

2006

Interior revolutions: doing domesticity, advocating feminism in contemporary American fiction

Kalene Westmoreland

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, kwestmore@lsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Westmoreland, Kalene, "Interior revolutions: doing domesticity, advocating feminism in contemporary American fiction" (2006). *LSU Doctoral Dissertations*. 2665.

https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_dissertations/2665

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.

INTERIOR REVOLUTIONS:
DOING DOMESTICITY, ADVOCATING FEMINISM
IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by
Kalene Westmoreland
B.A., Tarleton State University, 1995
M.A., Tarleton State University, 1998
May 2006

©Copyright
Kathi Kalene Westmoreland
All Rights Reserved

For Brett,
Shauna, Brendan, Maya,
and Momma.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge and thank Dr. Rick Moreland for his guidance, support, encouragement, and understanding throughout this project. Rick, without you, I would still be hunkered down in a chair, feeling overcome. I would also like to acknowledge my committee members for their support and invaluable instruction: Dr. Jack May, Dr. Sharon Weltman, Dr. Kevin Bongiorno, and of course, Dr. Robin Roberts.

I would also like to thank my mentors from Tarleton State University, Dr. Mallory Young and Tom Pilkington. Dr. Young, you inspired me from the very first day of my college experience thirteen years ago; your teaching, support, and friendship have guided me through the difficulties and joys of both academia and life, even when we could not greet one another with “bonjour” every day. Dr. Pilkington, your support during my graduate career, first as my thesis director and then as my friend, has been immeasurable; you have never failed to encourage me and guide me, even when I felt defeated.

Thank you to all my students who have encouraged me and made me a better teacher.

Thank you to all the constants in my life, my friends and family. Kris, I have cherished every conversation we have ever had, and without your expertise (medical, intellectual, and personal) and advocacy, I would not have been able to finish this project. I am grateful for your presence in my life. Donna and Jesse Riley welcomed me into their hearts and family; thank you for embracing me and encouraging me. Teresa, you were there with me when this incredible journey in education began; you helped me realize a dream I never knew I could have, and for that, I owe my “Keeter” a debt of gratitude always. Dennis, thank you just for being you, for always keeping me in check, and for making me laugh. Daddy, thank you for your constant encouragement and pride in your middle child. Without the influence and constant support of

my momma, Pat, I would not be the woman that I am today. Momma, you are the kindest, strongest, and smartest woman I know, and you and I share the kind of sisterhood that inspired my dissertation. Thank you for making sure that I was not simply as “smart as a whip” but that I ended up doing something about it.

Kids--Maya, B.J., and Shauna--thank you for being in my life, for loving me, and for letting me love you. I wish I could make you know how much I have enjoyed my journey as your stepmother and how much I look forward to every day I have the privilege of spending with you.

Brett: you know. You have loved me constantly, bolstered me when I was down, and guided me when I was confused. You are my best friend, my inspiration, my creative co-conspirator, and always, my tag team partner. Thank you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Abstract.....	vii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter	
1 Home-Sick: Personal Anxiety and Political Oppression in <i>The Feminine Mystique</i> and <i>The Stepford Wives</i>	30
2 Sewing Subjectivity, Cooking Communities: Sisterhood and Domestic Resistance.....	57
Survival, Subjectivity, and Sisterhood in <i>The Color Purple</i>	64
Cooking and Cross-Generational Sisterhoods in <i>Fried Green Tomatoes</i>	93
3 So Far From Sisterhood: Domesticity as Feminist Pedagogy.....	112
Isolation, Sacrifice, and Unification in <i>So Far From God</i>	120
Isolation, Sisterhood, and Disorder in <i>The Joy Luck Club</i>	130
4 Revising Domesticity, Restructuring the Ideal: The Myth of Family.....	149
(Dis)“satisfying” Stories and Sisterhoods in <i>A Thousand Acres</i>	157
Subversive Sentimentality in <i>We Were the Mulvaney</i> s.....	182
5 Imperfect Arrangements: Contractual Domesticity and Comparative Mothering.....	199
Subversive Surrogacy in <i>The Nanny Diaries</i>	206
Imperfect Domesticities in <i>A Perfect Arrangement</i>	218
Coda.....	232
Bibliography.....	239
Vita.....	245

ABSTRACT

Domesticity has endured as a facet of everyday life in the late twentieth century and beyond, despite cultural acceptance of feminist beliefs and ideals which encourage women's movement away from the private sphere of the home. A tumultuous and remarkable cultural transformation has marked the four decades since the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, a key text of early second-wave feminism. Equality and choice seem viable and attainable, yet many women today feel overwhelmed by responsibilities and the pressure to live up to the idealization of motherhood. Domesticity can be used as a tool of oppression, against which feminisms may provide useful forms of resistance; but feminisms and domesticity can also function in concert, which can strengthen their potential to transform individual women's lives and cultural attitudes about women. *Interior Revolutions: Doing Domesticity, Advocating Feminism in Contemporary American Fiction* examines how various late twentieth century writers represent this complex relationship and reveals domesticity's potential as a site of transformative feminist discourse and praxis.

Through a third-wave, feminist poststructuralist lens I analyze nine contemporary works of fiction from a variety of genres and one key feminist text, *The Feminine Mystique*, in order to reconsider the scope of American domestic fiction. *Interior Revolutions* illustrates how "advocating feminism" is a useful means of personal and political transformation for characters, readers, and American women. Representations of domesticity convey ways that our culture perceives women and their relationship to domestic space; such representations may in turn influence how women see their own relationship to domestic spaces and responsibilities. Engaging with these representations can spur women to reconsider and revise their conceptions of the ways that feminism and domesticity function in their own lives, potentially prompting

them to advocate feminism. *Interior Revolutions* examines texts and discourses about feminisms, domesticity, and the meaningful connections between these concepts.

INTRODUCTION

“The personal is political” (Robin Morgan, qtd in *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*)

“For our generation, feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice we have it--it’s simply in the water” (Baumgardener and Richards qtd in *Not My Mother’s Sister: Generational Conflict and Third Wave Feminism*).

According to postfeminism, women now have a choice between feminism and antifeminism, and they just naturally and happily choose the latter. And the most powerful way that postfeminism worked to try to redomesticate women was through the new momism. Here’s the progression: Feminism won; you can have it all; of course you want children; mothers are better at raising children than fathers; of course your children come first, of course you come last; today’s children need constant attention, cultivation, and adoration, or they’ll become failures and hate you forever; you don’t want to fail at that; it’s easier for mothers to abandon their work and their dreams than for their fathers; you don’t want it all anymore (which is good because you can’t have it all); who cares about equality, you’re too tired; and whoops--here we are in 1954. (Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it Has Undermined Women*)

Domesticity can be used as a tool of oppression, against which feminisms may provide useful forms of resistance, but feminisms and domesticity are not always and not necessarily opposed to each other. Feminisms and domesticity can also function in concert, which can strengthen their potential to transform individual women’s lives and cultural attitudes about women. Feminisms and domesticity are complex, fluid political and personal concepts that are widely undervalued and misunderstood by both men and women. Feminisms and domesticity are also interdependent, ebbing and flowing together and against one another politically; the seeming fixity which is culturally assigned to these complex terms in fact bolsters the political importance of both terms and their relationship to each other. Studying how various late twentieth-century writers represent this complex relationship reveals domesticity’s potential as a site of transformative feminist discourse and praxis.

The term domesticity is sometimes used as if it has one meaning that applies to all situations and individuals. However, domesticity actually has many possible meanings and associations that resonate politically and personally. Domesticity can refer to the paid and unpaid labors of housekeeping, to creative endeavors related to the home, and to the expectations related to the maintenance of private familial domestic space. It is also culturally coded as feminine, as it is traditionally labor performed by women. It consists of both preventive and reparative work expected to be routinely performed, such as preparing food and washing dishes, doing laundry, sewing, cleaning toilets, and eliminating clutter and dirt from surfaces. Creative endeavors related to the home, such as interior decorating and design, crafting, cooking, and sewing, can enhance this perception. These acts of physical maintenance and creativity can result in the perception of an individual's or a family's home as a private haven from a harsh world. Further, such domestic creativity and housekeeping performed by a single individual within a home can lead, or at least contribute, to a cultural conception that the familial (or individual) domestic home space *must* function as a haven. In all these senses of domesticity, the laborer's subject position is key. Because women have traditionally performed domesticity, and their performance has been paradoxically both undervalued and venerated, it is crucial to examine how representations of subject positions and power within the household have varied depending on historical and cultural situations. This study examines different representations of women's responses to the demands of such labor and related ideologies.

Feminism, like domesticity, can convey a deceptively fixed meaning. Estelle B. Freedman defines feminism in *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* as "a belief that women and men are inherently of equal worth. Because most societies privilege men as a group, social movements are necessary to achieve equality between women

and men, with the understanding that gender always intersects with other social hierarchies” (7). This definition of feminism is especially useful because it reflects the complexities of a belief and a movement which have the power to unify as well as highlight differences. According to Freedman, “by 1980 . . . anyone who challenged prevailing gender relations might now be called a feminist, whether or not they lived long before the coining of the term feminism, agreed with all the tenets of women’s liberation, or claimed the label” (5). My study examines characters that, in bell hooks’ term, “advocate feminism”¹ by attempting to define a place for feminist thinking and behavior in their own lives and experiences, whether or not they self-identify as feminists. This focus parallels the realities of many women’s lives in twentieth century American culture and contributes to useful redefinitions of feminism, which in turn encourages its survival.

This study examines how the various waves of feminism have surged forward and receded during the latter half of the twentieth century and how domesticity has likewise vacillated as an area of concern for feminists. Feminism’s so-called “first wave” spanned generations and centuries. While motherhood and domesticity were issues for early feminists, they were not the focuses of critique by mainstream women’s rights activists as much as other political issues were, such as suffrage, legal and educational rights, and abolition. In fact, some first-wave feminists embraced symbolic “social motherhood” in order to transform society; using maternalism, groups such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union organized and “tried to

¹ In *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989), bell hooks argues “I believe women should think less in terms of feminism as an identity and more in terms of “advocating feminism”; to move from emphasis on personal lifestyle issues towards creating political paradigms and radical models of social change that emphasize collective as well as individual change” (82). I find hooks’ suspicion of feminism as identity useful, particularly when examining the various manifestations of the women’s movement. However, my study emphasizes individual changes which preface and sometimes replace attempts to effect collective change; I find that these characters provide models for readers to advocate feminism in their own lives.

protect women and children in the home,” according to Freedman, “rather than rejecting women’s domestic identities” (65-66). During much of this era, particularly during the Victorian Cult of True Womanhood, first-wave feminism intersected with women’s domestic identities. For example, through the establishment of settlement houses for working-class women and children, the “conservative ideal of the home as a separate, complementary, but not equal sphere of social life” was upheld (Domosh and Seager 22). However, Freedman states that “maternalism represented a political consciousness that could either reinforce the ideal of separate spheres or subvert it to oppose certain forms of inequality” (68). The intersections of maternalism/feminism and the private sphere of the home continued into first-wave feminism’s final era, the 1950s, which, as Stephanie Coontz asserts in *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, “revived the Victorian notions of separate spheres for men and women” (43).

The wave imagery used to describe the historical stages of feminism suggests ongoing concerns for women. This is certainly true of second-wave feminism, which began in the 1960s and drew first upon women’s domestic experiences; Coontz states that “although Betty Friedan’s bestseller *The Feminine Mystique* did not appear until 1963, it was a product of the 1950s” (37). Widespread discontent with domesticity helped catalyze second-wave feminism; in addition to dissatisfaction with the limitations posed by women’s cultural assignment to the private sphere, feminists and housewives questioned the economic inequity of unpaid domestic work. The movement later shifted its attentions to more overt political issues, in spite of the continuing overarching domestic subjugation of women. Yet, the achievements for women made possible by second-wave pioneers like Betty Friedan have positively infiltrated much of our culture. Coontz states that “the legitimacy of women’s rights is so widely accepted today that only a tiny

minority of Americans seriously propose that women should go back to being full-time housewives or be denied educational and job opportunities because of their family responsibilities” (40). Many of the freedoms which women have gained because of the women’s liberation movement seem to stem from a resistance to the limiting implications of domesticity. Progressive attitudes about women’s equal rights are so pervasive that in 2000, 85% of Americans polled supported the idea. However, only 29% of respondents claimed to be feminists in another American poll conducted the same year (Freedman 10). This disparity between feminist ideas and non-feminist identities exemplifies the contradictions between popular thinking about women’s equality and lingering perceptions about women’s roles in the home, a contradiction which Coontz noted in 1992: “Yet when commentators lament the collapse of traditional family commitments and values, they almost invariably mean the uniquely female duties associated with the doctrine of separate spheres for men and women” (41).

Third-wave feminism, which began in the early 1990s, attempts to investigate such contradictions. The third wave also aspires to ameliorate some of the divisiveness which had marred first- and second-wave feminisms by aiming to bring together women from disparate social and cultural positions by recognizing and embracing contradictions. Some recent feminist scholarship scrutinizes a renewed cultural emphasis on the importance of motherhood and domesticity; this scholarship suggests that domesticity and feminism remain persistent crucial concerns for women despite the seeming dissolution of previously tenacious beliefs about the gendered separation of public and private spheres. Third-wave feminism and domesticity can share a connection that helps illustrate the second-wave feminist credo that the personal is political. However, the common-sense ways that domesticity typically functions within individual households as well as cultural perceptions about domesticity destabilize Morgan’s

powerful message: that is, the political importance of domestic work remains insufficiently understood. Domesticity has functioned both to undermine the potentially transformative nature of Morgan's statement and to encourage women to reject or revise the ways in which their personal labor is used and perceived within overarching power structures. Further, as the history of women in twentieth-century America illustrates, women's attempts to transform how domesticity impacts their lives have catalyzed feminist movements. The symbiotic relationship which can exist between domesticity and feminism continues to pose concerns for individuals, feminist activists and theorists, and American culture in general, even as feminism settles into its third wave; this history suggests a renewed need to study how various authors and scholars throughout the latter half of the twentieth century have responded to and represented these ideas and practices. By using a variety of texts that were written during and/or set in contemporary America I hope to illustrate that domesticity has sometimes been represented as a springboard for feminist change within individual women's lives, regardless of which wave of feminism has most influenced their generation. Maybe now more obviously than ever, domesticity is a crucial feminist site.

Domesticity and feminisms function together symbolically as well as symbiotically. Domestic work is most often performed by women within the confines of the home; however, a clean, well-managed home usually bears no markings of the labor. Therefore, domesticity is often considered invisible work. While feminism is not necessarily invisible work, it too is culturally undervalued, as we still live in a patriarchal society. Like housework, feminist activism is most often performed by women; and, like housework, the absence or failure of feminist activity is most noticeable when the need for such activities is most obvious. Seen in this light, domesticity can be conceptually and metaphorically compared to feminism. The

preventive and reparative aspects of domesticity reflect the aims of the women's liberation movement. The multiple backlashes against feminism resemble the daily cycles of housekeeping. Feminism and domesticity must both be assessed regularly, as after the work has been done, its progress is eroded and must be maintained. Further, both domesticity and feminism are profoundly affected by cultural nostalgia. The texts that I examine in this study reveal ways that domesticity is often used to reinforce nostalgia, and ways that feminism must dismantle the cultural grip of nostalgia, which is usually counter-productive to progressive change in women's lives.

Despite calls for revised cultural attitudes about women's choices and the domestic division of labor, very little seems to have changed. Domesticity has not gone away. Instead, it has transformed, and in some ways, intensified. Widespread assumptions about the natural place of women's labor in the home, ideas that were disseminated and strengthened through the Victorian Cult of True Womanhood are not significantly different than the "Cult of True Motherhood" that, as some feminist critics have argued, seems to be a part of latter twentieth-century America's cultural *zeitgeist*. However, much like other domestic issues I will discuss in this study, similar attitudes toward motherhood are not strictly confined to this time period or wave of feminism. For instance, Mary Wilkins Freeman's 1887 short story "The Revolt of Mother" allegorically and thematically illustrates the difficulties of demanding and enacting change within the sphere of the home. The demand by Sarah Penn (the story's "Mother") for a more suitable space in which to live and perform her domestic duties anticipates various issues of the twentieth century women's movement(s). Like some women of subsequent generations, "Mother" does not ask for a life free of domestic burdens, but expects a better one within the confines of her home. Her vacillation between aggressive demands and meek requests is as

complex as twentieth century women's reactions to similar concerns. The cows with which "Mother" must contend in the story mean more work for her, though their placement is allegedly a convenience and their number represents a certain status and comfort for the family; similarly, the deluge of appliances in the twentieth century was meant to ease housewives' burdens, but the demand for perfection within the household increased, ironically intensifying housewives' labor. Further, the husband's going back on his forty-year promise to give "Mother" the home she desires parallels the consistent devaluation of women and the domestic labor they often perform or manage. This narrative situation represents how women's choices and potential fulfillment are dependent on male whims, even in the culturally sanctioned "woman's place"; the twentieth-century texts that I will study continue to represent this problem. Also, like feminist activists of the twentieth century who are concerned for their literal and figurative daughters' futures, "Mother" is apprehensive about her daughter's future role as housewife. This reveals her selfless need for change. She wants a better life for her daughter, but her perspective is limited to domestic, "natural" concerns of the home. Though "Mother" has successfully relocated her family into a nicer home--the new family barn--the patriarchal perspective is both emphasized and questioned through the story's conclusion. The story ends with an image of the defeated husband sobbing, which could be read as a "victory" for Mother; however, Freeman's decision to end the story with an image of the Father figure centralizes his perspective and the events' effect on him, all of which might foreshadow actual twentieth-century cultural backlashes against the women's movement away from the home. In other words, Mother's "revolt" foresaw both revolutions and counter-revolutions.

Recent scholarship supports this reading's assertion of limited feminist progress, particularly for women who are trying to negotiate the seemingly limitless "choices" made

possible by their foremothers and made problematic by the powerful cultural pull of traditional motherhood and domesticity. During the Victorian Cult of True Womanhood, private and public spheres were divided along gender lines, with each sphere intended to contribute to the overall goal of a healthy economy, supported by healthy families. This is similar to what recent scholarship, including Arlie Hochschild's *The Second Shift*, reveals about the structure and goals of current American households. What differentiates this seemingly archaic methodology from current practice are changes wrought by the women's movement: women can now move beyond the private sphere of the home, taking jobs and engaging in careers in addition to or instead of motherhood. Yet they are still tethered by domestic concerns within the home. According to Judith Warner in *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*, "choice," as a key term in the women's liberation movement, is nothing more than a buzzword, the "fetish word of our generation, perhaps the most sacred of all our articles of faith" (145). As scholars such as Warner, Susan Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, and Sally Helgesen reveal in their recent studies of both cultural artifacts and real women's lives, the fetishizing of "choice" is indeed as pervasive and complicated as the cultural pull of nostalgia. The myth of "choice" undermines change.

Studying the symbolic and symbiotic relationship between domesticity and feminism also reveals a troubling idea about the current state of feminism in America. If feminism can be viewed as extended or "enlarged housekeeping"ⁱⁱ 1) done by women in the private sphere wherein 2) continual upkeep is needed to maintain progress, then 3) the invisibility of feminism, like that of domesticity, becomes very problematic. If feminism becomes culturally invisible or

ⁱⁱ Thomas Foster's *Transformations of Domesticity in Modern Women's Writing* examines how modernist women writers "reimagined domesticity . . . to reject the ideology of separate spheres" (2) and critiques the "enlarged housekeeping" metaphor that privileged white, middle-class needs.

is deemed unnecessary, then “postfeminist” theories arise, which undermine and undervalue the feminist work already accomplished and suggest that further feminist work is unnecessary. The repetitive and everyday nature of cultural and private housekeeping contributes to their eventual invisibility. This invisibility limits not only the good that can be accomplished on a broader scale but also the general perception that good *needs* to be done. Ironically, we are encouraged to believe that the domestic tether is, as Martha Stewart says, “a good thing.”

How did domesticity come to be perceived as a “good thing”? Although my study is not a formal historical survey of feminism in twentieth-century America, it reveals parallels and contradictions between representations of domesticity and historical movements, such as the various stages, or waves, of feminism. By studying texts which were written from the beginning of second-wave feminism and set either directly before or during this thirty to forty-year time span, I attempt to deconstruct the ways in which cultural and historical forces have shaped women’s lives. Domesticity is a constant concern for women, regardless of race, class, sexual orientation, and marital status; the ways that women interact with domesticity, however, are often profoundly affected by these factors. Typically, women have been expected to perform domestic duties within the home based on what Alice Kessler-Harris and Karen Brodtkin-Sacks deem the “domestic code [which has] insisted that women’s most essential role is that of wife-and-mother” (72). This ideology is a continuation of the Victorian Cult of True Womanhood; variations on this oppressive domestic ideology can be seen throughout the twentieth century. In *Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World* Mona Domash and Joni Seager cite design historian Penny Sparke, who argues that the “Victorian home set the tone for the contemporary U.S. and British gendered relationship within the home. The Victorian ‘Cult of Domesticity’ served as an important social role. It set up a

women's world that complemented, but did not supersede, the world of men" (7). The pervasiveness of upper- and middle-class sensibilities from this era has contributed to an inaccurate picture of domesticity in women's actual lives. While many women, particularly of the middle class, did adhere to this paradigm, many others did not, and worked outside the home as well, either for wagesⁱⁱⁱ or in a career, usually earning substantially less than men.

In fact, because so little has changed in terms of expectations for women to perform domestic labor within the home, it makes more sense to examine the ways that women have altered domesticity by combining activities within and outside of the home. Yet this perspective is difficult to maintain and stabilize because both cultural mythology and even early feminist work privileged ideology and image over economic and social realities. Feminist benchmarks like Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and much second-wave work privileged a white, middle-class perspective, which has contributed to the misperception that virtually all women in pre-women's liberation America were relegated to the suburbs and did not perform labor for wages. However, the demands of domesticity were indeed pervasive. As Stephanie Coontz points out in *The Way We Never Were*:

Beneath a superficial revival of Victorian domesticity and gender distinctions, a novel rearrangement of family ideals and male-female relations was accomplished [in the 1950s]. For women, this involved a reduction in the moral aspects of domesticity and an expansion of its orientation toward personal service. Nineteenth-century middle-class women had cheerfully left housework to servants, yet 1950s women of all classes created makework in their homes and felt guilty when they did not do everything for themselves. The amount of time women spent doing housework actually increased during the 1950s, despite the

ⁱⁱⁱ In "The Demise of Domesticity in America," Kessler-Harris and Brodtkin Sacks provide a succinct sociological/historical survey of women's work inside and outside the home. Regarding working-class families, these authors trace the "informal economy" of wage-earning, "where they provided significant amounts of cash for family needs and stretched family income with their unwaged labor" including "petty entrepreneurial sales and service activities, such as taking in piecework or laundry at home, baking goods for sale, peddling, or running a small store" as well as taking in lodgers (68).

advent of convenience foods and new, labor-saving appliances; child care absorbed more than twice as much time as it had in the 1920s. By the mid-1950s, advertisers' surveys reported on a growing tendency among women to find 'housework a medium of expression for . . . [their] femininity and individuality'. (27)

Yet, economic realities and personal determination meant for many women that domesticity was not the sole mark of identity, though cultural expectations demanded that their work outside the home be accomplished in ways that were meant to reinforce capitalist patriarchy, not undermine it. For working-class families in particular, as Kessler-Harris and Brodtkin-Sacks point out, "reality [dictated they] needed more than one paycheck to participate in the more expensive suburban lifestyle. Part-time work, 'mothers' shifts,' seasonal jobs that allowed 'vacations' when the kids were out of school all helped these 'deviant' women disguise themselves as proper homemakers" (73). As in the Victorian era, upper and middle class standards helped define working-class expectations about women's participation in the workforce, yet the practical reality was that "during the 1950s the proportion of wives and mothers in the wage labor force grew by one third" (73). Additionally, the women's liberation movement catalyzed further increases in women's workforce participation. Yet in spite of such increases cultural and historical misperceptions linger regarding women's workforce participation and women's engagement with domesticity. Thus, inaccuracies often continue to impact current ideology. Because women's "choices" of today seem like new, radical concepts instead of variations and expansions on previously established patterns, complacency with alleged progress and change abounds.

The meanings that domesticity may have in culture and in women's lives are elusive and unfixed, yet the perpetuation of the previously discussed problematic notions relies on an illusion of fixity. This illusion that domesticity's meaning is static--that despite resistance the women's

movement provided and enhanced, domesticity is still unavoidable and undervalued, yet culturally assigned to women--is based in part on nostalgia. However, if we recognize the mythological nature of fixed ideas about home and family, we can recognize how such myths distort and inhibit the potential for change. In other words, refusing to recognize that change is possible may actually make change impossible. Nostalgia is powerful because it operates on several interconnected levels: 1) cultural, as myth dominates and defines societal conceptions of family and home, 2) generational, as parameters of what these concepts can mean become more limited even as subsequent generations attempt to differentiate themselves from their predecessors and 3) personal, as the individual woman or family trying to define herself or itself within the individual home finds that cultural and generational myth hinders attempts to change domestic paradigms. In one epigraph to this chapter, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels explain "the progression" from feminist to circa 1954 stay-at-home mother, illustrating how myth and nostalgia can self-perpetuate. Stephanie Coontz argues that "not all myths are bad, of course. People need shared stories and rituals to bring them together and reinforce social solidarity. But myths that create unrealistic expectations about what families can or should do tend to erode solidarities and diminish confidence in the problem-solving abilities of those whose families 'fall short'" (6). Despite such negative consequences, nostalgia is difficult to resist. The desire to conform to nostalgic images of what a family should be--middle class, patriarchal, and white--reflects an understandable desire to fit in with the most commonly disseminated images of domesticity, but it also produces an overly narrow cultural conception of what the American family should be. As Coontz asserts, "many myths are white, middle-class myths, both because middle-class individuals are the predominant mythmakers in our society and because the media tends to project fragments of the white, middle-class experience into universal

‘trends’ or ‘facts’” (6). This assertion parallels the problematic assumptions of early second-wave feminism which promoted a white, middle-class perspective as universal.

My study attempts to unravel the myths of the American family, to deconstruct nostalgic strongholds, and to disentangle potentially false assumptions about the nature of domesticity--specifically that it is necessarily oppressive, negative, and stultifying work. By drawing on the broad history of the women’s movements of the twentieth century, I hope to disprove the potentially damaging notion that their fundamental concepts--such as awareness of personal and political oppression and rejection of these oppressions through subversion and the formation of sisterhoods--are no longer as relevant as they once were. For example, in *Practising Feminism: Identity, Difference, Power* Nickie Charles points out that “the idea of a shared oppression that unites women in their struggle for liberation has been central to second-wave feminism. It is often seen as marking the emergence of women’s liberation movements while their subsequent fragmentation is linked to the recognition that ‘sisterhood’ hid differences and that women automatically shared neither interests nor identities” (2). While sisterhood has been problematic in terms of feminist theory and practice, it is also potentially transformative for women who engage in it. Several of the texts I examine show that sisterhoods, while difficult to form and maintain, can actually acknowledge differences between women even as they help cross boundaries of race, class, age, and sexual orientation that have historically separated women.

The positive aims of constructed sisterhoods in these texts reflect the theoretical perspectives I use to frame this study. By combining feminist poststructuralism and a third-wave feminist perspective, I am able to examine a varied group of characters who ultimately advocate feminism, whether they openly identify themselves as feminist or not. Chris Weedon, in *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, defines feminist poststructuralism as a “mode of

knowledge production which uses poststructuralist theories of language, subjectivity, social processes and institutions to understand existing power relations and to identify areas and strategies for change” (40). Studying domesticity can highlight cultural and familial power relations; feminist poststructuralism is useful to such a project because it analyzes resistance. Domesticity, as it is typically labor performed by individual women, provides a discursive field upon which to examine intersections of personal (for characters and readers) and political interests. The family is one site where these interests intersect:

Liberal, radical, and socialist feminisms are all critical of the family to varying degrees, but none of them can really account for its appeal. In order to understand why women so willingly take on the role of wife and mother, we need a theory of the relationship between subjectivity and meaning, and meaning and social value. We need to grasp the range of possible *normal* subject positions open to women, and the power and powerlessness invested in them. The family, for example, most obviously offers power to men, who might have none outside it. But the positions of wife and mother, though often subject to male control, also offer forms of power--the power to socialize children, to run the house and to be the power behind the throne. It is to the understanding of these issues that poststructuralism can usefully contribute. (18-19, original emphasis)

Feminist poststructuralism helps to reveal the motivations of characters who, despite widely varying domestic scenarios and experiences, undergo self-imposed discoveries about the nature of power, particularly as it applies to their situation. These discoveries, the result of willingly engaging in discourses, involve exploring questions about sites of power, sovereignty of self, and resistance. Weedon states that “discourses represent political interests and in consequence are constantly vying for status and power. The site of this battle for power is the subjectivity of the individual and it is a battle in which the individual is an active but not a sovereign protagonist” (40). By using domesticity as a discursive tool, these characters are able to transcend their personal experiences and ultimately advocate feminism for themselves and others.

Further, I use bell hooks' terminology to examine sites of power and powerlessness; a term such as "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" indicts multivalent oppressors and is thus useful to examine the continued appeal of domesticity for characters of differing backgrounds. Finally, I am writing from a third-wave feminist perspective, not only because I identify with the third-wave generation of feminists, but because it usefully critiques and expands upon first and second-wave theories. Regardless of what era the texts in this study are composed or set in, first and second-wave feminist theories do not allow for contradictions associated with various characters' interactions with domesticity. As I will illustrate in individual chapters, the characters who transform their perspectives on domesticity through subversively or defiantly rejecting white supremacist capitalist patriarchy often enact bell hooks' idea of "advocating feminism" rather than identifying as a feminist (Gamble 250).

Thus, my incorporation of feminist poststructuralism and a third-wave feminist perspective underscores the idea that domesticity and feminism are fluid political concepts that do impact all women's daily lives, but considerations of race, class, sexual orientation, or age may change exactly what kind of impact an individual woman encounters. As *Third Wave Agenda* writers Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake assert: "what oppresses me may not oppress you . . . what oppresses you may be something I participate in, and . . . what oppresses me may be something you participate in" (qtd. in Gamble 52). Building upon second-wave feminism, third-wave feminism promotes awareness of complicity in traditional power structures and oppression through consciousness raising. Yet unlike second-wave feminism, third-wave feminism allows for and embraces "paradox and contradiction," while encouraging activism (Dicker and Piepmeier 5, 12-13). One way third-wave feminism reveals both continuity with its predecessor(s) and the beneficial aspects of contradiction is through its revision of the familial

metaphor of sisterhood. In *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflicts and Third Wave Feminism*, Astrid Henry argues “the mother-daughter relationship--with both its implied connection and aggression--is a particularly female political metaphor, and thus has particular resonance within feminism” (11). The inherently generational “matrophor” is particularly valuable to my study as most of the characters, regardless of whether they participate in or identify with feminism, are both literally and metaphorically mothers, daughters, and sisters.

Despite the potential for “daughterhood” to supplant “sisterhood” as a metaphor of political accord in current feminist criticism, women today--daughters of previous liberation movements--remain unduly burdened with domestic concerns, as well as with the idea of “choice.” Thus, my study examines characters that negotiate different kinds of choice from a variety of familial perspectives and historical settings. For example, I analyze representations of domestic scenarios based on differing economic and social realities, including domestic workers who negotiate a “second shift” of domesticity. A feminist, poststructuralist, third-wave perspective helps the reader to perceive the home as what sociologist Mary Romero refers to in *Maid in the U.S.A.* as “one of the *sites* of class struggle” (44 original emphasis). Romero also argues “that sisterhood is one of the *stakes* of class struggle,” which in my texts applies to both the domestic workers and the typically white, middle-class women they serve. Despite the tendency for women of the twentieth century to handle the burden of domesticity with no outside help, this trend is changing.^{iv}

^{iv} See Mary Romero’s *Maid in the U.S.A.*, Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo’s *Domestica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning in the Shadow of Affluence*, Susan Douglas and Meredith Michael’s *The Mommy Myth: the Idealization of Motherhood and How it Has Undermined Women*, Judith Warner’s *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*, Susan Chira’s *A Mother’s Place*, Arlie Hochschild’s *The Second Shift* and Mona Domosh and Jonie Seager’s *Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World* for statistical analysis and overviews of

Women's taking on the second shift of housework and childrearing after the first shift of career while distributing some of the burden to domestic laborers suggests that multiple, continuous, and even increasing backlashes against feminist advances have occurred since women's liberation movements, particularly second-wave feminism, began. While Susan Faludi's groundbreaking text *Backlash* informs my own readings of feminist texts and history, my study attempts to show that multiple backlashes have relentlessly followed what Faludi defined as the most visible and recent one. A current example of backlash is the postfeminist ideology of mythologizing motherhood. Theorists and writers currently are attempting to define the "new problem that has no name" (Warner 34). Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels in *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* critique the "new momism," while Judith Warner explores the terms "Mommy Mystique," "This Mess" and "The Motherhood Religion" or "total-reality motherhood" (5, 13, 67). Arlie Hochschild's foundational study refers to the "stalled revolution" signaled by the pervasiveness of the "second shift" (12). Sally Helgesen, on the other hand, theorizes from a more positive critical perspective; she analyzes real women's lives in "edge cities," finding that these women, as "everyday revolutionaries," are exploding the boundaries of work and home that the "new momism" seems to promote. These studies inform my understanding of current trends in domesticity. By attempting to define the "new problem that has no name" these studies underscore how domesticity and feminisms are fluid political concepts grounded in the complexities of personal experience, rather than fixed sites of "choice" from which women always gain positively.

the trends and effects of increased employment of domestics, nannies, and housekeepers in America.

I will also examine how different writers characterize home-spaces as discursive fields--as sites of oppression and/or resistance--and the ways in which domesticity can potentially spur individuals to advocate, or at least engage with, feminist concerns. As each chapter will illustrate, various locations--including farms, suburban homes, apartment homes, and even cafes--can isolate women while also encouraging them to resist oppression and revise traditional definitions of domesticity. bell hooks recognized that "homeplace has been a site of resistance" (452). hooks' article calls for conscious remembrance of black women who have struggled "to keep something for their own" (449). However, these ideas can apply to other women who might define the home as a place to nurture their identities and gain subjectivity. I examine several different representations of homeplaces in this study, including farmhouses, suburban homes, cafes and single family homes in urban areas, revealing that the potential for resistance and revision of domesticity can exist in any setting.

However, the texts that I study most often utilize one of two general kinds of location, both of which reflect cultural images of idealized American family life; these locations are the mythological family farm and the typical suburban home. Historically, farm life and rural locales are isolated, and have primarily kept labor separated along gender lines. Because farms are typically run by male head-of-households, and as Domosh and Seager illustrate in their feminist analysis of geography, the countryside is conceived of as feminine (69); farm life also promoted both an ideal of hyper-masculinity and economic independence for males and hyper-femininity and economic and social subordination for females. Several of the texts I examine in this study are set in such a locale: *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, *So Far From God* by Ana Castillo, *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley, and *We Were the Mulvaneys* by Joyce Carol Oates. Sections of *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan are set in rural areas, as is much of *Fried Green*

Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café by Fanny Flagg. These texts draw on the above historical concepts, though some of them also explore how women can subvert these oppressive structures to varying degrees. These complex representations reflect the possibility for useful contradiction in women's lives.

Other texts in my study explore how suburbia, the second of these locales, may extend, alter, and/or problematize the reach of these power structures, particularly since suburbia writes white supremacist capitalist patriarchy onto a much larger literal and cultural landscape. Sally Helgesen's important study of how women's entrance into the workforce has revolutionized many aspects of American life, *Everyday Revolutionaries*, offers an intriguing comparison of the possibilities available to women before suburbia became the landscape of America. She compares "Kaiservilles," feminist-inspired working women's communities of World War II modeled on European design, to Hicksville, Long Island, the first American suburb, revealing some ways that architecture directly impact women's daily lives.^v Through their architecture of convenience, "Kaiservilles" were antithetical to the type of architectural planning that kept suburban women relatively isolated in their traditional roles. Suburbia's remarkable system of inconveniences insured that domesticity was women's primary concern. Domesticity continues to be a concern for suburban women, regardless of their perspectives on feminism.

^v In the sprawling suburbia of Hicksville, "developers gave no thought to issues such as convenient child care, low-maintenance housing, public transport, or energy conservation. Because residents were completely dependent upon cars, and because there were no buses, it was simply assumed that women would serve their families as unpaid chauffeurs" (145). This example illustrates how domesticity could extend from the confines of the home into the confines of the family car; in this sense, domesticity became mobile and inescapable, offsetting the relative comfort provided by suburbia's sense of spaciousness and home ownership. Further, Helgesen notes that "the suburban strategy reversed efforts made during the war to build housing that served the needs of women who worked. In scores of 'Kaiservilles,' where women labored in highly productive shipyards, new housing was erected convenient to child-care centers, children's infirmaries, and food services, so that women could fetch dinner and children in a single trip" (144).

Helgesen's historical discussion of Kaiservilles shows us that at certain points in American history society has created urban/industrial spaces in which women's choices and convenience were of primary importance. Yet Helgesen's study also makes us aware that these spaces no longer exist, which leads us to a consideration of how women function within the spaces available to them. Because so much of the American landscape is comprised of suburban sprawl, it is important to consider the impact of this location, even though in my study representations of suburbia are minimal compared to rural or farm-life. While the idea of a banal suburban setting is approached and critiqued in other texts, such as in Evelyn Couch's section of *Fried Green Tomatoes*, only two of the remaining fictional texts I study confront the impact of suburban life in a substantial way. However, these texts frame the study, as well as allude to its historical span. I begin by examining *The Stepford Wives* in conjunction with *The Feminine Mystique*, and I conclude the study with a chapter that analyzes *A Perfect Arrangement* by Suzanne Berne. Both novels are set in what seem to be well-established communities, but the communities' disapproval of individuality speaks to the negative aspects of suburban living, including the system of inconveniences that Helgesen's study illustrates. The main characters of each novel also face problematic conclusions to their quest for unified identities as mothers, wives, and feminists. Because all of these characters exist in some homeplace that has been constructed and maintained by a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, it is crucial to examine how they advocate feminism as a means of both existing within and resisting the potentially limiting parameters of those spaces.

The structure of my study follows a trajectory which corresponds to the feminist movement from the beginnings of second wave into the development of third wave, revealing domesticity's complex interaction with feminisms. Although the study is framed by second

wave texts (*The Stepford Wives* and *The Feminine Mystique*) and third wave era texts (*The Nanny Diaries* and *A Perfect Arrangement*), the structure is not strictly chronological. Chapters two, three, and four thematically examine texts that were produced during the 1980s and 1990s, yet these pairings are not necessarily historical or chronological. I have arranged these chapters according to the paired texts' treatment of domesticity and feminism, as well as related concerns, such as familial constructs and metaphors, like sisterhood. I have also attempted a structure which reflects the fluidity of feminism's history. One motif of several which has informed my decision to study one pair of texts before another is their treatment of how sisterhood and domesticity intersect. Although the setting of the texts which comprise Chapter Two (*Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and *The Color Purple*) precede second wave's historical era, their treatment of sisterhood reflects early second wave ideas about unifying women against oppression embodied in domesticity, and thus builds upon ideas of resistance against domesticity which are explored in Chapter One. The texts which comprise Chapter Three (*So Far From God* and *The Joy Luck Club*), the center of the study, treat the concept of sisterhood, as well as the developing metaphors of motherhood and daughterhood, with a complexity that builds upon Chapter Two's overall positive treatment of sisterhood. These texts form an appropriate center of the study because of the characters' meaningful investigations of home space, thus expanding the study's overall treatment of domesticity, including emergent perceptions of domesticity which move beyond resistance. Further, these texts foreshadow how the backlash, critiqued in Chapter Four, limited some of second wave's progress by sentimentalizing family life. Chapter Four's emphasis on family and failing sisterhoods (in *A Thousand Acres* and *We Were the Mulvaney's*) recognizes and reflects the cultural backlash

against feminism of the 1980s, and appropriately precedes the concerns about choice that characters studied in Chapter Five (*The Nanny Diaries* and *A Perfect Arrangement*) encounter.

Because I aim to examine cultural perceptions of domesticity and feminisms as they have manifested themselves since the inception of the women's liberation movement, I chose texts that were critically and/or commercially well received. Although only two of the works chosen do not strictly fit these criteria, they nonetheless may eventually gain more critical and popular attention. Using a feminist poststructuralist lens to guide my historical analysis of popular feminism, I opted for texts that seemed to engage with the tenets of feminism as they were popularly understood in American culture and history. Therefore, the scope of my project moves beyond studying contemporary fiction by female authors.

Domestic fiction is important to the American literary tradition and to feminist scholarship, as are studies of domesticity in general. Much has been written about texts that emphasize domestic concerns, and feminist criticism has successfully adapted new and increasingly useful lenses through which to interpret these artistic representations and the lived experiences of women. However, less attention has been given to the emerging variety of works that have been produced during this most recent (from the beginnings of second-wave feminism) politically and culturally tumultuous era. My choice of texts illustrates that recent domestic fiction comprises a multitude of perspectives across a wide variety of genres, thus expanding the literary tradition of American domestic fiction. My study aims to contribute to a community of feminist critics who attempt praxis. Therefore, I attempt to revise the scope of American domestic fiction to include and transcend realistic representations of domestic life. My primary texts include such disparate genres as science fiction/thriller (*The Stepford Wives*), magical

realism (*The Joy Luck Club*, *So Far From God*, *The Color Purple*), chick lit^{vi} (*The Nanny Diaries*) and even feminist scholarship (*The Feminine Mystique*) in order to contribute to a deeper understanding of domesticity in contemporary American culture. Acknowledging a multiplicity of voices is also key to examining domestic fiction in its changing contemporary forms. I studied works from a variety of genres about characters that represent a large cross section of socio-economic classes; these works were written by authors from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. My inclusion of one male author, Ira Levin, who wrote what I believe is a foundational text of contemporary domestic fiction, eschews a gynocritical approach; this choice enhances my study's aim to reflect and question changing realities in American domestic life.

