Neodomestic American Fiction

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Conclusions

The Territory Ahead

Serious intellectual work would seem to have much in common with housework.

—Toril Moi, "What Is a Woman? Sex, Gender, and the Body in Feminist Theory"

Just as Jonathan Franzen claims in “Why Bother” that good literature resists closure, Toril Moi suggests that serious scholarship poses questions that demand constant work. Domestic scholarship likewise requires endless housekeeping. Just when we think we have finally caught up, another pile of novels appears, and we must start the process over again. Dust, laundry, and novels accumulate. Before outlining the territory ahead, let me first briefly review the terrain covered in the previous chapters. I will then summarize what this literary map of domesticity suggests for lived experience.

Neodomestic American Fiction’s contribution to the study of American literature is threefold: first, it traces and extends domestic fiction’s time period into the twenty-first century; second, it redefines the genre so it includes male as well as female authors and protagonists; and finally, it adds another lens with which to define and interpret this genre, providing a spatial rather than an exclusively plot- or character-based analysis of the fiction. This analysis defines a new subgenre, which I call neodomestic fiction, and demonstrates a shift in the politics of home from stability to instability. I locate this shift in the 1980s, pointing to the threshold neodomestic novels Housekeeping and The House on Mango Street as landmark texts that mark neodomestic fiction’s emergence with their revised conception of model domesticity. The preceding chapters identified and analyzed the three primary characteristics
that define neodomestic fiction: mobility, home renovation or redesign, and relational domestic space.

(Ne)domestic fictions share intense attention to the domestic sphere and self-conscious homemaking. The geographic lens focused on domestic space and the processes of homemaking plots neodomic fiction’s queer, recycled, and unstable domestic territories. Understanding these changes in the context of nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century fiction and culture reveals that neodomic fiction does not represent a radical break but rather a recycling and reordering of domestic tropes, practices, and spaces. Particularly complex are the ways in which neodomic fiction recycles and queers raced and gendered spaces. Neodomic fiction intervenes in what Cheryl I. Harris describes as “Whiteness as Property,” or “the legal legitimation of expectations of power and control that enshrine the status quo as a neutral baseline, while masking the maintenance of white privilege and domination” (1715). Like Harris’s legal analysis, my analysis of (neo)domestic fictions demonstrates that the “origins of whiteness as property lie in the parallel systems of domination of Black and Native American peoples out of which were created racially contingent forms of property and property rights” (1714). Neodomic fiction addresses and remodels the resulting “race house,” as Toni Morrison labels it.

Neodomic fiction also complicates the distinctly gendered binary between domestic fiction’s gendered strands. This aspect of my analysis places my own study in a potentially awkward position. I frequently emphasize gender distinctions in my chapter divisions while simultaneously explaining how neodomic fiction blurs such boundaries. At first glance, I may appear to reproduce the very discourses that neodomic fiction and my research questions. In other words, the gendered map that my chapters create seemingly participates in the disciplining of gender. However, rather than disciplining gender, the chapters embody gender’s relational dynamics. In Janet R. Jakobsen’s terms, the gendered chapters aim “to queer . . . [or] rely on and trouble norms” (530). Domesticity emerges from this gendered binary and has developed along two distinct but related tracks; maintaining gendered chapters represents the norm’s power and clarifies masculine and feminine domestic fiction’s distinct and common tropes and politics. Furthermore, while neodomic fiction troubles these gendered traditions, it does not eliminate them or present a postgendered genre. Neodomic fiction heightens rather than erases gendered spatial awareness. My “queer” analysis, thus, seeks “to engage the complex of uneven relations among norms” (Jakobsen 520). Gender performances in the fiction and in my analysis operate across a spectrum of masculine and feminine behaviors.
The analysis of these gendered fictions reveals that both strands offer viable neodomesticities because of their shared emphasis on domestic instability. However, I also want to be clear about how difference—differences that are often grounded in gendered notions about spiritual geography—functions. Neither difference nor sameness is constructed on neutral ground. American culture and literature suggest that masculine and feminine spaces and genres are different but certainly not equal. They espouse distinct politics, and feminist geography makes a case for why a relational (feminine) spatial politics might serve us better than an oppositional (masculine) spatial politics. My analysis of the literature contributes to arguments against oppositional spatial relationships and spaces that de-emphasize, if not attempt to erase, the past.

Here we might keep in mind what Homi Bhabha explains in “DissensiNation” about how nation formation emerges from a violent forgetting. A conventional strand of masculine and feminine domesticity follows this forgetful course. Neodomestic fiction—particularly those novels that emphasize “historically conscious recycling”—attempts to construct different routes to home and nation (George, “Recycling” 2–3). As we saw in The Poisonwood Bible, Paradise, Gardens in the Dunes, and A Gesture Life, in its most intense forms, this historically conscious recycling process materializes the past in the form of a spiritual geography. Domestic fiction’s literary history demonstrates that the novels engaged in this project tend to emerge out of the feminine tradition, whereas masculine domestic fiction, following an oppositional and patriarchal spatial organization, tends to break with history. As we saw in Suburban Sketches and Independence Day, masculine domestic fiction’s most intense forms reject the past in favor of the present and the future.

