Neodomestic American Fiction

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Performing Domesticity
Anxious Masculinity and Queer Homes

Jonathan Franzen’s confusion about how to define his writing points to a more general confusion about masculine domesticity and its literary and cultural place. Reviewers of Franzen’s The Corrections characterize it as a hybrid novel that combines the feminine family saga with the ironic masculine edge associated with suburban fiction. Benjamin Svetkey in Entertainment Weekly, for example, not only described The Corrections as a “domestic drama” but also as “a big, ambitious, unwieldy hybrid of a book” (85). Jesse Berrett writing for The Village Voice characterizes Franzen as “half brainiac hipster, half traditionalist” (72). Such celebratory reviews could have heralded a new age for American literature, announcing a happy reconciliation between the long-estranged masculine intellect and feminine sentiment. However, this literary marriage between high art and domestic drama did not last long. The “Franzen Affair,” the public spectacle tipped off by the author’s snide remarks about Oprah’s Book Club that led to his appearance being pulled from the show, reestablished the old boundaries and, as a result, provides valuable insight into the gendered and classed tensions that surround and inhabit twenty-first-century American domestic fiction.¹ The affair suggests that little has changed since Nathaniel Hawthorne complained about “a d—d mob of scribbling women,” many of whom wrote popular domestic fiction in the nineteenth century (304).
This chapter examines the textual and cultural anxieties produced when masculine and feminine forms mix. As explained in the previous chapter, domestic masculinity especially heightens our awareness of “the ‘unnatural’ [that] might lead to the denaturalization of gender as such,” because conventional gender roles consider masculinity already outside, unnatural, or foreign to domesticity (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 149). According to The Oxford English Dictionary Online, for instance, the word “cotquean” refers to “a man that acts the housewife, that busies himself unduly or meddles with matters belonging to the housewife’s province” (def. 3). Thus, by its “undue” incorporation of domesticity, domestic masculinity especially highlights gender’s denaturalization and performative aspects. As Homi K. Bhabha explains in “Signs Taken for Wonders,” hybridity represents “that ambivalent ‘turn’ of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification—a disturbing questioning of the images and presences of authority” (174). Like Bhabha, I am interested in how this “terrifying” hybridity—particularly in the form of domestic masculinity—gets classified and causes “trouble” in twenty-first-century American culture.

My discussion of these hybrid, recycled novels demonstrates that while individual neodomestic fictions may lean more toward a masculine or feminine association, they ultimately trouble or “queer” conventional dualistic gender paradigms. As a result, they also are often regendered by readers and critics rather than read as queer novels. Nayan Shah in *Contagious Divides* defines “queer domesticity” as a category that resists the conventional model home: “Rather than viewing the term queer as a synonym for homosexual identity, I use it to question the formation of exclusionary norms of respectable middle-class, heterosexual marriage. The analytical category of queer upsets the strict gender roles, the firm divisions between public and private, and the implicit presumptions of self-sufficient economics and intimacy in the respectable domestic household” (13–14). Shah’s definition clarifies that queer domesticity offers another way of describing the neodomestic novel’s recycling of gender roles and spaces, referring specifically to homemaking practices that produce “an alternative articulatory space of gender and sexuality” (Parikh 863). Thus, neodomesticity’s hybridity does not erase gender distinctions but rather attempts to “trouble” their stability.

Judith Butler describes “trouble” as “inevitable, and the task, how best to make it, what best way to be in it” (*Gender Trouble* vii). Neodomestic novels provide various models of making and being in “gender trouble.” As we have seen in the previous chapters, unlike conventional rhetoric that stabilizes boundaries, neodomestic novels “trouble the gender categories that support gender hierarchy and compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler viii). That
is, neodomestic fiction understands “gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” and that these “tenuous acts” carry significant stabilizing power (Butler 140; emphasis in original). Neodomestic “local strategies” produce “subversive repetitions” within gender’s stylized (conventional domestic) categories; thus, neodomesticity provides models to trace the movement “From Parody to Politics” (Butler 149; 146).

Butler’s performance model emphasizes that “the task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat” (148; my emphasis). As we have seen throughout this study, Rosemary Marangoly George’s notion of historically conscious recycling provides one model of “how to repeat” (Butler 148). As neodomestic novels challenge and recycle conventional domestic structures—both in terms of domestic space and fictional tropes—the speculative limits of gender’s flexibility or fluidity come to light. Just as Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse map out regionalism’s queer space in Writing Out of Place: Regionalism, Women and American Literary Culture, this chapter provides a blueprint for neodomesticity’s queer homesteads—the emergent home territories appearing across a more fluid gender terrain: “The analysis of ‘queer domesticity’ emphasizes the variety of erotic ties and social affiliations that counters normative expectations” (Shah 13). The Franzen-Oprah miff highlights that “unadulterated” masculinity still receives high prestige in American literature and culture; however, the queer homes discussed in the final section pose serious challenges to this policing of neodomestic fiction’s reception.

This Is Not a Chick Book!
Jonathan Franzen’s Corrections

As I discussed in the previous chapter, a variety of tropes within a novel help establish its gendered identity. A text’s marketing, readership, and reception also contribute to its gendered identity. Jonathan Franzen’s remarks about his novel’s selection as “an Oprah book” highlight how literary and social hierarchies continue to exclude or degrade women and femininity. These patriarchal hierarchies reproduce gender distinctions that differentiate the so-called niche category of women’s fiction from genres coded as more “universal,” well respected, and frequently more masculine. As Eva Illouz points out regarding Oprah’s Book Club, “The cultural objects that irritate taste and habits are the very ones that shed the brightest light on the hidden moral assumptions of the guardians of taste. Such cultural objects make explicit the tacit divisions and boundaries through which culture is classified and
thrown into either the trash bin or the treasure chest” (4). In this case, feminine culture as represented in The Oprah Winfrey Show creates an anxious masculine culture that must separate itself from the program’s feminizing properties.

Just what did Franzen say or imply that led Oprah to call off her invitation and for reporters, writers, and publishers to spill untold amounts of ink over the tiff? On October 12, 2001, The Oregonian published Franzen’s remarks about the Oprah’s Book Club logo: “I see this as my book, my creation, and I didn’t want that logo of corporate ownership on it” (Franzen, qtd. in Baker 5). Franzen remarked three days later on the National Public Radio show Fresh Air that “more than one reader” expressed to him that they were “put off by the fact that it is an Oprah pick” (Franzen, “Novelist”). He also said of Oprah: “She’s picked some good books, but she’s picked enough schmaltzy, one-dimensional ones that I cringe, myself” (Franzen, qtd. in Jacoby A19). 2 Shortly after these remarks, Oprah canceled Franzen’s appearance, disinviting Franzen on October 22, 2001. 3

