’s “third space” also describes neodomestic space. Third space, especially when put to use by feminist principles, can create “alternative geographies which bring together space, politics and hybrid identities” (Jeffery 274). According to Craig Jeffery’s entry on third space in A Feminist Glossary of Human Geography, “geographers have focused particularly on third space as a location of knowledge and resistance” (274). He sees the concept’s strengths “as lying in the fact that it elaborates the ‘grounds of dissimilarity’ on which dualisms are based; acknowledges that there are spaces beyond dualisms; and accepts that third space itself is fragmented, incomplete and the site of struggle for meaning and representation” (Jeffery 274). Neodomestic spaces, similarly, complicate conventional dualistic epistemologies, such as public-private and male-female, to produce hybrid geographies.

Bhabha emphasizes that hybridity cannot “trace two original movements
from which the third emerges” and “this third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives”; neodomesticity, by contrast, maintains clear traces of its conventional origins in order to produce “a new area of negotiation” (Bhabha, “The Third Space” 211). Neodomestic instability, furthermore, also emphasizes space’s fragmentation and its relational “struggle for meaning and representation.”

The characters in *Breaking and Entering*, for instance, violate the private sphere by breaking into homes, but they do not steal anything except the otherwise empty space of the uninhabited home. The luxurious vacation homes would simply sit empty if the characters did not squat in them. The squatters learn about the homeowners’ intimate lives and then drift to the next house. The space that they inhabit is both home and not home; the stolen homes are more suitable than the home that they rent, yet the stolen houses are never their permanent homes. Their “perverse skill of inhabiting the space others had made” constitutes a third space that resists such dualities as private-public and lawful-unlawful (Williams 28). Outlining domestic fiction’s generic definitions and literary histories clarifies further how neodomestic space and literature differs from its predecessors. Examining the origin and history of the term “domestic fiction” also clarifies how domestic fiction emerged as a legible genre largely to the exclusion of masculine domesticity.

**Defining Domestic Fiction**

**Shifting and Resisting Terminologies**

Whether focused on men’s or women’s lives, and whether set in rural, urban, or suburban locations, all domestic fictions share a focus on the home’s physical and ideological spaces. Nina Baym explains in *Woman’s Fiction*, “The term ‘domestic’ for this [nineteenth-century] fiction generally means that the content is largely descriptive of events taking place in a home setting” (26). Significantly, the term “domestic fiction” itself is of fairly recent vintage and emerges from second-wave feminist scholarship that worked to revalue the space of the home and American women’s writing; it is a product of feminists working to recover and reassess nineteenth-century fiction by women. The term “domestic fiction” was most likely coined by Baym “so as to avoid calling the genre I worked with ‘sentimental fiction’”: 3

Other scholars . . . used the term domestic sentimentalism (i.e., Gillian Brown) or wrote about the novelists as sentimental domestics (Mary Kelley). And then there’s the term “domestic feminism,” a term applied by con-
temporary historians for the kind of feminism that was rooted in women’s supposed connection with the home. (Baym, “Re: Query”)

In all cases, the adjective “domestic” is “a coinage of second-wave feminism” (Baym “Re: Query”). While “domestic fiction” is not the only generic descriptor of women’s writing, the term reflects both its deeply rooted history and the critical reception of its texts.

Labeling this separate sphere of literature originally served to demarginalize these frequently forgotten or undervalued nineteenth-century women’s voices. As Catherine Jurca points out in her study of suburban fiction, our generic definitions still tend to reflect a separate sphere approach to literature about the home and domesticity: “Literary scholarship on the home has continued to be confined almost exclusively to nineteenth-century texts and contexts and to the experience of women” (9). Domestic fiction conventionally denotes women’s fiction and writing. Masculinity, which is conventionally considered to be outside of domesticity, heightens attention to domestic fiction’s gendered genre status and the practices that define it as such. How domesticity is gendered influences which novels historically wear the label “domestic fiction.” Outlining the characteristics of domestic masculinity and domestic femininity clarifies their distinctive but interdependent literary and spatial traditions.

**Outlining Gendered Terrain**

**Domestic Masculinity and Domestic Femininity**

Where domestic femininity traditionally celebrates homemaking, domestic masculinity attempts to escape it. White domestic masculinity, from Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” to its contemporary forms in novels such as John Updike’s *Rabbit, Run*, often presents the home as a trap. Judith Fetterley argues in “‘Not the Least American’: Nineteenth-Century Literary Regionalism” that this antidomestic masculine tradition often generates a “national narrative that valorizes violence, that defines masculinity as the production of violence and defines the feminine and the foreign as legitimate recipients of such violence” (893). Similarly, Baym describes such stories (for example, the fiction by “Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, and James” as well as Thoreau, Kerouac, Updike, and Bellow [Baym 128; 132]) as “Melodramas of Beset Manhood.” In the early twentieth century, the “new woman” frequently appropriated this masculine story and likewise presented the home as a trap
to be escaped (as in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Story of Avis*, Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth*, and, more recently, Erika Lopez’s *Flaming Iguanas*).

Contemporary literature that focuses on domestic masculinity narrates a range of experiences and perspectives, including those of the genre’s hallmark, the disenchanted or alienated white male (for example, Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* and Richard Ford’s *Independence Day*); equally disenchanted female protagonists (Sandra Tsing Loh’s *If You Lived Here, You’d Be Home by Now* and *A Year in Van Nuys*); African American families making community (John Edgar Wideman’s Homewood trilogy and Gloria Naylor’s *Linden Hills*); and stories of a young man’s spiritual rebirth (Anne Tyler’s *Saint Maybe*). Suburban fiction constitutes the dominant masculine domestic model, from William H. Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956) to John Updike’s Rabbit novels and Gabrielle Zevin’s *The Hole We’re In* (2010).

Representations of white domestic masculinity, like representations of domestic femininity, not only reflect but also challenge the domestic sphere’s gendered definitions and ideals. As I have begun to argue, American literary history emphasizes that domestic masculinity frequently presents narratives of “beset manhood”; it also often understands home as property. Homeownership, closely associated with successful masculinity, often symbolizes a male’s ability to protect and provide for his family. Significantly in this regard, Richard Ford’s protagonist Frank Bascombe shifts from being a fiction writer, to being a sportswriter (*The Sportswriter*), and finally, after his divorce and the death of his son Ralph, to being a real estate agent (*Independence Day* and *The Lay of the Land*). Frank’s job as a real estate agent epitomizes domestic masculinity’s connections to the formal domestic economy.