This project demonstrates that there are historical drives, gendered/raced/classed incentives, and political consequences related to the rejection or embrace of a spiritual or a historically relational domestic geography. Neodomestic fiction that espouses an incorporation rather than a rejection of ghosts—who function in much of the fiction as “specters of history”—more clearly and consistently aligns itself with a feminist and antiracist politics. Feminism, in this sense, agrees with Gaston Bachelard’s statement, “An entire past comes to dwell in a new house” (5). Neodomestic fiction finds ways to reintroduce funk—those “problematic” eruptions from the past—into American housekeeping and homemaking and to craft relational rather than oppositional bonds to the past and/or other “foreign” entities. It espouses the critical, historically grounded queer foundations that feminism demands.
Consequently, to argue that fictions that reject ghosts and fictions that embrace ghosts are simply different types of fiction fails to consider seriously the politics inscribed in these distinct spatial narratives. If scholars, like myself, who further a politics of difference, hybridity and multiplicity, want to be heard, we also need to clarify the politics of the difference that we seek. In other words, like Homi Bhabha, I believe that the critic has political responsibilities: “For the critic must attempt to fully realize, and take responsibility for, the unspoken, unrepresented pasts that haunt the historical present” (Location 12). Novels such as Gardens in the Dunes, A Home at the End of the World, and Beloved represent neodomestic fictions of strong persuasion—fictions in which a spiritual geography becomes an integral part of the narrative. DeLillo’s White Noise and Franzen’s The Corrections provide a more realist, hybrid presentation of spiritual geography, shifting between (feminine) sentiment and (masculine) irony. For instance, Wilder’s wild ride across the highway in his tricycle at the end of White Noise perhaps confirms a force larger than ourselves: “[Wilder] began to pedal across the highway, mystically charged” (DeLillo 322). Or his survival may simply be dumb luck or even a testament to “lame-brained determination” (DeLillo 323). As Ann Douglas argues, “Sentimentalism provides a way to protest a power to which one has already in part capitulated” (12). The suggestive strength of masculine neodomestic novels such as DeLillo’s White Noise, Franzen’s The Corrections, and Ford’s Lay of the Land lies in the possibility that their irony counters this capitulation. While my own analysis suggests that there is little to gain from embracing a forgetting of history—an analysis that other feminists share—future research in literary and cultural studies may seek other routes to answer the question: does killing such ghosts necessarily reproduce patriarchal logic?

As such, my research, like neodomestic fiction itself, seeks—as Elaine Neil Orr describes in Subject to Negotiation: Reading Feminist Criticism and American Women’s Fiction—“to contribute . . . to a progressive shift in feminist discourse,” a shift from a criticism of subversions—the dominant mode of American feminist criticism from Judith Fetterley’s The Resisting Reader to Alicia Ostriker’s poetics of theft—to a criticism of negotiations, a form of work that emerges where feminist readers and intellectuals argue for productive relations at the crossroads of difference and opposition. (Orr 2)

Rather than argue for women’s subversive domestic powers—powers that merely allow Enid to punish her husband by cooking bad meals—neodo-
Chapter 6

Domestic fiction encourages domesticity’s unstable, productive differences that consider normativity’s “interrelational complexity in the hope of establishing a different type of network” (Jakobsen 529). It aims to “engage” domestic norms’ “complex field rather than . . . reverse or oppose the norm” (Jakobsen 518). It places in dialogue or in negotiation the past, present, and possible future constructions of and theories about home. It aims, as Hortense J. Spillers writes in regard to the “female social subject,” to construct an “insurgent ground” (80; emphasis in original).

The architect Aldo van Eyck aptly describes neodomesticity’s goal: “Architecture need do no more, nor should it ever do less, than assist man’s [and woman’s] homecoming” (qtd. in Hertzberger, Roijen-Wortmann, Stauven 65). Eyck directs us to another fundamental implication of my project—the influence that such narratives have on or reflect for lived experience. Until now, this aspect of my research has remained, for the most part, at the margins of my analysis. Census statistics, architectural design, and historical research ground my readings of the fiction, but what does the fiction suggest about lived experience? How does neodomestic fiction’s architecture, to paraphrase Eyck, facilitate homecoming? I will now look more closely at what neodomestic fiction and its politics reveal about lived American domestic experience.

To Be Really Domestic
Lived American Neodomesticity

Domestic architecture mediates social relations, specifically those between women and men. Houses are the spatial context within which the social order is reproduced. . . . The history of American housing design indicates a gradual reduction in the gendered spaces creating, and created by, gender stratification. . . . The home is now indicative of more egalitarian gender relations.

—Daphne Spain, Gendered Spaces

There are numerous encouraging examples of lived neodomesticity, suggesting, as Daphne Spain writes, that “the home is now indicative of more egalitarian gender relations” (140). For example, the innovative program CoAbode refashions conventional domesticity’s geography by connecting single mothers who are in search of other single moms to share housing; such programs help widen women’s access to housing. Indicative of American domesticity’s changing and unstable legal definition is the fact that gay
marriages began being officially recognized in 2004 in Massachusetts and San Francisco, albeit they were also immediately contested. Also apropos of Spain’s conclusions about contemporary American housing design is the fact that today’s American women are fastening around their waists the traditionally masculine tool belt more than ever before.

