Richard Ford’s Pulitzer Prize–winning *Independence Day* (1995) explores homemaking from a man’s perspective. Like the domestic fiction that I have discussed in previous chapters, Ford’s suburban novel takes homemaking as its topic and situates home as a central feature of the novel’s geography. Similar to Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*, Ford’s *Independence Day* uses the Fourth of July as a motif to explore American domesticity and “the sacrifices people are willing to make to protect themselves and their property” (Jurca 171). Like Morrison’s novel, various domestic geographies and dispossessions compose this exploration—though in *Independence Day*, dispossession primarily results from divorce. As a real estate agent, furthermore, Frank Bascombe earns a living through the transfer of property rather than suffering from its exchange. Such differences between the novels highlight important gender and racial disparities. Furthermore, Ford’s centering of a male protagonist—men are conventionally considered to be outside of domestic fiction—and the novel’s call to defeat home’s power heighten attention to domestic fiction’s status as a gendered genre and prompt us to ask what practices define it as such. After all—even given its focus on the home—what does it mean to label *Independence Day* “domestic fiction”?
The question is partly political. Male-authored and male-focused novels like *Independence Day* challenge conventional approaches to domestic fiction, approaches that often assume that domestic fiction is predominantly, if not exclusively, written by and about women. Clearly, men write domestic fiction, too. By rereading and reconceiving domestic fiction’s literary history, we can account for the ways in which masculinity and men’s fiction have always been a part of domestic culture and literature. The chapter begins by outlining and accounting for domestic masculinity’s distinct literary history, particularly through the genre of suburban fiction. As in the previous chapters, a spatial reading allows for comparisons across home-centered fictions that are not often considered in relation to one another. This chapter and the next address the politics of the creation and maintenance of gendered fictions about the home, mapping more precisely the degree to which American authors write gendered domestic fictions and promote distinctly gendered ideologies and spaces.

Building on Judith Butler’s notion of “gender performance,” I examine the construction of gendered genres by identifying the key tropes that a text “performs” to produce a gendered identity. The performative features reveal the complexly gendered structures undergirding domestic fiction; the same performative features allow neodomestic fiction to interrogate such structures. By focusing on domestic fiction’s gendered tropes rather than on the author’s gender, I reject an essentialist view of biology, though I do not deny that the protagonist’s gender and the author’s gender do shape domesticity and the construction of domestic fiction (although biographical criticism is not the focus of my analysis). Sorting texts (rather than authors) according to gendered categories allows an analysis of the gendered roles assigned to both authors and texts, however socially or biologically determined, within American literature. As novels themselves are rhetorical and fictional constructions, they especially lend themselves to a socially constructed analysis of gender. Their fictional worlds provide insight into how “real” gender matters, particularly as it shapes and is constructed by social formations.

Mapping domestic fiction’s gendered contours emphasizes that many gendered domestic roles—and the gendering of genres—have not changed dramatically through the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Female authors generally write a feminine form of domestic fiction (focused on female protagonists and feminized housekeeping activities), and male authors likewise tend to create a masculine form (focused predominately on male protagonists and masculine domestic duties). My own largely gendered chapter divisions reflect these tendencies. In part the correlation between genre and gender reflects men and women’s longstanding labor and spatial
Like our gendered genres, domestic roles remain traditionally divided.

Today, for example, most of the women who work outside the home still start a second shift when they return home, functioning as the family’s primary caregiver and domestic laborer. According to data collected in 2005 by the University of Michigan Institute for Social Research, “women, of all ages with no children, on average do 10 hours of housework a week before marriage and 17 hours of housework after marriage. Men of all ages with no children, on the other hand, do eight hours before marriage and seven hours afterward” (Mixon par. 6). While women do less housework today (seventeen hours per week in 2005 compared to twenty-six hours per week in 1976), men’s weekly averages remain lower than women’s, even as they have increased since the mid-1970s (six hours in 1976 compared to thirteen hours in 2005) (Mixon par. 13). As Kris Frieswick points outs, the discrepancies “made sense, sort of, back when women’s occupations were limited to variations on caring for other people, usually the ones living at home with them. But it makes no sense today” (30). Today, in fact, “women, who compose 49 percent of the American workforce, are now outearning their husbands in 32.6 percent of American married couples, up from 23.7 percent in 1987” (Frieswick 30). As women contribute more financially, however, their husbands’ housework contributions have decreased (Frieswick 30). Same-sex couples, by comparison, “tended to share the burdens [related to housework, sex, and money] more equally” (Parker-Pope F1). Such trends among same-sex couples emphasize gender’s inequitable and socially constructed power dynamics more than its firm biological roots. These gendered divisions and revisions appear in and shape our understanding of contemporary fiction, too.

This chapter’s epigraph hints at the nature of literary domesticity’s gender divide. Frank Bascombe’s proposal that the home’s power is “worth defeating” endorses a more masculinist, oppositional framing in regard to the home (Ford 106). Unlike Morrison’s Paradise, Kingsolver’s The Poisonwood Bible, or Silko’s Gardens in the Dunes, Ford’s Independence Day seeks to demystify the home’s spiritual geography rather than reinscribe or promote it. Frank Bascombe’s remarks, as a result, do not endorse the same type of historically grounded spatial tactics. Thus, while the overarching theme of “productive instability” is the hallmark of neodomestic fiction, gendered differences among neodomestic fictions regarding homemaking practices and views of the home’s spiritual geography mark residual gendered practices that survive both the recycling process and the “third space” produced by neodomestic fictions. These gendered differences, moreover, hold significance for neodo-
mestic fiction’s politics. While “masculine” and “feminine” neodomestic novels both provide viable alternatives to domestic stability, my reading in this and the next chapter demonstrates why novels that nourish spiritual geographies more clearly reflect feminist and antiracist politics. Tracing domestic masculinity’s emergence in early American fiction provides a historical and cultural context for contemporary domesticity’s gendered qualities.

**Suburban Fiction**

**American Domestic Masculinity’s Literary History**

Domestic masculinity is a construct that the conventional gender dichotomy considers already hybrid: if domesticity is implicitly and explicitly gendered feminine, then something or someone that is both masculine and domestic is, by definition, a gendered mix. Traditionally, domestic masculinity has been categorized separately from domestic fiction—especially in distinct and arguably more “universal” literary categories such as the romance or the social novel. In the twentieth century, suburban fiction became a primary genre for domestic masculinity. Often focused on a male protagonist and written by men (and in these ways its definition is similar to that of its feminine counterpart, domestic fiction), suburban literature includes fictions focused on suburban space and suburban domesticity. The home as haven and trap appears in these masculine domestic fictions, too. Such shared features begin to suggest that suburban fiction, such as Ford’s *Independence Day*, “requires us to revise our current understanding of the home as a gendered [feminine] fixture in American literature and literary criticism” (Jurca 9). By repositioning several representative suburban texts as domestic fictions, I aim to flesh out the suggestion that, like the rhetoric of separate spheres, divisions among men and women who write about the home have historically been overstated, oversimplified, or simply undertheorized. Analyzing domestic masculinity’s literary history continues the reversionary work advanced by scholars such as Catherine Jurca and Lora Romero and clarifies neodomestic fiction’s recycling efforts.

Domestic masculinity has a long American literary history. In its earliest literary forms, the home frequently symbolizes an oppressive feminine space that threatens masculinity and male freedom. For instance, in “Rip Van Winkle” (1819), generally considered the first American short story, Rip escapes oppressive domesticity by fleeing his home and falling asleep for several years. When he wakes up and conveniently finds his wife dead,
Rip enjoys a life free of domestic duties: “Having nothing to do at home, and being arrived at that happy age when a man can be idle with impunity, he took his place once more on the bench at the inn-door, and was reverenced as one of the patriarchs of the village, and a chronicle of the old times ‘before the war’” (Irving 47). When Rip awakes, not only does he find America free of England’s shackles, but he also discovers perfect domestic tranquility without a wife to nag him.

Rip’s literary legacy of the home as a trap to be escaped, rebelled against, or dominated appears throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, where male characters flee the home and “light out for new territory.” Judith Fetterley, referring to Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” argues, “Irving suggests that the quintessential American story will be a tall tale circulated among men for the purpose of establishing dominance” (891). Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Tom Sawyer (1876) and The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1885) follow in this tradition that Nina Baym aptly describes as “melodramas of beset manhood” (130). These foundational masculine antidomestic dramas imagine women as “entrappers and domesticators” and present the domestic sphere as an impediment to male development and comfort (Baym 133). Peggy Cooper Davis and Carol Gilligan, building on the work of Nancy F. Cott, clarify that such “flights from relationship are grounded in what we call the logic of patriarchy” (58). Patriarchal logic discourages relational and egalitarian interactions in favor of competition, dominance, and hierarchy.

Rip’s “beset manhood” becomes a key trope for American domestic masculinity. Significantly, not only does this seminal melodrama position a male character’s flight from domesticity, but it also “can be taken as representative of the [male] author’s literary experience, his struggle for integrity and livelihood against flagrantly bad best-sellers written by women” (Baym 130). According to this logic, Rip’s “beset manhood” is not dissimilar to the male author’s struggle against domesticity and domestic fiction or women’s writing in particular. The next chapter takes up this theme in greater detail, looking at how Jonathan Franzen’s remarks about Oprah’s Book Club relate to this long history of anxiety about feminine writing. In this section focused on the literary origins and history of domestic masculinity, I wish to build on this foundational trope to reread and revise domestic fiction’s formation as an exclusively feminine genre. Tracing suburban fiction’s emergence as a masculine genre reveals narratives of men’s flights from and to the home.

Women are also central to suburban fiction; however, suburban literature traditionally comes out of a male-authored and male-focused tradition.³ Steven M. Gelber suggests in “Do-It-Yourself: Constructing, Repairing and
Maintaining Domestic Masculinity” that masculinity’s strong relationship to suburban (domestic) space results from “the creation of a male sphere inside the house” that emerged with the rise of suburbia (73; emphasis in original). Gelber explains, “the do-it-yourself movement . . . brought men back into the home by turning their houses into hobbies” (104). The suburban home, in other words, became a domestic space where one could securely assert or perform masculinity. While today women are increasingly performing these same do-it-yourself tasks, the rise of suburbia in the first half of the twentieth century carved out a space for domestic masculinity. Suburban fiction reflects this masculine focus.

Suburban fiction is perhaps best known for narrating (white) men’s alienation. Catherine Jurca suggests that the twentieth century’s suburban “domestically oriented male identity” is a remarkably modern paradox that compels writers to “treat paradise . . . as though it were purgatory” (168). Jurca identifies the contemporary suburban novel’s central paradox as a rejection of the home that grants the (white) characters their privilege: “Literary representations of the suburb propose that white middle-class identity is not grounded in safe havens or homes but in its alienation from the very environments, artifacts, and institutions that have generally been regarded as central to its affect and identity” (7). Jurca identifies this paradox as a dominant trope that has changed little since the 1920s and probably will not change in the twenty-first century (171). However, modern suburban literature’s hallmark masculine irony and domestic alienation connects to earlier American literary traditions, linking suburban literature to both the nineteenth century’s antidomestic male and domestic female literary traditions.