Chapter One, "Home-Sick: Personal Anxiety and Political Oppression in *The Feminine Mystique* and *The Stepford Wives*," grounds my study historically, as I examine both a popular novel written during the peak of second-wave feminism and a foundational feminist text that catalyzed the women's movement, at least for some women. Analyzing *The Stepford Wives* in conjunction with a critically important non-fiction text illustrates that newer domestic writing engages in and encourages discourse. By devoting the first chapter of my study to an analysis of Friedan and Levin, I attempt to underscore *The Feminine Mystique* as a foundational text not only in feminist criticism but in studies of domestic fiction. *The Stepford Wives*, studied in conjunction *The Feminine Mystique*, enhances the critical conversation about the isolating nature

^{vi} "Chick lit" is an emerging genre marked by polarized responses from critics and readers. In *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, Mallory Young and Suzanne Ferriss contend that this genre "calls for a more considered response" as a "serious consideration of chick lit brings into focus many of the issues facing contemporary women and contemporary culture--issues of identity, of race and class, of femininity and feminism, of consumerism and self-image" (2). Young and Ferriss suggest that the "genre is rife with possibilities and potential" and "even if chick lit's popularity were to diminish, the body of work [fiction and criticism] amassed over the past decade alone raises issues and questions about subjectivity, sexuality, race, and class in women's texts for another generation of women to ponder" (12).

of suburbia and the oppressive aspects of domesticity versus the liberating effects of feminism. Yet it also indicts *The Feminine Mystique* for its limiting portrayal of suburban housewives, critiquing the very images that Friedan used to rouse middle-class women into action. *The Stepford Wives* encapsulates many of the early concerns of the women's movement--consciousness raising, sisterhood formation, marriage, body image, domestic servitude--and presents them in a compact, thrilling, dystopic vision of patriarchal backlash. Levin establishes the frightening possibility of backlash sensationally, by critiquing the men of Stepford, representatives of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, as easily seduced by nostalgia. Yet his position is also one of sympathy with and support of feminist concerns. Because these two texts are key works produced during second wave-feminism's inception, they also form a useful basis for the concept of advocating feminism, which many of the characters studied in the following chapters embody. These characters illustrate that "knowledge of more than one discourse and the recognition that meaning is plural allows for a measure of choice on the part of the individual, and even where choice is not available, resistance is still possible" (Weedon 102). This chapter establishes how these two texts both operate in and critique the women's movement by representing how the movement resisted patriarchy but not white supremacist capitalism.

Chapter Two, entitled "Sewing Subjectivity, Cooking Communities: Sisterhood and Domestic Resistance," examines the foundations of the women's movement. Although both texts, *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and *The Color Purple*, are primarily set in a time period that predates second-wave feminism, they were written during the 1980s, a contentious time for feminism. The primary backlash had taken root; second-wave feminism was fracturing; and postfeminist ideology became increasingly popular. By emphasizing issues such as awareness of oppression, sisterhood formation, racial inequality, and lesbianism in a pre-

women's movement setting, *The Color Purple* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* underscore these issues as central to women of color, lesbians, and women of the working class (including domestics), groups that mainstream second-wave feminists tended to ignore. Set in the first half of the twentieth century, these texts realistically portray oppression while resisting the lure of cultural nostalgia for a seemingly simpler time. Domesticity is portrayed as both oppressive and generative. While certain domestic acts are portrayed as negative, isolating and/or overly sentimental, these texts also show that cooking and sewing in particular can be the basis for sisterhood formations. These texts reclaim the possibility that sisterhood can be empowering, despite criticisms that sisterhood erases differences including race, class, and sexual orientation. Thus, chapter two functions as a critical response to the concepts discussed in chapter one and to the ways in which second-wave feminism limited or denied certain women access to its quest for liberation.

Chapter Three, "So Far From Sisterhood: Domesticity as Feminist Pedagogy," builds on these ideas, exploring representations of sisterhoods in the lives of women of color. Acts of housekeeping and domestic creativity are portrayed less explicitly in *So Far From God* and *The Joy Luck Club* than in *Fried Green Tomatoes* and *The Color Purple*; while characters are shown performing domestic acts, they are more likely to theorize on the potential meaning(s) of their home-spaces and how these meanings relate to their identities as women, mothers, daughters, and sisters. Some of these characters also use domesticity as a discursive field through which they might engage more directly with feminist activities and identities, despite their marginalization from the formalized movements of second wave feminism. This chapter will examine the familial metaphors of sisterhood, daughterhood, and motherhood, which are important concepts in second-wave and third-wave feminism. Because the texts overtly engage

with the potential meanings of motherhood, daughterhood, and sisterhood, they illustrate interpersonal struggles for subjectivity through mother-daughter discourses. The texts in this chapter use a variety of characters--thirteen main characters in all--to deconstruct the concepts of unified womankind and of unified races, classes, and family. *So Far From God* and *The Joy Luck Club* represent how these familial metaphors can be positive or negative for members of the same group/family. This also parallels realizations by feminists that a certain way of resisting racism, homophobia, or classism, does not necessarily appeal to all people of color, lesbians, and domestic laborers.

Chapter Four, "Revising Domesticity, Restructuring the Ideal: the Myth of Family," reveals the enduring and potentially damaging influence of traditional values during an era of alleged liberation. This chapter explores how *A Thousand Acres* and *We Were the Mulvaneys* underscore the continued need for feminist activism; they emphasize gender inequality, isolation, and abuse as inherent facets of the American dream. By illustrating how the feminist attitudes have challenged but failed to make substantive changes in the traditional conception of the American dream, these texts show that domesticity is part of that oppressive ideology. Through their portrayal of failed or stalled sisterhoods, these novels emphasize the primacy of patriarchal discourse and its potential to divide women. These texts are set at the beginning of the backlash against the women's movement, at a time when postfeminism was gaining popularity, yet *A Thousand Acres* and *We Were the Mulvaneys* illustrate that the empowering ideology of second-wave feminism was limited in scope to begin with, even for some of the white, middle-class women to whom it was meant to appeal. This is not to say that either of these texts takes part in the backlash or embraces postfeminism. In order to particularize these ideas, this chapter will explore how nostalgia functions to undermine change even as cultural progressions are generally

praised. While these authors might not identify themselves as third-wave feminists, their texts do represent and examine characters that seem unaffected by the women's liberation movement and that sometimes seem uncritically nostalgic. These conditions tend to contribute to the characters' isolation; lacking a place in a widespread feminist movement, these characters attempt to form their own sisterhoods with varying results. Thus, the texts studied in this chapter reflect the third-wave feminist tendency to examine the contradictory nature of backlash and postfeminism. Chapter Four therefore supports the need for continued and reinvigorated feminist discourse, while highlighting the value of the original tenets of second-wave feminism.

Chapter Five, "Imperfect Arrangements: Contractual Domesticity and Comparative Mothering," examines texts that emphasize the challenging nature of enacting "choice." I conclude with a study of *The Nanny Diaries* and *A Perfect Arrangement* because they illustrate previously explored ideas; yet they examine the complex processes involved when women engage in exercising "choice." *The Nanny Diaries* and *A Perfect Arrangement* construct an even more complex representation of women's lives in the late twentieth century. Further, these texts reflect the ironic and problematic return to pre-second-wave motherhood worship. Because these novels present both sympathetically and disapprovingly characters who have used the advancements of the women's movement to their personal, emotional, and financial advantage, they construct a critical discourse about domesticity and feminism. White supremacist capitalist patriarchy is critiqued heavily, particularly in *The Nanny Diaries*, despite its cast of white main characters. These texts also explore and critique the mythologizing of home and motherhood, which necessitates comparative mothering, a divisive strategy meant to bolster self-image for women separated by class. Further, these texts illustrate that sisterhood formation between generations of women--some adhering to feminist tenets more than others--is difficult, if not

impossible, particularly since class lines are becoming more distinctly divided in America. Despite the problematic or negative aspects of domesticity presented in these texts, the ways in which certain characters advocate feminism ultimately connect all the characters in my study. By placing this chapter last, I hope to illustrate how the contradictions between domesticity and feminism can intersect, including contradictory ideas about what “choice” can mean for some women.

In this study I attempt to go beyond positive and negative readings of domesticity and feminism in order to show the complexity of both and how these ideas function in concert. This is a particularly important effort because both concepts have undergone multiple cultural revisions that may not effectively portray the complex impact these ideas have in real women’s lives. As the characters in my study will illustrate to varying degrees, both feminism and domesticity can be embraced, revised, and rejected in a variety of ways. As I have done above, most feminists have used the wave metaphor to discuss different manifestations of feminism. It is the nature of waves to ebb and flow, recede and push forward. This reflects how the waves of feminism have certainly had different specific effects on groups of women. Yet, regardless of how the manifestations and effects of feminism may ebb and flow, domesticity is like the tide--deeper at times than others, but always present and inescapable for women of all races, classes, and sexual orientations. My study will demonstrate that feminism is not in the water “like fluoride”; it is rather, what keeps women afloat in the tide.

CHAPTER 1
HOME-SICK: PERSONAL ANXIETY AND POLITICAL OPPRESSION
IN *THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE* AND *THE STEPFORD WIVES*

My own encounter with what would become the new reality for women probably began on the day in 1963 when my mother checked out *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan from our public library in Kalamazoo, Michigan. Reading that book, my mother, a well-educated and intellectually curious woman who had stayed home to raise five children and tried occasionally to fill leisure hours with unsatisfactory neighborhood barbecues and bridge games, quickly recognized the scope and cause of her dissatisfactions. Within the year, despite a new baby and the firm disapproval of her own mother, she was back in school, and upon graduation she for the first time joined the workforce, teaching at our local university. (Sally Helgesen, *Everyday Revolutionaries: Working Women and the Transformation of American Life*)

The husband who is unable to bear his wife's saying 'no' to the feminine mystique often has been seduced himself by the infantile phantasy [sic] of having an ever-present mother . . . It is difficult for a woman to tell such a husband that she is not his mother and that their children will be better off without her constant attention. Perhaps if she becomes more truly herself and refuses to act out his phantasy [sic] any longer, he will suddenly wake up and see *her* again. And then again, perhaps he will look for another mother. (Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*)

The publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* in 1963 catalyzed second-wave feminism and encouraged positive changes in women's lives. These changes were met in some cases with backlash against the threat to patriarchy's potency. Ira Levin's science fiction/thriller, *The Stepford Wives* (1972) provides a dystopian version of the domestic aftermath of second-wave feminism's early successes. This dystopia further dramatizes the limitations of culturally imposed domesticity to which *The Feminine Mystique* responded. Simultaneously, *The Stepford Wives* questioned *The Feminine Mystique*'s generalizations of women's experiences. This intertextual discourse exposes to a wide readership--over generations who have differing experiences and perspectives--complexities of victimization and oppression. *The Stepford Wives* underscores how the relationship between second-wave feminism and domesticity is a catalyst for feminist progress and backlash. Though science

fiction, the novel's historical basis suggests that second-wave feminism's initial denunciation of domesticity as a tool of patriarchal oppression is warranted and, through its continued appeal through the three decades since its initial publication, relevant. These historic works are significant to women's lives today.

The Feminine Mystique remains both important and problematic, due in part to Friedan's overall approach to the historical, cultural, and individual complexities of domesticity and femininity. Resistance to the text by feminist critics is indicative of pervasive problems faced by feminism, particularly as work towards women's liberation began in earnest in the 1960s. Estelle Freedman notes that although the book "touched a nerve among educated suburban white women" its author was seen by some feminists as denying the "personal is political" credo. "Power, these feminists realized, operated within and through personal relations, including sexuality and the family. In addition, they questioned the liberal feminist goal of integrating women into male power structures" (86, 88). Freedman quotes Bonnie Kreps as stating that "We [radical feminists] . . . do not believe that the oppression of women will be ended by giving them a bigger piece of the pie as Betty Friedan would have it. We believe that the pie itself is rotten" (87). Although Ira Levin did not necessarily affiliate himself with either liberal or radical feminists of the time, his text also serves as a critique of Friedan and illuminates the political underpinnings and effects of the foundational text. *The Feminine Mystique* concentrated on a very specific class and race of women--white, middle-class suburban housewives--and has thus been questioned for its limited usefulness to understanding contemporary life and for its overall validity in feminist thought. Critics such as Joanne Hollows point out the problematic nature of the work, as it

(over)dramatises her point by comparing the loss of identity experienced by the American housewife to that of the prisoner in the Nazi concentration camp. Both

housewife and prisoner are dehumanized; both are taught to behave like children and be dependent and passive; and eventually, both become prisoners of their own minds, consenting to their position because they can no longer conceive of having any other place in the world. (11)

The Stepford Wives takes these very images (housewife as dehumanized prisoner) and mocks the power structures which support and promote such dehumanization. Levin constructs Stepford as an example of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and reveals, through satire and horror, that the overly dramatic images that Friedan employs should not simply be dismissed.

Certainly, Friedan's essentializing treatment of culture, class, and gender in the mid-century era is problematic. Joanne Hollows assesses "three key problems of *The Feminine Mystique* which would be reproduced in some later feminist thought": privileging a masculine value system, essentializing female experience, and implying that women are non-resistant consumers of traditional imagery (11-13). Despite these problems, the text remains relevant; some of its assertions remain valid for a more contemporary generation of women, who may or may not identify themselves as feminists. Though in many ways positively affected by the changes wrought by the women's movement, these women contend with some form of domestic responsibility, balancing the burdens of domesticity, motherhood, career, and the myriad financial, emotional, and practical choices involved in those pursuits. In light of the seemingly increasing complexity of contemporary women's lives, the very sense of complexity that *the Mystique* cried out for, Friedan's call for change still merits consideration as we struggle with the meaning(s) of domesticity in contemporary women's experience. Rather than feeling truly liberated or united as a sisterhood by getting out of the house in order to pursue careers, as Friedan's generation of second-wave feminists suggested, many women today feel overwhelmed with choices yet also inundated with increasing standards of domestic responsibility. Revisiting *the Mystique* may underscore the compelling connections between the domesticity that women of

the post WWII generation contended with and the increasingly multifaceted and demanding version with which women must now struggle.^{vii} Friedan's version of the suburban housewife's plight relates to women's real lives and the ways that cultural ideals of femininity both resist and respond to progressive change.^{viii}

Revisiting the myths and realities of post World War II domesticity becomes important to understanding how both texts have effected change, as nostalgia for any era can inhibit cultural and individual progress. *The Feminine Mystique's* presentation of women's limited agency and lack of subjectivity in the suburbs of the 1950s and 60s must be dissected in light of a broader historical window. *The Feminine Mystique* is often perceived simply as a flawed study of the "happy housewife heroine," a constrained product of women's magazines and "monolithic" femininity that, as Joanne Hollows points out "ignores the ways in which femininity is cross-cut by class and race . . . If confinement within the domestic sphere caused these women problems, the idea of being a full-time suburban wife and mom seemed like an impossible dream to many working-class women" (12). Women's experience in the 1950s and 60s was more complex than Friedan's study revealed, but our cultural response to this era remains somewhat general and therefore limited. Mention of 1950s suburbia still evokes for some an image of despair and domestic oppression--we may easily envision a faceless multitude of women from this era living in much the way that Friedan concludes. For others, Friedan's indictment of the era's "conservatism and constraints" does not enter the picture; instead, the familial warmth and general happiness portrayed in the era's popular culture comes to mind. Feminism has not

^{vii} Chapter Five will deal more specifically and thoroughly with representations of domesticity and feminism as it applies to modern women.

^{viii} The prevalence of concern over these issues extended to Hollywood, as a remake of the film version of *The Stepford Wives* was produced and distributed in 2004. However, the film was critically panned and was considered a box-office disappointment.

erased misconceptions of the past. However, together, perhaps, these dichotomous--and granted, over-generalized--images of the era come nearer completing the paradoxical picture of women's realities than does any single source or image alone. Levin's popular text attempts to resolve this paradox; it critiques the backlash and acknowledges the catalyst(s) of change. This text thus contributes to cultural perceptions of domesticity through the way that "Stepford" has joined the lexicon in several ways. Variations on Stepford--Stepford wife or wives, or simply Stepford--can refer (critically or descriptively) to women who pursue domesticity with unrealistic zeal. Yet this term can more usefully refer to overzealous reaction of those who respond negatively to feminist transformation, particularly men. "Stepford" can simultaneously critique the oppressor(s) and command change by criticizing those who wish to return to the past through nostalgia. In his introduction to the 2002 re-publication of the novel, Peter Straub comments on "Levin's Olympian humor:"

If the Stepford Wives [sic] were the easy satire on the banality of suburban housewives that it is commonly mistaken to be—a misconception that has installed its title in our language as shorthand for those homemakers who affect an uncanny perfection—[its] humor would seem out of place. Yet it fits the moment so accurately that it slips by almost unnoticed, for it is the same subversive humor that shapes the entire book. This is a novel that satirizes its oppressors and their desires, not their victims, within a context that satirizes its very status as a thriller. (Levin x-xi)

Understanding the possibilities of meaning for this now common term can reinforce the complexity of an often oversimplified era and its various responses to class, race, gender, and technology. Advances in technology served to reinforce gender construction and performativity. As the accepted distinctions of gender and correlating labor became increasingly culturally acknowledged, even as these divisions were occasionally resisted or rejected, a sense of homogeneity blanketed the era which Friedan decried.

The increasing sense of domestic homogeneity among the different classes also denied women opportunities for sisterhood through the isolation which was becoming increasingly common for women carrying out their domestic role in an improving post-war economy. Suburbia's meteoric advancement throughout the postwar years thus in many ways aptly symbolizes the plight of women whose identities were increasingly tied to domesticity. Although suburban life and middle class expectations made up only one facet of women's overall experience in the post war years, it is the ideals of suburban leisure, comfort, and pervasive domesticity that remain characteristic of these decades. These characteristics were brought into focus by *The Feminine Mystique*, which boldly opposed the limitations of such an idealized life. Friedan's concentration on suburban housewives was effective as a transformative critique of the postwar years, but just as the suburban ideal masks the difficulties, inconveniences, isolation and tedium of real women's lives in the post war years, so too does *the Mystique* in its generalized approach. The sentimentality or nostalgia Americans feel for the postwar years obscures the complexity and importance of women's experience. In its own oversimplification of women's experience of the 1950s, *The Feminine Mystique* suffers from a problem similar to nostalgia.

The complexity of women's lives as they were affected by changes in the economy, in gender roles, in American landscape, and in household technology is eclipsed by the cultural privileging of male values that many of these changes reinforced. Domesticity, even when it offers agency for those doing the work, thrives on nostalgia and isolation. Despite the "ample hours of leisure" available to the suburban housewives "to visit with neighbors" of William Whyte's study of Park Forest, Illinois, demands upon women's time and energy were not necessarily decreased (Helgesen 21). Rereading William Whyte's findings from a feminist

perspective, Sally Helgesen notes that “in retrospect, it is apparent that the sense of spaciousness and leisure that pervaded the Organization Man era existed in large part because the division of adult labor allocated exclusively to women the care of household and children” (52). The generic nature of family interests along with rigid gender roles may have contributed to a sense of isolation among suburban women. Just as domesticity became increasingly the responsibility of the housewife alone, the ways in which she and her husband spent their days working were vastly different (21). Rather than simply bringing families together in an idyllic setting, suburbia may have further contributed to the isolation and resentment which *The Feminine Mystique* noted.

Friedan’s work catalyzed a necessary cultural upheaval, yet the realities of women’s lives in this era were much more multifaceted than either her study or our collective cultural memory may allow. *The Stepford Wives* criticizes such binary thinking and exposes through its treatment of domesticity multiple sources of both agency and oppression that can be traced throughout the twentieth century. Such diverse influences as economic fluctuations, world wars, trends in architecture and industrialization, and technology combine to create conditions under which women worked daily within the context of the home as well as outside its confines. Sociologists Alice Kessler-Harris and Karen Brodtkin Sacks illustrate in their article “The Demise of Domesticity in America” how changes in the economy have affected the evolving realities of family life, despite the persistence of a “domestic code that is increasingly anachronistic” (75). The domestic code supports the feminine mystique and has “provided a rationale for the reciprocally confirming notion that women who belonged at home lacked the impetus and ambition to make their way in the workforce, and therefore behaved in ways that justified their disadvantaged places in comparison with men” (72). Levin constructs the male participants in

the Stepford agenda as fearful of the domestic code's instability and thus as reactionaries; they act decisively, murder their wives and using technology, replace them with robots, in order to propagate and reaffirm their supremacy. The robots which replace their lives--similar to the robot housewives of which Friedan wrote--negate through their constructed passive femininity the powerful image of Rosie the Riveter, who used technology and power to positively affect the American economy during World War II. Yet, Kessler-Harris and Brodtkin-Sacks note that America's economic influences on family life affirms that the post-war forced exodus of "Rosie the Riveter" from the factory did not force most of these women back to a solely domestic experience: "Instead, they found other jobs in offices, hospitals, and banks, in nonunionized small factories, and in a variety of personal services" (72). Significant contentions existed between the economic realities (including a one-third increase in women's participation in the "wage labor force") and the mythic domesticity propagated in media outlets such as the women's magazines which Friedan studied (72). These sites of contention between image and reality indeed closely resemble the state of flux that constituted (and, as I will argue, continues today) women's individual struggles of adhering to the domestic code. Women of varying backgrounds may have accomplished this through maintaining a sense of hyper-domesticity while at the same time attempting to support their families economically, through part-time jobs and/or through strict household managerial methods. Part of this economic support expected of women of both the working and middle class came in the form of domesticity itself; as unpaid labor, domesticity served to reinforce the living wage.

Levin shows the men of Stepford denying their wives the chance to use these strategies to challenge the domestic code, or to allow them to become permanent changes within their home. Stepford's reinforcement of nostalgia highlights the absent presence of paid domestic labor, a

cultural and economic phenomenon noticeably erased in the Men's Association construction of traditional domesticity. Because they enforce rigid gender roles through communal nostalgia, the men of Stepford insure that their comfortable middle-to-upper class lifestyles are not influenced--economically or socially--by the potential of paying for domestic labor. Yet paid domestic labor is not entirely absent in Stepford; Charmaine Wimperis employs a maid, who is of course terminated when Charmaine is literally terminated. Any possibility for Charmaine to gain subjectivity in any fashion, including through the class privilege of managing domesticity in her home, is erased through her murder. This total enforcement of power, nostalgia, domestic homogeneity and household self-sufficiency essentially dooms the women of the town. Joanna's visit to Charmaine reveals the extent to which domesticity and male privilege is programmed into the robot versions of the Stepford women. Charmaine tells Joanna: "We've let Nettie go . . . It's absolutely unbelievable, the sloppy job she was getting away with. The place looks clean at first glance, but boy, look in the corners. I did the kitchen and the dining room yesterday, but I've still got all the other rooms. Ed shouldn't have to live with dirt" (52). Robot Charmaine's domestic managerial privileges are thus now entirely dependent on her husband's primary privileges. Walter, Joanna's husband, responds to news of Charmaine's "change" with sympathy for Ed: "Ed must have laid down the law to her . . . I don't think he makes enough money for that kind of setup. A maid must be at *least* a hundred a week these days" (55). Walter's neighborly concern for his friend's household, based on an increasing discontent with his own domestic arrangement with Joanna, reveals the Stepford approach to programmed domesticity that allows each household, controlled by a patriarch, to function as a self-contained economic unit.

In its isolated, suburban setting, the Stepford Men's Association form a brotherhood based on patriarchal privilege, and create a domesticity that unilaterally denies the possibility for subjectivity through sisterhood. This furthers the sense of regression and nostalgia uncharacteristic of the era in which it is set. Invoking "Stepford" critiques homogeneity as well as nostalgia. The possibility for this fluidity in meaning also suggests that Levin questioned the potential impermanence of the vast social changes that occurred in the 1960s, which rejected homogeneity and trust in organizations and institutions in favor of embracing individuality, consciousness-raising, and seeking identity through the pursuit of civil rights. While part of this transformation fractured a collective identity created in part by trusting organizations and institutions, the 1960s also re-imagined identity formation by encouraging participation in organizations which focused on individual growth and social change. Opposition to the Vietnam War, efforts to desegregate the South and attain civil rights, and the rise of the feminist movement are examples of efforts made by many to raise consciousness and improve lives. Even those who seemed to settle into a mainstream, comfortable existence benefited, or were at least affected by, this sense of individuality through community. Joanna Eberhart, the main character of *The Stepford Wives*, discovers the personal impact of identifying oneself with a group in several key stages of the compact narrative. In the simplest terms, Joanna does *not* identify herself as a "housewife" although she is primarily a stay-at-home mother; instead, she identifies herself as a wife and mother, feminist and photographer. She seems keenly aware that each of these characteristics is fundamental to her happiness and her family's contentment and growth. Through these four discrete identities Joanna achieves agency and engages with others to achieve subjectivity. The narrative focuses largely on Joanna's struggle to integrate her feminist philosophies into a regressive culture which responds by murdering her, effectively

undoing her short-lived sisterhood. By contrasting Joanna's potentially disruptive viewpoint(s) with the traditional, conservative, and eerie backdrop of Stepford, Levin connects these four various possible identities, showing that patriarchy and feminism, ostensibly binary concepts, should be reconciled for everyone's benefit.

Levin also critiques social regression, nostalgia, and patriarchy by using technology not just as a tool for domesticity and cultural progress but as a tool used to silence women completely. While trends in industrialization contributed positively in some ways to women's lives in the post World War II era, advances in technology also increased demands on women. Middle class wives were expected to rely, by and large, on these advances in household technology, rather than hire domestic help to maintain a sense of familial and economic harmony. The nature of domesticity's constraints upon women's time and labor was allegedly alleviated by an influx of technology meant to ease her domestic burdens. Technology and industrialization were also homogenizing domesticity for women of different classes. Ruth Cowan notes in her groundbreaking study *More Work for Mother*

The housewife of the "professional classes" and the housewife of the "working classes" were assisted only by machines. Few such women had paid household help, and fewer still had food or milk or clean laundry delivered to their doors. The differences between these women were no doubt profound--differences in levels of education, in families of origin, in annual household income; but those profound differences did not produce, as they would have done in the past, equally profound variations in the ways in which the women did their work. (199)

This lack of substantial variations in the way women of different classes performed their work presented a domestic contradiction. This shared sense of domestic responsibility united women of different classes in terms of how they fulfilled their prescribed roles as housewives, mothers, and women. Cowan notes that "in almost all of the economic sectors of the population (except the very, very rich), housework has become manual labor: the wife of a lawyer is just as likely to

be down on her hands and knees cleaning her kitchen floor as is the wife of the bricklayer or the garbageman” (197). Yet these women were occupied with the demands of domesticity to such a degree that they may have had little time or opportunity to explore whatever interests and complaints they may have had in common, class differences excluded.

Levin constructs Joanna as a sympathetic character, a heroine, who tries to unravel this domestic contradiction through sisterhood formation and other feminist activities. She is constructed as a likeable feminist, and a competent, loving mother and wife, whose philosophies spur her to action upon her arrival into a new environment. For Joanna, reaching out to women in the community is an essential part of setting up her household: she opts to put up a “signpost to women like her, potential friends” despite being weighed down literally and figuratively with necessary supplies for domesticity and femininity given to her by the “Welcome Wagon Lady” (2). For Joanna, domesticity marks the need and possibility for community-building with other women: “The women she had met in the past few days, the ones in nearby houses, were pleasant and helpful enough, but they seemed completely absorbed in their household duties” (2). The nature of the Welcome Wagon Lady’s job suggests that her interests reach beyond domestic responsibilities--unlike other Stepford women--but the woman’s surprise at Joanna’s eagerness to identify her and her husband as feminists is suspicious. The Welcome Wagon Lady’s polite interest in Joanna seems deceptively kind; though readers are not given direct reason to suspect this minor character of deception, as an older woman from a more conservative generation, she is symbolic of the deceptive “welcome” that Stepford is soon revealed to offer. In addition, Joanna’s interaction with the Welcome Wagon Lady, who works for *The Stepford Chronicle*, foreshadows how Joanna discovers the truth about Stepford. Public records provide a history of

the ways in which feminism and patriarchy have privately collided within the homes and institutions of Stepford.

Levin creates both a realistic and a dystopic version of cultural responses to feminism through Joanna, who simultaneously embodies a victim of patriarchal oppression and a contemporary feminist heroine. For readers with feminist sensibilities, Joanna may positively represent how women might integrate feminism with marriage and motherhood. As we quickly get to know Joanna, we do not know the particulars of her background, but we can assume that her participation in the women's movement and her feminist beliefs have thus far affected her and her family positively rather than negatively. But it is precisely because she is a feminist wife and mother that Joanna--like the women of Stepford before her--directly threatens the status quo more so than did the more publicly identifiable "angry" feminists of the time. Because domestic life directly affects society in profound yet mundane ways, change within the home directly affects those who depend upon and use the vast services that housewives provide.

The Stepford Wives illustrates the unwavering gravity of political change shaped within the context of the home, where the "personal is political" for men as well as women. Second-wave feminism advanced its cause fairly quickly in terms of how the message spread through the media and affected political changes. In the nine year span between the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* and *The Stepford Wives*, according to Amy Erdman Farrell, "the media created its own 'star system' of feminists, with women like Gloria Steinem, Kate Millett, and Betty Friedan as the recipients of the media's attention [which] . . . obscured the broadbased and diverse nature of the movement" (23). By the time the novel was published in 1972, the women's liberation movement was firmly entrenched in the national consciousness. The National Organization of Women formed, as did the Women's Equity Action League, The

National Women's Political Caucus, and "by 1967, a number of women's liberation groups had independently sprung up across the country in response to the anger women felt at their roles in leftist organizations or at their lives as housewives and mothers" (Farrell 17-19). The drudgery of domesticity and traditional gender roles provided a basis for some to join the women's movement. Farrell notes in her chronicle that

soon after the founding of NOW . . . a new social movement began to ferment, one that engaged women on the basis of their daily lives and experiences. These women challenged not only legal and economic restrictions to women's freedom but also the very definitions of womanhood, femininity, marriage, and sexuality, anything that constituted the reality of women's lives and existence. (18)

Although the larger, more politically focused and organized groups deemphasized domesticity as a focus of their attempts at change, grassroots organizations of women who met in consciousness raising groups and who published feminist pamphlets made the movement accessible to women who were interested in women's causes, including domesticity.

Through these localized feminist efforts, feminist ideology extended to many women, transforming the daily lives and experiences of women and their families. These collective and individual transformations are borne out in *Stepford* as we see, through the dichotomy of household activity as performed by Joanna and the Stepford wives, how feminism has or has not affected the women to whom the movement was first directed. For example, Joanna almost immediately announces through *The Stepford Chronicle* that she and her husband are both feminists, which brings both negative (as we discover through the narrative) and positive attention to the Eberharts. Walter responds by announcing that he will join the Men's Organization, which he claims to realize is "archaic" in its obvious sexism but emphasizes that he will try to change it from within, a statement which mirrors some attempts made by the

women's movement; however, his using the terminology of change masks his increasing complicity in inverting the very progress he claims to support.

Joanna's responses to the feminist "signpost" are more clearly, if not temporarily, positive. She quickly forms friendships with two women in town who respond to her announcement. Bobbie Markowe and Charmain Wimperis form with Joanna an informal consciousness raising group. Bobbie and Joanna are both members of NOW, and try to establish a chapter in Stepford but they are met with persistent, polite resistance. We first see Joanna's concern for the women as she observes, from the literal and figurative "other side of the fence" Carol Van Sant dutifully scrubbing her dishes after bowing out of polite chit chat with Joanna. Her offhanded comment about housework--"you know how it is"--meant to engender at least a neighborly, shallow camaraderie, instead inspires Joanna's sisterly concern. "No, she didn't know how it was, thank God. Not to be like that, a compulsive hausfrau. Who could blame Ted for taking advantage of such an asking-to-be-exploited patsy? *She* could blame him, that's who" (Levin 9). The trio's concerns are heightened not only by the quantity of domestic labor performed by the women of Stepford, but by the fervent domestic ideology that sharply contrasts with their own philosophies.

Further, their individual responses to the women they contact underscores the movement's power through unity and the multifaceted list of issues to be addressed for change to occur. Charmaine Wimperis, for example, "may not be ideal NOW material, but at least she's not in love with her vacuum cleaner" (35); instead, her upper class standing, complete with maid, allows her to concentrate on other interests, including astrology and avoiding sex with her husband. Her concerns regarding women's liberation are personal and do not move far beyond a need for friendship and socializing. Class marks a dividing line between Charmaine's

experiences and needs and those of Joanna and Bobbie. Her casual approach contrasts with Bobbie and Joanna's focus on more universal concerns for women's equality and the pressing need they see for liberation, particularly from the constraints of domesticity, in Stepford. Their collective wit emphasizes the novel's cynical yet serious treatment of both Friedan's ideology and patriarchy; this mix of seriousness and cynicism continues with their increasing paranoia, exacerbated by Joanna's discovery of a previously existing women's club and Charmaine's sudden and unbelievable "change".

Joanna's emphasis on compelling women to question their devotion to domesticity mimics Friedan's concerns in *The Feminine Mystique*. By revisiting these concerns through Joanna and Bobbie, Levin reveals the persistence of these issues. Because she is a feminist activist, Joanna is perceived by the locals, particularly by members of the Men's Association, as radical; her concerns about women's domestic labor are dismissed by every Stepford wife she visits. In her quest to spread the message of women's liberation and, in turn, find out why Stepford women are compulsively domestic, Joanna is constructed to resemble Friedan herself. She visits each woman in Stepford in her home, within the physical context of what she perceives as the wives' complicity with a system that oppresses them; this methodology is similar to Friedan's interview process for *the Mystique*. Further, the dismissive responses Joanna receives strike both her and the reader as regressive and unbelievable; these responses invert the typical response of the women Friedan interviewed. For example, when Joanna speaks with Kit Sunderson, the former president of the women's club, she asks her if she feels she's living a full life [as a devoted housewife with no outside interests]. She responds "Yes, I'm happy . . . I feel like I'm living a very full life. Herb's work is important, and he couldn't do it nearly as well if not for me. We're a unit, and between us we're raising a family, and doing optical research, and

running a clean comfortable household, and doing community work”. She further states that the Women’s Club meetings “weren’t as useful as housework” (43). The obvious absurdity of these unrealistic, archaic statements reflect how some critics perceived Friedan’s dramatic assertions. These archaic values also mimic those resistant to women’s liberation; the absurdity of Kit’s ideas reinforces the need to renegotiate the chasm between feminism and tradition. Further, Joanna’s involvement in a fulfilling career--her photography relies on artistry, talent, and analysis for substance--suggests how Joanna embodies the kind of woman that Friedan was trying to (re)create in *the Mystique*’s conclusion. Joanna also evokes Friedan’s critique of magazines targeted at women; she questions patriarchy by telling a former illustrator for women’s magazines that he “blight[ed] [her] adolescence” (30).^{ix}

These subtle connections to Friedan reinforce Joanna’s identity as a prototypical pioneering feminist who seeks to initiate liberation. Like Friedan, she is engaged in her project of affecting change. For example, Joanna experiences the discomfort of the male gaze and objectification in her own home. She confidently likens herself to a liberator (“Move over Gloria Steinem”) as she maneuvers among the members of the Men’s Association who visit her house one evening; as she hosts the informal gathering, she is focused on her feminist agenda and distracted by the men’s behavior, which seems adolescent, objectifying, and somewhat rude. “Try being Gloria Steinem when Ike Mazzard is drawing you . . . she felt suddenly as if she were naked, as if Mazzard were drawing her in obscene poses” (28-29). This feeling of obscenity and exposure parallels the sexually charged, adolescent nature of the men’s club meetings; Joanna is appalled to find her husband masturbating while she sleeps and later Walter admits to watching

^{ix} Joanne Hollows criticizes Friedan’s “understanding of culture,” specifically, her use of women’s magazines that support the feminine mystique. Citing Meyerowitz’s work, Hollows rejects Friedan’s presentation of housewives as “passive” readers of cultural products (13).

pornography with the others. Joanna's ignorance of the sinister nature of the men's stilted conversation at the impromptu dinner party and other adolescent mannerisms represents the divergence occurring between feminism and male dominance and tradition; the men are heady with the euphoria of creation, while Joanna, alone, defends her gender amidst oppressors. Later, in her kitchen, Dale Coba watches her, saying, "I like to watch women doing little domestic chores" (30). After a cool exchange, she tells Coba, (who is also known as Diz because of his former work at Disneyland) that he doesn't "look like someone who enjoys making people happy." Although he gets the last word in the conversation ("how little you know") Joanna reveals and confirms her feminism through her interaction with the men that evening; thus, the men target her as an object of their machinations. She is comfortable with her convictions but increasingly disturbed by her surroundings, which isolate her and leave her vulnerable to tragedy. Joanna's discomfort indicates the difficulties women face as they attempt to integrate feminist identities into their personal lives.

Through the narrative's quick conversion from advancement to enforced nostalgia, murder, and quasi-slavery, Levin exposes the fragility of progress and simultaneously suggests that change must be nurtured through networks of people joined in a united cause. When Joanna finds evidence that Friedan herself once visited Stepford's formerly thriving Women's Club, her parallels to the feminist pioneer mark her further as a target, both in the reader's growing suspicions and in her own competing senses of fervency and isolation. As she comes closer to discovering the truth about Stepford wives and becoming one herself, she learns how the town's social power structures were only recently upturned; thus, the archaic nature of the six or seven year old Men's Association is revealed to be even more powerful and threatening than initially suspected. The Men's Association's allegedly civic endeavors mimic and mock the serious

efforts made by the women's movement and specifically, by the murdered members of the defunct women's club. The women's club once thrived; now these formerly vibrant women, former feminists, have been replaced by robotized uber-domestics. As she unwittingly takes steps toward becoming a Stepford wife, Joanna creates a short, prophetic verse, which ironically assumes free will on the part of the women of Stepford: "They never stop, these Stepford wives . . . They work like robots all their lives" (64). Joanna's rhyme concisely summarizes Ruth Cowan's point in *More Work For Mother* that as housework became technologized in the post war years, it simultaneously became more "feminine" and isolated women from other family members. Domesticity meant solitude and a rigorous, demanding schedule. Stepford accentuates Cowan's statement that "Almost all of the work that once stereotypically fell to men has been mechanized" (201). Joanna aptly perceives the Stepford wives' ultra-femininity and uber-domesticity as concepts connected by technology. The men's club allows its members not only to exercise seemingly unlimited powers of destruction and creation but emphasizes suburban bliss through their creation of a permanent excuse to forever avoid "KP" or kitchen patrol, which might support domestic equality between men and women in the home. By literally constructing femininity and domesticity through robotocized versions of their murdered wives, the men of Stepford drastically reverse the impact feminism has had upon their homes and prohibit the possibility of changing gender roles.

Levin critiques antifeminist backlash through an extended parody of the Stepford men as reactionary victimizers. He also suggests how traditionally male, public spheres, such as technology, can be the sites of further oppression of women; although he takes these possibilities to the extreme through science fiction, his disturbing portrayal appropriately indicts how easily change may be contained by those with power. Levin lampoons those in power by constructing

tradition based on remnants of pre-pubescence and the fetishization of motherhood; for example, Joanna notices that Kit Sunderson smells like Walter's mother's perfume, an indication that the wives have been programmed, literally, as robotic replacements built to perform nostalgic versions of femininity. This correlates with Joanna's assessment that the Stepford wives are "like actresses in commercials, pleased with detergents and floor wax, with cleansers, shampoos and deodorants. Pretty actresses, big in the bosom but small in the talent, playing suburban housewives unconvincingly, too nicey-nice to be real" (43). Falsity and construction in advertising again underscore how the seductive messages of domesticity and femininity are spread through media such as television, magazines, and through the sense of nostalgia which these elements of culture inspire.

By performing femininity, the Stepford wives are constructed like actresses or models that perform domestic and sexual acts submissively, with only minimal direction or command. This programmed submission creates a forced, false domestic and sexual harmony and mimics the complicity of stereotypically oppressed suburban housewives. Believing they are altruistic, acting for their own good and the sanctity of their families, the collective of men transform an intrusive, privileged gaze into a nihilistic one, seeking to transform the image of a domestic actress into a reality. For example, the gaze in which Walter's friends blatantly participate at the impromptu dinner party does not merely objectify Joanna to the point of discomfort; it is also a tool of their ultimate oppression of her, mapping out nuances of her body and face to form a perfected image. When Joanna finds Walter masturbating after an early night at the Men's Association, the reader suspects that Walter is stimulated by both the pornography the men watch and by the prospect of uncompromised perfection in the form of a "new" Joanna. Charmaine Wimperis is also a victim of her husband's attraction to perfection and submission;

before her death, he routinely chases her, seeking to restrain her in a “rubber suit,” an outfit meant for ultimate bondage and submission. He can only achieve his desires without resistance through her murder. Before she is murdered, Joanna senses her own fate will match Charmaine’s, and remarks to the Stepford druggists that his own wife is “pretty, helpful, submissive to her lord and master; you’re a lucky man” (102).

The men of Stepford thrive on a heightened and obviously perverted sense of nostalgia, one which harkens specifically to dolls and tradition as tools of gender role formation. In “Nostalgia: Experiencing the Elusive” E.B. Daniels notes that the men of Stepford are “fascinated with the manufacturing nostalgia of television: grandmas with homey, clean houses and kitchens, ruffled aprons, homecooking . . . Nostalgia becomes demonic as the men of Stepford, driven crazy by nostalgia, in a fantastic attempt to recreate the community of their nostalgia, capture only a horrible illusion” (78). This perverse nostalgia that focuses on such ingrained perceptions of domesticity--grandmother and family traditions--underscores how the Stepford wives become life size dolls with which the men can play. Both grandmother and dolls--as images of a revisionist past--are tools through which gender roles can be perpetuated. This male “play” with dolls favors falsity and power over reality and the possibility for equality. Uncritically revisiting the past may lead to false assumptions about women’s satisfaction with domesticity, minimizing the possibility of resistance.

Dolls can serve as pedagogical tools for inculcating gender roles and as such can undermine feminist efforts for equality in the future. Ironically, Joanna notices that the Stepford wives are not passing on their uber-domestic ways to their daughters, when she hires one of them to babysit Pete and Kim. That the young girls of Stepford resist the uber-domesticity of their home environment highlights the limitations of the men’s understanding of motherhood, identity

formation, and subjectivity. The men of Stepford may not believe that it is necessary for their daughters to adhere to traditional gender roles until their resistance becomes problematic for the male-dominated community when the girls grow to be adults. Further, they may not view the transformation as necessary for anyone not married to a member of the Stepford Men's Club, as the Stepford wife is constructed as a sexual and domestic servant. Ultimately, the resistance to domesticity exhibited by the teenage girls of Stepford is paradoxical. Their fathers have constructed wives to fulfill a traditional female gender role, which in addition to sexual and domestic submissiveness includes motherhood, but because these robotic versions of mother are so simplistic, cultural and social influences such as feminism may become even more attractive models for the young girls.

Thus, Levin lampoons the limitations of patriarchy through male characters who pathetically construct a specific version of femininity, a doll that performs motherhood and sexuality to fill the void created by nostalgia. Dolls, used as instruments of nostalgia, misread and limit the actual complexity of women's desires and reinforce an immature, unfulfilling image of the interaction between young girls and young boys. By combining these two limited roles into one roboticized version of a wife, the men of Stepford fetishize motherhood. The men construct their new wives' sexuality to meet the men's own desires; they are walking, talking, working, customized dolls through which the men of Stepford reinforce their power. Specifically, they eliminate knowledge created from any source or perspective other than their own. Their dolls have been programmed, literally, to nurture them; in their child-like ignorance about the world, these robots are similar to children who mimic nurturing and perpetuate gender roles through doll play. Like Barbie dolls, these women have exaggerated breasts which not only satisfies the men's sexual desires but also suggest the hyper-nourishing purpose of these

“women.” Joanna discovers that the Stepford Wives do not know history, such as the Gettysburg Address, but do know nursery rhymes like “this little piggy went to market” (101). As we often find the women of Stepford filling their carts neatly at market, Levin’s use of this particular nursery rhyme is exceptionally chilling, particularly in conjunction with their ignorance of the Gettysburg Address, which symbolizes a sense of freedom which the Stepford wives once sought and now are unable to even acknowledge as a possibility.

