Neodomestic American Fiction

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Recycling Feminine Domesticity
Rewriting Conventional Domestic Fiction

All domestic fictions agree with the March family housekeeper’s tidy summation in *Little Women*: “Housekeeping ain’t no joke” (Alcott 114). As I outlined in the previous chapter, how the serious business of keeping house plays out in individual novels reflects the novels’ distinct historical milieus as well as reveals significant generic and ideological connections and revisions. This chapter further demonstrates that, although domestic fiction’s politics shift in the 1980s, useful links emerge when we compare the domestic cultures and fictions of the nineteenth century with those of the twenty-first century. The domestic cultures and novels of these periods invite “a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein” (Foucault, “Of Other Spaces” 22). This domestic palimpsest layers domestic history—literary and cultural—in the narrative and in the physical space of the home. We see this palimpsest in the ways that neodomestic fiction rewrites domesticity’s narrative tropes. Responding to the genre’s imperial and racist histories as well as to the revived interest in conservative family definitions and politics, neodomestic fiction recycles domestic fiction’s didactic turn and its gendered protagonists, ideology, and settings for its own ideological ends. Neodomestic fiction self-consciously reshapes the ways domestic space and fiction function. The sum total of these revisions produces a distinct subgenre, which in its most extreme form figuratively and literally rewrites nineteenth-century domestic texts, crafting reconfigured narrative spaces.
How neodomestic novels rewrite this generic space is the focus of this chapter. The chapter features Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Gardens in the Dunes* and Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* because of their hyper-revising of nineteenth-century domestic fiction and culture. This chapter also primarily focuses on women’s novels, or fiction written by and primarily focused on female protagonists. The focus on women’s (neo)domestic fiction allows us to examine the specific shared and distinctive characteristics of this traditionally gendered genre. It also reflects women writers’ continued investment in women’s experiences and in the genre of women’s fiction and how gender remains an important and distinctive lens for understanding domestic fiction and American literature and culture more broadly.

**Neodomestic Fiction**

A Blueprint for Recycling

Novels written after 1980 are by no means the first to recycle and revise domestic models. Domestic space in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries offers a theater for a highly charged battle to more firmly establish or unseat white Protestant domesticity. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Native American women, such as Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins (*Life among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims*, 1883) and Zitkala-Sa (*American Indian Stories*, 1921), narrate the exacting costs of acculturating to white American domestic norms, and African American women, such as Harriet Jacobs (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, 1861), describe the barriers erected against access to American domestic ideals.¹ Pauline E. Hopkins and María Amparo Ruiz de Burton also negotiated responses to dominant white domesticity. Such “alternative” voices struggled against being subsumed by the dominant American domestic ideology and culture that often denigrated other domesticities in order to establish and advance white domesticity.

Leslie Marmon Silko’s novel *Gardens in the Dunes* continues this tradition developed by women of color by reimagining conventional narrative frames. Silko’s novel epitomizes the notion of recycling “past domestic edifices” (George, “Recycling” 2) by crafting a literal return to the nineteenth century and revising the period’s popular genres. Angelika Köhler, in fact, describes Silko’s novel according to this neodomestic formula: “Silko’s characters are in search of their individual homes, the places where historical rootedness and modern awareness intersect” (242). Set at the turn of the century (circa 1893), *Gardens in the Dunes* revisits a crucial moment in American domesticity and domestic policy, especially for Native Americans.
Like much nineteenth-century domestic fiction, furthermore, Gardens in the Dunes is structured as a journey home. Divided into ten sections with a third-person narrator who focuses on multiple perspectives, Gardens in the Dunes encompasses several settings that reverse an imperial East-West frontier narrative. The novel begins in the American Southwest and then moves east to Long Island, England, and the Mediterranean before returning west. Because of the multiple story lines and circular emplotment, the novel ultimately defies a strictly linear plot in both chronological and spatial terms. Characters’ stories overlap and flashbacks abound.

The storylines primarily concern two character sets. The first involves two Sand Lizard sisters, Indigo and Sister Salt. The Sand Lizards are a fictional, southwestern, indigenous people who share similarities with Laguna culture. Early in the novel, police separate the sisters from each other and their family. Indigo’s story focuses on her quest to return to her family and ancestral home in the dunes after being forcibly sent to the Sherman Institute in Riverside, California. Sister Salt, the elder sister, is judged to be too old for boarding school and is left under custody of an Indian agency in Parker, Arizona. Indigo escapes from boarding school and hopes to reunite with her sister; however, while trying to find her way home she is found by Hattie Palmer, a thwarted religious scholar, and her husband, Edward, a collector of exotic plant specimens for European and American companies.

The Palmers’ story composes the novel’s other principal narrative. They take Indigo in under the guise that Hattie will train her for domestic service. The Palmers take Indigo along on a trip east to Long Island and then to England and eventually the Mediterranean. During these travels Hattie loses her home as well due to her husband’s illegal plant-collection activities, his poor financial management skills, and their eventual divorce. The novel juxtaposes Indigo’s and Sister Salt’s experiences with Hattie’s struggles to find her place in the world. In the end, both Hattie and Indigo find their way back home: Indigo, reunited with her sister, returns to the old gardens in the sand dunes; Hattie returns to her Aunt Bronwyn’s house in Bath, England. She remains a friend to Indigo and her sister, sending money to assist the women’s independence.

From this brief plot synopsis, we can begin to see that the novel rewrites several popular nineteenth-century genres, including travel and captivity narratives, the Victorian children’s novel, and domestic and sentimental fiction. Its diverse cast of characters, likewise, addresses several key nineteenth-century issues: (1) nineteenth-century American imperialism—for example, through Edward’s collection expeditions and his approach to the cultures and people that he encounters on his travels (Silko 129–51); (2) the place
of Native American peoples at the turn of the century—especially the role of Native American land claims and Indian schools, which forcibly separate Indigo and Sister Salt from their mother and grandmother (Silko 64–74); (3) (white) female education—Hattie’s liberal education (Silko 95) and her “hysteria” (Silko 231), for example; and (4) Christianity’s patriarchal nature—as exhibited in its suppression of Coptic scrolls that demonstrate Mary Magdalene was an apostle in the early church (Silko 97–104; 268). This list only scratches the surface, as the novel also incorporates federal development projects, such as Parker Canyon’s dam construction (Silko 207), conflicts in Mexico (Silko 356), and Celtic mysticism (Silko 250–69). Such diverse, historically grounded plot elements demonstrate that this narrative is keenly aware of nineteenth-century conventions and concerns.

Additionally, this contemporary Native American text incorporates Western and non-Western domestic spatial and narrative practices. Silko explains that in her cultural tradition (Laguna Pueblo), all narratives are spatial narratives, or stories deeply connected to the land. This tenet holds true for many indigenous cultures and for the fictional Sand Lizards. Silko defines the deep connections between story and place in her introduction to her collection of essays, *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit*:

This book of essays is structured like a spider’s web. It begins with the land; think of the land, the earth, as the center of a spider’s web. Human identity, imagination and storytelling were inextricably linked to the land, to Mother Earth, just as the strands of the spider’s web radiate from the center of the web. (21)

The image of the spider web positions narrative as a web, rather than a linear plot line. Pueblo people, furthermore, “never conceived of removing themselves from the earth and sky.... Viewers are as much a part of the landscape as the boulders they stand on” (Yellow Woman 27). Silko’s remarks begin to describe an interdependent relationship with the landscape and how space takes precedence over time in the Pueblo oral tradition. Silko goes on to say, “The precise date of the incident often is less important than the place or location of the happening” (Yellow Woman 33). Thus, location (more than a specific moment in time) possesses priority.

Significantly, in this regard, *Gardens in the Dunes* contains clues to the time period in which it takes place but does not give precise dates. The novel’s beginning, for example, emphasizes mythic time rather than locating the story in a specific historical moment. The novel’s initial paragraphs
describe the sisters laughing naked in the rain and invoke an Eden-like setting where the sisters live in peace. At the same time, the narrative grounds itself in historical references to locate the contemporary reader within the story’s specific temporal-spatial politics, but does not pace the narrative so it matches dates precisely. For example, we know that the assassination of King Umberto I took place on July 29, 1900, and that the Spanish-American War occurred from April 21, 1898 (U.S. declaration made retroactive to April 21) to December 10, 1898 (Silko 276). As a result, the novel’s reference to the Parker Dam’s construction, which begin in 1934, presents a historical rupture. Rather than evaluate the novel as a loose or even inaccurate portrayal of history, its Laguna framework emphasizes location. In other words, it is more important that these events occurred in the same landscape rather than that they occurred at exactly the same time.

Furthermore, rather than providing one version of the story, the characters’ multiple perspectives present a “communal truth, not an absolute truth”: “For [ancient Pueblo people] this truth lived somewhere within the web of differing versions, disputes over minor points, and outright contradictions tangling with old feuds and village rivalries” (Yellow Woman 32). The multiple snake stories produce an example of the “communal truth” Silko describes in Yellow Woman. Hattie begins to realize the significance of the multiple, competing narratives while traveling through Europe: “Hattie drifted off to sleep recalling the pictures and statues of the Blessed Virgin Mary standing on a snake. Catechism classes taught Mary was killing the snake, but after seeing the figures in the rain garden, she thought perhaps the Virgin with the snake was based on a figure from earlier times” (Silko 306). Indigo and Sister Salt’s competing stories about snakes add another layer of significance. When the sisters return to the old gardens at the end of the novel, they notice that someone killed the old rattlesnake. They make amends by giving the rattlesnake’s bones a proper burial. The novel concludes with the snake in the garden—but not as an image of temptation and human sin. A rattlesnake welcomes Indigo and Sister Salt back to the old gardens, suggesting that a balance has returned and that ecological relationships have been mended. The rattlesnake’s return represents ecological and domestic harmony: “Old Snake’s beautiful daughter moved back home” (479). Before the sisters and Hattie reach this moment and find their respective homes, each embarks on a journey. Domestic mobility is key to understanding (neo) domesticity. In Gardens in the Dunes, historically conscious journeys seeking home contribute to the novel’s deconstruction of conventional domestic rhetoric.
Neodomestic Mobility

Home’s Locations

Whether literal or metaphoric, the basic plot for much nineteenth-century domestic fiction involves the process of making or finding home. In Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850), this journey is literal. Ellen, the protagonist, travels from place to place in search of a home. In *Little Women*, the journey is more metaphoric. The March girls’ behavior structures their search for home. The neodomestic novels’ use of mobility follows bell hooks’s notion that “home is no longer just one place. It is locations” (*Yearning* 148). Adopting this “postmodern” definition of home does not overlook material factors. For example, distinctions exist between a homeless person, an itinerate person who may lay claim to homes in various locations, and a multimillionaire who owns several homes or may have dual citizenship. Comparing and contrasting the domestic mobility of white women and Sand Lizard women clarifies these politics.

