Neodomestic American Fiction

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Remodeling Home

Redesigning Conventional Domestic Space

According to Harvard University’s Joint Center for Housing Studies, Americans doubled the amount they spent on home improvement between 1995 and 2007; by 2008 a sluggish housing market and falling real estate prices contributed to a nearly 16 percent drop in renovations by the third quarter of 2008 (Joint Center 3; 8). While the recent drop is significant, so is the growth that has been recorded over the last ten years or so; in 1995 remodeling expenses hovered at $149 billion, and by 2007 Americans were spending $326 billion on remodeling (Joint Center 3). Daniel McGinn in *House Lust* points out that while some of this remodeling is simply replacing the things, like roofs, that wear out, “More than half of Americans’ home improvement spending . . . [goes] toward ‘discretionary’ remods that let older homes boast some of the features—like family rooms and master bathrooms—that either didn’t exist when they were built, or were considered proper amenities for only upper-class housing” (89–90). Whether we remodel out of necessity, desire, or some combination of both, renovation is part of the homeownership experience.

The booming remodeling period that characterized the early years of the twenty-first century figured in other areas of the era’s domestic culture. The late twentieth century saw a steep increase in the number of home improvement shows and networks, the sustained success and growth of shelter maga-
zines, and the expansion of big-box home improvement outlets such as Home Depot and Lowe’s. This widespread commercial growth coincided with a sustained interest in domestic laborsaving technologies and rising interest in green design. As Anita Gates points out in regard to the large variety of home makeover television programs, “It’s not hard to understand the genre’s popularity. Combine the traditional importance of home with a hunger for security in the post–Sept. 11 era and a growing middle-class sense of entitlement, and you get a huge potential audience eager for home betterment” (E1). Home renovation both maintains and redesigns model domesticity; the home’s shifting ideal architectures reveal entrenched and changing ideas about the social construction of the American family, particularly regarding gender, race, class, (dis)ability, and sexuality.

Remodeling in American literature involves both literal renovation projects within the storyline as well as generic and symbolic restructuring. Redesigning the domestic novel carries bold potential, as it simultaneously asks us to remodel our understanding of the American family and, by extension, our national identity. Key to neodomestic fiction’s literal and generic remodeling projects is how race and gender shape the American home’s physical and ideological contours. This chapter examines the geopolitical roles that race and gender play in the home’s material and ideological structures. Through a series of “careful and effective reversals,” neodomestic fictions condemn homes that violently construct oppositional boundaries (Martin and Mohanty 306). This chapter appraises the American home’s physical and ideological space by surveying several (neo)domestic novels’ gendered and raced spaces and their literal and metaphorical remodeling projects.

The various homes in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Paradise* focus especially on the ways that race, gender, and sexuality influence domestic geopolitics. The residents’ unique styles of housekeeping and renovation and the characters’ fundamental notions about what constitutes home provide important case studies in how recycled and renovated domestic spaces affect female character development and notions of security. Following the lead of scholars like bell hooks, I am interested in the special investment African American women have in domestic space: “Since sexism delegates to females the task of creating and sustaining a home environment, it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of the brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination” (hooks, *Yearning* 42). *Beloved* and *Paradise* provide ideal novels for this analysis because both sustain attention to the relationship between their female protagonists and the home as a safe haven. Additionally, unlike Morrison’s first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Beloved*
and *Paradise* exhibit the three key tropes of neodomestic fiction: mobility, home renovations, and relational domestic space. Following neodomestic ideology, the novels’ remodeling emphasizes the dangers associated with oppositional, patriarchal space and the benefits of following relational, feminist spatial practices.

**Remodeling the Race House**  
*Morrison’s Beloved and Paradise*

The American home is raced as well as gendered. Traditionally, both paradigms frame the house as either a haven or a trap. For example, *Beloved* (1987) and *Paradise* (1997) may appear at first glance to reproduce the American home’s faults—its traps, exclusions, and the very real physical dangers associated with unstable housing—rather than remodel domesticity in ways that “domesticate,” in Toni Morrison’s words, “an elusive race-free paradise” (“Home” 8). For instance, homes become sites of violence in both novels. The house in *Beloved*, 124 Bluestone Road, fails to protect the “crawling already baby.” The Convent in *Paradise* should epitomize a safe haven for its female residents, but it instead traps them during a blaze of gunfire. However, these initial impressions of the novels’ domestic geographies do not tell the whole story. Rather than ultimately constructing the home as a trap (or as a haven), both novels deconstruct and remodel the conventional house-home dichotomy, materializing neodomestic ideology through their experimentation with an elusive but productive domestic instability.

Uncritical and oppositional constructions of home explain the folly of the residents’ actions in *Beloved* and *Paradise*. The novels address how “the pursuit of safe places and ever-narrower conceptions of community relies on unexamined notions of home, family, and nation” (Martin and Mohanty 293). In both novels the residents attempt to construct a safe home and community, but their isolated homes promote precisely the violent relations that they had wished to avoid. Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty have made keen observations about Minnie Bruce Pratt’s critical construction of home that also apply to *Beloved* and *Paradise*: “The tension between the desire for home, for synchrony, for sameness, and the realization of the repressions and violence that make home, harmony, sameness imaginable, and that enforce it, is made clear in the movement of the narrative by very careful and effective reversals which do not erase the positive desire for unity, for Oneness, but destabilize and undercut it” (306). This domesticated violence is the type of brutality that Morrison spoke about in an interview.
with Claudia Tate: “There’s a special kind of domestic perception that has its own violence in writings by black women—not bloody violence, but violence nonetheless” (Morrison, qtd. in Tate 162). This is a violence infused in everyday life; this is the violence of conventional, oppositional constructions of home. Morrison’s domestic fiction, thus, incorporates both subtle and extreme manifestations of the home’s violent aspects and attempts to remodel this space.

Placing Morrison’s theoretical conceptions of “house” and “home” in conversation with other historical and theoretical paradigms before turning to the novels themselves helps to unpack the relationships between power and place. An examination of Morrison’s essay “Home” clarifies what is at stake when she distinguishes between house and home, then deconstructs and remodels this dichotomy in her fiction. Additionally, “Home” clarifies how Morrison’s fiction realizes neodomestic principles. Morrison writes, “I am determined to concretize a literary discourse that (outside of science fiction) resonates exclusively in the register of a permanently unrealizable dream” (“Home” 8). Morrison’s essay and neodomestic fiction bring to fruition what David Harvey defines in *Spaces of Hope* as “spatiotemporal utopias”—fictional maps grounded in present and historical realities.

**Pouring the Foundation**

**Morrison’s “Home”**

As the epigraph to this chapter implies, Morrison’s fiction “domesticates” three elements crucial to this study: history, present realities, and spatial theory. The present and historical experience of home for African Americans shapes domestic fiction’s geopolitics in particular ways. Four salient moments in American history come immediately to mind when considering the significance of home for African Americans: (1) slavery; (2) dispossession in the wake of Reconstruction (1865–1877) and *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896); (3) the Great Migration north during the first half of the twentieth century (roughly 1910–1930); and (4) the perpetuity of low African American homeownership rates during the twentieth century. During the 1980s, African American homeownership rates declined after steadily increasing for fifty years (“Decline in Black Home Ownership” 19). According to data released by the U.S. Census Bureau, “After 50 years of steady and uninterrupted progress, the percentage of blacks who own their homes suddenly and unexpectedly declined in the 1980s. A continuation of this trend would reinforce the position of America’s blacks at the margin of America’s proper-
tied society” (“Decline” 19). In 1980, blacks were 36 percent less likely than whites to own their own home (“Decline” 20). Discouragingly, affordability for a modestly priced house in 2004 remained low for African Americans, especially for black renter families. (The Census Bureau defined “affordability” as the ability to buy a home with cash or “qualify for a conventional, 30-year mortgage with a 5-percent down payment” [Savage 1].) According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2004, “about 1 out of 5 non-Hispanic White married couples who rented could qualify to buy a modestly priced home, while 1 in 10 Black married couples who rented could buy a home” (Savage 4).

The material, ideological, and fictional home for African Americans emerges from this history of disenfranchisement and repeated resettlement. Furthermore, the violence lodged within this domestic geography contextualizes the frequency and significance of the reconstruction and renovation of home and community as significant themes within African American literature broadly and Morrison’s novels specifically. As historian Andrew Wiese writes, “space and spatial struggle” are central to African American life (288): “In the face of white racism, expressed through extraordinary efforts to limit their [African Americans’] freedom to occupy, use, or even move through space, they battled to defend and expand the territory available to them” (291). As bell hooks has written, “Many narratives of resistance struggle from slavery to the present share an obsession with the politics of space, particularly the need to construct and build houses” (“Black Vernacular” 397).

Toni Morrison’s novels not only share a focus on domestic space but also situate the American home within each of the above landmark struggles. Beloved addresses the denial of home and family brought about by slavery, drawing special attention to slavery’s geopolitics through the haunting of 124. Set in the 1680s, A Mercy (2008) goes back further to map the building of colonial America; portions of the story are literally written on the walls of an empty house. Song of Solomon, Paradise, and Love take up African American dispossession and segregation following Reconstruction and Plessy v. Ferguson, tracking their legacies into the twentieth century. Jazz follows its characters from the rural South to the urban North during the Great Migration when about one million southern blacks moved north. Set in the fall of 1941, in the wake of a national decline in homeownership that occurred in 1940, The Bluest Eye accurately portrays disparities between black homeowners (as represented by Geraldine) and black renters (like the Breedlove family), highlighting that homeownership issues for the black community have not changed much throughout the twentieth century. Additionally, Sula (1974) is set during a period of rampant suburban growth (1919–1965). Not coincidently, Sula tells the story of the Bottom’s inhabitants, locating the
story in an African American neighborhood that no longer exists because it was removed “to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course” (3). Finally, the contemporary setting in *Tar Baby* (1981) considers the longstanding relationship between African American domestic servants and white employers.