Levin parodies patriarchy further by lampooning how the men of Stepford attempt to create meaning through programming their “wives.” As Joanna discovers their lack of historical and social knowledge, she is literally hours away from her death and “rebirth” as a Stepford wife; it is unsurprising the extent to which the creators of these robots eliminate “extraneous” knowledge, concentrating only on domesticity and sexuality. Levin has earlier hinted that these reactionary tactics began after the women’s club attracted Betty Friedan as a speaker. As an embodiment of second-wave feminism’s activists, like Friedan, Joanna threatens the men of Stepford not only through her consistent questioning of Stepford’s archaic patriarchal ways, but by attempting escape once she realizes the danger she faces. As she runs, she is literally surrounded by men, every one of which is a threat, as she realizes the extensive network of men who have the same goal. This inverts the shift in power which prompted the men of Stepford to hatch their plan.

Through its indirect treatment of *The Feminine Mystique*, *The Stepford Wives* critiques and resists the dichotomous natures of patriarchy and feminism. Friedan rejoined the conversation when she critiqued *The Stepford Wives* upon release of director Bryan Forbes’ film in 1975, but she failed to acknowledge that Levin’s and Forbes’ critiques patriarchy through their characterizations of individual, symbolic victimizers. Anna Krugovoy Silver contends in her

article “The Cyborg Mystique: *The Stepford Wives* and Second Wave Feminism” that “Friedan’s dismissal of the film suggests her discomfort with . . . the way that the film implicates *all* men in the destruction of women’s lives: not one man in Stepford moves away from the town or attempts to save his wife”^x (111). Silver further examines the “political context” of Friedan’s response: “By the mid-1970s the liberal feminist movement, as institutionalized in the National Organization for Women (NOW) and *Ms.* magazine, was concerned with consolidating power as the best way to continue the dissemination of its goals into legislation and the culture at large” (111). Friedan’s reaction to the film supports and furthers the intertextuality which exists between *The Feminine Mystique* and *The Stepford Wives*. Each of these texts--and Friedan’s response--exaggerates and thus underscores the distance between opposing viewpoints regarding gender roles in American society. By lampooning the victimizers, *The Stepford Wives* articulates the pervasive and persuasive nature of patriarchy; the portrait may disturb those hoping for a less conflicted vision of liberation from patriarchal oppression.

Rather than negating the possibility for hope and change, the novel merely re-emphasizes the gravity and persistence of power; it stresses and predicts the persistent challenges of seeking women’s liberation. One of these challenges is the increasing prevalence of the suburban landscape; Levin represents white supremacist capitalist patriarchy symbolically through the novel’s suburban setting. The sprawling topography of suburbia symbolizes the increasing

^x In Frank Oz’s 2004 remake, Friedan’s discomfort with the original film version seems to have been responded to: while Joanna’s husband sets her up to be transformed into a robot (through an implanted chip), the film reveals her “transformation” to be a unrealistic ruse by the previously unhappy and mismatched couple to undo the damage inflicted upon the women of Stepford. Yet the remake is ultimately an anti-feminist text as it reveals that the mastermind behind the transformation of Stepford is not the head of the Stepford Men’s Association, but is his highly educated, competitive, ambitious wife who has murdered her husband, replaced him with a roboticized version (as in the original), and directs him to lead the Men’s Association towards roboticizing the members’ wives.

distance between the housewife and non-domestic activities and interests; domesticity was performed discretely and privately as suburban housewives were literally spread further out geographically, both from one another and from their husbands away at work. Their energies were also spread thinner due to responsibilities placed upon them by prevailing ideology and the goal of attaining comfort and/or affluence. Time that may have been spent on certain aspects of a domestic routine was reduced by advances in technology only to be replaced with increasing standards and added demands, including commuting between the public spaces of the community--where services essential to domestic and familial upkeep were placed--and the private space of the home.^{xi} Suburbia's very structure, which reflects male privilege, arranged and perpetuated physical space in such a way as to inhibit the potential agency offered through community, particularly for the women who lived daily within an increasingly separate, increasingly mechanized world of domesticity.

Levin's emphasis on victimization and oppression also highlights the question of women's complicity in the creation and perpetuation of the feminine mystique. As Joanna is forced to grapple with her husband's change from feminist sympathizer to men's organization puppet, an oppressive and marginalizing environment of ultra-domesticity, and the loss of her friends, she is increasingly powerless to affect positive change or maintain her sanity. By resting the weight of these questions and situations on Joanna's shoulders, *The Stepford Wives* could be read as critiquing not only Friedan's portrayal of women as passive robots, but also as foreseeing some critics' insistence on women's complicity. Yet Levin simultaneously revisits the feminine mystique's power to cripple "a woman's mental health before she is physically destroyed" (Silver 113). For example, "Pauline Kael's angry *New Yorker* essay concludes that the film's

^{xi} For a concise tracing of the ways that changes in transportation affected women in the mid twentieth century, see Ruth Schwartz Cowan's *More Work For Mother*, p. 79-85.

aggressively pro-woman stance places too much blame on men and not enough on women. ‘If women turn into replicas of the women in the commercials, they do it to themselves . . . Even if the whole pop culture weighs on them--pushing them in that direction--if they go that way, they’re the ones letting it happen’ (Silver 110). But *The Stepford Wives* seems to reject such simplistic denial of the power of ideology by sensationalizing it. When Joanna finally visits a psychiatrist, the kind but ultimately dismissive treatment she receives mirrors the desperation invoked by the feminine mystique. Rather than recognizing the literal immediacy of her patient’s problems, Dr. Fancher offers Joanna medication and a blanket statement on the state of women: “It sounds . . . like the idea of a woman who, like many women today, and with good reason, feels a deep resentment and suspicion of men. One who’s pulled two ways by conflicting demands, perhaps more strongly than she’s aware, the old conventions on the one hand, and the *new* conventions of the liberated woman on the other” (Levin 94). Despite Dr. Fancher’s accurate assessment of Joanna’s emotional state, it is ultimately an oversimplification, a dismissal. By grouping Joanna’s fears with other women’s, Dr. Fancher at once both supports Joanna yet also undermines the reality and immediacy of her personal situation. Joanna’s fatal solitude mimics the feminine mystique and inverts the progress she experienced before her life in Stepford. Unfortunately, Joanna is one among many; she is merely the latest victim of Stepford’s nostalgic machinations which literally refigures hopes of greater equality and opportunity for women into male economic and social privilege.

Studying a text such as *The Stepford Wives* in conjunction with historically important and controversial feminist documents such as *The Feminine Mystique* is useful in understanding the complexities of domesticity and of feminism, which has the potential to revise the ways in which domesticity can be used as a tool of oppression. By constructing sympathetic, accessible

characters such as Joanna and Bobbie, Levin extends feminism, making it even more palatable to readers and enhancing the usefulness of Friedan's work. As we will see through examining the ways that domesticity, patriarchy, and oppression intersect with feminism, sisterhood, and subjectivity in other works, Levin's satire of men--who succumb to the forces of nostalgia and tradition and who are seduced by the power available to them systemically--underscores that the personal is political. His critique of a seemingly catalyzing work such as Friedan's also emphasizes the importance of complex, earnest dialogue between feminist participants in the movement. Although his portrayal of women as victims could be read as limiting, *The Stepford Wives* ultimately reaffirms the value of engaging in the struggle for equality.

CHAPTER 2
SEWING SUBJECTIVITY, COOKING COMMUNITIES:
SISTERHOOD AND DOMESTIC RESISTANCE

“No nation can be free when half the population is enslaved in the kitchen”
(Lenin)

“When Frederick Douglass proclaimed, ‘This is the Negro’s hour,’ Sojourner Truth, then eighty years old, predicted that ‘if colored men get their rights, and not colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before’” (Estelle Freedman, *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*).

The landscape of domesticity and feminism, as well as sites of intersection (culturally, through the women’s movement and individually, through women’s personal experiences) underwent significant change in the years preceding and following the publication of *The Feminine Mystique* and its fictional response, *The Stepford Wives*. Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Fannie Flagg’s *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* both navigate the complexities of historical and personal change occurring during these eras. Because of the unique similarities of these novels, they work well together as a response to the more overt and timely feminist indictments of domesticity provided in Friedan’s and Levin’s works, studied in chapter one. Both novels are set in the pre-women’s liberation movement American South, between the eras of the political suffragette movement and the organized women’s liberation movement influenced by the publication of *The Feminine Mystique*. Lending further credence to the two novels’ relevance to a study of domesticity and feminism, both novels were written in the 1980s, a contentious time for second-wave feminism, as it had seemingly peaked. By bypassing the most crucial years in the popular women’s movement, instead focusing on the years and problematic ideologies preceding and following its birth and success, both Flagg and Walker underscore the necessity of rejecting the potential trappings of a “postfeminist” ideology, or in the case of Walker, with her Womanist philosophy, the potential limits of second-wave

feminism. Both texts suggest the importance of sisterhood formation as a means of gaining subjectivity specifically by revising domesticity into shared, generative acts of subversive discourse and community building. Both texts advocate feminism by addressing its ideals rather than its history.

Like the other texts I examine in this study, *The Color Purple* and *Fried Green Tomatoes* encourage scholars and readers alike to question how we can distinguish the difference between subversive, resistant domesticity and hegemonic domesticity that merely fulfills the expectations of patriarchy. How can we determine the effects of a non-political, pre-organized effort meant to eradicate or at the very least alter the constraints of patriarchy when the end result seems very similar to the beginning stages of the process? Regardless of their changes in personal and political awareness these characters still perform domestic work. Thus, acknowledging and exploring changes in attitudes about domesticity and daily life are more tangible goals than is the possibility of eradicating domesticity from women's lives--fictional or real. Flagg and Walker offer their readers the opportunity to explore the differences between recognizing the potential for renewal that domesticity offers--of overcoming the mundane, isolating nature of domesticity as an impediment for creativity, spirituality, or happiness--and accepting that which has not changed. What forms of resistance are realistic and meaningful?

Resistance cannot occur without the recognition of and subsequent use of agency, in whatever form domesticity may provide. Bettina Aptheker contends in *Tapestries of Life* that "Women's resistance . . . is shaped by the dailiness of women's lives. It comes out of the sexual division of labor that assigns to women responsibility for sustaining the lives of children and, in a broader sense, their families" (173). Aptheker's description of resistance through the dailiness of women's lives, the domesticity that tends to inform women's existence within a patriarchy, is

similar to the tenets of feminist poststructuralism. However, Aptheker insists that the women's resistance she discusses exists outside the parameters of any political or social theory which implies opposition and power struggles. Instead, she states that "women's resistance is not necessarily or intrinsically oppositional; it is not necessarily or intrinsically contesting for power. It does, however, have a profound impact on the fabric of social life because of its steady, cumulative effects. It is central to the making of history, and . . . it is the bedrock of social change" (173). In Walker's "womanist"^{xii} text, Celie uses alternative discursive modes to create a political discourse and subjectivity based on personal, daily experiences. Lauren Berlant posits in her article "Race, Gender, and Nation in *The Color Purple*"

Celie's narrative radically resituates the subject's national identity within a mode of aesthetic, not political, representation. These discursive modes are not "naturally" separate, but *The Color Purple* deliberately fashions such a separation in its attempt to represent a national culture that operates according to "womanist" values rather than patriarchal forms. While political language is laden with the historical values and associations of patriarchal power, aesthetic discourse here carries with it a utopian force that comes to be associated with the spirit of everyday life relations among women. (4)

Thus, this recognition of the impact of women's agency, particularly through alternative or refigured discourses in the domestic sphere, is pertinent to a study of texts that are set in pre-women's movement America.

Resistance through the "dailiness of women's lives" differs from the domestic routine that liberal feminists like Ann Oakley^{xiii} condemns and the ritual acts that Jeanne Batz

Cooperman discusses in *The Broom Closet: Secret Meanings of Domesticity in Postfeminist Novels by Louise Erdrich, Mary Gordon, Toni Morrison, Marge Piercy, Jane Smiley, and Amy*

^{xii} Walker uses the term "womanism" instead of feminism to describe black women's experience. Womanism revises some problematic applications of "1970s white" feminism to black women's experience (Lauret 19).

^{xiii} I refer here to Oakley's *Woman's Work: The Housewife, Past and Present*.

Tan. Cooperman critiques Ann Romines' notion of the "domestic ritual" outlined in her foundational text *The Home Plot: Women, Writing, and Domestic Ritual*, which describes

all physical activities that were performed regularly in a house and derived emotional and symbolic meaning from its boundaries. Viewing housework in this way allows us to see its power, its significance, and its numerous aspects: the holiness of the everyday, and the paradoxically sacred quality of time spent quietly performing the regular, simple, earthbound tasks that sustain and order our lives. (Cooperman 4)

While Cooperman allows for Romines' almost reverent description of domesticity to establish the potentially positive aspects of the domestic ritual, she also describes its potential for having a negative impact: "domesticity can also empty into meaningless rote, or shatter into profane, disconnected acts used to control and manipulate the rest of the household" (4). Both assessments contain truths particularly applicable to the texts studied in this chapter. However, Cooperman's argument uses a discernable hierarchy of values based on the potential for resistance that domesticity can offer, noting that domesticity in general terms adheres to an anthropological definition of ritual--that it makes and preserves order, fosters community and encourages transformation. Such an argument seems prescriptive in light of the complex ways which real women and fictional characters, such as Celie and Sofia in *The Color Purple*, interact with domesticity. Cooperman argues

if someone prepares a meal with special care, acting in prescribed ways, for a symbolic purpose, on a regular and preordained basis, then shares that meal with appreciative loved ones in a communal setting, I defy anyone to deny that meal ritual status. But if the same person carelessly microwaves frozen entrees so the family can gulp them in front of the TV set, she has entered the mundane with a thud." (5)

I contend that domesticity offers the potential for resistance, agency, and power, regardless of whether a repetitively-performed set of acts can meet Cooperman's assessment of ritual; resistance can still be found in the ordinary acts of housework--even if this resistance is fostered

in direct response to the mundane, as Oakley's theories suggest. The "dailiness of women's lives" exists within the continuum that Cooperman describes, even at the undervalued level of the mundane that her definition of domesticity condemns. Denying the generative potential within even the most banal acts involved in maintaining a household also denies the possibility of change and growth. If ritual can offer transformation, this transformation does not have to wait until Thanksgiving dinner; Celie embodies this dynamic of ritual and mundane as she announces her independence from domesticity at Christmas dinner, punctuating her announcement of liberation with a case knife thrust at her oppressor. While performing domestic rituals and routines can be negative and stultifying, for some women these repetitive acts may offer varying degrees of personal satisfaction and empowerment. Domesticity offers a range of complex emotional responses to the routine inherent in its performance. Resistance to the stultification of routine, whether through rejecting or redefining domestic acts' meaning(s), is one of many possible responses. Feminist writing like Walker's and Flagg's highlights these responses. The possibility for resistance against mundane, routine characteristics of domesticity exists because the very political and societal structures such as white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that domesticity is meant to reinforce and uphold, while pervasive, are tenuous. Domesticity exemplifies white supremacist capitalist patriarchy because domestic labor is divided along racial and gender lines. Women, not men, are expected to fulfill the role of domestic worker or servant, usually in the context of marriage. Further, domesticity itself is associated with culturally constructed femininity; because women have historically fulfilled the role of homemaker, many people falsely assume that women doing "women's work" likewise fulfills a natural order, rather than a socially constructed and culturally reinforced one. Chris Weedon posits

Behind the general unwillingness, except among feminists, to rethink the sexual division of labour and its implications for the equality of women and men lies a fundamental patriarchal assumption that women's biological difference from men fits them for different social tasks . . . we are [assumed to be] naturally equipped to fulfill different social functions, primarily those of wife and mother. Being a good wife and mother, as these roles are currently defined, calls for particular qualities, thought to be naturally feminine, such as patience, emotion, and self-sacrifice. These expectations about natural femininity structure women's access to the labour market and to public life. Common sense tells us that women are best suited to the service industries and 'caring' professions and the 'aggressive' worlds of management, decision making and politics call for masculine qualities even in a woman (2-3).

Further, because domesticity is thought to fulfill a natural order, paid domestic workers are compensated poorly. Both positions--housewife and domestic worker--assume a subordinate role within the home. As domesticity is feminized work, associated with the subordinate status of women in society, compensation typically is limited to prescriptive emotional benefits, such as pride in maintaining the home, joy in childrearing, and security from the marital relationship.

Domesticity can exemplify white supremacist capitalist patriarchy because female domestic workers who supplement their own domestic duties with work in other people's homes tend to be non-white. In her article "Race, Class, and Intimacy in Southern Households" Mahnaz Kousha posits

domestic household service typically brings together women of contrasting social positions for work that is distinctive in its site and tasks. Elite women, most commonly white and middle or upper class, employ less privileged women, often of a subordinated racial and/or ethnic group, to carry out the gendered household duties for which all women in the United States tend to be responsible." (77)

The hierarchies and value systems inherent in a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy are both reinforced and resisted, to varying degrees and with varying effects, in the homes and culture of black domestic workers. bell hooks' essay "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance" reinforces the ideal of black women's resistance against the machinations of a capitalist system which has historically and economically required them to care for white women's homes and children.

Resistance in the homeplace occurs as well, as hooks describes it, against the “sexism [which] delegates to females the task of creating and sustaining a home environment [while] it has been primarily the responsibility of black women to construct domestic households as spaces of care and nurturance in the face of brutal harsh reality of racist oppression, of sexist domination” (449). Despite the possibility for resistance against racial oppression in the act of constructing and maintaining a homeplace, sexist assumptions and practices can still prevail in these places of sanctuary. While the act of constructing nurturing domestic households may provide for some black women a resistance to racial oppression, as hooks contends, it may also serve as a reinforcement of black women’s ultimately subordinate role in a racist, sexist hierarchy. Some black men, painfully aware of their subordinate, oppressed status, have historically used women’s role as domestic caretaker to further elevate their own relative position within the household. Walker and Flagg offer two very differing versions of this phenomenon. Walker, for instance, constructs a representation of homeplace that it is a site of resistance to racial oppression for some but sexist domination still prevails for others, whereas the black characters in Flagg’s novel seem to resist both forms of oppression.

Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Flagg’s *Fried Green Tomatoes* exemplify the personal and social conflicts inherent in negotiating the complex territory that exists between domesticity’s oppressive and potentially liberating functions. Both novels also emphasize the importance of sisterhood formation through various main characters’ endurance of isolation and oppression as well as through their eventual bonding with other women with similar experiences. At times, these characters’ awareness of their own domestic isolation and oppression mirrors their actual isolation and willingness and/or ability to make positive changes in their lives. Each novel begins with isolation and stultification as forms of spiritual imprisonment and ends with

the potential for personal growth and subversion against intertwining systems of oppression. Some elements of domesticity, such as isolation, rigid gender roles, sexual oppression, and social hierarchies, mimic and reify white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Yet domesticity can also encourage survival against these oppressions.

Survival, Subjectivity, and Sisterhood in *The Color Purple*

In *The Color Purple*, symbolic imprisonment through domesticity and domestic servitude is illustrated in the isolation felt by major characters--specifically Celie who, as a poor, uneducated, Southern black woman is already marginalized. Her forced adjustment from victimized young woman to isolated, abused, helpless housewife exemplifies the most oppressive functions of domesticity. Walker demonstrates the damaging effects of domesticity as a tool of patriarchal oppression through Celie's increasing isolation and emotional desolation. However, her eventual transformation from victim to independent, creative survivor illustrates the potential for resistance against these oppressive functions. Walker's portrayal of the close relationship between Celie and her sister, Nettie, as well as the bond that develops between Celie and her daughter-in-law, Sofia, illustrates the possibility for personal growth and happiness despite the prison-like atmosphere that domesticity can sometimes foster. While Nettie and Celie's close sisterly relationship does not necessarily mean that family relationships can always supplant the more dangerous or damaging aspects of traditional domestic life, the near physical pain Celie and Nettie feel after they are separated illustrates that close bonds can be an emotional salve. Walker also suggests that sisterhoods based on choice are just as, if not more, powerful than familial ones.

Sisterhoods of choice can be subversive because they are often based on emotional connections or provide emotional support; these connections help women overcome isolation.

For Celie, who is particularly devastated by isolation, sisterhood formation provides eventual resistance against oppression through love, friendship, and community building. Her struggles, burdens, and the physical and emotional abuse she endures represent the most isolating, spiritually harmful side of domesticity. The domestic labor which she and other women perform is isolating, mind-numbing work; while she and other female characters are able to occasionally behave subversively in some of their domestic activities, Celie's primary experience with domesticity centers on its control over every aspect of her life. Because domesticity can be used as a form of physical, emotional, and sexual imprisonment, through abuse, denial, and domination, it is a form of power and agency reserved for males who adhere to the tenets of a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy and benefit from their unconscious acceptance of this pervasive system. Mr. ____, Celie's husband, and Alphonso, Celie's stepfather, benefit from the form of domesticity that their abuse ensures. Domesticity, for the women who inhabit the community of which Celie is a marginalized player, forms a symbolic house of oppression.

The physically and spiritually oppressive functions of domesticity are reinforced through the normative heterosexual expectations of patriarchy and, specifically, through men's attempts at sexual control over women. Walker illustrates both the patriarchal stronghold over female sexuality and the attempts some men make in order to maintain this stronghold. Celie's sexual disinterest in men likely stems in part from having been raped by her stepfather, and later, used sexually by her husband. Celie's lesbian desires, specifically her desire for Shug Avery, can be seen as a form of personal protection and resistance to a system that oppresses her. Further, Walker illustrates that sexual oppression is connected to a loss of zeal in life; varying degrees of sexual frustration and satisfaction are illustrated through characters' interactions with daily chores. Celie, for example, becomes energized and sexualized in her work, using domesticity as

an expression of her desires for Shug; she serves her like a domestic worker, willingly, despite Shug's seeming indifference: "I don't want none of your damn food, she say. Just gimme a cup of coffee and hand me my cigarettes" (53). Celie's response is not to argue. "I git the coffee and light her cigarette. She wearing a long white gown and her thin black hand stretching out of it to hold the white cigarette look just right. Something bout it, maybe the little tender veins I see and the big ones I try not to, make me scared. I feel like something pushing me forward. If I don't watch out I'll have hold of her hand, tasting her fingers in my mouth" (53). Because sexual freedom and pleasure is reserved for those in power or who maintain a sense of empowerment, and is otherwise discouraged, denied or condemned, Celie's sexual desire for Shug is an internal form of resistance.

Further, because men alone are eligible for sexual privilege, Celie perceives sex with men as another domestic chore. On Celie and Mr. ___'s wedding night, Celie thinks about Nettie [her absent sister] "while he on top of me, wonder if she safe. And then I think bout Shug Avery. I know what he doing to me he done to Shug Avery and maybe she like it. I put my arm around him" (13). Later, she explains to Shug how she feels about sex with Mr. ___: "What is it like? He git up on you, heist your nightgown round your waist, plunge in. Most times I pretend I ain't there. He never know the difference. Never ast me how I feel, nothing. Just do his business, get off, go to sleep" (81). Celie's strategies for making sex more endurable or enjoyable, such as thinking of Shug or pretending to be asleep, are strategies of resistance against a system of male dominance; clearly, sex is no more than an unpleasant domestic chore. The results of the traditional heterosexual sex act, childbearing and childrearing, can be used as forms of punishment for women, particularly Celie and Shug, who cannot raise their own children or must raise others' children with no appreciation or help. Because she is emotionally scarred by rape,

childbirth, and the denial of motherhood, Celie must defend herself with passive acts of resistance to sex and subversive attempts to enjoy it.

Walker shows domesticity as a means for men of elevating and maintaining social power by promoting male dominance and keeping female power in check. In bell hooks' conception of black women's experience with domesticity, however, the homeplace has had

a radical political dimension. Despite the brutal reality of racial apartheid, of domination, one's homeplace was the one site where one could resist. Black women resisted by making homes where all black people could strive to be subjects, not objects, where we could be affirmed in our minds and hearts despite poverty, hardship, and deprivation, where we could restore to ourselves the dignity denied us on the outside in the public world. (449)

In Walker's construction of the black domestic household or homeplace, these positive functions exist, but not for Celie; for the other members of the household, including Mr. ____, his children, even Shug, these subject positions are available because of Celie's ultimately subordinate position in the family power structure. The rigid gender roles of a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy pervade the Johnson household, despite outside influences that do not adhere to such narrow, rigid perspectives. For example, when Mr. ____'s sister Kate suggests to Mr. ____'s son, Harpo, that he help Celie with bringing in the water from the well, he balks. "Women work, he say. What? she say. Women work. I'm a man. You're a trifling nigger, she say. You git that bucket and bring it back full" (22). Soon after, Kate is ejected because her suggestions have upset the balances of power in the household. Because domesticity keeps women isolated, particularly those in a rural environment like the one in which Celie lives, a culturally imposed hierarchy of gender roles is relatively easy to maintain through abuse, domination, and the routine of domesticity. Kate's attempts to show her brother's household that their ideas about male privilege are not universally supported are futile in terms of helping Celie construct a homeplace similar to the one bell hooks describes. Except for a few visits from Mr. ____'s

family, such as his sisters and brother, Celie is literally isolated within the household from outside ideological influences.

The Color Purple also demonstrates that institutions can contribute to women's isolation, even when these institutions are social in nature. The church, one of Celie's potential havens from abuse and neglect, is merely an extension of her husband's household; while on these sanctioned excursions from her husband's home, she does "a right smart for the preacher. Clean the floors and windows, make the wine, wash the altar linen. Make sure there's wood for the stove in wintertime. He call me Sister Celie. Sister Celie, he say, You faithful as the day is long. Then he talk to the other ladies and they mens" (45). Thus, the church is constructed as and perceived by Celie as a cruel affirmation of her place within the household and within society. Celie hears gossip but does not participate in it, as she is resigned to her status. These other ladies, the ones whose gossip she overhears both at church and at home, are the same ones who "used to be here both times I was big [pregnant]. Sometimes they think I don't notice, they stare at me. Puzzle" (45). Rejected by the women of the church, potential allies in oppressively male-dominated environments, she is not the subject of or participant in discussion. Celie's sense of her own isolation and subordinate status, then, is compounded and reaffirmed through the social hierarchy represented in the church.

Domesticity represents social worth or value of the domestic worker and by extension, the results of a homemaker's labor also signify worth or value for the head of household. For example, if a woman is known in the community for her good cooking, admirable housekeeping, or how well she treats her children, her social standing increases, or is at the very least, maintained. Despite its seemingly rigid structure, Mr. ____'s household is actually composed of conflicting and unstable domestic values. Celie, his subordinate, for example, is not the subject

of gossip, but is known to be a good homemaker and housewife. Conversely, Shug Avery, Mr. ___'s occasional live-in lover, represents non-sanctioned femininity: she has abandoned her children to the care of her parents, she is single, she travels, and she sings secular songs in public. Perceived through the community's narrow lens of what constitutes culturally approved femininity, Shug Avery has little worth in any domestic or feminine sense; her resistance against domestic life and femininity is perceived as a threat to the community. Celie's domestic efforts and her well known subservience help maintain the balance of community perception in Mr. ___'s favor. Her fields "bring in more than anybody" (58); Mr. ___ barely contributes to the work involved in maintaining the farm. Because the social status of the head of the household is dependent upon the degree of control he has over his wife, male characters in *The Color Purple*, such as Mr. ___ and his son Harpo, behave in ways that are meant to ensure that their wives will obey commands and not question their subordinate status. These male characters enact a generational strategy (seen in Mr. ___'s father's attitudes towards Shug and Celie as opposites in feminine worth), which harkens to slavery. Eva Boesenberg notes in *Gender, Vernacular, Voice: The Formation of Female Subjectivity in Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker*

practically all female characters in the novel are confronted with sexual ascriptions designed to keep or put them in their place. These epithets tend to focus on external appearance in a manner evaluating their bodies against a hypothetical standard of female beauty with a tendency to emphasize its 'shortcoming' . . . For Celie, the female insecurities about one's attractiveness and the 'acceptability' of one's body are greatly exacerbated by continual pronouncements of her "ugliness" by the men in her life. (221)

Celie uses her talent and propensity in the domestic sphere, in combination with her fantasies and desires towards Shug, as private counterstrategies against constant degradations of her femininity.

The bond of motherhood and acts of maternal care complicate the ubiquitous effects of patriarchy and predate the subversive and regenerative act of sisterhood formation. Celie's early and continuous reliance upon her biological sister is especially significant as it starkly contrasts with the intensive isolation she endures as Mr. ____'s property. The restorative nature of Celie and Nettie's reliance on one another, even when their physical separation prevents them from communicating, also contrasts with the relationship they have with their mother, who is not only physically and mentally ill, but is also burdened with an abusive, scheming husband and several more children to tend to. Because their mother cannot be her family's caretaker, Celie and Nettie must both contribute to the household in ways that exceed their youth and innocence. Thus, the woman who is privileged in the positive functions of domesticity, such as the nurturing facets of motherhood, yet burdened by its negative, restricting facets, such as tending to the routine household duties and satisfying her husband's sexual demands, is practically absent during Celie's adolescence. Her inability to meet her husband's sexual demands, an understandable refusal to perform what patriarchal society sees as her duty to her husband, leads Alphonso to view Celie as a sexual object. Raped repeatedly by the man she believes to be her father, but who is later revealed to be her stepfather, Celie gives birth to two children who are taken from her. Eva Boesenberg states that "Celie's maternal role at the beginning of the novel contrasts sharply with her own immaturity. After her actual motherhood is brutally terminated and symbolically obliterated by Pa's theft of her babies, she assumes quasi-maternal responsibilities for her younger siblings and a large share of the domestic labor despite the fact that she is barely adolescent herself" (202). Further, she consciously submits to Alphonso in order to prevent Nettie from enduring the same traumas. Celie's youth, therefore, is spent fulfilling her mother's prescribed roles, including the sexual role typically assigned to wives; that she sacrifices her own

body in order to prevent her sister's rape signifies the depth with which she has internalized the role of motherly caretaker, but also signifies Celie's recognition of how fulfilling men's sexual desires is part of mothering. She therefore must endure the loss of her mother as a role model and a caretaker, the burden of protecting Nettie, the shame and traumas of incest, and the loss of her children. This loss prevents her from taking advantage of any potentially positive aspects of domesticity available through the bonds of motherhood. In addition to these traumas, which only compound one another, Celie must also endure what she perceives as mundane, undesirable aspects of domesticity, as she is now the caretaker of the entire household.

In these early sections, Walker constructs domesticity as not merely oppressive and stultifying, but as a traumatic psychic and physical burden to which there seems no viable alternative. Celie's experience is essentially one of domestic imprisonment; only education offers an alternative, but Celie's chances for escape through education are lessened due to the social stigma associated with her pregnancies. Despite her brightness and determination, Celie is taken out of school; the girls' teacher, Miss Beasley says that "[as] long as she been a teacher she never know nobody want to learn as bad as Nettie and me" (11). Female powerlessness in patriarchal institutions such as home, church, and school, as well as the social stigmas surrounding pregnancy prevent the teacher from assisting the girls at home beyond a plaintive visit: "[when] she see how tight my dress is, she stop talking and go" (11). Celie's abandonment by a well intentioned but ultimately powerless female authority figure further illustrates the pervasive control that Celie's new domestic role has over her future. Regardless, Nettie continues to teach Celie reading and geography, including the names of Christopher Columbus's ships, symbols of travel and adventure that contrast starkly with the limiting realities of Celie's life. Celie's early traumas have conditioned her not to expect significant change in her physical

and emotional landscape: “I feel bad sometime Nettie done pass me in learnin. But look like nothing she say can git in my brain and stay. She try to tell me something bout the ground not being flat. I just say, Yeah, like I know it. I never tell her how flat it look to me” (11). Celie’s loss of hope and her internalization of the isolating nature of her environment foreshadow the ways in which she will later internalize the abuse handed down by her husband.

Yet Celie’s desire to educate herself suggests an internal struggle with the passivity she has learned through her experiences with domesticity. This struggle between passivity and action coincides with her developing awareness of her bleak situation and with her varying responses to forces beyond her control. Celie’s dramatic transformation from childhood to painful adolescence--one which she has spent pregnant and psychologically scarred--to isolated womanhood occurs while Celie fulfills domestic roles and duties, even those not typically or reasonably ascribed to her as a young, able-bodied female in a traditional household situation. Celie is aware that it is unusual or at least unjust that women so young are used by men (Alphonso’s new wife is about the same age as Celie), and she is perhaps more aware of the stigma associated with being pregnant (Miss Beasley abandons her, and no one else, particularly the women from the church, comes to visit). Her awareness extends to the hope of Nettie’s possible escape from this particular life. This degree of awareness makes her situation more difficult and her hope for change decreases with each passing day as her sense of isolation, and the actual reality of that isolation, increases. As Celie and Nettie are eventually separated by Celie’s forced marriage to Mr. ____, Celie’s virtual re-imprisonment as a domestic servant in another home, isolated and powerless, is enforced swiftly. Mr. ____ has several children of his own, and her status as last choice further marginalizes her, thus practically ensuring that she will

not move beyond the traditional role that she has fulfilled in what remains of her mother's household.

Walker's construction of this situation exemplifies the degree to which women are commodified as objects rather than treated as people in a capitalist patriarchy. The process by which Mr. ___ comes to "take Celie's hand" in marriage rather than Nettie's--his first choice--illustrates how Celie has been dehumanized. Mr. ___ and Alphonso discuss which young woman Mr. ___ will marry using language suggestive of the barter and exchange used in slavery (Boesenberg 200). "Well, He [Alphonso] say, real slow, I can't let you have Nettie. She too young. Don't know nothing but what you tell her. Sides, I want her to git some more schooling. Make a schoolteacher out of her. But I can let you have Celie. She the oldest anyway. She ought to marry first" (9). At this point in the exchange, Alphonso's reasons seem paternal and benign. However, his next statements reveal that he is aware of how this trade will affect his own standing in the community and his place in the social hierarchy; because Mr. ___'s position is tainted by his dalliances with Shug Avery, Alphonso cannot risk making a family alliance with him unless he does so using the girl that the community already also perceives as tainted. He says, "She ain't fresh tho, but I spects you know that. She spoiled. Twice. But you don't need a fresh woman no how. I got a fresh one in there myself and she sick all the time. He spit, over the railing. The children git on her nerve, she not much of a cook. And she big already" (9). This statement also reveals Alphonso's cunning--a young, virginal wife does not mean that she will be a satisfactory wife--and he uses his own personal experience to try to sway Mr. ___. Alphonso then reveals his true perception of Celie as commodity, which includes seemingly negative aspects, such as "she ugly" (9). Alphonso's inclusion of his opinion of Celie's looks is part of his calculated efforts to get rid of her, as her perceived unattractiveness would potentially

guarantee her faithfulness, which would in turn help to insure against further degradation of his social standing. Alphonso then concludes his pitch with emphasis on matters central to the labor and sexual facets of domesticity:

But she ain't no stranger to hard work. And she clean. And God done fixed her. You can do everything just like you want to and she ain't gonna make you feed it or clothe it. . . Fact is, he say, I got to get rid of her. She too old to be living here at home. And she a bad influence on my other girls. She'd come with her own linen. She can take that cow she raise down there back of the crib. But Nettie you flat out can't have. Not now. Not never. . . She ugly. Don't even look like she kin to Nettie. But she'll make the better wife. She ain't smart either, and I'll just be fair, you have to watch her or she'll give away everything you own. But she can work like a man. (9--emphasis mine)

Alphonso cleverly emphasizes Celie's subordinate nature in order to ensure that Mr. ____ will return to have "another look at" Celie; when he does so, Alphonso adds that "she [is] good with children" (12). Because Mr. ____ is currently widowed, has four children, is involved with Shug Avery, and is also sexually interested in Nettie, Celie's position as wife and caretaker of his children is more akin to filling the position of domestic servant than marrying. Judy Elsey concurs in "Fragmentation in the Quilt": "Celie's enforced hysterectomy has reduced her from person to commodity. Pa gives Celie to Mr. ____ as little more than a convenient labor saving device. 'Men make commerce of them [women], but they do not enter into any exchanges with them' (Irigaray 172)" (164). Alphonso and Mr. ____'s reduction of Celie to a commodity to be bartered--for Alphonso's convenience and lessened financial burden, and for Mr. ____'s need for a housekeeper--emphasizes the ways in which the value of women is likewise reduced to the services they can perform.

As an instrument of emotional and physical isolation and imprisonment, domesticity has worsened Celie's situation once she is forced into marriage. Having witnessed the exchange between Alphonso and Mr. ____, Celie seems more acutely aware of the gravity of her plight yet

more resolved to accept her circumstances and position. Her move from one household to the next is marked by contrasts and paradoxes of which Celie is increasingly aware and against which she feels powerless. The contrast between the ideal of marriage and the reality of Celie's actual position is symbolized in the treatment she receives on her wedding day. She states, "Dear God, I spend my wedding day running from the oldest boy. He twelve. His mama died in his arms and he don't want to hear nothing bout no new one. He pick up a rock and laid my head open. The blood run all down my tween my breasts. His daddy say Don't *do* that! But that's all he say" (12). This violent introduction to the household that Celie is expected to maintain and to the children she is expected to love and care for represents a cruel irony for Celie as a mother figure. Celie cannot care for her own children, but the loss she feels for them haunts her daily. While she is a willing participant in the care of other people, particularly Mr. ___'s motherless children, she cannot care for them emotionally. Her emotional resistance to them is one of few limited, private acts of choice and free will; nevertheless, she is forced, due to the nature of her position, to fulfill the maternal role of self-sacrifice. Celie's emotional detachment from her stepchildren is similar to the subversive strategies, including detachment and attachment, which some black domestic workers used in relation to their white employers, as described by Mahnaz Kousha. While Celie's situation differs from the situation of black female domestic workers in that she is unpaid, she nevertheless functions as a "complaint department" for her husband and stepchildren, who offer her no reciprocation (Kousha 79).

This lack of appreciation and reciprocation on the part of her stepchildren illustrates their acceptance of the idea of mother worship. bell hooks contends in "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance" that "mother worship" praises "the virtues of the self-sacrificing black mother" while implying that "such a gesture is not reflective of choice and will, rather the perfect

embodiment of a woman's 'natural' role. The assumption then is that the black woman who works hard to be a responsible caretaker is only doing what she should be doing" (451). Celie's early relationship with Harpo, Mr. ____'s oldest son, illustrates Celie's struggles with her desire to care for her own children rather than the ones she must care for. Harpo expects Celie to comfort him when he finds out that his mother had been murdered; he also seeks her counsel about the woman he is in love with, Sofia. She reflects: "Everybody say how good I is to Mr.____ children. I be good to them. But I don't feel nothing for them. Patting Harpo back not even like patting a dog. It more like patting another piece of wood. Not a living tree, but a table, a chifferobe. Anyhow, they don't love me neither, no matter how good I is" (31). Celie's comparison of her stepchildren to inanimate pieces of furniture suggests the unnatural connection she must engage in. Celie is aware of the contradictions inherent in her position within the household; her roles as mother, wife, and domestic servant are all exceedingly difficult. These roles are made even more difficult for Celie because she feels she has no viable avenue of recourse other than to accept her lot, thus fulfilling the role of self-sacrificing mother. Her private act of subversion--erecting an emotional wall between herself and her stepchildren--does nothing to change perception or her status within the household. Thus, awareness does little to improve Celie's situation.

Walker's narrative construction of Celie as an almost detached observer of her own oppression emphasizes the need for sisterhood formation. Despite Celie's engagement in privately subversive behaviors, such as her sexual fixation on Shug and the emotional distance she places between herself and her stepchildren, her isolation is profound. Her overall passivity as a means of survival suggests to other characters that she is fulfilling the demands of domesticity placed upon her and is thus confirming the ideals of a white supremacist capitalist

patriarchy. Eva Boesenberg notes “Celie’s manner of surviving through docility is conspicuous in the first half of the novel. Any hope she has for her own salvation she would seem to place in God” (201). Celie’s religious beliefs factor into her relative passivity. Suicide is not a viable option for consideration, although the respite from work that death could offer appeals to Celie. As well as enduring the persecution she feels she deserves as a sinner before God, Celie’s unfulfilling, degrading role as housewife compounds the punishments she endures; if her work does not meet the standards Mr. ___ has prescribed, she will be punished even further.

Walker shows us through this part of the narrative that domesticity can actually be a matter of life and death. For Celie, adhering to patriarchal standards of domesticity represents her choice to live rather than die; unlike Joanna Eberhart, Celie is able to choose to live. Although she has internalized the hegemonic power restrictions handed down first by Alphonso and then by Mr. ___, Celie she still needs some form of positive affirmation from the small community of her secondary family, particularly since she believes that Nettie is dead. A brief visit from Mr. ___’s two sisters confirms her value as a housekeeper and stepmother, as well as her decision to remain docile. A second visit from Kate proves to be more significant as it illustrates Celie’s utter lack of subjectivity. For example, when Kate buys Celie a new dress, Celie is overwhelmed by Kate’s generosity and by the energizing feeling of ownership gives her; she “can’t remember being the first one in my own dress. Now to have one made just for me. I try to tell Kate what it mean. I git hot in the face and stutter. She say, It’s all right, Celie. You deserve more than this. Maybe so. I think” (22). Celie’s uncertainty here suggests that the hierarchy within the household, reified in the community and church, is so pervasive that Celie has trouble accepting the idea that a new dress is a basic need rather than an indulgence. Further, Kate’s urge for Celie to fight Mr. ___ reminds her of Nettie’s earlier insistence; she is also

reminded that she believes Nettie is dead. “I don’t say nothing. I think about Nettie, dead. She fight, she run away. What good it do? I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told. But I’m alive” (22). However, Mr. ___’s ejection of Kate verifies for Celie her conviction to remain completely subordinate to her husband. Thus, for Celie, overtly resisting the established degradation and isolation of domesticity--as she has experienced it--is not an option. Her decision to only engage in the most subtle acts of resistance against her oppressors instead of engaging in what she views as a losing battle is reaffirmed when she is reminded, through the continual banishment of others, of her isolation.

Walker has constructed domesticity, through representing its many negative and damaging effects, as isolating. Celie’s tenuous and impermanent relationships with other women lead her to reject further attempts at sisterhood, such as with a potential sympathizer in Sofia Butler, the Amazonian woman that Harpo marries. Noting their differences, Celie attempts to use the tools of power and oppression to her own advantage. While Celie is clearly meek, submissive, and passive, Sofia is loud, domineering, and assertive, if not aggressive. Their relationship is marred by power struggles initiated by both women, since Sofia attempts to gain happiness through the attainment of power over her household. She defiantly rejects Mr. ___’s attempts to control the couple, telling her father-in-law “What I need to marry Harpo for? He still living here with you. What food and clothes he git, you buy” (33). This first meeting with Mr. ___ and Celie illustrates how Sofia differs from the rigid norm of traditional femininity and foreshadows the ways in which this difference complicates the family dynamic, particularly Celie’s response to Mr. ___’s abuse, domesticity, and isolation. Sofia’s assertions, which undermine Harpo’s role as masculine caretaker, correlate with Walker’s portrayal of Harpo, like Celie, as meek and submissive to Mr. ___. The dynamic between Sofia and Harpo is somewhat

flexible, but is undermined by a power struggle over traditional gender roles. Harpo's interpretation of how a husband and wife should behave has been cultivated by the example given by Celie and Mr. ____, and by the continued admonishments and degradations that Mr. ____ has handed down even to his male children. Although Harpo defies Mr. ____ and marries Sofia, he is ashamed and bewildered by the flexibility of their gender roles. For example, Sofia "tell Harpo, Hold the baby, while she come back in the house with me to git some thread. She making some sheets. He take the baby, give it a kiss, chuck it under the chin. Grin, look up on the porch at his daddy. Mr. ____ blow smoke, look down at him, and say, Yeah, I see now she going to switch the traces on you" (36). Mr. ____'s position in the family hierarchy is illustrated in his disapproval from above--he sits up on the porch looking down. Soon, Harpo asks Mr. ____ and Celie how "to make Sofia mind" (36).