Newsweek caught up with Franzen shortly after the cancellation. Franzen explained his controversial remarks by positioning himself as a writer detached from mass culture: “The Oprah Show, like almost everything on TV, is not really quite real to me because I don’t see it,” he said [referring to the fact that he does not own a television set]. ‘I think if it had been more real to me I would have realized, ‘Hey, watch what you’re saying’” (Giles 68). Franzen’s explanation does not suggest that he did not mean what he said about Oprah’s “corporate logo” and his disquiet about the wide range of texts endorsed by Oprah, these rhetorical gymnastics serve, at least in part, to position his work as “high art,” allegedly beyond or outside corporate sponsorship. Franzen went on to say, “I feel as if I’m not the first writer to have experienced some minor discomfort over the selection. I’m just the first one who was unwise and insensitive enough to mention some of that discomfort in public” (qtd. in Giles 68). The economic implications of Oprah’s “corporate sponsorship” are indeed phenomenal. According to Jeff Jacoby, reporter for the Boston Globe, Oprah’s endorsement of The Corrections “prompted Farrar, Straus & Giroux to increase their print run from 65,000 to 600,000. . . . The added sales, it is said, will swell Jonathan Franzen’s royalties by more than $1.5 million” (A 19). Entertainment Weekly reported that Oprah’s endorsement prompted Farrar, Straus & Giroux to increase the print run from 90,000 to 800,000 copies (Burr 167). Whatever the exact numbers, selection for Oprah’s Book Club is a financial jackpot for writers and publishers.
Franzen’s postquarrel essay “Meet Me in St. Louis” (published in The New Yorker in December 2001) also attempted to diffuse and explain his criticism of Oprah. The essay begins by emphasizing his midwestern compulsion to please and the “so fundamentally bogus” filming that he was required to participate in as part of the Oprah appearance (70). However, Franzen’s 1996 Harper’s essay, “Perchance to Dream”—which he revised and retitled “Why Bother?” for his 2002 collection, How to Be Alone—provides the context for many reviewers’ remarks and persistent questions about The Corrections’s place within American literary history and culture. Franzen writes in the introduction to How to Be Alone that after the publication of The Corrections, “My interviewers were particularly interested in what they referred to as ‘the Harper’s essay.’ . . . Interviews typically began with the question: ‘In your Harper’s essay in 1996, you promised that your third book would be a big social novel that would engage with mainstream culture and rejuvenate American literature; do you think you’ve kept that promise with The Corrections?’” (3). The Harper’s essay did set up The Corrections within the masculine tradition of the postmodern social novel, epitomized by the work of authors such as Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon who engage both high and low cultures. Nevertheless, for his essay collection Franzen decided to revise the Harper’s essay because he thought its argument was not clear and because he no longer agreed with the “very angry and theory-minded person” who wrote the essay “from this place of anger and despair, in a tone of high theoretical dudgeon that made me cringe a little now” (How to Be Alone 4; 5).

What was once an ivory tower of escape from mass culture now is a trap in the form of a “high theoretical dudgeon.” Significantly, both his pretentious Harper’s essay and his invitation to appear on Oprah made Franzen “cringe.” One grimace results from an association with “schmaltzy low novels” and the other from theory-minded elitism. Franzen’s “double-consciousness” of high and low, and masculine and feminine, puts him at war with himself. His critics tend to agree. As Joanna Smith Rakoff points out in her profile of Franzen, “he embodies both the humble charm and earnestness of the Midwesterner and the haughty superiority of the New Yorker. And, I suppose, it’s no surprise that such oppositions—which clearly coexist in Franzen himself—are at the heart of The Corrections” (31). Written before Oprah selected The Corrections for her book club, Rakoff’s article presents these contradictions as producing interesting tensions—both within the author himself and within his work. After the Oprah blowup, however, both Franzen and his critics seem unable to envision Franzen’s work or personality as both sentimental and intellectual. Franzen’s specific concerns arise not
only out of an anxiety about confusing high and low cultures, but also from
the ways that “Oprahfication” specifically genders and races that blurring.

The fact that Franzen’s snobbery played such a large role in the press sug-
gests that many writers, journalists, and readers do worry about how popu-
lar, commercial success can affect a writer’s long-term reputation. Several
commentaries on the Franzen Affair considered this dilemma between high
art status and popular, commercially successful readership. David Mehegan
characterizes Franzen’s problem as something that “many fiction writers,
past and present” have grappled with: “He wants to be famous and sell a
lot of books, but he also wants to be honored in his tribe. And he’s not sure
he can be both” (F1). “Tribe” is an especially curious and apt word. “Tribe”
implies elite white male writers without requiring Mehegan to spell out the
specific gendered and racial paradigm for his readers. Mehegan may also be
subtly referring to Franzen’s Harper’s essay, “Perchance to Dream,” in which
Franzen describes straight white men as a “tribe” that is “much more suscep-
tible to technological addictions than women are” (52).

How is it that Oprah’s invitation produced such consternation among
Franzen’s “tribe”? While John Seabrook suggests that “culture and market-
ing” merge at a zero point called “nobrow,” he also recognizes that the pub-
lishing industry houses a last guard of “genteel tastemakers” who remain
invested in the “old High-Low” hierarchy (199). Seabrook also points out
that we increasingly live in an age when what is popular is considered “good”;
consequently, these “genteel tastemakers” confront a new dilemma: “How do
you let the Buzz into the place, in order to keep it vibrant and solvent, with-
out undermining the institution’s moral authority, which was at least partly
based on keeping the Buzz out?” (64). What happens, in other words, when
good literature—or art generally—becomes popular?

Rather than reconciling popularity and quality, much literary and cul-
tural criticism has responded by continuing to invest in their separation. If
“quality, once the exclusive property of the few, has slowly and inexorably
become available to the many,” how do readers determine a novel’s literary
worth? (Seabrook 166). Rather than developing new strategies or meth-
ods of evaluation, a vocal contingent responding to the Franzen case has
continued to suggest that the old ways of determining literary worth are
still the best. According to this formula, Winfrey and her ilk cannot read
serious fiction. While a novel may blur high/low and masculine/feminine
forms and be praised for its postmodern blending of these dichotomies,
the trained critic/reader continues to examine sales as a key means to dis-
tinguish genuine literature from a cheap knockoff. If a lot of people are
reading it (and especially if those readers are women), then the novel sim-
ply cannot be that good—or those readers certainly will not get the story's importance.

Thus, we can begin to see that while much American (post)modern fiction may blur the boundaries between high and low cultures, the evaluation process remains invested in solidifying the separation between these classes and their gendered implications. For example, novelist Allan Gurganus goes so far as to suggest that it is doubtful whether *The Corrections* would have been selected as a National Book Award finalist if Winfrey had selected the novel earlier: “You are not nominated for certain prizes if you have had huge critical success. It's not an unmixed blessing” (Gurganus, qtd. in Mehegan F1). Joseph Epstein concurred in *Commentary*, taking the joining of high art and obscurity to the next level. Epstein praises Richard Russo’s *Empire Falls* (2001) because, unlike Franzen’s novel, neither Winfrey nor the National Book Award singled it out (37).

The possibility of “Oprahfication,” thus, promises a triple whammy: high sales, a feminine domestic readership, and the possibility that the novel could be read not as a novel engaged in questioning the status quo (compared with the critique offered by the social novel) but as yet another *Oprah* novel (or sentimental woman’s fiction) that provides “Medicine for a Happier and Healthier World” (Franzen, “Why Bother?” 79). The conscious and unconscious acts by Franzen and various critics emphasize, as John Seabrook observes, how “people become more obsessed than ever with status” when “the old High-Low hierarchy” becomes blurred or absent (168). Ironically, the spectacle of the Franzen Affair reestablishes the gendered boundaries that *The Corrections* blurs.

*The Corrections*, at least in part, sets out to recycle the narrative of “beset manhood” through the character Chip Lambert, introduced in a section called “The Failure.” Chip’s character arc begins with labeling his parents “killers,” a clear rejection of the home, and concludes with the prodigal son returning and reconciling himself to family, home, and responsibility (Franzen 15). Chip’s disastrous screenplay is even shaping up nicely by the novel’s conclusion. However, unlike Chip, Franzen cannot escape or recycle his role in the “beset manhood” narrative so easily. For example, *Entertainment Weekly* writer Ty Burr reproduces distinctions between art and women’s fiction in his commentary: “If some of Oprah’s book choices tend to fall out of art and into earnest, womanly fiction, is it enough that she’s getting people ready?” (167). Such comments reveal that while Franzen mixes and recycles genres in *The Corrections*, his own and his critics’ remarks suggest that the author and the public are less than comfortable with this hybrid form, especially its popular, feminine component.
In the contemporary American fiction world, Oprah's Book Club is often understood as emphasizing a text's feminine qualities, both in terms of content and readership. These connotations are almost universally negative. For example, Philip Hensher, writer for *The Spectator*, characterizes “typical” Oprah selections and the divisive attitudes that her club has inspired: “[Oprah selections are] heartrending tales of love prevailing over circumstances, kitsch guff about the human spirit, epics about hoeing in Wyoming and smutty reconstructions of the lives of strong women during the American Civil War” (44). Eva Illouz's more positive analysis of Oprah's Book Club also emphasizes the club's feminine choices: “the genre of novels chosen by Oprah is [the detective novel's] feminine and therapeutic counterpart” (167). These “chick books,” or, broadly defined, domestic fictions, must be defined against not with Franzen's *The Corrections*, lest the novel is taken outside the realm of “serious” (masculine) fiction.7