Morrison repeatedly uses the home setting to “domesticate” or “bring home” her message for her readers. While domestic fiction is not the only genre that defines Morrison’s oeuvre, her experimentation with this form situates it as a central rather than marginal literary genre—within her own body of work and within contemporary American literature generally, as Morrison is one of the major American authors of our time. Especially in *Beloved* and *Paradise*, home remodeling and the search for community address the violent historical legacies and present realities described above.

To use Michel Foucault’s terminology, the recycled, renovated, and relational domestic spaces in *Beloved* and *Paradise* record a “history of powers.” Connecting historical and theoretical concerns regarding space, Foucault argues that “a whole history remains to be written of spaces—which would at the same time be the history of powers” (*Power/Knowledge* 149; emphasis in original). Significantly, both novels locate home and community at the margins; the novels’ geopolitics address the construction of African American communities that are frequently required to make homes on the periphery. Therefore, while Geoffrey Bent claims that Morrison in *Paradise* “undermines her talent for characterization by making the protagonist a place—for a piece of real estate to have a personality” (a criticism that also could have easily been made about *Beloved* and its haunted house), I argue that the intense focus on the home in both of these novels moves beyond prosaic personification (Bent 149).

Morrison’s fictional dwellings—like Kingsolver’s and Silko’s homes—historicize and emphasize the “racial project” of moving “the job of unmattering race away from pathetic yearning and futile desire; away from an impossible future or an irretrievable and probably nonexistent Eden to a manageable, doable, modern human activity” (“Home” 3–4). Her didactic structures teach us much about our own participation in the maintenance of what Morrison calls the “race house,” which contributes to home’s Edenic qualities. Adding her own voice to the growing chorus of criticism concerning the domestic spaces that appear in her fiction, Morrison describes in her essay “Home” the difference between “house” and “home.” Drawing directly from descriptions of dwellings in her novels, Morrison describes a “home” as where “one can imagine safety without walls, can iterate difference that is prized but unprivileged, and can conceive of a third, if you will pardon the expression, world ‘already made for me, both snug and wide open, with a doorway never need-
ing to be closed” (12). Significantly, a portion of this passage first appeared in Jazz as the narrator’s description of home: “I want to be in a place already made for me, both snug and wide open. With a doorway never needing to be closed, a view slanted for light and bright autumn leaves but not rain” (221). In Paradise, one of the men set on murdering the women at the Convent also describes home in these terms, further complicating and destabilizing Morrison’s definition of home (Paradise 8–9; “Home” 9–10). These textual repetitions demonstrate that Morrison’s essay draws from and reflects on her fictional portrayals and interrogations of home.

The borderless home—imagined but not impossible—contrasts with the “race house,” which embodies the ideological structures that keep racism alive in American culture (“Home” 8). Frequently acting as symbolic structures of racism and sexism, houses in Morrison’s novels prompt readers to police themselves in a Foucauldian manner. In his chapter on the panopticon, Foucault explains that the efficiency of the “house of certainty” is its ability to make the subject self-policing: “He inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (Discipline 202–3). Along similar lines, Morrison states at the end of her essay that we must “recognize [our] own participation in the maintenance of the race house” (12). Institutional racism materializes in the race house. This transformation connects social forces with individuals’ behavior. In Foucauldian terms, the race house functions as a state apparatus made visible through the vehicle of fiction. Where Morrison’s description of the race house builds on Foucault’s notion of discipline, her definition of home resembles bell hooks’s conception of home: “Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference” (hooks, Yearning 148). Like hooks’s characterization of home, Morrison describes home as radically open. For Morrison, there are no walls or doors that need closing (“Home” 12). She defines the “house” primarily as an “oppositional space” and the “home” primarily as a “relational space.”

Morrison’s and hooks’s conceptions of home link well with feminist geographers’ ideas about relational space. Like relational space, home for Morrison and hooks emphasizes the interaction between spaces rather than their opposition. Although Carolyn M. Jones does not refer to relational space in her discussion of landscape in Morrison’s fiction, she suggests that place both shapes and is shaped by people: “We shape and, finally, return to land, mark it with our work and our being, even as the land marks us” (46). This give and take is a hallmark of relational space and of the domestic geography in Beloved and Paradise. While the houses in Beloved and Paradise are located at
the margins of society, domestic space often shifts between alienation from and reintegration into a larger community.

My reading here diverges from Patricia McKee's understanding of how the home functions in Paradise. While we both turn to bell hooks who, like Morrison, understands that home cannot be a “secure or fully-constructed place” (McKee 204), McKee argues in “Geographies of Paradise” that hooks constructs a “dialectics of center and margin” and, therefore, Paradise’s “claims are not quite marginal, since they produce no secure or significant border” (212). McKee's reading productively describes how the Convent women “practice a geography of replacement rather than displacement” (208). However, my understanding of hooks’s conception of the margin stresses its flexibility and multiplicity over its function as a clear boundary marker—although certainly borders and margins can and do function in those ways.

In Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference, human geographer David Harvey offers a similar critique of hooks’s essay “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness.” He questions whether appropriating the margin can serve as a source of agency. Harvey points out that hooks’s discourse appears to move “from a real ‘space’ one might call ‘home’ . . . to a metaphorical ‘place’ that is to open a different kind of becoming” (Justice 104). Where Harvey critiques this movement from a “real space” to a “metaphorical place,” feminist geographer Doreen Massey refutes Harvey and understands such “metaphorical” places as “relational,” not unrealistic or dangerously nonmaterial. That is, she rejects Harvey’s insistence—which McKee’s reading also seems to follow—on place's bound nature.

According to Massey, geographers like Harvey depend on “negative counterpositions” to define places like the home (Massey 167–68). Harvey’s position requires concrete distinctions between house and home. In contrast distinction, Massey argues for a more fluid, relational definition of home in her essay “A Place Called Home?” and in her interpretation of hooks’s notions of the home and the margin. The homes and communities in Beloved and Paradise interrogate the viability and dangers of embracing the margin as home and of constructing home as a relational space. Additionally, the home's “spiritual geography,” which offers another way of mapping home’s relational characteristics, is fundamental to the imaginative and historically grounded homes located in Morrison’s fiction and in neodomestic fiction more broadly.

Inés Salazar describes three roles that spiritual geographies play in African American and Chicana literature and culture that apply to Morrison’s novels and to neodomestic fiction generally, but especially to those fictions that are focused on characters who are members of minority groups:
The first is personal affirmation outside the framework of western cultural paradigms. Secondly, cultural and geographical dislocation requires a nonmaterial means to maintain historical remembrance and cultural continuity in the face of potential erasure. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the emphasis on the spiritual signals a process of transformation that signifies the always unfolding negotiation between the collective and subject; and between the preservation of the past and the requirements of the present. (400)

Salazar’s description resonates with the neodomestic spatial practices that I describe in this and previous chapters. Neodomestic space also emphasizes historical and cultural specificity as well as the relational nature of the individual’s private sphere with the larger community. I explore spiritual geography’s particular significance to neodomestic fiction in greater detail in chapters 4 and 5. The following sections focus on the significance of relational space in Morrison’s novels, especially regarding how the characters remodel the home in ways attentive to the past and the present and to individual and communal needs.

Thus Morrison’s essay “Home”—especially when placed in conversation with Foucault, hooks, Harvey, Massey, and Salazar—articulates the tensions among material dwellings, theoretical interpretations of domestic space, and, as we will now consider in more detail, representations of home in fiction. While Morrison’s essay “Home” makes clear distinctions between houses and homes, the distinctions in her fiction are not always as clear. Morrison even writes in “Home” that she has abandoned her search for the “elusive sovereignty” known as home (4). However, this admission does not mean that she has yielded to the race house. Rather, the relational, recycled structures in Morrison’s fiction articulate an ongoing struggle to “domesticate”—or bring to physical reality—the relational “elusive race-free paradise” (“Home” 8). She is no longer searching for an oppositional haven—a “sovereignty”—but rather a “race-specific yet nonracist home” (“Home” 5). The domestic structures in Beloved and Paradise in particular demonstrate qualities of both the race house and the ideal home.

Slavery’s Domestic Geographies:
Remodeling the Big House in Beloved

A geopolitical analysis of the house at 124 Bluestone Road in Beloved reveals that its design contains elements of both the race house and the idyllic home.
In *Beloved*, we see further support for hooks’s characterization of the home as a “site of resistance and liberation struggle” for African American women (*Yearning* 45). In fact, such resistance within domestic spaces has roots in slavery. By remodeling her fictional dwellings, Morrison demonstrates an African American woman’s power to change domesticity’s traditional geopolitics by destabilizing the house-home dichotomy and remaking home.

John Michael Vlach in *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* explains that one means of resistance utilized by slaves was the (re)appropriation of space. Such resistance centered on the plantation’s domestic sphere:

> The spaces that slaves claimed and modified for their own domestic purposes provided them with their own sense of place. In these locations they were able to develop a stronger sense of social solidarity, a feeling of community that would serve as a seedbed not only for further resistance but also for the invention and maintenance of a distinctive African American culture. (Vlach 236)

Slaves gained agency, according to Vlach, by appropriating places on the plantation (169). While these domestic spaces were still strongholds of oppression, slaves effectively made spaces like the kitchen or the slave quarters so “black” that their white owners entered them reluctantly (Vlach x–xi). Vlach notes that after emancipation, slaves often remained on the plantation. Rather than indicating dependency, this behavior illustrates the true extent to which slaves appropriated plantation space, calling and claiming it their own. For example, in a collective petition sent to President Andrew Johnson, a group of emancipated slaves “protested the restoration of plantation lands to their former owners, declaring, ‘This is our home. We have made these lands what they are’” (Vlach ix). This appropriation of domestic space by (former) slaves plays an important role in understanding Baby Suggs’s motivation to remodel 124 as well as in understanding the particular ways in which she changes the house on Bluestone Road.