Walker illustrates through Celie the degree to which women can appropriate patriarchy's acceptance of domination and abuse, particularly when they are without the influence of a unified women's movement. Celie appropriates this system, despite her growing awareness of its dangers; we see this through her detached narration of the events surrounding her betrayal of Sofia's "spirit". Because Mr. ____'s domination has been Harpo's only example of how husbands and wives relate to one another, his perception complicates the reality of his happiness with Sofia. He relates how he tells "her one thing, she do another. Never do what I say. Always backtalk" (37). Celie senses Harpo's hesitancy to maintain rigid gender roles and notes his resistance to adhering to his father's system of domination: "To tell the truth, he sound a little proud of this to me" (37). Mr. ____'s advice is to beat her, because in his perception, "Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating" (37). Harpo resists his father's advice, but asks Celie her opinion;

her complicity with Mr. ___'s suggestion of abuse influences Harpo, as Celie reifies Mr. ___'s system of domination and degradation. Celie decides to employ what little power is offered her through her complicity with Mr. ___'s patriarchal viewpoint after she thinks about the way she and Sofia relate to one another as women.

I like Sofia, but she don't act like me at all. If she talking when Harpo and Mr. ___ come in the room, she keep right on. If they ast her where something at, she say she don't know. Keep talking. I think about this when Harpo ast me what he ought to do to make her mind. I don't mention how happy he is now. How three years pass and he still whistle and sing. I think about how every time I jump when Mr. ___ call me, she look surprise. And like she pity me. Beat her. I say. (38)

Celie's internalization of the isolating nature of domesticity prevents her from empathizing with another woman in a similar situation. Instead, she feels contempt and envy for Sofia, who may have the power to resist what Celie has had to meekly accept and endure. Sofia is indeed defiant; she defends herself physically, often gaining the upper hand in fistfights with her husband.

Celie's response to Harpo's attempts to beat Sofia illustrates to her the tenuous and damaging ideology of patriarchy which she has internalized, despite her attempts at subversive emotional resistance. Her domestic routine is disrupted, as she begins to suffer from sleeplessness. The few minor comforts she allows herself--soaking herself in a "warm bath with milk and epsom salts," sprinkling a "little witch hazel on [her] pillow and curtain[ing] out all the moonlight"--do little to distract her from her betrayal of Sofia. "Way late one night it come to me. Sofia. I sin against Sofia spirit. I pray she don't find out, but she do. Harpo told" (41). Celie understandably fears her inevitable confrontation with Sofia.

The confrontation proves to be a critical moment in Celie's progression from awareness and relative passivity to an increasing emotional openness; this openness leads to a sisterhood

formed through the domestic acts of sewing and quilting. Sofia reveals her own feelings of helplessness and isolation, despite her blustery, aggressive demeanor, telling Celie “Just want you to know I looked to you for help” (42). Her attempt to return the curtains that Celie made for her and Harpo reveals how domestic work fostered an uncertain bond between the two women, when communication, empathy, and trust failed because of the restrictions of patriarchy.^{xiv} Celie is forced to admit to Sofia that she encouraged Harpo to beat her.

I say it because I’m a fool, I say. I say it cause I’m jealous of you. I say it
cause you do what I can’t.
What’s that, she say.
Fight. I say.
She stand there a long time, like what I said took the wind out of her jaws. She
mad before, sad now. (42)

The tension between the two women begins to melt, as each woman admits to their own sense of desperate isolation. Sofia’s subsequent revelation that as a young girl she suffered at the hands of her male family members reveals common ground between her and Celie. Further, she divulges that her goals for resistance included constructing what bell hooks deems a homeplace, a home in which she and Harpo and their children could live by their own rules--not Mr. ___’s, not her father’s, nor any other patriarchal model. In her imagined homeplace, which she deems “my own house,” her own subjectivity is more important than love or loyalty to her husband-- “I’ll kill him dead before I let him beat me” (42). Despite Harpo’s attempts to conform to patriarchy’s expectations, Sofia was reaching her goal of resistance and subjectivity; Celie’s suggestion to Harpo, which reaffirmed his father’s advice, impeded Sofia’s progress to successfully construct a homeplace.

^{xiv} Martha J. Cutter notes in her article “Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker’s Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in *The Color Purple*”: “Sewing often functions as a language, communicating far more effectively than lexical signs. Celie sews curtains to welcome Sofia, and when Sofia is angry at Celie, she cuts down these same curtains and returns them (45). When they reconcile their differences, Celie and Sofia use the spoiled curtains as part of a quilt (47)” (171-72).

The conversation that ensues between the two women reveals differing coping strategies against controlling patriarchy. Sofia admits to feeling sorry for Celie, because she reminds her of her mother. “She under my daddy thumb. Naw, she under my daddy foot. Anything he say, goes. She never say nothing back. She never stand up for herself. Try to make a little half stand sometimes for the children but that always backfire. More she stand up for us, the harder time he give her” (43). Unlike Sofia’s mother, Celie has avoided continuing the cycle of abuse/resistance/abuse by meeting all of Mr. ____’s specific demands, as well as the more general demands of domesticity and patriarchy. Her next revelation to Sofia illustrates how her emotional detachment, a subversive strategy, has led to her emotional entropy: she has “never struck a living thing” and she “can’t even remember the last time [she] felt mad” (43). Celie recognizes how her denial of anger has limited her understanding of injustice; this recognition clarifies her perception of herself as a servant--to Mr. ____, to her father, to God. She tells Sofia

I used to git mad at my mammy cause she put a lot of work on me. Then I see how sick she is. Couldn’t stay mad at her. Couldn’t be mad at my daddy cause he my daddy. Bible say, Honor father and mother no matter what. Then after while every time I got mad, or start to feel mad, I got sick. Felt like throwing up. Terrible feeling. Then I start to feel nothing at all . . . This life soon be over . . . Heaven last all ways. (44)

Although Celie’s isolation is an imposed effect of Mr. ____’s domination--and of the damaging effects of domesticity in her life--she has also isolated herself, in the form of denial for emotional protection. Her self-imposed isolation from Sofia, however, soon ends, and indicates a positive new stage in Celie’s development. Sofia offers, “You ought to bash Mr. ____ head open [and] think bout heaven later,” a statement that combines Celie’s denied anger and humor. “Not much funny to me. That funny. I laugh. She laugh. Then us both laugh so hard us flop down on the step” (44).

Walker illustrates the necessity for discourse to occur between women if they hope to move beyond oppression. The conversation between Sofia and Celie is a critical turn in Celie's personal development and in the development of a sisterhood between the two women. However, the manner in which they confirm their bond--through sewing and quilting--underscores how domesticity, when used strategically, can help form subjectivity through alternative discourses. Through the alternative discourse that Celie and Sofia engage in, communication and creativity replace Celie's resignation to passively, piously resist through awareness and self-imposed isolation. Sofia's offer to "make quilt pieces out these messed up curtains" (44), represents mending between the two women, independent of Celie's punitive vision of God. Celie's intense isolation lessens as the two women develop a friendship that creates a kind of resistance against the routine demands of domesticity, as well as their husbands' demands. Quilting together offers them an excuse to talk privately with one another and create while working. Bettina Aptheker explains that "quilting gave meaning to [women's] daily lives, the cumulative effects of their quilts finally transforming the ragged and the mundane into discernable patterns, beautiful, sturdy, enduring" (69). The pattern that the women choose is appropriately named Sister's Choice, a name which denotes choice and resistance, as well as a reference to sisterhood--both to Celie's sister, Nettie, as well as Sofia and Celie's new bond. Celie's use of her free time--as "quilting was done predominantly . . . after the day's chores had been completed"--to create, rather than continue to serve others, is a significant first step in her reclamation of domestic acts (Aptheker 68). Judy Elsey states in "Fragmentation and the Quilt" that "by asserting her right to choose even in such small ways, Celie takes the first step toward living autonomously" and "Celie and Sofia's quiltmaking is a process of healing because they are no longer passive victims who are torn" (166-7). Celie's acceptance of Sofia's offer to create

something special together, rather than as individuals, indicates a change in her perception (167) and a rejection of her self-imposed isolation and emotional entropy; she must simultaneously become both autonomous and part of a community for her resistance against oppression to further develop. Celie's burgeoning friendship with Sofia, whose assertive manner has not changed despite Harpo's attempts to dominate her, indicates her willingness to be influenced by non-domestic interests, such as the spirit of friendship and community which quilting fosters, which are radically different than those that Mr. ____ has used to dominate her.

The Color Purple also effectively demonstrates the ways in which personal relationships, including friendships and sisterhoods, but not limited to these, can foster subject formation. Celie's developing feelings for Shug Avery signal another significant adjustment in Celie's state of emotional detachment and isolation towards one of increasing happiness and stability. Celie initially functions as a domestic servant/nursemaid in her interactions with Shug, which complements Shug's role as a dominant, privileged houseguest; Celie's role as domestic combines her normal role within the household as well as her lesbian desires for Shug. However, Celie also feels a deep connection with Shug and is able to foster a relationship with her as a friend and confidante, despite the fact that Shug is Mr. ____'s lover. She simultaneously nurses Shug back to health and quilts with Sofia, thus broadening her circle of surrogate "sisters," while forming connections that lessen Celie's sense of isolation. Through these connections Celie uses positive aspects of domesticity to foster her own creative spirit and subjectivity. Beyond communicating more deeply with Sofia and creating with her during their quilting sessions, Celie uses quilting to become physically and emotionally closer with Shug, who does not know how to sew. Shug's donation of a yellow dress to Celie's quilting scraps provides Celie with further inspiration to quilt. This newfound sisterhood minimizes her sense

of alienation and enables her to use domesticity as a means of achieving subjectivity. However, Celie becomes aware once more of her relative degree of isolation when she counsels Sofia and Harpo individually over their marital problems, most of which stem from Harpo's continuing inflexibility over gender roles in the couple's domestic space. When she counsels Sofia to try to make the best of her marriage and stay with Harpo, Sofia's response reminds Celie of the limitations and fragility of the bond she has formed with Sofia; the emotional bond between them may endure, but Celie is not necessarily free to leave her home. Sofia ponders going to stay with her sister, which prompts Celie to "think bout my sister Nettie. Thought so sharp it go through me like a pain. Somebody to run to. It seem too sweet to bear" (69). Because Sofia is ready to leave Harpo, rather than continue to adjust her own perspective over domestic issues, Celie is reminded of her relative isolation and powerlessness to move beyond the confines of her limited existence.

The Color Purple illustrates that sisterhoods can be positive even if they are temporary. For example, the sisterhood Celie forms with Shug and Sofia offers her positive female role models upon which she can base her developing subjectivity, despite the fact that these relationships seem impermanent because of Shug's and Sofia's ability to leave. Shug may return to her home in Memphis, and Sofia has family to which she can turn. Celie is strengthened through Sofia's defiance of the patriarchal norms that bind women to men and to their homes; she is also strengthened by Shug's free attitudes towards sexuality and her frank verbal responses to those with whom she disagrees. Later, however, after Sofia's circumstances change dramatically, and Shug leaves to return to her life in Memphis, Celie is less certain of the effectiveness of Sofia's type of defiance and aggression. Shug's brand of assertiveness is more suitable to Celie's personal needs. According to Priscilla Leder's study of the way *The Color*

Purple combines the domestic and wilderness literary traditions, “Alice Walker’s American Quilt: *The Color Purple* and American Literary Tradition”

[Celie’s] vision of Shug as the embodiment of possibility motivates Celie’s kindness to Shug. Thus, although Celie closely resembles the self-abasing heroine of the domestic novel when she feeds, bathes, and otherwise nurtures Shug, who is after all her husband’s mistress and who initially rewards Celie’s kindness with abuse, her motive is not the same. Domestic heroines nurture their oppressors because to do otherwise would be a willful assertion of pride; Celie nurtures Shug because Shug represents her own potential for assertiveness. (146)

When Shug learns from Celie of Mr. ____’s abusive behavior towards Celie, she persuades him to stop beating her. Celie uses Shug’s influence over Mr. ____’s behavior; thus, she actively protects herself, even if she does not act as assertively as Sofia. In this way, Celie’s act of self-protection metaphorically sews Celie to Shug, combining Celie’s developing resistance to victimization in a sisterhood with Shug’s brand of personal empowerment.

Walker reveals the degree to which sisterhood may empower women such as Celie through the novel’s narrative strategy. The subjectivity Celie finds in sisterhood enables her to endure the dailiness of her domestic life for the next few years, to the point that Shug’s departure is barely mentioned. Much of Celie’s comparatively sparse narrative over the next three-year span focuses on one member of her new found sisterhood, Sofia, who has been imprisoned for physically confronting the mayor. Celie willingly adopts the role of sisterly caretaker for Sofia, visiting her regularly in jail and tending her wounds. The narrative silence, which occurs after Celie partakes in an effort to get Sofia released from prison, could signal a temporary plateau in her continuing process of using domesticity as a means of gaining subjectivity. The narrative silence may also suggest that while sisterhood formations are paramount to overcoming the damaging effects of isolated domesticity, sacrifice and great effort is needed to maintain those bonds. Celie faces uncertainty about the changes in her circumstances and attitudes towards the

constraints of domesticity, as she has known it. She is no longer merely passive, as she encourages others to alter bonds of conformity; specifically, she tells Harpo's new lover she should make him call her by her real name, Mary Agnes, rather than by her nickname, Squeak. Mr. ___ is beating her much less, "just a slap now and then when he ain't got nothing else to do" (115). She has gained the affirmation and support of friends through her emerging voice. Further, her sexuality has been awakened by Shug's erotic influence and instruction. However, Celie is forced to see Sofia in a completely different light, as her aggressive manner has played a part in her enslavement in a prison laundry; her response to the direct intrusion of the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy proves too aggressive. When Celie and a small group of family and friends visit Sofia in jail, Sofia says she "manages" by using passivity to her advantage: "Every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say" (93). Celie "can't fix [her] mouth to say how [she] feel[s]" (93). Celie's witness to the subsequent period of domestic servitude and slavery Sofia must endure add to Celie's uncertainty over the need to continue developing her subjectivity, as they are reminders of her past experiences with limiting aspects of domesticity.

However, Walker reveals that sisterhood formation is a powerful regenerative force and is crucial to gaining and maintaining subjectivity. She does so by emphasizing Celie's newfound self-reliance. Shug's sudden return after a long absence marks the beginning of Celie's active, deliberate use of domesticity as a means to economic independence; after a series of near catastrophic revelations about her family's history, Celie uses domesticity, specifically sewing, to mend herself. Shug's visit is marked by several remarkable occurrences: she is now married, but she and Celie soon make love; Shug's and Celie discover letters from Nettie, which Mr. ___ has hidden for years. To take Celie's mind off her intense depression, Shug suggests that she

and Celie make a pair of pants for Celie, a project that utilizes domesticity in a positive function for Celie in several ways. First, having a “needle and not a razor in [her] hand” balances out Celie’s murderous rage for Mr. ____ (153). The emotional impact of the revelation that Nettie’s letters have been kept from her, as well as the information about her family that is revealed to her through them leaves her feeling numb and almost unable to speak. Sewing offers Celie an “alternative methodology of language that moves her away from violence and victimization and into self-empowerment and subjectivity” (Cutter 163). Further, the goal of making pants causes Celie to question the implications of such a gender role reversal in her own home. Shug points out that Celie does all the work around the house, including traditionally men’s work. Finally, Shug’s recommendation that Celie make pants and thus treat gender as fluid rather than fixed hints at what Shameem Kabir deems the alternative domestic “feminine economy” in *Daughters of Desire: Lesbian Representations in Film* (126). Celie and Shug will later establish this sort of homeplace once they move together to Shug’s home in Memphis.

Celie’s process of using domesticity as a means of personal liberation and subjectivity culminates as she engages with her former oppressor, Mr. _____. Before she and Celie leave for Memphis together, Celie finally rejects and curses Mr. _____. Her verbal and physical confrontation with him (she stabs his hand with a case knife when he threatens her physically) occurs at the dinner table; this domestic safe space for Celie enables her to hold court safely and symbolically. Essentially emasculating her husband with words and physical violence, Celie is free of her oppressor. Despite the domestic feminine economy which Celie and Shug establish in Memphis, where Celie has founded her fledgling business, Folkspants Unlimited, Celie’s stay there is not permanent. She eventually returns to her former home, first having been temporarily romantically rejected by Shug, and finally, having unexpectedly inherited her family home and

business. Eva Boesenberg notes “the properly owned space grounds Celie’s voice and personal history in a manner her room in Shug’s house could not. Celie’s reconstruction of place revises the conditions of her earlier victimization in a manner which prefigures the ending of the novel in its adamant drive for completion” (210).^{xv} Mr. ___’s transformation from unnamed oppressor to Albert, Celie’s friend and confidante, further revises her earlier victimization. As she mourns her break with Shug, and later, as she mourns the reported death of Nettie and her children, she finds solace in Albert’s company.

At this point in the novel Walker begins exploring domesticity’s potential to ameliorate oppression and bridge gaps between men and women. As with Sofia, Celie and Albert’s revised relationship is based on discussion and sewing. Albert’s transformation, spurred by Celie’s abandonment and curse against him, is the novel’s most remarkable and oft-critiqued change. However, his interest in Celie’s sewing, a feminine act seemingly incongruent with maintaining masculinity, the pursuit of which Albert seems increasingly disinterested, is remarkable both for the audience and for Celie, who coaxes him into pursuing his interest.

When I was growing up, he said, I use to try to sew along with mama cause that’s what she was always doing. But everybody laughed at me. But you know, I liked it.

Well, nobody gon laugh at you now, I said. Here, help me stitch in these pockets.

But I don’t know how, he say.

I’ll show you, I said. And I did.

Now us sit sewing and talking and smoking our pipes. (Walker 279)

Albert’s adoption of a formerly suppressed interest suggests his realization of how personally damaging patriarchal ideology and practice have been for him and those he oppressed. Celie, his most obvious victim, instructs Albert in his transformation. Celie’s liberation is complete when

^{xv} Celie’s sudden inheritance of her family home and business is often cited by critics as a narrative convenience, as is Mr. ___’s transformation from evil oppressor to one of Celie’s “peoples”.

she surrounds herself in the quilt of family she has constructed through her liberating use of domesticity, particularly sewing.

Celie's ultimate liberation has been informed through the development of personal relationships and her increasing awareness of circumstances beyond her limited domestic sphere. Sofia's years of imprisonment, first in jail, and then, in service to the mayor's family, as well as Nettie's narration of her experiences in Africa, instruct Celie about the social and political realities that inform Celie's domestic existence. Nettie's tales of Africa simultaneously render larger issues of race and class, including colonialism, and expose Celie to alternative, broadened perspectives on gender roles, religion and spirituality, and the world in general. Elliot Butler-Evans writes that "Nettie's letters form a counter-discourse that undermines prevalent myths about Africa . . . Nettie's descriptions of the experiences of African women argue that Black women's oppression is transcultural. Celie's situation is then placed within a larger framework, linking her Black American experiences with those of Black women in Africa" (171). In an active attempt to broaden her own domestic sphere through her relationships with others, Celie often prompts discussion with Albert about the Olinka tribe that Nettie and her children inhabit. These discussions further develop her own ideas about gender roles through language and domesticity, as she often discusses these serious issues while she is sewing with Albert.

However, the novel never constructs domesticity as a device that can heal all wounds and bridge all gaps. In contrast to their conversations about Nettie and the Olinka, Celie and Albert cannot bring themselves to discuss Sofia's past imprisonment, as the impact of her experiences both in and out of prison reminds them of the grave powers that white supremacy hold through domesticity. Sofia's imprisonment results from a clash between her assertion of what she rightly views as an innate right to choose--in particular, whether or not she will work for the mayor's

wife as her maid--and white supremacy's denial of that right, born out in the mayor and the police, who savagely beat Sofia into submission after she retaliates against the mayor's slap. Once Celie's foil in terms of spirit, aggression, and claimed subjectivity, Sofia is reduced to a disenchanted, passive object to be worked by the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy she dared to resist. For this transgression, she must work in the prison laundry, a domestic task she hated before imprisonment, and which represents the absolute seizure of choice by the system. Though she is granted an early "pardon" to work for the mayor's wife as domestic, her victimization is only intensified, as she must care for a white woman's children and household, rather than create and inhabit her own homeplace.

Despite the personal degradation and oppression Sofia must endure, she eventually regains her ability to resist through a strategy of emotional detachment, which her employer's daughter, Eleanor Jane, confuses as an "unnatural" "detached attachment," terms coined by Mahnaz Kousha to describe strategies of resistance among black domestic workers (Walker 272, Kousha 85). Sofia's strategic detachment to resist her oppressors, who expect emotional loyalty from their servant, continue to develop after she is released from domestic custody; the seeds of her reclamation of her silenced voice are planted when she witnesses Celie's liberating moment at the dinner table, when she curses Albert, gains voice and agency, and moves to Memphis with Shug. Celie's active rejection of Mr. ___'s use of the oppressive strategies employed by the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy causes Sofia to laugh cathartically. This moment connects her forced silence to Celie's, who has gained agency partially through the sisterhood she formed with Sofia years earlier. Sofia relates--through her continued associations with her and discussions with her, Celie and others--truths about the nature of forced domesticity in a white supremacist framework. When Eleanor Jane presses Sofia about the nature of their

relationship, specifically whether Sofia loves Eleanor Jane's baby, Sofia's reaction conveys, according to Tuzyline Allen in "*The Color Purple: A Study of Walker's Womanist Gospel*" "that although she has been ground down by her oppressors, she has shown a great deal of humanity by the mere fact that she harbors no hate for them" (134). Sofia's response to her oppression mirrors Celie's eventual state of friendship with Albert and the spirit of forgiveness and renewal that Celie's homeplace comes to represent for her "people."

Thus, in *The Color Purple*, Walker shows through her characters' various strategies against oppression how domesticity and sisterhood can form a strong resistance against the potential for isolation and degradation that patriarchy's vision of domesticity and gender roles attempts to maintain. Patriarchy's rigid expectations, borne out through domesticity, often render motherhood as an untenable role; rather than promoting the nuclear family, then, patriarchy can tear families apart, literally through physical separation, or figuratively, through emotional distance. In *The Color Purple*, sisterhood is a viable option for subject-formation because it offers individual characters the possibility to connect in ways which motherhood has failed them, in one way or another. Domesticity, particularly creative endeavors like sewing and quilting, can provide an outlet for sisterhood formation and a discursive field upon which subjectivity might be gained. For Celie, sisterhood's positive replacement for family is evidenced in her reclamation of family at the novel's conclusion; she has both her sister and children with her, but also her "people," who are just as much family as her blood relations. For Sofia and Shug, sisterhood offers each a unique avenue of creating a homeplace in the face of forced segregation from their children.

Cooking and Cross-generational Sisterhoods in *Fried Green Tomatoes*

Likewise, in Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes*, the female characters form sisterhoods as a means of achieving subjectivity in ways that patriarchy has denied them. These sisterhoods use cooking and the exchange of food, rather than sewing, as a means of resistant domesticity. As both novels are set in pre-women's movement historical contexts, sisterhood based on resistant uses of domesticity can be seen as precursors for the feminist movement, or in Walker's case, the need for "womanism" rather than second wave feminism; both novels indicate the need for the sort of generational discourse necessary for the feminist movement to touch women's lives, as shown in Evelyn and Ninnie's relationship in *Fried Green Tomatoes*. While *The Color Purple* ends before the feminist movement can affect the characters, Walker's womanist philosophy, which revises feminism, is borne out through her character's experiences and philosophies. *Fried Green Tomatoes* forays into pre-women's liberation/pre-civil rights movement contexts as well as the 1980s when the women's movement had peaked. However, due in part to *Fried Green Tomatoes*' southern setting, Evelyn's frustrations reflect an earlier, pre-second-wave feminist movement ideology; the emotional conflicts she feels are due in part to this confluence of time, ideology, and progress, or lack thereof. In her introduction to *Neither Separate Nor Equal: Women, Race and Class in the South*, Barbara Ellen Smith points out that the women's liberation movement was not strong in the region, but it "nonetheless legitimated the aspirations of women who sought freedom from abusive spouses, equal pay for equal work, and remedies for other injustices" (25). Evelyn suffers directly from none of these injustices, but as an isolated and undervalued housewife, she lacks the kind of alliances offered by the movement that she missed out on. Flagg positions Evelyn as a member of a lost generation that "seemed to be on a fence, not knowing which way to jump" (44). Adhering to the conservative ideology of the

fifties has failed Evelyn; later, in her middle age during the 1980s, having foregone pre- or extramarital sexual experience, Evelyn feels betrayed by her conservative choices: “She had been a good girl, had always acted like a lady, never raising her voice, always deferred to everybody and everything. She had assumed that somewhere down the line there would be a reward for that: a prize” (42).

Flagg thus portrays the women’s movement as insufficient and inaccessible for some women, underscoring the strength of borders beyond race and gender erected by white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Partially isolated due to her Southern upbringing, Evelyn’s sense of awareness and entitlement occurs later in life, which lends an almost Job-like quality to her deferment of subjectivity. Not having found the prize she waited for, and seeking some form of sisterhood with other women, Evelyn attempts to “find herself” in woman’s groups, such as the “Complete Woman,” whose leader “informed them that all rich and successful career women out there who appeared to be so happy were, in reality, terribly lonely and miserable and secretly envied them their happy Christian homes” (43). Like Celie, who internalized her abuse and marginalization through the church’s ideology and treatment of her, Evelyn is comforted by familiar ideology--“the Bible backed her in being a doormat” (43)--yet she also sees the irony of the leader’s divorce. Evelyn’s spiritual development is stunted by the conservative ideology of the church, which reifies white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. As she becomes more aware of her need to escape that limiting ideology, Evelyn continues her pursuit of community and sisterhood elsewhere. Her next attempt at finding her “group, the place where she fit in” leads her to Women’s Community Center, whose un-feminine feminist leanings make her uncomfortable, particularly when the leader suggests “they bring a mirror so they could all study their vaginas” (43). Evelyn’s two forays into finding her place among other women are failures;

with these failures Flagg's novel could be read as an indictment of the feminist movement's effectiveness to break down barriers which domesticity and other patriarchal ideals, like femininity, may construct for some women, particularly in the South.

In pitting two diametrically opposed versions, or caricatures of the feminist movement--or what became of the women's movement as it became increasingly fractured--Flagg suggests that for some women like Evelyn, subjectivity cannot be found in either hegemony or radicalism, but in cross-generational efforts based on discourse. Evelyn eventually "finds herself" by listening to the narrative reconstructions of Ninny, with whom she develops a close relationship, a sisterhood that resembles a mother/daughter dyad. Shameem Kabir posits that the film versions [of *The Color Purple* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*] "show children being raised by other mothers, Nettie the sister and Idgie the partner, in ways that could liberate biological mothers from the demands of a desire for their exclusive attention" (133). Flagg constructs Evelyn in physical and emotional age as in need of a mother figure; her experiences with her own mother's death have left her emotionally empty and overcome with feelings of guilt. Likewise, Ninny often speaks of the emotional need for children; her own child never developed past the mental age of five, and her relationship with Evelyn may fulfill Ninny's desire for a daughter. Flagg's presentation of their relationship--Ninny as experienced and wise, Evelyn as emotionally damaged and confused--suggests cross generational relationships among women as a possible substitute for organized efforts which may have failed some southern women like Evelyn.

Further, Ninny's initial domination of their conversations enables Evelyn to retreat into a helpful silence where she may examine her lack of subjectivity without requiring her to perfunctorily access her feelings in the way that a psychologist might. Through Ninny's storytelling, the reader, alongside Evelyn, learns about Whistle Stop and its residents; the act of

listening in turn allows Evelyn to find her own voice and develop a sisterhood with Ninny. For example, Evelyn is able to reveal her depression to Ninny in conversation normally dominated by Ninny's voice; this conversation is similar to Celie and Shug's confrontation in both content and function. Evelyn's thoughts about death--she feels she lacks the courage to commit suicide--are similar to Celie's passivity, but differ in religious conviction. Ninny's response to Evelyn's suicidal frustration--that suicide is "just silly talk, honey--you've just got to pull yourself together and open your heart to the Lord" (67)--confirms Evelyn's spirituality rather than contests or complicates it. Ninny smartly recognizes Evelyn's depression as part of menopause; she counsels her to get some "Stresstabs" and to forego seeing a psychiatrist. "Honey, you don't need to go and do that. Anytime you want to talk to someone, you just come and see me" (69).

Like Celie and Shug's developing sisterhood, which is sealed with quilting, Ninny and Evelyn's sisterhood expands through an increasing sense of trust based in part on another key aspect of domesticity: food preparation and eating. Evelyn, a junk food addict with a weight issue, shares her various candy bars with Ninny, who is isolated from outside culture and the comfort of her own home since she lives in a nursing home. Many of the women's early discussions are based on food, discussing and sharing their favorites, the emotional responses they trigger, and memories. Junk food, for Evelyn, symbolizes her emotional isolation and the loss of tangible interpersonal connections; as she gorges herself on these foods, she continues to gain weight, which further contributes to her low self-esteem and depression. Yet it is through their common love for sweets that Ninny and Evelyn often begin their conversations, which eventually focus on more nurturing kinds of food. The encouragement she receives from Ninny and the empowerment she feels through the bonds of sisterhood enable her to construct much healthier body- and self- images. This is similar to Shug's encouragement of Celie, whose own

self-image was damaged by Mr. ___'s emotional abuse; Celie inverted her poor self-image by constructing and selling her gender-neutral, customized "folkspants."

Flagg and Walker both show a transitional use of domestic acts--cooking and sewing--as each of their main characters, particularly Evelyn and Celie, move toward subjectivity through sisterhood formation and their subsequent reclamation of domesticity. Flagg, for example, underscores the need for intergenerational discourse which defies boundaries of race, gender, and age, by interspersing the chronology of Evelyn and Ninny's developing friendship with flashbacks to Idgie and Ruth's history, Ninny's personal history, and an extensive subplot involving the major and minor characters of the novel, including the extended family of Sipsey, the Threadgoode's domestic servant. Flagg also includes newspaper excerpts from *The Weems Weekly*, (Whistle Stop, Alabama's Weekly Bulletin) as well as from the Slagtown News Flotsam and Jetsam, ("Birmingham's Sepia Newspaper") (Flagg 121). Framed by Ninny's storytelling, Flagg moves readers, and Evelyn, beyond the isolation of a single household or friendship to encounter multiple communities and various cultures, just as Nettie's letters allow Celie and Albert to move beyond their limited world.

The faux-epistolary narrative approach Walker uses may reveal a pre-feminist movement need for open dialogue unavailable at the time for many women, much less someone like Celie. Celie has conveyed her experiences through her writing about them in letters to God, first, and later, Nettie as she subversively opposes her stepfather's instructions to "not tell nobody." Much of the critical conversation surrounding *The Color Purple* has centered on whether or not Celie actually writes, or if Walker's epistolary narrative provides Celie with an outlet that she does not actually use. This debate is tied to a more prominent one about whether *The Color Purple* is an exercise in Realism that overlooks important historical references, such as setting, or if the novel,

with its almost mythic conclusion, is more akin to parable, fable, or even fantasy.^{xvi} In “Writing the Subject: Reading *The Color Purple*” hooks critiques Celie’s epistolary narration as a means for Walker to achieve her “didactic purposes” such as “strip[ping] the slave narrative of its revolutionary ideological intent and content” (62-3). hooks’ analysis of writing in *The Color Purple* suggests that Celie’s liberation and self-affirmation come not through writing about her experiences, but through talking (63). But whether Celie’s narrative is actually written or represents Walker’s use of the epistolary form as a representation of Celie’s inner voice, Celie’s formation of sisterhoods, through domestic acts as well as language, fashions a more discernable path to subjectivity. hooks states

Taken at face value, Celie’s letter writing appears to be a simple matter-of-fact gesture when it is really one of the most fantastical happenings in *The Color Purple*. Oppressed, exploited as laborer in the field, as worker in the domestic household, as sexual servant, Celie finds time to write--this is truly incredible. There is no description of Celie with pen in hand, no discussion of where and when she writes. She must remain invisible so as not to expose this essential contradiction--that as dehumanized object she projects a self in the act of writing even as she records her inability to be self-defining. Celie as writer is a fiction. Walker, as writing subject, oversees her creation, constructing a narrative that purports be a space where the voice of an oppressed black female can be heard even though the valorization of writing and the use the epistolary form suppress and silence that voice. (63)

^{xvi} Critical responses to the many ways the novel strays from realism include its treatment of lesbianism (see hooks, Smith), its “happy ending” (see Warhol), and its overall lack of detail in reference to setting. Barbara Smith, for example, in “The Truth that Never Hurts: Black Lesbians in Fiction in the 1980s” contends that the work is a fable due to its “complex simplicity” . . . “the archetypal and timeless Black southern world in which it is set, the clear-cut conflicts between good and evil, the complete transformations undergone by several of the major characters, and the huge capacity of the book to teach . . . and may account partially for the depiction of a Lesbian relationship unencumbered by homophobia” (661). Other critics, like Eva Boesenberg, see some of the more questionable aspects of the novel, such as Celie’s status as writer, at face value. Diane Gabrielsen Scholl approaches the novel’s “lack of verisimilitude” as evidence that “the means to [the novel’s] interesting but problematic resolution is parable, which defies realism’s effort to convey the ordinary and plausible course of events in its depiction of a topsy-turvy world where the unlikely and predictable are indeed most likely to happen” (109).

Like hooks, Tamar Katz notes the practical impossibilities of Celie as writer: “In a literary genre traditionally obsessed with the privacy necessary for letter writing, and the material conditions necessary for that privacy--the locked room, the hiding place, the constant threat of violation hovering over both--*The Color Purple* presents us with a letter writer who possesses neither the time nor the privacy to write, and whose own letters are never hidden or uncovered” (71).

Celie’s journey towards subjectivity, then, is not likely informed by her secretly subversive act of writing. Rather, Celie gains subjectivity through the subversive joy she finds in forming bonds with other women, and through her use of the domestic tools available to her, indeed foisted upon her as housewife, as a means of emotional fulfillment and connection with others.

Ninny’s stories perform a similar function. In addition to engaging Evelyn in an act of companionship, Ninny’s stories about Ruth and Idgie and the Whistle Stop Café exude sentimentality for seemingly simpler times and a spirit of useful, uncomplicated feminism that directly correlates with her own experiences and issues. Through Ninny’s narration of Ruth and Idgie’s life together, Evelyn becomes a part of a larger sisterhood. Evelyn’s desires to explore the past also suggests a need to re-envision her relationship with Ed, an emotionally unavailable husband whose traditional expectations about marriage and domesticity smother Evelyn’s sense of individuality. Ninny’s stories about her husband, Cleo Threadgoode, contrast with Evelyn’s experiences with marriage, about which she expresses regret: “I just feel stuck . . . right in the middle. Women’s lib came too late for me . . . I was already married with two children when I found out that I didn’t have to get married. I thought you had to. What did I know? And now it’s too late to change . . . I feel like life has just passed me by” (67). While Ninny doesn’t counsel Evelyn regarding her marriage, her stories provide a useful framework from which Evelyn can begin to reposition her traditional perspectives on domesticity.

Ninny's tales of Idgie and Ruth and their version of family enable Evelyn to revise her culturally imposed, limited perspectives on domesticity and the heterosexist ideology upon which those perspectives are based. The community of Whistle Stop accepts the two main characters, Idgie Threadgoode, Ninny's sister-in-law, and Ruth Jamison, Idgie's partner, as a family unit. This acceptance is related in the tone of Ninny's stories, many of which center around Idgie's developing lesbian identity--she refuses to wear dresses at age eleven, cuts her hair off and looks boyish soon after--and the development of Idgie and Ruth's relationship, including Idgie's crush on Ruth and their subsequent courtship. Ninny does not put a name on Idgie and Ruth's relationship, but her tone, combined with the narrative shifts from Ninny's perspectives to excerpts from the community newspaper, suggests an overall personal and community acceptance of their relationship. For example, Dot Weems casually writes in the June, 24, 1936 edition of the *Weems Weekly*, "I am sorry to report that Idgie's and Ruth's little boy lost his arm last week while playing on the tracks in front of the café" (107). Ninny's informal tone regarding an obviously lesbian relationship in such a small southern town translates to Evelyn's acceptance of their remarkable partnership as she continues to revise her conservative ideology.

Flagg constructs Ruth and Idgie's partnership as untouched by homophobia, much like Walker treats Shug and Celie's relationship. Some critics of *The Color Purple* have taken issue with the lack of homophobia presented in response to the lesbian relationship at the core of the novel. For example, Barbara Smith notes in "Black Lesbians in Fiction in the 1980s" that "In the 'real world' the complete ease with which Celie and Shug move as lovers through a totally heterosexual milieu would be improbable, not to say amazing. Their total acceptance is one clue that this is indeed an inspiring fable, a picture of what the world could be if only human beings

were ready to create it” (661). Likewise, bell hooks heavily criticizes Walker’s construction of lesbian identity as separate from homophobic responses: “Homophobia does not exist in the novel. Celie’s sexual desire for women and her sexual encounter with Shug is never a controversial issue even though it is a catalyst for her resistance to male domination, for her coming to power” (55). However, the sexual and romantic nature of both sets of partnerships is presented in the narratives as private events that are never related to the other characters in the novels, only to the audience. When Shug and Celie consummate their relationship, Mr. ____ and Shug’s husband are off drinking together. When Idgie seduces Ruth, it is a private affair. While the Threadgoode household has been aware of their courtship, and hears them profess their love for one another during an argument, their acceptance of Ruth’s place in Idgie’s life sets the tone for the rest of the community. This lack of open lesbian expression does not negate the power of such encounters to enable resistance against male domination, particularly for the audience members who make the connections between private resistance and public resistance.^{xvii}

The private and public functions of domesticity, then, can be both the site and cause of transformation and subjectivity formation. This is particularly true for Evelyn, in that she rejects the limitations of a solely domestic role. She eventually becomes a career woman who sells femininity in the form of Mary Kay cosmetics. By becoming a “career woman” as a concerted step in her emotional development, Evelyn further rejects the prescriptive ideology of her church’s women’s group. Evelyn’s transformation is similar to Celie’s in several aspects, but

^{xvii} Further, it is possible that Freudian ideology has not yet altered the small southern community’s perception of female partnerships. Bettina Aptheker draws upon Lillian Faderman’s history of lesbianism to note that the “prevailing patriarchal culture [of the nineteenth century] asserted that females . . . had little sexual passion [and, according to Faderman] ‘women might kiss, fondle each other, sleep together, utter expressions of overwhelming love and promises of eternal faithfulness and yet see their passions as nothing more than effusions of the spirit’” (80).

differs greatly in how severely she is isolated, physically and emotionally. Celie's prison of isolation is enforced by abuse; Evelyn's sense of isolation is exacerbated by the complications of changing societal and cultural expectations about women's roles. Both women endure a cathartic period of rage; whereas Celie directs hers towards her oppressor, Mr. ____, sewing instead as a strategy of healing herself from the damaging effects of that rage, Evelyn directs her secret rage at every facet of society, creating the character Towanda the Avenger to cope with her suppressed anger.

Flagg uses Evelyn's rage to demonstrate the necessity of engaging with other women to gain subjectivity. By entering into conversations with other women, through Ninny, thus joining a larger sisterhood of women with domestic and social concerns, Evelyn further rejects the prescriptive ideologies of gender, race, and class, which have stifled her. Evelyn's need for discourse extends into the realm of imagination, as she carries Towanda with her everywhere. After being "raped by words" by a boy at the supermarket, Evelyn's damaged ego and fragile sensibilities give way to her previously censored feminism. Imagining that Idgie would not have let propriety or femininity prevent her from righting wrongs, Evelyn allows Towanda to take over her imagination and emotions.

Few people who saw this plump, pleasant-looking middle-aged housewife out shopping or doing other menial everyday chores could guess that, in her imagination, she was machine gunning the genitals of rapers and stomping abusive husbands to death in her specially designed wife-beater boots . . . Towanda [was] so busy all day that Evelyn was exhausted by bedtime.

No wonder. Tonight, while Evelyn was cooking dinner, Towanda had just put a roomful of porno and child exploitation film producers to death. And later, as Evelyn was washing the dishes, Towanda was in the process of single-handedly blowing up the entire Middle East to prevent the Third World War. And so, when Ed yelled from the den for another beer, somehow, before Evelyn could stop her, Towanda yelled back, "SCREW YOU, ED!" (238-240)

Just as Celie forgives Albert in part through her revised spirituality, Evelyn confronts her growing hatred towards the world she feels has failed her when she enters the largest black church in Birmingham and thus continues to revise her spirituality and undo the oppression of the church. The preacher “assured them, with a great and mighty authority, that his God was not a vengeful God, but one of goodness . . . love . . . forgiveness . . . and *joy*. . . Evelyn took a deep breath and the heavy burden of resentment and hate released itself into thin air, taking Towanda along with them” (311-13). Evelyn’s experience of denial, anger, and eventual catharsis enables her to develop a feminist sensibility and achieve subjectivity through the formation of a sisterhood that intersects and transgresses time and space.

The four main characters of the novel each illustrate a differing mode of resistance against the imposed femininity and heterosexism of domesticity. Two characters, Ruth and Evelyn, come to acknowledge and embrace resistance on some level because they feel trapped in unfulfilling relationships or dangerous situations whereas Idgie and Ninny are more confident, stabilized and seemingly less affected by the expectations of patriarchy. Shameem Kabir notes that “Idgie transcends dichotomies of gender, by incorporating the best of both, masculine autonomy and feminine economy. Ruth and Evelyn, conventionally ‘feminine’, both renounce the passivity of their gendered ascriptions, and attain separate voices” (129). Ninny’s form of resistance against imposed femininity is subtler than the three other main characters. As a self-described “tagalong” she quietly views other women’s experiences, so much so that her husband jokingly complains about how much time she spends at the Whistle Stop Café with Ruth and Idgie. Her position as spectator allows Ninny to develop a feminist sensibility of her own, one that incorporates the voices of others. Subsequently, hearing Ninny’s stories about Ruth and Idgie’s re-imagined domesticity functions to help transform Evelyn.