Twentieth-century white male suburban “sentimental dispossession” (Jurca 7) harkens back to nineteenth-century narratives of “beset manhood” and to turn-of-the-century novels written primarily by white women that also posit the home as a trap. For instance, contemporary white male suburban fiction often narrates a masculine version of the conventional (feminine) domestic trope of the home as a trap. The “veneer stripping” and “exposé” (Jurca 161) aspects of the (suburban) home’s constrictive qualities connect the twentieth-century male suburban tradition to white women’s own literary exposé of the home. Where the masculine tradition may emphasize alienation (especially in the modern period), the feminine tradition frequently focuses on isolation. Such distinctions emerge from distinct cultural milieus represented by William H. Whyte’s *The Organization Man* (1956) and the alienation from labor it represents for (primarily white) men and masculinity; whereas Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) emphasizes (primarily white) women’s isolation produced by a career in homemaking. Additionally,
white men frequently enjoy greater mobility to escape these traps; although, as Jurca argues, in the twentieth century men’s alienation “from the suburban home in the popular novel expresses the desire for domestic familiarity” rather than a desire to escape such “familiarity” (11; emphasis in original). Significantly, race and class considerations also shape the alienation-isolation dichotomy. As Ann Petry’s novel *The Street* (1946) reminds us, the alienation-isolation described is arguably most applicable to the experiences of middle-class whites. Her own “desire for domestic familiarity” and inability to achieve it as well as the novel’s invocation of “home as the measure of the characters’ loss” speak to distinct gendered, raced, and classed experiences from her white male and female contemporaries (Jurca 11).

While the alienation from home remains a dominant theme within (white) masculine domestic fiction, the home as a haven appears in masculine domestic fiction as well. William Dean Howells’s *Suburban Sketches* (1872) is particularly interesting because of the groundwork it lays for suburban literature and neodomestic themes, its historical placement at the beginning of the development of suburban space in America, and its literary presentation of Charlesbridge, a suburb of Boston, as both “a kind of Paradise” and a suburban trap (Howells 12). Like the nineteenth-century domestic advice books and female-authored and female-focused domestic fiction that I discussed in previous chapters, *Suburban Sketches* clearly advances a domestic politics of stability. It also simultaneously celebrates American mobility. In *Suburban Sketches* the domestic haven-trap dilemma appears in conjunction with the promotion of the single-family dwelling and the development of suburbia.

*Suburban Sketches* marks the emergence and development of suburban space in the nineteenth century. It describes an ideal “picturesque enclave” that “architects and landscape architects began to design . . . in the 1850s” (Hayden, *Building Suburbia* 45). *Suburban Sketches* describes its setting as a haven, or an ideal combination of city and country: “We were living in the country with the conveniences and luxuries of the city about us. The house was almost new and in perfect repair; and, better than all, the kitchen had as yet given no signs of unrest in those volcanic agencies which are constantly at work there, and which, with sudden explosion, make Herculaneums and Pompeii of so many smiling households” (Howells 12–13). The home’s newer condition sets chaotic remodeling projects—especially the project of remodeling the kitchen—at bay. *Suburban Sketches* promotes American suburban space as a secure domestic sphere—a haven from the city without the complete isolation of the country.

Dolores Hayden’s description of the early suburban “borderland” or “edge” in *Building Suburbia* echoes Howells’s description of the Charles-
bridge home. Hayden writes, “The edge was neither rural nor urban. It formed a distinctive gateway zone between city and country” (22). Howells writes, “The neighborhood was in all things a frontier between city and country” (13). Suburban space’s role as a “gateway zone” ostensibly offers a utopian balance between these two worlds. However, living on this chosen borderland also frequently proves isolating for many residents. Additionally, the narrator valorizes his new home for its lack of history rather than its potential for longevity as a home. The narrator has not yet worn out or outgrown this home—although his initial description suggests this inevitable fate. Thus, we can begin to see the trap embedded in the suburban “frontier” haven.

Regarding the suburban home’s isolation, *Suburban Sketches* relates the trouble that the family has in finding a housekeeper because most of the Irish “gairls doesn’t like [sic] to live so far away from the city” (Howells 16). While this isolation from the city makes finding household help more difficult, this problem also curiously centers the sketch’s otherwise marginalized domestic figures. For example, *Suburban Sketches’s* first sketch, “Mrs. Johnson,” describes the narrator’s new black housemaid and cook. The difficulty of finding a housekeeper leads the family into the black quarter of the city in search of African American help, because black women are presumably less picky about their employers than are Irish women. This domestic problem opens a space for the narrator to ruminate on racial difference. He distinguishes Mrs. Johnson, for example, from Anglo-Saxon New Englanders: “It was only her barbaric laughter and her lawless eye that betrayed how slightly her New England birth and breeding covered her ancestral traits, and bridged the gulf of a thousand years of civilization that lay between her race and ours” (Howells 20–21). The contrasts that the narrator draws between his own household—which clearly depends on this “outside,” “foreign” labor—and the “sympathetic” portraits of the Irish and black servants control access to suburbia’s “gateway zone” or domestic “frontier.”

Thus, the sketch suggestively begins with the narrator’s oblique indication that such “volcanic agencies” are foreign traits that are also necessary for the household to function smoothly (Howells 13). They hold the power to quell or produce kitchen chaos. *Suburban Sketches* begins by incorporating and distinguishing these “foreign” elements from the “native” residents of the domestic frontier. Beginning with the “Mrs. Johnson” sketch emphasizes suburbia’s literal and metaphoric negative space—its central but potentially unsettling Africanist presence upon which the American home depends. The narrator, for example, states, “We were conscious of something warmer in this old soul than in ourselves, and something wilder, and we chose to
Think it the tropic and the untracked forest” (Howells 29). This portrait of a not fully domesticated Mrs. Johnson presents her “barbaric” qualities as local color; her features amuse and sometimes frustrate but never truly pose a danger to the household. For example, her son’s constant presence around the house constitutes an annoyance but never a real threat for the narrator and his wife: “We could formulate no very tenable objection to all this, and yet the presence of Thucydides in our kitchen unaccountably oppressed our imaginations” (Howells 32). As Valerie Sweeney Prince points out, “White Americans read the presence of African American domestic workers as a sign of their own domestic security. Nearly a hundred years after the collapse of the slave economy, home for white people continued to be stabilized at the expense of black laborers” (114, n. 2). Additionally, the fact that help was hard to find heightened the experience of living on the suburban “frontier”—a frontier that was hardly beyond (white) civilization’s reach.

Later masculine domestic and suburban fiction—such as John Updike’s second Rabbit novel, *Rabbit Redux* (1971)—complicates the Africanist presence within white suburbia. While the character Skeeter also provides, at best, “something wilder” or local color to Rabbit’s story, he also functions more clearly as a disruptive, dodgy character over which the white male protagonist has no control. Unlike Mrs. Johnson, Skeeter is not domesticated; he is dangerous. He makes the neighbors so nervous they make it clear to Rabbit that Skeeter needs to leave (Updike, *Rabbit Redux* 249–54). When he does not, the house mysteriously burns down, sparing Skeeter, Rabbit, and Rabbit’s son, but killing Jill. The community’s fear of Skeeter, however, should not suggest that Skeeter merely presents or represents physical violence in the novel. Key scenes in the novel involve Skeeter educating Rabbit’s temporarily reconfigured family—Rabbit, Rabbit’s son, Skeeter, and the runaway Jill—during living room teach-ins. What is particularly interesting about such scenes is that they bring the civil rights movement and the sexual revolution smack-dab into the middle of Rabbit’s suburban living room. One especially intense and bizarre scene involves Rabbit reading aloud, at Skeeter’s request, from *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass.* By contrast, Howell’s *Suburban Sketches* positions the “external” workers who make the suburban home possible in clearly domesticated and “foreign” (not fully American) roles.

The narrator in *Suburban Sketches*, in fact, initially revels in the domestic tranquility and reliability that the suburban space produces: “Breakfast, dinner, and tea came up with illusive regularity, and were all the most perfect of their kind; and we laughed and feasted in our vain security” (13). Here the narrator describes the conventional model home of security and comfort. *Suburban Sketches* goes on to describe a sundry list of homemaking activities...
and suburban personalities and activities. As the narrator prepares to move from Charlesbridge in the final sketch, he discusses the labor involved, the effect the moving process has on domestic possessions and life, the preparation of the final meal in the old house, and the first meal in the new home. During this transition a less idealistic view of suburbia, which is more readily apparent in modern suburban fiction (such as Updike's Rabbit novels), begins to emerge, disrupting the family’s “vain security” (Howells 13).

In the final chapter, the home’s security—or the narrator’s reliance on this security—gives way to a more masculine mobility—or “lighting out for new territory.” This early sketch about the flight from home develops the concept of American domestic mobility. The final sketch about the move, “Flitting,” begins with the narrator’s negotiation between a “beset manhood” that requires the rejection of home—particularly the maternal home—and a desire for home and security. The expression of these conflicting desires in the late nineteenth century simultaneously advances an imperial absorption of new territories and a solidification of homeland security amidst change and cultural diversity. It is also a precursor to what Jurca calls “sentimental dispossession,” the sense of homelessness expressed in modern suburban fiction.

The following passage from “Flitting” succinctly outlines the narrator’s negotiation between domestic security and mobility:

I would not willingly repose upon the friendship of a man whose local attachments are weak. I should not demand of my intimate that he have a yearning for the homes of his ancestors, or even the scenes of his own boyhood; that is not in American nature; on the contrary, he is but a poor creature who does not hate the village where he was born; yet a sentiment for the place where one has lived two or three years, the hotel where one has spent a week, the sleeping car in which one had ridden from Albany to Buffalo,—so much I should think it well to exact from my friend in proof of that sensibility and constancy without which true friendship does not exist. (Howells 241)

The narrator expresses a paradox: the rejection of the boyhood, ancestral home—which I take to be feminine/maternal, in the sense that the boyhood home is ruled by the mother’s influence—and the embrace of the adult masculine/patriarchal home, a symbol of Christian virtue, stability, and prosperity. Notably, public residences like a hotel or sleeping car help define this transient, masculine sense of home.