Franzen's defenders also frequently emphasize that their critique of Oprah's Book Club stems from the way that books are read on the show—Winfrey's “emotional” reading method. Janice Radway disagrees with this critique, “She's criticized by high-art critics or even cultural-studies scholars, because they say when she picks a book like *Beloved*, she's not looking at its aesthetic complexity—she's making it sentimental, confessional. That seems like a pointless criticism to me. When you write a book and put it out, that book can be read in many ways by many different people” (qtd. in “A Novelist” B4). Radway emphasizes that Winfrey's method is one of many. Critics following a Frankfurt School mentality suggest that the combination of Winfrey's popularity and power makes her “dangerous” to literary studies—a threat that stems in part from fears that her popularization of literature will “dumb down” literary critique. In this vein, Thomas R. Edwards, writing in the *Raritan*, goes so far as to hint that the book club is a sham: “Oprah, or her panel of referees, pricked up their ears at the sound of this one [*The Corrections*] even before they read it, assuming they did” (78). He goes on to characterize the club's “prevailing taste” as “schmaltzy,” “female,” and “one-dimensional or at best middlebrow” (78). According to Edwards, Winfrey's sentimental reading may be one of many but it is clearly one of the worst. Significantly, Cecilia Konchar Farr argues in *Reading Oprah: How Oprah's Book Club Changed the Way America Reads* that Winfrey's emotional reading of novels has been overemphasized and oversimplified in the criticism. Countering such selective analysis of the book club's reading methods, Farr demonstrates how Winfrey leads her readers through “all three modes—reflective, empathic, and inspirational” (50). However, reviewers and critics rarely address this point.
The harsh critiques of Winfrey’s book club selections help contextualize the “unseemly tinge” that the Oprah’s Book Club logo represents to Franzen and general readers who may feel uncomfortable—at least in the (masculine) public sphere—about reading or liking an Oprah pick. As John Young suggests, “The ‘Oprah’ editions are thus less ‘authentic,’ in Walter Benjamin’s terms, than the first editions” (182). The Oprah sticker, like a movie-version book cover, renders texts less “literary.” To retain status, some readers avoid Oprah picks or explain that they read a novel before it was an Oprah selection. Scott Stossel reports, “Several people I know refuse to read an Oprah-selected book—or if they do read it, they decline to read it in public—not out of principled objection to what Oprah is doing or what she represents (in fact, each of these people say, as Franzen did, that they admire and support what she does), but because they feel embarrassed to be publicly associated with an Oprah-selected book.” In fact, some readers went so far as to request editions of The Corrections without the Oprah sticker. Farr clarifies in Reading Oprah, “So when Farrar, Strauss [& Giroux] put the Oprah seal into the cover art of Franzen’s The Corrections, it became a different book. It became a mass-produced, popular choice rather than a marker of distinction and taste. And elite readers began to insist on unmarked covers” (88). Kathleen Rooney also reports in her study Reading with Oprah: The Book Club That Changed America how some readers went even further by establishing anti-Oprah book clubs.8

Why does this elitism expressed by the author, critics, and some of The Corrections’s readers exist when Nobel Prize–winning author Toni Morrison has appeared on the show several times? Farr reminds us, “For Americans, artistic standards come trailing shrouds of an aristocratic Western cultural tradition, where real art is supposed to be underappreciated, reserved for a discriminating few” (80). In this light, Franzen—unlike Toni Morrison—may be perceived to be “selling out” if he appears on Oprah because white male writers have not “historically been excluded from both the market and the canon” (Young 185). Nevertheless, Franzen claims after his fallout with Winfrey that he did not have “any preconceptions about what kind of reader makes a good reader for my work” (Franzen, qtd. in Giles 69), and he was hesitant to claim that “the work I’m doing is simply better than [Michael] Crichton’s” (Franzen, qtd. in Wood 3).

Tellingly, Franzen does not cite Toni Morrison in his remarks that attempt to reconcile himself with Winfrey and her supporters. While Michael Crichton never appeared on Oprah’s Book Club, Crichton seems to represent the club’s supposed “lowlbrow” popular taste. Interestingly, like the club’s supposed reductive reading methods, this lowbrow or middlebrow reputation persists despite the club’s emphasis on “the transforming possibilities of seri-
ous fiction” (Hall 655). Moreover, Crichton’s novels are not associated with women’s fiction, a female readership, or an analysis of oppression—three commonly cited hallmarks of Winfrey’s picks. Franzen plays it safe and tries to deflect the racial and gendered implications by comparing his work with that of another white male author—at most, Crichton and Franzen occupy distinctive literary positions.

Thus, we can begin to see how part of Franzen’s discomfort may stem from the ways in which Winfrey’s work promotes African American heritage and black women’s cultural practices. As Sherryl Wilson points out, Winfrey’s celebrity is associated with “an African American tradition of thought” (180). Wilson explains, “black feminism and African American thought in which self is constructed in relation to community and significant others” constitutes one of the show’s important traditions (94). R. Mark Hall notes that the book club promotes literacy in order to achieve cultural uplift (655). Winfrey, thus, blurs categories by her careful cultivation of “her success, wealth and celebrity—with all of the connotations of consumption and commercialism—whilst being simultaneously considered ‘down home’” (Wilson 157). To insert Franzen into this context would mean that he would be out of his “natural” cultural element—forced to participate in a discourse and environment associated with both feminized consumer culture and African American rhetorical and cultural traditions. Rather than embrace this opportunity to cross or blur boundaries, Franzen balks and then Winfrey forecloses the possibility by canceling his appearance on the show. Franzen eventually does clarify that he and Winfrey are on the same team: “Both Oprah and I want the same thing and believe the same thing, that the distinction between high and low is meaningless” (qtd. in Epstein 34). Franzen also did not turn up his nose at selling the film option for *The Corrections* and later appeared as a guest for the *Today Show*’s book club.

The femininity that Oprah’s Book Club represents is not just a dilemma for white male writers like Franzen. Nor, as the narrative of “beset manhood” illustrates, does masculine anxiety toward femininity appear only on the public stage; it erupts within fiction as well. One of the most curious passages in regard to masculinity, white femininity, and the home appears in David Wong Louie’s *The Barbarians Are Coming* (2000). In the following scene, Sterling Lung, the twenty-six year-old protagonist, has sex with the home—actually a ladies’ club, not a residence—where he works as a chef. This perverse sexual scene seeks to reassert masculinity and male power—to get Sterling out from under the thumb of his female employers. Like the Franzen Affair, this fictional passage amplifies masculine anxiety about feminine power in particularly telling ways.
I slide off the bed, onto the Oriental rug, seeking friction commensurate with my hardness and longing. My hand is too soft and familiar for this strange urgency. I fuck the rug some more, then the brass bedpost, the armoire, the back of the overstuffed chair; eventually I fuck the entire bedroom. Still unsatisfied, I fuck the runner in the dark hallway, the moldings, the telephone and its stand just outside the bathroom. I fuck the banister, the stairs, the dining room table, where the ladies are most intimately acquainted with me. I leave droplets of myself everywhere, the sticky residue of my love—they won't even know how we've communed, each time they turn a knob, pull up a chair, raise a fork to lips. I fuck the front door like crazy, then the shabby mat at the threshold. (Louie 32)

By literally screwing the home, Sterling figuratively fucks his white female employers. His transgression challenges white authority and reworks stereotypical Asian submissiveness and asexuality. Crystal Parikh suggests in “The Most Outrageous Masquerade: Queering Asian-American Masculinity” that such textual “perversions” challenge and rework “the heteronormative logic through which Asian-American masculinity has been formulated” (863). This passage in particular confronts the relationship between Asian American masculinity and white femininity, revealing “the schisms in the purportedly unitary and normative formations of gender and nation in the US” (Parikh 863). Sterling’s remarks near the end of the novel clarify these gender, racial, and national connections: “I embraced school because school wasn’t home, European cuisine because Escoffier wasn’t home, Bliss because she wasn’t home” (323). Following this logic, he fucks the ladies’ club because it is the (white) home he desires. Sterling’s othering of white culture both serves as an oppressive rejection of his own heritage (home) and a transgressive means of control and mastery of the dominant culture. Furthermore, his acts invoke rape and sexual violation because they are committed without consent.