In both *The Color Purple* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*, each lesbian partnership is initially portrayed as adhering to a butch/femme lesbian dichotomy. In terms of these characters developing a productive domestic partnership, the deconstruction of this dichotomy questions cultural notions about the hierarchy of masculinity/femininity in the formation of family. In *The Color Purple*, Shug and Celie's relationship begins as a form of mistress/servant hierarchy, but the two women eventually view each other as equals; Shug addresses this false hierarchy when Celie comes to live with her in Memphis. Once in Memphis, Shug and Celie establish a home where domesticity is part of the beauty of life that Shug's version of Christianity promotes. Celie's conversion to Shug's alternative reading of Christianity, which reconfigures God as non-gendered and non-white, enables Celie to admire most everything, including the domestic work required to maintain a home; this admiration in turn enables her to embrace her domestic skills as creative outlets rather than as a means of survival as a docile servant. In Shameem Kabir's discussion of how the filmic version of *The Color Purple* minimizes the lesbian aspects of the novel, she notes that "the film texts [*The Color Purple* and *Fried Green Tomatoes*] rewrite the black subject, while working through the stereotypes of us as servants and sexual servicers, and they rewrite the family in terms of the feminine economy, seen here in alternative envisionings of household groupings" (114). As Walker envisions the household grouping that Celie and Shug establish, the two women share equally in their vision of what their home should be, even though the home technically belongs to Shug. Shug tells her "You not my maid. I didn't bring you to Memphis to be that. I brought you here to love you and help you get on your feet" (Walker 218). Celie spends her days sewing pants; unlike her previous domestic work, she invests her heart in her work and soon understands its emotional and financial value: "I dream and dream and dream over Jack's pants. And cut and sew. And finish them. And send them off

. . . One day when Shug come home, I say, You know, I love doing this, but I got to git out and make a living pretty soon” (220). Shug responds by suggesting that they advertise, raise prices, and convert the dining room into a factory so that Celie can “sit back and design.” She reassures Celie, “You making your living . . . Girl, you on your way” (221).

In *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Idgie and Ruth likewise challenge domesticity as part of culturally constructed heterosexist femininity and rewrite domesticity for themselves. As a young woman, Ruth accepts and adheres to patriarchal expectations of femininity but is victimized in an abusive marriage; Idgie rejects these expectations from an early age. Idgie adopts an alternative form of domesticity early in life: she hunts, fishes, and charms bees, all masculine activities that nonetheless help to sustain a home. Idgie and Ruth’s relationship allows them to bring the richness of their individual experiences together to form not only a domestic partnership which is recognized by the community and their extended family as positive, but also brings the community together in the domestic setting of the Café. Further, the couples’ covert feminist charity work, performed under guise of “Railroad Bill,” a mysterious Robin Hood figure that rides trains and redistributes food to the homeless, enables displaced families to survive. The covert nature of the charity prevents disruption of the couples’ family and business. Ruth and Idgie’s feminist acts of charity--reducing prices for black customers, feeding hobos for free in the café, and redistributing food as Railroad Bill--reconfigure and challenge the capitalist patriarchal system by taking the domestic out of the home and into the community. Celie’s foray into business with Folkspants Unlimited certainly suggests a similar effort to emancipate herself and others from heterosexist cultural divisions.

Ruth and Idgie’s revised, resistant domesticity, then, is based on the care of others through their extension of home into the community, past traditional familial and racial

boundaries. Flagg presents the practice of domestic servitude in a distinctly more positive light than does Walker in her portrayal of Sofia's literal imprisonment at the hands of a privileged white woman, whose family continues to consider her property long after her employment has ended. Because the family's domestic servants are treated as members of the family, Flagg critiques the white supremacist ideology that supports domestic servitude by deconstructing the necessity of distance between employer and employee. Shameem Kabir notes that the film progressively reworks the notion of family, which "entails sharing, giving, exchanging; it is not about appropriation or exploitation . . . Idgie is not tempted by the offer to escape trial [for Frank Bennett's murder]. She cannot let Big George take the rap and knows she has to stand trial herself because of white jurors' alacrity in hanging black subjects. So, effectively, she risks her life again, in loyalty to her 'pretended' family" (128-9). Likewise, Ninny refers to Sipsev almost reverently when she discusses her with Evelyn:

When I get to heaven, with all my people . . . I know old Sipsev's gonna be there. I don't have any idea where Sipsev come from . . . you never know where colored people come from. She was about ten or eleven when she started working for Momma Threadgoode. She'd walk over from Troutville, the colored quarters across the tracks, and said her name was Sipsev Peavey and she was lookin' for a job, and Momma just kept her. She helped raise all the Threadgoode children . . . You never saw anybody love babies more than Sipsev did . . . Sipsev said nothing made her happier than to have a little baby to rock. (48)

Despite her emotional reminiscences about Sipsev, Ninny's description of the way Sipsev came to work for the Threadgoodes reveals lingering problematic assumptions about the reciprocal nature of domestic servitude in general. Stating "Momma just kept her," Ninny's diction reveals that custodial notions about domestic servants in relation to their employers existed even among obviously caring white employers like the Threadgoodes. However, Ninny describes her own adoption into the Threadgoode household with the same diction of inclusion, thus equating Sipsev and herself in terms of belonging with the Threadgoode household. Unlike

Ninny, who is both informally adopted by and raised by the Threadgoodes and then marries into the family, Sipsey is portrayed as living beyond the boundaries of her white employers' home. Instead, she creates a homeplace for herself. Sipsey's desire to have a baby of her own (she eventually informally adopts an abandoned child) is conflated with her "natural" role as caretaker for other women's children, although Ninny is careful to note that other black women also used her love for children to secure free babysitting services. Flagg further complicates this complex give and take of black subjectivity through narrative shifts that explores Sipsey's family. Flagg gives voice to several black characters through an extensive subplot that centers on the vastly differing opportunities and limitations faced by blacks in Depression-era south.

Domestic servitude, as Flagg presents it, is an opportunity for the softening of racial discord. While her presentation does not deny that domestic servitude was a problematic segregating factor, especially for the South, Flagg characterizes the exemplary domestic atmosphere, the Threadgoode household, as a safe sphere where black and white subjects interact as humans. Idgie, who has as many black friends as white (284) condemns the racism in her community by pointing out the hypocrisy of one of her acquaintances who supports the Ku Klux Klan: "Ruth, I wish you could have seen that big ox, down at the river for three days, drunk as a dog, crying like a baby, 'cause Joe, that old colored man that raised him, died. I swear, I don't know what people are using for brains anymore" (55). Flagg invalidates a myth which supports racism: that "deep down, all colored people hate white people and if [they] got a chance, they'd kill us off in our sleep" through Ninny's discussion with Evelyn about the depths of devotion shown the Threadgoodes by Sipsey, her son, Big George, and his wife, Onzell (283). Sipsey kills Frank Bennett, who threatens to kidnap Buddy, Jr., Big George barbeques his body, and Onzell nurses Ruth as she dies from cancer. Evelyn responds to Ninny's criticism of racist

attitudes with fitting disgust, but later confronts her complicity in racist practices when she finds herself entering the largest black church in Birmingham.

All her life she had considered herself to be a liberal. She had never used the word *nigger*. But her contact with blacks had been the same as for the majority of middle-class whites before the sixties--mostly just getting to know the maid or maids of friends . . . Her parents' attitudes about blacks had been like most back then; they thought most were amusing and wonderful, childlike people, to be taken care of. Everyone had a funny story to tell about what this maid said or did, or would shake their heads with amusement about how many children they kept having. Most would give them all their old clothes and leftovers to take home, and help them if they got in trouble . . . But then, she had always admired them, their strength and compassion. She had always wondered how they could love and care for white children and nurse old white men and women with such gentleness and care. She didn't think she could have. (309-10)

Evelyn's epiphany about her own racism reveals her to be a work in progress; she conflates the prescribed roles of caretakers with an assumed nature. This lack of full realization is a realistic and thus accessible approach for readers who may experience similar hindrances in their attempts to overcome the legacy of racist ideology.

Flagg and Walker's construction of white female complicity, particularly in the oppression of black female subjects in the name of domesticity, involves an epiphany and an active revision. Evelyn's realization about her complicity with white supremacist ideology is similar to Eleanor Jane's belated understanding of how racism has kept Sofia in her life. Evelyn finds religious salvation for the first time in a black church and feels at ease crossing over into Troutville, a predominantly black neighborhood, and Eleanor Jane goes to work for Sofia, thus turning the tables on her mother's enforcement of domestic servitude. However, Walker and Flagg offer different presentations of relationships between the domestic servants and the white females they serve. Sipse's devotion to Ruth and Idgie goes beyond the devotion that Mahnaz Kousha describes in her article "Race, Class and Intimacy." Sipse's devotion demonstrates a revision of "strong attachment", an emotional strategy used by black employees, which Kousha

points out, is rarely reciprocated; in Sipsey's case, the "strong attachment" is returned fully. Conversely, the relationship between Sofia and the mayor's wife exceeds Kousha's descriptive strategy of "detached attachment" (79). Indeed, it is Sofia's appropriately placed rage that contributes to such myths as the one that Ninny dispels through her experiences with black subjects. Evelyn's recognition of her complicity in white supremacist ideology has its roots in the domestic sphere and leads to her eventual rejection of internalized white supremacy.

This pattern of recognition and rejection occurs in both texts. In *The Color Purple*, Walker represents resistant domesticity primarily through sewing and quilting motifs. In *Fried Green Tomatoes*, Flagg's use of the motif of cooking and the exchange of food functions similarly. The preparation and offering of food occurs throughout the text as pivotal moments in the development of several relationships. For Ruth and Idgie, a key moment in the development of their relationship occurs when Ruth "charms" an angry swarm of bees so that she may offer Ruth the honeycomb. Though Idgie's risky, undomesticated act of courtship contrasts with Ruth's traditional, feminine domesticity, the gesture foretells their formation of a domestic feminine economy. In the film version of the text, the two playfully smear food on one another, a comic scene that illustrates their willingness to embrace alternatives to traditional, restrained femininity and to use domesticity to challenge propriety. For Ninny and Evelyn, the exchange of Sipsey's recipes enables Evelyn to free herself from junk food; Evelyn's reliance on junk food parallels her search for fulfillment, which she finds in the sisterhood she forms with Ninny. The recipes from which she prepares food for Ninny are an offering of friendship and a sense of connection to the past of which Ninny speaks, and specifically, to Sipsey, who is the creator of the recipes. The formation of sisterhood, for Evelyn, includes Sipsey, as she uses her recipes to preserve Sipsey's voice and creative domesticity. As a prologue, Flagg includes Sipsey's recipes

“Compliments of Evelyn Couch”; the diction used in the recipes do not match the diction that Sipsey uses in the narrative, but the brief, descriptive statements which follow each recipe, such as “Naughty Bird’s favorite”, “So long, Mr. Chicken” and “Big George could eat eight at a time” seem to be written in Ninny’s voice. The convergence of these three voices--Sipsey’s, Ninny’s, Evelyn’s--further suggests a spirit of cross-generational sisterhood. Sipsey’s use of a skillet as a weapon to kill is a subversive revision of domesticity. For Sipsey and Big George, acting in concert to protect themselves and the Threadgoodes, the barbequing of Frank Bennett is an ultimately subversive act. The unwitting cannibalism by the people who are searching for him reclaims for both the agents of this action (Big George, Sipsey) and those who have no knowledge of it (Ruth, Idgie) the power that Frank’s threats of violence literally took from them. Further, this action symbolized a rejection of the overarching threat of patriarchal violence in their lives.

Walker and Flagg present readers with accessible characters and plots that, while rooted in eras and places in American culture that are often mythologized and/or disregarded, effectively illustrate the need for sisterhood formation. While these texts, particularly *The Color Purple* with its use of magic realism, romanticize or blur certain aspects of daily life (such as homophobia, discussed earlier), they also convincingly portray the daily struggles inherent in oppressive, unquestioned domesticity and the need for using and sharing domesticity subversively and creatively. Flagg and Walker approach a myriad of subjects intertwined with domesticity--abuse, isolation, sexual oppression, racism, to name a few--through a variety of characters whose growing awareness and eventual epiphanies about many of these issues occur at differing stages of their development. Evelyn and Celie, for example, are middle-aged, or near middle-aged when they attain happiness; thus, sisterhood formation(s)--which are not necessarily

related to any formalized movement--can increase individual agency and undermine the power of oppressive systems which domesticity often exemplifies. Without venturing directly into the women's movement, both Walker and Flagg offer approaches with which readers might continue to revise and improve it.

CHAPTER 3
SO FAR FROM SISTERHOOD:
DOMESTICITY AS FEMINIST PEDAGOGY

. . . Whatever the individual mother's love and strength, the child in us, the small female who grew up in a male-controlled world, still feels, at moments, wildly unmothered. When we can confront and unravel this paradox, this contradiction, face to the utmost in ourselves the groping passion of that little girl lost, we can begin to transmute it, and the blind anger and bitterness that have repetitiously erupted among women trying to build a movement together can be alchemized. Before sisterhood, there was the knowledge--transitory, fragmented, perhaps, but original and crucial--of mother-and-daughterhood. (Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*)

We [second-wave feminists] had fled the domesticity of our mothers' lives, mistakenly concluded that it offered no satisfaction, just relentless misery, without realizing how many of our mother's hopes and secret dreams we took with us. (Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*)

In rejecting a notion of collective sisterhood--but without another model, familial or otherwise to supplant it--[third wave feminists] remain within the mother-daughter relationship, albeit as only children to a controlling mother feminism. "Sisterhood is powerful" has been replaced by a new slogan: "Daughterhood is powerful." (Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third Wave Feminism*)

Representations of generations of women within families--specifically mother/daughter relationships--parallel changing cultural perceptions of domesticity. Familial responses to the various stages and ideals of the feminist movement are particularly relevant as the tropes of motherhood and sisterhood figure prominently into histories of the movement. Ruth Rosen, for example, examines how the sisterhoods of second wave of feminism crumbled. Yet third-wave writers such as Astrid Henry embrace the possibilities available in this familial metaphor. Both generations of feminist critics comment on the dissention and confusion between mothers and daughters; the language of action/reaction and consequence underscores the complexities of familial and feminist pedagogy. These metaphors and complexities are key to understanding the relationship between feminism and domesticity.

In the texts that I analyze in this chapter--*The Joy Luck Club* and *So Far From God*--the relationships between mothers and daughters represent the complex generational interaction between the women's movement and its struggle with domesticity as a persistent, underlying concern. The characters in these texts reveal through interaction with mainstream feminism concepts which mirror their relationships with their mothers and/or daughters and domesticity. This interaction is evident in Ana Castillo's Chicana feminist novel *So Far From God*. Castillo's five main characters--a Chicana and her four daughters--represent various opportunities open to women, including traditional housewife and feminist activist. *So Far From God*, like *The Joy Luck Club*, also problematizes the simplicity of choosing between these ideologies and practices, particularly for women of color. Castillo's attention to Chicana cultural struggle with assimilation further complicates the ways in which domesticity is rejected, recycled, or revised. In looking at both of these texts, I will examine how cultural traditions embedded in domestic work such as cooking and housekeeping may reinforce or enable characters' resistance to traditional femininity and to feminist movement(s) as well. Through generational interaction and instruction Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* recycles and revises domesticity, femininity, and tradition, thus constructing various avenues of feminist praxis for characters and readers. Tan examines a community of older, pre-feminist movement Chinese-American female friends and their daughters dealing with the ramifications of the lessons their mothers taught them, or in some cases, failed to convey. The daughters' modern, feminist-influenced lives are directly related to feminist renderings of domesticity. Yet the daughters, by virtue of when they were born, their race, as well as their class concerns, do not feel special kinship within the women's movement. While second-wave feminism has influenced their lives and identities, the novel is set during a time when postfeminist ideology had taken root culturally. The daughters view

sisterhood with their fellow Joy Luck daughters and with other women skeptically; because they have troubled relationships with their mothers, they are unable to see that “daughterhood is powerful” as third-wave feminists would later posit. Thus, the daughters of the Joy Luck Club must negotiate their identities as women, as Chinese-Americans, and as daughters. The mothers’ lessons--and in some cases, their absences and/or perceived failures as mothers--also serve as useful foils to their daughters’ complicated existences and as revisions of traditional domesticity. Both texts also show how attempts at sisterhood formations, such as through Sofi’s formation of the M.O.M.A.S. group and the Joy Luck Club itself, can further revise domesticity and feminism(s) through reconsidering the mother-daughter dyad. All familial feminist metaphors are both problematic yet potentially “powerful.”

Unlike sisterhoods, the formation of which depends upon choice and agency exercised by members, mother-daughter relationships can be characterized by a lack of choice and the resulting imbalance. Simply put, mothers may choose to give birth to and raise their children, but their children do not exercise such choice in birth; children, particularly adolescents, sometimes express resentment at this lack of choice and agency. These resentments often translate to the adult relationships between parent and child. The traditional process by which daughters are socialized by their mothers further complicates the possibilities of mother-daughter relationships based upon the degree of choice reflected in sisterhood-formation, particularly during the process of identity formation. Ruth Wodak and Muriel Shulz state in *The Language of Love and Guilt: Mother-Daughter Relationships from a Cross-Cultural Perspective* that

Our culture, while it encourages boys to become independent of their mothers at an early age, sanctions--and in fact encourages--continued dependence in girls. That the girl is expected to develop a gender identity as a female compounds that dependence. . . [thus] the daughter develops a closer identification with her mother than does the son, and the mother identifies more closely with her, often

experiencing the daughter as an extension of herself. This generates between them a unique bond, in which each feels the other to be a part of the self. (4)

This fluidity of identity between mothers and daughters is interrupted and complicated by the daughter's quest for individuation. At this point in identity formation, the daughter assumes the active role of searching for self, independent of the mother's identity; this process reverses the lack of agency involved in being born. "The daughter must simultaneously develop her *personal* identity, separate from that of her mother, while accepting *the mother* as a model for her own *gender* identity. Thus the process of separation and individuation pushes her away from her mother, even while the development of a gender identity pulls them closer together" (Wodak and Shulz 9). The daughter's quest is punctuated--but not solely defined--by acceptance and rejection of the mother and her version of femininity. Acceptance and rejection are two possible choices that a daughter may make. These active choices show that each individual must engage with feminism in her own way.

As an expression of culturally sanctioned femininity, the mother's interaction with domesticity is a key factor in a daughter's identity formation. In traditional households (those which fit the traditional patriarchal mold) where the mother is primarily a housewife, her continual presence in the home factors into both the physical closeness her children may access and their interpretation of women's accepted roles. In homes where the mother is not solely housewife, she is nevertheless traditionally responsible for the care of the family home, regardless of her duties and burdens outside the realm of the household. In each of these cases, which represent only two choices of many available to women, the characteristics of traditional femininity--self-sacrifice, above all--often leads to the mother's unhappiness. The mother's response to self-sacrifice may translate into the daughter's revision or rejection of her mother's engagement in domesticity. The women's movement in America reflected the cumulative,

overwhelming discontent felt by many mothers and daughters. Revealing this sense of generational tension, Ruth Rosen references a woman contemplating her motivations for taking part in the women's movement: "As we grew older . . . we saw our mothers--our role models, the women we were to become--thwarted in their efforts toward self-realization and expression. A deep and bitter lesson . . . reverberated through the core of our beings, and we resolved not to let it happen to us; we resolved to be different" (3). The women's liberation movement, then, can be characterized as a younger generation of daughters forming a cultural response, rejection, and revision of the life which patriarchy dictated for generations of women. Second-wave feminism's trope of sisterhood reflects an embracing of choice and a rejection of passivity embedded in the mother-daughter hierarchy of birth and growth.

As women, mothers, daughters, and sisters, however deeply engaged or disengaged in resistance against the patriarchal limitations of domesticity, must still contend with domesticity theoretically and practically. Further, women of color must contend with complexities of cultural backgrounds from which their versions of femininity and domesticity are formed. bell hooks aptly criticizes the "white bourgeois" conception of home--a "politically neutral space"--in "Homeplace: A Site of Resistance" (453). Although hooks writes specifically about the plight that African American women have faced in forming and maintaining home spaces which successfully resist the oppression of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, her concepts apply to other women of color as well. Women of color--in my analysis, I refer specifically to representations of Asian Americans and Chicanas in works by authors from these cultural backgrounds--face the multivalent forces of cultural assimilation, parenting and/or daughterhood, femininity, and domesticity. Cultural assimilation makes the process of parenting more challenging; raising daughters, particularly, in a culturally ambivalent or shifting context further

problematizes femininity and the ways in which domesticity affects femininity. These forces make advocating feminism more challenging and appealing.

Feminism shares with motherhood the concept of hope for future generations of women; it attempts revision of cultural and social structures and the ideology that support those structures. This individual and/or group quest for future generations' well being is not limited to work which attempts to eliminate social injustice; the hopefulness which characterizes motherhood and the women's movement extends to a yearning for agency, self-actualization, and an overall improved life than the one which came before. Related to this concept of hope is the myth of Happily Ever After, a common theme in fairy tales, which also pervades our cultural perceptions of femininity and domesticity. However, hope based on the agency of concerned individuals (mothers) or groups (such as those groups which comprise the women's movement) is far different from the elusive fantasy which constitutes Happily Ever After; rather, this concept is based on feminine passivity which results in a static state of elusive wedded bliss and perpetually (un)satisfying domesticity. Hope is dynamic and offers the possibility of change; Happily Ever After, like nostalgia, is a seductive, pervasive and potentially destructive myth. While nostalgia relies on a false sense of history or beginnings, In *The Sacred and the Feminine: Toward a Theology of Housework*, Kathryn Rabuzzi suggests that the "fairy tale ending [Happily Ever After], perhaps more than any other, contributes to the misery most traditional women are forced to endure . . . those words are repeatedly implanted in impressionable minds, only to spring up and form a wall behind which traditional women are expected to live in domestic bliss" (1). The concept of Happily Ever After reaches far past "middle class young women in the United States," as "the scarcely articulated, tacit myth of middle-class American women's experience" (4-5). But the myth is not limited to middle-class American experience; it pervades

regardless of social class and/or racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. The myth of Happily Ever After is borderless.

The distinct struggles with exclusion and identity formation are similar to patterns seen in the history of the women's movement, which is commonly criticized for its initial--and some suggest, persistent--exclusion of women of color and seeming inattention to concerns beyond the scope of white middle class experience. As one response to the cultural pervasiveness of the Happily Ever After myth, the women's movement mainly targeted white middle-class women, but its effects were also felt by even non-participating women with differing cultural backgrounds. According to Wendy Ho, author of *In Her Mother's House: The Politics of Asian-American Mother-Daughter Writing*, "Asian American women also claim the in-between spaces as sites on which to resignify themselves and their culture, distinct from white mainstream feminist and Asian American masculinist nationalist discourses and practices" (39). As the myth represents the patriarchal boundaries of femininity and domesticity, revising it exposes limitations and enables border crossing, particularly for women of color. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Mestiza* underscores this concern for Chicanas:

Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, la mestiza undergoes a struggle of the flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in one or more culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes *un choque*, a cultural collision. (qtd in Madison 561)

The cultural collision is profound for women of color, some of whom may have viewed the women's movement from the margins, as does Sofi and the mothers of the Joy Luck Club. Though alienated or marginalized by organized feminism, these women have used feminist concepts to form a culturally specific approach with which to inform or influence their daughters

in achieving their potential as women--worth beyond the disappointing end result of Happily Ever After. Others, such as the daughters in *So Far From God* and *The Joy Luck Club*, have experienced the effects of others' efforts, including those of their mothers. The mothers' hopes for a better life, for themselves and their daughters, may act as a replacement, or a salve, for disappointments inevitable with Happily Ever After.

As mothers, the women who comprise the Joy Luck Club, as well as Sofi in *So Far From God*, attempt to reconcile feminist hope and patriarchal myth for their daughters. Because these attempts at reconciliation occur within the confines of both mothers' and daughters' home spaces, the familial interaction within these homes and the locations themselves become symbolic of oppositional forces. Further, the domestic acts, rituals, and spaces with which these women engage (or resist and possibly reject) reflect the degree of traditional femininity they accept. The daughters may find themselves caught between these forces, including hegemony and agency; their identities as Chicanas or Chinese Americans and non-ethnic Americans; and the rejection or revision of their mothers' domesticity. The mothers also find themselves engaged in similar struggles. Their experiences as young women or as mothers coping with the limitations of patriarchy are sometimes appalling and grim, thus viscerally informing their aspirations for their daughters' lives; these experiences, however, are painful to recall and thus often are not openly discussed by the mothers. Through their close examination of mother-daughter relationships against the background of possibility for sisterhood-formation, these texts ultimately indict the fracturing of sisterhoods in the postfeminist era. Despite the mothers' best intentions, the daughters ultimately behave as individuals, rather than as a part of a collective unit. Their mothers, conversely, belong at some point to a collective of women whose goals range from mutual personal support to political change. None of the daughters join together with

other women or their mothers to until it is either too late (as in the case of Fe and La Loca) or the narrative concludes without clear resolution on this matter (the Joy Luck daughters).

Isolation, Sacrifice, and Unification in *So Far From God*

Castillo's *So Far From God*, equal parts magic realism and political commentary, centers on an isolated, self-sacrificing mother who ultimately unifies women in a feminist cause. Sofi, a headstrong mother, struggles to keep her homestead afloat and her daughters alive, healthy, and happy, despite the fact that she is a single mother in a culture permeated with stultifying Catholicism and machismo. For much of the narrative, Sofi mistakenly perceives herself as an abandoned wife (her husband, Domingo, ran off in the middle of the night). Likewise, the community perceives her as a victim, an "abandonada"; despite her discomfort with that title-- "there was almost nothing more pitiful to her than to be called an abandoned woman"--she denies the reality of the situation. But after Domingo's return some twenty years later, she suddenly remembers that she forced him out of her home because his gambling was threatening the integrity of her home--both literally and figuratively.

Despite the community's perception of Sofi as a victim of her husband's irresponsibility, she instills within her four daughters a feminist sensibility through her parenting. Her status as "abandonada" does not dampen her spirit and determination; thus, her daughters perceive her strength, self-sacrifice, and her self-reliance as admirable qualities. For example, Sofi chooses a baseball bat, rather than the company of a man, for protection "'just in case' she encountered some tonto who had gotten ideas about the woman who lived alone with her four little girls by the ditch at the end of the road" (20). Likewise, the community's perception of Sofi as "abandonada" is tempered with their admiration of her abilities and self-reliance: "by anyone's standard's it was unfair to call [Sofi] unambitious, since [she] single-handedly ran the Carne

Buene Carneceria she inherited from her parents. She raised most of the livestock that she herself (with the help of La Loca) butchered for the store, managed all its finances, and ran the house on her own to boot” (28). However, Sofi’s interaction with the community is limited, as she may extend herself only so far as the confines of the butcher shop. Because La Loca, her youngest daughter, cannot and will not leave the safety of her mother’s home space, Sofi’s life is essentially limited to domesticity and parenting.

Her daughters’ varying responses to their mother’s version of domesticity, femininity, and feminism, represent widespread cultural responses to the women’s movement itself. One logical response among many to traditional domesticity is rejection. Esperanza’s interactions with feminist and Chicano ideals in college--despite her majoring in Chicano Studies (25)--reflect her overarching questioning and rejection of tradition, including domesticity, feminine passivity, and the kinds of self-sacrifice made by her mother. However, this rejection is not without complications. In “The Dilemma of the Modern Chicana Artist and Critic,” Marcela Christine Lucero-Trujillo remarks, “The sanctuary of the Chicano home [is] a replica of the conflictive society. The modern Chicana faces a double conflict. On the one hand, she must overcome Chicano family overprotection, and on the other, she faces contempt from the outside world as she emerges into the professional world, only to find indifference as answers to her questions on reality and life” (624). Esperanza embodies this conflict. She is drawn to the familiarity of her home and family, but she is also educated and cynical; she senses that for her, neither remaining at home nor establishing her own traditional home will ease her spiritual confusion. She rekindles a relationship with Ruben, an ex-boyfriend from college, whose own experience with white middle-class Happily Ever After ended badly. Through this relationship,

built on Ruben's masculine response to his domestic failure, she begins to understand the problematic sexism of allegedly enlightened Chicanos.

Every two weeks she was right there with Ruben, at the teepee meetings of the Native-American Church, Ruben singing and drumming, keeping the fire, watching the "door," teaching her the dos and don'ts of his interpretation of lodge "etiquette" and the role of women and the role of men and how they were not to be questioned. And she concluded as she had in their early days, why not?

After all, there was Ruben with his Native and Chicano male friends always joking among themselves, always siding with each other, and always agreeing about the order and reason of the universe, and since Esperanza had no Native women friends to verify any of what was being told to her by Ruben about the woman's role in what they were doing, she did not venture to contradict him. (36)

Like Sofi, Esperanza is isolated from a community of peers who may offer solace and encouragement. Unlike Sofi, Esperanza's isolation is not based on sacrifice, but confusion. The inequity of her situation with Ruben echoes the inequity she had earlier perceived in choosing a career over tradition and a relationship, a common and complex issue for many women: "These were transitional years where she felt like a woman with brains was as good as dead for all the happiness it brought her in the love department" (26). Her response is to literally flee these confining aspects of femininity through her career.

Like many other women of her generation and race, Esperanza questions the value of feminism. Feminism has not, on the surface, eased her spiritual confusion despite her material gains (including a promising career) in a patriarchal world, and it has not been an apparent factor in the lives of her sisters and mother. Despite her disenchantment with organized sisterhood, Esperanza manages to unite with her sisters, as she cares for two of them while they recover from physical and emotional tragedies. According to Carmela Delia Lanza in her article "Hearing the Voices: Women and Home and Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*" "Esperanza . . . misjudges her own position and the source of power within her family . . . [she] is deceived by the male values that dominate the outside world in the novel; in turning from the female world of

her home space (which her mother and sisters created) to the male world of war, she is moving towards self-destruction and can only return home after she is dead, in the form of a spirit” (68). Esperanza’s journey away from home begins by questioning how resisting the dominant, commercial, masculine culture factors into her own life. She returns to her mother’s home, to witness and embrace her mother’s resiliency amidst great adversity. Yet her journey ends as she abandons the “political resistance” available in Sofi’s home space to participate in the same political and cultural machine she originally questioned as a young woman (Lanza 66). Esperanza’s rejection of domesticity coincides with her questioning of feminism’s usefulness and accepting the “male values” of patriarchy; this trade-off allows for her career as a journalist to develop without hindrance. (Lanza 69).

Castillo’s construction of these young Chicanas allows for more complex responses to domesticity and feminism. Fe, for example, the third of Sofi’s daughters, approaches domesticity much differently. Like Esperanza, Fe uses the advances for women made possible by the women’s movement, so that she may work outside the home in preparation for her life of domestic bliss. However, she rejects the possibility of a radical departure from an accepted white, middle-class norm. Fe actively pursues the elusive dream of Happily Ever After and thus purposefully engages with domesticity and traditional femininity; her prescriptive viewpoint illustrates the limitations of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Specifically, Fe experiences othering, due to her race, gender and class, but denies its effects through fastidiously maintaining her image and work ethic. Sofi, too, has a strong work ethic and maintains a strict image for the community, and Fe has likely been influenced by her mother’s responsible nature. According to Patricia Hill Collins in her essay “Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood” “Racial ethnic women [must teach] their children . . . to survive in systems

that oppress them” (57). Unlike Sofi, who isolated herself from many of the systems that oppress her and her children, Fe actively engages those systems. She survives by denying the positive facets of the heritage of her family, her home, and her ethnicity. Her desire for the perceived benefits of the transcultural myth of Happily Ever After and the “racial privilege enjoyed by white middle-class women” overrides the feminist praxis which Sofi’s independence has successfully instilled in her other daughters (57). Sarcastically, Castillo’s narrator describes Fe as

fine. That is, twenty-four, with a steady job at the bank, and a hard-working boyfriend whom she had known forever; she had just announced their engagement. With the same job since high school graduation, she was a reliable friend to the ‘girls’ at work. Fe was beyond reproach. She maintained her image above all--from the organized desk at work to weekly manicured fingernails and a neat coiffure. (27-8).

Her superficial, feminine image reflects her one-dimensional attitude towards her family’s overall approach to domesticity--she sees them all, save for careerist Esperanza, as “soulless” “self-defeating, so unambitious” (28). Fe overlooks the spiritual richness of her mother’s home, rejecting it, and instead looks forward to her marriage as an opportunity to re-envision home as a space more commiserate with white culture (Lanza 67).

This attempt at re-envisioning a mainstream whitewashed domestic space fails. Fe’s fiancé rejects her; horrified at her emotional and social losses, she spends almost a year screaming during her every waking moment. Rather than seek solace in the false sisterhood of her three white bridesmaids, she helplessly succumbs to the care that her sisters and mother willingly provide inside the homeplace of her upbringing. Ironically, Fe’s dreams of becoming a traditional homemaker and fulfilling this part of the Happily Ever After myth, are not only postponed due to Tom’s fear of commitment, but are inverted during her nervous breakdown.

Rabuzzi's philosophy of homemaking^{xviii} states, "Aside from caring for the objects, plants, and pets which constitute elements of her physical world, a traditional housewife is expected to care for others--children, aging parents, spouse, and sometimes other relatives or in-laws" (123). Fe is unable to enact this aspect of domesticity. Her detached, contemptuous attitude towards her mother's domesticity and her resistance to two sisters' healing abilities initially render her spiritually disconnected from her family and the nurturance Sofi's home space provides. Despite being unable to think clearly or take care of herself, Fe finally recovers, feeling a familiarity and kinship with her sisters that resembles true sisterhood. However, the sisterhood seems superficial and based on convenience.

Rather than seeing her own breakdown as a sign that dream of Happily Ever After might elude her, Fe persists in a quest for individuation that denies true sisterhood. Once at least partially healed, she continues to pursue the myth; her attitude of superiority and detachment remains largely unchanged. However, her damaged vocal chords serve as a painful physical reminder of her particular vulnerability to emotional loss and to the illusion of stability. Eventually, Fe becomes engaged once again, to a first cousin, Casirimo (anglicized as Casey). Her determination to live Happily Ever After results in her disregard for white society's general disdain for such a tie. She has also overlooked her inability to cook; yet as an inherent aspect of traditional domesticity, cooking is essential to maintaining a home. Realizing her oversight, she comes to La Loca for instruction. "Above all, Loca knew how to cook. She was, in fact, a better cook than her own mom, even though she learned most of what she knew from Sofi, who had

^{xviii} In citing Rabuzzi's important work in this chapter, I acknowledge that the texts and characters I examine herein interact less directly with routine aspects of domesticity than do other texts and characters. Rather, the overarching importance of homeplace dominates these works and meaningfully resonates with an examination of the similarities between feminism and domesticity.

learned what she knew from her own mother and so on. Every now and then, it happens that a child actually surpasses the knowledge and the knack for doing some things that a parent has shown her and this was the case with Loca” (165). Fe’s cooking lessons with Loca and occasionally, with Sofi, allow an emotional closeness missing in Fe’s detached pursuit of domestic perfection. She candidly tells her mother how she met Casey, foreshadowing her own tragedy: “Well, he ___ came into ___ bank one day ___ open ___ ___ new account and there I was. ___ there he was. And ___ rest ___ history . . . we liv__ happily ___ ___ter.” The narrator responds: “And if ___ that ___ been true” (169).

Castillo not only critiques the lack of sisterhood that second-wave feminism afforded Chicanas, she condemns the systems of oppression that exist outside the home space. Although Sofi attempts to teach her daughters by example to survive in a system that oppresses them, Fe and Esperanza, the two daughters who venture furthest into the harsh realities of the world die, as a result of their exploitation. Esperanza, the family eventually learns, is killed in Saudi Arabia during her stint as a reporter. Fe’s new job kills her as well. She takes a job at Acme International in order to afford the payments for her new appliances: “Fe got the long-dreamed-of automatic dishwasher, microwave, Cuisinart, and the VCR, not for wedding presents (since nobody seemed to gotten none of her hints . . . either that, or they just couldn’t afford them), but which she had bought herself with her own hard-earned money from all the bonuses she earned at her new job” (171). In Castillo’s borderland, the “Land of Enchantment/Land of Entrapment” (173), Acme represents the worst of capitalist exploitation, as it callously endangers the environment and the workers who unknowingly sacrifice their bodies and lives. Acme relies on a workforce comprised mostly of poor, uneducated women of color, who are either mothers, or like Fe, hoping to become mothers. “Some of the women who worked there did not have a high

school diploma like Fe, several spoke Spanish, Tewa, Tiwa, or some other pueblo dialect as a first language, and none (except her friend) had had the prestigious experience of having been a white collar worker before. Also, most had children already and the children wore them out before and after work so that they did not have their all to give to Acme International, as did Fe” (179). Fe’s ensuing illness, a rapidly developing cancer, prompts her realization that her desire for Happily Ever After is not only elusive, it is a myth that perpetuates through the economic exploitation of people like herself. She had mistakenly perceived herself as a potential beneficiary of white culture and prescriptive femininity by denying her ethnicity and heritage.

Through Fe, Castillo effectively dismantles the Happily Ever After myth. Fe’s slow, painful death--and her return to the sanctuary of her mother’s home, a home she once despised--allows her to approach her belief in the myth with some degree of ironic speculation; the possibility exists for her as never before to identify herself as a member of a racial ethnic group that must struggle for power (Collins 51). Fe’s resistance to the radical politics Esperanza explored in college contrasts painfully to her need for some of the unity those politics may have provided her. “And she began to read, not Fe the manicured, made-up bride of a few months before but a Fe without even the nice insides she had when she started out at Acme International, about the chemical she more than once dumped down the drain at the end of her day, which went into the sewage system and worked its way to people’s septic tanks, vegetable gardens, kitchen taps, and sun-made tea” (188). The connections Fe makes thus extend beyond her own deteriorating body and the abrupt end of her lifelong dream; the domestic spaces of others--their kitchen taps and sun made tea--figure into her perception of how far-reaching the effects of race- and gender-based exploitation are. Fe’s growing awareness of these connections is similar to Kathryn Rabuzzi’s description of cosmization: “Ritualized housework not only sets a housewife

in the context of female ancestors, placing her in the larger family of women, it also determines her place in the largest context of all: the world” (105). Rabuzzi also describes the “demonic” flipside of cosmization, or the distasteful aspects of housework. Fe did not live long enough to perform ritualized housework in the context of her marriage, but she performed distasteful or “demonic” duties similar to housework at Acme International, significantly harming the environment and her own body. Looking at the concepts of cosmization and its demonic flipside through the lens of Fe’s tragedy, we can see that Rabuzzi’s concepts provide a useful perspective through which we can view domesticity and feminism. Despite her firm belief in a myth that relies upon, but downplays, the routine and/or ritualized performance of domesticity, Fe denied her connection to other women and the possibility of sisterhood formation. Not until Fe suffered from the myth’s exploitations, did she realize and appreciate her connection to other women, including her mother and sisters.

Fe’s isolation not only parallels the women’s movement’s loss of momentum but also reflects some women’s continuing vulnerability to domestic and social oppressions. Fe’s decision to return to her own isolated mother, to die under her care and in her home, underscores Castillo’s call for spiritual and political regrouping.

A year from the time of her wedding, everything ended, dreams and nightmares alike, for that daughter of Sofi who had all her life sought to escape her mother’s depressing home--with its smell of animal urine and hot animal breath and its couch and cobijas that itched with ticks and fleas; where the coming and goings of the vecinos had become routine because of her mom’s mayoral calling . . . and where her prodigal dad, though generally a sweetheart, was always hard up for cash, talking Fe into writing him a check or giving up her watch, high school graduation ring, whatever she had on her to get him out of some urgent debt. Despite all this and more, Fe found herself wanting to go nowhere else but back to her mom and La Loca and even to the animals to die just before her twenty-seventh birthday. Sofia’s chaotic home became a sanctuary from the even more incomprehensible world that Fe encountered that last year of her pathetic life. (171-2)

Fe realizes that Sofi's homeplace is not only spiritually and physically comforting but is also "infused with political resistance" (Lanza 67). Thus, her return home is key to Castillo's political message, which is further, and much more explicitly, borne out through Sofi's growing political activities. Fe dies following through on a culturally sanctioned dream; this, combined with Sofi's domestically inspired political career pushes her desire for change even further past the boundaries of her home and village. Before Loca's death, Sofi becomes Mayor of Tome, begins a productive community-saving coop, and eventually becomes the first president of M.O.M.A.S--Mothers of Martyrs and Saints.

Castillo politicizes Rabuzzi's concept of cosmization as each character endures the isolation associated with domesticity and disenchantment with formalized feminism, only to ultimately experience the connectedness of all women. Through engaging with and enduring the process of cosmization, each character eventually joins a sisterhood with women of the past and present, within and beyond the borders of their culture. "Cosmization [is] the creation of world out of chaos. Whereas community with ancestors connects human to human across time, cosmization relates human to environment in both time and space. These two inherently religious connections--the one to community, the other to cosmos--usually complement, but occasionally clash with, each other" (Rabuzzi 105). Fe's connection to other women is brief yet profound; her epiphany about domesticity and feminism nevertheless enacts cosmization as her awareness creates "a world out of chaos" (105). Her death, along with her sisters' deaths and their subsequent returns from the afterlife, underscores the spiritual and political potential of cosmization. Sofi's political and spiritual reaction to her daughters' deaths solidifies this connection between domesticity and feminism. In forming M.O.M.A.S. in memory of her daughters, Sofi finally ends her self-imposed isolation as a mother, pays tribute to her daughter's

sacrifices, and translates cultural differences into a unified sisterhood of mothers, thus empowering daughterhood by extension. Castillo advocates feminism through politicizing cosmization.

Isolation, Sisterhood, and Disorder in *The Joy Luck Club*

The Joy Luck Club, like *So Far From God*, centers on motherhood as a pedagogical feminist opportunity to revise the meanings of domesticity for future generations. Each mother in these texts revises domesticity and opts to unite with other women for varying reasons. Sofi, for example, benefits personally from her political activities: her losses are somewhat placated by her involvement in revisionist, feminist activities that reject isolation and disorder. Sofi's counterparts in the Joy Luck Club unify much earlier in life and less formally and politically. They each experience grave losses as children in patriarchal China and for some, as young mothers. Thus, they perceive their settling in America as somewhat revisionist; their hopes for their daughters seem proactive. Like Sofi, they must articulate hope for themselves first. In war torn China, Suyuan Woo's need for positive interaction with other women inspired her to form an earlier version of the Joy Luck Club. Suyuan, an officer's wife, disregarded the strict social strata of Chinese culture in order to foster hope through sisterhood. Playing Mah-Jong, Suyuan and three other women "would pretend each week had become the new year" (Tan 25). Reclaiming a sense of sisterhood rather than dwelling on their status as victims of war, these women chose to concentrate on laughter, games, food, and storytelling. Suyuan explains to her daughter, Jing-Mei (June) how their interaction in one another's home held such importance for them: "each week, we could hope to be lucky. That hope was our only joy. And that's how we came to call little parties Joy Luck" (25). Through the Joy Luck Club, these women sought a form of Happily Ever After, by invoking what Rabuzzi calls a surrogate motherhood, enacting

“homecoming”: “For a woman to circumvent the emptiness at the center of her homebound experience and keep it from engulfing her demonically instead of enlarging her divinely, demands a different ritual model . . . one where [young] homemakers seek each other out and unconsciously function as surrogate mothers” (135-6). The potential to experience the “emptiness at the center of the homebound experience” is heightened for these particular women, as their violent situations and past experiences threaten to isolate them psychically and physically. Their foray into surrogate motherhood allows them to resist this futility, as illustrated through Suyuan’s reactions to the loss of her twin daughters. The loss haunts Suyuan, but she attempts to reclaim her status as mother and sister. She gives birth to Jing Mei soon after her arrival in America; Jing Mei, whose name means Long Cherished Wish, represents a new hope for Suyuan (281). Once in America, Suyuan met the Hsus, the Jongs, and the St. Clairs and senses the “unspeakable tragedies they had left behind in China and hopes they couldn’t begin to express in their fragile English.” These numbed women embraced Suyuan’s idea for the Joy Luck Club (20).