Mobility, a by-product of both dispossession and privilege, enters Silko’s novel at several levels. The sisters’ separation from each other and from the rest of their family dispossesses them of their known home and forces them to construct new ones as they attempt to reunite. Hattie, Indigo’s guardian, loses her home as a result of her husband’s illegal activities, their eventual divorce, and her own resistance to conventional white womanhood: “Hattie realized, oddly enough, she was the one who no longer had a life to return to. Although they would welcome her, she could not return to her parents’ house” (Silko 439). *Gardens in the Dunes* creates various comparisons between Indigo’s and Hattie’s experiences involving issues of women’s domestic mobility and dispossession.

Hattie’s and Indigo’s stories about dispossession demonstrate that both are trapped by conventional domesticity and that both exhibit key differences in how this trap functions. For example, *Gardens in the Dunes* opens with stories about how the Sand Lizard people move to escape persecution by the whites (15–20). Controlling the Sand Lizard’s mobility and the location of their homes becomes tantamount to the American government: “the new orders stated all Indians must leave their home places to live on the reservation at Parker” (19–20). The Indian schools attempt to retrain Native girls to follow conventional (white) domesticity. When indigenous bodies cannot be retrained or contained to produce docile domestic subjects, they are frequently killed: “All those who were not killed were taken prisoner. Grandma Fleet lost her young husband to a bullet; only the women and children remained, captives at Fort Yuma” (18). Indigo’s pet parrot, Rainbow,
serves as a symbol of her captivity and colonialism. The parrot is an exotic pet associated with the Victorian era. Indigo loves the parrot, so when the parrot bites Indigo, it is as though the parrot says, “Then let me out of the cage” (196). Conversely, Hattie and Edward enjoy freedom of movement, represented in their grand tour through Europe and across the United States and its territories. Unlike Indigo, Sister Salt, and Rainbow, they freely trespass borders—at least until Edward’s illegal citron collection gets them in trouble with Spanish police (323–32).

Hattie is a woman trapped by conventional domesticity and notions about a (white) woman’s place in society. She is, after all, a queer woman and foreshadows the New Woman of the early twentieth century: “housekeeping chores bored her” (76). Her (proto)feminist intellectual pursuits—she is labeled a heretic after arguing that “Jesus had women disciples and Mary Magdalene wrote a Gospel suppressed by the church”—set her apart (79). Her frustrations, as in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), escalate to visible mental and physical problems. The doctor “pronounced her condition female hysteria” and prescribes for Hattie “complete rest and above all no books” (Silko 231). American patriarchal forces have vested interests in keeping her, like the Sand Lizard people, contained.

We can begin to see how mobility may be a transgressive and imperial feature of the home’s structure and function in the community; its multiple locations may be liberating or a result of dispossession. Hattie and Indigo also demonstrate home’s preferred locations. Bath, England, becomes Hattie’s preferred home, and the gardens in the sand dunes are Indigo’s and Sister Salt’s ideal home. During their travels in Europe, Hattie, Edward, and Indigo confront various homes and homemaking strategies—frequently symbolized through the different types of gardens people cultivate. The characters that successfully integrate or diversify their gardens end the novel at home. Edward, who attempts to colonize space by stealing plant cuttings, meets difficulties that bring about his demise. In contrast, Hattie and Indigo demonstrate a relational interaction with their environments.

Neodomestic Relational Space
The Home’s Contexts

Hattie and Indigo practice what feminist geographers define as a relational interaction with their environments. That is, rather than attempt to conquer space or set up oppositional dichotomies, they attempt to create diversity. Relational space demarcates neodomesticity’s refusal to reinscribe separate
spheres or other hierarchical binaries. This view recognizes, for example, that home is not exclusively private or isolated. Rather, it is defined by its associations with the community and other spaces in its vicinity. Rather than figured as an idealized feminine space (as in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland), as a dystopian trap (as in Edith Wharton's The House of Mirth and many other works of feminine domestic fiction), or as a site from which boys and men must flee (as in Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn and many other works of masculine antidomestic fiction), neodomestic fiction portrays homes with shifting (ideological) locations and meanings, which are relative to their present and historical relationships with surrounding communities. In Doreen Massey's terms, neodomestic fiction rejects the “culturally masculine” tendency that exhibits the “need for the security of boundaries, the requirement for such a defensive and counterpositional definition of identity” (7). Relational space produces “open security” through blurred rather than oppositional boundaries.

Silko explains in an interview that Gardens in the Dunes follows a philosophy best described as relational: “Those who would make the boundary lines and try to separate them, those are the manipulators. . . . We can be our best selves as a species, as beings with all the other living beings on this earth, we behave best and get along best, without those divisions” (qtd. in Arnold 170–71). In Gardens in the Dunes, Sister Salt explains, “‘A house’ means a circle of stones, because spirits don’t need solid walls or roofs; but it must have two hearths, not one, to be the Lord’s house” (438). “Two hearths” implies community. In other words, Sister Salt’s and Silko’s descriptions of relational space emphasize the cliché that “no man, (or woman), is an island.” As seen in Cisneros’s The House on Mango Street, relational space translates into a welcoming home to “outsiders”—Esperanza’s “bums in the attic.” Sister Salt and Indigo, for instance, share their home with Vedna and Maytha, the twin sisters Sister Salt befriends. The twins do the same. In Gardens in the Dunes, the relational home also extends to an ecological relationship with nature.

Often, as I described in chapter 1, these alternative, relational, or third spaces foster hybrid identities (Jeffery 274). Hybrid identities blur boundaries that are usually considered sacrosanct—boundaries such as race, gender, and class. Hybridity enters Gardens in the Dunes in multiple ways. For example, both Sister Salt and Indigo are of mixed race. Sister Salt also has relationships with both black and Mexican men; Big Candy, an African American, fathers her child. Racist notions about cross-racial relationships emerge in the text only to be defeated (Silko 211), even when practiced among indigenous peoples: “Some of the other tribes used to smother their half-breed babies because they were afraid of them” (Silko 204). This theme
of beneficial diversity is also paralleled in discussions and examples of hybrid flowers and other plant life. Where Indigo and many of the other characters she encounters on her journey freely share seeds (Indigo saves and plans to transport them to the old gardens), Edward collects plants for profit and illegally attempts to obtain *Citrus medica* cuttings; he also finds himself on an expedition attempting to secure equally sought-after rubber tree seedlings resistant to a blight that is “destroying Britain’s great Far Eastern rubber plantations” (131).

Edward engages in oppositional spatial practices that lead to violence and his eventual death: “His ambition was to discover a new plant species that would bear his name, and he spent twenty years of his life in this pursuit before their marriage” (Silko 80). Edward invokes patriarchal, colonial, and imperial powers and oppositional spatial practices. Edward’s interest in Indigo, for instance, emerges when he believe that she, too, is a rare specimen for his collection: “He was intrigued with the notion that the child might be the last remnant of a tribe now extinct, perhaps a tribe never before studied by anthropologists” (Silko 113).

By contrast, Indigo’s relational spatial practices result in a literal and figurative fecundity. The gardens and Indigo’s life at the end of the novel are flourishing. Unlike the controlled Western gardens portrayed in the novel—especially the gardens of Hattie’s sister-in-law, Susan—the Sand Lizards’ garden in the dunes represents not just beauty but also utility. For example, the hybrid gladioli that Indigo brings back from Aunt Bronwyn’s garden nourish the eye and body: “Those gladiolus weren't only beautiful, they were tasty!” (478). Hattie by the novel’s end participates in her Aunt’s Celtic mysticism and gardening practices that honor the land’s spirits. Aunt Bronwyn has “gone native” in Edward’s mind because she protects stones that “dance and walk” at night (239).

Sister Salt, Indigo, and Hattie also clearly demonstrate the limits of sharing their home and of following an uncritical understanding of relational space—especially in the face of racism and sexism. When the nearby town floods but leaves the land owned by Maytha and Vedna safe and dry, Maytha remarks, “If we leave for even one night, the flooded people will call our place abandoned and move in” (438). Later, when Hattie joins Sister Salt and Indigo on the riverbank south of Needles where they are dancing, she also brings white soldiers and her father: “Hattie realized the police and soldiers came to break up the Indian gathering because of her—because they came looking for her there” (472). While ideally Hattie, Sister Salt, and Indigo should be able to live together, conditions do not allow for this to happen, especially if their homemaking practices follow Native American, rather
than Western, traditions. Their ideal home cannot exist outside of relationships with the larger community. The model home—especially in a novel set nearly one hundred years ago—requires further renovations.