Significantly, Sterling positions his transgression in relation to the female body and domestic space, even as his transgression challenges stereotypical formulations of Asian American masculinity. While the reader may have little sympathy for the women Sterling works for—they treat Sterling more like a pet than a person—Sterling recovers his masculinity, if only temporarily and imaginatively, through an act of sexual violence against unaware “foreign” women. While clearly exaggerated, this textual eruption provides an important example and reminder of how conventional masculinity frequently depends on the (violent) repression of the feminine. Franzen and the critics’ rhetorical violations of Oprah's intellectual integrity compose another
part of this patriarchal logic. In this case, Oprah’s race, gender, and status as a popular (that is, not intellectual) television host make her a prime target for Franzen and his supporters to reassert a patriarchal masculinity.

In Franzen’s case, reestablishing his authorial masculinity—correcting his novel’s status so potential readers understand that his book would not appear on *Oprah*—stabilizes cultural norms about the differences between high and low art forms as well as between masculine and feminine aesthetics and tastes. As querying American masculinity seemingly demands queering it, Franzen must assume a “tough guise” against popular or feminine culture to “straighten out” his place in the literary canon. Thus, even as fictions break apart gendered binaries, real authors and critics frequently correct any confusion and reestablish clear gender differences.

Returning to Franzen and turning to the novel itself, we see that like *House of Leaves* and *Independence Day*, *The Corrections*’s domestic politics are decidedly masculine in their ambivalent, progressive principles. Yet, there are also clear feminine elements recycled throughout this hybrid novel. Like *The Lay of the Land*, which hinges on gathering Frank’s family for Thanksgiving dinner, *The Corrections*’s plot pivots on getting the entire Lambert family together for one last Christmas. John Mullan points out that *The Corrections* also features meals throughout the novel. As the homemaking mother and the person responsible for calling the family together, Enid Lambert plays a central role in shaping *The Corrections*’s domestic politics.

Like the other mothers I have discussed thus far—Orleanna in *The Poisonwood Bible*, Sethe from *Beloved*, and Mrs. March from *Little Women*—Enid plays a pivotal role in determining the home’s construction. Enid, in fact, gets the last line. Her “correction” comes at age seventy-five. After her husband’s death, Enid decides that “she was going to make some changes in her life” (568). After suffering under her husband’s domineering rule, Enid is finally free. The novel’s conclusion, thus, recalls the ending of *Rabbit at Rest*, in which Rabbit’s wife Janice, waiting to see her husband after his heart attack, thinks that “she should pray for Harry’s recovery, a miracle, but when she closes her eyes to do it she encounters a blank dead wall. . . . With him gone, she can sell the Penn Park house. Dear God, dear God, she prays. Do what You think best” (Updike 423). Like Enid, Janice’s blossoming seems to come with her husband’s demise.

There are at least two schools of thought about *The Corrections*’s ending. For some, the ending is genuinely hopeful: Enid “embod[ies] the prevailing [American] myth that one can start over again, or at the very least live for a better day tomorrow” (Filkins 231). Valerie Sayers argues that the novel’s conclusion holds the most promise—“in its last third, the novel shifts from
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a condemnation of contemporary American materialism to the possibility of family (and, by implication, human) forgiveness” (Sayers 23). Others read the ending as ironic: Enid’s triumph at age seventy-five is too little, too late; her dogged belief in the American dream is a farce. Joseph Epstein complains that by the ending the Lamberts “have long since lost their color by having been thoroughly rinsed in contempt” (Epstein 35). Looking more specifically at Enid’s character suggests that while the novel leans more toward the latter reading, which follows an ironic masculine tradition, it clearly mixes gendered traditions. The Corrections’s ending is ambivalent, although of a decidedly different sort than what we encounter in Paradise or The Poisonwood Bible’s more ghostly, uncertain conclusions.

Knowing a little about Enid’s relationship with her husband helps us understand the significance of Enid’s concluding statement. For example, early in her pregnancy with their daughter, Denise, Enid initiates sexual contact with her husband. Enid does so with a mind to influence a financial investment that Alfred refuses to make because of his ethical business principles. However, she explicitly protests vaginal intercourse because she fears that it may hurt the baby. Alfred ignores her protests and commits spousal rape (Franzen 279–82). To justify his actions, Alfred tells himself that “he was a man having lawful sexual intercourse with his lawful wife” (280). Enid submits to her husband and cries herself to sleep. She does not change Alfred’s mind about the investment.

Although she is not always satisfied by her marriage, leaving is never a feasible option for Enid. Like Orleanna Price, Enid is portrayed as a woman from “another country.” Her generation of women was not permitted to conceive of other options and, as a result, rarely saw divorce as viable. All Enid can do is exclaim, “Oh, I’m so unhappy about this!” and cook unpleasant dinners that she knows Alfred hates (281). While Enid is clearly the victim of spousal rape, her manipulative behavior toward her husband and children prevents us from casting her only as a victim of Alfred’s domineering personality. Nevertheless, her manipulations come to nothing; she never succeeds in correcting Alfred: “All of her correction had been for naught. He was as stubborn as the day she’d met him” (568). Alfred’s death frees her to change her own life at the novel’s conclusion: “She felt that nothing could kill her hope now, nothing” (568). Alfred’s death seemingly produces a late regeneration for Enid. Her remarks echo Suburban Sketches’s forward thinking: Enid envisions—whether read ironically or seriously—a life that focuses on the future and not the past.

Enid’s fear of instability furthers our understanding of her character and of the novel’s neodomesticity. Unlike the neodomestic women discussed in
the previous chapters, Enid continues to fight against rather than embrace instability, especially in regard to her domestic life. Her manipulative behavior can in part be explained by her overwhelming fear of domestic instability. While talking with Sylvia, a woman whom Enid meets on a cruise, Enid envisions a house of tissue, an image that serves as a metaphor for her anxiety and fears:

To Enid at this moment came a vision of rain. She saw herself in a house with no walls; to keep the weather out, all she had was tissue. And here came the rain from the east, and she tacked up a tissue version of Chip and his exciting new job as a reporter. Here it came from the west, and the tissue was how handsome and intelligent Gary’s boys were and how much she loved them. Then the wind shifted, and she ran to the north side of the house with such shreds of tissue as Denise afforded: how she’d married too young but was older and wiser now and enjoying great success as a restaurateur and hoping to meet the right young man! And then the rain came blasting up from the south, the tissue disintegrating even as she insisted that Al’s impairments were very mild and he’d be fine if he’d just work on his attitude and get his drugs adjusted, and it rained harder and harder, and she was so tired, and all she had was tissue— (310; emphasis in original)

Rather than embracing this radically open structure, as we have seen other neodomestic protagonists do, Enid attempts to construct walls (lies). Enid realizes here that the flimsy stories (lies) that she tells others and herself about her children and husband cannot withstand the blasting storms pummeling her family. Her job as caretaker depends on her ability to construct a home that will weather such storms, but fabricated stories are unstable building materials.

The home that Enid attempts to construct, eventually revealed as a house of tissue, looks very familiar: it is Protestant, white, and suburban. Enid fixates on this vision of the perfect home. Unlike Frank Bascombe, “Enid reliably experienced the paroxysmal love of place—of the Midwest in general and suburban St. Jude in particular—that for her was the only true patriotism and the only viable spirituality” (118; emphasis in original). Enid attempts to construct home as a spiritual haven. Even though Enid no longer really believes in God or nation, “at a Saturday wedding in the lilac season, from a pew of the Paradise Valley Presbyterian Church, she could look around and see two hundred nice people and not a single bad one” (118). St. Jude weddings, in fact, remind Enid of the upstanding young men and women produced by a town like St. Jude: “Enid’s heart would swell at the sight of yet
another sweetly charitable Root girl now receiving, as her reward, the vows of a young man with a neat haircut of the kind you saw in ads for menswear, a really super young fellow who had an upbeat attitude and . . . who came from a loving, stable, traditional family and wanted to start a loving, stable, traditional family of his own” (118). Enid reflects, “Most important of all was that the bride and groom themselves match: have similar backgrounds and ages and educations” (119). Through Enid’s character, Franzen focuses the ironic, masculine domestic fiction lens on conventional domesticity’s sacred home.