The house at 124 Bluestone shares external and internal similarities to slave plantation architecture. According to Vlach, typical buildings on slave plantations included the big house, slave quarters, yard, kitchen, smokehouse, barn, and a collection of outbuildings. While the 124 property does not have separate housing for slaves, the house does have a designated sleeping area for the hired help (*Beloved* 207). Additionally, the property has a yard and a small collection of outbuildings: the privy, a detached kitchen that later becomes the woodshed and toolroom where the “crawling already
baby” dies, and a cold house where Paul D eventually sleeps with Beloved (29). Baby Suggs creates an attached storeroom after she removes the back door. The location and layout of 124 also evoke plantation design because the house is surrounded by eighty acres of land (Beloved 259). Slave quarters were often located at the margins of “civilized” space on the plantation (Vlach 229). Located near the border between slave states and free states, 124 likewise is set in the wilderness outside of the town (Beloved 3). Considering that the house’s design and location bear so many similarities to a plantation, it is not surprising that Baby Suggs remolds 124 Bluestone Road shortly after moving in. Two major renovations take place: she moves the kitchen inside the house, and she boards up the back door. By moving the kitchen inside and eliminating the back door, Baby Suggs abolishes two architectural features that are characteristic of slave plantations.

In slave plantations, the location of the kitchen was deeply symbolic. Vlach notes that moving kitchens outside and to the back of the big house “established a clearer separation between those who served and those who were served. . . . The detached kitchen was an important emblem of hardening social boundaries and the evolving society created by slaveholders that increasingly demanded clearer definitions of status, position, and authority” (Vlach 43). Although it remained a clear symbol of slavery, the plantation’s kitchen still served as an empowering space for slaves. Vlach relates, “The cook at the Merrick plantation in Louisiana not only ran the kitchen but determined who could have access to it” (15). While denied ownership of their bodies, slaves like the Merrick’s cook could occasionally control their domestic workspaces.

Similarly, Baby Suggs’s refusal to conform to white housing design standards for the placement of the kitchen emphasizes her appropriation of domestic space. Baby Suggs doesn’t pay any mind to the “visitors with nice dresses [who] don’t want to sit in the same room with the cook stove and the peelings and the grease and the smoke” (Beloved 207). Moreover, by boarding up the back door, Baby Suggs ensures that everyone enters and leaves the house through the front door, regardless of race. Baby Suggs logically remolds 124 to eliminate slave space, although people might say that she illogically turned the house (read “white space”) into a cabin (read “black space”) (Beloved 207). White outsiders may not understand her design because, as Vlach notes, appropriated domestic spaces often became unreadable to white slave owners (Vlach 14). By extension, a black community that is enmeshed in white ideology and attempting to live in a world dominated by white supremacy—a reality of the race house of American culture—might also misread her renovations.
Furthermore, Baby Suggs’s refusal to accept slave plantation spatial design initially provides her with a source of power. In this space she is able to feed the black community spiritually and physically (Beloved 135–38). She crafts a home “without losing or denying racial identity” (Wiese 292). After its occupants become alienated from the surrounding black community, however, the isolated remodeled home cannot safeguard its residents. Designed to keep danger outside of her home, the remodeled kitchen and the elimination of the back door fail to keep schoolteacher out of Baby Suggs’s yard. While the yard is technically not a part of the house, it does constitute an important part of the home, especially within African American culture. As bell hooks notes, “Often, exploited or oppressed groups of people who are compelled by economic circumstance to share small living quarters with many others view the world right outside their housing structures as liminal space where they can stretch the limits of desire and the imagination” (“Black Vernacular” 398). Home’s flexible or relational territory includes the space beyond a house’s four walls; in this case, it also includes the yard.

According to Andrew Wiese, the garden and yard are key parts of African American domestic space: they extend the home’s territory, provide a means of economic enrichment through food production, and create domestic focal points for African American culture. In A Raisin in the Sun (1959), Lorraine Hansberry represents these aspects of the African American home (and its rural, southern ideal) in the character Mama, who wants “a little old two-story somewhere, with a yard where Travis could play in the summertime” and “a little garden in the back” (44, 45). Mama says, “Well, I always wanted me a garden like I used to see sometimes at the back of the houses down home” (53). Her dream home includes a modest house, yard, and garden—an alternative to the “rat trap” house that she has lived in for years and that does not even allow enough sun in the window to grow a “little old plant” (44; 52–53). Thus, we can begin to see that gardens and yards are significant spaces in African American homes.

In Beloved, Denver’s fear of leaving the yard demonstrates the relational aspects the house, the yard, and her initial oppositional spatial politics: “Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants to. So I never leave this house and I watch over the yard, so it can’t happen again and my mother won’t have to kill me too” (205). Denver’s oppositional spatial politics require that she guard her house and yard against the forces “outside.” She eventually understands that her family is “locked in a love that wore everybody out” (243). As a result, one warm spring day she gathers the courage to face the outside and enact a relational spatial politics by reconnecting with the community.
beyond her yard: “She stood on the porch of 124 ready to be swallowed up in the world beyond the edge of the porch. Out there where small things scratched and sometimes touched” (243). Denver hesitates on this threshold: “Denver stood on the porch in the sun and couldn’t leave it. Her throat itched; her heart kicked” (244). Baby Suggs’s spirit eventually encourages her. Still frightened of what’s “out there,” Denver responds:

But you said there was no defense.
“‘There ain’t.”
Then what do I do?
“Know it, and go out the yard. Go on.” (244)

Denver embraces insecurity and ventures into territory beyond her isolated home.

While 124 initially shelters and rewards its inhabitants, once the inhabitants are alienated from the black community, the property fails to protect and the house becomes haunted. As Denise Rodriguez observes, “The house becomes a site of isolation that carries traces of the other structure looming ominously in the narrative’s background, Sweet Home” ( “‘Where the Self’” 44). The reference to Sweet Home clarifies that one person’s shelter—or “home, sweet home”—is frequently another person’s slavery: the race house and the conventional, idealized home constitute each other. Furthermore, the property’s failure to protect its inhabitants emphasizes the interrelated aspects of a productive neodomestic instability. If remodeling alone could successfully produce a safe haven, for instance, Rachel Price in The Poisonwood Bible would have been better able to fortify her hotel. In fact, Rachel’s hotel demonstrates that giving too much attention to remodeling can isolate individuals rather than connect them to the home’s translocal communities.

The relational aspects of 124 are clear: home depends on the ways in which it relates to the community. When the house at 124 Bluestone becomes temporarily isolated from the African American community, we see that choosing the margin as a site of resistance requires support from a community; remodeling the home is not enough. Baby Suggs recognizes her community’s withdrawal of support just before schoolteacher arrives: “And then she knew. Her friends and neighbors were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess” (138). This passage implies that the black community fails to notify Baby Suggs of the approaching slave catchers because of their anger. A dozen years later, Denver takes the necessary steps beyond 124’s yard and successfully reintegrates the household; by doing so, she eventually brings about Beloved’s expulsion
from 124 (Beloved 245). Paul D remarks on the change in the house when he returns to 124 at the end of the novel: “Something is missing from 124. . . . He can’t put his finger on it, but it seems, for a moment, that just beyond his knowing is the glare of an outside thing that embraces while it accuses” (270–71). Paul D’s description suggests that the surrounding black community provides the accusing embrace. After all, Paul D recognizes that the absence is not related to “Beloved or the red light” (Beloved 270–71). The community “embraces” as well as “accuses,” implying individual and community obligations to one another. The house’s dependence on the black community supports bell hooks’s observation that choosing the margin as a site of resistance relies on community: “One needs a community of resistance” (Yearning 149). One cannot live alone on the margin—at least not if one wishes to resist successfully the forces of white supremacy.

At the novel’s conclusion, 124 appropriates, with the help of the black community, the margin of American culture. Although at the close of the novel Mr. Bodwin plans to sell 124 as soon as possible (Beloved 264), the house returns to the black community—a marginal location that hooks would call strategic. As hooks notes, this strategic space on the margin is not secure: “Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a ‘safe’ place. One is always at risk” (Yearning 149). As Paul D points out, the threat of losing their house remains, but “anybody got the money don’t want to live out there” (264). Just like the places Vlach describes that were made so “black” that white slaveholders were reluctant to enter them, 124 holds no attraction to those (presumably white) people who could buy it. Another key factor to 124’s potential for successful resistance from the margin deals with the inhabitants’ agency. There is a difference between choosing the margin and being forced to live on the margin, bell hooks argues: “I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance” (Yearning 153). While the characters’ choices are circumscribed by slavery’s legacies in Beloved, the characters can nonetheless choose how to live on the margin. In this vein, Charles Scruggs argues in “The Invisible City in Toni Morrison’s Beloved” that Morrison’s geopolitics aim to move African American domestic space out of the slave quarters—to move, in other words, African Americans from an oppressive margin to an appropriated margin.

What is true for 124 holds potential for individual characters. If Sethe, like 124, can return to the community, she will not suffer the same demise as Baby Suggs, who dies isolated from the black community (Beloved 179; 201). The repositioning of the house within the black community hints that Sethe will likewise repossess herself. In this space Sethe—like hooks—will
not “pass on” (*Beloved* 274–75) the “remembrance of the past, which includes recollections of broken tongues giving us ways to speak that decolonize our minds, our very beings” (hooks, *Yearning* 150). Indeed, the “broken tongues” in section 2 (210–217) of *Beloved* suggest that this decolonization process has already successfully begun. If Sethe chooses to embrace fully the margin, she will empower herself and her experiences will not be passed over or forgotten, even if 124 is sold: “She thus moves from the position of the ‘defined’ to that of the ‘definer’—to borrow School Teacher’s terms” (Rodriguez, “‘Where the Self’” 49; *Beloved* 190). Significantly, Sethe ends the novel in the store-room built by Baby Suggs. She is temporarily stored and resting when Paul D comes to take her off the shelf and help her back into the world. Rather than emphasize individual agency, Morrison concludes the novel by highlighting the need to accept help from others.

The house at 124 Bluestone, therefore, stands as a “race house,” structured by white and black actions that construct and maintain racist ideologies. The dwelling also represents a remodeled home. The house features the haunted structures of slavery and occupies a peripheral position in the white and black communities. The haunting unfixes the structure—materializing the negative and positive aspects of domestic instability. As Michael Hogan notes, “It is a site riddled by paradox: both white house and black house, safe house and slaughterhouse” (168). As a house located on the border between free states and slave states, between city and country, and as a dwelling that shifts between safe haven and haunted house, 124’s fluctuations into and out of the community contribute to and are part of its ambivalent design. The ambivalent design suggests the home’s ability to resist oppression but not to forget history. Denise Rodriguez holds similar optimism for *Beloved*’s productive, albeit ambivalent, conclusion: “The characters’ growing awareness of the historical factors that inform familial life leads to a reshaping of families and to the emergence of a new domestic narrative” (45).