Neodomestic Renovation and Redesign
Remodeling the Model Home

Neodomesticity resonates with and differs from the conventional heterosexual home by way of renovation and redesign. While the single-family, heterosexual home continues to dominate domestic culture, neodomestic renovations and redesigns broaden the geography of domestic fiction to include more diverse family structures and domestic settings. Neodomestic fiction reveals and recovers “queer space” as a vital part of domestic fiction’s architecture. As I outlined in chapter 1, the term “queer space” in this context broadly describes homes that “deviate” from the single-family, heterosexual norm:

In the context of feminism, [“queer”] most commonly refers to the “deconstruction” by literary critics, artists and, increasingly, social scientists, working in a postmodern or post-structuralist framework, of oppressive binarisms, especially those related to gender, sexuality and the sex–gender system (most notably the homosexual–heterosexual binarism). (Knopp 225)

In line with relational spatial practices, queer space rejects “counterpositional definition[s] of identity” and space (Massey 7).

Literal home renovations, as I discuss in greater detail in chapter 3, also take place within neodomestic fiction. Gardens in the Dunes presents both physically and ideologically different or “queer” homes. That is, it renovates our understanding of home through the indigenous homemakers’ distinct practices and housing locations and situations. Sister Salt and Indigo, for instance, model Sand Lizard homemaking. Sister Salt in particular challenges Western conventions regarding female sexuality and domesticity, especially nineteenth-century Protestant expectations: “Sex with strangers was valued for alliances and friendships that might be made” (204). Although she lives with Big Candy, her African American boyfriend, Sister Salt earns money by selling beer and engaging in sex work along a construction route: “Sister Salt took her choice of the men willing to pay a dime for fun in the tall grass along the river” (220). From Sister Salt’s perspective, “sex with strangers was advan-
tageous because it created a happy atmosphere to benefit commerce and exchange with strangers” (220). Big Candy, furthermore, does not mind: “He was making good money and busy himself. Her body belonged to her—it was none of his business” (220). Their transient housing, open relationship, and her sexuality present a clear contrast to the conventional monogamous heterosexual marriage. Even Hattie and Edward’s marriage does not fit within this conventional definition; the couple never consummate their marriage.

We can read the ending of Gardens in the Dunes as an ideological revision of Little Women’s conclusion and depiction of the model home and homemaking. Unlike Little Women, which concludes during the fall harvest, Gardens in the Dunes concludes in the spring. Rather than end the novel with the characters reaping the rewards of the fall harvest and of their individual successful journeys to home and marriage, the Sand Lizard sisters remain single, fertile, and independent. By returning Hattie to live in Bath with her Aunt, furthermore, Gardens in the Dunes—in a more subtle fashion than Almanac of the Dead—sends the white population “back home.” An older spatial order is restored in the conclusion of Gardens in the Dunes. The narrative comes full circle, back to the idyllic gardens with which the narrative began. While the homemaking practices in Little Women and Gardens in the Dunes are worlds apart, both novels conclude with characters celebrating their domesticity. In both cases, the home provides a sanctuary.

A sanctuary, of course, implies a kind of stability or haven that neodomestic fiction resists. Morrison’s notion of home is instructive here; home is a place that is safe but open (Morrison, “Home” 9). Gardens in the Dunes, after all, presents a world where even the stones “dance and walk” (Silko 239). The old gardens represent “a place ‘already made for me, both snug and wide open. With a doorway never needing to be closed’” (Morrison, “Home” 9). The sense of timelessness and emphasis on the space of the gardens reflect neodomestic principles by challenging conventional Western notions of a “good home.” Edward, for example, feels “reassured to know the time; one of the worst parts of the Brazilian ordeal had been the sensation time disappeared with the white men” (Silko 314). When Edward literally and figuratively leaves his place in the world (represented by the disappearance of white men), he is ill-equipped to survive. The contemporary reader, furthermore, knows the sense of stability in the gardens will not last. We know the challenges faced by American Indians at the turn of the century did not end as happily as they do in Gardens in the Dunes. The cycle of dispossession begins again.

Far from nostalgic in its presentation, Gardens in the Dunes portrays realistic consequences for women who attempt to remodel the home and
redefine their place within American culture in the nineteenth century. Hattie, for example, is raped, robbed, and left for dead when she travels alone (458–60). Indigo and Sister Salt endure many setbacks before they finally reunite. Silko cannot rewrite the violence associated with Western expansion and sexism, but she can retell the story in such a way that questions the ways other narratives uncritically valorize the taming of women’s and indigenous people’s bodies and the West. In the sections and chapters that follow, I discuss in greater detail domestic remodeling, recycling, and instability’s costs, advantages, and consequences by exploring, for instance, Toni Morrison’s, Barbara Kingsolver’s, Chang-rae Lee’s, and Jonathan Franzen’s domestic fiction. The next section examines neodomestic fiction’s revision of nineteenth-century domestic fiction in greater detail, primarily focusing on another novel that consciously returns to the genre and recycles it: The Poisonwood Bible.

Recycling Nineteenth-Century Domestic Tropes

Where Silko’s novel returns to the nineteenth century, Kingsolver’s The Poisonwood Bible is set in the mid-twentieth century. Nevertheless, this novel also self-consciously rewrites nineteenth-century domestic fiction. The ways that The Poisonwood Bible (1998) recycles the domestic novel can be seen when we compare it to Little Women (1868). Both stories are set in the “women’s sphere” of the home and narrate the women’s domestic travails. The Price family in The Poisonwood Bible loosely but distinctly parallels the March family from Little Women. Both stories have minister fathers and families with four girls. The Price girls’ character flaws especially coincide with the March daughters’ failings that set Little Women’s narrative in motion. Rachel Price mirrors her precedent Meg March, who thinks too much of her looks and hates to work. Both Leah Price and Jo March are tomboys who long to be somewhere else, and Adah Price and Amy March are similarly selfish, “defective” girls. Amy endures ridicule due to her nose, and Adah’s noticeable birth defect sets her apart physically and emotionally. Void of moral or physical defects, the family favorites, Ruth May Price and Beth March, die tragically young. With its missionary family, The Poisonwood Bible also invokes the Protestant morality promoted in Little Women. The rich ways such parallels jumble together—Meg March, for example, ultimately represents a woman of domestic faculty whereas Rachel Price commercializes faculty for profit—provide an extreme example of how neodomestic novels revise nineteenth-century domesticity and fiction.
The connections with *Little Women* suggest that *The Poisonwood Bible* self-consciously plays with domestic fiction’s generic features in both subtle and literal ways. Set during the Civil War, *Little Women* follows the March girls’ transition from practicing homemaking as daughters to producing domesticity as wives and mothers. The Price’s recycled story begins in 1959 in Bethlehem, Georgia, as this Baptist family prepares to leave for a mission in the Belgian Congo. The father’s ego and attendant difficulty in converting the community, the family members’ culture shock, communication problems, environmental disasters, the political uprising, and Ruth May’s death all conspire against the mission’s success. What began as a year-long pilgrimage to the Congo turns into three decades of stories mapping the aftermath of the family’s experiences in Kilanga, the fictional Congolese community where the Price family moves. Unlike *Little Women*, there is not an omniscient narrator. All the Price women take turns narrating the events. The novel’s structure—similar to *Gardens in the Dunes*’ multiple focal points—thus promotes narrative and ideological instabilities because different voices with distinct perspectives narrate the same incidents.

While not an explicit rewriting of *Little Women*, *The Poisonwood Bible* consciously echoes the significant features of Alcott’s novel. On her publisher’s Web site, Kingsolver says, “Certainly I considered that other famous family of ‘little women,’ as I was writing this. It was one of the most beloved books of my childhood. But the parallels don’t go too far. Louisa May Alcott didn’t put any snakes in her book” (Kingsolver, “Barbara Kingsolver FAQ”). Kingsolver’s remark about snakes provides a figurative distinction between conventional domesticity and neodomesticity. Neodomesticity emphasizes the American home’s problems (read “snakes”) as well as its potential.

Kingsolver’s innovative recycling is not always as historically conscious as it could be. The problematic recycled narrative in *The Bean Trees* revolves around an illegally adopted Native American child. After publication of *The Bean Trees*, Kingsolver admits,

> I realized with embarrassment that I had completely neglected a whole moral area when I wrote about this Native American kid being swept off the reservation and raised by a very loving white mother. It was something I hadn’t thought about, and I felt I needed to make that right in another book. Otherwise I don’t think I would want to write a sequel. I would just start from scratch. (qtd. in Perry 165)

As Mary Jean DeMarr points out, “People living in the Southwest are familiar with cases of well-meaning white families adopting Native American infants
who are later wanted back by their tribes” (94). Turtle’s adoption becomes the main focus of *Pigs in Heaven*, the unplanned sequel to *The Bean Trees*. This example reminds us that recycled narratives should be carefully examined for their problems as well as for their potential in envisioning alternative domesticities. The following sections examine the ways that neodomestic fiction critically recycles domestic fiction’s common tropes, including its protagonists, journey plots, ideologies, and spaces of domestic privilege.

### Revised Protagonists and Domestic Ideology

#### Selfless, Benevolent Women

Nineteenth-century domestic fiction requires, at least according to the conventional definition, a selfless female protagonist. In Carolyn Vellenga Berman’s words, “Not every domestic novel features a good wife as a major character, but if a novel cannot teach us what would make a good wife, even by counterexample, then it is probably not a work of domestic fiction” (22). The protagonist that (eventually) represents conventional domestic ideology usually reaps marriage or its promise as her reward. Ellen, for example, must gain her Aunt Fortune’s respect in *The Wide, Wide World* through Christian tenets of female selflessness. *The Wide, Wide World* implies that women’s moral, Christian education relies on “dispossession,” or a letting go of self. For instance, when Ellen questions the logic of her mother’s impending death, her mother responds, “Perhaps he [God] sees, Ellen, that you never would seek him while you had me to cling to” (Warner 41). Ellen achieves success when she finally disciplines herself to be selfless.