Reality is much different for Enid. Going to St. Jude weddings allows Enid to participate vicariously in the lives she wishes for her children. Her divorced, lesbian daughter, Denise; her unmarried, philandering son, Chip; and her married but clinically depressed son, Gary, do not fit the St. Jude mold like other people’s children: “Her children wanted radically, shamefully other things” (122). While Enid understands that midwestern St. Jude weddings are not “elegant,” the “lack of sophistication” nonetheless assures her that “for the two families being joined together there were values that mattered more than style” (119). Notably, when Denise marries her boss, who is Jewish and much older, Denise elopes to Atlantic City (120). When Denise announced her divorce, Enid stews: “The effort she made to be a good sport and cheerleader, to obey Alfred and receive her middle-aged son-in-law cordially and not say one single word about his religion, only added to the shame and anger she felt five years later when Denise and Emile were divorced . . . she felt that the least Denise could have done was stay married” (123; emphasis in original). She echoes here the put-upon white male suburban character. Enid, constructing herself as a martyr and victim of her children’s poor choices, bites her tongue and gives advice to her children in an attempt to keep her house of tissue intact.

Enid’s unrealistic desires for her family produce shame. These feelings make the shame-blocking drug, Aslan, attractive to her. Nancy Berlinger suggests that Enid’s shame is representative of her American Protestant heritage: “Her sense of shame is part of her cultural identity, to the extent that she has vague religious scruples about allowing Dr. Hibberd to ex(or)cise shame from her personality, . . . Thanks to ‘Aslan’s effect on the chemistry of shame,’ Enid will be released from a key aspect of her American Protestant heritage” (18). By naming the drug Aslan, Franzen is surely referencing C. S. Lewis’s lion Aslan, who is an allegory for Christ, from The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. Christ or redemption, in this sense, becomes a pill—a sly critique that the novel levels at both organized religion and the pharmaceutical industry. Enid’s use of the shame-blocking drug verges on addiction, but she
ultimately decides not to continue taking it. Enid explains to her daughter, “I want the real thing or I don’t want anything” (530). She does not appear to be released from her American Protestant heritage (her shame) until the moment her husband dies. Widowhood frees Enid from duty to her husband and any shame she may have felt for not being able to care for him. As Enid also sees Alfred as a lion, this sets him up as a Christ figure; it follows that Alfred dies so she can live.

In this light, we see that the novel produces a certain amount of hope—a kind of secular, ironically charged spirituality that follows in the tradition established by Updike’s Rabbit novels, DeLillo’s *White Noise*, and Ford’s Frank Bascombe series. This ironically charged spiritual geography constructs and deconstructs itself. For example, when Chip, the middle Lambert child, returns to St. Jude for Christmas, he notes how the Lambert house is “saturated with an aura of belonging to the family. The house felt more like a body— softer, more mortal and organic—than like a building” (541). His response and changed demeanor after his near-death experiences in Lithuania provide additional evidence that the novel has taken a hopeful turn. After returning home, Chip initially moves into his parents’ house to help care for his father who suffers from Parkinson’s disease, and he eventually marries. Chip turns his selfish life around, recognizing the spiritual geography of the Lambert home and becoming a responsible caretaker.

Yet, while some circumstances have changed, Enid and her construction of home remain the same in many respects. Her narrow Protestant outlook still leads her to find fault with herself and others. In this sense, Franzen’s recycling in *The Corrections* emphasizes the flaws rather than selects only the best domestic qualities to be reused. For example, the following passage demonstrates that the more things change, the more they stay the same in *The Corrections*:

But when Chip informed her that he was going to be the father of twins with a woman he wasn’t even married to, and when he then invited Enid to a wedding at which the bride was *seven months pregnant* and the groom’s current “job” consisted of rewriting his screenplay for the fourth or fifth time and the majority of the guests not only were extremely Jewish but seemed *delighted* with the happy couple, there was certainly no shortage of material for Enid to find fault with and condemn! (566; emphasis in original)

These remarks make the reader suspicious of the type or degree of life changes that Enid contemplates in the concluding line a few pages later. Enid’s chance
to correct her own life comes so late, only with her husband's death, and with no clear direction. The novel uses this ambivalence to conclude ironically. *The Corrections*'s ironic masculine tone and ambivalent ending—its assertion of instability combined with the critique of religion, specifically Protestantism—renders the novel's drama in the public sphere all the more curious. In many respects, Franzen should not have needed to defend his novel's masculinity. The tremendous response to the Franzen Affair demonstrates that Franzen's anxieties by no means represent an isolated or individual artistic quirk. The affair's resolution suggests that domestic novels—especially those written by and focused on men—have clear stakes in establishing a masculine identity. In the aftermath of the scandal, Franzen pondered whether he was a “social novelist” or “an old-fashioned domestic novelist” rather than framing his role along genre- and gender-bending terms (qtd. in Adams C01). These anxieties regarding the feminine present one of the greatest challenges to neodomestic politics. Furthermore, a neodomestic fiction that is more fully invested in a spiritual geography does not simply prescribe a guaranteed route for spreading the good news. Neodomestic fiction's lessons, as the novels I discuss below demonstrate, model hybrid identities and conclusions that are less anxious and ironic.

**Queer Eyes for Homespun Guys**

Viable Neodomestic Masculinity

*The guy who put this house together is an artist*

—Henry Rios from Michael Nava's *Rag and Bone*

*The Corrections*'s ensemble cast of male and female characters does not allow it to study masculine domesticity, let alone male domestic artists, in great detail. Male domestic artists, like the character that Henry Rios refers to in the mystery *Rag and Bone* (2001), are a rare breed in contemporary American literature. Unlike their female contemporaries, heterosexual male characters are not generally known for their domestic artistry and faculty. They are, in this sense, doubly queer by virtue of their rarity and their domestic talents. In the specific case of *Rag and Bone*, the characters are also queer due to their sexuality. A reductive reading of Michael Nava's mystery novel would simply place Henry Rios's remark as a sign of the popularized queer eye. Gay men, according to this stereotype, have a feminized proclivity for fashion, interior design, and mass consumption.

Like the undeveloped gay male characters in Jane Smiley's *Good Faith*,
who have “so many friends. . . . With so much money,” gay men, according to this stereotype, demonstrate an uncanny eye for economic profit and domestic style (Smiley 55). In rather stereotypical fashion, the gay couple in *Good Faith*, David Pollock and David John, provide sympathetic ears to the main (heterosexual) characters’ affairs, demonstrating their feminine listening skills, while simultaneously performing a very masculine do-it-yourself project—ripping up kitchen tile (Smiley 84–87). While the other characters lose money in *Good Faith*, “the Davids” come out on top: “True to form, they [David Pollock and David John] tripled their investment” (Smiley 415). In fact, much like a drag queen can be said to outperform femininity at its own game, the queer eye may be said to outdo a woman’s domestic touch.

However, Henry's remark that serves as this section's epigraph does not place his lover’s masculinity or femininity under erasure. This is not a “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy” but rather a queer eye for the domestic guy, whose bisexuality transgresses boundaries and defies stable definitions. If Franzen’s novel ironically repeats conventional domestic structures as its mode of critique, the novels in this section reverently and irreverently challenge gender constructions through their tweaked performances. Such neodomestic representations of domestic masculinity craft alternative narratives to the “melodramas of beset manhood” that often require a rejection of home and frequently condone violence against women and foreigners. The range of queer domesticities surveyed here begins to map domestic masculinity’s “social variety” frequently masked by “a narrow expectation of domestic, social, and sexual arrangements” conventionally considered “acceptable, plausible, recognizable, and knowable” (Shah 15).