By contrast, homemaking, not homeownership and the formal domestic economy, takes precedence and more frequently symbolizes a female character’s ability to produce a loving, safe, and comfortable environment. For instance, the Convent women in Morrison’s *Paradise* never bother to obtain official ownership of their home, nor do they follow others’ notions of conventional domestic propriety. In Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*, the mother Orleanna initially hoards her domestic property; after her daughter’s death, Orleanna gives it all away. She, too, eventually rejects the premise of domestic property and ownership. *The Poisonwood Bible* also ends with the possibility for redemption. In contrast, Andre Dubus III’s *House of Sand and Fog* revolves around homeownership and concludes from an alienated space, with Kathy in jail silently signaling to another inmate for a cigarette and three other characters dead due to the dispute over who legally owns the property.
The presence of ghosts or the evocation of spirits—what Kathleen Brogan defines as “cultural haunting”—frequently distinguishes masculine and feminine domesticities. Brogan explains, “To be haunted in this literature is to know, viscerally, how specific cultural memories that seem to have disappeared in fact refuse to be buried and still shape the present, in desirable and in troubling ways” (Brogan 16). Domestic masculinity tends to resist this haunting, especially when the story is written by and focused on white men; domestic femininity tends to embrace ghostly presences. For instance, while Behrani in House of Sand and Fog assures his married daughter, to whom he writes his suicide note, “Your mother and I await you upon your return,” he closes with the postscript, “Soraya-joon, live here if you like but if you sell it take no less than one hundred thousand dollars” (Dubus 337). Behrani does not expect to haunt the house he leaves behind—nor has he given up his desire to provide for his family by making the contested house turn a profit.

The masculine and feminine domesticities that I have begun to outline here demonstrate how key gendered and racial distinctions remain operative within American literature and culture. In the following chapters, I analyze these approaches to the home’s geography in greater detail to flesh out further the suggestive differences between the various strands of domestic fiction and their influence on our mapping of neodomestic fiction. Given domestic fiction’s historical and literary connections to a feminine domesticity, there are advantages and disadvantages to reviving this generic terminology in the twenty-first century.

Redefining Domestic Fiction
(Re)Domestic Terminology and Spatial Fictions

(Re)claiming domestic fiction for twenty-first-century novels and for women’s fiction, in particular, becomes a fraught proposal when we consider previous criticism that argues against this generic moniker for nineteenth-century women’s fiction. Domestic fiction’s literary history emerges from a cultural anxiety about domesticity and women writers. Like their nineteenth-century predecessors, writers of domestic fiction today struggle against accusations of “excess”—of too much “heart” or sentiment (Harris 5). These features supposedly make them popular but not necessarily “authentic” or “literary” American writers; “literary” authors do not always enjoy the same degree of popular acclaim, but they supposedly write aesthetically superior novels (Harris 5). Certainly, the presence of neodomestic powerhouse authors such as Toni Morrison suggests that domestic fiction’s status has changed. How-
ever, Jonathan Franzen’s remarks about Oprah Winfrey’s book club, as I explore in chapter 5, remind us of readers’ continued anxiety about domestic themes and the negative connotations associated with producing women’s fiction and masculine domesticity. Without a doubt, patriarchy depends on strict gender codes and imbues them with gravity as a means to solidify gender, race, and class hierarchies.

Even domestic fiction’s advocates are sometimes reluctant to use the term. Both Nina Baym and Susan K. Harris, for instance, caution against the label “domestic fiction” to describe nineteenth-century women’s fiction. Baym explains, “the term ‘domestic’ is not a fixed or neutral word in critical analysis. For many critics, domesticity is equated with entrapment—in an earlier critical generation, of men by women and, more recently, of women by a pernicious ideal promulgated (so the worm turns!) by men” (Woman’s Fiction 26). In turn, Harris specifically rejects “domestic fiction” as the appropriate descriptor for nineteenth-century women’s fiction because the term restricts rather than enhances our understanding of the texts: “My objection to ‘sentimental,’ ‘women’s,’ and ‘domestic’ as genre descriptives is that the terms themselves encourage us to continue approaching women’s novels of the mid-nineteenth century within a particular hermeneutic that focuses on the social/sexual context and that, consequently, restricts our access to the novels’ verbal, structural, and thematic adventures” (Harris 20). Harris goes on to clarify that, unlike Baym, the form that she describes is not exclusively a woman’s genre; male writers employ the “exploratory” as well (Harris 20). More recently, Amy Kaplan’s term “manifest domesticity” has also raised questions about American domesticity’s positive resonance, linking domesticity and the domestic novel with imperialism.

Both Baym and Harris offer cogent arguments against using domestic fiction as an exclusive category to define nineteenth-century women’s novels. Kaplan, in turn, reminds us of its imperial connotations. While domesticity’s negative and limited connotations should not be ignored or propagated, we also should not underestimate domesticity’s continued centrality to American identity and literature. In response to Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s landmark question about feminist politics—“What’s home got to do with it?”—feminist politics and contemporary fiction still have much to do with home.4 Home contributes to our physical, mental, and economic well being. As Dana Heller writes of the contemporary family romance, domestic fiction also offers feminists “a tool for rewriting and reconnecting with feminist history” (230). Domesticity’s fraught connotations need to be engaged and recognized; neodomestic fiction shares this goal. The label “neodomestic” helps mark significant changes in the genre’s history
while recognizing connections to its literary roots. The term “neodomestic” responds to the criticisms leveled against the label “domestic” by distinguishing the structural differences that characterize the home in narratives that may be removed from one another by more than a century. Therefore, rather than suggest a postfeminist or postgender world, neodomestic fiction’s spatial definition and inclusion of male and female writers and protagonists offers opportunities to examine contemporary gender hierarchies.

In essence, I am arguing that a critical emphasis on spatiality should converge with the temporal or plot considerations that have long been a part of the study of American domestic fiction. During the mid-nineteen-eighties, the same period during which neodomestic fiction emerged, Foucault argued in “Of Other Spaces” that “we are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein” (22). This understanding of time-space relationships resembles some non-Western worldviews, which frequently also do not understand space, narrative, and time as separate concepts. Reading domestic fiction as a spatial narrative takes into account space’s influence on and reflection of domestic culture and incorporates non-Western narrative strategies. The shared space of the home and the focus on homemaking, or “the processes by which diverse subjects imagine and make themselves at home in various geographic locations,” more than a specific plot sequence, connect these novels (Espiritu 2).