The “new domestic narrative” includes 124’s contradictory architectural features and location that render it a strong but unstable structure. Like the table leg that Paul D mends, making the table stronger than before it was broken, 124’s structural fractures produced by the race house hold the potential to heal stronger than the original design (*Beloved* 64). In this light, Michael Hogan’s pessimistic assessment of 124 is perhaps too harsh, granting too much agency to the race house and not enough power to the remodeled home: “As a free-standing American house, it promises protection; as home to African-American slaves, the disenfranchised and dehumanized, it cannot possibly deliver” (174). The house at 124 Bluestone questions the status of the “free-standing American house,” its promised protection and isola-
tion from the community. Charles Scruggs offers a more optimistic reading of 124’s paradoxical features in relation to the female protagonists: “Morrison’s female characters often evince strong attachments to houses, even those that seem cursed, and instead of rejecting the house as an image of confinement or entrapment, as white women writers have often done, in her fiction Morrison shows a desire to redeem the house and to re-integrate it into the community” (99). The recycled relational space that Morrison creates “eventually defines home as communal . . . [and] bind[s] the domestic to the external world” (Rodriguez, “Where the Self” 49). The recycled narrative that redeems domesticity depends on Baby Suggs’s remodeling and on 124’s relationships with its local community.

**Paradise Refurbished**

Restoring (African) American Home and Community

The characters in *Paradise* also struggle to balance a life on the margin that redesigns the race house and gender house while attempting to maintain some connection to supportive communities. *Paradise* sketches this struggle from two community’s perspectives: from the standpoint of a patriarchal black community attempting to preserve its racial purity (as represented in the “8-rock” families who found Haven, Oklahoma, and later Ruby, Oklahoma) and from the standpoint of the renegade women who form a haphazard community at the Convent, located at Ruby’s outskirts and considered a “white’s house” by some of Ruby’s residents (*Paradise* 198). Where Baby Suggs remolds her home to produce a space so “black” that whites will be reluctant to enter, the 8-rock families attempt to construct an all-black town that will likewise discourage outsiders and protect its residents. In contrast, the Convent, as its name implies, becomes a space associated with women from various racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. As when communication breaks down between 124 and the black community in *Beloved*, violence also erupts when relations between the Convent and the black community disintegrate in *Paradise*. Magnifying Haven’s and Ruby’s gendered geopolitics, the Convent emphasizes how traditional, oppositional home constructions rely on violence.

Chronologically, *Paradise* takes up where *Beloved* leaves off, mapping the migration of rural southern blacks westward as Reconstruction ends and terrorism against African Americans in the South pushes blacks to seek homes along an increasingly distant margin of American life: the frontier. *Paradise*’s narrative present primarily takes place from the mid-1960s to 1976, the year
when the men raid the Convent and America celebrates its bicentennial.\textsuperscript{5} The 8-rock story told in \textit{Paradise} fictionalizes the Oklahoma version of the Exoduster migration, the first major migration north and west by ex-slaves.\textsuperscript{6} Scholars thus far have used \textit{Paradise}'s version of this migration and the subsequent establishment of the all-black towns Haven and Ruby to critique the American dream and nationalism. For many readers, \textit{Paradise} seems to be Morrison's version of the American jeremiad.\textsuperscript{7} An examination of the novel's engagement with local and national histories has provided rich terrain for scholars interested in \textit{Paradise}'s communities and sense of home.\textsuperscript{8} Viewing this narrative through a spatial lens provides additional insight into the novel's complex framing of the relationships between (African) American history, home, and community. In fact, an examination of the novel's spatial politics—especially important in this ambivalent, postmodern novel notorious for its refusal to reveal its roman à clef—reveals a key that unlocks the geopolitical dynamics of the 8-rock and Convent communities.\textsuperscript{9}

The information we learn about the creation of Haven and Ruby reveals that the 8-rock community's insistence on isolation and an oppositional construction of space contributes to Haven's failure and causes Ruby's violence. Given that black homeownership consistently registers well below the national average, a generous reading may interpret the fierceness with which the men defend Ruby against outsiders, especially against the Convent, as a response to the lack of access to housing—the violence is a specific domestication of the race house. In addition to drawing from the spatial politics of dispossession in the aftermath of Reconstruction and \textit{Plessy v. Ferguson}, Morrison's representations of domestic space in \textit{Paradise} may have contemporary foundations as well. The novel's present roughly covers a span of about twenty years, from the 1960s to July 4, 1976. While individual states may have had black homeownership levels that were above national averages, the only uniformity to these individual instances is that rural areas tended to have better percentages than metropolitan locations. Kansas and Iowa, for example, boasted black homeownership at or above 60 percent in 1950, but by 1990 both states' black ownership rates dropped dramatically to 43 percent and 39 percent, respectively (U.S. Census Bureau, “Historical Census”). As African Americans historically and currently experience lower homeownership rates and often inferior housing quality, these national averages emphasize the \textit{myth} of home and the \textit{reality} of the race house for African Americans during the latter half of the twentieth century. However, even given this historical and material “justification,” the men's actions against the Convent are not endorsed by \textit{Paradise}'s narrative.

The original title, \textit{War}, emphasizes the tactics employed by the 8-rock
men, especially the Morgan twins, to maintain their power and sovereignty. *War* also highlights the ideological conflicts between the patriarchal town of Ruby and the matriarchal Convent. Pallas, in fact, says that the Convent “felt permeated with a blessed malelessness, like a protected domain, free of hunters” (*Paradise* 177). The title *Paradise*, in turn, encompasses the search for (a lost) home, a search shared by the residents of Haven, Ruby, and the Convent. The narrative attempts to materialize or “domesticate” an elusive safe haven or home. Mapping the search for home and subsequent home-making practices highlights Morrison’s decisive endorsement of remodeled domesticity and relational space, neither of which promise an easy way to attain home.

**The Geopolitics of Oppositional Isolation**

*Founding a Haven in 8-Rock*

Scholars examining *Paradise* have not overlooked the patriarchal aspects of Haven and Ruby. Michael K. Johnson, for example, argues, “In *Paradise*, Morrison casts a critical eye at the desire to create a black patriarchy (even as a defense against white oppression) in the West” (247). Additionally, Therese E. Higgins frames Ruby as a representative patriarchy and the Convent as a matriarchy (131). Ellen G. Friedman describes the Convent as a “woman’s utopia” and Ruby as a “black utopia” (703). The novel fairly straightforwardly lays out the towns’ patriarchal control: we need only to review the towns’ primary landmarks to see the numerous ways in which the (religious) patriarchy functions within these towns. Patriarchal control at various geopolitical levels remains necessary in order to patrol the boundaries between men and women, “good” and “bad” women, and between insiders (8-rock families) and outsiders (non-8-rock families). Thus, 8-rock patriarchal control becomes synonymous with oppositional space, where territories must be clearly distinguished from each other. Patriarchal space, furthermore, constructs gendered hierarchies among its oppositional spaces. We can also see that patriarchal space often works in tandem with the race house, which similarly insists on hierarchal control and segregated space. Finally, the religious or spiritual geography of both Ruby and the Convent spreads across these patriarchal and matriarchal spaces. *Paradise* self-consciously deploys spiritual geographies in its interrogation of home.

Ruby’s layout, for instance, demonstrates extreme spatial partitioning that is suggestive of the various ways in which the town attempts to police its inhabitants. The town’s streets, for example, follow a strict grid. The main
street, Central Avenue, has four east side streets, named after the Gospels. The streets’ names announce that the town is organized within a Christian structure. As Ruby grew, west side streets were added: “Although these newer streets were continuations of those on the east—situated right across from them—they acquired secondary names. So St. John Street on the east become [sic] Cross John on the west. St. Luke became Cross Luke. The sanity of this pleased most everybody, Deek especially” (Paradise 114). The street names underscore the importance of distinguishing between original lines (or streets) and the tributaries that come along later. The naming practices also emphasize the town’s closed, incestuous nature. No new names are used: “St. Luke became Cross Luke” (114). Additionally, they emphasize paternal, not maternal, lines; there are no streets named after women. Endemic of the founders’ monitoring of pure bloodlines, the genealogy of the town’s streets reveals the town’s patriarchal religious foundations.

However, the town’s “blood rules” do not stay as neatly organized and distinct as the names of the streets might suggest (Paradise 196). As a result, some spaces must be left unnamed or unmarked. As the town’s unofficial genealogist and historian, Patricia Best Cato, points out, women rarely have recorded last names; presumably, the town did not deem the women’s last names worthy to be recorded or remembered. These “lost” names facilitate informal appropriations: “A young widow might take over a single man’s house. A widower might ask a friend or a distant relative if he could take over a young girl who had no prospects” (Paradise 196). A space or person not claimed through a last name, after all, can become someone else’s territory. At best confused, at worst incestuous, the resulting bloodlines create unusual familial relationships that ultimately defy legible mapping. Patricia explains, “Billy’s mother was wife to her own great-uncle. Or another way: my husband’s father, August Cato, is also his grandmother’s (Bitty Cato Blackhorse’s) uncle and therefore Billy’s great-granduncle as well” (196). Patricia’s genealogy “should delineate branching paths along which ‘bloodlines’ travel through time and through bodies. But the ‘lines’ Pat discovers circle back, cross one another; and some branches are left out, where light-skinned people have come in” (McKee 203).

In the face of this confusion, the 8-rock men nevertheless aim to arrange the women just as they have arranged the streets. The fact that the men preside over town business—including the conflict between KD and Arnette when Arnette’s father says, “I’ll arrange her mind” (Paradise 61)—provides additional evidence of the town’s patriarchal and religious organization. Billie Delia, in fact, observes that the conflict between KD and Arnette was really about male control of women and children: “The real battle was not
about infant life or a bride’s reputation but about disobedience, which meant, of course, the stallions were fighting about who controlled the mares and their foals” (150). Significantly, both “stallions”—Senior Pulliam and Reverend Misner—have scripture on their sides (150). At stake, as Billie Delia explains, is whether “history” or the “future” will win out: “Senior Pulliam had scripture and history on his side. Misner had scripture and the future on his. Now, she supposed, he was making the world wait until it understood his position” (Paradise 150).