Morrison’s Sethe in *Beloved* specifically recycles the selfless domestic protagonist by embodying a “self-less” woman. Unlike Ellen, Sethe must “re-member” herself. Rather than ultimately embodying an idealized, selfless woman, neodometic women continue to exhibit a range of flaws and beneficent personality traits. When looking at the broad range of characters presented in nineteenth-century fiction, alternatives and complications also appear; for example, Aunt Fortune in *The Wide, Wide World* models an alternative domesticity in contrast to Ellen’s pious selflessness. Nevertheless, neodometic heroines (and heroes) are not as one-dimensional as those that Baym describes as significant to the study of nineteenth-century women’s fiction, where the heroines by the novel’s conclusion tend to be either “flawless” or “flawed” (Baym 35). For instance, Sethe’s capacity for love—an advantageous trait, especially in the sentimental and domestic traditions—is
also her Achilles heel. Sethe and her literary contemporaries accentuate such inconsistencies.

Where the domestic heroine generally stabilizes her identity and environment, the neodomestic protagonist learns to cope with her volatile domestic setting. Ellen in *The Wide, Wide World* and Jo in *Little Women*, for example, must give up their contrary ways. The quintessential neodomestic protagonist, whether male or female, learns to reconcile but not necessarily eliminate his/her contradictions. Iliana in *Geographies of Home*, for example, embraces instability at the novel’s conclusion. When she prepares to leave home once again, Iliana vows, “She would leave no memories behind. All of them were her self. All of them were home” (Pérez 321). At the end of the novel’s journey, she seeks neither an escape nor a safe haven. She creates a home that is not dependent on such dichotomies. Iliana ultimately embraces her home’s instability and contradictions: “All of them were home” (321).

In (neo)domestic fiction, the characters’ actions frequently represent some aspect of domestic ideology. The nineteenth century’s “cult of true womanhood” requires helping others successfully produce white middle-class domesticity. In Alcott’s *Little Women*, the March women’s charity work furthers this aim, adding benevolence to womanhood’s virtues of domesticity and piety. The March women embody “THE WOMEN OF AMERICA, In Whose Hands Rest the Real Destinies of the Republic,” to which Catharine E. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe dedicated their domestic handbook, *American Woman’s Home* (1869). Beecher and Stowe explain that a (white) woman’s domestic teaching and example should demonstrate, “the peculiar privilege of woman in the sacred retreat of a ‘Christian home,’” which is “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). To these ends, the March family assists local foreign and destitute families, thereby furthering their Christian and patriotic missions. For example, early in the novel they take a poor German family under their wing and informally adopt the motherless Laurie (17–19). Such acts of Christian charity promote the cult of true womanhood, making the March women good Christians and good American citizens.

The March women embrace their “peculiar privilege” by (re)producing a stable Christian home and community. The Price women in Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*, in turn, produce a poor imitation at best. For example, the Price family also adopts a child—a local boy, Nelson. However, they ultimately depend more on the aid provided by Nelson and Mama Tataba, (a local woman who assists Orleanna with the cooking and housekeeping) than the
Congo depend on and benefit from their relationship with the Price family (Kingsolver 90–98). In the end, the Price women form their own “Circus mission” that highlights the failure of American domesticity in the Congo (271).

Analyzing the mother’s role of promoting the cult of true womanhood provides further insight into the novels’ reproduced and recycled protagonists and domestic ideologies as they affect white privilege. As mothers, Orleanna and Mrs. March share the “peculiar” responsibility of modeling domesticity for their daughters. Mrs. March self-assuredly takes up this role, explaining that following one’s duty produces happiness: “I gave my best to the country I love. . . . Why should I complain, when we both [referring to her husband] have merely done our duty and will surely be the happier for it in the end?” (84). *The Poisonwood Bible* also presents the mother as an exceptional character. Like her nineteenth-century counterpart, Orleanna serves as a fundamental source of knowledge. Orleanna enjoys a “complete” historical consciousness—she always narrates from the present—whereas her daughters narrate their stories chronologically. Orleanna’s reflections faintly echo the confident, fully formed wisdom that Mrs. March shares with her girls. However, Orleanna lacks Mrs. March’s righteousness and Christian confidence. Whereas Mrs. March turns to God to legitimize her actions (84–85), Orleanna does not use faith as her justification. As a result, Orleanna exhibits less confidence about her homemaking and parenting. Where Mrs. March understood her “peculiar privilege” as her Christian duty, Orleanna wrestles with how to live with white privilege—with the legacies and realities of what Amy Kaplan terms “manifest domesticity.”

Orleanna, however, is not Mrs. March’s complete opposite or a failed mother. She models a compelling recycled ideology that negotiates American domesticity’s imperial past, present, and possible future incarnations. Orleanna does not cleanly reproduce the rhetoric of manifest destiny or domesticity, and yet she recognizes its power and deep, relational connections to “foreign” powers. Our suspicions about Orleanna’s abilities to recycle old discourses are piqued when she compares her situation with her husband, Nathan, to that of a colonized country, specifically the Congo: “To resist occupation, whether you’re a nation or merely a woman, you must understand the language of your enemy” (383). “In the end,” explains Orleanna, “my lot was cast with the Congo” (201). Like Africa, Orleanna contends that she was an occupied country. As a result, Orleanna implores her readers to judge her fairly: “My talents are different from those of the women who cleave and part from husbands nowadays—and my virtues probably unrecognizable. But look at old women and bear in mind we are another country” (383).

The conflation between Orleanna and the Congo could be read as an
appropriative gesture. Furthermore, the African villagers with whom the Prices live and work are heard only through the women’s narrations. Kimberly Koza critiques *The Poisonwood Bible*, “because [Kingsolver’s] Congolese characters never speak for themselves, she seems to deny them agency in their own history” (288). However, as much as Orleanna identifies with the colonized Congo, she also understands the limitations of their similar situations. To the extent that privilege is a function of race—as well as gender and class—truly moving out of the site one is often born into is an extremely difficult, if not impossible, task. Orleanna powerfully articulates her inability to relinquish privilege completely and why it is important to recognize this aspect of white privilege.

Reflecting on her family tragedies and her personal losses, Orleanna understands that despite her troubles she still has the “peculiar privileges” afforded her by her birthplace and her race. She explains,

> You’ll say I walked across Africa with my wrists unshackled, and now I am one more soul walking free in a white skin, wearing some thread of the stolen goods: cotton or diamonds, freedom at the very least, prosperity. Some of us know how we came by our fortune, and some of us don’t, but we wear it all the same. There’s only one question worth asking now: How do we aim to live with it? (9)

Orleanna questions her family’s role and her own role in the Belgian Congo, complicating duty’s connection to privilege and to the domestic. The passage demonstrates Orleanna’s awareness of her geopolitical privilege and a concomitant uncertainty about her role. Orleanna’s questioning epitomizes neodomestic ideology’s emphasis on historical consciousness (as opposed to Christian duty) and instability (as opposed to stability) as a central feature of the domestic sphere. Orleanna’s recognition of her privileged position, a position dependent on “stolen goods,” also acknowledges the Africanist presence, which domestic novels by white women historically tend to conceal. Her plea suggests that white American women can no more eliminate their privilege than they can shed their white skin. While metaphorically shackled to her husband, Orleanna draws a distinction in this passage between her patriarchal oppression and African and African American suffering as a result of imperialism and slavery. Her references to cotton and diamonds invoke two key resources picked and mined by African American and African slave labor, respectively. The passage concludes with a key question about how to construct homes that are critical and mindful of the varying forces that (re)produce privilege.
Orleanna’s closing question in the passage pinpoints the problem that white women struggle with in neodomestic fictions: How can one move beyond imperial history without forgetting or ignoring it? How will and how should (white) Americans negotiate their privilege on domestic and global scales? Seyla Benhabib in her essay “Sexual Difference and Collective Identities: The New Global Constellation” poses a similar question about the construction of home. She asks, “Can we establish justice and solidarity at home without turning in on ourselves, without closing our borders to the needs and cries of others? What will democratic collective identities look like in the century of globalization?” (Benhabib 355). Orleanna suggests that the goal of eliminating white privilege fails to take adequate account of the present and historical factors that form (white) privilege. Unable to reproduce or eliminate white privilege, she must recycle it.

When “things fall apart” in Kilanga, the Price family cannot be put together again just as they were. The Price women recycle to survive. For instance, Orleanna gives away much of what the family owns (371–72) and finally gathers the courage to leave her husband and Kilanga. In this symbolic and material act, Orleanna relinquishes the material trappings of her house of privilege: “My household would pass through the great digestive tract of Kilanga and turn into sights unseen” (382). The Price women unpack white privilege, a key step in the shift from reproducing to recycling home. While they cannot eliminate white privilege, they can change how they carry it. Balancing their respective ideological and material burdens informs the Price women’s exit from Kilanga and functions as part of the process of deconstructing white privilege and the model American home.

The Prices’ domestic breakdowns during their journey—both before and after Ruth May’s death—highlight rather than attempt to mask American domesticity’s connections to imperialism. Furthermore, the lost sense of home that results from their repeated domestic failures forces the Price women to recycle American domesticity, crafting homemaking strategies that remodel their positions within their family, the village of Kilanga, and—more broadly—their positions as American citizens and exiles in Africa. Unpacking white privilege requires that the Price women find ways to live responsibly with their privileges and histories. They need new homemaking strategies.

While Orleanna successfully distributes a portion of her material possessions, her redemptive act cannot so simply produce a more egalitarian society. Leah understands her mother’s actions as a “farewell gift to Kilanga. . . . My pagan mother alone among us understood redemption” (456). However, the limited extent of this “redemption” reveals itself through the burdens that the Price women carry out of Kilanga. When the women leave, they are
traveling much lighter than they were when they arrived. Rosemary Marangoly George, using Jurgen Joachim Hesse’s essay about Canadian immigrant writers, explains that “immigrant novels themselves suggest that traveling light or arriving with luggage are both serviceable ways of entering the new location” (Politics 173). In The Poisonwood Bible, however, both cases are equally ineffective. The section “What We Carried Out” emphasizes that traveling with less material luggage and incorporating new domestic and traveling strategies does not eliminate the Price women’s imperial loads.