There are several advantages to redefining the genre according to its geographic focus. A focus on “domestic geographies,” or various broadly defined “home spaces” and self-conscious homemaking practices, more easily connects a range of domesticities across time and cultures. For instance, domestic practices change with time; specific historical and cultural circumstances frequently merit attention to particular plots. Historical and literary changes, furthermore, make following a common plot across the span of a century or more difficult, if not impossible. When radically different domestic plots emerge—for instance, those that write the home as haven, as seen in Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women (1868), versus those that depict the home as a trap, as seen in Edith Wharton’s The House of Mirth (1905)—the domestic plot may be seen to change so dramatically as to not merit a common genre. Hence, a plot-based lens generally affirms domestic fiction’s disappearance soon after the Civil War. However, a spatial analysis reveals that the home as haven or trap represents two sides of the same coin: both rely on domestic security.

Moreover, the novel’s form changes from largely omnipotent, realistic nineteenth-century narratives to frequently multivocal, (post)modern
experiments. As a result of these aesthetic changes in novelistic form, the plot may be less linear in twentieth- and twenty-first-century novels. What remains, despite these aesthetic changes, is a collection of novels that feature a domestic setting and the processes involved in making home. A spatial lens reveals that these novels, like their nineteenth-century predecessors, use the local domestic setting to engage their audiences for “political or moral purposes by (re)presenting political struggles neither in the theater of political institutions (Congress or court) nor in the public arena (the press, town meetings) but in conversations between husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and servants” (Berman 22). This spatial understanding of the genre of domestic fiction provides the foundation for further distinctions and interpretations.

Writing and analyzing domestic literary history from this spatial perspective allows us to consider the links and disjunctions among a range of authors writing about the construction of home during the same period as well as across centuries and cultures. A spatial approach includes female and male writers and protagonists and centers the African American women’s novels that Claudia Tate analyzes in Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century. The resistance initiated by women of color, as Iris Marion Young argues, is “integral to modern political theory and is not an alternative to it” (306). Herein lie the generic taproots of what eventually becomes neodomestic fiction. That is, such “alternative” narratives—when read in the context of contemporary neodomestic fiction—are not marginal but rather are central to domesticity’s reconfigurations.

The domestic novel, after all, did not die after the Civil War but underwent a renaissance within African American women’s literature. Tate demonstrates in her study how African American women writers deployed domestic fiction “to promote the social advancement of African Americans” after the Civil War (Tate 5). Where many white women writers changed domestic plots after the Civil War, black women writers appropriated the white domestic form for their own enfranchisement. Along these lines, Kate McCullough argues that Pauline E. Hopkins recycled the domestic novel for her own ends: “Rewriting an erased history specifically through figures of African-American womanhood—primarily mulatto members of the bourgeoisie but also the working-class business woman—Hopkins produced a new version of African-American womanhood and simultaneously made it clear that ‘America’ had always included her, even if in an elided form” (94). While some critics understand Hopkins’s use of the domestic form as “a sell-out to white America encoded in the white bourgeois genre of the sentimental novel,” McCullough and others place Hopkins “in a line of
African-American writers—Hopkins’s contemporary Frances Harper or her predecessors Harriet Wilson and Harriet Jacobs, for instance—who use sentimental forms as a means of cultural intervention” (McCullough 98; 99). African American writers like Hopkins have not simply reproduced domestic fiction’s conventional ideology; rather, they have been among the first to recycle and revise it for their own political ends.

Nineteenth-century African American women writers’ adoption of the sentimental, domestic form emphasizes that neodomestic fiction represents an intensification of narrative practices and tensions that have been present since domestic fiction’s inception. A character like the tomboy Jo in Little Women signals that even during the nineteenth century, a narrow model of domesticity produced tensions that white domestic fiction had to resolve. Alcott complicates the home as a separate sphere and as a space that follows conventional domestic ideology lockstep when she transforms the home into temporary performance spaces and, through the Pickwick Club’s newsletter, makes it a “news worthy” place. Such examples emphasize that nineteenth-century writers like Pauline E. Hopkins and Louisa May Alcott did not simply produce domestic fiction; they used its ideology for their own political ends. Neodomestic fiction eventually emerges from such sustained efforts by writers ranging from Pauline E. Hopkins, María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, and Louisa May Alcott in the nineteenth century to Edith Wharton, Gertrude Stein, Ann Petry, and Paule Marshall in the early twentieth century. Neodomesticity’s distinct ideology and spatiality materializes from these nineteenth- and early twentieth-century domestic novels.

**Neodomestic Fiction**

A Distinct Ideological Map

While they share domestic settings and a concern with homemaking, neodomestic novels craft distinctive model homes. Conventional domestic prose specifies white Protestant domesticity as the ideal domestic model and seeks to stabilize and produce this model in the midst of American diversity. Barbara Welter clarifies that the “four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity”—define True Womanhood and domestic ideals (if not realities) in the nineteenth century (21). Finding the proper home frequently stabilizes the protagonist’s identity and her domestic life. The home, in this sense, serves as a metaphor for the protagonist’s development. If she is successful, she is rewarded with a home and marriage, or at least the promise of such, as seen in the conclusion of Susan Warner’s The Wide, Wide World.
Remapping Domestic Fiction

(1850). While domestic fiction such as *The Wide, Wide World* may begin in or move through positions of instability, its heroine ultimately seeks some type of domestic stability. Warner’s novel offers a quintessentially feminine domestic tale focused on a single young woman’s struggle to find and make home.

Nearly as popular in the nineteenth century as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), *The Wide, Wide World* follows the experiences of the orphaned Ellen Montgomery. Her search for home is a lesson in Christian selflessness and patience as well as in proper American homemaking. At the story’s conclusion, Ellen is living with Scottish relatives, and we understand that she eventually marries John. While we do not get a marriage in the novel, the novel’s conclusion is written so as to set the reader’s mind at ease about Ellen’s future: “In other words, to speak intelligibly, Ellen did in no wise disappoint” (Warner 569). By contrast, death and the denial of home function as a punishment; or, on occasion, an ideal woman is brought “home” to God through death. The deaths of Ellen’s mother in *The Wide, Wide World* and of Beth in *Little Women* function as the latter.