The narrator reconciles his alienation from and desire for home by describing a characteristically American domestic mobility: the ability to
make home anywhere. This story individualizes America’s foundational mythology of discovery, settlement, and independence. Later in the final sketch, the narrator explicitly connects domestic mobility with being American: “If the reader is of a moving family,—and so he is as he is an American—he can recall the zest he found during childhood in the moving” (Howells 250–51). Although the narrator in Suburban Sketches only recommends moving to members of the “leisure” class, he suggests that mobility and a succession of homes embody American domesticity and identity (Howells 245). Literally progressive, this sense of mobile domesticity fits nicely with the American dream of upward mobility. Domestic mobility in this incarnation involves reconciling, on the one hand, the desire for change and freedom, and on the other hand, the desire for stability and security. By implication, the ability to find or make home in a variety of locations—from a home of a few years to a sleeping car or a hotel—becomes the required domestic skill for all Americans. As we have seen in the previous chapters, neodomestic fiction that focuses on women—such as Barbara Kingsolver’s The Poisonwood Bible, Leslie Marmon Silko’s Gardens in the Dunes, and Toni Morrison’s Paradise—recycles this American drive and narrative. These neodomestic fictions point to the edges where the two gendered sides of the domestic coin meet.

Thus, we can begin to see in Suburban Sketches the blueprint of twentieth-century suburban and neodomestic fiction. Howells’s text anticipates later, more sardonic, suburban novels, and ends on a somber but assuring note. After four years of living in Charlesbridge, the narrator begins to see suburbia’s flaws: “Many of the vacant lots abutting upon Benicia and the intersecting streets flourished up, during the four years we knew it, into fresh-painted wooden houses, and the time came to be when one might have looked in vain for the abandoned hoop-skirts which used to decorate the desirable buildings-sites. The lessening pasturage also reduced the herds which formerly fed in the vicinity” (Howells 242). Developed suburbia no longer provides the ideal mix of city and country. As suburbia develops, nature disappears. Additionally, the suburb frequently lacks the city’s comforts and services. In the first sketch the narrator notes that while he “paid a heavy tax” and “never looked upon Charlesbridge as in any way undesirable for residence,” his street lacks many conveniences: “Our street was unlighted. Our street was not drained nor graded; no municipal cart ever came to carry away our ashes; there was not a water-butt within half a mile to save us from fire, nor more than the one thousandth part of a policeman to protect us from theft” (16). A more oblique critique of the lack of municipal services appears in the final sketch. Howells describes how the sidewalks, poorly
constructed and not maintained, quickly return to a “Nature” of the wrong sort (Howells 242). This lack of services and planning was a common problem in nineteenth- and twentieth-century suburban developments (Hayden, *Building Suburbia* 115; 128; 136–37).

While Howells’s sketches are instructive for their early portrait of white, middle-class suburban space and domestic masculinity, they do not narrate the full extent of suburbia’s diversity. By the latter half of the twentieth century, a more diverse presentation of suburban spaces and experiences emerged. For example, John Edgar Wideman’s Homewood trilogy, which includes *Damballah* (1981), *Hiding Place* (1981), and *Sent for You Yesterday* (1983), depicts a frequently understudied location: the African American suburb. As Andrew Wiese explains, “The truth is . . . historians have done a better job excluding African Americans from the suburbs than even white suburbanites. Scholarly neglect notwithstanding, African Americans lived in and moved to suburbs throughout the twentieth century, and black communities served as a social and spatial basis for expanded suburbanization over time” (5). Stereotypically, the term “suburban” evokes Protestant whiteness; however, as productive as this stereotype can be in regard to noting exclusionary development practices, it ignores suburbia’s historical, present, and literary cultural diversity. Wiese, a historian of black suburbia, writes, “By the end of the [twentieth] century, suburbia, once a symbol of white supremacy and exclusion, had become a fundamental setting for African American life” (10). Wiese’s observations hold true for other racial and ethnic minorities.

Dolores Hayden similarly points out in *Building Suburbia* that “some affluent suburban communities remain almost entirely white and Protestant, but there are also Irish-American suburbs, African-American suburbs, Polish-American suburbs, and Chinese-American suburbs, as well as older streetcar suburbs like Boyle Heights in Los Angeles, a place that has welcomed successive waves of new immigrants from Mexico, Russia, and Japan” (13). Hayden also notes suburbia’s long history as a home for a variety of socioeconomic groups:

Although the history of the suburbs includes countless examples of exclusion implemented through developers’ deed restrictions, bankers’ red-lining, realtors’ steering, government lending policies, and other discriminatory practices, not all nineteenth-century [or twentieth-century] suburban residential areas were white, Protestant, and elite. From about 1870 on, many working-class and lower-middle-class families were attracted to the periphery of the city, where land was cheap and houses might be constructed with sweat equity. (*Building Suburbia* 12)
Although not generally considered suburban literature, Wideman’s Homewood trilogy, which takes place in the Homewood neighborhood outside of Pittsburgh, has clear suburban roots, particularly in the sweat equity connected with domestic masculinity.\(^\text{12}\) Significantly, the Homewood trilogy memorializes home, especially one’s ancestral home. For example, when John French in *Sent for You Yesterday* tries to explain why his troublemaking friend Albert Wilkes returns to Homewood, where he surely will be murdered for sleeping with a white woman, he says, “The man needs to come home” (84). The sentiment packed into this sentence emphasizes that men’s identities are as deeply rooted in home as are women’s. Additionally, when Mother Bess burns down her house in *Hiding Place*, she leaves her home or hiding place—a cross between a haven and a trap—to enter the world (158). The Homewood trilogy explores both women’s and men’s investments in home.

This abbreviated literary and spatial history of suburban fiction and domestic masculinity opens the discussion for how distinctly gendered characteristics produce related but unique domestic genres and politics. Literary history demonstrates that domestic masculinity presents the home as a haven and a trap; however, domestic mobility keeps the narratives from becoming overtly or problematically feminine. Looking across the spectrum of domestic fictions reveals distinct landmarks that signal a novel’s gendered identity.

**Domesticity’s Gendered Landmarks**

To analyze the domestic novel’s gender politics more thoroughly, this section outlines three gendered facets that consistently appear in (neo)domestic fiction and that play key roles in determining a novel’s gendered identity: (1) the presentation of gendered domestic space, (2) the main characters’ domestic labor, and (3) the novel’s understanding of the home’s spiritual geography. Examining these characteristics helps identify how a novel “performs” its gender. Neodomestic fiction often blurs these gendered boundaries and may include both genders within the narrative for contrast or for merging: neodomestic fiction may carry a strong gender association or continually play with such conventions. Outlining the American home’s gendered spatial contexts enriches our understanding of this so-called separate sphere and its connection to raced, classed, and sexualized space.
Gendered Space
The Den, the Parlor, and the Remodeled Suburb

Gender plays a key role in the home’s social and economic organization. As married women for the most part could not legally own property in most states until the mid-nineteenth century, early domestic narratives featuring women understandably focus less on ownership and property relations. Rather, they focus on achieving marriage and maintaining the family in order to acquire and keep a physical house. Women’s home management roles contribute to the house’s status as a private–public feminine space: the home traditionally reflects a woman’s private–public housekeeper role. For men the home conventionally functions as private property, symbolizing their ability to provide for and protect their families. Because of the home’s general association with femininity, men often carve out distinctly masculine spaces within the domestic sphere. The den and later the home office, garage, and workshop epitomize such masculine domestic spaces.

In the nineteenth century, according to Milette Shamir, the den functioned as the male’s private domestic retreat and the parlor provided a public–private domain for women. We see such gendered spatial contours in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The House of Seven Gables* (1851) where the den is an important setting. For example, key male deaths in the novel take place there. The study also houses a lost property deed. In this novel and for masculine domesticity generally, private property and the den are “sacrosanct [for] the romantic individual, demarcating the boundary between what he chose to hide and what he chose to display, between his private self and his public persona” (Shamir 446). In the twentieth century, gendered domestic space remains, but the den’s and the parlor’s significance and layouts undergo remodeling. For example, the lawyer Henry Rios in Michael Nava’s mystery *Rag and Bone* (2001) designs his home office for specific effects consistent with conventional masculinity:

Unlike the rest of my house, furnished, as John said, with mismatched pieces bought on sale, this room was formal and deliberate. The walls were forest green; the bookshelves, the file cabinets and the long table I used as my desk were mahogany. On the wall above the black leather sofa was the usual collection of degrees and admissions to various courts, including the United States Supreme Court. My tall desk chair was of the same black
leather. Since I never met clients at my house, the businesslike furnishings of the room were strictly for my own benefit; their conventional severity put me into work mode even if I stumbled in wearing a bathrobe and slippers. (Nava 79)

While designed for Henry’s private use, his office also structures his personal relationships. His lover Josh “had hated this room and told me he never entered it without expecting to be cross-examined” (79). Henry’s niece experiences a similar sensation. The furnishings, therefore, successfully embody legal authority (read “masculine authority”). The dark wood, leather, and certificates symbolize stereotypical masculine authority and space. Such spaces offer male characters a retreat and a position of power within an otherwise typically feminine domestic domain—even when no women live in the home, as in Henry Rio’s case.

In contrast to the den, the parlor offers little, if any, private space. As a result, women rarely experience the home as a private space. The young protagonist Ellen in The Wide, Wide World provides a case in point. Ellen does not have privacy within the home: she has no control over her mail (Warner 146; 488–93) or over Nancy Vawse, who invades her room and privacy while Ellen is ill (Warner 207–12). As a poor orphan, she has no home, so she seeks her aptly named Aunt Fortune for a home. Aunt Fortune literally embodies Ellen’s initial means to gain access to “fortune” or domestic property in the form of a house. Ellen negotiates family relations as she grows up; she does not seek formal employment or other means of obtaining money for subsistence. Ellen, moreover, never owns land; her material property consists of carefully selected possessions, such as her Bible, a writing desk, and articles of clothing.14 The novel clearly indicates that Ellen’s most precious “property” is the state of her soul and her search for “that home where parting cannot be” (Warner 64). Without a retreat, Ellen’s “private” morality is open to public scrutiny: “The virtues now attributed to the ‘valiant’ woman—self-sacrifice, the ability to maintain intimacy, and social responsibility—are precisely those that are shown to endanger privacy” (Shamir 435).

The bedroom of a middle- or upper-class girl or woman provided some privacy in the nineteenth century; it was a space where she could literally and figuratively loosen the corset strings. Unlike the den, women could not fortify this space against intrusions by other family members or servants. In The House of Seven Gables, Colonel Pyncheon retreats to his study, leaving orders that he is not to be disturbed (Hawthorne 32–34). His servants dare not disturb him: “My master’s orders were exceeding strict; and, as your worship knows, he permits of no discretion in the obedience of those who owe
him service” (Hawthorne 33). Ellen, by contrast, has little—if any—control over access to her bedroom or private affairs.