Like Sofi, each of the Joy Luck Club mothers embrace and enact the idea of teaching feminist concepts through parental praxis. Because the women who comprise the Joy Luck Club--Suyuan Woo, An-Mei Hsu, Ying-ying St. Clair, and Lindo Jong--have each experienced the harshest aspects of patriarchy in China (separation from their mothers and family, abuse, rape, loss of children) their hopes for their American-born daughters represent feminism as parenting, exclusive of any formal cultural movement. Each mother’s relationship with her own mother is explored in the women’s narratives; these experiences inform her particular beliefs and hopes for her daughter. Suyuan is the only member of Joy Luck whose relationship with her mother is not explored; this is appropriate considering that she is, in a sense, the founder of the

Joy Luck Club and is essentially a mother figure. We see her only as a mother who has lost tragically and triumphantly regained. Suyuan's transformation from tragic to hopeful mother further emphasizes the complexities of motherhood and American life that Tan explores through the other daughter/mother/daughter triads in the book. As a mother in America, Suyuan hopes only for the American ideal to bring her daughter happiness. She rejects the limitations of China's harsh patriarchy by blindly clinging to America's ideal of equality: "In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch" (18). Once in America, she accepts the limitations of living within a system of oppression, becoming a domestic worker to help support the family. Out of necessity, the swan feather she carries as a symbol of her good intentions--the feather that comes from a "creature that became more than what was hoped for"--is traded for the feather duster of a domestic worker (18).

Tan constructs Suyuan as the epitome of hope and joy for the other mothers even as she performs a sanctioned job within the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy that others her, her daughter, and her friends and community. Although Suyuan works as a domestic, through her Americanized home and Americanized hopes for her daughter's future, she nonetheless embodies a politicized version of hope. The Joy Luck Club mother's political resistance initiates with their flight from China and results in their explicit hopes for their daughters in a "land of opportunity." This sense of joy and hope does not necessarily translate into their daughters' lives, but neither does it in end in tragedy, like Sofi's daughters' lives do. Specifically, Suyuan's daughter, June, perceives her mother's revision of patriarchal limitations and her Chinese-American blend of domesticity as negative. Yet after Suyuan's death, June finds herself critiquing the Hsu's home, much like her mother did: "The Hsus' house feels heavy with greasy

odors. Too many Chinese meals cooked in a too small kitchen, too many once fragrant smells compressed onto a thin layer of invisible grease. I remember how my mother used to go into other people's houses and restaurants and wrinkle her nose, then whisper very loudly: 'I can see and feel the stickiness with my nose'" (28-9). June's perception of Suyuan's domestic standards--and her outspokenness about these standards--translates to other problematic areas of their relationship. For instance, Suyuan reinvents her own crushed dreams by focusing on June's potential as a child prodigy, thus driving a wedge between them. June is burdened by her mother's hope and feels she cannot live up to her mother's expectations and standards.

June's feelings of mediocrity, which result from her failure to meet her mother's high expectations, personify both impossible standards of femininity and the fractured women's movement. Women of June's generation experience more complex cultural expectations due to the sometimes-contradictory freedoms gained during and after the movement's peak. These competing feminist influences result in a sense of imbalance for June and others like her, including Rose, Lena, and Waverly. Despite the sisterhood of the Joy Luck Club and the mothers' essentially feminist parental intentions, the Joy Luck daughters can access empowerment as individuals yet feel alienated from their mothers and one another. June's self-perception among the other Joy Luck daughters suggests a fragmentation similar to the kind which occurred within the women's movement itself. Though the daughters were all childhood friends, as adults they do not call upon one another in times of need, such as when they struggle with their mothers. Rather, they are suspicious, competitive allies: "Even though Lena and I are still friends, we have grown naturally cautious about telling each other too much. Still, what little we say to one another often comes back in another guise. It's the same old game, everybody talking in circles" (38). Sisterhood eludes these daughters.

Like Esperanza, June embodies the contradictory aims of self-sacrifice and personal achievement that has plagued many women of her generation. June's fractured relationship with Waverly Jong exemplifies this contradiction. During a Chinese New Year dinner, June's feelings of self-doubt are put on display as Waverly patronizes June's work. In front of the other guests, Suyuan sides with Waverly, saying "June not sophisticated like you" (206). Behind closed doors, however, in the sanctuary of her own kitchen, Suyuan explains to June that her true hopes for her daughter are realized because June has a quality heart. Suyuan sees her brand of maternal feminism and self-sacrifice mimicked in June's character. She tells her "Only *you* pick that [small, undesirable] crab. Nobody else take it. I already knew this. Everybody else want best quality. You thinking different" (206). Suyuan's endearing maternal gesture is fraught with double meaning: while her character is admirable and self-effacing, June does not admire herself enough to ask for or achieve more.

Similarly, through Lindo and Waverly Jong's antagonistic relationship, Tan illustrates the ways in which domesticity may be altered or reinvented to express love. Their interactions with domesticity are similar to June's and Suyuan's, but these women differ markedly in the ways in which they alternately embrace domesticity and reject its negative aspects, assigning feminist meaning to order and disorder. Lindo's experiences as a young woman contribute to her cynical approach to domesticity, as well as her somewhat harsh approach to motherhood. Separated from her mother by an arranged marriage, young Lindo viewed the domestic facets of her life as symbols of her shattered emotional state and her low social status as a woman. Her in-laws house "had a confused look. It had been hastily built and then rooms and floors and wings and decorations had been added on in every which manner, reflecting too many opinions" (54). She quickly realizes that her opinions matter little; indeed, her standing within the household

hierarchy is beneath the hired domestic help (55). However, as a mother in America, she wants only the best for her children, including for her daughter Waverly. During Waverly's run as a chess champion, Lindo alters the strict gender roles of domesticity by making the sons do the dishes so that Waverly can practice. But as Waverly develops into her own person, who is very similar to Lindo in her stubbornness and sanctity of self, Lindo is shocked by Waverly's constant refusal to follow her mother's ways. "It's my fault she is this way. I wanted my children to have the best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character. How could I know these two things do not mix?" (254). In a striking illustration of their antagonistic relationship, Waverly uses her own changing approach to domesticity to make a point about her life to Lindo, who Waverly perceives as an emotional adversary.

My mother had not been to my apartment in months . . . She had refused to come unless I issue an official invitation.

And so I watched her, seeing her reaction to the changes in my apartment--from the pristine habitat I maintained after the divorce, when all of a sudden I had too much time to keep my life in order--to this present chaos, a home full of life and love. . .

"It's back here," I said. We kept walking, all the way to the back bedroom. The bed was unmade, dresser drawers were hanging out with socks and ties spilling over. My mother stepped over running shoes, more of Shoshana's toys, Rich's black loafers, my scarves, a stack of white shirts just back from the cleaner's. Her look was one of painful denial . . .

"Aren't you going to say anything else?" I asked softly.

"What should I say?"

"About the apartment? About *this*?" I gestured to all the signs of Rich lying about.

She looked around the room, toward the hall, and finally she said, "You have career. You are busy. You want to live like mess. What can I say?" (168-9)

Waverly's methodical, passive-aggressive confrontation of her mother's prejudices against Rich, her Irish-American fiancé, belie her similar method of using domesticity as agency. Waverly perceives the mess as a tribute to her happy life with Rich; Lindo perceives the mess as a sign of a productive, busy life, which attests to her own success at raising a goal-oriented daughter. But

she fails to relate Waverly's domestic expression of love to her own. Despite her seemingly traditional domestic behavior--she provided a warm, safe home for her children, and expresses her love through cooking--Lindo's domestic life is a rejection of her experiences in China. Waverly's domesticity is an expression of love and agency as well, but reflects a broader cultural acceptance of choices for women.

As the women's movement changed the texture of possibility in women's lives, it has made the myth of Happily Ever After less stable. Two Joy Luck daughters' marriages seem in part based on the myth or on revising the myth; yet the daughters' abilities to dismantle the myth are undermined by competing cultural influences. Like Esperanza, June, and Waverly, Lena St. Clair embodies the contradictory aims of self-sacrifice within the home and social achievement outside the home. Unlike June and Waverly, particularly, Lena is aware of the parallels between her marital inequity and the inequity she experiences in her career. She feels helpless to effectively revise the feminist version of Happily Ever After, one which incorporates a career rather than the unspoken domestic model of fairy tales. However, the advances made possible by feminism backfire for Lena; these imbalances are more problematic and painful for Lena because her marriage is based upon a flawed system of economic fairness, which she helped construct and willingly maintains. The façade of equity contrasts with the reality of emotional and financial imbalance she maintains with her husband. Because he is also her employer, Lena feels a fundamental sense of imbalance that translates to their domestic sphere. The home she co-inhabits with Harold Livotny, her successful, self-centered architect husband, symbolizes for Lena the social and emotional inequities she suffers in her marriage. Lena is aware of how her disappointing engagement with domesticity undermines her agency; this awareness parallels her intuitions of how environment can affect emotional well-being. Her mother, Ying-ying, has the

ability to prognosticate, which factors in prominently to her daughter's identity. Lena's sense of intuition is learned from her mother but her observations of her mother's abilities only carry her so far: "Even as a young child, I could sense the unspoken terrors that surrounded our house, the ones that chased my mother until she hid in a dark secret corner of her mind" (103). Wendy Ho comments on Ying-ying's isolation: "In the foreign and suffocating spaces that discipline and confine her, Ying Ying is portrayed as numb, off balance, and lost, living in small houses, doing servant's work, wearing American clothes, learning English, accepting American ways without care or comment, and raising a distant daughter" (163). Lena has thus not only inherited her mother's sense of intuition and wariness of imbalance, she has mimicked many of her passive, self-isolating characteristics.

Lena's deliberate, yet tentative excavation of her marital imbalances is similar to her mother's passive emotional distance; the Joy Luck Club's feminist hopes and parenting has not translated into assertiveness. Rather than communicating with her husband and directly changing the marital situation that bothers her, Lena uses her mother's impressions of her new home to better understand her life. We see this particular interaction from Lena's perspective in "Rice Husband" and from Ying-ying's in the chapter entitled "Waiting between the Trees." Upon her first visit to Lena and Harold's new home, an expensive renovated barn, Ying-ying immediately sees structural flaws in the house: slanted floors, lopsided ceilings, a flea and spider infestation. "My mother knows, underneath all the fancy details that cost so much, this house is still a barn . . . I look around and everything she's said is true. And this convinces me she can see what else is going on, between Harold and me. She knows what's going to happen to us" (151). Despite Ying-Ying's lack of assertiveness, Tan has indeed constructed as a wise mother. She sees that the structural flaws of the home mirror the structural flaws in Lena's relationship

with Harold. Their marriage is based on a faulty pattern of idealized financial and emotional equity: they each paid for half the dinner bill when they dated, they “agreed that [Lena] should pay only a percentage of the mortgage based on what [she] earn[s] and what he earns, and that [she] should own an equivalent percentage of community property” (160-1). Harold and Lena make equality seem simple.

Despite its rhetoric of equity and promise of satisfaction, the financial ideal upon which their relationship is based is like the myth of happily ever after: it does not consider the tacit realities of the marriage and the satisfaction of both partners. The financial disparity is due to the imbalance of power at work, where Harold earns “seven times more” than she does, even signing her paycheck. She deposits her comparatively meager check into her separate checking account and then pays for half of household expenses, despite the fact that Harold, with more earning power and thus more agency, spends much more than Lena--she ends up owing him money (159). The list of household items they each buy is largely gender-based--she is clearly responsible for the domestic sphere (cleaning, groceries, flowers, etc). On the other hand, Harold’s purchases are for the car and exterior of the house, on which he apparently spends frivolously and without regard to Lena’s financial situation. This gendered hierarchy is also reflected in their job descriptions: he is the “concept man, the chief architect, the designer, the person who makes the final sales presentation to a new client”. Lena’s radical design concepts are appropriated by Harold, and she remains working under the interior designer “because, as Harold explains, it would not seem fair to the other employees if he promoted me just because we are now married” (159). However, because Harold earns much more than Lena, and thus owns a larger percentage of their home, he decides how the house will look--“it is sleek, spare, and what he calls ‘fluid,’ nothing to disrupt the line, meaning none of my cluttered look” (161).

Thus, despite their efforts not to confuse money and love, Harold's higher earning power ensures that Lena has virtually no voice in any aspect of their lives. Like her mother, in many ways, she is invisible and passive, despite her attempts to love freely and base a marriage on feminist ideals. Ironically, her husband purports to share these ideals, but he misinterprets to his own advantage.

The domestic imagery of Lena's failing marriage also mimics Ying-ying's nervous breakdown years earlier. The loss of her newborn child haunts Ying-ying, and a teenaged Lena helplessly watches her mother's nervous breakdown borne out in the domestic acts which her mother cannot complete:

After the baby died, my mother fell apart, not all at once, but piece by piece, like plates falling off a shelf one by one. I never knew when it would happen, so I became nervous all the time, waiting. Sometimes she would start to make dinner, but would stop halfway, the water running full steam in the sink, her knife poised in the air over half-chopped vegetables, silent, tears flowing. And sometimes we'd be eating and we would have to stop and put our forks down because she had dropped her face into her hands and was saying, "*Mei gwansyi*"--It doesn't matter. (112-13)

This sense of futility and emotional exile translates into her relationship with her daughter and Lena's sense of self. Ying-ying's inability to express herself and Lena's inability to excavate her mother's strengths from her fragile shell hinders their emotional development and locks them in an emotional stasis, both as individual women and as a mother-daughter unit. Wendy Ho sees Lena as being "in the middle, trying to translate the silence and nightmares. Lena does not have all the parts of her mother's story, especially the parts of women's experiences that been denied, repressed, devalued, and absent in the male-privileged discourses and institutions" (180-1). Mother and daughter both feel out of place in their own homes; rather than gaining agency through domesticity, they passively allow their husbands to speak for them. Ying-ying's

husband, Saint, does so literally because they cannot understand one another's language; Harold denies Lena's voice through social and financial power structures.

Ying-ying's passivity and Lena's reincarnation of that passivity is more problematic because these women deny themselves agency despite their ability to sense events to come within their own households. Further, these women do not take advantage of their membership in sisterhoods: Ying-Ying may rely on the Joy Luck Club for hope and strength, but she hesitates to translate these benefits into her own life. Lena has access to a group of surrogate mothers, and at least two sisterhoods of daughters (the Joy Luck Daughters and the women of her generation, those these sisterhoods are fractured), yet she does not reach out. She does, however, eventually reach out to her mother, even though the two are distant emotionally. Lena's invitation to her mother to stay at her house while her apartment is being exterminated is a first step in altering the pattern of passivity and isolation. For Ying-ying, the visit offers an opportunity for her to act upon her decision to finally unleash her own "tiger spirit" and simultaneously unleash Lena's through communicating with her daughter. In the guest bedroom, each woman notices the unstable, useless black marble end table which Harold constructed; both note its uselessness, and Lena says later that she knew it would fall. Ying-ying's simple response--"Then why didn't you stop it?" reflects both mother and daughter's desire to transcend the limitations of their mother-daughter dyad, to gain agency through communication, and to assert themselves as individuals. This attempt at transcendence, at revising the disorder of their lives, begins in Lena's own home, where both women are merely guests. Although Tan leaves the results of their collaboration unwritten, it is clear that the women are ready to revise domesticity, the myth of Happily Ever After, and the unfulfilling mother-daughter dyad that has hindered their adult relationship. In this respect, Lena seems ready to embrace the possibility that "daughterhood is powerful."

As with Lena and Ying-ying, for Rose Hsu Jordan, and her mother, An-Mei, domesticity reflects spirit, a mother's influence, and competing cultural traditions and beliefs, including feminism. Although the other Joy Luck daughters, particularly Lena and Waverly, marry, Rose's interaction with domesticity resembles most closely the myth of Happily Ever After. Rose marries and stays at home; though she works from there as a graphic artist, she is as isolated as Sofi, and as much as Fe planned to be before her life was cut short. Unlike Fe, whose calculated attempt to achieve and maintain the myth formed much of her identity, Rose's uncertain identity and overall passivity affects her interaction with domesticity and acts as a hindrance to achieving subjectivity. Although Rose's relationship with her mother is not fraught with antagonism as is June and Suyuan's or Waverly and Lindo's, it is laden with misinterpretations. When Rose's husband leaves her due to her inability to make simple decisions, Rose turns to a psychiatrist rather than her mother; a hurt An-Mei reminds her "A mother is best. A mother knows what is inside you" (188).

Unlike her contemporaries and peers whose paths have been determined largely by their decisions and their deliberate interactions with domesticity and feminism, Rose merely exists, afraid to make choices. She has neither accepted nor rejected any particular feminist or domestic ideology that she observed in her mother's household. This contrasts with her mother's feminist mindset; but as is the case with Sofi and Fe in *So Far From God*, An-Mei's sense of agency and voice does not translate to her daughter's beliefs or character. Although An-Mei, like the other Joy Luck mothers, has suffered losses that affect her spirit--including separation from her mother as a child, separation from her brother through immigration, and the death of one of her children, Bing--she maintains a proactive mindset that favors independence and strength. She laments that Rose's inability to choose, her refusal to speak for herself, is itself a choice. "If she doesn't try,

she can lose her chance forever” (215). An-Mei’s victimized mother taught her to believe that it is useless to wallow in your own misery. Rose, however, is paralyzed by her self-inflicted misery; her passivity is a reaction to personal tragedies: “I think about Bing, how I knew he was in danger, how I let it happen. I think about my marriage, how I had seen the signs, really I had. But I just let it happen” (130-1). She is also hindered by the myriad choices available to her culturally: “Over the years, I learned to choose from the best opinions. Chinese people had Chinese opinions. American people had American opinions. And in almost every case, the American version was much better. It was only later that I discovered there was a serious flaw with the American version. There were too many choices, so it was easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing” (191). Thus, her passivity and fear of the unknown, her retreat into her own house and her inability to find agency in that situation, resembles pre-feminist resignation and hegemony, rather than her mother’s feminist character or the feminist ideals of her generation. Her traditional marriage to Ted Jordan, a successful surgeon, illustrates her resignation and loss of identity, even among her more feminist-minded contemporaries. Of the four Joy Luck daughters, Rose’s marital situation seems the most traditional; Ted’s overprotection of Rose at first seems a perfect complement to her insecurities and passivity. Although she has a career as a graphic artist, she voluntarily remains at home to work, isolated. His earning power, interaction with others outside the home, and social prestige follow the patriarchal pattern of male head of household. Rose’s complicity in allowing Ted to make all the decisions in their relationship eventually results in her inability to help him emotionally once he becomes professionally vulnerable; his resentment of her overall passivity and inability to contribute to the quality of his public life leads to his demand for a divorce.

Domesticity figures prominently into An-Mei's feminist mindset, which developed as a result of her interaction with her mother's victimization by various facets of patriarchy, including her own family. An-Mei's mother is known in her family as a "ghost"; although she is very much alive, because of her unavoidable status as concubine she is dead to her family. Thus, An-Mei spent much of her childhood physically and emotionally separated from her mother. Even as a child, however, she sees domestic symbols of familial separation and secrecy, which help her understand her mother's situation and which later inform her own responses to domesticity. For example, An-Mei's earliest memories conflate separation from her mother with great physical pain and emotional anguish. She is accidentally burned on her neck with a bowl of overturned soup; the family's emotional upset over the audacious and scandalous return of An-Mei's "ghost-mother" results in an upset table and in An-Mei's injury. Later, as her grandmother is on her deathbed, An-Mei's mother returns again. An-Mei witnesses the remarkable depths of her mother's love; An-Mei's mother sacrifices her physical wholeness in order to make her mother's journey to the afterlife easier. This sacrifice symbolizes her emotional loss through the separation from her own mother.

I saw my mother on the other side of the room. Quiet and sad. She was cooking a soup, pouring herbs and medicines into the steaming pot. And then I saw her pull up her sleeve and pull out a sharp knife. She put this knife on the softest part of her arm. I tried to close my eyes, but could not. And then my mother cut a piece of meat from her arm. Tears poured from her face and blood spilled to the floor. My mother took her flesh and put it in the soup. She cooked magic in the ancient tradition to try to cure her mother this one last time . . . Even though I was young, I could see the pain of the flesh and the worth of the pain. This is how a daughter honors her mother. (48)

After her grandmother dies, An-Mei returns with her mother to her home in Tientsin. She is mystified by the excessive details of the home; the rich atmosphere in which her mother dwells contrasts to the harsh treatment she received at home and, to An-Mei's naïve eyes, her mother's

status of concubine. Soon, however, the magnificent bed that she and her mother share is invaded by Wu Tsing; a bewildered An-Mei learns from a servant how her mother was raped by Wu Tsing and thus forced to become his Fourth Wife. Upon her mother's death, which she carefully planned to bring the entire Wu Tsing household bad luck, An-Mei wakes up from her dream of sorrow and tears and "learned to shout".

I know how it is to live your life like a dream. To listen and watch, to wake up and try to understand what has already happened. You do not need a psychiatrist to do this. A psychiatrist does not want you to wake up. He tells you to dream some more, to find the pond and pour more tears into it. And really, he is just another bird drinking from your misery. My mother, she suffered. She lost her face and tried to hide it. She found only greater misery and finally could not hide that. There is nothing more to understand. That was China. That was what people did back then. They had no choice. They could not speak up. They could not run away. That was their fate." (240-1)

An-Mei's refusal to mythologize her mother's sacrifice relates her own awakening to Rose's slow awakening from the shock of her divorce. Rose has resisted her mother's advice for much of her life, yet she feels overpowered by her mother's words and influence. An-Mei laments her daughter's resistance to her wisdom, comparing their generational repetition of mistakes to repeatedly treading stairs. This imagery symbolizes not only the problems within the Hsu family, but with the women's movement's missteps as well.

Certainly, Rose's journey to finally finding her own voice and asserting her agency shares common elements with her grandmother's tragic experience. But Rose's journey differs in that she awakens, much the way An-Mei did after her mother's death. Rose isolated herself passively, which is tantamount to rejecting the possibilities of sisterhood. An-Mei's mother suffered from an imposed isolation and a false sisterhood with other Wu Tsing wives and concubines. Before her death, Rose's grandmother lay comatose for three days; in trying to come to a decision on what to do about her failing marriage, Rose sleeps for three days, and

wakes only to “go to the bathroom or to heat up a can of chicken noodle soup. But mostly I slept. I took the sleeping pills Ted had left behind in the medicine cabinet. And for the first time I can recall, I had no dreams” (193). The meticulous timing of her grandmother’s suicide caused bad luck to fall on the Wu Tsing house; thus, in death, she mocked their cruel exploitation of her. Once Rose wakes up from her incubation and speaks to Ted, she has made a decision, is able to laugh at him, find her voice, and challenge his wishes. Like her grandmother, Rose does not feel that her home is truly hers, until Ted threatens to take it in the divorce. Rose’s grandmother’s death ensures that An-Mei and her younger brother would have a more secure place within the Wu Tsing household; Rose’s contemplation of her home and her place within it enables her to find her voice and thus ensures that she will keep it, and in it, develop into a more whole person. Rose regains the “wood” of her spirit, the missing element of her character that causes her to bend to too many opinions, when she seizes her own house/home as her own. The “wood” of her spirit then builds the foundation of her home; her home, now hers, in turn, reinforces her developing spirit.

An-Mei perceptively views domesticity as part of a cycle that daughters and mothers enact: birth/happiness--growth/separation--identity formation/victimization--agency/(re)birth. Despite her tacit awareness of this complex cycle, when she transitions from child to mother, she neglects to impart the specific knowledge of her past in order to solidify her wisdom for doubtful, confused Rose. According to Wendy Ho, “This cacophony [of psychiatrists and other influences] in the United States makes it difficult for An-Mei to communicate with and understand her daughter” (171). Although An-Mei does “learn to shout” and tells Rose her grandmother’s story, Rose is unable to immediately see the connections between her own passivity and her grandmother’s victimization. Like generations of women attempting to not

only survive but achieve subjectivity some through feminist beliefs and praxis An-Mei's mother, An-Mei and Rose have in common their birth, growth, identity formation, and agency, but each enact this cycle and the related happiness, victimization and (re)birth differently. The cycle which An-Mei observed with despair now is reborn in the positive reality of Rose's reclamation. "Even though I taught my daughter the opposite, she still came out the same way! Maybe it is because she was born to me and she was born a girl. And I was born to my mother and I was born a girl. All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way" (215). Like the other Joy Luck daughters, Rose does not know her mother because she has denied herself true communication with her; cultural confusion and her own natural quest for individuation away from her mother have silenced her. Instead, she at first only hears what she assumes her mother wants, which is to save the marriage; in actuality An-Mei advises her daughter to speak up. Finding her voice is one way in which Rose, like the other Joy Luck daughters, "becomes a reflection of her mother as she could be anew, a self enacting viable options in new circumstances" (Ho 156). Through experiences which mirror her grandmother's--not her mother's--Rose is able to accept the idea that daughterhood can be powerful.

In Rose's efforts to find her own voice, she inventories her home and assesses how she feels within the house itself. She aptly sees the house as a metaphor for both her passivity and her creativity and connection with something larger than her failed marriage.

I thought to myself, I love this house. The big oak door that opens into a foyer filled with stain-glassed windows. The sunlight in the breakfast room, the south view of the city from the front parlor. The herb and flower garden Ted had planted. He used to work in the garden every weekend . . . I looked out the window and saw the calla lilies had fallen and turned brown, the daisies had been crushed down by their own weight, the lettuce had gone to seed. Runner weeds were growing between the flagstone walkways that would be between the planter boxes. The whole thing had grown wild from months of neglect. (192)

Rose begins to recognize the connections between her passivity and her self-neglect through the imagery in the garden. Her mother had warned her “if you bend to listen to other people, you will grow crooked and weak. You will fall to the ground with the first strong wind. And then you will be like a weed, growing wild in any direction, running along the ground until someone pulls you out and throws you away” (191). Certainly, this is what Ted is attempting, but rather than allow it, Rose resists, and even comments that she likes the disheveled, unkempt garden. She does not view the weeds as a nuisance, as does Ted. Rather, she sees the weeds as part of the foundation, which she now likens herself to--“no way to pull them out once they’ve buried themselves in the masonry; you’d end up pulling the whole building down” (195). Rather than continue her passive collapse and fall victim to the disappointment of Happily Ever After, Rose begins an emotionally fulfilling revision of the myth.

Rose’s figurative rebirth, which enacts cosmization, symbolizes the true possibility for hope to translate into domesticity in order to advocate feminism. While we do not witness her join any sisterhood, whether organized or informal, the potential for this sort of activism exists in her character once she, like Lena, has become willing to reject her limiting perspective on the mother-daughter dyad, essentially creating order. Rabuzzi states that “As a major aspect of ritual housework, cosmization attempts to create or renew wholeness” (106). Rose certainly engages in this form of ritual housework, just as Caridad does when she leaves Sofi’s home to train as a healer. These texts describe, in varying degrees, the “ritual patterns of enactment, if they are religious, [which] are intended to bring together two worlds--the ordinary, profane world and the ideal, sacred world which alone has “reality.” The outside masculine world is “naturally profane” but the home is not automatically sacred (106). The mothers all attempt to make their home sacred, thus rebuking the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy which oppresses them and

their daughters (and by extension, other mothers and other daughters in their community). All of these mother-daughter relationships suffer from a lack of communication which impedes their understanding of themselves as a part of a larger sisterhood.

In order for generative communication to occur, the mothers must willingly engage in dialogue and share their past experiences with their daughters; the daughters, in turn, must willingly listen and apply their mothers' conflicts to their own experiences. When this dialogue occurs, the potential for sisterhood formation exists; the domesticity which has isolated these women in their own home-spaces now may potentially unite them across these borders and thresholds. The parallel between this process--(at a personal level and formalized in feminisms) which Tan at least hints at as she concludes each mother/daughter narrative--and cosmization is striking. Rabuzzi states that cosmization relates to the creation of self in that it "involves a preliminary tearing up" or throwing out unnecessary chaos-contributing "accumulated possessions" (106). The characters in these texts, as they revise domesticity, enact cosmization, engage with informal feminist groups through revised sisterhoods, and join together to form a unified, ordered home space, where the potential exists for creating a whole self. The mothers and daughters of these two texts advocate feminism through the difficult process of engaging with one another and recognizing the power of sisterhood available to them in their identities as mothers and daughters. Thus, Tan and Castillo connect these familial metaphors positively and usefully.

CHAPTER 4 REVISING DOMESTICITY, RESTRUCTURING THE IDEAL: THE MYTH OF FAMILY

When one is feeling stranded, finding a safe harbor inevitably becomes a more compelling course than bucking social currents. Keeping the peace with the particular man in one's life becomes more essential than battling the mass male culture. Saying one is "not a feminist" (even while supporting quietly every item of the feminist platform) seems the most prudent, self-protective strategy . . . to expect each woman, in such a time of isolation and crushing conformism, to brave a solitary feminist stand is asking too much. (Susan Faludi, *Backlash*)

Marianne perceived that to be without a family in America is to be deprived not just of that family but of an entire arsenal of allusive material as cohesive as algae covering a pond. (Joyce Carol Oates, *We Were the Mulvaney's*)

[The pastor] said, "Families are better together. Working together."
"Is that an absolute?" (Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres*)

In previous chapters, we have seen how domesticity may be used as a tool with which women may resist imposed femininity and other pervasive limitations of patriarchy. Various stages and characteristics of the women's movement underscore the shared motifs of community building and, specifically, sisterhood formation as means of resistance to isolation, particularly of the isolation of the housewife within the boundaries of the typical nuclear family. This isolation and emotional distance are complicated further when mother-daughter relationships are considered, as *The Joy Luck Club* and *So Far From God* demonstrate. While sisterhood formation can make historical, cultural, and individual advancements and achievements more accessible, actual mother-daughter relationships, as well as sibling relationships, often function differently. In other words, familial metaphors are often complicated by familial realities. Because mother-daughter relationships operate within boundaries prescribed by patriarchy, it is difficult to view them as unmitigated by this pervasive power structure. In order to further understand and explore the ways in which domesticity, sisterhood, community, and mother-daughter relationships function in concert, we must also consider the effect of the male presence

or absence in the household.^{xix} The power of the male presence within the household is multivalent, as power is defined and disseminated structurally and maintained within the household dynamic. Chris Weedon points to the underlying basis of this power: “In patriarchal discourse, the nature and social role of women are defined in relation to a norm which is male” (2). The changing nature of female characters’ responses to their male counterparts, most notably Celie’s eventual empowerment in her relationship with Albert in *The Color Purple*, highlights the tenuous foundations of patriarchy and reveals the possibility for revising patriarchal discourse. From the seeming ruins of these relationships and often consequently, through the birth of more satisfying relationships with other women, strong female characters emerge, unearthing and creating more complete and complex identities from oppressive isolation or restriction. In the process of symbolically cleansing themselves emotionally and psychically, these characters revise how domesticity functions within their household, within themselves, and within the context of their larger social environment. Thus, they alter personal and political meanings of domesticity. The female characters in previously studied works share either the formation of sisterhoods or the mostly positive development of mother-daughter relationships which illuminate, offset, and/or alter the limiting aspects of domesticity. However, these works do not explore as conclusively the mythologized American “nuclear family”. The works studied in this chapter explore this construction by dissecting the nuclear family and revising domesticity through examining domestic abuse; the fracture, exile, and escape from the constraints of

^{xix} I explore the impact of the male presence and the ideal of the nuclear family unit in other chapters, such as when I discuss Albert Johnson’s abuse of Celie in *The Color Purple*, and his son Harpo’s attempts at mimicking that abuse to reign in Sofia. However, because the two texts I study in this chapter focus on the idealization of the nuclear family, unraveling it as myth, it is important to establish or re-establish its stronghold as a domestic power.

idealized family life; and ironic nostalgia. Read in this sense, family can impede feminist progress.

In this chapter I will examine the ways that domesticity functions in the absence, denial, postponement or failure of sisterhood formation in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* and Joyce Carol Oates' *We Were the Mulvaney's*. These novels present mythic representations of the typical, and thus idealized, conventional American nuclear family. Yet these mythic representations, or to use Weedon's terminology, exercises in "patriarchal discourse," are treated ironically, as both authors ultimately revise such discourse through questioning its validity and stability. Smiley and Oates trace the tragic unraveling of traditional nuclear families that appear emotionally and financially successful due in part to their perceived familial cohesion. These deconstructions of American family focus on a mythic era of harmony to which our culture nostalgically clings. Although in some ways culturally outmoded, the idea(l) of family in general is still based on the particular myth of the supremacy of the nuclear family and the power structure which promotes the "natural" gendered division of labor and the sanctity of family over the sanctity of the individual. Chris Weedon argues that "Feminist theory to date has responded in a range of ways to this political agenda, as can be seen, for example, in feminist approaches to the family. Think for a moment of the dominant image of the family which confronts us in adverts, magazines, the cinema, television and family portraits, from the royals to our own photo albums" (14). Her analysis of the composition of the typical family photo points to the symbolically patriarchal agenda which is "immensely seductive. It signifies warmth, happiness and emotional and material security, and every year, despite their experience of the families in which they were children, and the much publicized evidence of the breakup of families in Britain today, thousands of women willingly set out to create conventional family life" (16). Works

such as Susan Faludi's *Backlash* and Stephanie Coontz's *The Way We Never Were* document the realities and complexities of alleged familial and cultural breakdowns in America. Like Weedon, Faludi, and Coontz, Smiley and Oates seem to denounce these aspects of patriarchy through revisions of the seductive yet ultimately corroded portraits of idealized, conventional American family life. Thus, these works criticize nostalgia as both anti-feminist and anti-family.

Unexamined nostalgia idealizes a sacral domestic family wherein female performance of domesticity is central. Cultural backlashes against the women's movement, including the most recent one, documented by Susan Faludi, use nostalgia to maintain the status quo.

Unfortunately, the misperceived threats against family relationships and the sanctity of motherhood that backlash propaganda have engendered may have affected traditional and prevailing views of domesticity and conventional family by rendering these concepts as even more sacred. Through their representations of fractured families, *A Thousand Acres* and *We Were the Mulvaney*s challenge this idealized familial patriarchal power structure; these texts question the validity of such a romanticized traditional family as it stands in response to notions of the isolated feminist superwoman and in defiance of cultural advancements for women in general. The idyllic nature and ultimate vulnerability of this traditional family paradigm is heightened in these texts by the authors' portrayal of hardworking, farm-based, middle-upper class families whose ideal standing is reaffirmed through community perception and interaction. Oates and Smiley construct worlds which mirror the American dream of success and happiness, ostensibly attainable through adherence to convention and tradition. These allusions to tragedy also underscore the role which domestic abuse (physical, verbal, and emotional) plays in maintaining and undermining a traditional family structure. The novels' portrayals of overt denials of sisterhood-formation also seem to underscore the tragedies experienced by the

characters. These portrayals indict a culture poised to reject subject-formation and equality for women.

Each of the texts I consider in this chapter seemingly treat domesticity's realities with some degree of sentimentality, especially compared to previous studied works. However, this superficial, perhaps unstable idealization of family structure and life is overshadowed by portrayals of familial disintegration. The texts thus highlight the differences between lived experiences and mythic family relations. Jane Smiley's *King Lear* influenced tragedy, *A Thousand Acres*, published in 1991, traces the collapse of a prominent farming family in Iowa during the late 1970s, a volatile time in agriculture, one marked by precipitous success and subsequent devastating economic failure. The Cook family patriarch, Larry, a bitter, selfish widower, impulsively deeds his property to his daughters, but they are divided on the wisdom of such a gift. The estrangement caused in part by the daughters' differing opinions and Larry's hubris and increasing senility reveals the fragility of the once powerful family; just as the thousand acres fractures and disintegrates as a symbolic and literal entity of power, the family suffers a similar fate. Formerly buoyed by her sister Rose, Ginny recognizes her isolation despite being part of an allegedly cohesive family unit. *A Thousand Acres* is her story of recovery from the damaging effects of culturally compelled domestic and psychological isolation via domestic catharsis. Individuation is therefore a personal as well as political struggle.

In contrast to *A Thousand Acres*, *We Were the Mulvaney's*' sentimentality idealizes domesticity and the meaning of home, but it too indicts the limitations of adhering to patriarchy. Published in 1996, the novel is set in roughly the same 1970s cultural climate as *A Thousand Acres*. Unlike *A Thousand Acres*, which focuses on the development of its narrator, *We Were the Mulvaney's* is narrated through the imagined perspective of many family members, including its

sons and father. This narrative choice lends itself well to a more tempered treatment of domesticity and the search for individuation and equality. Like the Cooks of *A Thousand Acres*, the Mulvaney family prospered admirably in their small town upstate New York community of Mt. Ephraim, popular and envied among even their more financially successful peers. Living in an idyllic farm setting, High Point Farm, set far atop the community, the Mulvaney family themselves appreciate their good fortune. But the public shame and household secrecy following the date rape of Marianne Mulvaney, a popular, almost angelic high school student, rip the family apart. Antiquated notions of femininity and masculinity undermine the family's solidarity. As a saga of family members' individual efforts to recover some semblance of the seemingly blissful existence they shared together before Marianne's rape, *We Were the Mulvaney Family* simultaneously questions and respects the complexities of a traditional family life. Through Michael Mulvaney, Sr.'s personal and public disintegration into alcoholism, which is a primary factor in the family's breakup, *We Were the Mulvaney Family* indicts the patriarchal structure of the nuclear family. While the character of Corinne Mulvaney exposes the emotional and physical isolation of the mother in the idealized home, it is her daughter's struggle with exile, impermanence, and quest for family definition that ultimately exposes the difficulties of adhering to patriarchy's demands.

The elements of tragedy in these two novels--either allusive and structural, such as in *A Thousand Acres*, or subtle and thematic, such as in *We Were the Mulvaney Family*--underscore the isolation inherent not only in traditional domesticity but also in the formation and maintenance of the typical nuclear family. Further, the rural settings of these novels highlight the potential for domesticity to foster female isolation, and dramatize the ways in which potential sisterhoods might or might not form not just with other wives or daughters of farmers, but with mothers and sisters as well. Oates and Smiley construct particular farm settings where women can see one

another easily at town functions but not typically in their own homes; unlike in *The Joy Luck Club*, where a friendship/sisterhood forms the backdrop of the novel, or *The Color Purple*, for instance, where Celie, Sofi and Shug were not only close neighbors or roommates, Oates and Smiley (de)construct representations of ideal families by setting their stories in remote, rural locales, suggesting that a diminished possibility for sisterhood formation is one of the tenets of a strong patriarchal family. As these texts demonstrate, the potential for sisterhood formations exists among female family members, but the very structure of patriarchy, of the nuclear family, with the power-center firmly vested in the male head of household, actually undermines or makes impossible that feminist feat. Again, these novels differ in their representation of sisterhood formation from a novel like *The Color Purple*; Oates and Smiley set their novels not just in a remote, idealized rural locale, but at a specific cultural moment in order to critique nostalgia.

Despite setting their novels within cultural vacuums and against specific cultural backdrops where domesticity and feminist advancements fused at a slower pace, like Walker, the authors reveal important ideas about the difficulty of sisterhood formation. Susan Faludi, for example, notes that “1980 was the year the U.S. Census officially stopped defining the head of household as the husband” (67). The main action in each novel, the dissolution of the traditional family structure, occurs around this cultural moment, which also predates the backlash of the 1980s. Despite the popularity of feminist ideals during the 1970s, the women’s movement figures into each work most notably by its absence both in time and locale. Estelle B. Freedman notes in *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women* that the United Nations declared the 1970s to be the decade for women, a decade where both *Ms.* magazine was founded and the Equal Rights Amendment was passed by Congress (in the same year) (117, 85).

Though global and national changes were certainly underway in this decade, Oates and Smiley show us that these changes did not necessarily affect everyone. Ginny, for example, reads in 1979 the same kind of magazine that early feminist Freda Kirchway derided in 1921 in *The Suffragist*: ““They differ from each other sufficiently for circulation purposes--and yet essentially they are all the same. One has more fashions, another more stories, another more helpful hints for housekeepers: but they are all imbued with one deep purpose--to make a domestic career endurable to all married women’” (Farrell 25). Ginny reads this kind of magazine, not *Ms.*, for recipes and distraction from her life; unsurprisingly, the Equal Rights Amendment is never considered as worthy of mention by any of the characters in either novel. As participants in farm labor (or at least the image of it, in the case of Corinne in *We Were the Mulvaneys*), the main female characters in these texts were contributors to a “family economy that is legally ‘owned’ by husbands . . . Although not all farm families consider women merely laborers rather than owners, deeply held beliefs that women work for their families and not for themselves continue to influence the meaning of female labor” (Freedman 127). In both novels, the female protagonists seem to function within their domestic setting (unhappily, or temporarily) despite lacking cultural resistance and unification. The women’s liberation movement--or even some of its seemingly basic sentiments--does not impact them directly. However, when familial tragedies force these characters into trials of independence, they are then influenced by or entertain notions of sisterhood and/or the increased self-reliance such a sisterhood may foster. These novels also question the ways that “daughterhood” can usefully revise “sisterhood.” The daughters in both novels, coming to age in a more progressive era than did their mothers (or mother-figures), struggle with the expectations of independent achievement and ultimately deny the full potential of that independence, each choosing to fulfill more or less

traditional gender expectations. Read in these terms, *A Thousand Acres* and *We Were the Mulvaneys* underscore that unquestioned belief in the myth of American family can impede individuation and feminist change.

(Dis)“satisfying” Stories and Sisterhoods in *A Thousand Acres*

Smiley consciously chose *King Lear* as “the obvious internal system” for her novel about farm life (Smiley “Not a Pretty Picture” 160). The parallels are obvious: Kingly and powerful farmer Larry Cook (Lear) hastily retires, and for tax purposes, relinquishes his property to his three daughters. The youngest daughter, Caroline (Lear’s Cordelia) expresses doubt over his decision and is quickly ostracized by Larry, and by extension and degrees, the rest of the family as well. Ginny (Goneril) and Rose (Regan) go along with their husbands’ ideas for change and expansion and accept the gift of land which brings with it some degree of autonomy and power, to which Larry strongly objects. Larry perceives deceit and malevolence on the part of his two elder daughters, and allows Caroline back into his life to care for him, though she has rejected this subordinate feminine role in the past.