Nineteenth-century domestic fictions emerge from a cultural context in which slavery, immigration, and America’s expanding borders granted special urgency to the need to stabilize and “unionize” the American family. America’s shifting demographics and national borders in the nineteenth century simultaneously expanded the home and produced anxiety about the “foreign” bodies that were newly incorporated into the national union. Kaplan explains that the ideal of “economical, healthful, beautiful, and Christian homes” was bound up in a project of “manifest domesticity,” in which American imperialism and model domesticity worked hand-in-hand: “Adherence to [the] woman’s sphere guarantees adhesion to the larger family of the Union” (Kaplan 24). The feminine, orderly home, thus counters the disorder created by such forces as the annexation of new territories, slavery, and immigration.

The ideology of the conventional model seeks to stabilize and homogenize diverse bodies and homemaking practices. Ann Romines agrees, suggesting that housekeeping, which often takes on a “godlike status” in nineteenth-century domestic fiction, provides women with a means of control (10). Jennifer Haytock also agrees with this characterization of conventional domesticity (xii). These frequently “illusory” notions of a stable model domesticity do not end with the nineteenth century and the rise of modernism (Haytock xii). Even novels that mark the emergence of the new woman and new domestic forms frequently continue to emphasize stability. For example, the conclusion to *Ruth Hall* (1855) sets the protagonists on the road but also
assures the reader that “life has much of harmony yet in store for you” (Fern 211).

The modern period represents a significant transitional point in portrayals of the home and domestic ideology. As Thomas Foster explains in Transformations of Domesticity in Modern Women’s Writing, “Modernist women’s writing . . . should be read as a transitional moment between nineteenth-century domestic ideologies and postmodern concepts of space, when those two sets of assumptions about space and gender can still be read in relation to one another” (3). Modern domestic fictions form an “interspace”—a place between conventional and neodomestic ideologies. The modern period encompasses both the freedoms associated with the jazz age and the repressions tied to the red scare.

The persistent power of conventional domesticity in the first half of the twentieth century is apparent in the names of popular Sears mail-order houses. The names continue to “speak of the desire for assimilation” and the need for broader, more diverse conceptions of model domesticity. “‘The Yale,’ ‘The Franklin,’ ‘The Portsmouth,’ ‘The Hamilton,’ and ‘The Atterbury’ might be modest bungalows, colonials, or Cape Cods, but they had upper-class white Anglo-Saxon Protestant names. In the 1919 Aladdin catalog, even the small garages had names such as ‘The Peerless,’ ‘The Winton,’ ‘The Maxwell,’ and ‘The Packard’” (Hayden, Building Suburbia 106; 110). These names indicate how conventional domesticity is threatened by the uncertainty and instability that diversity fosters, especially as familial diversity allegedly threatens “the good influence of society” (Bush) in the twenty-first century or “the refinements of high civilization” (Beecher and Stowe 441) in the nineteenth century.

The lasting and powerful influence of conventional American domesticity is further demonstrated by the fact that white women have been the leading domestic icons of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. The New England domestic ideals promoted by Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe in the nineteenth century live on in the model domesticity televised by fellow New Englander Martha Stewart. Emily Jane Cohen emphasizes, “As the cradle of American civilization, New England was every American’s home. It was the birthplace of our first cookbook, of the domestic school of romance, and of the science of home economics, which tried to give housekeeping a respectable name” (655–56). Hortense Spillers further explains model domesticity’s patriarchal and racial traits: “Domesticity appears to gain its power by way of a common origin of cultural fictions that are grounded in the specificity of proper names, more exactly, a patronymic, which, in turn, situates those persons it ‘covers’ in a
particular place” (72). This patriarchal domesticity practices “the vertical transfer of a bloodline, of a patronymic, of titles and entitlements, of real estate” and, as a result, “becomes the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community” (Spillers 74; emphasis in original). Model American domesticity, thus, reveals and promotes white privilege: “Physical and psychological security of place is . . . a rare and privileged fate that many women have never experienced” (Gathorne-Hardy 125). Contemporary culture’s continued psychological and material investment in the model domesticity represented by popular domestic icons exposes its literal and figurative investment in “white houses”—the domestic spaces, practices, and ideals buttressed by or dependent on white privilege. Rather than seeking access to this model, neodomestic fiction “gain[s] the insurgent ground” (Spillers 80; emphasis in original).

What makes neodomestic fiction unique is that it recycles these longstanding tensions in ways that promote, rather than attempt to resolve, instability and heterogeneity. Neodomestic fiction’s distinct ideology and geography tend to maintain instability. The home’s characteristic instability can be broken down into three interrelated traits or specific spatial practices that define the neodomestic narrative: (1) “mobility,” bell hooks’s notion that home is not one place but locations (Yearning 148); (2) “relational space,” an understanding that the domestic sphere depends on “outside” or “foreign” relations and vice versa; and (3) “renovation” or “redesign,” the active construction and (re)design of the (conventional) domestic sphere and its concomitant effects on community and the self. These distinctive features highlight how neodomestic novels redesign what architectural historian Dolores Hayden describes in Redesigning the American Dream as the “architecture of gender” (34). The “architecture of gender” refers to how the home’s spatial design, or in this case its narrative design, prescribes restrictive gender roles for both men and women. Neodomestic novels, furthermore, expand Hayden’s paradigm to explore the genre’s architectures of gender, race, sexuality, and class.

Neodomestic novels map a revised generic conception of domesticity that self-consciously addresses the ways in which various Americans have been (dis)enfranchised. As a result, instability becomes an ideological and architectural attribute. The protagonists in both Housekeeping and Breaking and Entering, for example, remain drifters. They are not recontained within conventional domestic norms, which also means there is no guarantee at the end of these novels that “life has much . . . harmony in store” (Fern 211). Neodomestic fiction also highlights the home’s social relations rather than (re)inscribing stable divisions between public and private spaces. For example, the Puente’s converted warehouse home in Cristina García’s Dreaming in
Cuban (1992) combines commercial space and private residence, and Sylvie's homemaking in Marilynne Robinson's Housekeeping (1981) breaks down the barriers between the natural and domestic worlds. Sylvie's methods prepare the home for "wasps and bats and barn swallows" as well as for human occupants (Robinson 74).\textsuperscript{10}

In Loida Maritza Pérez's Geographies of Home (1999), we also see how instability develops as an ideology and as an architectural feature. In Geographies of Home, the female protagonist's family home is "stable" because it is comforting and recognizable: "This was home: safe and familiar" (Pérez 27). The home is also profoundly "unstable" because it is the location where the protagonist's mentally disturbed sister sexually assaults her (Pérez 292–94). The neodomestic home remains politically charged: neither fully a haven nor a trap, these spaces explore and explode conventional binary oppositions.