In *Rag and Bone*, John, the bisexual house artist whom Henry refers to above, built and designed his home. The passage below underscores that John embodies feminine homemaking and masculine do-it-yourself characteristics. As a professional builder, furthermore, John’s character follows the masculine domestic tradition of having a formal profession related to the domestic sphere. John balances conventionally masculine and feminine characteristics. Henry’s remark about John’s unique housekeeping and homemaking highlight his hybrid, bisexual domesticity:

The walls of the kitchen were painted a warm orange, the tile was blue and white. On the stove was a skillet with rice and peas in tomato sauce. A handpainted ceramic bowl on the counter held a green salad. There was a second, glass bowl in which two pieces of fish were marinating in a clear oil. A door opened out to the deck, where there was a grill and a small wrought-iron table set with pale green plates and blue glasses. I was
aware that the things in John's house had not been chosen at random, but the effect was casual rather than calculated, and though the eye that had arranged them was masculine, it was also capable of delicacy. (112–113)

Nava's passage carves out a nonpatriarchal, “delicate” domestic masculinity. The passage praises John's domestic arts while not denying his masculine sensuality. Patriarchal masculinity allows little, if any, room for domestic masculinity beyond protector and provider roles. Additionally, it assumes that such roles will occur within a heterosexual relationship. *Rag and Bone* successfully, as Ralph Rodríguez argues, “scratches familia,” or “reinvent[s] it so as to think past what Michel Foucault identifies as the poverty of relational possibilities that saddle us” (76).

Nava's *Rag and Bone* queers domesticity. This queer, neodomestic fiction details the minutiae involved in making and keeping a home and unsaddles the white, Protestant, heterosexual, and masculine norm. Michael Cunningham's *A Home at the End of the World* (1990) similarly rewrites patriarchal, heteronormative domesticity. The novel narrates the lives of “the Hendersons,” which includes adolescent friends and lovers, Bobby and Jonathan, and Jonathan's roommate Clare. The trio's personal and sexual relationships shift throughout the novel. The name “the Hendersons” emerges after Bobby and Jonathan stop their adolescent affair but before Bobby and Clare begin seeing each other. (Bobby and Clare do not marry, but they do eventually date and have a daughter, Rebecca.)

The name “the Hendersons” recycles or reperforms the conventional family for the characters' unconventional situation. Bobby explains the name's origin and what it connotes: "We took to calling ourselves the Hendersons. I don't remember how it started—it was part of a line tossed out by Clare or Jonathan, and it stuck. The Hendersons were a family with modest expectations and simple tastes. They liked going to the movies or watching TV. They liked having a few beers in a cheap little bar. . . . Clare came to be known as Mom, I was Junior, and Jonathan was Uncle Jonny" (Cunningham 155–56). The characters repeat these roles with ironic twists:

Mom was the boss. She wanted us to mind our manners and sit up straight, she clicked her tongue if one of us swore. Junior was a well-intentioned, shadowy presence, a dim-witted Boy Scout type who could be talked into anything. Uncle Jonny was the bad influence. He had to be watched. "Junior," Clare would say, "don't sit too close to your Uncle Jonny. And he doesn't need to go into the bathroom with you, you're big enough now to manage just fine on your own.” (Cunningham 156)
These familial roles represent exaggerated aspects of each character's personality and also play-up their stereotypical implications. For example, the “caretaker” Mom (Clare) must watch the “dangerous” homosexual Uncle Jonny (Jonathan) when he's around the “innocent” Junior (Bobby). Rather than simply conform to stereotypically gendered and sexualized family roles, the characters recycle and reinvent them as shorthand for their (un)conventional family. I hesitate here to label the Hendersons simply unconventional because this label too easily assigns the normative, “natural” familial role to heterosexual “conventional” families. Part of what Bobby, Clare, and Jonathan accomplish is to reassign and rethink the conventional family unit.

The protagonists form a close-knit family, bonding as friends and lovers better than they were able to connect with their biological families. Like any other family unit, all of the members must participate to form a family. Bobby explains that Uncle Jonny’s role is particularly important: “But without Uncle Jonny, the Hendersons didn’t work. Without our bad uncle we were too simple—just bossy Mom and the boy who always obeyed. We needed all three points of the triangle. We needed mild manners, perversity, and a voice of righteousness” (156). Jonathan, the element of “perversity,” adds an atypical element to this “ideal” family. In this context, perversity provides a necessary “imperfection”—the queer element that makes the family, in the end, a “normal,” cohesive unit.13

The family, however, does not stay together just as it is. By the novel's conclusion, a fifth member (in addition to Clare and Bobby's daughter) has joined the family: Erich, who is dying of AIDS and who was one of Jonathan's lovers. At the end of the novel, Clare leaves the family, taking her daughter with her. Even though Bobby is the biological father, he understands: “Clare has taken Rebecca to the world of the living—its noise and surprises, its risk of disappointment. . . . We [Jonathan and Bobby] are here in the other world, a quieter place, more prone to forgiveness” (331). The concluding geography of the “home at the end of the world” embodies a spiritual, otherworldly nature. A reference to a spirit also appears briefly at the novel's conclusion. For a moment, Bobby thinks that Clare has returned. He realizes that he was mistaken: “Clare isn't back. What I saw was just the wind blowing. It was either the wind or the spirit of the house itself, briefly unsettled by our nocturnal absence but too old to be surprised by the errands born from the gap between what we can imagine and what we in fact create” (Cunningham 336). This domestic space is more materially grounded than the spaces that conclude The Poisonwood Bible and Paradise, but it is also, as the remarks above suggest, not completely “real.” Like the Convent in Paradise, the house functions as a place where outsiders can find home on the margin. This
frontier, however, is not like the suburban frontier defined by Howells and his successors.

This home, unlike the home we see in *Suburban Sketches*, does not border on the future but “maintain[s] a present, so people can return to it when their futures thin out on them” (Cunningham 336). This “home at the end of the world” provides a haven, a “place to escape” and a place to escape from: “This is ours; we have it to run from and we have it to return to” (336). It is the haven and the trap, incorporating and gender-bending masculine and feminine domestic narratives. Furthermore, sexual relations are not the foundation of the haven that Jonathan and Bobby create. Their homemaking remains platonic and stereotypically feminine in its nurturing selflessness. In this story Clare, not Bobby or Jonathan, finds it necessary to leave home—to light out for new territory. Domestic masculinity forms the foundation for Bobby and Jonathan’s home: “Jonathan and I are here to maintain a present, so people can return to it when their futures thin out on them. We’ve been on our way here for a long time” (Cunningham 336). Bobby and Jonathan’s home mixes masculine and feminine features, demonstrating that their home and their lives do not have to follow one gendered model; they negotiate various roles to produce a hybrid space and gendered identities.

### Making Home

**Spiritual Geographies and Masculine Domesticity**

Explicitly homosexual or bisexual characters are not masculine domesticity’s only homemakers. Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* (1999) also queers stereotypical masculine suburban space by positioning the reclusive, heterosexual Japanese (Korean) Franklin “Doc” Hata as its narrator. Although his narration remains reluctant to move beyond surfaces, the small details of Doc Hata’s habits and home combined with wartime flashbacks of Hata serving as a medic in the Japanese army during World War II accumulate to form a fuller, deeper picture of Doc Hata’s complex domestic masculinity and his queer homemaking. Similar to Quentin Compson, Doc Hata attempts to resist the haunting of his violent past and finds that he cannot. Rather than commit suicide, Doc Hata attempts to make a home after World War II in the American suburban town of Bedley Run. The novel recycles suburban and Asian American literary conventions, producing a neodomestic suburban masculinity that ultimately accounts for its haunting history and the home’s spirit.

*A Gesture Life* addresses the challenges associated with occupying traditionally white spaces; the “race house” that Doc Hata encounters emerges
from his own experience as an ethnic Korean adopted by a Japanese family and the broader sociohistorical contexts that inform the Asian American experiences of making home in America after World War II. Cindy I-Fen Cheng explains, “While postwar suburbanization has come to typify the retreat of whites and European immigrants into the suburbs, sociological and historiographical studies, along with newspaper and magazine articles published during the early cold war years from 1946 to 1965, highlighted how many Chinese also sought residence in the suburbs” (1067). While not Chinese, Doc Hata’s experiences relate to Cheng’s findings. Although Doc Hata maintains his “deviant bachelor society,” he still models a “conformity to the domestic ideal of suburban, middle-class heterosexual, nuclear families” through his perfect suburban home and adopted daughter (Cheng 1068). As a result, he “mitigate[s] the alterity that racial difference pose[s] to white society” (Cheng 1068). The price Doc Hata and his mixed raced daughter Sunny pay for his gestures or performances of domestic conformity composes much of the novel’s plot.