Thus, named and unnamed territories hold deep significance in Paradise. While Ruby’s name pays tribute to Deacon and Steward Morgan’s sister who died shortly after the “new Haven” was founded, Ruby also signifies a patriarchal idolization of women that ultimately confines more than liberates women: “The men of Ruby devote themselves to the ideal of the black woman as a racially pure figure who must be protected both from white men and from other (impure) African American men. The necessity of protecting the ‘sleepless woman’ justifies the establishment of homosocial bonds” (Johnson 64). When with “God at their side, the men take aim. For Ruby,” they are not only defending the town; they are also defending the virtue of idealized black Christian women—a virtue that they believe the Convent women threaten (Paradise 18).

The 8-rock community’s appropriation of the Oven also testifies to the group’s insistence on patriarchal control, on the one hand, and to the power of community, on the other. Michael Johnson also notes, “The Oven itself is a female symbol taken over and controlled by men” (Johnson 62). When transferred into the public sphere, “the oven” (traditionally a feminine symbol of hearth and home) becomes “the Oven” (a part of the men’s domain). The following passage describes the Oven’s glory days in the first town, Haven, where it once provided the community with literal and metaphoric nourishment because of its ability to keep black women out of white kitchens and its ability to foster community connections:

In 1910 there were two churches in Haven and the All-Citizens Bank, four rooms in the schoolhouse, five stores selling dry goods, feed and foodstuffs—but the traffic to and from the Oven was greater than to all of those. No family needed more than a simple cookstove as long as the Oven was alive, and it always was. Even in 1934 when everything else about the town was dying; when it was clear as daylight that talk of electricity would remain just talk and when gas lines and sewers were Tulsa marvels, the Oven stayed alive. (15)
The Oven outlasts numerous changes in the community. To Haven’s original founding fathers, the “thinking that made a community ‘kitchen’ so agreeable” appealed to their pride: “They were proud that none of their women had ever worked in a white-man’s kitchen or nursed a white child. Although field labor was harder and carried no status, they believed the rape of women who worked in white kitchens was if not a certainty a distinct possibility—neither of which they could bear to contemplate” (Paradise 99). So, the Oven keeps the 8-rock wives from having to work in white kitchens—freeing them for other labors. Keeping black women out of the kitchen was a means to honor and respect their wives and to protect their way of life. The narrative reverses expectations and historical privileges: fieldwork is better than housework and dark skin is better than light.

Gradually, however, the Oven’s use declines. In Ruby, “A utility became a shrine” (Paradise 103). The men carry and rebuild the Oven, brick by brick, when they move: “The women nodded when the men took the Oven apart, packed, moved and reassembled it. But privately they resented the truck space given over to it—rather than a few more sacks of seed, rather than shoats or even a child’s crib. Resented also the hours spent putting it back together—hours that could have been spent getting the privy door on sooner” (103). The women’s resentment clarifies that the Oven no longer functions to keep the women out of the kitchen. Instead, the Oven has become a status symbol for the men. Furthermore, “What was needed back in Haven’s early days had never been needed in Ruby” (Paradise 103). Rather than function as a community gathering place and communal kitchen, the Oven in Ruby becomes a contested symbol detached from material worth or use.

The women’s flower gardens and the resulting “garden battles” also emphasize a shift from practical “use value” to ornamental, “symbolic value”: “The garden battles—won, lost, still at bay—were mostly over. They had raged for ten years, having begun suddenly in 1963, when there was time” (89). Changes in domestic technology help bring about this shift from use value to symbolic value: “The humming, throbbing and softly purring gave the women time” to propagate flower gardens (89). As a result, “the dirt yards, carefully swept and sprinkled in Haven, became lawns in Ruby until, finally, front yards were given over completely to flowers for no good reason except there was time in which to do it. . . . The women kept on with their vegetable gardens in back, but little by little its produce became like the flowers—driven by desire, not necessity” (89–90). The “husbands complained of neglect and the disappointingly small harvest of radishes, or the too short rows of collards, beets” (89). Like the gardens in The Poisonwood Bible and...
Gardens in the Dunes, these beautiful but unfruitful gardens characterize Ruby and its problems. The emphasis turns to a “frenetic land grab” based on control, where suddenly doors need to be locked against something: “Dovey was sure theirs was the only locked door in Ruby. What was he [her husband] afraid of?” (90). The fight over the Oven’s meaning clarifies the fear at the heart of the men’s control.

Just as they fight over how to resolve the dispute between KD and Arnette, the men fight over the Oven’s meaning. Is the motto it bears “Beware” or “Be the Furrow of His Brow”? The disputes reflect a desire to control meaning and space—not so much to find the Oven’s “true meaning,” which as Patricia Best points out, was designed “to have multiple meanings: to appear stern, urging obedience to God, but slyly not identifying the understood proper noun or specifying what the Furrow might cause to happen or to whom” (195). Rather than embrace multiple, flexible meanings, the men insist that there can only be one.

The stories describing the towns’ establishment also reverberate with patriarchal cosmogony. Several scholars have noted that Haven’s mythologized founding echoes America’s Puritan establishment as a “city upon a hill.” Likewise, the town’s condemnations of the Convent women parallel the Salem witch trials. We recall the founding fathers of the American Revolution when we learn that Haven’s founders are known as the “Old Fathers” and Ruby’s founders are called the “New Fathers” (Paradise 99; 194). Haven’s and Ruby’s founding as cities upon a hill, led and governed by a pioneering group of men, establish the towns as patriotic, nationalist, and patriarchal communities. Haven’s and Ruby’s oppositional spatial politics, which can be appraised by comparing the towns’ histories and locations, underscore their patriarchal roots and functions. At the same time, Paradise refuses to construct a patriarchal house of straw ready to be blown away by the matriarchal wolves residing in the Convent. The all-black towns of Ruby and Haven present compelling homes, albeit inherently flawed ones, by (re)establishing African Americans as actors within an idealized American mythos—not just as victims of an American nightmare.

The towns’ spatial politics solidify patriarchal rule while simultaneously correcting the marginality of the African American experience related in the conventional telling of the westward expansion narrative. While clear parallels exist between the specific founding of all-black towns and the white American patriarchal mythos upon which the country was founded and expanded, African American contributions to the “broader” American foundation have been largely excluded or lost. The dominant narratives of westward expansion set white American cowboys against American Indians.
Paradise recovers a lost history of African American pioneers while simultaneously critiquing the frontier’s patriarchal foundations. Peter Widdowson similarly locates Ruby at the crossroads of the recognition of African American experience and of the critique of (white) patriarchal power. Because of the ways that the 8-rock men “replicate the conservative values at the heart of white America,” Widdowson sees Ruby as “not just an isolated black small town—‘deafened by its own history’—but America at large by the end of its second century of independence” (326). Widdowson explains,

What the town of Ruby seems to represent, then, is a distillation of all the abuses and failures of the American democratic experiment in respect of its black population: it is at once the extreme of an enforced siege or ghetto mentality and the extreme of a cherished racial separatism. In this respect, Ruby is both a chilling indictment of white America (the failures of the Declaration, Reconstruction, twentieth-century reforms), and a celebration of black resilience, independence and honour (a triumph of the Exoduster spirit). (324)

The construction of the all-black towns of Haven and Ruby critiques African Americans’ denied access to the American dream while simultaneously replicating conservative white values. As Audre Lorde might have said, the 8-rock men use the “master’s tools” (the very same used to construct the race and gender houses) to build their communities. Policing its women and their children, the 8-rock community’s reversal of the one-drop rule provides a case in point. Reverend Misner points out the danger of the “blood rule”: “Separating us, isolating us—that’s always been their weapon. Isolation kills generations. It has no future” (210; my emphasis). Examining the margin’s geopolitical functions in this narrative clarify further how the towns’ geopolitics work at the crossroads of recognition and critique.

Significantly, Haven’s and Ruby’s founding fathers choose the margin—the extreme western frontier—as the location for their communities. The historical justification for Haven’s marginal location begins with the Exoduster experience. Like many Exodusters traveling to Kansas and Oklahoma in the late nineteenth century, the 8-rock families came from the lower Mississippi Valley, specifically Zechariah Morgan and Juvenal Du Pres from Louisiana and Drum Blackhorse from Mississippi (Paradise 193). Nell Irving Painter describes the motivation for the Exoduster migration as dependent on two factors: economics (especially “access to land and the terms of tenant farming and sharecropping”) and terrorism (namely “anti-black terrorism”) (ix). Paradise makes several pointed allusions about black migration to Oklahoma
as a result of these factors (13–14; 193–94). The story also lists the prominent all-black towns in Kansas and Oklahoma that Haven's founding fathers planned to visit during their trip: “Boley, Langston City, Rentiesville, Taft, Clearview, Mound Bayou, Nicodemus” (108). Like the historical Exodusters, the fictional 8-rock families “got to the place described in advertisements carefully folded into their shoes or creased into the brims of their hats” (Paradise 194). However, the streets of these all-black towns were not paved with gold. Paradise, in fact, includes a quotation from the Langston City Herald: “Come Prepared or Not At All” (Paradise 13).

The 8-rock legend emphasizes the fact that some all-black towns in Oklahoma, Langston City in particular, “actively discouraged poor blacks from coming to Langston and to Oklahoma” (Hamilton 104). Kenneth Marvin Hamilton explains that one of Langston City’s promoters, Edward P. McCabe, “realized from his prior experience in Nicodemus [an all-black town in Kansas] that only blacks with capital could stimulate the growth of Langston, which would in turn provide the promoters with increased profits” (104). In fact, “When the paper [the Herald] learned that three hundred destitute blacks, en route to the Cheyenne and Arapaho areas of the Oklahoma Territory, had arrived in Fort Smith, Arkansas, it attempted to deter them from entering Oklahoma, reporting ‘common labor is not in demand, the supply is already too great’” (Hamilton 104). Paradise fictionalizes the historical discouragement into the “Disallowing.” The 8-rock families are “shooed away” by the all-black towns they visited (Paradise 194). As a result, they form their own town rather than join an existing one.