*American Demographics* reports that women currently favor home improvement projects over shopping or cooking as their preferred leisure activity (Gallop-Goodman 14). Additionally, according to Home Improvement Research Institute’s product purchase tracking study, “Women’s fix-it-yourself purchases jumped from 32 percent in 1997 to 37.6 percent in 1999” (Gallop-Goodman 14). The percentages quantify changes in America’s domestic arrangements. Home improvement and do-it-yourself projects, traditionally men’s forte, now find women their fastest growing market, indicating that American (heterosexual) homemaking is undergoing fundamental changes.

Additionally, the term “metrosexual” has emerged to revise our understanding of men who engage in traditionally feminine activities like shopping and paying careful attention to grooming. The term attempts to craft a positive word for a “feminine male.” According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the term “metrosexual” refers to “a man (esp. a heterosexual man) whose lifestyle, spending habits and concern for personal appearance are likened to those typical of a fashionable, urban, homosexual man” (def. A). Mark Simpson coined the term in 1994, according to the online dictionary *The Word Spy*, to refer to a “gay, straight or bisexual” man who is “not afraid to embrace his feminine side” (“Metrosexual”). While it is unclear what effects the metrosexual has had, if any, on domestic relationships, it has clearly influenced the marketplace. Jean-Marc Carriol, director of the fashion company Trimex, goes so far as to suggest that feminism directly brought about this change for men: “The feminist movement has been the biggest contributor to the men’s market since it has developed. . . . The success of that push has fundamentally altered the way men and women interact within the workplace. Appearance and grooming are really important” (qtd. in “Rise of the Metrosexual”). Fashion is an opening, though clearly not an end point, for feminist intervention. As Janet R. Jakobsen points out, even “non-normative” terms like “lesbian . . . can become a specific regime of the normal” (521; emphasis in original). The metrosexual challenges male heterosexual norms evens as it affirms norms scripted for homosexual men and a feminized American consumer culture.

Material spaces also engage the norm of the single family, privately owned home while actualizing new architectures. The Rural Studio, Auburn
University’s community architecture program founded by the late Samuel Mockbee, provides one of, if not the best, material examples of neodomestic architectural standards.3 The Rural Studio asks its students to cross the threshold of misconceived opinions to create/design/build and to allow students to put their educational values to work as citizens of a community. The Rural Studio seeks solutions to the needs of the community within the community’s own context, not from outside it. Abstract ideas based upon knowledge and study are transformed into workable solutions forged by real human contact, personal realization, and a gained appreciation for the culture. (“Mission”)

As the mission statement begins to explain, the Rural Studio seeks to provide livable, sustainable designs for low-income families and communities. The buildings use local and unique materials to keep economic and environmental costs low (by making houses out of recycled carpet tiles and hay bales, for example). Recently, they have also begun to recycle buildings for new purposes. At the same time that they aim to keep initial construction and long-term maintenance costs low, the Rural Studio’s designs also seek “to raise the spirits of the rural poor through the creation of homes and community facilities that aspired to the same set of architectural ideals and virtues as those buildings which have substantial budgets and prosperous clientele” (King 50; 52). For example, one particular challenge that the Rural Studio tackles is the design and building of “20K” homes, or dwellings whose materials and labor cost no more than twenty thousand dollars.

The Rural Studio’s attention to smaller living and community spaces, local materials, economic and environmental sustainability, and vernacular architecture clarifies its differences from the extreme dream homes and the portrayal of the American dream in renovation shows like Extreme Makeover: Home Edition and This Old House.4 Additionally, while the Rural Studio has enjoyed its share of the media limelight, Mockbee advised architects to “help those who aren’t likely to help you in return, and do so even if nobody is watching!” (qtd. in Polter 42). Krista Tippett’s radio show, Speaking of Faith, featured a segment on the Rural Studio, “Rural Studio: An Architecture of Decency.” The segment explores the material and spiritual ways that Rural Studio designs affect their communities. The Rural Studio emphasizes (like the neodomestic fiction I have defined and analyzed) the sense of cultural history embedded in the local geography, particularly the history of slavery. Mockbee, in fact, hoped that the Rural Studio would help complete the unfinished reconstruction of the South.5
Conclusions

Not Living the American Dream
Failures to Change

As suggestive as these changes are for how neodomesticity emerges within lived experience, there are also problematic aspects to these popular hybrid constructions. Who has access to the egalitarian homes Spain describes and to the neodomestic ideology explored in this book? More specifically, to what extent is the “metrosexual” man the same person packaged in a different, albeit Armani, outfit? Carrio's suggestion that feminism has brought fashion to men carries dubious egalitarian politics. For example, attention to grooming and vanity perpetuate a youth- and body-obsessive culture that feminism has long fought against. Furthermore, while the term “metrosexual” increases attention to men's “lifestyles,” it does not dramatically or explicitly challenge the unequal division of domestic labor. The metrosexual does not, for good or bad, foster an interest in laundry, childcare, or eldercare. Fundamental feminine domestic roles (as caretakers and house cleaners) do not enjoy this same “sexy” hybridity, which is primarily available to middle- and upper-class single or childless men. Until real changes occur in the hours that men and women devote to domestic labor, the home will remain women's special domain.