In the twentieth century, architectural changes in home design and the middle-class (white) woman's relationship to the public sphere and to formal (paid) employment dramatically influenced women's relationship to domestic property and privacy. In one sense, (white, middle-class) women's relationship to domestic privacy began to resemble men's more closely. Baym explains this shift in Women's Fiction: “The liberal women who began their writing careers after the Civil War found the redemptive possibilities of enlightened domesticity to be no longer credible. . . . Home now became a retreat, a restraint and a constraint, it had not appeared to be earlier; to define it as woman's sphere was now unambiguously to invite her to absent herself permanently from the world's affairs” (50). Women seemingly gained privacy at the expense of connections to the world. White women writers, such as Elizabeth Phelps and Edith Wharton, began to characterize the home as a trap—like their male counterparts—or they idealized the home as a retreat from the public sphere.

The contemporary home's literary and material designs reflect the social changes experienced by women in the public and private spheres. Architecturally, parlors changed to living rooms, but these public, social rooms still frequently showcase the family's (and its homemaker's) domesticity. Family rooms, where the television set is frequently located, became the family's private social space (and portal to the public world via the television). Living rooms—frequently unused space unless visitors were present—emerged as architectural and social remnants of the public/private parlor. In the late twentieth century, the (re)turn to the “great room” as a popular architectural feature further complicated feminine domestic space, because the great room follows seventeenth- and eighteenth-century housing designs that also incorporated a great room: “Overall, then, the seventeenth- and eighteen-century interior was largely a communal space that made few accommodations for individual privacy and shaped open, visible spaces shared by the nuclear family and its adjuncts” (Shamir 437). Such spaces, scholars argue, are not clearly gendered, especially in comparison to nineteenth-century architectural designs.

Daphne Spain maps one version of this narrative of the home’s architectural development through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in her chapter “From Parlor to Great Room”: “New housing forms reflect changing family ideals and with them new ideas of women's and men's proper places. Emphasis on family rooms and master bedroom suites in magazines illustrates the decreasing force of the older ideals of separate male and female
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spheres” (132). According to Spain, the modern home’s open plan suggests a more egalitarian sociospatial design. Spain concludes, “The home is now indicative of more egalitarian gender relations” (140). Given these architectural and cultural changes in American domesticity, neodomestic fiction’s emergence appears to follow and reflect a logical, historical progression toward “radical openness” (hooks, Yearning 148). However, further investigation reveals that American domestic history, culture, and architecture do not line up so neatly.

First, not everyone lives in such homes with ostensibly “more egalitarian gender relations,” and not everyone can remodel living space in this fashion, even if everyone wished to do so. Additionally, the great room floor plan, as Shamir notes in regard to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, also effectively reduces private space—a spatial change that does not necessarily produce egalitarian relations. The great room locates personal privacy within individual bedrooms, which perhaps explains why with the reemergence of the great room we also see couches and reading chairs along with small kitchen suites appearing in the master bedroom. Where else would parents find private space? There is also no evidence that architectural changes have produced or reflect substantial changes in heterosexual women’s and men’s household roles and labor (Domosh and Seager 2). Furthermore, in the early twenty-first century, gendered domestic space made a comeback in the form of the “man cave” or “mantuary.” The DIY Network launched a program, Man Caves, devoted to this design phenomenon, which may be situated in the basement, garage, outdoor shed, or even in rented storage units. According to the DIY Network’s Man Caves Web site, “Every guy needs a space to call his own . . . a sanctuary where boys can be boys, where life essentials include a wet bar, a poker table and a place to watch the game with the fellas.” Like the den, the man cave is a gendered space that supposedly harkens back to masculinity’s primal instincts and need to escape the feminine domestication that pervades the rest of the residence.

A fixation on the home’s (gendered) designs in and of themselves, though, does not fully illuminate the larger sociospatial positing of gender and family in the twenty-first century. Dolores Hayden, for example, situates the contemporary housing crisis by downplaying such design concerns and highlighting the need to recycle existing out-of-date structures like suburban tract housing: “The question of how to sustain or divide our seven-room suburban houses is not the problem itself, but a symptom of a larger, underlying demographic shift. Americans have established a national fabric of single-family housing that needs updating” (Redesigning 224). Therefore, while gendered space continues to shape contemporary literature and domestic
culture, the question of the value of the single-family dwelling also requires our attention.

Hayden locates many contemporary housing problems in the single-family dwelling’s monolithic status. She also suggests that our contemporary housing problems share much with those experienced by Americans in the 1870s (Redesigning 222–24). Hayden explains,

The adaptation of suburban house forms to new uses is as inevitable as was the adaptation of brick row houses and brownstones and the introduction of mixed uses, higher densities, and new building types that accompanied it. This adaptation can be carried out brilliantly or half-heartedly. Housing stock can deteriorate or it can be correctly preserved; multifamily neighborhoods can create fear and unease or generate a better context for new kinds of units. These choices reverberate with implications for the larger public domain. (Redesigning 224)


The Puente family lives in the back of a warehouse. Pilar, the daughter, explains that her father, Rufino, “bought the warehouse from the city for a hundred dollars when I was in third grade.” According to Pilar, the warehouse had lots of great junk in it until Mom made [Rufino] move it out. There were a vintage subway turnstile and an antique telephone, the shell of a Bluebird radio, even the nose fin of a locomotive. . . . Dad tells me the place was built in the 1920s as temporary housing for out-of-town public-school teachers. Then it was a dormitory for soldiers during World War II, and later the Transit Authority used it for storage. (Garcia 29–30)

Pilar’s description highlights several neodomestic characteristics. First, the Puente family literally lives in recycled housing. In characteristic neodomestic fashion, the building flexibly exchanges human cargo for transit castoffs and then becomes family housing. The description implies that the building’s transitions—it houses teachers, soldiers, equipment, and eventually, the Puente family—were fairly easy. The home also directly connects domesticity with commerce and mobility; the Transit Authority once used the building for storage. Significantly, “puente” means “bridge” in Spanish, which further emphasizes the relational aspects of the “bridge home.” Dreaming in Cuban thus constructs a neodomestic spatial paradigm.
The Puentes’ home also remains an ambivalent, unstable space—making it both flexible and potentially insecure. A Cuban family in New York living in a warehouse—a temporary storage place—is deeply significant. Where will they go next? Will they return to Cuba? The Puentes’ home recycles the warehouse to craft a home with positive and negative features. While the mother maintains control of domestic space—she tells her husband to get rid of the junk—twenty-first-century neodomestic fiction does not generally produce the “divided plots” that Shamir describes as significant to the nineteenth century. Hybrid commercial-domestic spaces like the Puentes’ home better characterize neodomestic space.

The conclusion to Chang-rae Lee’s *Aloft* (2004) also remodels the suburban home in neodomestic fashion. Jerry Battle, the novel’s narrator, owns a modest suburban ranch house on Long Island. His grown children have developed housing practices at two extremes. His daughter, Theresa, and her partner, Paul, still rent: “Theresa [is] perfectly content with whatever post-doc-style housing she and Paul can flop in each academic autumn with their fold-up Ikea furniture” (69). Theresa and Paul model a transient domesticity. His son, Jack, on the other hand, has a hefty mortgage and a large debt due to his McMansion:

> The house that Jack built is in a gated development called Haymarket Estates, a brand-new luxury “enclave” that sits on what was a patch of scruffy land a few exits east of where I live. . . . The proportion is really the opposite of my place, where my modest ranch house sits right smack in the middle of the property (just over an acre), so that I have plenty of trees and shrubs and lawn to buffer me from my good neighbors. (Lee 64–65)

Jerry, in fact, spends several pages describing the details of Jack’s house. The home’s opulence, however, is not sustainable—a truth played out in the novel and in the real downturn in the American housing market. Because of financial trouble, Jack rents his Haymarket home: “Jack found a Danish corporate executive on assignment to take a three-year lease on the place for $6000 a month, fully furnished, which will cover the mortgage and taxes plus” (334). The renter seems fantastical given the real housing crisis and falling dollar, but perhaps he is not entirely unrealistic as he is a foreign executive; Lee’s novel portrays the real trend of foreigners taking advantage of increased buying power and a weak dollar by scooping up U.S. properties. Investing in American real estate, particularly in urban areas like New York City and Miami, is a global enterprise. Furthermore, the global economy plays a significant role in American housing: “Nearly one in three buyers now are recent immigrants. . . .30 percent of new U.S. homes since 2005 are being
built by foreign-sourced labor,” and large, publicly traded American home builders have seen “big infusions of foreign investment” (Wasserman).

However, *Aloft* pays less attention to the globalization of the American housing market than to the renovation of Jerry’s suburban home. Jerry begins the novel living alone in his suburban three-bedroom house; by the novel’s end, he has added a bedroom suite and a swimming pool, and he is living with seven family members, including his eighty-five-year-old father, his son-in-law (his newborn grandson will soon join them), and Jack’s family. His long-time girlfriend, who left him at the beginning of the novel, has returned and spends time at the house. This racially, generationally, and ethnically mixed family and living situation redefines the conventional suburban home. In Jack’s words, “I’ll go solo no more, no more” (328), suggesting that he has changed from a rugged and alienated individualist to a happily domesticated man. Rather than devolve into decay and violence, this racially, ethnically, and mixed-age family and living situation redefine and reinvigorate the conventionally segregated, single-family suburban home.

As these examples from *Dreaming in Cuban* and *Aloft* suggest, neodomestic fiction aims to represent more routes to (and floor plans of) home and to scrutinize women’s and men’s relationships to domesticity. The homes and homemaking practices outlined above only begin to suggest the ways in which neodomestic fiction expands, remodels, and forges alternative routes to domestic enfranchisement. Nevertheless, as women today still lag behind men as homeowners, the conventional routes to access home and hearth—routes that deemphasize private property and ownership—remain relevant for women today. Until women’s legal and cultural relationship to property changes, realistic domestic fiction that focuses on women necessarily continues to construct domesticity through marriage or other family ties, not through private property relations. Furthermore, as women still spend more time than men on home maintenance, especially within the private interior of the home, gendered spatial and social domestic relationships remain largely unchanged in the twenty-first century. Thus, while neodomestic fiction mixes and merges domestic fiction's gendered traditions, these gendered conventions remain powerful spatial and social markers. The protagonists’ professions and their homeownership status often emphasize gender’s powerful structuring role within the domestic sphere and beyond.

**Domestic Labor, Domestic Property**

The protagonist’s profession also plays a large role in gendering a text and identifying or disqualifying it as a domestic fiction. In domestic fiction that
focuses on women, non-wage-earning caregivers are common central characters or narrators. In these stories, non-wage-earning caregivers are often daughters, mothers, and wives, though these characters may also have wage-earning professions in formal or informal sectors of the labor force. We see such characters in *Paradise* (the 8-rock wives and the Convent women), *The Poisonwood Bible* (Orleanna), and *Gardens in the Dunes* (Indigo and her sister). As cultural norms still predominantly assign women to domestic caretaking roles, (neo)domestic fiction reflects these norms. Compared to domestic novels that focus on male characters, domestic fiction that focuses on women disproportionately describes women’s unpaid or informal domestic labor.