The intense focus on property and ownership emphasizes how economics structures the all-black towns in Paradise. Furthermore, “In the aftermath of the Civil War, property ownership was indissolubly linked with freedom in the aspiration of former slaves. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, property ownership persisted among the chief values of blacks in the rural South” (Wiese 84). The 8-rock families clearly illustrate this value. Yet instead of emphasizing class concerns, the 8-rock mythology frames the rejection by the all-black towns as primarily a result of the 8-rock families’ dark skin. Like Beloved, Paradise emphasizes the oppositional space constructed by the “race house.”

In Paradise, the separation is not between black and white but between light- and dark-skinned blacks. The 8-rock families “saw a new separation: light-skinned against black. Oh, they knew there was a difference in the minds of whites, but it had not struck them before that it was of consequence, serious consequence, to Negroes themselves. . . . The sign of racial purity they had taken for granted had become a stain” (Paradise 194). Emerging
from slavery with dark skin initially generated pride in the 8-rock families; however, the Disallowing presents a “new” racial hierarchy to the 8-rock families who apparently were used to being discriminated against by every other group but not by their fellow African Americans: “Turned away by rich Choctaw and poor whites, chased by yard dogs, jeered at by camp prostitutes and their children, they were nevertheless unprepared for the aggressive discouragement they received from Negro towns already being built” (Paradise 13). The sting of this rejection fosters a consolidation of 8-rock blood, where the unwritten rule was against marrying outside of the founding families (that is, “light-skinned blacks”). Haven’s founding represents an absolute circling of the wagons to protect and secure a home for its rejected residents.

Paradise provides historical reasons for Haven’s founding, but the novel does not present an irrefutable account of the characters’ motivations. The 8-rock families embody both the rhetoric of American exceptionalism and the reality of American empire. One of the more subtle ways that Paradise registers its critique of Haven’s patriarchal, imperial foundation emerges in how the town’s land was secured. The spatial ramifications of the Disallowing push Haven to “unassigned lands.” The novel hints that the land upon which the 8-rock families build Haven is not free. Dispossessed or otherwise forced from the South, the 8-rock Exodusters seem to have few qualms about squatting on Native American lands. During the nineteenth century, the Oklahoma Territory was largely reserved for displaced Native Americans, specifically those members of the so-called Five Civilized Tribes (the Cherokees, Choctaws, Chickasaws, Creeks, and Seminoles). The 8-rock families travel through Arapaho territory, see members of the Choctaw, and barter with the Creek (Paradise 14). Haven was built on land that belonged to the Creek Nation and “which once upon a time a witty government called ‘unassigned land’” (Paradise 6). Paradise recognizes that Haven’s founding required stealing land, an act that centralizes the town’s marginal position. The Convent’s status as a school for Indian girls also marks the American Indian’s displacement and dispossession within Oklahoma.

The 8-rock community’s isolation—historically “justified” and fiercely defended—ultimately has destructive consequences. One of the most condemning features of the community’s isolation is that it is not productive, especially after its move to Ruby. Literally, the residents have trouble reproducing. As I discussed previously, the lack of interaction with outside communities results in incestuous intermarriages across generations, an ultimate sign of both Haven’s and Ruby’s dangerous isolation. Incestuous communities often fail to organize against white supremacy. As seen in the discussion about Beloved, successfully resisting from the margin requires community
support. However, the 8-rock families do not resist: “Just as the original way-farers never sought another colored townsite after being cold-shouldered at the first, this generation joined no organization, fought no civil battle. They consolidated the 8-rock blood and, haughty as ever, moved farther west” (Paradise 194). Ruby’s insistence on “pure blood” cements rather than dissolves the race house’s foundation. Instead of seeking justice, the families seek to be left alone. Their actions contribute to rather than deconstruct the race house. Living on the margin without community ties results in an incestuous isolation without resistance against the internal and external forces that structure the race house.

The community’s continued isolation and reliance on an oppositional construction of space contributes to Haven’s failure. The second “Disallowing” occurred after World War II (Paradise 194). Soldiers returning to Haven note the emasculation and economic stagnation of black men—“the missing testicles of other colored soldiers; . . . medals being torn off by gangs of rednecks and Sons of the Confederacy”—and decide to move farther west (Paradise 194). Once again, antiblack terrorism and economic need instigate migration to a more distant margin, a place fortified against the outside world. As seen in Beloved, venturing beyond the confines of the town invites the terrorism of “Out There, where your children were sport, your women quarry, and where your very person could be annulled; where congregations carried arms to church and ropes coiled in every saddle. Out There where every cluster of whitemen looked like a posse, being alone was being dead” (Paradise 16). So great is the fear of the outside that Sloane Morgan believes her sons are safer fighting in war than living in “any city in the United States” (Paradise 101): “Safer than anywhere in Oklahoma outside Ruby” (Paradise 100).

Where other all-black towns “merged with white towns” or “shriveled into tracery,” Ruby emerges and persists in defiant opposition (5–6). However, the same mistakes that contribute to Haven’s failure are replicated in Ruby: “The men of Ruby identify so strongly with the ideology and actions of the Old Fathers that they try to replicate rather than imitate their ancestors’ accomplishments, establishing Ruby on the model of Haven, painstakingly rebuilding the Oven” (Johnson 62). In other words, the men attempt to rebuild home—symbolized here in the rebuilt community Oven—without renovating or seeking to improve otherwise on the original structure, or even assure that the new town and its services account for the present needs of its inhabitants. Their actions suggest that a resistance to change, an inability to negotiate new borders, contributes to the race house. McKee suggests that the ways in which the residents rewrite history and religious myth—such as in the Christmas play that mixes the Christian story of Jesus’s birth with the
Disallowing—“poses no challenge to ‘claims of cultural supremacy and historical priority,’ as [Homi] Bhabha suggests, except to make those claims on behalf of different people” (207). The 8-rock families, therefore, reproduce rather than recycle home, still focusing on exclusion in their construction of a secure home.

Ruby, therefore, can only delay the need to move again. However, with no more frontiers at their disposal, the men see no other choice but to stand their ground and to defend violently their way of life. Backed against their chosen margin, the 8-rock men not surprisingly emerge with guns blazing in an attempt to reestablish their town. Ruby’s extreme isolation, its lack of frontier space, and its oppositional, patriarchal construction of space conspire to produce the town’s destructive violence. Drawing from Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Rob Davidson understands Ruby’s isolation as key to understanding the subsequent “crisis” situations that elicit action by the Old and New Fathers: “the perpetual ‘state of emergency’ is one of their chief tactics for retaining power, as it justifies—in their minds, at least—practically any course of action” (359). In this light, Davidson argues, the 8-rock men “execute the Convent women not for moral reasons but as a show of strength” (368). Just as I described in the previous chapter where Rachel Price in *The Poisonwood Bible* epitomizes the worst in American foreign policy, so too do the 8-rock men exhibit the “culture of fear” that can drive government policy.

Ruby’s oppositional space requires constant surveillance and, when “necessary,” a violent defense of the boundaries against threatening others or outsiders. A closer look at how Ruby’s residents and the Convent define home helps unpack the conflict and the cause of the violence against the Convent by Ruby’s 8-rock men.

**The Geopolitics of a “True Home”**

Defining Home in *Paradise*

How the residents create home provides a useful lens for analyzing Haven, Ruby, and the Convent. As the analysis above suggests, the founding of Haven and Ruby as safe spaces against “Out There” challenges us to revise traditional definitions of home (*Paradise* 16). As in *Beloved*, the cost of these safe spaces is too great. One seemingly alternative vision of home emerges when two of Ruby’s resident outsiders—the Baptist minister Richard Misner and the unofficial historian Patricia Best Cato—disagree about what constitutes home. Richard Misner is an outsider because he moves to Ruby to serve the Baptist congregation; thus, he does not have an 8-rock ancestry. Additionally,
he is associated with stirring up the young people and encouraging them to participate in a world larger than the confines of Ruby. The light-skinned Patricia also occupies a position outside the tight 8-rock bloodline because her light-skinned mother was, according to Steward Morgan, “the dung we leaving behind” (*Paradise* 201).

The narrative sets up these insiders/outsiders as uniquely positioned to reflect on the meaning of home in Ruby. During her conversation with the Reverend Misner, Patricia observes, “Home is not a little thing” (213). Misner responds, “I’m not saying it is. But can’t you even imagine what it must feel like to have a true home?” (213). A “true home,” according to Misner, is an “earthly home,” not heaven (213). His definition can be understood as emblematic of *Paradise’s* examination of the traditional definition of home and Morrison’s project to domesticate the “elusive race-free paradise” (“Home” 8).

Misner’s definition of the “true home” reveals “very careful and effective reversals which do not erase the positive desire for unity, for Oneness, but destabilize and undercut it” (Martin and Mohanty 306). Misner’s definition contains clear contrasts to the ways in which the 8-rocks have constructed home in Haven and Ruby. The “true home,” he says, is

not some fortress you bought and built up and have to keep everybody locked in or out. A real home. Not some place you went to and invaded and slaughtered people to get. Not some place you claimed, snatched because you got the guns. Not some place you stole from the people living there, but your own home, where if you go back past your great-great-grandparents, past theirs, and theirs, past the whole of Western history, past the beginning of organized knowledge, past pyramids and poison bows, on back to when rain was new, before plants forgot they could sing and birds thought they were fish, back when God said Good! Good!—there, right there where you know your own people were born and lived and died. (*Paradise* 213)

Home, in contrast to Haven and Ruby, is neither stolen nor a fortress. Misner’s true home is not a place “snatched because you got the guns” (another line crafted to distinguish the true home from Ruby’s patriarchal and imperial homemaking practices). This definition of a true home shares some of the features of a relational definition of home—specifically, the claim that home is not a “fortress” that keeps “everybody locked in or out.”