Although *Lear* is the “obvious internal system,” Smiley has revised the tragedy to allow the daughters, particularly Ginny (Goneril) and Rose (Regan) an opportunity to tell their stories and ultimately deny the patriarch his narrative power. Sarah Appleton Aguiar notes in her article “(Dis)Obedient Daughters: (Dis)Inheriting the Kingdom of Lear” that Smiley’s revision of *Lear* “bestows motivations for the elder daughters’ actions” and allows Goneril, through Ginny, “to tell her side of the story” (196). After a climactic argument in a thunderstorm Ginny defiantly rejects her father’s cruelty and “turns him away” into the storm but only in response to his cruelty: “You don’t have to drive me around any more, or cook the goddamned breakfast or clean the goddamned house . . . You barren whore! I know all about you, you slut. You’ve been

creeping here and there all your life, making up to this one and that one. But you're not really a woman are you? I don't know what you are, just a bitch, is all, just a dried-up whore bitch" (195). Ginny, who has not yet borne children due to repeated miscarriages, and Rose, a breast cancer survivor who is defiant by nature and thrives on anger resulting from her clear memories of her father's sexual abuse, are now perceived by their father as worthless and a threat because they have decided to put up a "united front" against his emotional abuse. A man whose values are dependent on productivity and power, Larry perceives his daughters' femininity and their increasing, though relatively minute, refusal of those roles as threatening to the patriarchal sanctity of his masculine power. Despite the two older sisters' appearance of a "united front" against their father's abuse and power, *A Thousand Acres* is ultimately Ginny's story; Aguiar notes that "Smiley's revision suggests that the primary transgression of Goneril/Ginny is not her ostensible cruelty to her father, but rather it is her insistence on retelling the story from the feminine/daughter perspective, depreciating Lear's perspective" (196). Ginny's insistence on gaining subjectivity threatens not just the sanctity of her father's thousand acre property but the entire patriarchal value system upon which it rests as well.

Smiley's revision of *King Lear* clearly shows how domesticity and patriarchy are enmeshed as oppressive systems that often work against families and women in particular. By dramatically revising the archetypes of the play into well-developed characters, even affording Larry (Lear) a sense of sympathetic understanding from his victimized daughter, Smiley destabilizes the mythic hold of nostalgia as it pertains to family. Further, its revision of the play's archetypes deconstructs the setting itself as an archetype, rendering it useful for understanding recent American history. John Mack Faragher states in "The Historical Imagination of *A Thousand Acres*" that the Cooks' thousand contiguous acres composes "an

iconic midwestern landscape. There is ‘no sign of anything remotely scenic in the distance.’ For many readers, the American countryside is terra incognita. They associate rural places with the distant past or even timelessness. Smiley will have none of this” (148). By carefully historicizing the action of the novel in 1979, Smiley positions the characters on the cusp of an economic explosion, as farmers such as Larry Cook were benefiting from a decade of “unprecedented agricultural boom” yet facing, in October, 1979, the beginnings of a “policy shift” which lead to economic devastation: “Over the next few years, thousands of families lost their farms, hundreds of rural banks collapsed, and the nation’s agricultural credit system teetered on the brink of bankruptcy” (Faragher 149, 154). Rather than sentimentalize the losses, though they were great for many families, Smiley indicts the intertwined systems upon which the subjugation of female individuation is built and maintained through tradition, isolation, and the privileging of capitalism above all else.

Due in part to its realistic portrayal of farm life as well as its reliance and revision of *King Lear*, *A Thousand Acres* effectively reveals from its beginning the strict power structure under which the Cook family must live. As it exposes not just the familial system of domination by a demanding head of household, but entire sets of intertwined systems of oppression, *A Thousand Acres* provides compelling examples of the paradoxical strength and vulnerability of a white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. Because Larry is the sole owner of the sizeable and successful farm which his daughters (except for Caroline, a lawyer who lives in Des Moines) and their husbands contribute to and depend upon, he commands respect and attention both by the community and his family. The capitalist acquisition of the land is told as a “satisfying story;” for much of her life, Ginny respects the land, her father, and the story itself, even finding a certain calming effect in her deference to its alleged truths. As Susan Strehle points out in “The

Daughter's Subversion in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*" "Ginny begins her narrative in the style of assent . . . [her] conversational style is neutral, bland, and unremarkable" but makes "her transformation possible and credible [by showing] early in the narrative . . . glimpses of a forceful and critical point of view, nascent, tentative, and quickly repressed" (220-1). One of these early moments of quick repression occurs during a conversation with Jess Clark; her deference in conversational prowess to Rose foreshadows not only the painful dynamics of their eventual love triangle (Rose wins Jess from Ginny after their brief affair) but also Ginny's understanding of how the capitalist patriarchy operates. Rose says, "According to Daddy, it's almost too late to breed [Caroline, who is 28]. Ask him. He'll tell you all about sows and heifers, and things drying up and empty chambers. It's a whole theoretical system" (11). Yet Larry's sudden and uncharacteristic bequest of his land to his daughters, and his subsequent erratic, if not carefully orchestrated behavior, provide Ginny an avenue to discover that Rose's assessment is truthful, and that male ownership and oppression of women is a pervasive, patriarchal construct, and not simply a result of her own father's demands for respect and attention from his family.

Despite being set in an era full of women's voices and experiences providing connection, support, and strength through the women's movement, *A Thousand Acres* shows that the first step in sisterhood formation--voicing individual dissent against oppression--can be a terribly difficult one and is not universally accessible to all women. Ginny's deference to her father's story of land acquisition, her cajoling of Caroline to go along with her father's plans and to ask forgiveness for hesitating to accept his gift, and her simple conversational style, all point to her strategy for shouldering the burden of oppression without contemplating its painful meaning. In this regard she is similar to Celie, who suffered at the hands of the men around her, and who

depended upon more vocal, assertive women, such as Sofi and Shug, to help her find voice and subjectivity. Likewise, Ginny's individuality is consistently denied; like Celie, Ginny's tendency to defer to others is a marker of her identity as an undeveloped "girl," as Larry often calls her. She depends on her sister Rose to converse with others comfortably, defers to others' opinions readily, and navigates conversations with her father by being agreeable, passive and simplistic.

The process by which Ginny comes to internalize the feminist mantra of "the personal is political" is protracted, labored, and ultimately solitary, as Smiley presents sisterhoods that fail throughout the novel. One of the most importantly symbolic failed sisterhoods is between the seeming "united front" of Rose and Ginny. Rose is an intrinsic facet of Ginny's identity; Ginny acknowledges this as she reflects on her "life's companion, little Rose, always four to my six, the way she was when I first became really conscious of her (when I first became really conscious)" (Smiley 100). Rose is Ginny's only constant female companion throughout her life, as their mother died when Ginny was fourteen. Unlike Ginny, Rose more easily grasps the prevalence and importance of personal/political connections, openly sharing her beliefs about the "theoretical systems" her father adheres to, individualizes, and promotes. She has survived the loss of her mother, breast cancer, domestic abuse (defiantly announcing her husband Pete's guilt in this by wearing a cast with the words "Pete did this" over her broken arm), and as we learn when Ginny does, incest committed by her father. Despite her open bitterness and willingness to discuss these matters frankly with Ginny and others in her immediate circle (such as with her husband, and eventually, with her lover Jess Clark), Rose is an insufficient or ineffective feminist model for Ginny. Rose and Ginny represent the division that even shared experiences can foster between women as they attempt to navigate the process of gaining subjectivity. Because Ginny has not experienced breast cancer (though she has suffered five miscarriages) and

her husband, Ty, does not abuse her, she perceives herself as lucky, even jealous of Rose's motherhood and her more dominant, confident personality.

By comparing her current, seemingly fortunate circumstances not only to her victimized sister and her own childhood memories, Ginny processes not only her unformed identity but her place in a culture of women who have been similarly oppressed. She finds that by plumbing her memories for clues about herself, she belongs to a clearly defined community of women that extends beyond Rose. This is crucial because despite their experiential similarities, their basic attitudes towards oppression and individual freedom are distinct. Susan Strehle points out that Ginny is

defined by what she does not know, which includes both past sources of her own personal identity--what happened to her between ages nine and eighteen, what led her to marry Ty, what caused her miscarriages--and present motives and actions of those around her in the present. A latter-day picaresque innocent, she is surprised at every turn by revelations, mostly of the selfishness and greed of those around her. (213)

Ginny's discoveries about women who have preceded her, though her literal knowledge has been limited by the writers of the patriarchal narrative she revises, combine with Rose's feminist-inspired influence. The most important explored connection for Ginny is with her deceased mother. For example, Rose's revelation about "whole theoretical system[s]" connects sharply with Ginny's remembrances of her father's domination of her mother. Upon his wife's death, Larry's quick assumption of the role of competent widower shows his deference to the demands and benefits of capitalism; practicality dictates that his wife's possessions be removed from the house, ostensibly to make the transition after her death less painful, but it also callously marks the two older sisters as permanent replacements for their mother. "Nothing about the death of my mother stopped time for my father, prevented him from reckoning his assets and liabilities and spreading himself more widely over the landscape. No aspect of his plans was undermined,

put off, questioned” (147). During a casual discussion with an older female neighbor, Ginny discovers that her mother wanted a different existence for her, a revelation which “unnerves” her “as if something intensely private had suddenly been exposed and discussed by people I barely knew. Simultaneously, I recognized and pitied her frustration and fear” (98-100).

This revelation about her mother’s particular concerns about Ginny, who she believed to be unable to “stand up to him,” prompts Ginny to begin re-imagining the familial “satisfying story” (98). She revisits the parts of the story which have been glossed over, focusing on the women, because as domestic laborers on a farm, they are merely a part of the machine and are relegated to being only a part of the story. Her grandmother Edith’s life, for example, amounted to “details to mull over but not to speak about” (142). Married at sixteen to her father’s older business partner (helping the men to combine 240 acres), Edith was a quiet woman, bore three children, including Larry, and died at age forty-three. Ginny follows these details with contemplation: “I used to wonder what she thought of him, if her reputed silence wasn’t due to temperament at all, but due to fear. She was surrounded by men she had known all her life, by the great plate of land they cherished. She didn’t drive a car. Possibly she had no money of her own. That detail went unrelated by the stories” (142-3). The similarities between Ginny and her grandmother Edith are remarkable. Able to imagine herself as part of a line of women, including her mother and grandmother, who served the masculine narrative of acquisition and capitalist patriarchy, Ginny can begin facing the truth about patriarchy that Rose has already accepted as tacit.

Ginny struggles to achieve individuation by continuously separating herself from and reconnecting with her sister, in addition to searching for connections with her foremothers. Although she is privately connecting or reconnecting with women and forming a sort of spiritual

sisterhood, Ginny's efforts are similar to women involved in various stages of the feminist movement(s), as she is gaining solidarity with a group, while at the same time coming to terms with her own individual oppression. Ginny dismisses a fantasy, a "magic solution--that Rose, in herself, in her reincarnation of our mother, would speak, or act the answers. All I had to do was be mindful of the relationship between them (mindful in secret, in a way no one else could be mindful), and gather up the answers, glean the apparently harvested field for overlooked bits" (100). The imagery Smiley provides here through the harvested field, the exhausted earth holding 'overlooked bits' of truth, significantly ties together the physical abuse of the land and the systemic oppression of women, including Ginny. Through remembering other women's painful stories, or recognizing their narrative denial, Ginny begins to connect not just the overarching oppression of women to the unknown women in her family, but also begins to accept the abuse and pain which the systems of capitalism, patriarchy, and traditional family have wrought upon her and many others. She reflects on how the most important female support system--aside from Rose--was taken from her by the dual oppressors of capitalism through land acquisition and her father's ruthless competition. Ruthie Ericson, her childhood best friend, and Mrs. Ericson, her mother, bear bad news to Ginny just after Ginny's mother's funeral: they are leaving, unable to "make it here" as farmers and Larry will be buying their land from them.

I looked at her looking at me, and in retrospect, I think that I did feel everything gentle and fun and happy draining away around me. I think that though I was only fourteen and not accustomed to judging my life or my father, or demanding more of our world than it offered of itself, I knew exactly what was to come, how unrelenting it would be, the working round of the seasons, the isolation, the responsibility for Caroline, who was only six. I didn't cry then. I had been crying all morning and I was at the end of tears. I said, "I wish you could take me with you," and Mrs. Ericson said, "I wish we could," and then she cried. (146)

In this moment of reflection, despite having lost tangible female connections, Ginny moves closer to becoming part of a sisterhood that is able to buoy her past feelings of complacency, that “what is, is, and what is, is fine” (147).

Smiley’s revision of *Lear* consistently reveals the difficulties of achieving individuation against systems of oppression which use domesticity and isolation as part of their master narrative. As we have seen before, domesticity and its related isolation can be significant impediments to achieving subjectivity. Ginny is shown to struggle with the “tempting” complacency of continuing to accept her life as it is, just as she did when Ruthie Ericson left. Throughout the narrative, Ginny recounts her daily domestic routines and rituals. Cooking, cleaning, ironing, sewing, gardening, and housekeeping all function metaphorically and literally in Ginny’s imagination as she reassesses her role in her family’s disintegration. As she becomes more consciously aware of how her labor--and the community’s perception of that labor--is used to maintain working order on the farm and the larger “theoretical systems,” Ginny’s knowledge of her subordinate status is reminiscent of Celie’s experiences in *The Color Purple*. Unlike Celie’s linear narrative progression which chronicles her developing sense of agency, Ginny’s use of flashback allows for a more cynical, detached perception of her experiences. For example, her reflections on her childhood reverence for her family’s prosperity and work ethic illustrates her ability to critically perceive both her privilege and her function as a woman:

There was no way to tell by looking that the land beneath my childish feet wasn’t the primeval mold I read about at school, but it was new, created by magic lines of tile my father would talk about with pleasure and reverence. Tile “drew” the water, warmed the soil, and made it easy to work . . . tile produced prosperity . . . I knew what the tile looked like . . . as I got older, “tile” became long snakes of plastic tubing), but for years, I imagined a floor beneath the topsoil, checkered aqua and yellow like the floor in the girls’ bathroom at the elementary school, a hard shiny floor you could not sink beneath, better than a trust fund, more reliable than crop insurance, a farmer’s best patrimony . . . I, in my Sunday dress and hat, driving in the Buick to church, was a beneficiary of [my grandparents’ and

father's] grand effort, someone who would always have a floor to walk on. However much these acres looked like a gift of nature, or of God, they were not. Went to church to pay our respects, not to give thanks. (15)

The imagery of a subterranean bathroom represents Ginny's intuitive and experiential understanding of domesticity as supportive, and thus critical, to productive farm life, perhaps as critical as the very tile lines she participates in worshipping. This perception elevates her importance as a contributor to the family's prosperity, but also reveals to her the detriments of patriarchy. The financial stability which the farming tile lines create affects Ginny's learned perception of her part of this "natural" order: as a woman, Ginny must also keep clean these literal and symbolic floors. She does so willingly, but aware that her importance in the structure of farming and family is minimal and secondary at best. Her willingness to comply, even to aspire to greatness in her identity as housewife, is rooted in a period of psychological damage. Between the ages of fourteen and nineteen--ages marked first by her mother's death, the Ericsons moving, and repeated rapes by her father, and later, her marriage to Ty and their moving into the old Ericson home--Ginny adhered to the narrow, comforting innocence which feeds unexamined nostalgia: "When . . . Ty and I moved in, I had stopped thinking about the past--my mother, the Ericsons, my childhood. I loved the house the way you would any new house, because it is populated by your future, the family of children who will fill it with noise and chaos and satisfying busy pleasures" (146). Maintaining traditional domesticity, then, is a key factor in suppressing the terrible memories of her adolescence and in her future success as a wife and mother.

Unlike the isolation of the life which she foresaw at age fourteen, Ginny finds some aspects of traditional domesticity comforting. The daily and seasonal rituals of the home and farm she partakes in provide a solid basis--much like the imaginary subterranean bathroom--for

her dreams of the future. Unable to imagine living beyond the realm of idealized family which she hopes to recreate with Ty, she has buried the reasons she may want to desire escape or resistance. Her failure to become a mother due to repeated miscarriages has created for Ginny a sense of perpetual naiveté as she waits for the future to happen within her household. When she and Rose discuss “the hardest thing”--their individual emotional difficulties--Ginny’s response reveals the depths of her isolation:

“Well, I don’t know. Probably being comfortable with people outside the family.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, you know. I either act too shy, or else I want the person to be my friend so much that I act like an idiot. I never believe that Marlene Stanley or anyone else actually likes me, even though I suppose I know they do.”

“God! This is just like how you used to talk in junior high.”

I stiffened a little. “What practice have I had since then?” (65)

Ginny’s other admitted fear, “standing in the lunch line naked . . . in ninth grade,” which Rose points out as being very common, is perhaps more particular to Ginny than Rose’s dismissive response allows for. Her father’s incestuous relationship with her began at age fourteen (around ninth grade), directly after her intense emotional and physical isolation began as a result of her mother’s death and the Ericsons’ departure. Ginny’s dreams of becoming a mother, a goal she maintains through adherence to routine and tradition, are distinctly similar to the dreams which reveal Ginny’s fears: both point to isolation, sexuality, innocence, and hope.

With Jess Clark, a neighbor’s prodigal son who has returned, Smiley introduces the exotic to the culturally isolated Zebulon County and to Ginny in particular. Though Jess is revealed to be a flawed character in many ways, Smiley’s construction of Jess as sensitive and worldly provides balance against the largely unsympathetic and provincial cast of male characters. Ginny’s relationship with Jess provides an outlet for her natural feelings of hope to renew beyond the practical hopes for equity briefly engendered by Larry’s bequest of land and

money. Jess's experiences outside of farming intrigue her and cause her to suspect "that there were things he knew that I had been waiting all my life to learn" (73). As a runner, he maintains a routine, a commonality between the two that makes it easier for their relationship to develop; waiting for him to run by her house becomes a part of her morning domestic routine. A returning prodigal son, Jess is a relative outsider to Ginny's world and symbolizes the "other" of sensitive masculinity, which is both sexually desirable and potentially emotionally fulfilling for Ginny as she theorizes his impact on her existence. She questions how his influence functions in her efforts to become a mother: "I was not exactly eager to see him. It was more like I knew I had something important to wait for, something besides the next pregnancy [which] might be the final stage, the culmination or the reward, for learning what Jess Clark had to teach, a natural outgrowth of some kind of rightness of outlook I hadn't achieved yet" (73-4). Her new outlook includes a developing, deepening perception of how she relates to the men in her life--her father, her husband, and Jess as a potential lover.

Since my talk with Jess the day I planted tomatoes, my sense of the men I knew had undergone a subtle shift. I was less automatically critical--yes, they all had misbehaved, and failed, too, but now I saw that you could also say that they had suffered setbacks, suffered them, and suffered, period. That was the key. I would have said that certainly Rose and I had suffered too, and Caroline and Mary Livingstone and all the women I knew, but there seemed to be a dumb, unknowing quality to the way the men had suffered, as if, like animals, it was not possible for them to gain perspective on their suffering. (121)

This newfound perception of male responses to suffering impacts her devolving communication with Ty regarding her miscarriages. In order to maintain a sense of calm, Ginny decides, without consulting Ty, to continue having sex without birth control and to keep her ensuing miscarriages a secret from him. Because she feels that he cannot learn from his suffering, and thus cannot share her deepening perspectives, she foregoes challenging their stable, sedentary relationship.

Furthermore, Ginny gains a sense of control through her subversive secrecy. Her belief that the male psyche is possibly limited--“like animals”--is appropriate considering her developing cynicism and awareness regarding her position within the hierarchy of family. Despite the secrets she keeps from Ty, Ginny believes her marriage is “fine.” She denies, at least for the time being that her marriage is unstable; for feminists marriage is variably seen as an area of contention for most women struggling to find individuation. The kinds of secrets Ginny keeps from her husband suggest another connection between Ginny’s sheltered domestic existence and cultural debates over women’s rights at the time. The aftermath of the intense confrontation with Larry during the storm highlights not only the isolation inherent in domesticity, but the unacceptable lack of control and power over one’s body that adherence to traditional domesticity encourages; her father attacks her sexuality and her ability to reproduce, yet her husband does not defend her. By characterizing Ty as insensitive and unaware rather than abusive, and ultimately unrewarded for his attitudes and actions, Smiley suggests that adherence to traditional domesticity, to the “theoretical systems” of patriarchy and capitalism, is damaging to the men who revere and repeat the pattern of an idealized family structure. Over the course of the novel, Ginny’s relationship with Ty deteriorates; his natural passivity and his failure to defend Ginny cause her to question if the power of the oppressive theoretical systems extend into her seemingly stable marriage. Her once comfortable relationship with her husband is sullied by his complicity in Larry’s quest to regain a sense of power he willingly relinquished. Thus, Ginny feels more alone in her home than she can recall; Ty’s emotional capabilities as a husband are limited and his desire to maintain control of the farm override his emotional duties to his wife. Ty, once warm, caring, and as conciliatory as Ginny, becomes cold and resentful in the face of failure. Much like Larry, he is unable to assess blame and to accept his own complicity in the

continuing failure of an untenable ideal--symbolized in the deterioration of the farm. Ty blames his wife instead.

Ginny's discovery of empathy for the male perspective also coincides with and impacts her decision to attempt resistance beyond the secrets she keeps from Ty. In a time of unity with Rose, she decide to resist Larry's dictatorial control over most aspects of her life, certainly including his hold over her domestic duties, which consist of cleaning his house and cooking meals for him. These demands keep Ginny and Rose very busy, thus reassuring their roles as women--as pieces of family property--do not change. Larry's almost violent reaction to any hint of change stalls Ginny's progress. The potency of his patriarchal control of her identity as well as her time is reaffirmed in her reaction to her father's demands for respect.

It was easy, sitting there and looking at him, to see it his way. What did we deserve, after all? There he stood, the living source of it all, of us all. I squirmed, remembering my ungrateful thoughts, the deliciousness I had felt putting him in his place. When he talked, he had this effect on me. Of course, it was silly to talk about "my point of view." When my father asserted his point of view, mine vanished. Not even I could remember it. (190)

Maintaining the status quo, however uncomfortable that has become for Ginny, in light of her shifting perspective, is certainly more comfortable than resistance. Through directly resisting her father's demands she must face the discomfort of his diehard rigidity and maintenance of control. Resistance, as she has experienced her father's reaction thus far, means that Ginny must also continue to face the intense isolation of her domestic existence and the futility of her domestic, familial dreams. Her newfound sense of sympathy for men's suffering is not reciprocated; her emotional dilemma revealed through domesticity exists only for Ginny, not for her father or Ty.

Thus, the emotional rewards for blatant resistance, attempted thus far through domesticity, are few and contrast with the private, internal gains she makes through (re)connecting with women who have previously inhabited her current role. The kind of

interaction that occurs between Ginny and Larry exposes a sense of shame that goes beyond her recognized role as domestic and is similar to the kind of shame and fear she suspects her grandmother Edith endured. Specifically, Larry's reaction to an uncharacteristic tardiness and lack of planning on Ginny's part (she forgot to bring eggs for his breakfast) presents a "test" for Ginny:

I looked him square in the eye. It was my choice, to keep him waiting or to fail to give him his eggs. His gaze was flat, brassily reflective. Not only wasn't he going to help me decide, my decision was a test. I could push past him, give him toast and cereal and bacon, a breakfast without a center of gravity, or I could run home and get the eggs. My choice would show him something about me, either that I was selfish and inconsiderate (no eggs) or that I was incompetent (a flurry of activity where there should be organized procedure). I did it. I smiled foolishly, said I would be right back, and ran out the door and back down the road. (122-3)

In choosing to give him eggs, Ginny marginally passes Larry's test but fails her own; her attempt to resist backfires; her "plan to let him have it seemed like another silly thing" (123). Choice and agency are very limited for Ginny as she sees only two options in this situation and neither response presents growth, only subordination. Confused and disappointed, she notes how her "job remained what it always had been--to give him what he asked of me, and if he showed discontent, to try to find out what would please him" (123). Despite her urge to act upon her growing awareness and cynicism towards her father, and by extension, the patriarchal structure which seems to control her life, she reverts to her previous attitude: "At that moment, standing by the stove, with my arms crossed over my chest, waiting to pour him more coffee, that seemed like a simple and almost pleasant task" (123). She is in this significant moment unsuccessful in seeking and maintaining any sort of identity that differs with the one forced upon her as faithful daughter and dutiful housekeeper, including a repressed identity as sexual object. Her response to her father's test exposes a troubling sexuality between them. In the scene where Ginny runs

back to her house to fetch the eggs, she feels Larry's gaze and recognizes it as a central symbol of power.

The whole way, I was conscious of my body--graceless and hurrying, unfit, panting, ridiculous in its very femininity. It seemed like my father could just look out of his big front window and see me naked, chest heaving, breasts, thighs, and buttocks jiggling, dignity irretrievable. Later, after I had cooked the breakfast and he had eaten it, what I marveled at was that I hadn't just gone across the road and gotten some eggs from Rose, that he had given me the test, and I had taken it. (123)

Ginny's candid description of her feelings of exposure and subordination resemble closely the mechanics of sex. At this point, Ginny still suppresses the memory of her father's incest; however, his gaze, sexual, penetrating, and shameful, invokes for her a similar sense of nakedness as in the dream she discussed with Rose. Despite making gains towards writing her own perspective, Ginny's subordination to her father is so extensive that one limited act of domestic resistance reduces her to an undignified, objectified, powerless domestic slave.

Smiley underscores the paradoxically tenuous but rewarding bonds of sisterhoods not only through the "egg test" but through the ways Ginny's solitary reaction to it foreshadows her recollection of Larry's sexual abuse. Again, the seemingly "united" front of Lear's eldest daughters fails to form a beneficial sisterhood. In light of this particular incident, Ginny marvels that she underwent the test alone or even endured it all, considering she could have easily involved Rose. As she makes a guest bed for Jess Clark using the same sheets she used in the years between her mother's death and her marriage to Ty, she lays down to visualize what he would soon be seeing as a guest. "The dressing table was beside the window; the closet door was ajar; the yellow paint on the empty chest was peeling; some bronze circles floated in the mirror; a water spot had formed in the ceiling" (247). In the midst of comforting herself, by accounting for her surroundings, she feels nostalgic and hopeful, but suddenly visualizes the past

in a way she had not expected. “Lying here, I knew he had been in there to me, that my father had lain with me on that bed, that I had looked at the top of his head, at his balding spot in the brown grizzled hair, while feeling him suck my breasts. That was the only memory I could endure before I jumped out of the bed with a cry” (247). She immediately calls out to Rose for help, but Rose does not appear. Much like other women and children of farm life, who experienced sanctioned abuse, Ginny finds that isolation crystallizes the pain of her father’s objectification and sexual abuse. Rose’s absence and subsequent abrasive discussions about the abuse--“Say the words, Ginny! If he hadn’t fucked us and beat us we would think differently, right? . . . But he did fuck us and he did beat us” (326)--alternately cause Ginny anxiety and soothe her with anger, which she believes contains simple truths. Ultimately, Rose’s emotional input fails her, as other concerns undermine the bond they share through discussions of their victimization.

One of those concerns is what Ginny names “The Eye,” or the community’s perception of the family; it is a pressing concern as “the eye” perpetuates the cycle of isolation, abuse, and self-denial from which Ginny is emerging. The family’s lawyer suggests that Pete and Ty be “model farmers.” Ginny and Rose receive a more prescriptive order: “And you ladies, wear dresses everyday, and keep the lawn mowed and the porch swept” (307). Rose laughs, but Ginny, already accustomed to silently adhering to her role as housewife, follows through with this advice. Acquiescing to cultural and community expectations has wearied Ginny; weeks earlier she had asserted her newfound perspective on the family minister, whom she asks, “Are you watching us?” (285). Her assertiveness effectively denies the minister his purpose--of consoling, advising, mending a fractured family. Yet she feels compelled to ask, and the answer she commands from such an authority figure may allow her a sense of power. The community’s

invasive gaze, much like the gaze of her father, is beyond her control, but she verbalizes in her interrogation of the minister her need to be conscious of it.

Ironically, Ginny finds a sense of control through following the lawyer's prescriptive, antiquated directions. Cleaning the house frenetically keeps her mind busy; sensing the irony and absurdity, her relentless housekeeping goads "[the] Eye [that] was always looking, day and night, even when there were no neighbors in sight. Even when no one who could possibly testify for or against me was within miles, I felt the familiar sensation of storing up virtue for a later date. The days passed" (309). Rather than succumbing to the potential numbing effects of housekeeping, Ginny uses the work to her advantage: she is cynical and subversive in her reflections upon the purpose of housekeeping:

I was so remarkably comfortable with the discipline of making a good appearance! It was like going back to school or church after a long absence. It had ritual and measure. Tasks proliferated. Once you made a good appearance your goal, you could confidently do things like nest all the spoons and forks in the newly washed and dried silverware tray and face them in the same direction. You could spend an hour or two vacuuming the tops of the floor moldings in the house with an attachment . . . there was cleaning you could do in the bathroom with an old toothbrush that might have repelled you before . . . There was no limit to your schedule . . . I was amazed at what I didn't have time for any more--reading, sewing, watching TV, talking to Rose, talking to Ty, strolling down the road, departing from the directives of my shopping list, taking [my nieces] places. (309)

She is distracted by the ordered frenzy, comforted by the ritual nature of housekeeping which keeps her mind from pondering what is specifically painful to her (her father, Rose and Jess, Ty). Her description suggests that she is also aware of its symbolic nature, perhaps recognizing the similarities between her literal housekeeping and the process of self-discovery, a dirty, unpleasant process: "There were corners and angles and seams all over the house that could be gotten at" (309). She also uses housekeeping to anchor herself against self-destructive options for resisting isolation, subordination, and abuse. Pete's suicide via drowning is recounted

directly after the previous passage; this makes sense in terms of the chronological narrative, but it also reveals another option Ginny could enact: she could violently confront her abusers and/or commit suicide. Much like her inactivity during her father's sexual abuse, where she strategically used a "desperate limp inertia," Ginny's methodical, hyper housekeeping is an inversion of this strategy with similar results: she follows orders, implied or explicit, and the hurt she experiences is not immediately painful but can be further suppressed, if only temporarily. Frenzied, formulaic housekeeping, then, in Ginny's use of it, revises its typical culturally sanctioned subordination and allows both exploration of and repression of traumatic experiences.

Domesticity for Ginny, in this most recent stage of activity, is a struggle between control (searching for meaning through activity) and subordination (the inertia of not moving beyond the boundaries of traditional domesticity). Revising how domesticity functions for her empowers Ginny as she faces self-destruction and the destruction of her family. When the hearing to determine the rightful ownership of the Cook land concludes (wherein Larry, in another shocking display of senility, denies Ginny and Rose's existence, but also accuses them of murder), Ginny assesses with an eye for the domestic that her house is lifeless, "far beyond the power of our usual winter cleaning up, mending, and planning to make it what it had been only the previous spring" (355). She sees the fractured household--"the furnishings were old and mismatched, the carpeting and vinyl dark with stains that simply don't respond to the products available for removing them. Shit, blood, oil, and grease eventually hold sway in spite of the most industrious efforts"(355)--and realizes that her efforts in housekeeping and self-study cannot reassemble flawed ideals--house, marriage, family, farm. Her ironic revision of domesticity exposes her literal and metaphorical household as dirty, fractured, and completely unsound. Leaving supper on the stove, she demands money from Ty--a thousand dollars--and leaves to start her life over.

In leaving, Ginny gains freedom and rebuilds herself from the fractured pieces of her former life. Once controlled by social and familial structures, she revises these aspects by avoidance or inversion. In her new job as a waitress in a restaurant alongside an interstate highway, Ginny performs similar tasks to those which dominated her former life: she pours coffee, like she did for her father after the egg test; she finds this a pleasant task now not because she feels compelled to maintain inner and outer calm, but because she enjoys the active participation of small talk of customers.

The noise was the same, continuous, reassuring: human intentions (talking, traveling, eating) perennially renewing themselves whether I happened to sleep or wake, feel brisk or lazy. The thing I loved most about the restaurant was the small talk. People bantered and smiled, thanked you, made polite requests . . . for me, it was like a tune playing in my head, and the phrases I produced--“What may I bring you?” “Will that be all?” “Thanks for stopping by, come in again”--were me picking up my part of the harmony. (361-2)

As a waitress, she is anonymous, impermanent, and heard in a superficial way that provides both comfort and distraction; at her former home, she was defined as sweet, patient, and passive, her participation in family and domesticity felt permanent, and she was often ignored, misheard, and taken for granted. In her new home, her “afterlife,” she reinvents herself, including her approach to domesticity: “A toothbrush, a beat-up sofa bed, a lamp I found in the trash bin, shaped like a palm tree but perfectly functional, and a cardboard carton to set it upon, a hot-water kettle, a box of teabags in the refrigerator, two bath towels from a J.C. Penney white sale, a box of bath-oil beads. Pajamas” (362). Her purposeful minimalist revision of domesticity is a significant resistance in her efforts to heal. At this point, she does not want to think about the future or the past except in abstract terms: “When I wasn’t working I stayed in my sofa bed or my bathtub, reading books from the library, one author at a time, every book in a collection. I preferred them to have been productive, but now to be dead, so that their books formed a kind of afterlife for

them and seemed as distant and self-contained, for me, as Heaven or Hell” (362). The future, in the form of Rose’s daughters, who need her after Rose’s death, eventually brings her out of her purposeful isolation.

Smiley contrasts Ginny’s deliberate, painful revision of Lear/Larry’s perspective with Rose’s, revealing a different feminist philosophy for achieving individuation. Ginny’s relationship with Rose, fraught with jealousy and difference of opinion and personality, simulates the political struggles of the women’s movement, which was united in its fight for women’s equality, but often fraught with strife and misunderstanding. Ginny’s cynical awareness about the inequities she experiences as a woman, as a housewife, and as a member of the Cook family/farming empire differs significantly from her sister’s, which is more overt and acknowledged as part of her uncompromising personality. Ironically, though Rose seems more defiant, it is actually Ginny who leaves, taking a stand against an oppressive environment, and finally moves beyond passivity. Because the basic structures of their lives are similar, Ginny perceives Rose’s interaction and attitude with domesticity similarly to her own original assumptions: as a natural position and necessary commodity for an ordered, productive farm life. Rose is less subordinate than Ginny and more keenly aware of how the idealization of family life has harmed her personally. Her attitude toward her home, her husband, Pete, and her two daughters, Pammy and Linda, is strikingly similar to her father’s proprietary notions of his small farming kingdom. She admits to Ginny that her own “hardest thing” is “not grabbing things.” She says, “One of the main things I remember about being a kid is Mommy slapping my hands and telling me not to grab. What’s worse is I have this recurring nightmare about grabbing things that hurt me, like that straight razor that Daddy used to have . . . I know I shouldn’t and I watch myself, but I can’t resist” (65). Searching for justice through anger, Rose’s inability to

control herself impedes her ability to change that which has harmed she and Ginny as teenagers. Unlike Ginny, Rose acknowledges openly her victimization and thrives on her anger--Ginny tells her that she makes the process of achieving subjectivity seem "simple" or "easy" (254). She replies: "Ginny, I know what I think because I've thought about it in the hospital, after the operation. You know, Mommy dying, and Daddy, and then Pete being such a mean drunk, and having to send the girls away, and then losing a part of my own body on top of it all. In the face of that, if there aren't some rules, then what is there?" (254). As Ginny begins to catalogue the injustices done against her, she perceives Rose's use of domesticity as more symbolic of her personality and their relationship. She notes that everything in Rose's house must be ironed, which mimics her belief in rules and systems. When Ginny finally admits to Rose that she remembers the rapes, she is calmed by watching her sister work: "She went back to the sewing machine. She didn't speak, but the methodical way she assembled her pieces, transformed them into a pair of slacks, was reassuring enough" (295). Earlier, however, when she cuts a pattern with Linda, the scissors she uses seem to foreshadow the threatening tone she uses with Ginny and Jess while discussing retribution against their fathers.

Rose's dominant emotion, anger, prevents a true sisterhood between Ginny and Rose from developing. Rose's anger about her father extends to Ginny, who she views as complicit in the abuse: "Don't be so stupid. You're such a good daughter, so slow to judge, it's like stupidity. It drives me crazy . . . You show him the way in, every time you're reasonable, every time you pause to wonder about his point of view. Every time you stop and think. I don't want to stop and think!" (Smiley 162-3). Not only are their approaches to assessing their pasts and relative power remarkably different, they each are intensely jealous of one another. Rose admits her jealousy of Ginny's relationship with Jess prompted her to begin an affair. Because Ginny is

able to share with Jess her growing subversive doubts and resentment, his choice of Rose over Ginny is particularly damaging and painful. Ginny's jealousy escalates to the point that she devises a plan to kill Rose via poisoned sausages, an unsuccessful act that Jeanette Batz Cooperman assesses as "absurdly domestic, diabolically passive" (89). Further, Rose's obsession with vindication and Ginny's increasing determination to resist her sister's domination prevent the shared aspects of domesticity from bridging this ever-widening emotional gap. Domesticity comprises much of their experiential commonality: they are blood-related, live on the same property, are nearly the same age, both married, both take care of their father, have shared in the raising of their younger sister, and share a secret of sexual abuse. In addition to these experiences, they share an even more intimate, immediate bond: Ginny cared for Rose during her first bout with breast cancer. Ginny uses this experience to reaffirm an earlier conviction not to remain jealous of Rose's motherhood, particularly as she strongly desires to keep their family together: "We've always known families in Zebulon County that live together for years without speaking, for whom a historic dispute over land or money burns so hot that it engulfs every other subject, every other point of relationship or affection. I didn't want that, I wanted that least of all, so I got over my jealousy and made my relationship with Rose better than ever (Smiley 8-9). Ginny's reasoning in overcoming her jealousy underscores the fragility of the ideal family and the crucial role of the self-sacrificing housewife plays in maintaining this illusion.

Smiley's portrayal of Ginny as self-sacrificing lends her paradoxical qualities, as caretaking is not only expected of competent, caring housewives but is a feminist endeavor as well. However, Ginny's caretaking extends only as far as her immediately family; she tends to her husband and father, certainly, but she also mothers her youngest sister Caroline and takes

care of Rose during her bouts with cancer. Despite her differences with her sister, her attempts to suppress any negative emotion towards Rose reveal her assumed subordination to others' needs, a trait necessary for the ideal housewife. As caretaker, she is able to express her love for Rose in a way that she will likely not reject, for Rose is not tolerant of sentimentality: "I threw myself into feeding her, cleaning her house, doing her laundry, driving her to Zebulon Center for her treatments, bathing her, helping her find a prosthesis, encouraging her with her exercises. I talked about the girls, read the letters they sent home, sent them banana bread and ginger snaps" (Smiley 9). Rose rejects sentimentality to protect herself emotionally from what she sees as Ginny's failure as a woman: to contemplate but never act, to "stupidly" assume others' (read: patriarchy's) point of view. Despite her motherly protection of her daughters, Rose's interests primarily lie with protecting herself. Ginny's interests seem to eventually head in this direction as well, especially when considering her failed attempt to kill Rose, but her path toward achieving feminist understanding actually harms only the abandoned men in her life, particularly Ty. She later tells him: "you see this grand history [of the farm] but I see blows. I see taking what you want because you want it, then making something up that justifies what you did. I see getting others to pay the price, then covering up and forgetting what the price was" (371).

Through Ginny's ultimate rejection of nostalgia, *A Thousand Acres* represents its stunting cultural effects, as well as the emotional benefits of feminist thinking. Ginny's refusal to succumb to nostalgia's allure suggests that denying the power of the patriarchal point of view, while difficult, can undermine the pervasive power structures the narrative upholds. Though Rose disdains sentimentality and also rejects nostalgia, her transformation is incomplete, due in part to her life being cut short from cancer; her only success, she tells Ginny, is she "didn't forgive the unforgivable. Forgiveness is a reflex for when you can't stand what you know. I

resisted that reflex” (384). Yet Caroline’s failure to gain knowledge and awareness from her family’s past and its dissolution stands in contrast to her mother figure’s rejection of nostalgia. Caroline benefits emotionally from her complicity in her father’s point of view and his “theoretical systems”. Despite her temporary exile from the Cook farm, she ultimately is Larry’s favorite child and wins complete loyalty; the only wrong she perceives he has committed against her--“getting mad and cutting me out of the farm”--is forgiven quickly (391). She leads a different sort of life away from the farm; as a lawyer, engaged to a colleague, she is worldly and sophisticated. Ginny and Rose have successfully raised her from age five to live life away from the limitations and isolation of the farm and of feminized domesticity, wanting, like their mother before them, for the younger generation to have a different life. Their strategy has created a stranger: because Caroline is only a visitor to the farm, she is able to “play” at assuming her sisters’ full time responsibility of caring for Larry. Thus, she does not understand the full extent of her sisters’ discontent with their father’s extensive demands, cruelty, and erratic behavior.

Further, she ironically perceives all of Ginny and Rose’s actions as simplistic and negative: “It’s like they seek out bad things. They don’t see what’s there--they see beyond that to something terrible, and it’s like they’re finally happy when they see that!” (390-1). This reactionary, overly naive viewpoint is likely rooted in loyalty, denial, and loss: having developed a “close” relationship with her father near the end of his life, she fears losing the comforts of those memories, and having adhered to her father’s wishes and ways, she fears losing the comforting rigidities of his traditional thinking. She yells at Ginny, as they divide up what little is left of the family’s property after Rose’s death: “You’re going to tell me something terrible about Daddy, or Mommy, or Grandpa Cook or somebody. You’re going to wreck my childhood for me. I can see it in your face. You’re dying to do it just like Rose was. She used to call me,

but I wouldn't talk to her!" (390). Caroline's inability to even listen to her sisters' perspectives on the past positions her as one of the many who struck "blows": she has benefited from Ginny and Rose's combined sacrifices. She was raised well by them when their mother died, protected her from their father's sexual abuse (they hope), edged away from the futility of the farm and towards a successful professional life. Smiley presents Caroline's nostalgia unsympathetically, and as it is divisive and backward-thinking, she is a modern woman who ultimately rejects feminism.