Domestic fiction in the nineteenth century also responds architecturally and structurally to the domestic problems that produce instability. As Kaplan notes, "Many domestic novels open at physical thresholds—such as windows or doorways—to problematize the relation between interiors and exteriors" (43). These transitional, unstable beginnings position domesticity's turmoil within the architecture of the home and within the plot's structure. Neodomestic protagonists reconfigure these domestic thresholds; rather than becoming recontained by the domestic narrative's structure and the home, neodomestic protagonists embrace and invent "spaces of radical openness" (hooks, Yearning 148). "For me," bell hooks writes, "this space of radical openness is a margin—a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a 'safe' place. One is always at risk" (Yearning 149). The threshold becomes a homeplace: "One's homeplace was the one site where one could freely confront the issue of humanization, where one could resist" (hooks, Yearning 42). The neodocmenstic protagonist seeks to construct what hooks names the "margin," what Morrison calls "home," and what Gloria Anzaldúa describes as the "borderlands." Thus, rather than eliminate or stabilize the crossroads—the narrative's literal and figurative thresholds—neodomestic fiction seeks "a place 'already made for me, both snug and wide open. With a doorway never needing to be closed'" (Morrison, "Home" 9).

Neodomestic politics, as a result, play up the home's relational, unstable nature (rather than its homogenizing properties) and recycle the genre's didacticism. Kingsolver's statement in Small Wonder, "Home is where all justice begins," can be seen as a recycled version of nineteenth-century didacticism and notions about domesticity and the home's political place (201). Carolyn Vellenga Berman summarizes domestic fiction's political force: "Domestic novels . . . reshaped political communities both by their structures
of address and by their content. By modeling and critiquing contemporary modes of sexual and family life, family-orientated fictions established not only who belonged in the (national) community they addressed but also how the (national) community would reproduce itself” (Berman 19–20). The neodomestic home experiments with open security. Neodomatic fiction's first novels help us understand this seemingly contradictory architecture of home.

Neodomatic Thresholds

_M Housekeeping_ and _The House on Mango Street_

Two threshold neodomestic novels from the early 1980s are Marilynne Robinson's _Housekeeping_ (1981) and Sandra Cisneros's _The House on Mango Street_ (1984). Up until this point, domestic fiction tended to categorize the home as either a haven or a trap, a dichotomy predicated on domestic stability. Robinson's novel presents one of the first American domestic novels to reject strongly conventional domestic stability. The novel's title together with the orphan girls in search of a home emphasize _Housekeeping_’s rewriting or recycling of conventional domestic ideology and fiction. Sylvie’s unconventional homemaking and the resulting domestic geography emphasize its status as an unusual domestic fiction.

In _Housekeeping_, Sylvie takes over the care of Ruth and her younger sister Lucille after their father abandons them, their mother commits suicide, their grandmother dies, and two other relatives seek to be relieved of their young charges. With Sylvie at the head of the household, the family home changes from an ordered space of “habit and familiarity” to a disordered space that blurs the boundaries between inside and outside, where “leaves began to gather in the corners” of the rooms (Robinson 28; 73). Sylvie’s housekeeping exhibits subversive, comic, and tragic features. The kitchen, for example, has a scorched curtain that was “half consumed by fire once when a birthday cake had been set too close to it. Sylvie had beaten out the flames with a back issue of _Good Housekeeping_” (Robinson 87). Sylvie’s “antihousekeeping” creates both freedom and a potentially dangerous instability for the two young girls: “But it was not the pleasures of home at suppertime that lured us back to Sylvie’s house. Say rather that the cold forced me home, and that the dark allowed Lucille to pass through the tattered peripheries of Fingerbone unobserved” (Robinson 85). This passage hints that the young girls do not feel loved and secure; they have too much freedom and instability. Lucille eventually seeks domestic security and regularity by moving in with her
home economics teacher. Ruth follows Sylvie’s lead and becomes a transient, helping Sylvie set fire to the house before hitting the road. The fire “puts an end to housekeeping,” a result that seems liberatory because of the ways that domestic responsibilities can entrap women; yet the ending also suggests a darker side to leaving the home-as-haven behind (Robinson 179).

*Housekeeping’s* status as a threshold neodomestic text becomes more apparent when we consider how the novel questions the antidomestic promise of emancipation. The novel complicates the haven-trap binary. Leaving housekeeping behind does not ensure a better life. Christine Caver’s essay tempers celebratory readings of the novel’s resistant qualities, arguing that Ruth, *Housekeeping’s* narrator, ends the story not as a liberated outsider but instead as someone with an “ontologically uncertain status—socially, if not literally, dead” (133).11 Ruth and Sylvie’s indeterminate status at the end of the novel leaves open the possibility that they are not “drifting” through the countryside but rather are dead at the bottom of the lake (Robinson 180). The fact that the ending is not clearly positive or freeing, however, does not disqualify *Housekeeping* from initiating the neodomestic novel.

*Housekeeping* exhibits all the hallmarks of the neodomestic novel. A significant portion of the narrative takes place in the home, and that home exhibits domestic instability and a rewriting of conventional homemaking through Sylvie’s transient housekeeping and the characters’ mobility. Once Sylvie comes to live with the girls, the home exhibits a relational construction with the outdoors—blurring the boundaries between the natural and domestic worlds. The ways in which Sylvie’s housekeeping renovates conventional methods, furthermore, changes the home’s physical structure: “it seemed that if the house were not to founder, it must soon begin to float” (107). The home is unstable. These qualities, together with the novel’s self-conscious construction of the home and homemaking, introduce neodomestic fiction’s defining features of domestic instability and recycling. Significantly, Sylvie’s and Ruth’s transience marks their privileges as white women. Like the protagonists in *Breaking and Entering*, their transience is voluntary rather than forced. They consciously leave behind a physical home.