Rejecting isolationism, Misner finds Afrocentrism attractive and feels a deep connection to Africa. In fact, he claims that “Africa is our home” (210). In contrast, Pat says that she is “really not interested” in Africa: “I just don’t
believe in some stupid devotion to a foreign country” (210). Rob Davidson understands Pat’s rejection of Misner’s true home as a reversion to “isolationism” (366). However, one can never truly return and live in Misner’s true African home, which is no more “true” or “real” than the “pure blood” that the 8-rock families isolate themselves to maintain. Pat’s skepticism does not necessarily realign her with 8-rock patriarchal ideology.

Reverend Misner’s true home also reproduces several key features of the traditional definition of the ideal American home, sharing traits, if not the letter of the law, with the 8-rock ideology. Misner and the 8-rock community agree that they cannot steal a true home; doing so would only taint it. Rather, a true home is inherited from ancestors whose racial and cultural claims are indisputable. Given these similarities between 8-rock ideology and Misner’s definition of the true home, I disagree with Philip Page’s suggestion that Misner’s home is a fully viable alternative to the 8-rock configuration. Page argues that Misner’s portrayal of the true home presents an alternative to the “materialistic, acquisitive pursuit of a worldly home” (647). Page contends, “Through their new prophets—Richard Misner and Consolata—they [the novel’s characters] begin to imagine a spiritual home that transcends their efforts to establish material homes” (646). While I agree that spiritual geography plays an important role in the novel’s construction of neodomesticity, Page fails to take into consideration Africa’s participation in colonialism. Additionally, Misner’s true home appears to be paradise before Adam and Eve were banished from the garden. Unlike the opening and closing of Gardens in the Dunes, Paradise does not suggest that we can return to this earthly paradise. While this true home in the mind may open a productive imaginative space, it does not adequately deal with or recycle the historical and material realities encountered by (African) Americans constructing home in the United States.

Pride in one’s connections to African cultures can ground a character spiritually and psychologically; however, locating one’s true home in a single place may demand excluding other origins and refusing to acknowledge hybrid identities. A focus on pure origins, as the 8-rock story also emphasizes, fails to consider adequately the community’s present needs and realities. Home, as bell hooks writes, is frequently “no longer just one place. It is locations” (Yearning 148). In contrast to Page’s support of Reverend Misner’s definition, Peter Widdowson argues that “the novel does not side with either Misner’s dream of ‘a true home’ to be rediscovered at some pre-historical time, ‘past the whole of Western history’ [213], or Pat’s ‘real’ history of slavery and its aftermath” (328). “But what it does seem to confirm,” Widdowson suggests, “is that the purity, exclusivity, intolerance and isolation of Ruby is
a kind of living death” (328). I would add that the specific ways Morrison associates 8-rock ideology with the true home of Afrocentrism emphasizes a critique of any definition of home based on a purity of cultural origins. Thus, the Convent women’s “impure,” unknown, or uncertain origins, in addition to their renegade position as a collection of women without men, clearly threaten Ruby’s patriarchal foundations and test the viability of a home not based on pure origins. More so than Misner’s ideological and spiritually authentic African home, the Convent materially and spiritually experiments with a viable alternative to the traditional, detached American home of pure origins represented and critiqued in Haven, Ruby, and Misner’s true home.

A look at the Convent’s history illustrates how Morrison continues to destabilize and recycle traditional notions about home in *Paradise*. Originally, the Convent was not a convent; rather, it was the mansion of a wealthy embezzler (*Paradise* 3). The mansion’s phallic shape highlights its overall masculine design: “Shaped like a live cartridge, it curved to a deadly point at the north end” (71). Filled with ornate, lascivious ornamentation and strategically placed windows and doors, the mansion was designed as a fortress against the original owner’s enemies and as a playground for his guests (*Paradise* 71). Comparable to the 8-rock families, the embezzler fears the outside world: “Fright, not triumph, spoke in every foot of the embezzler’s mansion” (71). Like Sethe and 124 in *Beloved*, the design and location of the embezzler’s mansion does not protect him. The embezzler apparently has no community invested in protecting him. During his first party, the embezzler is captured (71). Capitalizing on the embezzler’s misfortune, nuns purchase the mansion and attempt to remove, or at least rub out, the unusual decor, including the “nipple-tipped doorknobs” and penis-shaped faucets (72). Playing with the virgin-whore binary, Morrison constructs a dwelling that shifts from a house of ill repute to a house of God.

When viewed in tandem with Haven’s and Ruby’s histories and Misner’s definition of a true home, the Convent’s history thus far illustrates the shared foundations of the race house, the gender house, and the idealized American home. Violence and separation are traditionally fundamental to these constructs. The race house and the gender house police boundaries through racism and sexism, respectively. As Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty remind us, “the desire for home” frequently demands “repressions and violence that make home, harmony, sameness imaginable, and that enforce it” (306). Although gated communities today more clearly operate along class lines, such spaces crystallize the traditionally shared foundation between house and home—emphasizing the home’s exclusionary qualities.

The Convent’s school further emphasizes the conventional American
home’s homogenizing goals. Misnamed “the Convent” by locals, Christ the King School for Native Girls aims to convert its Arapaho scholars; however, the nuns are only able to renovate partially the building’s and the girls’ most superficial aspects (Paradise 224). The nuns’ partially successful refurbishing efforts attempt to eliminate excess: “The ornate bathroom fixtures, which sickened the nuns, were replaced with good plain spigots, but the pricey tubs and sinks, which could not be inexpensively removed, remain coolly corrupt” (4). Like Geraldine’s fanatical cleaning in The Bluest Eye, the house’s new owners fail to sanitize the Convent or to rid the girls of their “funk”: the nuns “could not wipe out what [they] ruled out-of-place” (McKee 210).

“Funk” in Morrison’s fiction, as Susan Willis points out, “is really nothing more than the intrusion of the past in the present” (41). Furthermore, “As often happens in Morrison’s writing, sexuality converges with history and functions as a register for the experience of change, i.e., historical transition” (Willis 34). These sexual and historical aspects of funk frighten the men who attack the Convent after the school closes. When the school initially closes, Connie, Sister Roberta, and Mother Mary Magna spend the “winter waiting, then not waiting, for some alternative to retirement or a ‘home’” (241). After Sister Roberta goes to a nursing home, Connie takes care of Mother and sells produce and baked goods to the community. At this point, Connie opens the Convent to various women who need a place to stay, and funk erupts in ways that are intolerable to Ruby’s residents.

The 8-rock men fear the Convent women’s funk partially because of the 8-rock women’s “loss of spontaneity and sensuality” (Willis 35). That is, the Convent women represent a return of a past and largely lost sensuality and fertility. The men liken the Convent women’s funky housekeeping to “slack” and are disgusted by the bathroom that foregrounds the women’s fertility with a “Modess box” and “a bucket of soiled things” (Paradise 5; 9). As in The Bluest Eye, rather than siding with the men’s critiques, Morrison writes “against the privatized world of suburban house and nuclear family,” where women have assimilated to a (white) bourgeois culture that demands order and fights against funk (Willis 34).

The Ruby women also criticize the Convent women for “dancing nasty” and wearing inappropriate clothing at KD and Arnette’s wedding reception (158). The impression of overt sexuality also condemns Billie Delia (203). Moreover, Anna’s unstraightened hair embodies a dangerous, disordered funk for many of Ruby’s residents: “The subject [her unstraightened hair] summoned more passion, invited more opinions, solicited more anger than that prostitute Menus brought home from Virginia” (Paradise 119). Thus, funk includes a variety of behaviors and appearances deemed uncivilized or
beyond the bounds of conventional suburban order. Women as well as men participate in the policing of funk.

This embrace of and revulsion to funk helps illustrate that oppositional space may cloak itself under a variety of ideologies. The spatial practices of patrolling and controlling boundaries trump more superficial homemaking principles. For example, the embezzler (through his careful construction of the mansion as a fortress) and the nuns (through their efforts to erase sexuality) patrol and attempt to manipulate the structure of the Convent to fit their individual purposes and ideas about home. Their similar spatial tactics make them more alike than their opposing lifestyles and houses might suggest. Patricia McKee makes a similar argument about the homes in *Sula*, noting that Eva and Helene Wright are “primarily occupied, then, with controlling, or even patrolling, boundaries in order to control the definition of their own selves” (“Spacing” 11). That is, despite the fact that Eva’s house is messy and Helene’s house is neat, the “difference between the two is less than such oppositions suggest, since the primary concern of each woman seems to be her capacity to control and manipulate boundaries” (McKee, “Spacing” 11).

However, do all spaces have to be defined according to these negative binary oppositions (what Massey terms “negative counterpositions”)? The Convent women add a third, funky term to the mix, exploding the binary. For example, after the school closes, the Convent becomes a safe house for wayward and wounded women from Ruby and abroad. Connie counters oppositional spatial logic when she says, “Scary things not always outside. Most scary things is inside” (39). Kidnapped from South America in 1925, Connie (née Consolata) is perhaps the school’s most conventionally successful student—at least until 1954 “when she met the living man” and had an affair with the married Deacon Morgan (*Paradise* 223; 225). Connie’s unique homemaking practices ultimately recycle spiritual power, funk, and strong mothering, thereby remodeling the ideal home.

The home Connie builds not only heals its inhabitants but also allows the women to come and go freely. The Convent women do not refurbish the home, but they do eventually add paintings to the basement floor, an action that heals the house’s residents: “the Convent women were no longer haunted” (266). Not being haunted by their pasts, however, does not mean that they have forgotten them. Like Sethe, the Convent women must come to terms with their pasts. Additionally, while they may leave at any time, the women realize “that they could not leave the one place they were free to leave” (262). This statement begins to define home in a relational sense—as a place where you can and perhaps do leave but do not want to abandon. It is also a place open to others—a place you may claim as your own but
not a place that is secured in order to exclude outsiders. For a short period, the Convent provides a safe residence and retreat for a variety of women. Even the fierce disagreements between Mavis Albright and Gigi (née Grace) settle into the Convent’s structure. But Ruby’s residents storm the Convent, reminding us of the building’s historical and continued failure to protect its inhabitants.