In masculine domestic fiction, key characters more frequently have a paid profession related to the domestic sphere. They are, for example, real estate agents, developers, cooks, architects, and home builders. The main characters in David Wong Louie’s *The Barbarians Are Coming* (2000) and Richard Russo’s *Empire Falls* (2001) are a professional chef and a cook, respectively. Joe Stratford from Jane Smiley’s *Good Faith* and Frank Bascombe from *Independence Day* are real estate agents. Will Navidson from *House of Leaves* is a professional photographer engaged in capturing his family’s life on film. Rachel Price, a hotel proprietor in *The Poisonwood Bible*, could also be viewed as a character that subscribes to domestic masculinity’s value system, even as the novel overall is more closely associated with a feminine neodomestic tradition. *The Poisonwood Bible*, therefore, also demonstrates neodomesticity’s hybrid form by combining masculine and feminine domestic paradigms. In fact, as helpful as it is to note the novels’ depiction of informal and formal economies, such gendered economic spheres are often blurred and complicated in neodomestic fiction.

For instance, while the Homewood trilogy offers some fairly traditional depictions of domestic duties and labor, some of its characters are mavericks who emphasize homemaking’s possibilities. For example, the elder generation represented in John French’s family follows the conventional roles of male provider (John French) and female caretaker (John French’s wife, Freeda). John’s domestic duties do not include cooking or cleaning. He is a professional domestic laborer, an independent contractor who hangs wallpaper. The next generation (the narrator’s parents, aunts, and uncles), does not follow such gender roles as strictly. For example, Lucy Tate’s bold sexuality and her unconventional life offset her traditional caretaker role. Lucy and her long-time lover Carl never marry. Carl, furthermore, cooks dinner. Thus, we can begin to see in this trilogy from the early 1980s what later novels emphasize to greater degrees: the mixing, recycling, or hybridizing of conventional feminine and masculine domestic traditions and roles.
If the characters in masculine domestic fiction do not have a domestically orientated profession, then frequently the characters’ conflicts revolve around ownership, property, or both. Smiley’s Good Faith involves a real-estate-agent protagonist and property conflicts. Andre Dubus III’s House of Sand and Fog (1999) and Walter Mosley’s mystery novel Devil in a Blue Dress (1990) also use homeownership as a central motivating factor and as a source of conflict for their characters, especially for the male protagonists. In House of Sand and Fog, a dispute over homeownership leads to violence. A contested tax payment results in the recovering addict Kathy Nicolo’s loss of her inherited family home. As a result, the Persian immigrant Massoud Amir Behrani, a former colonel in the Iranian air force, seemingly achieves the American dream when he buys Nicolo’s home at an auction. Tensions quickly escalate between Kathy and the Behrani family about the home’s sale.

Homeownership—the attainment of the American dream’s material accoutrements—does not bring happiness for the characters in House of Sand and Fog. The novel’s final scenes bring the characters to breaking points. Kathy attempts suicide and her lover kidnaps the Behrani family to force a reversal of the home’s sale. After police mistakenly shoot and kill Behrani’s son, Behrani rejects the American dream that he fought so hard to attain: “I spit upon these people. I spit upon this country and all of its guns and automobiles and homes” (Dubus III 328). After Behrani leaves the hospital and his dead son, he attempts to kill Kathy and succeeds in killing his wife, saving her from suffering the news of her son’s death. Behrani then commits suicide. He understands his family’s terrible fate as a punishment for vanity and greed. Like Icarus, “For our excess we lost everything” (Dubus III 329). In Behrani’s case, the pursuit and fulfillment of the American dream brings tragedy.

The story’s strong pathos connects the neodomestic House of Sand and Fog to a feminized sentimental tradition, while the source of this dispute (property ownership and control) emerges from domestic masculinity. When the problems over the home’s ownership first begin to intensify in House of Sand and Fog, Behrani’s wife confronts her husband: “You want this home for you. You. You could never live in the street because there no one would respect you, Behrani, and you need everyone to respect you, even strangers must respect you” (Dubus III 285; emphasis in original). Mrs. Behrani’s remarks emphasize that property is a prerequisite for Mr. Behrani’s masculine sense of self-respect. Daddy Glenn from Dorothy Allison’s Bastard Out of Carolina (1992) also seeks suburban tract rental houses (which are usually in worse condition and more expensive than the other available types of housing) as a means to represent his worth to his family. Homeownership
and the types of homes that men provide for their families help define the characters’ successful or unsuccessful domestic masculinities.

Homeownership, of course, is significant to female protagonists, too. Ownership is important to Kathy in *House of Sand and Fog*. Keeping her home represents not letting her family down; she especially does not want to disappoint her deceased father, who worked so hard for the house. Kathy, who is a house cleaner, emphasizes her ownership of the property throughout the novel. Her profession and homemaking practices emphasize domestic masculinity. When Kathy sees Behrani attempting to sell the house for a profit, she yells, “He can’t sell you that house! He doesn’t own it! He’s trying to fucking steal it! He’s trying to sell you a stolen house” (Dubus III 149; emphasis in original). Kathy shares with domestic masculinity an intense focus on the home’s economic value. Thus, once again, we see how a character’s sex is not a reliable indicator of the gendered practices that help define domestic space. Analyzing the home’s spiritual geography helps to flesh out further the suggestive tensions between masculine and feminine domesticities and the ways in which these differences define neodomestic fiction’s politics.

**Domestic Ghosts**

**Haunting Gender Distinctions**

> *Indeed, it’s worth asking again: is there any cause to think a place—any place—within its plaster and joists, its trees and plantings, in its putative essence ever shelters some spirit ghost of us as proof of its significance and ours?*

> —Frank Bascombe from Richard Ford’s *Independence Day*.  
> (emphasis in original)

Frank Bascombe, the divorced real estate agent and narrator of *Independence Day*, questions near the end of the novel whether homes remember, whether some trace of the inhabitant’s spirit remains in a place. The ways in which Frank Bascombe’s question contrasts with both Morrison’s ending to *Paradise* and Kingsolver’s ending to *The Poisonwood Bible* further clarify domestic masculinity’s unique characteristics and masculine domestic fiction’s distinctive but related flip side of literary domestic history. The recourse to a viable spiritual geography in the Homewood trilogy, *Paradise*, and *The Poisonwood Bible* suggests that feminine neodomestic fiction connects more directly with romantic, sentimental, or gothic fictions rather than the realist tradition. As Kathryn Hume writes in *American Dream, American Nightmare*, a collection of contemporary novels “do not belong to the realist
tradition” and rather “start from the belief that mainstream American cul-
ture has no spiritual dimension, and all seek ways of reinscribing the realm 
of the spirit in the imagination of their readers” (113). According to Hume, 
such novels craft a “spiritual reality” where “characters sense or experience 
form of reality beyond the strictly material, and the author treats this 
without irony or skepticism. In other words, the novel constructs reality in 
a fashion that differs from secular and scientific reality and invites readers 
to reconsider the validity and human efficacy of the strictly phenomenal 
exploration” (113). This spiritual geography or “spiritual reality” is largely 
absent or resisted in nineteenth- and twentieth-century domestic masculinity. Conversely, Protestant morality in the nineteenth century and a secular 
spirituality or panspirituality in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries 
have often defined the feminine forms of domestic fiction.

Hume includes John Updike’s Rabbit series in her discussion of spiritual 
reality. *Rabbit at Rest* can be seen as a masculine domestic novel that deploys 
and recycles elements of religious sentiment and memory in its domestic 
ruminations. For example, in *Rabbit at Rest* Harry Angstrom’s final flight 
from home takes him on a musical road trip from Pennsylvania to Florida. 
Oldies stations on the radio take Rabbit down memory lane. Even though 
Rabbit can no longer “get it up for Him” like he did “when God hadn’t a friend 
in the world, back there in the Sixties,” the road trip set to the soundtrack of 
his life provides a kind of spiritual, reflective space for Rabbit (*Rabbit at Rest* 373).

Wideman’s Homewood trilogy more thoroughly blends a feminized 
spiritual geography and a domestic masculinity, literally reimagining the 
Pittsburgh neighborhood that the novels invoke. Wideman creates a spiritual 
geometry with his trilogy that spans the 1840s to the 1970s. The neighbor-
hood’s description also clarifies how home extends beyond four physical 
walls: “Homewood wasn’t bricks and boards. Homewood was them singing 
and loving and getting where they needed to get. They made these streets” 
(*Sent for You Yesterday* 198). The neighborhood’s people and history con-
struct the novel’s spiritual sense of home.

Spiritual geography in Wideman’s Homewood trilogy, furthermore, 
emphasizes the neighborhood’s relational connection to other spheres. The 
description below moves from the street (Cassina Way), to the neighborhood 
(Homewood), to the city (Pittsburgh), and to the region (the North), demon-
strating the novel’s relational connections across geographic scales:

The life in Cassina Way was a world apart from Homewood and Home-
wood a world apart from Pittsburgh and Pittsburgh was the North, a world 
apart from the South, and all those people crowded in Cassina Way carried
the seeds of these worlds inside their skins, black, brown and gold and ivory skin which was the first world setting them apart. (21)

This passage emphasizes the home’s translocal, yet isolated, sense of place. That is, while the passage maintains an emphasis on the homes located on a particular street, Cassina Way, and within the specific neighborhood of Homewood, it also recognizes the ways in which the regional overlaps the local and vice versa. Additionally, it recognizes the body as a home—“these worlds inside their skins”—or a location that helps determine one’s place in the world. These connections are largely invisible (“words inside”) but for the color of “their skins” (21). In this case, the text marks a specifically racial and class-conscious location, a “first world” that helps determine the characters’ relationships with the outside world. This passage “results in redrawing the domestic space as the space of the normalizing, pastoralizing, and individuating techniques of modern power and police: the personal-is-the-political; the world-in-the-home” (Bhabha, Location 11; emphasis in original). The landscape’s power is embedded (“seeded”) in the body (Wideman 21).

Wideman’s Homewood trilogy does not follow domestic masculinity’s conventional practices that frequently posit a profoundly absent, alienated space and reject a reinscription or recycling of the (feminine) domestic novel’s religious or spiritual geography. Don DeLillo’s White Noise (1984) also follows the neodomestic form I have described in the previous chapters, but its irony and alienation distinguish it from novels like Wideman’s Homewood trilogy, Morrison’s Paradise, and Kingsolver’s The Poisonwood Bible.20 White Noise’s suburban family drama blends sentiment and satire in its characterization of a postmodern family created by multiple marriages. Living in a world where the television is always on, Jack Gladney, chair of the Department of Hitler Studies at the local Middle America liberal arts college, loves his children and wife fiercely. During a disaster that threatens the town, Jack reflects,

I wanted to be near the children, watch them sleep. Watching children sleep makes me feel devout, part of a spiritual system. It is the closest I can come to God. If there is a secular equivalent of standing in a great spired cathedral with marble pillars and streams of mystical light slanting through two-tier Gothic windows, it would be watching children in their little bedrooms fast asleep. Girls especially. (147)

DeLillo recycles feminine domestic fiction’s connection between religion and the home for a secular postmodern culture. Notably, “girls especially”
become associated with this “spiritual system,” heightening its femininity (DeLillo 147).