In Leah’s case, adopting new traveling modes initially produces clear benefits. As she leaves Kilanga, Leah implements the Congolese women’s carrying method, placing her burden on her head. She had never tried this before: “What a revelation, that I could carry my own parcel like any woman here! After the first several miles I ceased to feel the weight on my head at all” (390). Her sense of weightlessness contrasts sharply with the burdens that weigh down the family upon their arrival. The weightlessness, however, is not permanent. As Adah says, Leah’s “religion is the suffering” (442; emphasis in original). Even her husband Anatole’s love does not mitigate Leah’s burdens: “But even his devotion can’t keep this weight off my shoulders” (456). Whatever scruples her sister Rachel lacks, Leah appears to take on. Part of Leah’s burden is her guilt and loss over Ruth May’s death. Leah especially shares this weight with her mother, although all her sisters carry the burden of Ruth May’s death. Adah says of her mother’s millstone, “She will put down that burden, I believe, on the day she hears forgiveness from Ruth May herself” (493). And Adah herself reveals, “What I carried out of [the] Congo on my crooked little back is a ferocious uncertainty about the worth of a life” (443). Adah struggles to reframe her existence with the recognition of such instability. As the section “What We Carried Out” emphasizes, traveling with less luggage did not necessarily lighten the Price women’s loads. The balancing of their individual and collective burdens informs the Price women’s reterritorializations—their struggles to recycle domesticity responsibly. How will the Price women live now that “Africa has slipped the floor out from under [their] righteous house”? (443). To understand this, we must look at the houses they inhabit.

Recycling the Model American Home
A Neodomestic Approach

The recycled houses in Kingsolver’s domestic fiction offer various ways of dealing with white American privilege, modeling homemaking practices that
answer the “needs and cries of others” (Benhabib 355). Mona Domosh and Joni Seager in Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World remind us that in the nineteenth century, “middle-class notions of proper domesticity were often considered essential to the ‘Americanizing’ project, not only in American cities but also on the recently established reservations for Native Americans in the West” (21). As a missionary family in the Congo, the white Price family in The Poisonwood Bible continues this imperial tradition. An awareness of places and homes that exist beyond the characters’ locations and needs eventually enables the white female protagonists to recycle homes and homemaking practices that are not limited to their individual homes and nations.

Geographer Doreen Massey clarifies what is at stake when we begin to pay attention to home’s locations: “There is, then, an issue of whose identity we are referring to when we talk of a place called home and of the supports it may provide of stability, oneness and security” (167). American (neo)domestic literature provides a clear case study to flesh out Massey’s remarks because of its embrace of (in)stability. Examining the notion of a “stable” home to find its racial, gender, and class contours reveals more about how neodomestic fiction critically revises conventional domesticity.

The lost sense of home that the Price women experience when their conventional American homemaking proves more and more inadequate leads to the development of postcolonial homemaking strategies, methods that address the knotty relationship between imperialism and Western white feminism. A primary difference, for example, between Kingsolver’s The Poisonwood Bible and Alcott’s Little Women—and domestic and neodomestic fiction generally—is that unlike the March family, the Price women do not successfully reproduce a stable home. Little Women ends triumphantly with the fall harvest, in which Mrs. March symbolically reaps the fruits of her parenting. The final tableau of her three surviving daughters’ happy marriages celebrates Mrs. March’s successful reproduction of model American domesticity. At the conclusion Mrs. March sees her married daughters and exclaims that she “never can wish [for them] a greater happiness than this!” (502). While the Price women initially share this goal of creating a secure home, they are ultimately less successful in fulfilling it. The Poisonwood Bible does not repeat Little Women’s happy family tableau. In fact, Orleanna asks at the novel’s outset, “What do we know, even now? Ask the children. Look at what they grew up to be” (10). Orleanna’s children are scattered across the globe, and her knowledge of them is uncertain.

This reversal of fortunes may be seen in part as a product of the Price’s displacement, but it also suggests that the novels have fundamentally dif-
different views of the white, middle-class, American home’s redemptive possibilities and benign status as a model for all. *The Poisonwood Bible*’s revised protagonists and ideology distinguish it as “a text that speaks from within ‘Western feminist discourse’ and attempts to expose the bases and supports of privilege even as it renegotiates political and personal alliances” (Martin and Mohanty 296). The Price’s domestic breakdown similarly highlights rather than attempts to mask American domesticity’s connections to imperialism. Amy Kaplan in “Manifest Domesticity” clarifies these connections: “Domesticity is more mobile and less stabilizing; it travels in contradictory circuits both to expand and contract the boundaries of home and nation and to produce shifting conceptions of the foreign” (“Manifest Domesticity” 583).

The Price home emphasizes domesticity’s “expansionist logic” by destabilizing conventional dichotomies between the domestic and the foreign (Kaplan 602). Rather than functioning as oppositional constructions, these spaces encroach on each other’s territory throughout the novel. In particular, *The Poisonwood Bible*’s setting unmoors stable domesticity, exposing its imperial drive and intimate connections with the foreign.

Where nineteenth-century domestic novels tend to mask what Toni Morrison terms the “Africanist presence” within American literature, *The Poisonwood Bible* sets Africa at its most visible center, as its “foreign” destination (Morrison, *Playing 6*). Placing its portrayal of American homemaking in the Belgian Congo and the Jim Crow South, *The Poisonwood Bible* locates the Africanist presence within its narrative in order to tease out American domesticity’s connections to imperialism. Conversely, conventional domesticity in part reproduces American imperialism and white privilege by *displacing* the Africanist presence. In Amy Kaplan’s words, the Africanist presence “is intimately bound to the expansionist logic of domesticity itself” (602). *Little Women*, for example, does not foreground the Africanist presence even though it spurs the March’s homemaking projects. For example, the Civil War necessitates the father’s absence, but the slavery question remains an unspoken text. *Little Women* also does not explore the imperial implications of Hannah’s largely invisible domestic labor or Mr. Laurence’s desire for his grandson Laurie to become an “India merchant,” but these details expand the March’s ability to reproduce domesticity and to stabilize their domain (148).

Rather than repeating this lacuna, the neodomestic novel accounts directly for domesticity’s expansionist history and its ties to an Africanist presence. In addition to setting the novel in the Belgian Congo and the Jim Crow South, *The Poisonwood Bible* highlights domestic ideology’s hidden connections to an Africanist presence by deconstructing homemaking’s promotion of good works.13
The following sections illustrate that there is not a true “model” home among the Price women—at least in the sense of successfully constructing an idealized, perfect haven from the “outside” world or a home that fully allows them to “move out” of their privileged positions. As mentioned previously, such a goal fails to take adequate account of the present and historical factors that form (white) privilege. The Price women’s homes, especially Orlean-na’s, Adah’s, and Leah’s homes, imagine alternative homemaking practices that remain conscious of their historical and present locations. Rachel’s and Leah’s homes and homemaking practices especially interrogate the American home’s alluring pleasures (like security) and damning injustices (such as exclusion), thereby offering a critical rethinking of American homemaking in a postcolonial, translocal context.

The Prices of Stable Homes
Rachel’s and Leah’s Recycled Homes

Constructed after the Price women leave Kilanga, Rachel’s “bad” commercial hotel and Leah’s “good” charitable home appear to provide two contrasting models that apparently realign The Poisonwood Bible with conventional domestic ideology and its stable setting. Conventional domesticity constructs a sacred, stabilizing dichotomy that sets commercial concerns against domestic ones. The cult of true womanhood frequently places the home against commercial culture: “Domesticity is set forth as a value scheme for ordering all of life, in competition with the ethos of money and exploitation that is perceived to prevail in American society” (Baym, Woman’s Fiction 27). The Marchs’ stable, happy home and genteel poverty constructs itself in opposition to commercial culture. The Poisonwood Bible seems to follow this critique because commercial American culture’s burdens contribute to the Price’s failed Kilanga home.14 Rachel’s and Leah’s distinctive homemaking practices also appear to promote this tenet of conventional domesticity.

Rather than reestablishing the commerce/domesticity dichotomy, Rachel’s and Leah’s homes ultimately undercut it. Their homes demonstrate that the home’s material security cannot be decoupled from its emotional security and vice versa. While neodomesticity clearly favors Leah’s noncommercial homemaking, it also demonstrates that as long as Rachel and Leah share the same goal—domestic security—neither presents a genuine choice. Their distinctive homes emphasize domestic security’s two sides: one economic and the other emotional. In this sense, their recycled search for a safe retreat demonstrates what Judith Williamson calls “the supreme trick
of bourgeois ideology,” which “is to be able to produce its opposite out of its own hat” (100). Their homemaking practices connect domestic stability to imperialism and white privilege, teasing out economic and emotional security’s appeal, costs, and consequences.

Were she a character in a conventional domestic novel, Rachel would be tragically flawed for refusing to renounce her materialism. Unlike Jo March, Rachel never realizes the error of the personal pursuit of money and power (Alcott 354). Rachel, sinning against a fundamental tenet of the cult of true womanhood, profits by seeking individual gain. Within the neodomestic novel’s context, Rachel’s character flaws turn conventional domesticity against itself, connecting imperialism, commercial culture, and American domesticity. In true colonial form, Rachel describes her home and business as a “little country”.

Then why not go back [to America]? Well, now it’s too late, of course. I have responsibilities. First there was one husband and then another to tie me down, and then the Equatorial, which isn’t just a hotel, it’s like running a whole little country, where everybody wants to run off with a piece for themselves the minute you turn your back. (512; emphasis in original)

Rachel’s remarks suggest that she understands how imperialism works. She recognizes, in typical colonial fashion, that the land and its resources are up for grabs. She takes advantage of her situation and builds a home for personal financial gain. Aptly named the Equatorial, her hotel-home reflects Rachel’s “central” position as an American running a business abroad, a position that she gains at the expense of the Congolese.