Women's embrace of do-it-yourself projects also carries as much predicament as promise. One positive aspect of this trend is its reflection and encouragement of women's independence and confidence. Barbara's Way markets their Barbara K! line of tools, for example, as “a comprehensive lifestyle brand whose mission is to provide solutions for women through innovative products that help eliminate the fear factor in areas where women may lack confidence or knowledge.” Companies like Barbara's Way and Tomboy Tools market tools and do-it-yourself services that are designed for women. Some of the tools offer colors intended to appeal to female consumers as well as grips and other features designed to fit women's smaller hands; some work gloves, for example, “accommodate long fingernails” (McCann G07).

These tools for women suggest more about the enforcement of gender differences and an anxiety about women taking on these new roles than they suggest about a fulfillment of women's need for speciality tools. For instance, Herbert G. McCann reports the “Wisconsin-based RotoZip Tool Corp. introduced the Solaris, a bright red power saw, a smaller version of the company's original black model” (G07). According to the company's spokeswoman, “many women found the original too big and heavy. The new model is one pound lighter and has less power, which gives the user more control” (McCann G07). Tools designed for gender differences in hand size or upper
body strength hold merit, but companies seemingly ignore the fact that men will also benefit from a wider range of tool sizes.

Consumer remarks about these products designed for women confirm deeply entrenched ideas about femininity, masculinity, home improvement, and domestic roles. For example, one woman commented that she was not sure if she would buy power tools, even if they were designed for women, because “a lot of men won’t let you use it. They say it’s too dangerous” (qtd. in McCann G07). Another woman, while shopping with her husband for “drywall, flooring and a book on wiring” remarked that “she wasn’t sure about the tools either, especially if they were more expensive. ‘As a woman, I’d probably be more likely to adapt to what he wants. . . . It’s true, I’m more used to adapting’” (McCann G07). The women’s remarks suggest the appearance of these products and services does not necessarily indicate radical changes in gender roles. Whether a marketing trick or an attempt to recognize that “universal” tools do not fit the needs of all, these tools and services designed for women do not clearly measure up to more egalitarian gender roles.

Building companies’ marketing to single women also confirms that the more things change on the domestic front, the more they stay the same. Julie V. Iovine, for example, describes an advertisement produced by a Colorado builder that targets single female homebuyers. The advertisement’s visual and verbal rhetoric, which features a young woman and her dog, recycles a familiar fairy tale, Cinderella. According to Iovine, “The message is clear: Why wait for your prince to come? You can afford a home now—and ‘Woof! woof!’ surely beats a husbandly whine” (3). Owens Corning also reuses the fairy tale Sleeping Beauty to market its products: the “Chicago-based manufacturer of building materials, introduced a television ad campaign called ‘Siding Beauty’ in which a damsel awakens after 100 years to find that the vinyl siding covering her palace has outlasted them all. Subliminal message: Men may come and go, but good siding is hard to find” (Iovine 3).

These advertisements suggest that even as women take on different roles, there are clear attempts to recontain and repackage these changes in old narratives. Conversely, the advertisements’ humor suggests that they consciously recycle the old narratives to appeal to a new generation of women who increasingly do not wait until after marriage to buy a home: “Thanks to delayed marriages, profitable careers, higher divorce rates and longer lives, the number of women living alone has increased by more than a third in the past 15 years” (Iovine 3). Along these lines, another recent trend involves older women who are increasingly planning their retirement with their female friends: “This friends-helping-friends model for aging is gaining momentum among single, widowed or divorced women of a certain age.
The census does not tabulate households like these, and experts say it would be too early to see large numbers of older women living with friends, since few baby boomers, born from 1946 to 1964, have retired yet. But sociologists and demographers say the interest is growing” (Gross A). What discourages older single men from developing similar strategies? Men clearly also have much to gain in the revision and recycling of domestic roles, but as the Franzen Affair suggests, the troubling of domestic masculinity’s norms releases powerful anxieties.

Therefore, while the twentieth and twenty-first century’s “new normal” indicates some transformations in men’s and women’s roles and domestic settings, other domestic statistics encourage considerably less optimism about the emergence and establishment of more egalitarian domestic relations. For example, where male householders have a median net worth of $16,346 ($7,375 excluding home equity), female householders have a median net worth of $14,949 ($4,400 excluding home equity) (Davern and Fisher xvi). Such numbers indicate that women rely more on their homes for economic security than their male counterparts do: home equity composes about 70 percent of women’s median net worth, where home equity comprises about 50 percent of men’s median net worth. And, while neither married households nor female householders experienced a significant change in household net worth between 1993 and 1995, the median net worth of male householders rose from $14,219 to $16,346 during this same period (Davern and Fisher xvi). Men continue to hold distinct economic advantages over women. It follows, therefore, that gay male households would be better off financially than lesbian households. Gentrification’s association with the gay male community furthers this hypothesis. However, more data collection and research needs to be done on gay households and homemaking.