Following on the heels of *Housekeeping*, *The House on Mango Street* also exhibits neodomesticity’s major tenets and a critical self-awareness of the exclusions produced by the conventional single-family home. The narrator’s imaginative home destabilizes the domestic trap constructed by patriarchal notions about women. The house, for example, has “windows so small you’d think they were holding their breath... [A]nd the front door is so swollen you have to push hard to get in” (4). The home is both difficult to gain entry into and, once inside, difficult to escape. *Mango Street*’s narrator, Espe-
ranza, represents the one who might break a cycle of female disenfranchise-
ment and entrapment. Such women can inhabit the threshold without being
re-contained by the home; they can freely move between worlds. This ideal
space embodies a safe fluidity between inside and outside.

*Housekeeping* complicates the domestic freedom and security binary; the
house on Mango Street, likewise, is portrayed as both a haven and a trap.
The narrator’s assessment of her house on Mango Street reveals the eco-
nomic and social improvements that the house represents to her Chicano
family, but her remarks also expose how the house falls short of her family’s
dream home: “But the house on Mango Street is not the way they told it at
all” (Cisneros 4). Homeownership does not result in the achievement of the
American dream. Written as a response to Bachelard’s poetics of space, *The
House on Mango Street* crafts a spatial poetics relevant to its Chicana pro-
tagondist.12 Mango Street’s name, as Julián Olivares notes, marks the narrator’s
“circumscribe[d] . . . neighborhood . . . [for] its Latino population of Puerto
Ricans, Chicanos and Mexican immigrants” (162). This raced, less-than-
ideal home is contrasted with the home Esperanza hopes to inhabit some-
day. Her model “real house,” however, does not simply modify conventional
domesticity (Cisneros 5): “the narrator transgresses both against the norms
for women that prevail within her community as well as against the myth of
the American dream” (Salazar 393). Esperanza rewrites the dream home.

*The House on Mango Street* ultimately offers a more clearly positive out-
look for conventional domesticity’s redefinition than *Housekeeping*. Esper-
anza, the protagonist, openly embodies hope. “Esperanza” means “hope” as
well as “waiting” in Spanish (Cisneros 10–11). As an embodiment of hope,
Esperanza is determined not to live in the same homes as the women around
her, who lead such trapped and contained lives that they are always stand-
ing in doorways and peering out windows (Cisneros 11; 23–4; 79; 81; 102).
These women spatially and thematically recall the conventional domestic
protagonists who frequently appear in doorways and thresholds in nine-
teenth-century novels.13 Esperanza also occupies a metaphorical threshold;
she dreams of a house that she will not be ashamed to admit is hers and that
will not force her to conform to the Chicano patriarchal notions of feminin-
ity that many of the other women in the narrative exemplify.

Esperanza, like many of her nineteenth-century predecessors, is on a
journey to find home—what Inés Salazar calls “a metaphysical journey,
undertaken through her writing” (394). While her model home remains in
an imaginary realm—unrealized like Selina’s ideal home in Paule Marshall’s
*Brown Girl, Brownstones* (1959)—the novel presents a strong indication that
her dreams will not only be realized but that she has returned for those left
behind: “I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out” (Cisneros 110). The use of the past tense marks her return. The “ones” seem to refer to the trapped women whom the narrative introduces, such as Alicia (31–32), Rafaela (79–80), Sally (81–83; 92–93; 101–2), and Minerva (84–85).

Selina in Marshall’s Brown Girl, Brownstones, in fact, represents the narrative mother or grandmother for later female neodomestic protagonists such as the narrator in The House on Mango Street. Like Mango Street, Brown Girl, Brownstones explores the theme of homeownership and the American dream amid a young girl’s coming of age story. Like Esperanza, Selina experiences her home as a trap. When she escapes her home’s bounds, for example, “Selina knew. She had finally passed the narrow boundary of herself and her world. She could no longer be measured by Chauncey Street or the park or the nearby school. ‘Lord,’ she whispered behind her hand, ‘I’m free’” (56). As a young woman, Selina feels trapped by her domestic surroundings and by the domesticated life that she seems doomed to live. Selina sees her fate—in her sister’s menstruation pains and her mother’s household management—and attempts to find routes out of this trap. The novel’s final image of the torn-down brownstones sears a haunting picture in the reader’s imagination.

When Selina tosses one of her signature bangles into a brownstone, which is being leveled for a new city housing project, we can understand this gesture as Selina’s homage to her imperfect community. The wrecked buildings represent those within the Barbadian community, like her mother, who are the most trapped and broken. Selina imagines “seeing the bodies of all the people she had ever known broken, all the familiar voices that had ever sounded in those high-ceilinged rooms shattered—and the pieces piled into this giant cairn of stone and silence” (Marshall 310). Selina’s bangle makes “a frail sound in that utter silence,” suggesting that she may go on to create and experience a different end by giving voice to this silence (Marshall 310).

Esperanza’s narrative picks up where Selina’s ends. Esperanza speaks in the language of a community-based domestic ideology, narrating a clear plan for her revised home and homemaking. She will take in homeless people, for example, and not reproduce the private, exclusionary, single-family dwelling: “One day I’ll own my own house, but I won’t forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come in? I’ll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house” (Cisneros 87). When Esperanza achieves her private, single-family dwelling, she will recycle its properties to fit her own needs and those of her community. She clearly plans to achieve “the adaptation of suburban house forms to new uses” that Dolores Hayden calls for in Redesigning the American Dream (222–224).
envisions a plan to recycle the privately owned, single-family dwelling in ways that will better respond to the crisis in affordable and accessible housing. Thus, Esperanza represents the girls who will get out of the patriarchal domestic trap; the house on Mango Street represents “the house I belong but do not belong to” (Cisneros 110). Esperanza is not possessed; rather, she controls her domesticity.