Ironically, her failure as a true woman (to put others before herself) underscores the deep connections between commercialism, imperialism, and domesticity that conventional domesticity attempts to mask. Rachel’s domestic practices and ideology represent the worst in American domestic and foreign policy: she couches her individual economic gain as a cultural improvement. Jo March builds a school with her inheritance, and Rachel correspondingly incorporates commercial culture into her hotel-home. However, where Jo instructs for community good, Rachel clearly works for personal profit. She explains,

The restaurant is for paying guests only, which is, needless to say, whites, since the Africans around here wouldn't earn enough in a month to buy one of my prix-fixe dinners. But I certainly am not one to leave anyone sitting out in the rain! So I built them that shelter, so they wouldn't be tempted to come in and hang about idly in the main bar. (461–62)
Positioned as the center of Rachel’s universe, the Equatorial is a refurbished plantation for whites only. Rachel attempts to skirt her racist practices by translating into economic terms her refusal to treat blacks and whites equally; she will serve the black Congolese only if they stay out of the main bar. As a result, Rachel replicates segregated Georgia in her miniature empire through her “separate but equal” exploitative services. Rachel’s racist practices may also be a reproduced version of apartheid; after leaving Kilanga she moves to Johannesburg, South Africa, where she lives for at least four years (from about 1960–64). Rachel thus reproduces white privilege in her colonial retreat’s construction. In fact, she conflates the aims of capitalist enterprise and aid organizations when she complains, “Mother’s group has never raised one red cent for me, to help put in upstairs plumbing at the Equatorial, for example” (476). Rachel’s “imperial” hotel serves herself and other whites.

Significantly, Rachel idealizes American life in ways that fail to recognize her privileged position as an American. Her nationalist, “America is best” attitude voices a romanticized 1950s image of American home and family. Rachel begins the novel a young woman “whose only hopes for the year were a sweet-sixteen party and a pink mohair twin set” (28). She also assumes that the Congolese regard her pale skin and blonde hair with envy: “Of course, everyone kept staring at me, as they always do here. I am the most extreme blonde imaginable” (47; emphasis in original). Rachel grossly misreads their stares; the Congolese nickname her “termite” (208). Rachel is so vain that when driver ants invade Kilanga, she grabs her most prized possession, her mirror (301–2). Of course, she is only a teenager at this point in the novel. But perhaps her teenage narcissism—which she never outgrows—is exactly what characterizes American domesticity: it is beautiful, charming, selfish, and protected at all costs.

Thus, Rachel’s “dumb blonde” characteristics—hypervisual whiteness, child-like innocence, and sexual attractiveness and vulnerability—mark her as a privileged domestic figure. In other words, her place may be the home, but she reigns there as the bourgeois trophy wife or mistress and not as the mother and certainly not as the housekeeper. Later, when she takes over the Equatorial, for the first time in her life she is not directly defined and controlled by her father, a “husband,” or some other male authority figure. In Rachel’s words, “Not to boast, but I have created my own domain. I call the shots” (511). Nevertheless, she cannot simply define herself. Money and power do not protect her absolutely.

The Poisonwood Bible presents a witty critique of Rachel’s subservience to a patriarchal eye while it simultaneously criticizes her attempts to stabilize her precarious position, a stability that she hopes to gain by increasing her
separation from black Congolese culture. The cult of true womanhood pun-
ishes women’s entrance into commercial spheres by questioning their moral-
ity. Jo, for example, learns this lesson when she writes “sensation stories” (353–69). Before too long, Jo reflects, “They are trash, . . . I’ve gone blindly on, hurting myself and other people, for the sake of money” (365; emphasis in original). The cult of true womanhood haunts Rachel, too. Unlike Jo, who takes personal responsibility for her actions, Rachel places the blame on the viewer:

Every so often a group of fellows will stop by in the afternoon on a sightsee-
ing tour, and receive a mistaken impression of my establishment. . . . And
guess what: they’ll take me for the madam of a whorehouse! Believe you
me, I give them a piece of my mind. If this looks like a house of prostitu-
tion to you, I tell them, that just shows the quality of your own moral fiber.
(514–15)

Rachel abnegates personal responsibility for her business’s outward appear-
ance and the history that informs why men may misinterpret her occupation. Rachel questions the viewer’s moral fiber, not her own—or the patriarchal social constructions that associate single businesswomen with sexual pro-
miscuity. While Rachel may not escape a patriarchal, imperial gaze that often views independent women as sexual objects, she still benefits from her place within the system: “I’m making a killing,” she brags (512). Unlike her girlfriends in Georgia, Rachel has “opportunities as a woman of the world” (514). Her economic and racial privileges ultimately promote her success.

Rachel’s knack for brushing off moral qualms also helps her construct a retreat from the outside world. Combined with her economic capital, her colonial amnesia allows her to retreat from “bad luck” (465). For example, when Rachel learns about diamond mines, she thinks, “Gee, does Marilyn Monroe even know where they come from? Just picturing her in her satin gown and a Congolese diamond digger in the same universe gave me the weebie jeebies. So I didn’t think about it anymore” (127). The last sentence underscores Rachel’s domestic logic; she refuses to think about troubling issues: “If there’s ugly things going on out there, well, you put a good stout lock on your door and check it twice before you go to sleep. You focus on getting your own one little place set up perfect, as I have done, and you’ll see. Other people’s worries do not necessarily have to drag you down” (516). Rachel assumes that everything that happened in Kilanga was simply a result of “bad luck”: “What happened to us in the Congo was simply the bad luck of two opposite worlds crashing into each other, causing tragedy. . . . I’d made
my mind up all along just to rise above it all. Keep my hair presentable and pretend I was elsewhere” (465). The fact that she is able to repress or deny much of this history—to imaginatively rise above it—reveals her special dispensation as an American.

Rachel’s homemaking practices highlight the historical amnesia required to carry out American domesticity’s inequitable economic and imperial agendas. Notably, Rachel keeps forgetting that Leah and Anatole’s children are her kin. The racism of this passage is hard to ignore; just prior to making a remark about Leah and Anatole’s children, she says, “After all this time I can certainly work with the Africans as well as anybody can, mainly by not leading them into temptation. But to marry one? And have children? It doesn’t seem natural” (464; emphasis in original). The “natural” in this case actually refers to racist cultural constructions. Rachel defines herself as the prototypical imperial American woman (the self-confident white female who lives at the expense of the African colonial subject), denying the African presence that nonetheless exists within the social construction of herself.

In *Animal Dreams*, Kingsolver refers to this distinctive American quality of selective memory: “That’s the great American disease, we forget” (316). Or more accurately in Rachel’s case, we refuse to remember. Rachel thus represents white privilege’s “luck” with her conscious ability to forget and her economic means to lock herself away. Luck, in this case, functions as a synonym for colonialist opportunity. Her neocolonial retreat resembles a gated compound, requiring constant surveillance to assure that no one can “run off with a piece for themselves the minute you turn your back” (512).

This indictment of Rachel, however, fails to take into account the ways in which she also resists, or at least complicates, a neocolonial model of American domesticity. Her posture as the Price family’s “dumb blonde” fails to give her credit for recognizing the family’s precarious position as soon as she steps off the airplane in Africa: “We are supposed to be calling the shots here, but it doesn’t look to me like we’re in charge of a thing, not even our own selves” (22). Another of Rachel’s remarkable qualities is her use of language. At once demonstrating her “dumb blonde” mentality and her precise understanding of Africa and herself, her malapropisms are humorous and often express larger truths. For example, upon arriving in Africa, Rachel remarks, “Already I was heavy-hearted in my soul for the flush commodes and machine-washed clothes and other simple things in life I have took for granite” (23; my emphasis). Africa truly shakes Rachel’s “granite” foundation, and it takes all her might (and a few drinks at the bar) to restore her confidence.

The above condemnation, additionally, does not account for how Rachel’s nostalgic longing for America changes after Ruth May’s death: “Until that
moment I’d always believed I could still go home and pretend the Congo never happened. . . . The tragedies that happened to Africans were not mine. We were different, not just because we were white and had our vaccinations, but because we were simply a much, much luckier kind of person” (367). Prior to Ruth May’s death, “luck” in Rachel’s lexicon—like “duty” in Mrs. March’s worldview—ultimately justifies her racial, class, and national privileges. After Ruth May’s death, however, Rachel realizes that luck may not always be on her side. Her lot in life leads Rachel to understand that “sometimes life doesn’t give you all that many chances at being good” (515). Rachel knows, furthermore, that she can never go home again because she no longer fits in: “My long tramp through the mud left me tuckered out and just too worldly-wise to go along with the teen scene” (513). While she still does not concern herself with the material factors that might influence luck or her “peculiar privilege,” she knows from personal experience that sometimes all possible choices are bad.

Additionally, if Rachel had really “risen above it all,” she would not keep trying to justify her decision to remain in Africa and would not be so defensive about her exiled position. We must remember that as Orleanna and her daughters were trying to leave Kilanga, Rachel was effectively handed over to the colonialist mercenary Axelroot, who takes her to Johannesburg, South Africa, and promptly gives her a venereal disease that leaves her infertile. Rachel’s experiences—both in terms of her upbringing and the cultural moment—lead her to believe that her survival hinges on her ability to latch onto (white) men. In this sense, Rachel’s experiences are perhaps closer to her mother’s than those of her younger sisters. Like her mother, Rachel is representative of “another country” of women (383). However, Rachel manipulates men for her own benefit, whereas her mother is presented as a more passive and guileless woman.

This examination of Rachel Price reveals that Kingsolver’s novel fails to reproduce a clean copy of what George refers to as “the authoritative American woman.” Rachel’s shifts between facile and astute understandings resist straw (wo)man constructions. Rachel is not simply evil. Her likeable qualities and keen insights prevent us from dismissing her offhandedly. Her Americanisms make her especially difficult to ignore. Rachel says, “The way I see Africa, you don’t have to like it but you sure have to admit it’s out there” (516). This passage suggests that she, too, ultimately recognizes the Africanist presence within her own narrative. As readers, we don’t have to like Rachel, but we sure have to admit she’s out there.