One positive aspect of America’s love affair with the single-family, detached home is the fact that the “abundant supply [of privately owned housing stock] makes it relatively easier for American families to adjust their housing circumstances to changes in needs than is true of most European countries with larger social housing sectors” (Stegman 86). However, as we have seen played out in the fiction, the questions of access and material impact become especially significant when one considers homeownership differences among a range of gender, class, and racial groups. Black and Hispanic homeowners remain economically disadvantaged. And those individuals and families who rent are truly left out in the cold—especially when one considers that homes account for an average of 44 percent of household wealth (Luckett 1). Thus, masculine domestic fiction’s focus on property and economics remains an important area of inquiry. Fiction addressing
homelessness, such as Marge Piercy’s *Longings of Women* (1994), Nami Mun’s *Miles from Nowhere* (2009), and Helena Maria Viramontes’s *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007), and fiction addressing migrant families, such as Helena Maria Viramontes’s *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), also contribute to the widening awareness and understanding of the domestic sphere’s uneven geographic development.

**Extreme Makeover**

Sponsoring Faith in the Bankrupt American Dream

The persistent problem from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century with the popularization of a limited vision of American model domesticity is that such popularizations effectively impede alternative models from gaining larger visibility. In the twenty-first century, the American dream’s corporate sponsorship in the popular ABC television program *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* powerfully illustrates the amount of capital needed to keep the American dream alive in the public sphere. The weekly reality program chronicles the renovation of a needy family’s home. In most episodes, the old residence is demolished and the crew has only a week to build the family an entirely new, fully furnished and landscaped home. The experience of watching *Extreme Makeover* teaches viewers what the model home looks like in its extreme and resuscitates a narrow vision of the American dream in the face of harsh ownership realities and increased obstacles in the road to homeownership.

While its title does not explicitly invoke a nationalistic focus, *Extreme Makeover*’s storyline frequently uses the American myth of exceptionalism. This familiar European-based story places America as a New World where immigrants find a wealth of opportunities unavailable elsewhere, including private home ownership and upward mobility. In season 3, episode 25, of *Extreme Makeover*, for example, a family of immigrants—the Peter family—encounters troubles that are juxtaposed with the familiar narrative that hard work will bring success in the United States, regardless of religion or social status. This aspect of the American dream, the host Ty Pennington admits in this episode, is what he loves most about America. Pennington’s claim, however, exists in tension with the fact that all the families featured in *Extreme Makeover* are hard working and yet still have fallen on hard times that merit extreme measures.

The repressed subtext is that hard work alone is often not enough to keep or maintain your own home. While American exceptionalism, espe-
cially regarding homeownership, remains a central part of our contemporary American identity, “the relative advantage of the New World has declined: ownership levels are now much the same in North America and Britain” (Harris and Hamnett 184). Although the research conducted by geographers Richard Harris and Chris Hamnett does not consider the relative advantages for modern non-European or non-first-world immigrants, the material advantages that lead to more opportunities in the New World are largely gone: we no longer enjoy the “higher incomes, abundant land, and early suburban growth, [that] gave working families a real economic advantage in the New World” in the late nineteenth century (Harris and Hamnett 185). Not surprisingly, given this context, the show frames the families’ problems as a kind of “bad luck.”

Therefore, the Peter family is both representative of the American dream and unique because the family’s “special” circumstances interrupted the “normal” course of achieving the dream. Extreme Makeover’s Web site explains that this poor Hindu family from Guyana falls just short of “achieving the American dream, when tragedy struck” (“Peter Family”). Had the house not caught fire, the family would have been okay. The program, furthermore, reinforces and capitalizes on the American dream by condensing its achievement into a seven-day miracle makeover.

The critics agree that Extreme Makeover is more than just another reality show: it is a miracle that creates a new world for a family in seven days. Unlike God, though, the staff and volunteers usually need the full seven days to complete the project. Extreme Makeover also employs Christian-style rhetoric and philanthropy to elevate its goals. Ann Oldenburg, writing for USA Today, emphasizes the program’s religious power. She writes, “What may have seemed at first to be an updated version of This Old House has become a spiritual happening, more revival meeting than TV taping. With its charitable sensibilities and ability to mobilize entire communities with a single episode, EM: HE is setting a standard for a new genre: Good Samaritan television” (E1). Stephen Johnson, who received an Extreme Makeover house, tellingly remarks, “It was a gift from God and ABC” (qtd. in Oldenburg E1). While a few families express concerns about construction practices and their ability to pay taxes and upkeep costs after appearing on the show, almost all of the families profusely thank the volunteers and businesses who helped. Many businesses, furthermore, continue to volunteer their services and supplies. Extreme Makeover masks the corporate privatization of the American dream by invoking Christian charity as a key element to the American dream’s achievement.

Notably, Extreme Makeover airs on Sunday evenings. While not overtly
Pentecostal, the program’s religious “spiritual” aspects explicitly play into the show’s format. Julie Polter, a writer for *Sojourners Magazine*, observes, “I find something almost biblical in the abundance the crew pours out on families and the genuine delight they appear to take in bringing some fantasy and lushness into modest spaces” (41). In one episode, for example, not one but two subzero refrigerators outfit a gourmet kitchen to help support a mother’s burgeoning catering business. The gifts keep coming in every episode in the form of new vehicles, family entertainment and workout rooms, and lavish, if not outlandish, decors, courtesy of *Extreme Makeover* and Sears (as well as other national and local sponsors). This commercialized spiritual geography contrasts with the historically and culturally grounded spiritual geographies that are central to many neodomestic novels.