One way of understanding the attack on the Convent is to focus on *Paradise*’s critique of the 8-rock patriarchal order: “The women in the Convent become the scapegoats for the town’s crisis of identity” (Johnson 66). Placing the men’s violence in the context of other frontier narratives, Michael Johnson writes,

> While such works as Roosevelt’s *The Winning of the West* and Cooper’s *The Deerslayer* justify acts of violence by linking them to the protection of womanhood, Morrison reveals that male violence, which the frontier narrative so often celebrates, is more likely to be employed against (rather than in protection of) women. Through the attack on the Convent, Morrison makes visible the contradiction usually concealed in the trope of transformative violence—the irony of trying to achieve a civilized goal (protecting womanhood) through savage (violent) actions. (68)

The attack on the Convent reveals the violence embedded in oppositional patriarchal spatial constructions. The rhetoric of safe space within an oppositional construction requires aggressive reinforcement of the boundaries between protected and unprotected space.

Shifting our focus to the Convent and relational space, the attack reinforces the idea that home extends beyond a single physical structure and depends on community relationships. The Convent represents relational space’s potential and problems. The Convent confirms that the identity of a place “derives, in large part, precisely from the specificity of its interactions with ‘the outside’” (Massey 169). When residents fear the outside, problems often arise. Oppositional space, instead of continually negotiating the terrain between home and the outside, responds to these fears by either constructing higher and higher walls of protection or by turning to violence. Reading heaven as oppositional space, Geoffrey Bent claims that “One of paradise’s shortcomings as a concept is that it’s too schematic, a place that’s all of this and none of that. Morrison’s new novel falls prey to this same exclusivity” (148). However, Bent’s schematic characterization of *Paradise* offers yet another example of what feminist geographers such as Doreen Massey critique; Bent’s reading relies on and reproduces negative counterpositions—
strict boundaries and either/or constructions. Actually, by exaggerating the supposed differences between home and the race house, the novel highlights the failure of a schematic understanding of domesticity and emphasizes the importance of space’s relational nature.

Critics of relational space may argue that it does not adequately account for history. That is, by emphasizing current relationships, relational space does not account for past wrongs. Following this logic, the 8-rock men could evoke their own violent history of dispossession as a way of justifying their preemptive strike against the Convent. As Massey points out, however, a relational understanding of home “does not mean that the past is irrelevant to the identity of place. It simply means that there is no internally produced, essential past” (171). In this sense, the Convent embodies “the ever-shifting geography of social relations present and past” (Massey 172). Reading the concept of “paradise” or “home” as a continual negotiation between inside and outside, between past and present, reveals the crux of the novel’s spatial politics. The 8-rock community’s resistant, oppositional relationship with the outside and the Convent’s relational, open associations with Ruby illustrate that relational space may not eliminate violence, but oppositional space will produce violence every time. Even Billie Delia constructs an oppositional geopolitics as she critiques it, hoping the Convent women are “out there” and will return to seek justice against the “backward noplace ruled by men whose power to control was out of control and who had the nerve to say who could live and who not and where” (308). Does the Convent women’s history give them any more right to “take aim”?

Thus despite all her attention to the home in her novels, Morrison may agree—at least in one respect—with Daphne Spain who suggests that “modifying the interior of houses may be the least important form of spatial intervention because less time is spent in the home now than in the past” (236). Morrison’s reworking of home likewise cannot be completely bound by its physical barriers or structure. Paradise rewrites the conventional domestic narrative that frequently places its female protagonists at thresholds only to recontain them in the home. There must be open doors or windows: “Whether through a door needing to be opened or a beckoning window already raised, what would happen if you entered? What would be on the other side? What on earth would it be? What on earth?” (Paradise 305). The Convent’s invitation to embrace neodomesticity beckons. These routes establish connections with the outside. Home is locations. In fact, the women, who may be ghosts at the end of Paradise, leave the Convent and occupy various types of spaces.

Significantly, Morrison’s turn to a spiritual geography at Paradise’s conclusion, which is also seen in Barbara Kingsolver’s conclusion to The Poison-
wood Bible, sets up a key difference between many feminine and masculine domestic fictions. Feminine domestic fiction's frequent embrace of spiritual geography emphasizes nonmaterial, relational spatial relations. “Spiritual reality,” according to Kathryn Hume, “invites readers to reconsider the validity and human efficacy of the strictly phenomenal explanation” (113). Largely absent in masculine domestic fiction, this spiritual geography, or “spiritual reality,” recycles the domestic novel's traditional religious or spiritual basis. However, rather than reproduce an absolute moral authority, the neodomestic novel's spiritual geography invites a deep comfort with—a faith in—in instability: “What on earth would it be?” (Paradise 305). This same faith in instability takes Denver beyond her yard. Additionally, as Salazar points out, spiritual geographies are embedded in historical context, they negotiate individual and community relationships, and they affirm non-Western paradigms (400).

Instability unflaggingly recycles and renovates conventional domesticity in Paradise. For example, the Convent women embrace their marginality, accepting “dispersal and fragmentation as a part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting” (hooks, Yearning 148). Unlike the (ghost) woman in Beloved who needs to be exorcised from 124, these (ghost) women reconcile their pasts without haunting. The Convent opens passage to radical constructions of home and identity—what Patricia McKee describes as “radical geographical imaginaries,” which depend on “multiple occupations of space” (“Geographies” 197; 198). Such radical constructions focus on the home's relational nature and the prospects produced by renovation and instability.

By deemphasizing the home's and the women's physical borders (the women, as ghosts, are literally disembodied), the novel suggests a means of demolishing the race house and the gender house. Remodeling the traditional notions of home offers liberatory potential. If we are to understand spatial politics and ultimately try to change them, we must first understand, as Massey argues, that “a proportion of the social interrelations will be wider than and go beyond the area being referred to in any particular context as a place” (169). Haven, Ruby, and the Convent, therefore, cannot isolate themselves without destroying themselves or one another; negative counterpositions demand such violence because they require characters to constantly define the self against the Other. Placing these spatial relationships in a specific historical context, Johnson writes, “Although sympathetic with the desire to establish a space protected from white violence, Morrison is critical of excesses committed in the name of black solidarity” (60). While the novel
allows the Convent and the towns’ home spaces to heal these wounded and rejected people, it does not ultimately allow the characters’ desire for unity to segregate them from the larger community. Once again, some balance between these contradictory drives must be forged for a productive instability to exist and flourish.

Relational spaces, especially in conjunction with structural renovations that are targeted at oppressive race and gender structures, hold the potential to produce fruitful negotiations among places and communities, creating relationships beneficial to multiple parties. Mavis and Gigi’s ability to live together despite hating each other provides a hopeful (and certainly not idealized) picture of relational space’s potential. Benign skirmishes may occur but negotiations are not allowed to escalate to dangerous levels. By donning fatigues, the women seem to be preparing for battle at the novel’s conclusion; however, their attire may be camouflage of a different sort. Rather than suggesting that they are preparing to fight the men of Ruby, the women’s camouflage may allow them to move undetected between spaces and to choose when to reveal themselves to their loved ones. What we, as readers, desire for the women ultimately tells us more about how close we are to achieving an “elusive race-free paradise” than if Morrison wrote a decisive ending about the women’s fates.

Conclusions
Open Doors and Windows

Recognized as a historical battleground by Vlach, hooks, and Morrison, the home appropriately figures as a troubled space for the protagonists in these novels. In Beloved the haunted house engages the spatial history of slavery as a means to exorcise (but not forget) this specter. Haven, Ruby, and the Convent in Paradise outline the dangers of exclusion and separatism, which have conventionally been understood as necessary components of home and, at times, as viable solutions to racism and sexism. Carolyn M. Jones, writing about Beloved and Song of Solomon, observes that the home can be a place where “irreconcilable opposites” will destroy each other “to make home homogenous, or they can be complementary forces that yield, caress, express, and enrich our creative possibilities” (46). Jones goes on to say, “Even when it works, however, home is not paradise” (46). By appraising the novels’ dwellings and their gendered, racial, social, and historical relations, I have tried to highlight the ways in which the structures’ physical and spiritual (relational) frameworks and interior designs reveal authentic cultural constructions of race and gender as well as exhibit “imagined” or alternative constructions of
(African American) identity and home. Understanding Morrison’s domestic fiction in light of its interrelated theoretical, historical, and material worlds illuminates what the “manageable, doable, modern human activity” looks like—a domestication that composes one of the fundamental projects of her fiction and of neodomestic fiction more broadly (“Home” 4).

IN PREVIOUS CHAPTERS I discussed the Africanist presence necessary to the foundation of the American home and American domestic literature. Where critics of Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* question Africa’s role within her novel—suggesting that it presents local color, not serious history or cultural context—Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw points out in her work on critical race and legal studies that the African American woman more often than not fails to function as a “universal” model in American culture. This certainly rings true for the formation of domestic literature, which tends to privilege white women’s experiences as “universal.” Crenshaw’s groundbreaking article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” looks at the ways in which “Black women are theoretically erased” because of the failure of the legal and social systems to view the intersections of race and gender (23). Countering this line of critique, this chapter demonstrates that Morrison’s novels are both culturally specific and universally applicable for the study of American domestic fiction and American literature more generally. Grounded in the specifics of African American culture and history, Toni Morrison’s domestic fiction defines the range and breadth of neodomesticity’s varied forms. Morrison’s fiction helps us “to grasp the importance of Black women’s intersectional experiences, . . . [and to recognize the] unique compoundedness of their situation and the centrality of their experiences to the larger classes of women and Blacks” (Crenshaw 29).

Therefore, my first three chapters’ juxtapositions of Silko’s, Kingsolver’s, and Morrison’s neodomestic fictions demonstrate that the novels endorse neither “either/or” nor “white/black” constructions—rather, these chapters together demonstrate neodomesticity’s “both/and” relational nexus. The following chapters continue this mapping of neodomesticity’s relational nexus, focusing more extensively on masculine domesticity. These succeeding chapters also emphasize that the neodomestic novel locates itself translocally—encompassing both locally grounded histories and sociopolitical relations beyond the individual at home. The neodomestic novel locates interrelated local and global spheres and, when successfully crafted, brings this story home.