Leah’s character also explores a recycled version of the benevolent American, particularly true womanhood’s self-sacrifice for a greater good. Echoing
Mrs. March’s remarks about duty (84), Leah values her marriage not only for its individual and family comforts but for its “worldly” effects as well. For example, Leah hopes that her marriage, despite its difficulties, means something in the world: “But hasn’t our life together meant more to the world than either of us could have meant alone?” (473; my emphasis). Leah’s homemaking recycles Mrs. March’s philosophy, but her unorthodox family undercuts conventional domesticity. Thus, Leah also resembles fellow tomboy Jo March, who balks at traditional gender roles throughout Little Women and makes an unconventional marriage.

Jo and Leah both marry men who are ethnically different, resisting the cultural taboos against mixed marriages. This textual wrinkle underscores Little Women’s gender and ethnic complexities. Although Jo eventually marries the German professor Friedrich Bhaer, and is thereby recontained by conventional narrative expectations, her marriage—like Leah’s—is unconventional. Even as the story marks Professor Bhaer’s speech and demeanor as ethnically different, it also demonstrates how this unique match benefits both Jo and Professor Bhaer. This older man—he is forty while Jo is still in her twenties when they marry—takes Jo’s “improprieties” in stride. Furthermore, their school, like Leah and Anatole’s relief work, provides stimulating work for them both (Alcott 494–97). Little Women thus reinforces conventional, stable domesticity, but it should not be dismissed as a simple reproduction of patriarchal and racist ideologies.

Likewise, Leah does not blindly recreate the conventional home. She resists its imperial and commercial roots, recycling an alternative model home. Even before Ruth May’s death, Leah questions her own privileged position and begins to break away from traditional gender roles that would confine her to the home. For example, Leah’s participation in a Congolese hunt—a practice reserved for boys and men—challenges Congolese gender roles (335–42; 348–49). Her “feminist” participation also may be read as a stereotypical white American woman’s cultural insensitivity to local practices. Later, her biracial family hints at waging a significant mutiny against white privilege and other legacies of imperial history. Her children, furthermore, are documents of possible redemption, proof that whiteness and by extension imperialism will not endure. Observing her children, Leah remarks, “I look at my four boys, who are the colors of silt, loam, dust, and clay, an infinite palette for children of their own, and I understand that time erases whiteness altogether” (526). The fact that her children appear fairly well adjusted to their lives in the United States and Africa attests to her hope’s veracity.18

Ruth May’s observation about whiteness helps us understand Leah’s statement about the erasure of whiteness. Ruth May observes that whiteness
Recycling Feminine Domesticity

...in the Congo does not last: “Anything that ever was white is not white here. That is not a color you see. Even a white flower opening up on a bush just looks doomed for this world” (50). I understand Leah’s comment about her children as fitting in along these same lines. Her whiteness—coded as sin—will not be erased, but her children represent possible redemption, proof that whiteness (colonialism) will not last in the Congo. Leah flips white privilege’s familiar script: “[I] work my skin to darkness under the equatorial sun” (526). Rachel, on the other hand, accuses Leah of being brainwashed by Communists (503). In Rachel’s mind, Communists and Leah share the desire to dissolve national, racial, and class boundaries.

A less generous reading might suggest that Leah simply engages in “cultural impersonation”; she borrows, in other words, “the identity of the Other in order to avoid not only guilt but pain and self-hatred” (Martin and Mohanty 306).19 Leah’s self-conscious awareness of her position as a white American, however, disproves or at least weakens this argument. After all, Leah and Anatole’s sons are all named for men lost to war (497). History lives within their household. Unlike Rachel, Leah does not attempt to mask her white privilege or use her home for personal profit. She does not construct security behind a door with stout locks. Rachel, like conventional domestic ideology, masks fissures to achieve stability. Leah, practicing neodomestic ideology, recognizes how the historic and present forces of cultural and economic capital converge to form privilege.

For example, describing her residence in Kinshasa in 1974, Leah explains, “Our house is sturdy, with a concrete floor and a tin roof. We live in what would be called, in America, a slum, though here it’s an island of relative luxury in the outskirts of la cité, where the majority have a good deal less in the way of roofing, to say the least” (446). Contrasting American slums with the Kinshasa housing illustrates Leah’s ability to distinguish the cultural and economic differences between the two urban environments and notions of a good home. Leah consciously makes key distinctions between similar economic housing conditions. Nevertheless, she still often retreats to a model of security and stability. Leah will attempt extreme acts to achieve a “safe retreat”: “But in my dreams I still have hope, and in life, no safe retreat. If I have to hop all the way on one foot, damn it, I’ll find a place I can claim as home” (506). While Leah, like Jo, finds a good partner, she is not as successful in finding her place in the world. Therefore, despite their distinct homemaking practices, Rachel and Leah ultimately share a core definition of home. Both seek security.20

Where Rachel frequently defines home according to material comforts like running water, her sister understands home as a place of emotional...
security. For example, Leah describes their house in the Kimvula District of Zaire as follows: “Our house here is mud and thatch, plenty large, with two rooms and a kitchen shed. A happier place, for sure, than the tin-and-cement box that packaged us up with all our griefs in Kinshasa” (501). While the home depends on both discursive and material elements, Leah’s experiences emphasize that “in all societies . . . the home is much more than a physical structure” (McDowell 92). Rachel struggles to fabricate a sense of security through conscious forgetting and material hotel improvements. Leah struggles to construct a family and home able to withstand a nomadic life. While this house is “a happier place,” Leah still does not feel at home on the insecure border: “But our life in this village feels provisional. We have one foot over the border into the promised land, or possibly the grave” (501).

Where Rachel pursues financial control and security by running her business, Leah seeks emotional security for herself and her family. The time that Leah’s family spends in the United States demonstrates the complex ways in which economic and cultural, specifically racial, politics influence one’s sense and experience of home and security. Where Rachel replicates segregation, her sister and her biracial family suffer from its legacies. In America, their home’s material comforts are beyond what Leah’s family has ever experienced. Living in “married-student housing, a plywood apartment complex set among pine trees” (468), Leah and Anatole have trouble adjusting to American ideas about home:

The singular topic of conversation among our young neighbors was the inadequacy of these rattletrap tenements. To Anatole and me they seemed absurdly luxurious. Glass windows, with locks on every one and two on the door, when we didn't have a single possession worth stealing. Running water, hot, right out of the tap in the kitchen, and another one only ten steps away in the bathroom! (468; emphasis in original)

Modern conveniences like hot water from the tap seem “luxurious” considering the home Leah and Anatole recently left behind in Africa. Their experience demonstrates that material comforts and physical security—in the form of window and door locks—do not successfully produce a safe home or even a safe retreat. While their physical housing improves in America, Leah’s family still experiences racial prejudice, which prevents them from feeling comfortable. Leah explains, “The citizens of my homeland regarded my husband and children as primitives, or freaks. On the streets, from a distance, they'd
scowl at us, thinking we were merely the scourge they already knew and loathed—the mixed-race couple, with mongrel children as advertisement of our sins” (468–69). Anatole’s warrior markings on his face present another problem—further pushing him to the outer extremes of being an outsider in America (469). Racism against biracial families prevents Leah’s family from feeling at home.

Part of Leah’s problem is that she does not seem to belong anywhere, which holds true when the family decides to return to Africa (468–74). Anatole’s arrest upon reentry forces Leah to make a home without him: “Cloaked in my *pagne* and Anatole, I seemed to belong. Now, husbandless in this new neighborhood, my skin glows like a bare bulb” (472). Alone, Leah does not feel at home in Kinshasa either. Nevertheless, she understands her Kinshasa neighbors’ reserved manner: “They know just one thing about foreigners, and that is everything we’ve ever done to them” (472). Leah recognizes the historical justification behind her Kinshasa neighbors’ behavior, and she dreams “to leave my house one day unmarked by whiteness” (504).

Leah and Rachel’s mutual search for a safe retreat may be traced back to their lost American home—once again we see “the materials and debris of past domestic edifices” recycled in their homes (George, “Recycling” 2). Feminist geographer Doreen Massey best contextualizes their search for security: “Those who today worry about a sense of disorientation and a loss of control must once have felt they knew exactly where they were, and that they had control” (Massey 165; emphasis in original). Massey goes on to clarify, “There is, then, an issue of whose identity we are referring to when we talk of a place called home and of the supports it may provide of stability, oneness and security” (Massey 167). In Sanza Pombo, for example, Leah struggles to get her students to plan for the future: “I ought to understand. I’ve been as transient in my adult life as anyone in our cooperative” (524). Leah seems to forget that prior to adulthood she knew security. Being nomadic for most of one’s adult life is not the same as living “homeless” in one’s own country for generations. Leah still seeks control. However, Leah’s final chapter in book 6 suggests that she eventually strikes a balance between a safe retreat and access to the privileges that she desires for others: “There’s the possibility of balance” (522). Significantly, *Little Women* also points to balance as a mark of domestic success (121). However, neodomestic balance is not predicated on stasis but rather on movement. Leah finally understands her mother’s wisdom: “As Mother used to say, not a thing stands still but sticks in the mud” (526).
Chapter 2

Neodomestic Homes in America
Orleanna’s and Adah’s Recycled Homes

Orleanna articulates most clearly how neodomesticity’s instability can be productive. According to Orleanna, if we can embrace change and let go of our need to conquer space and people, then we will experience “the only celebration we mortals really know” (385). Unlike Mrs. March, Orleanna does not rejoice in domestic stability. In fact, she suggests that the desire for stability will not only eventually cause colonialists to fail but will ultimately curse all of humanity (384). Orleanna explains, “In perfect stillness, frankly, I’ve only found sorrow” (385). When we insist on domestic stability, we experience sorrow. Orleanna does not hold these views throughout the novel. She initially practices conventional homemaking. The changes in Orleanna’s conventional homemaking begin just prior to the women’s exodus out of Africa.