The numerous material gifts overwhelm the family members and the audience. In some cases, the families are literally overwhelmed—teasers for the program frequently play and replay family members ecstatically collapsing on the ground when they see their new home for the first time. Hands are thrown in the air and clasped in prayer. The recipients invoke God. In the words of the Koepke family, “You are all a blessing from God.” The hosts graciously give the new home to the family, receive their thanks, and share hugs and tears. The show’s format emphasizes the extreme contrasts with “before” images juxtaposed against the dramatic new results. And, to ensure that the results are dramatic, the homes selected for the program are never larger than two thousand square feet. Once lost, but then found by *Extreme Makeover*, the participants are truly saved. Thus, (Christian) faith legitimizes and elevates the volunteers’ call to action, and families attest that their faith has been rewarded through their appearance on the program.

Like the nineteenth-century texts that precede it, *Extreme Makeover* highlights society’s duty to help the needy. In fact, Beecher and Stowe’s chapter entitled the “Homeless, Helpless, and Vicious” could very well be a subtitle for *Extreme Makeover*. A leaked March 2006 memo written by Charisse Simonian, *Extreme Makeover*’s director for family casting, acknowledges the show’s emphasis on sensational tragedy. The memo, sent to several ABC affiliates, contains a specific “wish list” of diseases and tragedies that *Extreme Makeover* would like to feature, including families with members who have Down syndrome, skin cancer, muscular dystrophy, or amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (Simonian). The memo also expresses interest in families who have lost children to a drunken driving accident and families who have been victims of hate crimes (Simonian). The memo placed the show’s sentimental politics under close scrutiny, at least for a few days. The mainstream media quickly picked up the story; CNN’s *Showbiz Tonight*, for example, featured
an interview with Tom Forman, executive producer of *Extreme Makeover*, and Andrew Goldberg from *The Smoking Gun*, the Web site that initially published the leaked memo. Forman defended the memo and emphasized the program’s goal of helping people. Goldberg reminded viewers that reality television “looks to exploit people in order to commercialize people’s woe in order to sell ads and make money” (*Showbiz Tonight*). The incident raised questions about the show’s primary motivation: does it aim to help people or to market products?

*Extreme Makeover* piques audience interest by invoking foundational American myths, featuring sensational family tragedies, and subconsciously playing on our fears of homelessness. After all, stuck families seeking a way out of their American nightmares are increasingly more the norm than the exception. The suspense and relief that we participate in as viewers hits home during a time of record foreclosures and falling home prices. *Extreme Makeover* provides a fantasy of domestic security for our post-9/11, post-Katrina, and credit card debt-infused age.

Not all viewers and reviewers of *Extreme Makeover* celebrate the program’s philanthropy. Paul Farhi points out that the “designers and builders call constant attention to their own act of charity, as if the whole exercise were really about enhancing their self-esteem” (C1). Farhi goes on to quote host Ty Pennington and to provide context for Pennington’s remark: “It’s been said a million times—‘it’s better to give than to receive’—but I never thought about that more than I did this week.’ . . . Amid sad piano music, another crew member adds, ‘They [the featured family] didn’t have anyone to turn to, and that’s why we’re here”’ (C1). Farhi sarcastically adds his reading of *Extreme Makeover*’s presentation of their purpose, “Oh, thank you, kindly millionaires at ABC. Thank you” (C1). Farhi’s remarks emphasize that America’s streets may no longer be paved with gold (if they ever were); the United States is now a country where *Oprah, Extreme Makeover*, and any number of media outlets and corporations sponsor a few American dreams.

Also like its white nineteenth-century predecessors, *Extreme Makeover* privileges middle-class heterosexual whiteness. For example, while *Extreme Makeover* has featured a variety of blended, single-parent, multiethnic, and multigenerational families, the show has yet to feature an openly gay parent. When the program came under fire from gay rights groups for allowing the antigay, Christian group Focus on the Family to sponsor an episode aired on October 2, 2005, “ABC denied any bias and said it would ‘absolutely’ consider featuring a gay family on the show” (Allen 18). The roots of *Extreme Makeover*’s conservative vision of the American dream and the origins of its
philanthropic hypermaterialism that keeps the dream alive can be found in this exclusionary but powerfully conservative vision of the model home.

*Extreme Makeover* reveals how the achievement of the American dream remains tied to a conservative, middle-class whiteness. A family’s “uncivilized” dwelling becomes a tasteful dream home. While the children in *Extreme Makeover* often receive extravagantly themed rooms—designed with the individual interests and dreams of each child in mind—the living areas and master bedroom uniformly conform to mainstream notions of “good taste.” The new landscaping lacks such folksy touches as an old tire filled with dirt to create a raised flowerbed. The interiors include new furnishings of largely classic and contemporary design—no mirrored headboards, hula girl lamps, or velvet artwork. Valuing or representing ethnic diversity becomes a design challenge. Ethnic touches, such as those designed for the Native American Piestewa family, reflect “a decorator’s delight . . . if it can be done in time” (“About the Show”). Notably absent are liquor cabinets, wine cellars, and ashtrays, as apparently all family members are nondrinkers and nonsmokers. The viewers, at least, never see a family member drink or light up. Former addicts, however, are allowed to grace the screen (Sadie Holmes from season 3, episode 21, for example).