The overwhelming critical response to both *Housekeeping* and *The House on Mango Street* indicates a collective desire for and an anticipation of novels that write women beyond both the domestic trap and haven. This longing may be framed in the question Christine Caver poses: “how long will it be until women who flee an abusive or repressive system are allowed to escape the last frame alive?” (133). Toni Morrison’s *Paradise* picks up on this longing, beginning its story with the “final frame” of women fleeing for their lives. In *Paradise*’s real conclusion, as in *Housekeeping* and *Breaking and Entering*, the women’s physical status is unclear. Are they alive or are they ghosts? Although focused on a male protagonist, Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* also ends similarly unresolved; the novel concludes with Franklin “Doc” Hata at a border, on the “outside looking in . . . Come almost home” (356). *The Poisonwood Bible*’s conclusion, moreover, questions whether the Congolese village of Kilanga even existed. From Esperanza’s ideal home to the haunted house in *Beloved*, such “ghostly” or spiritual geographies emphasize that neodomestic novels often highlight instability through such inconclusive conclusions. Out of what cultural context do these ambivalent endings and neodomestic fiction more generally emerge?

**(Neo)Domesticity’s Cultural Foundations**

The dual explosion in attention to domesticity in the nineteenth and early twenty-first centuries helps explain domestic fiction’s twin renaissances. It also provides opportunities to compare what constitutes the model home and to what extent homeownership, a key symbol of the American dream’s achievement, has changed. The nineteenth century, for example, saw the rise of domestic fiction and domestic science. The late twentieth century marks a steep rise in home improvement shows and networks, cooking personalities and networks, the sustained success and growth of shelter magazines, and the expansion of big-box home improvement outlets. Additionally, the crisis in family values that Catharine E. Beecher describes in the conclusion of *American Woman’s Home* resembles our own so-called “crisis of the family” (463–70). A resurgence in “traditional” family rhetoric began
in the 1980s and continues through the present moment. Where Beecher worried about the harmful effects of woman’s rights conventions and free love, our own communities and government officials debate abortion and gay marriage. Furthermore, the anxieties that Beecher, Stowe, and other nineteenth-century domestic authors have expressed about foreign families and servants resonates in our own age in which foreign(er) and terror(ist) are closely aligned. Just as in the nineteenth century, a significant nexus of literary and cultural events have intensified in post-1980 American culture, including neoconservatism, neoliberalism, the new urbanism movement, and the aftermaths of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. The rise and aftereffects of second-wave feminism also provide the context for the proliferation of neodomestic fictions.

While the first- and second-wave feminist movements inaugurated significant changes in gender roles, domestic fiction’s continued status as a gendered genre reflects our gendered lives. Today, for example, studies indicate that the majority of women who work outside the home start a second shift when they return home, functioning as the family’s primary caregiver and domestic laborer. According to one survey, “married women spend forty hours a week on household chores, compared to seventeen for men” (Domosh and Seager 2). Such statistics continue to speak to the need to rethink gender roles, especially as they play out in the domestic sphere. These statistics also help account for why many women writers remain invested in the domestic sphere and its informal economy.

Conventional domesticity’s twenty-first-century revival, furthermore, continues the promotion of stereotypical roles related to gender, sex, class, and race. For example, while denying marriage to homosexual couples, the second Bush administration concurrently promoted marriage for heterosexuals, especially for low-income couples. Emerging after the racist and sexist “welfare queen” rhetoric that intensified during the latter half of the twentieth century with the Clinton administration’s efforts to reform welfare, this argument claims that Christian marriage improves the lives of unmarried, low-income Americans—especially poor, unmarried mothers. Building on controversial research that demonstrates “married people experience less poverty than single people, and that children of two-parent households tend to fare better overall than children of single-parent households,” the marriage initiative earmarked $1.5 billion for “counseling services, public awareness campaigns and marriage enrichment courses intended to foster ‘healthy marriages’ among the poor” (Zeller 4.3).

Before contemporary welfare programs, nineteenth-century Christian women had the “peculiar” domestic privilege and responsibility “to lift up
the fallen, to sustain the weak, to protect the tempted, to bind up the broken-hearted, and especially to rescue the sinful” (Beecher and Stowe 433). Today the institution of heterosexual Christian union, bolstered and policed by the U.S. government, similarly aims to build a better America among the impoverished: “If you have a single mom making good choices and she marries a good man,’ said the Rev. Ted Haggard, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, ‘then it’s not long before they’re driving a better car and living in a better home and the child is better off and they become an asset to society rather than a drain on society” (qtd. in Zeller 4.3). According to this logic, the model Christian home structures American culture and strengthens the nation’s economic health.

Notably, Haggard’s narrative does not challenge conventional gender or sex roles: women remain primary caregivers, men act primarily as economic providers, and financially beneficial unions can only take place within a legal, heterosexual marriage. Haggard’s narrative fails, too, to recognize that women—regardless of economic status—are most at risk for violence within their own homes. Ostensibly, healthy-marriage training alleviates such risk factors; however, as Doreen Massey and Pat Jess write, “For many women . . . the home is a site of hard work and perhaps physical and sexual abuse; for some, only by leaving such homes can they find a place in which to belong” (90). Real-life, single mothers can now make temporary “until better times do us part” cohousing arrangements at CoAbode, a nonprofit match-making service for single mothers (Pace, qtd. in Ydstie).

The redesigned alliances that conclude neodomestic novels also invent or recycle alternatives out of the conventional (white) heterosexual marriage as well as represent and theorize “real life” alternatives.

Neodomestic fiction emerges out of a cultural landscape marked by a crisis in access to affordable housing. The 1980s inaugurated an especially dark period for many seeking homeownership: “After 50 years of steady and uninterrupted progress, the percentage of blacks who own their homes suddenly and unexpectedly declined in the 1980s. A continuation of this trend would reinforce the position of America’s blacks at the margin of America’s propertied society” (“Decline” 19). Such setbacks, combined with the developments within domestic fiction during the modern period and the rise of homelessness under the Reagan administration, help contextualize the cultural landscape out of which neodomestic fiction emerges.

Suburban development in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is also significant to the emergence of neodomestic fiction because it helped solidify the American ideal of a privately owned, single-family dwelling. The popularity of gated communities, furthermore, emphasizes the strong hold oppo-
sitional spatial politics continue to have on American housing practices and desires, especially since 1980: “In the 1980s, upscale real estate speculation and the trend to conspicuous consumption saw the proliferation of gated communities around golf courses that were designed for exclusivity, prestige, and leisure. The decade also marked the emergence of gated communities built primarily out of fear, as the public became increasingly preoccupied with violent crime” (Blakely and Snyder 4–5). As Witold Rybczynski points out in *Last Harvest*, gated communities still account for only a small percentage of communities and most of the time the gates are left open (132). Nevertheless, their rise in popularity in the 1980s supports my argument that this period marks a watershed moment for American domesticity. While oppositional spatial politics such as segregation and exclusionary housing practices are present throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, we see once again in the 1980s a renewed intensification of longstanding domestic fears and a renewed desire for a safe home. As D. A. Leslie suggests, the era is marked by a “New Traditionalism.”