Orleanna’s homemaking practices follow an interesting trajectory. She begins with the traditional, protective home model. When the family arrives in Kilanga, Orleanna follows an oppositional model and uses their home as a traditional shelter against outside dangers. Orleanna seeks to construct a safe haven for her girls. Near the middle of the novel, as she grows increasingly frustrated with their situation, she makes a 180 degree turn. Adah describes this change in “Judges”:

Our mother, the recent agoraphobe, who kept us pumpkin-shelled indoors through all the months of rain and epidemic and Independence, has now turned on her protector: she eyes our house suspiciously, accuses it of being “cobwebby” and “strangling us with the heat.” She speaks of it as a thing with will and motive. Every afternoon she has us put on our coolest dresses and run away from our malignant house. (276–77)

Orleanna attempts to cope with the home-abroad by first trying to replicate the American domestic sphere abroad and then trying to invert this model, turning her daughters loose outdoors and breaking the barriers between the patriarchal Price home—likened to the nursery rhyme about female containment—and the “undomesticated” Congo. Finally, back in America, she sets up two transformed homes—homes that defy conservative bourgeois values—while never taking her eyes off Africa.

Orleanna’s fixation on Africa keeps her historically grounded and accountable. She situates her neodomestic homemaking within a translocal framework. Similar to her daughter Rachel who looks toward America without ever returning, Orleanna continues to look toward Africa with an anx-
ious gaze. Unlike Rachel, Orleanna does not look back with nostalgia. Her gaze fails to contain Africa; Africa shifts under it, “refusing to be any place at all, or any thing but itself” (10). Upon her return to Georgia, Orleanna becomes an exile in her own country. Africa hounds her, reminding her of the price that she paid to gain her wings and fly from her gilded cage: “I'd lost my wings. Don't ask me how I gained them back—the story is too unbearable” (201). The story that she cannot tell (but that her daughters do tell) is the story of how Ruth May died, how Orleanna pawned Rachel to a colonialist mercenary, and how Orleanna left a sick Leah behind in Africa. This series of events finally leads to and allows for Orleanna to leave her husband and return to America with one child in tow, her disabled daughter Adah.

Orleanna and Adah do not return home to Georgia in heroic glory; they also do not pick up where they left off in 1959. Without their requisite patriarch breadwinner, they are literally without a home (407). In a hometown that presumes they are insane heathens, Orleanna initially rents a small cabin on the town’s outskirts and begins a fantastic flower garden—something her husband Nathan never allowed. She later moves to a rented apartment in Atlanta and marches for civil rights. Not surprisingly, she never remarries: “Nathan Price was all the marriage I needed” (531). Her African colonial existence as Nathan's wife directly shapes her own postcolonial exile in America. Such changes document her refusal to return to the gilded cage after her flight back to America (201) and her self-chosen position on the margin of (white) American society.

Like her mother, Adah lives on the margin by rejecting marriage, but she does so for “different reasons” (531): “Eros is not so much an eyesore, it turns out, as just too much noise” (532). One might argue that Adah seeks security by not risking the “noise” or instability produced by depending on loved ones. Adah leaves home, as it were, almost the moment that she returns to America. She goes to college and eventually sets up house alone in Atlanta. Adah describes her changed view of home: “Africa has slipped the floor out from under my righteous house, my Adah moral code” (443). Like Rachel, she no longer takes life for “granite.” From her new position, Adah builds a life based on her work, not a husband and family: “I don't have cats or children, I have viruses” (530). Like Orleanna, Adah keeps her eyes on Africa but at the microscopic level.

In her work on God’s “housecleaning,” Adah seeks not so much to find a cure for the diseases she studies, but to understand more clearly their histories and the balance they create in the world: “The race between predator and prey remains exquisitely neck and neck” (529). Remembering the driver ants that invaded Kilanga and almost cost Adah her life helps her understand:
“This is what we learned in Kilanga: move out of the way and praise God for the housecleaning” (529). Adah connects domesticity and balance with nothing less than cosmology. Her minimalist homemaking similarly seeks to maintain this balance between loss and salvation: “My life is satisfying and ordinary. I work a great deal, and visit my mother on Sanderling Island once a month. . . . Sometimes I play chess with one of my colleagues, an anchorite like myself, who suffers from post-polio syndrome” (530–32). In this sense, Adah maintains a nomadic lifestyle to the extent that she refuses to construct a home, at least in any traditional manner with a conventional family: “I don’t think of the viruses as my work, actually. I think of them as my relations” (530).

While Adah’s home represents an alternative to a patriarchal construction, I imagine that it fails to resonate with many readers. Her sterile approach to creating a home lacks comfort. As Witold Rybczynski remarks, “Homeness is not neatness” (Rybczynski 17). In this light, Leah’s self-righteous homemaking practices render her home and character the least appealing and interesting—whereas Rachel, for all her faults, seems the most human and, in that sense, likable. Their homemaking strategies all fail in some respect to reconcile the conflict between comfort and equitable access. As a result, while Orleanna, Adah, and Leah all give up stable, patriarchal homes, the extent to which these individual changes produce decisive consequences for the “governing principles of exclusions and inclusions” remains limited (George, Politics 200). These individual women are not able to single-handedly wipe out white privilege. Nevertheless, their journeys and struggles to construct home provide rich terrain for inquiry. All the women’s descriptions of the various houses that they occupy reveal the extent to which a sense of home requires more than adequate shelter. Individuals within particular historical and cultural contexts experience home differently. Additionally, the variety of their homemaking strategies reveals that no single, monolithic model can work for everyone.

Various strategies of “responsible recycling” can be seen in the individual homes that Orleanna, Adah, and Leah construct after leaving Kilanga. These characters do not create traditional homes. Even Rachel opts for a home that is unconventional, though it is not particularly radical. Deviating too far from socially acceptable homemaking practices carries too high a price. In all fairness, we must also recognize the novel’s historicity and the constraints that this realism entails. To suggest that these women could have solved such problems would demean Kingsolver’s project to inform her readers about America’s destructive involvement in Africa. Thus, rather than measure the worth of the characters’ homes according to the degree of radical change that
they signify or produce, we must consider how these “personal histories that are themselves situated in relation to the development within feminism of particular questions and critiques” interrogate the boundaries between first-world inclusion and third-world exclusion (Martin and Mohanty 294). *The Poisonwood Bible* commands the respect that Rosemary Marangoly George argues should be granted to texts that “acknowledge the seductive pleasure of belonging in homes and in communities and in nations—while working toward changing the governing principles of exclusions and inclusions” (*Politics* 200). The novel’s representations of the Price women, specifically regarding their feelings about and constructions of home, complicate or destabilize what George calls the “authoritative American woman,” or the self-confident white female produced at the expense of the African colonial subject. What emerges out of these revisions is a clearly identifiable spatial genre tied together by three common features: mobility, relational space, and renovation and redesign.

While there ultimately may be no “outside” to the American home’s trap-pings, which would account for why neodomestic fiction relies on recycling rather than invention, neodomestic fiction generates a politics of home that focuses attention on the home’s relational nature, on its fundamental instability. Neodomestic protagonists reconfigure domestic thresholds; rather than becoming recontained by the domestic narrative's structure, neodomestic protagonists embrace and invent “spaces of radical openness” (hooks, *Yearning* 148). The neodomestic novel, thus, does not offer a magic solution to American domestic inequalities; however, it does attempt to destabilize conventional domesticity by revising, recycling, and remodeling alternatives that are cognizant of the past and the present.

**Recycling Conclusions**

We need fictional maps based on geopolitical realities to navigate contentious material realities. For white American subjects—especially women, who are traditionally associated with the home—this necessarily constitutes moving away from conventional homes founded on racism and sexism. As David Harvey and Rosemary Marangoly George suggest, those who imagine or otherwise engage in utopian or fictional constructions of space must eventually confront such material realities: “Any contemporary struggle to envision a reconstruction of the social process has to confront the problem of how to overthrow the structures (both physical and institutional) that the free market has itself produced as relatively permanent features of
our world” (Harvey, *Spaces* 186). Kingsolver and Silko actively produce such maps, which are key components in their activist, neodomestic fiction.

Their maps reveal that just as the various meanings of the word *bangala* depend on the word’s pronunciation—one referring to “something precious and dear” and one referring to the name of the poisonwood tree—the American home depends on at least two seemingly contradictory forces: the need to create emotional and economic security for oneself and the desire to share this security with others (Kingsolver, *Poisonwood 276*). *The Poisonwood Bible* and *Gardens in the Dunes*, along with neodomestic novels more generally, suggest that American homes—in their ideological and material manifestations—can change for the better as well as continue on well-worn destructive paths. Domestic stability serves as the linchpin.

Not surprisingly, when the model American home undergoes scrutiny, Americans bristle. Critiquing the American home brings the American dream—in essence the very ideology that *is* America—under question. But we risk more by placing stout locks on this ideal. Gwendolyn Wright, in “Prescribing the Model Home,” describes the problems that result when the model American home remains a singular proposition: “Confronting the problems of those for whom ‘home’ is lost or denied can intensify the potency of this ideal, making one’s own ‘perfect home’ seem all the more essential and precarious. This fear prompts large numbers of Americans to turn away from the injustice they see around them” (Wright 223). She cautions that the American model home can become a “form of bondage” when it fails to fit a variety of family types (Wright 223). Rachel Price in *The Poisonwood Bible* demonstrates the traits that Wright describes; Rachel never returns to the United States because she cannot meet traditional American domestic expectations. Likewise, Leah Price’s search for a safe retreat threatens to doom her ability to experience “the only celebration we mortals really know” (385). The homes that the female characters build in *Gardens in the Dunes* and *The Poisonwood Bible* represent America’s “poisonous” as well as “precious” domestic spaces and provide tenuous model neodomestic homes.

As the next chapter explores, the ways that neodomestic fictions remodel home further reveal the model home’s “form[s] of bondage” (Wright 223) and provide blueprints of “doable” alternatives (Morrison, “Home” 3–4).