In fact, one of the tips included in the show’s application packet suggests that family members not chew gum while taping their application video (*Extreme Makeover* 19). Editors need to select tape that will encourage the audience to sympathize with a family’s plight. If families smack gum or display other such “distasteful” habits, the editors’ task becomes more difficult. To put it bluntly, while these families may be poor or while they may have fallen on hard times, they should not exhibit “trashy” or “low-class” habits or tastes. Rather than overtly claiming that the designers civilize the needy homeowners, the program reverses this rhetoric by explicitly emphasizing how the family makes the volunteers more human. When we take into account the burdens associated with the gifts, we see that the half-million-dollar homes help the sponsors and perhaps even the volunteers more than the recipients.

Perhaps the vernacular architecture significant to projects like Auburn University’s Rural Studio or the green building practices that create both sustainable and ecofriendly structures are not regularly implemented in *Extreme Makeover* because they would eat into too much of the seven-day time limit. But this seems unlikely considering all of the other technological innovations and design elements each home includes. While more recent episodes often emphasize green options, any focus on a real reduction in size and consumption goes against *Extreme Makeover’s* formula of more is better—even when
the resources to support the excess are not readily available. *Extreme Makeover* replaces Beecher and Stowe’s call for thrift with a call for extreme excess.

As the economic downturn plays out, it will be interesting to see whether the program adjusts its rhetoric and practices, whether its popularity continues because of its appeal to fantasy and sentiment, or whether the show’s sponsors and viewers withdraw support. For our current moment—just as in the late nineteenth century—building a handful of lavish homes certainly does not address America’s housing crisis. Little wonder that *Extreme Makeover* receives more than fifteen thousand applications each week (“FAQ” 80). In this light, both *Extreme Makeover* and neodomestic fiction ultimately fail us. We have yet to popularize the domestic models that truly fulfill this extreme need and live up to the promise of the American dream.¹¹

Historian Andrew Wiese celebrates the positive changes in suburban space for African Americans during the course of the twentieth century. However, he concludes his history, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*, on a somber note, emphasizing “the persistence of racial inequality” and the challenges that disenfranchised populations still have to overcome:

> As Nobel laureate Toni Morrison has remarked, a central issue facing African Americans in the modern United States is how to overcome racism without losing or denying racial identity, how to build a ‘race-specific yet non-racist home’ from the building materials of a race-troubled society. For black suburbanites, this challenge was always more than figurative. In making places of their own in the margins of the city, they negotiated not only the hurdles of building homes and communities, but lines of color, class, and power embedded in the world around them. (Wiese 292)

Neodomestic fiction like Morrison’s *Paradise* interrogates exactly these questions. While the fiction does not necessarily provide solutions or answers to these issues, it demonstrates the advantages of relational spatial politics and helps us frame alternatives to the conventional model home within the arguably more manageable space of the novel.

Neodomestic fiction carves out spaces for alternative domestic geographies that both reflect and theorize lived realities. Americans’ lived domestic experiences provide clear material evidence—if there was any doubt in the first place—that sexism, classism, and racism remain lodged in the domestic geography of American culture. In other words, not everyone lives within and benefits from the contemporary egalitarian homes that Daphne Spain praises and from which she draws her conclusions. Masculine domestic fiction
significantly emphasizes this frequently overlooked aspect of the American dream. Additionally, feminine domestic fiction frequently emphasizes that the material house is only part of the equation. Like the dwellings designed and built by the Rural Studio, neodomestic fiction provides a “vernacular architecture” engaged in “dreaming, moving forward and beyond the limits and confines of fixed locations” (hooks, “Black Vernacular” 400).

A Woman’s Work Is Never Done
Conclusions and Remaining Chores

Women—from Jane Addams, who devoted her life to Hull-House, to Jane Jacobs, who reconceptualized how we view the city—are frequently at the forefront of alternative housing initiatives. My analysis of feminine and masculine (neo)domestic fiction reflects this trend as well. Women’s leadership in this area is not surprising given that women’s identities are still more strongly associated with the home, that their time investment in the home tends to exceed that of men, and that their economic well-being is more fully invested in their homes. A focus on instability and hybridity alone does not mark radical changes in cultures and everyday domestic space. Domestic fiction may be experiencing another renaissance, but we are far from a domestic revolution. Neodomestic fiction and American lived experience suggest that feminist politics still have much to do with home.

Thus, this study indicates that the long view is necessary. “Careful and effective reversals” take steps forward as well as steps back (Martin and Mohanty 306). Changes in the dominant, conventional politics of home—whatever “foreign” bodies it attempts to incorporate or exclude—come slowly. Unlike the popular home makeover show Trading Spaces (aired on the Learning Channel), where dramatic changes are achieved in a matter of days (and on a limited budget!), domestic fiction and culture cannot be renovated over the course of a few novels, even with expert designers such as Toni Morrison executing the task. Therefore, the chores ahead for domestic scholarship include more analysis of novels engaged in redesigning the home as well as those engaged in conventional constructions. As the housing crisis and foreign investment in American real estate continues to develop, writers will also continue to craft art that reflects and attempts to shape the shifting geography of the American dream.