Alienation from such moments of “genuine” feeling weaves between such sentiments and limits (or at least calls into question) the novel’s spiritual moments. The passage before this paragraph discusses humanity’s persistence in manufacturing hope, hinting that Jack is manufacturing hope when he watches his children sleep. The passage following this one engages Jack in a discussion with his son Heinrich about alienation from labor and technology. Then, Jack finds a university colleague talking to a busload of sex workers. Finally, the brilliant sunsets punctuating the novel epitomize a spiritual geography tinged with irony and alienation. The sunsets may be made so striking due to air pollution: “Certainly there is awe, it is all awe, it transcends previous categories of awe, but we don’t know whether we are watching in wonder or dread” (324). “Wonder” and “dread” succinctly characterize the shifting domestic spaces found in Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*.

**Domestic Instability**

Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* (2000) also recycles spiritual geography while testing the limits of domestic instability. While the novel mixes masculine and feminine traditions, it also—like *White Noise*—continues to emphasize a masculine domesticity. As a result, its neodomestic politics function distinctively, emphasizing instability but without as clear of a recourse to the spirituality and spiritual geography that tend to prevail in feminine domestic fictions. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* fits the masculine tradition’s multilayered “intellectual” tenor and combines it with a destabilized home and a gothic haunted-house tale. The novel, a postmodern, Deleuzian successor to Henry James’s psychological domestic short story “The Jolly Corner” (1908), constructs increasingly complicated relationships between the home’s inhabitants, the text’s construction, and domestic space. Instead of exploring a mysterious force located within the attic space of the family home, as Spencer Brydon does in “The Jolly Corner,” the characters in *House of Leaves* investigate a frighteningly unstable home whose dimensions expand and contract without warning. A mysterious and profoundly empty space materializes within the home. Additionally, where “The Jolly Corner” begins with a confirmed bachelor and ends with his commitment to Alice Staverton, the house on Ash Tree Lane in *House of Leaves* renders already unstable minds and lives more insecure.
Although the novel defies easy summary, an attempt clarifies how *House of Leaves* participates in the (arguably masculine) postmodern discourses of fluid subjectivity and spatiality, vis-à-vis a Deleuzian schizophrenic subject, and an absent center, à la Jean Baudrillard’s copy of a copy.²² Ostensibly, the novel describes and analyzes a film, *The Navidson Record*, which probably exists only in the mind of another character, Zampanò. A famous photographer, Will Navidson, supposedly made the film to record his family’s move to the house on Ash Tree Lane. Layered with this story about the Navidson family and their unusual home (the narratives are literally “layered,” as the novel itself is a palimpsest) are Zampanò, who provides commentary on *The Navidson Record* and may, in fact, have fabricated its existence, and Johnny Truant, who gives order to Zampanò’s scattered notes and comments on Zampanò’s writing. Unnamed editors, who provide a brief “foreword,” also apparently organized all the materials and put together the text that we, the reader, receive as *House of Leaves*, complete with a table of contents, appendixes by Zampanò and Johnny Truant, an appendix that provides “contrary evidence,” an index, credits, and a poem-like final page called “Yggdrasil.” The text indicates different contributions by using distinct fonts, the footnotes and index are narratives in and of themselves, and the spatial arrangement of the text generates yet another layer of meaning or level(s) of interpretation. As N. Katherine Hayles suggests, “the story’s architecture is envisioned not as a sequential narrative so much as alternative paths within the same immense labyrinth of fictional space-time that is also, and simultaneously, a rat’s nest of inscription surfaces” (784).

What I hope this description begins to suggest is that while there may be infinite ways to read *House of Leaves*, there remains, in the end, one basic way to understand it—through the lens of or as a commentary upon postmodern theories, especially as they relate to identity and space.²³ What concerns me here is the juxtaposition of this “high theory” experimental novel (often read as a masculine aesthetic) with the “popular” (feminine) domestic tale about the Navidson house that forms—in Johnny Truant’s words—the book’s “heart” (Danielewski xx). Navidson’s documentary relates the domestic tale that produces the commentary surrounding and penetrating its telling. The editors share with us Navidson’s explanation of his film’s original sentimental goal: “It’s funny,” Navidson tells us at the outset. “I just want to create a record of how Karen and I bought a small house in the country and moved into it with our children. Sort of see how everything turns out. No gunfire, famine, or flies. Just lots of toothpaste, gardening and people stuff. . . . I just thought it would be nice to see how people move into a place and start to inhabit it” (8–9). The home’s instability keeps him from documenting the family’s
habitation. The central narrative about the Navidson’s house explores the home’s unprecedented absent-presence that haunts the family and all who read about their mysterious and frightening experiences.

The novel’s narrative “heart” examines the house’s mysterious labyrinth structure. One particularly unusual feature about the house on Ash Tree Lane is that its interior dimensions exceed its exterior ones: “The width of the house inside would appear to exceed the width of the house as measured from the outside by 1/4”” (30). Like the narrative itself, the house resists “coherent mapping” (Hayles 784). During Tom’s “Exploration A,” which brings him into a hallway that mysteriously appeared in the Navidson’s living room, he discovers just “how big Navidson’s house really is” (64) and uncovers how fast the home can change dimensions: “Absolutely nothing visible to the eye provides a reason for or even evidence of those terrifying shifts which can in a matter of moments reconstitute a simple path into an extremely complicated one” (Danielewski 68–69). The home resists, as Hayles points out, the assumption “that the contained must be smaller than the container” (788). The home’s instability and the mysterious hallway’s complete emptiness produce horror and fear.

*House of Leaves* magnifies and embodies domestic instability to such an extent that it produces a gothic home of unprecedented proportions and complexity, shaped as a mysteriously cold, labyrinthine hallway that expands and contracts at will. Hayles remarks on the home’s hallway, also noting its extraordinary emptiness: “The absence at the center of this space is not merely nothing. It is so commanding and absolute that it paradoxically becomes an especially intense kind of presence” (788). Notably, when the family discovers the home’s core instability and emptiness, relationships deteriorate. (We see a similar relationship between family and house structures in Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.”) For example, when a door in the living room mysteriously appears that leads to the enormous interior hallway, fissures in the Navidson family intensify: “Without sound or movement but by presence alone, the hallway creates a serious rift in the Navidson household” (Danielewski 60).

Gothic fiction and ghosts who inhabit houses have long challenged domestic stability. Chapter 9 of *The Navidson Record* in *House of Leaves* shows awareness of this literary tradition and explores the film’s gothic elements (146–47). The film’s closing shots, additionally, take place on Halloween (527–28). *House of Leaves*, therefore, emphasizes that if neodomesticity celebrates such instability, it must also confront instability’s potential disadvantages. Can a family survive, let alone prosper, in an unstable, fluid, and flexible environment? If the core or heart of the family home is profoundly
empty, what are the consequences? Where the feminine forms of neodomestic fiction we have discussed suggest a productive instability based on a spirited, relational geography, House of Leaves’s instability generates horror and familial breakdown by juxtaposing a profoundly empty core with unstable space.

Instability combined with emptiness or unheimlich, which literally means “not at home,” produces a horror story of vast proportions in House of Leaves, cautioning against instability’s liberating powers. Karen, Navidson’s wife, eventually leaves Navidson because he continues to explore the mysteriously empty hallway, despite the clear dangers it poses to physical safety and mental stability (322). As she packs up her belongings in the bedroom, the house attacks, collapsing the bedroom walls (341). All told, the home kills at least three people, including Navidson’s brother, Tom (371). These flexible, unstable boundaries are no kinder than clearly defined oppositions. The home’s vast absent-presence, which can occasionally be heard growling in the background, represents danger, not the potential for regeneration, transformation, or renewal.

As in James’s “The Jolly Corner,” a woman eventually saves the male protagonist from this frighteningly unstable position. In the end of The Navidson Record, Karen returns to the house on Ash Tree Lane to retrieve her husband. When she does, the house dissolves (524). Although her husband is crippled after his hallway explorations, the family is back together again at The Navidson Record’s conclusion (527). Thus, the narrative concludes with reunion and apparent family stability. During the Victorian age, gothic novels often narrated a “cultural haunting” that derived from class or economic origins; these novels similarly ended with stability restored. Where female protagonists ordered domestic space in nineteenth-century domestic fiction, male protagonists similarly took on this role through the conceit of fighting a ghost, as Lara Baker Whelan argues in “Between Worlds: Class Identity and Suburban Ghost Stories, 1850–1880.”

Although she focuses on British Victorian writers, Whelan’s argument about the relationship between suburban ghost stories and class anxieties also holds true for an American context. As in Britain, the nineteenth century was a period of suburban growth that disrupted classed and gendered spaces—these new, unstable suburban spaces needed to be “normalized” or interpolated into the national imagination. Whelan argues that, like domestic fiction, the suburban ghost story “is also concerned with ordering and ‘normalizing’ domestic space. Unlike domestic fiction, however, where female agency is emphasized, the Victorian suburban ghost narrative provides a middle-class male hero the opportunity to order the space of a haunted house that has been disrupted by a specter, and through a fantasy of excluding the specter, to reassert (the readers’) middle-class values” (134). Stories
such as “The Jolly Corner” appear to follow this logic—the male protagonist orders his life and finds a mate by fighting a ghost.