Neodomestic fiction reflects, provokes, and theorizes distinctive responses to conservative visions of the contemporary home and family. Notably—but not surprisingly, given the historical and cultural context I have briefly outlined—when such neodomestic recycling appears, it is frequently perceived as un-American. For example, Mrs. Nguyen’s “refugee” housekeeping in Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* (1997) seems so different from the conventional American model that her daughter does not even recognize it as American. Mrs. Nguyen’s daughter describes her mom’s “un-American” housekeeping:

> Our apartment was so different. My mother wanted it maintained as a mere way station, rootlessly sparse since the day of our arrival. . . . She had even taken American disposability a step backward with her special kind of twist. Plastic spoons and knives, picnic plates and Ziploc bags, tin foil and Styrofoam cups, these were all modern-day inventions my mother had decided to reinvent, the refugee way.

Why should something be discarded just because it’s designed to be disposable? In our kitchen, my mother hand-washed plastic forks and knives. She saved used clingwraps and aluminum foil. (91–92)

Mrs. Nguyen recycles, literally and figuratively. She recycles Beecher and Stowe’s call for thrift—a principle largely lost in America’s contemporary emphasis on materialism. According to Beecher and Stowe, “a child should be brought up with the determined principle, never to *run in debt*, but to
be content to live in a humbler way, in order to secure that true indepen-
dence, which should be the noblest distinction of an American citizen” (285;
emphasis in original). Mrs. Nguyen transforms this Protestant ideal into a
mobile, “refugee” style of homemaking.

We see a similar scene of recycling the flotsam of white American domes-
ticity in Leslie Marmon Silko’s Gardens in the Dunes. At the beginning of this
novel, the narrator describes the housekeeping practices of the matriarchal
family of Grandma Fleet, Mama, and Mama’s two daughters, Sister Salt and
Indigo. In addition to gathering grains and grasses for subsistence and basket
weaving, Grandma Fleet and her granddaughter Indigo

walk though the town dump, where they surveyed the refuse and Indigo
scrambled down the sides of the garbage pits to retrieve valuables the
townspeople carelessly threw away. String, paper, scraps of cloth, glass jars
and bottles, tin cans, and bits of wire—they washed their discoveries in
the shallows of the river and reused them. Grandma Fleet saved seeds dis-
carded from vegetables and fruits to plant at the old gardens when they
returned; she poked her stick through the debris in garbage piles behind
the café and hotel. (22)

The scene demonstrates how those living at the margins of dominant society
survive. Grandma Fleet and Indigo literally live off the white community’s
trash, which highlights the community’s wastefulness and the Sand Lizard’s
ingenuity. Their homemaking also marks them as not fully American; hence
the “need” to send Native children to boarding schools and away from “dan-
gerous” domestic habits.

Dorothy Allison’s Bastard Out of Carolina (1992) similarly features a
scene that involves literal recycling (Allison 180–87). In this scene, members
of the protagonist’s “white trash” family troll the river that passes Aunt Ray-
lene’s house for useable items. Some things Aunt Raylene keeps and others
are cleaned and patched and sold during the weekend on the side of the road.
Like the Sand Lizard family, Bone’s “white trash” family occupies society’s
margins and lives off its trash. The community also considers them “trash.”
When Aunt Raylene proclaims that “trash rises. . . . Out here where no one
can mess with it, trash rises all the time,” she speaks of the literal trash that
rises out of the bend in the river and also of her family that lives at society’s
margins (Allison 180). The margin affords a certain amount of freedom that
Aunt Raylene as well as the other characters embrace when they engage in
recycling. Domestic thrift and living on the margin both empowers these
characters and marks them as outsiders.
Thus, conventional domesticity’s call for thrift should not be overidealized. It remains distinct from neodomestic forms of both recycling and questioning the dominant domestic consumer culture. As Hayden reminds us, “Beecher also became an early advocate of household consumption as necessary to a capitalist economy, recommending the use of multiple consumer goods, or ‘superfluities,’ in order ‘to promote industry, virtue and religion’ by keeping people employed in diverse kinds of production” (Building Suburbia 41–2). In contrast, Mrs. Nguyen models an alternative to rampant American consumerist consumption and its disposable domesticity. The fastidious recycling and stance against clutter produce an alternative domestic aesthetics that is “rootless” or mobile while also reasserting a kind of financial and environmental stability by stopping (or at least reducing) the cycle of disposable domesticity. This cycle causes her daughter to label Mrs. Nguyen’s housekeeping un-American, and the same cycle keeps the Sand Lizard and “white trash” families relegated to outsider status. They live as refugees in their own lands; their largely forced domestic mobility has empowering and oppressive characteristics.

Neodomestic fiction emerges out of such historical and contemporary contexts, exposes conventional domesticity’s limitations, and seeks alternatives to the prevailing model. Where conventional domestic ideology—whether expressed in the nineteenth or twentieth century—consistently responds to instability by homogenizing homemaking and patrolling domestic borders, neodomesticity experiments with instability and porous margins. It theorizes and represents a distinctive set of alternative domestic modes. Where conventional domestic discourses about union mask some exclusions (such as those associated with white privilege) and clarify other exclusions (such as the prohibition against the “foreign bodies” of homosexuals), neodomestic discourses self-consciously consider the historical and contemporary factors contributing to the home’s definition and its associated privileges. Orleanna’s question in The Poisonwood Bible is an example of this self-consciousness, which white women writers and privileged Americans increasingly encounter: “There’s only one question worth asking now: How do we aim to live with it?” (Kingsolver 9). Orleanna asks: how do we live with this conventional ideal, given its exclusions and its pervasiveness in American culture? As I explore in the next chapter, historically conscious recycling constitutes one response. Neodomestic fiction theorizes and represents alternatives to a homogenizing union—to the continued production of a conventional domesticity to the exclusion of other domesticities and people.