Furthermore, remapping American domesticity involves the critics as much as the literature and culture. The novels surveyed here emphasize that the study of domestic fiction should occupy a more central position
in American literary history. While a spatial redefinition of the genre more readily includes a range of writers and homes, this remapping of the genre does not eliminate domesticity’s taint within critical spheres. Hawthorne’s oft-repeated curse against such fiction continues to set the tone for its critical analysis. Mary Kelley points out in “The Sentimentalists: Promise and Betrayal of Home” how “Leslie Fiedler’s ridicule of ‘the purely commercial purveyors of domestic sentiments’” extends Hawthorne’s complaint into the twentieth century (434). The now infamous remarks made by Jonathan Franzen about Oprah’s selection of *The Corrections* for her book club further suggests that the labels “women’s fiction” and “domestic fiction” continue to pack a negative punch. As long as domestic fiction continues to occupy territory outside the realm of serious literature and scholarship, our criticism normalizes women’s marginality and men’s dearth of domestic responsibility.

While scholars have made some progress in complicating the “separate spheres,” such divisions still seem to function in the production of American literary histories. Dana Heller, for example, explains how men’s writing about domesticity occupies a separate sphere within American literary history:

Such irony is compounded by the recognition that a reification of the American literary tradition has occurred, in this century, largely in accord with a critical tendency—most impressively demonstrated by Eric Sundquist’s *Home as Found*, Richard Chase’s *The American Novel and Its Tradition*, and Leslie Fielder’s *Love and Death in the American Novel*—to concentrate on the male American writer’s ambiguous, yet powerfully romantic attachments to this domestic space and the concept of origin. (226)

Neodomestic fiction challenges us to revise such gendered mapping of American domesticity. As projects like the Rural Studio indicate, this remapping need not be confined to literature. We can find instructive examples in other art forms, including the visual arts.

Photographer and multimedia artist Clarissa Sligh in particular interrogates what constitutes normative gendered and raced family roles and domestic space. Her book *What’s Happening with Momma* (1987), for example, is shaped like a house. Lisa Gail Collins describes another series, *Reading Dick and Jane with Me*, as a project that “captures the pain and contradiction of poor African American children internalizing the American Dream” (50). Sligh’s work addresses domestic violence, incest, and colonialism and is also deeply engaged in the relationships between the present and the past: “From the perspective of the artist as participant-observer, Sligh
considers the voices of the past and uses them to create imagery that is both provocative and historically introspective” (Willis 11). Collins goes on to explain that Sligh’s approach
critique[s] the ideal. She incorporates pictures from her own family albums and school yearbooks to dramatize the gap between the world represented by watercolor illustrations in the [Dick and Jane] primers and the one represented in her black and white photographs. Drawing from her own photographic archive, she sets the mythic vision of the reader against the material reality of the children who lived in her neighborhood and attended her segregated school. (50)

Her neodomestic visual images (which often incorporate text) blur the lines between the past and the present as well as the personal and the universal, questioning and repositioning cultural norms and taboos.

Her series *The Men* examines men’s relationship to the domestic sphere and masculinity. The domestic masculinity in *The Men* provides a visual representation of what neodomestic fiction such as Nava’s *Rag and Bone* accomplishes. For example, *Ron Ironing, Dallas, Texas, 1986*, which serves as the cover image for the book, provides an instructive visual image. In the portrait the man is barefoot and ironing in a garage or some other space full of bicycles. Three bicycles appear in the background; two hang on the wall and one stands just behind the subject—on the right side of the image—in front of what appears to be a metal filing cabinet. A closed window also appears in the background. The subject is placed in the center of a triangle produced by the right and left walls and the length of the ironing board. The crossed ironing board’s legs reproduce the triangle shape. The circles (repeated with the bikes’ wheels) and the window’s rectangle fill out the composition’s visual depth and interest.

The photograph is particularly interesting for the ways it juxtaposes the stereotypically feminine (completing domestic chores while barefoot, if not pregnant) and the stereotypically masculine (working in a garage among symbols of athleticism). The feminine chore transforms the masculine space and vice versa. Rather than reinforce gender norms, the image blurs them. The subject’s steadfast gaze challenges the viewer to see him as an embodiment of a nonanxious, domestic masculinity. The other images in this series similarly ask the viewer to engage with images that destabilize our conventional understandings of masculinity and femininity. Sligh’s oeuvre, like neodomestic fiction, “is an ongoing investigation and reinterpretation of our perceptions of normality and the role of the individual within the various
frameworks that shape her or him, such as the family, society, one's gender group, and one's ethnicity” (Williams 3).

Thus, the work ahead will continue Biddy Martin and Chandra Mohanty’s project of determining “What’s Home Got to Do with It?” Undoubtedly, the heart of such inquiries will require a discussion about the relationships among power, place, and history. Jane Tompkins writes that “domestic fiction is preoccupied, even obsessed with the nature of power” (160). My own work confirms her statement. Determining the various incarnations and meanings of domestic power constitutes the territory ahead.

WHILE ENGAGED in the process of remapping the study of domestic fiction, I was reminded of how my brother teased me in high school after I became president of my high school's local chapter of the Future Homemakers of America. He poked fun that I was actually leading the charge of the Future Home-Wreckers of America. As much as it pains me to admit, but in the best possible ways, I hope this project proves that he was right. From the model's fragments may we continue to seek ways to recycle ecologically and socially viable homes and homemaking practices. We have only begun to scour the range of America’s domestic geographies.