*House of Leaves* undercuts *The Navidson Record’s* concluding domestic stability and, thereby, deconstructs the stabilizing model that Whelan attributes to gothic fiction. The novel’s narrative ends with a tree that is “ten thousand feet high / But doesn’t reach the ground. Still it stands. / Its roots must hold the sky” (709). Just as the rest of the novel plays with inversions, the final lines turn gravity upside down. The stability at the heart of this postmodern novel, after all, is most likely a fiction, not a reality. The tree in *House of Leaves’s* final poem refers to the sacred ash tree (Yggdrasil) from Norse mythology. The ending explicitly gestures to this spirited, mythological location. According to Gloria W. Lannom, “Yggdrasil (IG-drah-sil) stood at the center of the earth, where Odin discovered that its falling twigs formed the runic alphabet” (40). The tree connects various regions (including the earth, heaven, and hell) and provides a “life force” (Lannom 40). Significantly, the Navidson’s house is located on Ash Tree Lane. The house on Ash Tree Lane becomes, like Yggdrasil, a “life force” portal between worlds. Additionally, both the records of the house on Ash Tree Lane and Yggdrasil connect to runic language. Part of *House of Leaves’s* dangerous and seemingly magical potential includes its mysterious ability to produce obsession in those who encounter its papers. If the reader did not catch the sacred ash tree symbolism previously, the final lines spell out the connection. This “life force,” however, seems more destructive than life giving. Therefore, what the sacred tree really explains about the novel remains unclear. Are the connections between the mythological Yggdrasil and the house on Ash Tree Lane sacred and spiritual, or are they both fictions, mythologies? If they are both set up as mythologies, is the conclusion a final critique of the home as sacred space and as the family’s “life force”? The final lines do not provide a clear roman à clef for the novel—beyond the fact that the novel clearly references (recycles) this Norse myth. As this chapter’s epigraph suggests, domestic geographies that clearly embrace or reject spirituality more clearly outline the politics at stake. Other masculine suburban novels more strongly reject the home’s spiritual geography and clarify why such a rejection generally follows patriarchal rather than feminist principles.

**Comparing Gendered Approaches to Spiritual Geographies**

While both *The Poisonwood Bible* and *Paradise* invoke ghosts or spirits in their conclusions, Richard Ford’s Frank Bascombe gives up the ghost at the
end of his tale: “ghosts ascribed to places where you once were only confuse matters” (*Independence Day* 442). The ghostly memories that potentially haunt Frank Bascombe’s old residence, including memories of his deceased son, ultimately lack “corroborating substance” (442). If fostered or held onto, these haunting memories would contribute to a reduction of feeling—a freezing and loss of a piece of his heart. Rather than offer peace or even some well-deserved haunting, a place’s spirit becomes a joke and needless anxiety for Frank. Like Rachel Price in *The Poisonwood Bible*, Frank’s willful amnesia, his letting go of the past, allows him to get on with—or perhaps pass through—his life.

In Richard Ford’s *Independence Day*, the novel’s domestic politics hearken back to earlier (white) masculine domestic models such as those represented by William Dean Howells’s *Suburban Sketches*. Frank Bascombe’s domestic practices and politics in Ford’s novels hold more in common with the narrator in *Suburban Sketches* than with his literary contemporary Orleanna in *The Poisonwood Bible*. Both Howells and Ford, though writing over one hundred years apart, present the lasting power of the home (its spiritual geography) as worth defeating. *Suburban Sketches*’s narrator writes, “As to the house which one has left, I think it would be preferable to have it occupied as soon as possible after one’s flitting. Pilgrimages to the dismantled shrine are certainly to be avoided by the friend of cheerfulness” (252). Frank Bascombe comes to the same conclusion in *Independence Day*.

Frank responds to his own question about the home’s potential “spirit ghost” (442) by concluding that ghosts do not inhabit places:

> The truth is—and this may be my faith in progress talking—my old Hoving Road house looks more like a funeral home now than it looks like my house or a house where any past of mine took place. And this odd feeling I have is of having passed on (not in the bad way) to a recognition that ghosts ascribed to places where you once were only confuse matters with their intractable lack of corroborating substance. I frankly think that if I sat here in my car five more minutes, staring out at my old house like a visitant to an oracle’s flame, I’d find that what felt like melancholy was just a prelude to bursting out laughing and needlessly freezing a sweet small piece of my heart I’d be better off to keep than lose. (442)

*Suburban Sketches* similarly advises, “Yes, the place must always be sacred, but painlessly sacred; and I say again one should not go near it unless as a penance. . . . Let some one else, who had also escaped from his past, have your old house; he will find it new and untroubled by memories, while you,
under another roof, enjoy a present that borders only upon the future” (Howells 254–55). *Suburban Sketches* and *Independence Day*’s shared emphasis on progression, (a “faith in progress”) and on the future characterizes (white) domestic masculinity’s rejection of the home’s lasting spirit (Ford 442).

Frank and the *Suburban Sketches* narrator move on from their pasts. Frank specifically moves on from the loss of his son and marriage. He remains whole, whereas Sethe in Morrison’s *Beloved* must reassemble her past to become whole. Frank and the *Suburban Sketches* narrator believe they must “pass on”—move beyond—to a present and future that can only be confused or damaged by the past, “needlessly freezing a sweet small piece of my heart I’d be better off to keep than lose” (Ford 442). The narrator likewise concludes that his present “borders only upon the future” (Howells 255). Thus, Frank and the *Suburban Sketches* narrator contentedly bury and forget their ghosts. Conversely, Sethe uses the ghost Beloved to help her “pass on,” in the dual sense of remember and move forward (Morrison, *Beloved* 274–75). Beloved’s story, which emphasizes and plays on the meanings of “pass on,” is both not a story to forget and not a history to repeat.

Houses in particular do not serve as memorials to Frank or the narrator in *Suburban Sketches*. Matthew Guinn suggests that in *Independence Day*, “Frank’s comments about the dubious ‘mystery’ of certain places reveal an anti-essentialist conception of place, a notion of setting as empty of transcendent or definitive character” (202). Guinn characterizes Frank’s postmodern landscape and sensibility: “For the postmodern individual such as Frank, a new conception of place is in order: a sense of place as literal, straightforward, and knowable—with no mystery to complicate things beyond the tangible, no character beyond the commercial. In short, a postregional landscape” (202). A more spiritual domestic politics, as seen in Morrison’s *Beloved*, Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible*, and Wideman’s Homewood trilogy, suggest that this sense of landscape does not (always) adequately deal with the loss of history required to produce such a “blank” place. These novels support Salazar’s argument about spiritual geography’s “three fundamental functions”: spiritual geographies value non-Western perspectives, reveal history’s influence on the present, and connect the community and the individual (400).

However, Frank’s final descriptions of his spirituality are not clearly patriarchal. His spiritual ambiguity connects *The Lay of the Land* (2006), Ford’s final novel in the Frank Bascombe series, to *House of Leaves*. *The Lay of the Land* continues Frank’s exploration of home and its spiritual force. Near the end of *The Lay of the Land*, Frank’s estranged wife Sally writes a letter to him about his sense of spirituality: “I think everybody needs a definition of
spirituality, Frank (you have one, I believe). You wouldn’t want to go on a quiz show, would you, and be asked your definition of spirituality and not know one” (383). Frank does ponder his definition of spirituality. After a near death experience, Frank admits that he “possibly . . . could stand an improved sense of spirituality” (476). He goes on to quote several passages from the Dalai Lama and concludes,

I am not a poet, though I’ve read plenty of them and find their books easy to finish. But in the most purely personal-spiritual vein—since I took two slugs four inches above my own—the best motivational question in the spirituality catechism, and one seeking an answer worth remembering, may not be “Am I good?” (which is what my rich Sponsorees often want to know and base life on), but “Do I have a heart at all?” Do I see good as even a possibility? The Dalai Lama in The Road to the Open Heart argues I definitely do. And I can say I think I do, too. But anymore—as they say back down in New Jersey—anymore than that is more spiritual than I can get. (Lay of the Land 476; emphasis in original)

This optimism, if not confidence, in the possibility of goodness in the world defines Frank's spirituality. “Anymore than that,” the passage above suggests, would be unreasonable, entering a spiritual geography that does not hold water with practical New Jersey residents like Frank. This practicality is what Frank goes on to emphasize: “A working sense of spirituality can certainly help. But a practical acceptance of what’s what, in real time and down-to-earth, is as good as spiritual if you can finagle it. I thought for a time that practical acceptance, the final certifying ‘event’ and extra beat for me had been my breathless ‘yes, yes,’ to my son Ralph Bascombe’s death, and that I would never again have to wonder if how I feel now would be how I’d feel later on. I felt sure it would be. Here was necessity” (Lay of the Land 484; emphasis in original). Frank’s practical spiritual geography is more physically grounded than the amorphous women that conclude Morrison’s Paradise.

Ford’s series of suburban domestic novels about Frank Bascombe emphasizes that suburban literature and suburban space more generally do not readily foster spirited places. Rather than a site of regeneration and renewal, the suburban home is frequently characterized as a soulless or spiritless dystopia. The literary portrayal has roots in material suburban space. According to Dolores Hayden in Building Suburbia, by the 1970s and 1980s, architects and urban theorists “largely ignored suburbs or lambasted them as banal areas of tract houses. Artists and writers tended to agree, perhaps because television, films, and advertising often represented American family life in
comfortable suburban houses as a mindless consumer utopia. Synonyms for ‘suburb’ in the 1970s included ‘land of mediocrity,’ ‘middle America,’ and ‘silent majority’” (Hayden 15). Not surprisingly, given this divisive attitude, no apparitions appear at the end of *Independence Day* or *The Lay of the Land*. Ghosts, furthermore, are not usually ironic tropes. The two potential ways to understand *Beloved* and *Paradise*’s conclusions, one providing a rational explanation and another supporting the spirits’ existence, emphasize that a belief in spirits requires faith, a quality much of the literature focused on masculine middle-class America seems to disregard, lack, or discourage.

While neodomestic authors such as Kingsolver, Morrison, and Wideman do not reinscribe an “old-school” Protestant religion into their neodomestic fictions, they do maintain “spirituality” in a broad sense and support a living sense of history. Morrison’s *Beloved* is especially relevant to these comparisons between the spiritual geographies found in feminine and masculine domestic fiction because of the ways in which *Beloved* plays with the meanings of “pass on,” the home’s spirit, and memory (*Beloved* 274–75). Where Sethe works at “re-membering”—both in the sense of dealing with her past and of collecting or re-membering her self—*Independence Day*’s Frank Bascombe and the narrator of *Suburban Sketches* work at forgetting in order to keep themselves intact. The ghost/person Beloved is one of the characters who help Sethe through her “re-membering” process.

*The Poisonwood Bible*’s ghostly conclusion also offers an instructive comparison to the negative space described in *House of Leaves* and *House of Sand and Fog*. The Price women at the end of *The Poisonwood Bible* embark on a second family pilgrimage to Africa in search of their old home and Ruth May’s grave (Kingsolver 538–43). The Price family’s second pilgrimage also fails. The women cannot cross the border, and when they question a local merchant about their old village she insists, “There is no such village. The road doesn’t go past Bulungu. . . . There has never been any village on the road past Bulungu” (Kingsolver 542). This “absent presence” in *The Poisonwood Bible* functions as part of the story’s mystery—as part of the truth of the place that never existed. As Kingsolver explains, fictional place “exists in your heart and your imagination. So long as its truth sustains you from one page to the next, while a new way of looking at the world settles in beside your own, it’s true enough” (Kingsolver, “Q&A”). The spirit and memory of the place matters—regardless of what the woman tells the Price family in the marketplace. As in Naylor’s *Mama Day*, the spirit place constitutes the novel’s final voice and eyes.