Isolation is one of the consequences of living in a predominately white suburb, where “it seemed people took an odd interest in telling me that I wasn’t unwelcome” (Lee 3; emphasis in original). Unlike other suburban characters who express alienation or isolation, Doc Hata embraces his solitary position: “Save the time that Sunny spent with me, I’ve known myself best as a solitary person, and although I’ve always been able to enjoy the company of others, I’ve seen myself most clearly when I’m off on my own, without others in the mix” (Lee 68). Rather than producing a trap, suburban space’s isolation seemingly suits Doc Hata.

In part, suburban space fails to trap Doc Hata because he owns his own home and because of the particular homemaking practices he follows. A Gesture Life straightforwardly recycles the masculine suburban focus on ownership but crafts homeownership into something almost spiritual. Doc Hata explains,

I cannot help but feel blessed that I have as much as I do, even if it is in the form of box hedge and brick and paving stone. There is, I think, a most simple majesty in this, that in regarding one’s own house or car or boat one can discover the discretionary pleasures of ownership—not at all conspicuous or competitive—and thus have another way of seeing the shape of one’s life, how it has transformed and, with any luck, multiplied and grown. (Lee 137)

Doc Hata’s measured materialism allows for the “discretionary pleasures of
ownership” but does not condone conspicuous consumption. His views on homeownership also begin to suggest that where he tweaks suburban alienation to his advantage, he reproduces suburban control. Like Rachel Price in The Poisonwood Bible, Doc Hata considers his home “a lovely place of my own making” (Lee 24).

When Doc Hata repaints his estranged, adopted daughter’s bedroom, his penchant for control, perfection, and, by implication, domestic security emerges: “I remember patching and repainting the ceiling and walls, making sure to fix all the mars in the plaster. There were larger pocks, into which I found it easy enough to spade the filler. But it was the smaller ones, particularly the tack holes, which seemed to number in the hundreds. . . . It wasn’t until much later, as I’d drift into the room to inspect for missed holes, running my hand over the surfaces, that the whole project was quite satisfactorily done” (Lee 14–15). Doc Hata’s housework reveals his obsessive maintenance that smoothes out all imperfections and cracks in the surface. His meticulous patching technique presents a clear contrast to the cracked tile that provokes the mother’s realization in Geographies of Home that “nothing was stable—nothing” (Pérez 293). Instead of letting the evidence stand, Doc Hata attempts to make it seem as though the holes never existed. Unlike Baby Suggs’s renovations in Beloved—renovations that reverse race house expectations—Doc Hata’s renovations produce a “lovely, standing forgery” of conventional white domesticity (Lee 352).

The problem with Doc Hata’s reproduced suburban homemaking is that it appears “just as though I have not lived there [in his home] every day for the last thirty years of my life” (Lee 119). The lack of dirt and scratches leaves no trace of its inhabitants. As Witold Rybczynski so aptly puts it, “Hominess is not neatness” (17). Doc Hata’s perfect homemaking certainly does not create a homey atmosphere. In fact, his daughter Sunny hates the house (Lee 26). Doc Hata explains, “Sunny felt no more at home in this town, or in this house of mine, or perhaps even with me, than when she very first arrived at Kennedy Airport, accompanied by a woman from the agency” (55). Significantly, while both Sunny and her father possess a home, they feel homeless. As feminist geographer Linda McDowell points out, “At one time, the stereotypical homeless person was a rather romanticized version of the hobo or the tramp: a masculine figure who was unable to settle down and shoulder the responsibilities of home and work” (90). In contrast to this romantic masculine figure, Doc Hata represents the immigrant who finds himself homeless regardless of his material possessions.16

Doc Hata’s “gesture life” relates to the aspects of control and perfection in his homemaking and domestic design. By living a life of gestures, Doc
Hata remains on the outside. Doc Hata’s suburban homemaking embodies nonpatriarchal nonviolence but not simply. In fact, his daughter Sunny suggests, “You burden with your generosity” (95). As seen in *The Poisonwood Bible*, present actions, such as Doc Hata’s generosity, and the past, particularly his military duty during World War II, burden the characters and Doc Hata in particular. According to Doc Hata, because he has “seen what no decent being should ever look upon and have to hold in close remembrance,” he should be “left to the cold device of history, my likeness festooning the ramparts of every house and town and district of man” (345–46). Instead of living in “broad infamy,” Doc Hata “persist[s], with warmth and privilege accruing to me unabated, ever securing my good station here, the last place I will belong” (345; 346). The use of the future tense—“the last place I will belong”—underscores Doc Hata’s persistent homelessness and counterfeit domestic life.

Doc Hata’s “habitation” forges new territory and rehearses old (352). Similar to Rachel Price and Frank Bascombe, Doc Hata attempts to ignore the bad, especially the heavy burden of his past, in order to “pass on” with his life. Like Orleanna Price in *The Poisonwood Bible*, however, Doc Hata eventually realizes that there is no outside to his responsibilities and that he cannot slough off his role in events: “I see now, I was in fact a critical part of events, as were K and the other girls, and the soldiers and the rest. Indeed the horror of it was how central we were, how ingenuously and not we comprised the larger processes, feeding ourselves and one another to the all-consuming engine of the war” (Lee 299). While his military outpost was not near combat, Doc Hata still considers himself and those around him as central to the war. He eventually understands, like Orleanna, that local actions can have national and global repercussions.

Also similar to Orleanna, Doc Hata’s privileges influence the position that he occupies and creates. Like the characters in *Paradise*, Doc Hata occupies a vexed space. On the one hand, he is privileged; in Japan, his adoption by a Japanese family led to material and social prestige. In America, he owns a beautiful home and occupies an important position in his community: “Doc Hata is Bedley Run. He is what this place is about” (Lee 136; emphasis in original). On the other hand, his ethnic identity in Japan burdens him and needs to be hidden (Lee 112). He lives a dream life but not in a positive sense: “I feel I have not really been living anywhere or anytime, not for the future and not in the past and not at all of-the-moment, but rather in the lonely dream of an oblivion, the nothing-of-nothing drift from one pulse beat to the next, which is really the most bloodless marking-out, automatic and involuntary” (Lee 320–21). Furthermore, his American home is an “oddly unsatisfy-
ing museum” (139). As these passages suggest, the ghost in *A Gesture Life* is Doc Hata.

Doc Hata’s ghostly existence is emphasized throughout the novel. While driving through Bedley Run, for example, Doc Hata notes, “I feel precipitously insubstantial behind the wheel, like an apparition who has visited too long” (Lee 192). In another passage, Doc Hata’s friend and realtor, Liv Crawford, leads him through his home so he can examine the renovations that she supervised after a house fire damaged his living room. During the tour, Doc Hata has “the peculiar sensation that this inspection and showing is somehow postmortem, that I am already dead and a memory and I am walking the hallways of another man’s estate, leaning into rooms to sniff what lingering notes of his person may remain, the tang of after-shave or slivers of soap, the old wool of his coats and leather shoes, the dust and spice of the cupboards” (Lee 138–39). Doc Hata’s “museum house” entombs lifelessness.

Doc Hata creates this space as much as he finds himself lifelessly marking time. For instance, he explains how he makes his home: “I’ve always believed that the predominant burden is mine, if it is a question of feeling at home in a place. Why should it be another’s? How can it? So I do what is necessary in being complimentary, as a citizen and colleague and partner. This is almost never too onerous. If people say things, I try not to listen. In the end, I have learned I must make whatever peace and solace of my own” (135). Doc Hata ignores racial slurs and attempts to control life by focusing on his “predominant burden”—what he can control: his own personal space (135). Franklin Hata—if not an oblique reference to Benjamin Franklin, it works all the same—follows an “exact scale of . . . appropriate response” in order to maintain a “delicate and fragile balance” (Lee 44).

Like Benjamin Franklin’s measured work ethic described in *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, Doc Hata’s “Scheme of Order” attempts to keep his house in order and the past at bay (Franklin 288). However, it appears that Franklin Hata experiences what Benjamin Franklin warns against: “That such extreme Nicety as I exacted of myself might be a kind of Foppery in Morals, which if it were known would make me ridiculous; that a perfect Character might be attended with the Inconvenience of being envied and hated; and that a benevolent Man should allow a few Faults in himself, to keep his Friends in Countenance” (Franklin 290). When Sunny explains to her father, “You burden with your generosity,” she expresses the frustration caused by his perfection, a perfection that will not “keep his Friends in Countenance” (Lee 95). She also emphasizes that his housekeeping does not successfully make a home.
Doc Hata’s domestic practices account for much of the trouble he encounters with his rebellious daughter. A key scene that highlights the novel’s queer, “perverse” domesticity, especially as it relates to Sunny and her father, occurs in the middle of the book when Doc Hata recalls going out to look for Sunny at a friend’s house. The home is foul, and yet Sunny decides to live there instead of with her father. In the home Doc Hata spies his daughter with two men—Jimmy and another man named Linc (Lee 112–116). This scene breaks a social, familial taboo, exposing the daughter’s sexual life to her father. Significantly, this scene is juxtaposed against memories of the women who were under Doc Hata’s care as a medic during the Pacific war. The women under his care worked in the “Comfort House” and were forced into sexual slavery for the Japanese military (Lee 105–112).

The intervening scene with his daughter underscores that Doc Hata does not understand her chosen relationship with these unsavory, violent men who are involved with drugs: “I didn’t wish to think that it was she who had initiated this moment but there was nothing to indicate otherwise. They weren’t forcing her, or even goading her, or doing anything to coerce” (Lee 115). Doc Hata does not understand his daughter’s choices, given the sexual violence he witnessed committed against the women in the Comfort House.

What Doc Hata fails to understand is that Sunny rebels by not being polite, by not being a “model minority.” Sunny complains to her father, “You make a whole life out of gestures and politeness” (95). Doc Hata’s seemingly perfect housekeeping—his ability to be “active and vigilant” and keep at bay “the ever-threatening domestic entropy and chaos”—produces a daughter who hates her father’s house (Lee 196). His neighbor, lover, and friend Mary Burns questions his relationship with Sunny: “It’s as if she’s a woman to whom you’re beholden, which I can’t understand. I don’t see the reason. You’re the one who wanted her. You adopted her. But you act almost guilty, as if she’s someone you hurt once, or betrayed, and now you’re obliged to do whatever she wishes” (60). Hata’s reparations for what he did not do to help the women trapped in sexual slavery during the war, especially the woman K, do not ease his guilt. Doc Hata’s reparations include his adoption of Sunny and helping the Hickey family by buying back his business.

In the end, Doc Hata, like Frank Bascombe, decides to sell his beloved home. While Doc Hata does not wish to haunt the residence, he wishes that there could be some way for the new owners to know who he was:

And yet it seems nearly wrong that the next people will never know what sort of man walked the halls within, or know the presences of his daughter and his lady friend, or wonder about the other specters of his history.
Of course I don’t wish them to be haunted. But if they might be somehow casually informed, whispered to that this man was nothing special or extraordinary but, as Mary Burns suggested, particular to himself, I would feel a certain sentence had been at least transferred, duly passed. (352–53)

Here, the haunting becomes about a particular communication about the past—about this “particular” loner, Doc Hata. Doc Hata hopes to be remembered, to pass on some sense of himself.

Home, by contrast, remains a more grounded concept to the middle-aged Frank Bascombe in The Lay of the Land. Reflecting on Haddam, the home he left for his “chosen new life” in Sea-Clift, Frank Bascombe muses,

What is home then, you might wonder? The place you first see daylight, or the place you choose for yourself? Or is it the someplace you just can’t keep from going back to, though the air there’s grown less breathable, the future’s over, where they really don’t want you back, and where you once left on a breeze without a rearward glance? Home? Home’s a musable concept if you’re born to one place, as I was (the syrup-aired southern coast), educated to another (the glaciated mid-continent), come full stop in a third—then spend years finding suitable “homes” for others. Home may only be where you’ve memorized the grid pattern, where you can pay with a check, where someone you’ve already met takes your blood pressure, palpatates your liver, slips a digit here and there, measures the angstroms gone off your molars bit by bit—in other words, where your primary care-givers await, their pale gloves already pulled on and snugged. (14)

Written in the conditional, Frank’s meditation on home emphasizes familiarity and routine more than sentiment or spirit. The passage also eschews the didactic through its initial use of questions. Not defined or haunted by the past, home as a place is defined by the present: it is the place “where your primary care-givers await” (14).

In contrast, near the end of A Gesture Life a ghost appears to Doc Hata. The ghost is K, one of the women who was under his care and with whom he fell in love. At this moment, Doc Hata explains, “I think I feel at home” (Lee 286). However, my description of K as a ghost is not quite right. She is no more clearly a ghost in this novel than the ghostly women who conclude Paradise. Hata clarifies, “I was almost sure she was a spectral body or ghost. But I am not a magical man, and never have been. . . . And as deeply as I wished she were some wondrous, ethereal presence, that I was being duly haunted, I knew that she was absolute, unquestionably real, a once-personhood come
wholly into being” (Lee 286). In this mysterious scene, K asks Doc Hata when they will leave Bedley Run. He questions her about why they should leave when “we have everything that we require. And much more. . . . Everything is in delicate harmony. And yet still you seem dissatisfied” (Lee 287). K replies that she knows she will not die in Bedley Run, “and sometimes, sir, I so wish to” (287). Leaving Bedley Run, however, does not mean that Doc Hata finally has the courage to do what he could not do in Japan.

Doc Hata flees home not because it is a trap, but because his own past prevents him from creating home, at least in any conventional sense. Doc Hata can only gesture toward home. As he prepares to leave his home, Doc Hata reveals, “But I think it won’t be any kind of pilgrimage. I won’t be seeking out my destiny or fate. I won’t attempt to find comfort in the visage of a creator or the forgiving dead” (356). Doc Hata does not recycle the “melodrama of beset manhood” to seek out his fortune or his “destiny.” He also does not look to embark on a “Pilgrim’s Progress.” He just seems to go on yet another walk.

The novel’s final sentences emphasize that Doc Hata remains paradoxically outside of yet constituted by domestic masculinity’s framing. *A Gesture Life* recycles and queers the alienated suburban home and the narrative of “beset manhood”:

Let me simply bear my flesh, and blood, and bones. I will fly a flag. Tomorrow, when this house is alive and full, I will be outside looking in. I will be already on a walk someplace, in this town or the next or one five thousand miles away. I will circle round and arrive again. Come almost home. (Lee 356)

Mike Crang, explaining the work of Michel de Certeau, suggests that “walking is thus to create non-sites and haunted geographies” (150). Doc Hata embodies de Certeau’s tactic of walking; his “almost home” is a haunting “non-site.” This approximate space, “almost home,” in many ways epitomizes queer neodomesticity. It suggests a “third space” that is neither fully material nor fully spiritual. It never achieves what home “should be,” yet it provides a space in which the characters can live.

Jonathan and Bobby in *A Home at the End of the World* and Doc Hata in *A Gesture Life* settle into this type of hybrid, ambivalent space. The Convent women at the end of *Paradise* may also be said to inhabit an unstable “third space.” This space also describes the “lost” village at *The Poisonwood Bible*’s conclusion and the beautiful gardens that the protagonists return to at the conclusion of *Gardens in the Dunes*. As Jonathan in *A Home at the End of
the World remarks, “I wouldn’t say I was happy. I was nothing so simple as happy. I was merely present, perhaps for the first time in my adult life. The moment was unextraordinary. But I had the moment, I had it completely. It inhabited me” (Cunningham 342–43; my emphasis). Jonathan describes, like Doc Hata above, a queer homecoming—a feeling of being not quite out of place anymore.