*Sent for You Yesterday*’s conclusion particularly reveals a spirit that follows in the feminine tradition invoked by *Paradise* and *The Poisonwood*
Chapter 4

*Sent for You Yesterday* concludes with the dead (specifically Brother Tate and Albert Wilkes) returning to the Tates’ living room. The dead men are summoned by music. The final scene repeats a scene in which the narrator, John Lawson—now a grown man visiting the old neighborhood—took his first steps as a toddler while listening to the blues song “Sent for You Yesterday and Here You Come Today.” Although the closing scene features a different song—the narrator John Lawson, his uncle Carl French, and Lucy Tate are listening to Smokey Robinson’s “Tracks of My Tears”—the music emphasizes Homewood’s *soul*. The epigraph to *Sent for You Yesterday* clarifies the significance of the novel’s final scene in which the dead and the living commune: “Past lives live in us, through us. Each of us harbors the spirits of people who walked the earth before we did, and those spirits depend on us for continuing existence, just as we depend on their presence to live our lives to the fullest.” The paraphrased versions, “past places live in us” or “past places place us,” also ring true for this trilogy and for feminine, relational, neodomestic fiction that recycles the home’s spirit. Not so different from the women at the end of *Paradise*, these spirits—ancestors—at the end of *Sent for You Yesterday* partake in the living’s daily lives. Furthermore, as a trilogy enmeshed in traditional African religious practices—*Damballah*, for example, is a serpent god—the Homewood trilogy not surprisingly pays homage to the community’s ancestors. The connections among Morrison’s, King-solver’s, and Wideman’s novels suggest that fiction focusing on women and minorities remains invested in history whereas white (male) privilege seeks to move on from the past. However, Richard Russo’s *Empire Falls* complicates this schema.

*Empire Falls* clearly draws from and plays up the foundational narrative of “beset manhood” and entrapping femininity; however, it does so in a neodomestic fashion that also allows a space for reconciliation with the past. *Empire Falls*—with its likeable, white, divorced, suburban dad as its protagonist—presents an extreme example of anxious domestic masculinity. Francine Whiting and Miles Roby present revised versions of dictatorial femininity and anxious masculinity. Francine owns the entire town and controls the protagonist’s life—hence, Miles Roby’s “beset manhood”: “Francine—part of a long line of Whiting wives who contribute to the Whiting males’ *lives of marital torment*” (15; emphasis in original)—has agreed to bequeath Miles the restaurant, where he previously took over as a cook in order to be near his dying mother (Russo 36–38). The novel’s final image is of Francine and her female cat, Timmy. Francine is literally sent down the river in a torrential flood—her ferocious feline power highlighted in her spiteful cat, who ends the novel hanging on to the owner’s corpse for dear life: “Together, dead
woman and living cat bumped along the upstream edge of the straining dam, as if searching for a place to climb out and over. Bumping, nudging, seeking, until finally a small section of the structure gave way and they were gone” (Russo 483). In the tradition of Mark Twain’s The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Francine presents an extreme and often comedic portrait of domineering female power—and its eventual fall.

Like Independence Day’s optimistic ending, Empire Falls ends with the possibility that even broken families can be fixed. However, Miles’s “beset manhood” and flight from home is not cured by Francine’s death, as one might expect according to patriarchal power’s antidomestic logic. While Francine certainly gets her “due,” her death does not provide the linchpin for Miles’s change. In neodomestic fashion, Empire Falls clearly mixes the feminine and masculine narrative traditions. In the closing scene, just moments before learning of Francine’s death, Miles “awoke a man,” which meant, “It was time to return to Empire Falls, to his life. Better to be a man there, his ‘Sojourner’ dream has shown him, than a boy here [on Martha’s Vineyard]” (471; 472). Unlike Independence Day, Miles learns from a ghostly experience, specifically a dream in which he meets his mother’s dead lover, and they discuss why the lover never returned for her.

No longer haunted by his past, Miles grows up and embarks on his journey home as an adult. At the novel’s end, the reconfigured family includes Miles; his estranged father, Max; his daughter, Tick; and his ex-wife, Janine, who recently separated from her second husband. After Miles calls to inform Janine, “‘We’re on our way back, if that’s all right with you,’” Janine replies, “‘There’s plenty of room at the house’” (Russo 472). The novel concludes with an optimistic outlook that with whatever else comes, “anything could be fixed” (Russo 473). Given domestic masculinity’s—particularly the suburban male’s—connection to “do-it-yourself” domesticity, this outlook (expressed by the handyman grandfather, Max) provides a fitting capstone for this analysis of contemporary domestic masculinity.

Significantly, the absence of a viable spiritual geography does not necessarily exclude domestic masculinity from a neodomestic politics. Like the endings to Marilynne Robinson’s Housekeeping and Joy Williams’s Breaking and Entering, endings without recourse to a spiritual geography also confirm that not all alternatives to conventional domesticity may be uniformly freeing or fully realized; domestic instability carries its own set of restrictions, determined in part by the specific historical and present conditions recycled by the neodomestic narrative. Perhaps it is a (gender/race/class) privilege to not seek redemption or recourse to spirituality. And, perhaps the “empty” geography persistent in novels featuring (white) domestic masculinity also
marks a distinctly liberal, democratic politics that enjoys and demands a space to refuse recourse to religion or spirituality—an outlook that promises no cure or redemption. The refusal to (re)invent or recycle a spiritual system follows, at least in part, the logic of a post-Nietzschean, postmodern world. Just as a reinscription of spirituality or a moral imperative holds the unsavory potential to reproduce rather than recycle imperial practices, (white) domestic masculinity’s tendency to privilege the future over the past leads to a potentially explosive politics. As a result, feminine domesticity, coming out of didactic and (proto)feminist traditions, does not usually reject but rather recycles for a (post)modern world the conventional domestic novel’s spiritual geographies and didactic ambitions.

Unlike the haunting conclusions found in *Sent for You Yesterday*, *Beloved*, *Paradise*, and *The Poisonwood Bible*, *Independence Day* ends with Frank Bascombe looking forward to “The Permanent Period,” which would put an end to the “Existence Period” (Ford 450; 10). Caught up in the crowd enjoying the Fourth of July parade, Frank comments, “It is not a bad day to be on earth” (*Independence Day* 450). Jurca understands such examples of Frank’s optimistic “poignant ambivalence” as distinct from a characteristic “suburban victimization” (Jurca 170). Clearly, Frank (like the narrator in William Dean Howells’s *Suburban Sketches*) does not position himself as a victim or a martyr—whereas Rabbit and Rachel Price remain alienated martyrs and victims of their domestic environments. Nevertheless, his attitude is also part and parcel of the typical suburban male character that simply endures. *The Lay of the Land* chronicles Frank’s “Permanent Period” (31) and the “different necessities” that put this period to “its sternest test” (55). The Permanent Period, according to Frank, offered “a blunt break with the past and provided a license to think of the past only indistinctly” (*Lay of the Land* 54). He enjoys this “durable” stage of his life until cancer puts a wrench in the works and “everything got all fucked up” (*Lay of the Land* 55). As the above discussion suggests, Frank copes with such obstacles largely by rejecting both the past and his home’s lasting spirit (buying a new house on the shore marks the start of the Permanent Period)—which, furthermore, suggests in this case a desire for a more conventional permanence versus a neodomestic instability.

**Conclusions**

The Spirited Politics of Masculine Domesticity

Both a representative and a unique character, Frank Bascombe demonstrates how and why the past does not haunt conventional masculine domesticity.
Masculine domestic fiction, especially suburban fiction, is not often aligned with feminine domestic fiction’s moralizing, didactic tradition (examples of which include The Wide, Wide, World and Little Women). Rather, masculine domestic fiction’s frequently antidomestic literary history connects it more with the exposure of the home as a trap. Such masculine domestic novels remain ambivalent toward, if they do not outwardly critique, the responsibility to offer redemption or to reinscribe a spiritual geography. Like Rachel Price, Frank’s ability to leave the past behind marks his privilege as a white, middle-class American. Frank’s letting go of the past and resistance to such haunting also follows in a masculine gothic tradition that seeks stability. This tradition, in turn, often aligns itself with patriarchy.

Feminist politics coming out of and shaping the feminine domestic tradition bump against a masculine, progressive, “American” domestic politics because feminist analysis has a responsibility to the past. Feminist analysis associates such flights from history with “the logic of patriarchy” that discourages relational spatial constructions (Davis and Gilligan 58). My analysis of these masculine suburban fictions, an analysis that follows and is committed to feminist praxis, should not be misunderstood as a dismissal of suburban fiction, masculine domestic fiction, or of the subjectivity that the fiction explores. Rather, this critique seeks to put spiritual geography’s gendered approaches in conversation to flesh out the embedded politics. How critics understand the turn to or away from spiritual geographies constitutes an important part of these politics.

Jonathan Franzen’s essay “Why Bother?” offers a rubric for understanding these novels’ alternative endings and addresses the resistance to reinscribe a spiritual geography. The essay defines good, substantial fiction as similar to “a particularly rich section of a religious text”: good fiction is a text in which “the answers aren’t there, there isn’t closure. The language of literary works gives forth something different with each reading. But unpredictability doesn’t mean total relativism. Instead it highlights the persistence with which writers keep coming back to fundamental problems” (82). According to this definition of “good fiction,” the absence or presence of a spiritual geography still resonates as contemplatively rich and unstable. As long as “the answers aren’t there, there isn’t closure” (82). The endings to the (neo)domestic fictions that I discuss follow this definition. The unclear status of the women at Paradise’s conclusion and Frank Bascombe’s final remarks at the conclusion of The Lay of the Land resist narrative closure. Our understanding of Enid at the conclusion of The Corrections, as I discuss in the next chapter, also leaves more questions than answers.

However, Franzen also states earlier in his essay that “good” novels do not
provide “Medicine for a Happier and Healthier World,” which he believe is frequently an ambition in “the work of women and of people from nonwhite or nonhetero cultures” (“Why Bother?” 79). Here, we begin to see the ways in which literary analysis is itself influenced by gendered and racial practices and paradigms. Franzen’s remarks imply a resistance to feminine domestic fiction’s didactic turn and to the spiritual geographies often associated with this didacticism or “medicine.” As both masculine and feminine neodomestic fictions fundamentally value a politics of instability, we can begin to see the value and risks of a “both/and” rather than an “either/or” politics. Hybrid novels that combine these gendered strands especially challenge our generic and political categories as well as our aesthetic standards. In the next chapter, I explore in more detail such hybrid texts, their circulation in the public sphere, and the implications associated with the resistance to and embrace of a spiritual geography. I pay special attention to how authors and novels frequently become distinctly gendered—or, as Foucault might say, become disciplined into gendered categories.