Subversive Sentimentality in *We Were the Mulvaney*s

Oates' rendering of family tragedy operates similarly to Smiley's, as it reveals how tradition and the oppressive systems of patriarchy are upheld through domesticity, failed sisterhoods, and nostalgia. The novel's exposure of the tenuous nature of family can be read as a more subtle, but no less potent, indictment both of the imbalance of power in the idealized, traditional American family and of potential abuses of that power. Oates constructs Michael Mulvaney, Sr., as a familial patriarch with good intentions, whereas Larry Cook operates from a position of dominance and greed. While Michael is no more the focus of the Mulvaney story than are the other family members, his familial and self-destruction emphasizes the damage that idealized, conventional family life can bring even to the figurative head of household. Unlike his counterpart in *A Thousand Acres*, Michael does not abuse his children, but damages them nonetheless by being overprotective and ultimately, by using his traditional patriarchal privilege and power to fracture the family. His selfish but well meant response to his daughter's rape is prompted by the contradictory matters of heart and ego; Michael's very real love for his daughter cannot co-exist with cultural expectations of masculinity and fatherhood. His hubris lies in his own masculine confidence in his ability to protect each member of his family; his flaw is his

naïve belief in the powers of love and justice as concepts that pertain equally to all. As the American justice system undermines Michael's attempts to be an ideal American father, it also fails Marianne. Through Michael's character, *We Were the Mulvaney*s provides a more understated representation of patriarchy's potential abuses and unspoken fragility

Oates constructs the patriarch in this family tragedy much differently than Smiley constructed Larry in *A Thousand Acres*. Michael is a sympathetic character despite his mistakes and thus is as much a victim as practitioner of the limiting aspects of patriarchy. His quick descent into drunken disillusionment exposes a masculinist, vigilante ideology of justice; his passive son Patrick is so distraught by his father's failures--as a father and as a man--that he secretly transforms himself from scientist to "hunter" (187) in order to make Marianne's attacker pay for his crimes against her and the family. As a man who literally and symbolically keeps a roof over his family's heads, Michael represents ideal manhood. His sense of self worth is dependent on his financial security and position within the community, a position which is buoyed by his successful operation of Mulvaney Roofing. These determinants of value are in turn dependent on his family's stability and sense of normalcy. Brenda Daly's assessment of Oates' use of Oedipal fathers in her *oeuvre* applies to Michael, as well as to Larry Cook: "The fathers/husbands in these novels who cannot admit dependency--especially dependency upon a woman--transform their denial into the need to dominate" (128). Michael's banishment of Marianne also means that no one must ever mention her name again. As Oedipal fathers, Michael and Larry "feel entitled not only to emotional support from their wives, but also from their daughters--just as both Lear and Oedipus expect their daughters to provide the emotional support that ordinarily comes from wives" (128). Marianne's perception that she has failed her father, then, is not simply based on the violation of her body which he cannot control. She also

feels as if she has betrayed her father and her family because she cannot successfully aid in punishing the violator of the family's sanctity. Although Michael, like Larry, benefits financially and emotionally from patriarchy's rigidity and expectations, his various self-destructive behaviors point to his complicity in his family's dissolution.

Oates explores the complicity in and revision of patriarchal discourse through each character, revealing sympathetically the complex pull of nostalgia through shifting point of view narrative technique. Like *A Thousand Acres*, which revises *King Lear* from Goneril's perspective, the narrative structure and point of view of *We Were the Mulvaney*s paradoxically favors and undermines nostalgia and the systems of oppression it supports. One of those tools of oppression, domesticity, is treated differently than in *A Thousand Acres*; where domesticity is consistently present; in *We Were the Mulvaney*s Oates uses domesticity to highlight its emotional value within the family and, as a factor in nostalgia, its potential to seduce. Oates shifts attention to the nature and personality of the home through the narrator's focus on home as idea and entity, rather than through interactions with specific acts of domesticity. Instead of using a single narrative voice, like Ginny's in *A Thousand Acres*, *We Were the Mulvaney*s's narration is accomplished through the seemingly omniscient narrative re-imaginings of Judd, the youngest Mulvaney. Oates' re-construction of the Mulvaney's experiences through Judd's perspective correlates with the novel's questioning of the emotional dangers--and limited, sometimes temporary rewards--of adhering to the dominant family paradigm. Oates portrays Judd striving to be objective in his self-conscious narration of his family's story; as a "newspaperman" he is aware of his own talent and suitability for his task: "I'd rather be truth-telling and I hope always to be without hypocrisy. I've constructed a personality that is even and temperate and on the whole wonderfully civilized" (Oates 6). Judd's "even and temperate" personality shifts from his

own perspective into the minds and experiences of his mother, Corinne, sister Marianne, brothers Patrick and Mike, and his father Michael, Sr. As a survivor of family tragedy, Judd's knowledge settles into small crevices of other characters' homes and hearts. Yet his attempts at objectivity are undermined by his need for an intensely emotional exploration of his family's identity and his own identity as it relates to his fractured family.

Judd's third person narration is predicated on his own denial of the limited aspect of his narrative duties. Oates examines microscopically the feelings and actions of the other characters, including their interactions with domesticity; however, her chosen narrator, a young male damaged, constructed, and eventually healed by (or despite) family devastation, nonetheless mythologizes his own family. As the youngest, he literally remains in the family home for a more tumultuous time than did the other children, thus participating in family life and experiencing the family's past through stories and a sense of collective remembering. Through Judd we see the full circle of seduction and damage possible in the idealized American family. He claims that "this document isn't a confession. Not at all. I've come to think of it as a family album. The kind my mom never kept, absolute truth-telling. The kind no one's mom keeps. But if you've been a child in any family you've been keeping such an album in memory and conjecture and yearning, and it's a life's work, it may be the great and only work of your life" (6). Seen alternately through a child's naiveté and a young man's disillusionment, domesticity in *We Were the Mulvaney's* is treated more tenderly than in *A Thousand Acres*, but the shared cynicism over family's failure of the individual through idealism is palatable.

Oates constructs this "family album" by treating domesticity as part of the emotional landscape of the snap-shot-like chapters. Each character revises, adapts, or renews what domesticity means to them as individuals and as part of the myth of Mulvaney happiness.

Corinne is characterized, in part through Oates' "feminist postmodernist" "concern for women's historic sacrifice of public agency in the private maintenance of human relationships" (Daly 139). As Michael Mulvaney's wife, his "ballast," she helps secure his place in the community and within the home by maintaining an approved level of domestic labor and harmony. Corinne's domestic duties mark her as a typical housewife in many ways, but the ways in which she differs from other housewives in their upper middle-class social circle cause Michael anxiety, such as her liberal political views, her piety and "pride in truth," her disregard for the country club, and her discomfort with other women. Any deviance from what he perceives as ideal and comfortable represents the possibility of his failure. Like Ginny, Corinne is passive but energetic in her role as wife and mother; she fulfills her wifely duties with pride. However, Corinne views her comfortable and happy life as a blessing, rather than as a just reward for hard work. Like Ginny, she eventually survives the ruins of her toppled family, reinventing the meaning of domesticity in her life as part of her survival strategy. Like her daughter--whom she repeatedly chides for living a "rag-quilt life" (Oates 326)--in her journey of exile, Corinne adapts her interaction with domesticity. She comes from a "small farm . . . where farm life was work, work, work" (87); Corinne's relationship with her mother was remarkable for its lack of affection; her own relationship with her children is markedly different--like Michael, she is overprotective and free with affection. Uncertain how to respond to her injured daughter, Corinne reflects on her mother's distance and insistence upon maintaining traditional power within the household:

Never beg any child of yours, Corinne's mother had warned her, long ago. Of all things, never that.

What a strange, unexpected remark for Ida Hausmann to have said, impulsively, to her own daughter.

As if she, Ida Hausmann, had ever begged any of her children--for anything.

Yet here Corinne was, confused, hopeful, pleading with her daughter whose vague eyes, grainy skin, windblown hair frightened her--“We’ll just go home, honey? Yes?”

Going home, to High Point Farm: Corinne’s remedy for any sorrow. (117)

Her need for fantasy and false comfort, which High Point Farm symbolizes, overrides her mother’s cold advice. Corinne imagines herself, a wife and mother, as a sort of princess in a fairy tale; witnessing her own daughter, innocent and hopeful, wither under the weight of physical and emotional violation, reminds Corinne of her own dreams, miraculously realized through her marriage to Michael: “With a pang of sentimental, embarrassed affection Corinne saw herself hurrying along the street, a tall lanky rawboned girl with cheeks that looked perpetually windburned, bright eyes, heart brimming with excitement for--oh, everything! For life. For love. Falling in love. Marrying, and having babies” (120). Stoic but not cold like her mother, Corinne’s response to Marianne’s rape, the unraveling of the family, her husband’s descent into alcoholism, the sale of their farm, and the forced move into independence, is heroic, particularly when compared to her husband’s.

Through Corinne’s complicity in and execution of her husband’s wishes, Oates reveals the frailty of sisterhood formation, particularly between mothers and daughters. Unlike Ginny and Rose--who sacrifice some of their desires (and their mother’s desires for them) for their pseudo-daughter, Caroline--Corinne sacrifices her maternal desires to be emotionally available and warm when she sends Marianne away according to Michael’s irrational wishes. This betrayal of sisterhood within a mother-daughter dyad operates differently than in *A Thousand Acres*; in this novel, Caroline, who represents the postfeminist symbol of the younger daughter figure, is willing to comply with backlash ideology by rejecting her foremothers’ sacrifices. In *We Were the Mulvaney*s, the rape’s aftermath represents the inabilities of the foremothers’ feminist sacrifices and strategies to achieve equality and subjectivity for all women. In this

reading, these similar texts suggest that the choices of all women, whether or not they are engaged with the women's movement, profoundly impact womankind. Through these complex characterizations and representations of women's choices, Oates and Smiley might even question assigning blame or failing to sympathize with a character whose motivations could be read as complicit with oppression. For example, the swiftness with which Marianne is exiled problematizes her mother's choice to favor her husband's needs over her daughter's. Her own complicity in perpetuating the myth of idealized family life contributes to the degree of damage her children, particularly Marianne, experience as a result of the father's unquestioned authority. Marianne, after her banishment, believes her absence from the house will fix everything, despite the costs to her own emotional well-being. She is also particularly concerned about Corinne's opinion of her life, feeling as if she has wronged her mother and must seek her approval and forgiveness. Like Corinne, who is also damaged as a result of the failed sisterhood, Marianne wishes for what can no longer exist.

In this reliance upon sentimentality and nostalgia, Corinne's revision of her mother's traditional domesticity is at times hindered and underdeveloped, yet Oates constructs Corinne sympathetically, as a woman who attempts to negotiate the demands of tradition and progress. She and her kids identify her as

amusing! Like a mom on TV. She'd tell stories on herself, or relatives, or friends, or people she hardly knew but had just met, how she'd have loved to be a housewife, a normal American housewife, crazy about her kids, in her heart she loved housewifely chores like ironing, "calming and steadying on the nerves-- isn't it?" yet in the midst of ironing she'd get distracted by a telephone call, or a dog or a cat wanting attention, or one of the kids, or something going on outside, she'd drift off from the ironing board only to be rudely recalled by the terrible smell of *scorch*. (69, original emphasis)

Corinne's semi-cluttered home, maintained in part by the children to whom she has delegated some responsibilities, is the end result of her conscious attempts at identity formation and

revision of her mother's vision of domesticity and hierarchy of familial power. "She was the mother, and so possessed a mysterious and unquestioned authority. Dad was the boss, but Mom was the power . . . *Here I am, a funny-silly woman, an ordinary woman, a TV mom, but God has touched my life nonetheless*" (62, original emphasis).

Corinne's first revision of domesticity is dependent upon a traditional paradigm, in which the husband's authority over the household is primary. Michael's perspective on effectively running a household and being a father and husband originates in his mistreatment during childhood. His ideals are based on his abrupt (lack of) transition into manhood, which spurs his eager participation in an admittedly idealized, traditional family life, and solidifies his determination to revise how paternal emotion and affection factors into this ideal. His forced departure from his abusive family life at age eighteen foreshadows his insistence that damaged Marianne leave home. Despite his own troubles as a child, and his intense love for his children, particularly Marianne, Michael seems to cling to the belief in his role as family patriarch; however, in the metaphorical photo of which Weedon writes, Marianne is simply no longer present, as he has pushed her beyond the margins. Ironically, his willingness to fracture his family for the sake of his *ideal* of family sanctity essentially breaks his pact with his wife, Corinne, to "never favor one over the others; never to love one of their children the most, or another the least", because Marianne had "run away with his heart" (Oates 31). Michael uses the story of his own exile as the basis for his decision to love equally, a radical and unsuccessful goal compared to his own experiences; ultimately, he deceives himself and his family with the incomplete story of his banishment.

Unlike Ginny's useful revision of Larry's/Lear's narrative, Michael's incomplete and ironically repeated narrative fails. He eventually banishes and/or repudiates all of his children.

Its failure to guide Michael ideologically and practically as a father further reveals the seductive nature of the master narratives of our culture, particularly patriarchy and capitalism. Patrick, a pragmatic scientist repeatedly tells Judd that their parents are casualties, that Michael is “one of those frogs whose life is sucked out of them without having a clue what’s going on, by a giant water spider” (260). Michael’s courageous departure from his abusive home inadequately prepares him for the realities of parenting. Because we first hear Michael’s story of exile from his perspective, and later, through Judd’s re-imaginings, the readers--and the Mulvaney themselves--are left with an incomplete portrait of a man who achieves much on his own. Oates’ narrative strategy to leave Michael’s story incomplete reveals a problematic naiveté and self-indulgence of patriarchal discourse. Michael seems unwilling or emotionally unable to complete the story, even in his own recollection; his identity depends on his role as family man within the safe boundaries of a traditional household. Like Corinne’s story of her past, which informs her identity as a mother through contrast with her own mother, the story Michael chooses to tell stands in stark contrast to his good fortune and stability. Michael reflects: “A father’s curse! Michael Mulvaney, Sr. had lived his entire adult life in the wake of his father’s curse. So too he’d sent his own daughter away, not with a curse but in the name of love. He believed, he would swear to his very death--it had been love” (382). His overwhelming love, and the actions he takes because of it, is supported by his participation in the American way of life. “It was just life. It was American life. Look around, everybody’s marrying young, it’s an economic boom too, all the world’s watching in awe, post-World War II United States of America mushrooming up, up, up like the A-bomb cloud--*Sky’s the limit!*” (381).

Oates’ narrative construction of the Mulvaney’s home, High Point Farm, as an Edenic paradise further illustrates the story’s tragic qualities. Michael’s comparison of his family, his

own small kingdom, to the Garden of Eden illustrates the extent to which he depends on a working, but flawed, domestic order. “It was just life, normal life, and it was good. Like God said gazing upon His creation in the Garden of Eden, it *was* good” (381). Within his version of Eden, Michael may find comfort in ideology which supports the patriarchal notion of women’s subordinate, supportive status. In its stage of idealized perfection, the Mulvaney household functions harmoniously, so much so that Michael feels comfortable joking about the power structure within:

Dad used to complain jokingly that the boss of the household was a certain temperamental, supremely self-absorbed and very beautiful Persian cat named Snowball and the second-in-command was Mom, of course, and after that he didn’t care to speculate, it was too humbling. “Oh, yes! We all feel sorry for poor Curly, don’t we?”--Mom teased affectionately, as Dad made a brooding face. “So neglected in his own home!” (7)

The power structure of the household is inverted in this affectionate joking because of its very security, despite Corinne’s acknowledgement that “Dad was the boss, but Mom was the power” (62). Like Adam’s response to Eve’s taking of the apple, Michael’s response to the complexities of rape leads the family out of their Edenic existence. For the Mulvaney, this allusive exile from paradise only further mythologizes High Point Farm and the meaning of participating in the traditional family dynamic. Judd’s description of High Point Farm, prefaced by a catalog of the shifting, explosive animal population of the farm, reinforces the idea of family and household as prototypical: “When I think of us then . . . I think of the sprawling, overgrown and somewhat jungly farm itself, blurred at the edges as in a dream where our ever-collapsing barbed wire fences trailed off into scrubby, hilly, uncultivated land. (On a farm, you have to repair fences continually, or should) (8). This view of the land surrounding the family home--threatening, invasive, other--reinforces the isolation inherent, even desired and coveted, in the typical nuclear family as represented through the Mulvaney. Unlike the Cook’s thousand acres, which is

accessible for all in the county to marvel at and envy, High Point Farm is inaccessible to others, though they are similarly isolated. To reach High Point Farm, one must literally drive for miles to the outskirts of town, up perilous roads, past less desirable dwellings, into a perceived haven of family harmony, literally and metaphorically above all others.

Oates and Smiley construct High Point Farm and the one thousand acres of the Cook farm as pastoral and mythic, underscoring the idealized qualities of these prototypical families. The novels' pastoral settings underscore the isolation intrinsic in domesticity. Ginny is literally and psychically isolated, but she rejects the feeling of failure she associates with isolation by conforming to the domestic expectations--both cultural and familial--of her status as housewife; her help with the harvest, for example, a slight deviance from femininity and interior domesticity, only occurs when she can serve as a money-saving laborer. Ginny's growing awareness of the contrast between image and reality is underscored through pastoral imagery found beyond the context of house and farm. As she questions the meaning of her role as farm wife--a developing consciousness sparked by the fallout from the lightning storm argument with her father--she spots several items in an antique store that attract her interest. She first picks up a figurine of a shepherdess, a feminine figure of isolation and labor; next she peruses an old issue of the *Saturday Evening Post*, a magazine which seems to invoke a strong sense of cultural nostalgia; finally, she purchases an old crocheted antimacassar--she "imagines the work that had gone into it. Six dollars. It made me sad" (Smiley 290). Though these antique items seem to invoke the idyllic pastoral imagery of farming and domesticity, Ginny's tactile experience with these items in the context of an antique store influence her developing awareness of the outmoded nature of her father's rigid family ideology. Taken out of the home and for sale, these items, particularly the antimacassar, invoke in Ginny a growing understanding of inequality.

Oates, too, employs pastoral imagery. For the Mulvaney, nostalgia invoked through antique items functions differently; rather than heightening the uncomfortable contrast between ideal image and reality, these items provide solace and help reshape fractured identity for two of the Mulvaney children. The small antique store that Corinne runs from a barn at High Point Farm contains sentimental items of a pastoral nature which affect both Marianne and Patrick. Marianne fixates on a painting of a female pilgrim, an image which foreshadows Marianne's own pilgrimage. Patrick, despite masculine protestations about his mother's "cornball stuff," later fixates on a German woodcut of a huntsman as he reinvents himself in his quest for justice against Marianne's rapist. Both images are idyllic pastoral gender stereotypes and involve the outdoors as ideal; although regaining the feeling of safety within their family home is their ultimate goal, they are both forced out and must reimagine the home space. Shepherdess Ginny and pilgrim Marianne both construct identity in the home space or on the run from the home space (and in Marianne's case, a simultaneous effort to return to the home space). Marianne first reminisces on the pilgrim after her rape and sees a black hole rather than the image itself, suggesting her fragile identity. Likewise, Ginny sees the figurine as diminutive, fragile and young, not so unlike her the expectations inherent in her identity as farm wife, daughter of Larry Cook.

The understandable and intense yearning of the individual Mulvaney to return to their pre-tragedy happiness underscores the seduction of traditional family life. Memories of the past blind some family members who remain confident in the power and promise of the ideal family restoration. Marianne's journey of exile illustrates this gap between nostalgia and reality. Though she never "uttered the word *home* aloud" once she is exiled at age fifteen, Marianne searches for a similar domestic setting as High Point Farm through joining a commune, the

Green Isle Co-op, which is run by a charismatic man with whom Marianne falls in love (Oates 313). When Ablove, the leader of the Co-op, returns her affections, she flees, marking a pattern, the beginning of what Corinne deems her daughter's "rag-quilt life" where Marianne escapes emotional commitments. "She'd lost the narrative of herself, somehow. She'd become a girl who turned up places, stayed if she could get halfway decent employment and moved on if she couldn't; she'd made friends, sometimes very close friends, then with no warning, as if it wouldn't occur to her that anyone might miss her, moved on" (400). Eventually, her journey of exile ends when she finds herself at Stump Creek Hill, an animal shelter to which she has brought her cat Muffin. Here she meets Dr. Whit West, a veterinarian whose shelter and adjoining zoo feels familiar to Marianne; it is similar in scope to High Point Farm and in fact "feels like home" to her (412). Joining the staff, she moves in to an empty room in the old manor home "overlooking the tall oaks of the zoo with a view of the elephants' rocky compound. What a bliss of housewifery, furnishing her room with odd wonderful shabbily elegant pieces of furniture scattered through the house! If only Corinne could see!" (416). By eventually allowing herself to form a permanent bond with someone other than Muffin, marrying Dr. West and working beside him at Stump Creek Hill, Marianne rejects the imposed judgment of her mother, who chides her throughout her exile for living a "rag quilt life." Marianne both revises and renews her mother's domesticity. Because her life eventually stabilizes, and in accordance to a traditional paradigm, Marianne revises the narrative and identity that had been forced upon her at age fifteen, by her mother executing her father's bidding. Because the life she eventually leads at Stump Creek Hill fulfills much of what the Mulvaney's lost, she has renewed the aspects of traditional domesticity that Oates portrays convincingly as positive.

Corinne's further revisions of domesticity are ultimately more successful and useful, as they enable her to bridge the gaps that adherence to patriarchal and traditional ideals have created in her life. During her life at High Point Farm, she enjoyed decorating and contributed to the household income through High Point Antiques. In the family home, she decorated specifically to create the family space and effectively tie the home into the farm's history, thus attempting to confirm her family's (potential) permanency there. For Corinne, as well as the dispersed Mulvaney children, the home space is a highly charged emotional symbol of family connections and thus to identity. Once she and Michael lose the farm and have to relocate to a "tacky 'split-level ranch' with glary-white aluminum siding like corrugated metal, 'simulated redwood' trim, 'picture window,' carport on a two-third acre lot" (359), both she and Judd are particularly disoriented. Here, Judd's narration of his own part of the Mulvaney story becomes more apparent as he observes his mother's disintegration.

Take care of Mom. Be sure Mom doesn't crack up.

There was this voice instructing me, Judd Mulvaney's cheerful loud voice in my ears. I was open-eyed, I could see the way Dad was sliding, the way our lives were skidding . . . So I'd put away Mom's gardening tools in the shed, and get her to come back inside the house. If she'd been sitting in a trance on the basement stairs I'd tease her saying let's put some light on the subject!--switching on the light. And get her back upstairs, into the kitchen.

Now we could play TV Mom and teenaged son just home from school. He'd even bicycled home from school, he's such a good, clean-living simple country kid. (355-6)

After Judd is exiled from the split-level for protecting Corinne against Michael's alcoholic rages and Corinne is abandoned by Michael, son and mother revise domesticity simultaneously and separately. Though Corinne had chided her daughter for the impermanence of her "rag-quilt life," soon she, as well as her sons Patrick (on a self-imposed journey of exile after failing to seek justice against Marianne's rapist) and Judd, making his own way at age seventeen, like his

father before him, lives a “rag-quilt life.” Judd and Corinne’s post-family lives are similar to Ginny’s in that they forego the comforts of domesticity for an ultimately regenerative isolation.

Like Smiley, Oates employs regenerative symbolism in the novel’s conclusion. Ginny’s attempts at forgiveness for her father’s abuse and mistreatment are symbolized through the “gleaming obsidian shard” she “safeguards above all the others” (399). Corinne’s eventual recovery from her troubled Mulvaney existence is symbolized in the “antique” business she starts with a new female friend, Sable Mills, along the Alder River, which runs through High Point Farm, eighteen miles away. As a housewife, Corinne had used antiques as a reprieve from housekeeping--“Marianne guessed that the antique barn was Corinne’s haven from the continuous intensity, the carnival atmosphere, of family life” (79)--as well as a creative outlet that revised her mother’s ultimately pragmatic domesticity. Corinne’s talent for refinishing furniture represents her negotiations of the pragmatic and creative, of imposed isolation and elective isolation. As a restorer, she salvages nostalgia, reinvents, and repurposes. The instability of veneer is made stable through attention and care, like her growing awareness of her own complicity in her daughter’s emotional damage. Eventually, she is able to reinforce her identity by embracing her creativity and her love of nostalgia, once she forges a business partnership and friendship with another middle-aged antique enthusiast. Her ironic use of nostalgic items allows her to embrace its positive aspects without clinging to the specific emotional burdens associated with her particular past.

Oates reveals through the epilogue that despite its sentimental overtones, *We Were the Mulvaney* shows family to be, as in her postmodern novels, “a site of both critique and transformation” (Daly 139). The sisterhood that Corinne abandoned for her loyalty to Michael is repaired as Marianne’s “rag-quilt life” is now restructured traditionally, both in terms of their

mother-daughter relationship and her choices as an adult woman. Marianne's career as veterinary assistant to her husband seems an appropriate, even positive conclusion to the pattern of domesticity that her exile interrupted. Unlike Caroline in *A Thousand Acres*, who is similar to Marianne in age and in the progressive choices she was urged to make (such as going to college and pursuing a career) Marianne's more traditional choices seem to benefit her emotionally. Oates portrays Marianne's fulfillment of her family's assignment of domesticity as complex but ultimately positive. Corinne rejects the difficult memories of her past and revises her natural sentimentality and love for nostalgia positively, even expanding her definition of family to include friends at a "Mulvaney family reunion" held on the fourth of July (Oates 433). This transformation of familial boundaries contrasts optimistically with the isolation the Mulvaney's coveted on High Point Farm.

Oates' and Smiley's explorations of the traditional, mythic American family reveal both problematic and positive notions about the complexity of the institution as well as what role domesticity plays in maintaining and undermining it. Family, like patriarchy, can be fragile and tenacious, escapable and dominant, malleable and rigid. Sisterhoods are portrayed as less successful and more difficult to maintain, yet both authors ultimately seem to suggest that family and sisterhoods are much more negotiable than the systems of oppression that can prevent them from fostering feminist ideology and praxis. Family and sisterhoods can foster individuation when nostalgia is recognized and treated ironically. Each character, as a member of a family, renews, revises, or rejects the ideal of family and the meanings of domesticity. For example, the Mulvaney's, through Judd's re-imagining and critique of the family narrative, finally are able to reject the imagery of repairing fences to keep others out. Judd admits early on that "Getting us into focus requires effort, like getting a dream into focus and keeping it there. One of those

haunting tantalizing dreams that seem so vivid, so real, until you look closely, try to see--and they begin to fade, like smoke” (8). Despite this ephemeral quality, both novels represent some potential benefits of family and of treating domesticity skeptically. These characters advocate feminism through their emerging awareness of nostalgia’s seductive qualities, their revisions of “theoretical systems” and narratives upon which family is traditionally based, and their attempts at sisterhood formation and individuation. In this sense, *A Thousand Acres* and *We Were the Mulvaneys* represent ways that domesticity can be potentially liberating, useful, and subversive.

CHAPTER 5 IMPERFECT ARRANGEMENTS: CONTRACTUAL DOMESTICITY AND COMPARATIVE MOTHERING

Unlike the 1950s, the new cult of domesticity is not about staying home to be a helpmeet for your husband or devoting yourself to making your floor spick and span; it is about making sure your babies are the best they can be. By the 1990s, the term *housewife* had virtually vanished, to be replaced by *full-time mother*” (Susan Chira, *A Mother’s Place: Taking the Debate about Working Mothers Beyond Guilt and Blame*)

It sounds . . . like the idea of a woman who, like many women today, and with good reason, feels a deep resentment and suspicion of men. One who’s pulled two ways by conflicting demands, perhaps more strongly than she’s aware, the old conventions on the one hand, and the *new* conventions of the liberated woman on the other. (Ira Levin, *The Stepford Wives*)

“The mother at home remains the gold standard, and, by that definition, the majority of mothers today are tin” (Susan Chira, *A Mother’s Place*).

In *The Feminine Mystique*’s conclusion, Betty Friedan recommends to readers that they reject the “housewife image” by “combin[ing] marriage and motherhood and even the kind of lifelong personal purpose that was once called ‘career’” (342). Specifically, she states that the “first step in that plan is to see housework for what it is--not a career, but something that must be done as quickly and efficiently as possible” (342). We have seen that this facile rejection of domesticity is problematic and unrealistic, in terms of how women have responded to demands in their own lives and how various characters have interacted with domesticity in complex, sometimes fulfilling ways. Vast changes in women’s lives have occurred since *The Feminine Mystique*’s publication, changes due in part to its popularity and the subsequent successes of second-wave feminism. Indeed, most women today benefit from opportunities and choices inaccessible to previous generations of women. The “one role” of housewife that Friedan dramatically criticized has been replaced by many roles. It is difficult to imagine American women today feeling limited to leading the isolated, passive life of the mid-century housewife

that Friedan presented as a national epidemic. Susan Faludi, documenting the backlash of the 1980s, writes that “women’s contradictory circumstances in the 50s--rising economic participation coupled with an embattled and diminished cultural state--is the central paradox of women under a backlash” (54). Yet this paradox just as aptly describes the plight of many women today. Women still remain tethered to the limitations of domesticity, femininity and motherhood. Whether they care for their own home and children, hire someone else to assist them, or perform this work for others, women still hold primary responsibility for the domestic in most American households. And in many cases, women are too harried to contemplate sisterhood formation.

This chapter will explore how the increasing complexity of daily life is represented in works that explore how choices in women’s lives are often limited by the tethers of domesticity, specifically in terms of balancing family and career. These texts question the degree of feminist progress these changes in domestic structure might represent. I will also examine the subjectivities and experiences of female characters, both those who serve as domestic help and those who employ them. The two texts explored in this chapter, Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus’s *The Nanny Diaries* and Suzanne Berne’s *A Perfect Arrangement*, reveal that second-wave feminism’s rejection of traditional, gendered domesticity has certainly not resulted in liberation from its demands. Instead, it has produced a more complex engagement with it, a struggle that crosses boundaries of gender, race and class.

In previous chapters I have examined female characters that viewed domesticity as a potentially useful tool in subverting patriarchal oppression and have used or at least attempted sisterhood formations in an attempt to gain personal subjectivity. In this chapter, I examine texts that represent domesticity as the point of intersection between feminist idealism and personal

praxis. As such, domesticity is constructed in part as an impediment to subjectivity that class and privilege might help ameliorate for them individually but which denies the possibility of sisterhood formation. Another impediment to sisterhood formation and subjectivity is explored through female characters in contemporary settings who negotiate the expectations of the “second shift,” Arlie Hochschild’s term that describes the double burden of career and home that many contemporary women feel. One way they confront this is by hiring outside help, following the basic formula of Friedan’s recommendations to her white, middle-class audience. The incorporation of domestic help into household maintenance further perpetuates class distinctions and isolates women from one another. Comparative mothering, whether between women who have made various choices about career and home, or between employers and employees, further prevent women from connecting and understanding the political nature of their seemingly personal decisions. These contemporary texts illustrate the need for feminist examinations of domesticity.

McLaughlin, Kraus, and Berne consciously examine feminism and domesticity through the tribulations and triumphs of female characters that both require and help maintain domestic balance. Despite the fact that the mothers in these texts exercise choice, these choices are not presented as facile means to personal fulfillment. The texts thus help undermine the myth of choice as being a strictly personal action. The characters in these texts, including mothers, fathers, and nannies, together reveal important concepts about how domesticity has adapted or impeded personal and political changes. Unlike in the dystopic world of *Stepford*, where the husbands of vibrant women seeking liberation resort to murder in order to uphold the benefits of the feminine mystique, Howard Goldman, the husband in *A Perfect Arrangement* conscientiously attempts to find the perfect balance of equality in household responsibility by staying home. His

wife, feminist lawyer Mirella Cook, ponders her multiple responsibilities and identities as a mother, lawyer, feminist, wife, and employer; Joanna Eberhart attempted a similar process of self-identification. The Cook-Goldmans rely on the assistance of nannies to raise their children and keep their house presentable. Their liberal middle-class sensibilities and sensitivities about their need for and ability to pay hired help sharply contrast with those of Mr. and Mrs. X, who employ Nan in *The Nanny Diaries*, which examines the privileged world of the upper class family and the abuses suffered by those who serve them. Yet the young women these families hire represent the varying choices available to younger women. One choice is to embrace traditional domesticity. Randi Gill, the Cook-Goldman's nanny, does so, but her unhealthy attachment to the family is presented as problematic. Nan, on the other hand, seems ready to attempt to negotiate the myriad demands of womanhood and uses her time in the service of others as preparation for her own journey into career and motherhood. In comparison to Randi, Nan seems to symbolize a more viable, sympathetic young feminist attempting to find a useful middle ground between tradition and progress. Thus, these texts present sympathetic characters who advocate feminism.

Paid domestic labor, historically, has been a central point of contention in the quest for feminist sisterhood and subjectivity, yet has been culturally downplayed for much of the twentieth century. *The Color Purple* reveals through Sofi's imprisonment and oppressive employment, and finally, through her strained relationship with her white employers' daughter, that domestic work can oppress and limit the agency of employees and those served. *The Stepford Wives* further engaged the complexities of this issue by juxtaposing an era of political change against a sense of hyper-nostalgia for an era when middle class comfort and efficiency were dominant; paid domestic labor was made largely unnecessary and uncommon through

economics, technology, and cultural customs. Yet as the women's movement reflected and spurred an increase in women's participation in the workforce, many women began to manage domesticity by shifting the burden to other women of lower social standing rather than confront the root problems head on. Sally Helgesen points out the confluence of "wrenching [and] gradual" economic and social changes occurring in the post-*Feminine Mystique* era. Over the course of the 1960s, the percent of married women who worked outside the home rose 12 percent, from 21 to 33 percent. Inflation in the 1970s further served to increase this number so that "by 1980, 42 percent of married women were employed outside the home . . . By 1996, more than 74 percent of all women over the age of eighteen were in the workforce" (11-12). Shifting the burden becomes increasingly prevalent and problematic for all women.

While cultural attitudes towards women working outside the home have improved over the last several decades, the shift in attitude does not always reflect economic realities. For example, though the number of married women working outside the home increased throughout the 60s, the men of Stepford, representatives of patriarchy, suburbia, and the upper middle class, attempted to prohibit change via technology and murder. Today, women's choices are borne out in suburbia differently. Helgesen points out that women's increased work outside the home was not simply an acceptance of feminism, but was a mix of practical concerns and progressive thinking: "Middle-class women began to view work not simply as a means to achieve greater fulfillment or a greater measure of social equality, but as a necessary supplement to their family's income. Women might, and often did, stay at home when their children were small, but fewer viewed this as indicating a life-long commitment to solely domestic concerns" (11-12). Helgesen claims that "the changes wrought by the movement of women into the public arena are drastic, structural, and profound. And their effect is compounded, strengthened, and deepened

because they are taking place at the exact same time that the basis of our economy and the shape of the technology that supports it is undergoing a fundamental shift” (5-6). Because this fundamental shift is so dependent on women’s increased participation in the workplace, the ways in which domesticity has or has not shifted to accommodate women’s changing and complex lives is a concern.

This is further complicated by issues of class. Arlie Hochschild points out in *The Second Shift* that a “new plutocracy” is affecting American families, redefining for many of the middle and working classes what living comfortably means. “With the influx of legal and undocumented immigrants from Third World countries eager to take up such jobs, outsourcing is becoming available to many less well-off families as well. While most of us can’t afford to outsource basic family tasks, this “[]’over-class’ is spreading a new ideal” (xxvii). Judith Warner, Sally Helgesen, and others have documented this trickle-down domestic economy. Judith Warner’s initial focus as she studied the state of anxious motherhood in America, for example, was the middle class; however, she was forced to adjust her study to accommodate the prevalence of the upper middle class, because “the upper middle class is disproportionate in American culture . . . it is our reference point for what the American good life is supposed to look like and contain” (20). The ‘luxury fever’ of the 1990s compounded this confusion of image and reality (Warner 21); these increased complications are revealed in both *The Nanny Diaries* and *A Perfect Arrangement*. Helgesen’s study of Naperville, Illinois underscores the disappearance of the middle class and the increased “economic polarization” in America (34). This economic polarization directly impacts women in terms of domesticity, as well as their identities as women, mothers, and possibly as feminists, if they identify themselves as such. With “the center that defined the country at mid-century . . . disappearing” (Warner 20),

scenarios in which women employ other women in the home present opportunities to oppress rather than to eliminate oppression. Although domesticity has been deemphasized as a concern by the popularized women's movement, relegated to the personal sphere of individual women running private households, the sea changes which theorists like Helgesen explore ultimately reveal a complex economic, social and political network that affects individual subjects in their daily interaction with domesticity. Current trends in domesticity magnify the interplay of personal and political ramifications.

These complex intersections of class, race, and gender in a traditionally devalued form of labor contribute to a renewed demand for investigating those elements of domesticity that feminism has not changed, including the role that paid domestic labor plays in women's increasing or decreasing subjectivity through workplace participation. In her study of Latina domestic workers, *Maid in the U.S.A.*, Mary Romero contends:

The critical analysis of gender within the work setting draws our attention toward new interpretations of interpersonal conflicts between women employers and employees. We come to understand that the home is one of the *sites* of class struggle and that sisterhood is one of the *stakes* of class struggle. The content and definition of sisterhood are determined in the struggle and by the victor . . . Recognizing the opposing class positions of the women involved transforms sisterhood either into another means for employers to extract emotional and physical labor, or, conversely, into the means for employees to improve working conditions and increase pay and benefits. (44)

Despite constructing the main characters in these novels as white, McLaughlin, Kraus, and Berne reveal the potency of white supremacist capitalist patriarchal ideology. In *The Nanny Diaries*, Nan, white and middle class, is an outsider in the world of nannies where she works. By constructing a white main character who works with women of color, McLaughlin and Kraus represent the racial privilege of her employers and the over-class of which they are a part. Though the novel is set in an affluent, predominantly white community, it does necessarily

privilege whiteness; rather, it explores how race and class matter deeply in a culture where we pretend it does not. Because female employers who are now partaking in or mimicking the over-class are more akin to oppressors, sisterhood formation is difficult. Further, these contemporary works reveal that basic feminist goals of good mothering can be seen as divisive even between mothers of the same social and economic class, and between mothers of distinct classes who perform domesticity or manage it contractually. Therefore, sisterhood becomes more problematic if motherhood is seen as divisive.

These crucial intersections demand study as we recognize how domesticity and feminism vie for position in terms of practical implications in the lives of the women hired and those hiring. Women hired as domestic laborers must struggle against multiple forces of oppression which can constrain subjectivity and deny agency; those women who manage domesticity through hiring domestic labor must consider and cope with their roles in the daily intersections of domesticity and subjectivity. Examining these texts in conjunction presents a compelling juxtaposition of paid and unpaid labor in the household and also offers a wider lens with which to examine the unstable relationship between feminism and domesticity. How have these complicated relationships changed over the course of the last half of the twentieth century in relation to public responses to the women's movement, the increase in paid domestic help, and changes in class systems which point to the disappearance of the middle class? How does nostalgia figure into women's efforts to achieve and maintain a satisfyingly balanced life into which domesticity still figures prominently?

Subversive Surrogacy in *The Nanny Diaries*

In *The Nanny Diaries*, Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus dramatize these multivalent oppressors in a way that I read as a critique of complex intersections of race, class, and feminism

in an era which values and encourages women's increased subjectivity. A semi-autobiographical tale based on the combined experiences of New York nannies Kraus and McLaughlin, the book chronicles the outrageous and disgraceful treatment Nan, or "Nanny," a competent and thoughtful NYU senior, endures and witnesses in her nine-month tenure as nanny to Grayer Addison X, a privileged but emotionally neglected four year old. The upper-class privilege and power of Park Avenue establishes much of the motivation of the novel's nearly corrupt, flat characters, such as Mrs. X, Mr. X, her absentee husband, and others like them. Grayer's parents are caricatures of selfishness and privilege; they are abusive simply because they can afford to be. Despite their educations and pretense of sophistication, the Xes seem the epitome of a traditionally arranged household, and cling to the very sort of emotionally stifling domestic scenario feminism questions. The dynamic of their relationship is similar to that of the Wimperises in *The Stepford Wives*. Mr. X is breadwinner; Mrs. X is consumer; the child is emotionally neglected. *The Nanny Diaries* can be read as a fictional rendering of the theoretical and sociological issues that Mary Romero and Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo explore in their studies of Latina domestic workers. The Xes' situation mirrors the familial power structures that Hondagneu-Sotelo remarks upon in *Domestica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence*:

The work performed by Latina, Caribbean, and Filipina immigrant women today subsidizes the work of more privileged women, freeing the latter to join the productive labor force by taking jobs in business and the professions, or perhaps enabling wealthier women to become more active consumers and volunteers and to spend more time culturally grooming their children and orchestrating family recreation. Consequently, male privilege within homes and families remains uncontested and intact, and new inequalities are formed. (23)

Economic and social privilege has certainly reinforced the ultimately traditional home that Nan serves. Consumed by career and extramarital sex, Mr. X's neglect of his family directly

contributes to the general state of misery of the X household. Grayer, for example, is intensely attached to his virtually absentee father and insists on wearing pieces of his father's clothes and pins his father's laminated business card to his shirt like a name tag. Mrs. X spends much of her energy attempting to lure Mr. X home, ostensibly to spend time as a couple and as a family, but neither husband nor wife seems interested in the other or their son beyond superficial concerns and appearances.

As in Stepford, family life is an artifice; for the Xes, it is an artifice made possible and maintained by privilege, which both Xes work hard to preserve, particularly Mrs. X. This sense of forced domestic harmony is reminiscent of Stepford families and the isolated Cooks in *A Thousand Acres*. Mrs. X's constant attempts to maintain her family's social status by buying the right products, for example, is eerily similar to the spiritless conversations about detergent that occur in Stepford. Stepford and the Park Avenue community that McLaughlin and Kraus critique are similar in their rigid gender roles and emphasis on traditional social and familial structures. In keeping with the norms of her upper class community, Mrs. X does not formally work outside the home but her many social engagements and personal time for shopping leave her little time to care for her son, for whom she put her career on hold. However, Mrs. X seems to be constructed as the ultimate caricature of poor mothering--she is privileged to the point that she can portray the "gold standard" of the stay-at-home-mom but her heart is shown to be made of "tin" as she would rather shop than spend time with her son (Chira 23). Rather than embracing with any emotional depth the possibilities that are available to her, Mrs. X seems to have used--and then promptly discarded--the gains of the women's movement strictly to secure her social standing. Part of this social standing hinges on her appearance as a mother; yet her meticulous micromanagement of Grayer's activities betrays an emotionally artificial kind of

mothering, one which resembles the end result of the Stepford Men's Association's reactionary approach to the freedoms and choices offered by the women's movement.

Nan's cynical commentary on the stifling homogeneity of her Park Avenue employers further develops the novel's consideration of emotionally detached mothering supported by paid domestic labor. This homogeneity is most obvious during the ritualistic "interview process" in the prologue. Nan's feminist sensibilities and her keen observations liken her to a sociologist--in the same vein as Friedan and Joanna Eberhart--deconstructing oppression and complicity. Through her description of a typical interview Nan conveys both concern and contempt for the isolated women who hope to hire her. "Nanny Fact: she always waits for me to ring the doorbell, even though she was buzzed by maximum security downstairs to warn of my imminent arrival and is probably standing on the other side of the door. May, in fact, have been standing there since we spoke on the telephone three days ago" (1). Nan conveys the irony of the typical Park Avenue mother's isolation: in an allegedly "liberated" era, intelligent, educated women of privilege are often alone, uninspired, and uninspiring. Stay-at-home mothers in general are not the focus of Nan's ire; instead, she is most critical of those whose privilege supports a kind of emotionally detached mothering through what Sally Helgesen refers to as a "filofax way of life" (124), a highly organized method of parenting that uses business-management strategies to streamline the busy lifestyles of parents and children alike. Nan, a veteran in this field despite her youth, has subversively categorized various types of employers. According to Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo these "well-to-do women [act] as contractors. By subcontracting to private domestic workers, these women purchase release from their gender subordination in the home, effectively transferring their domestic responsibilities to other women who are distinct and subordinate by race and class, and now also made subordinate through language, nationality, and

citizenship status” (McLaughlin and Kraus 22-23). However, Nan’s observations and interactions with various employers, or contractors, allow her to critique her own oppression. “There are essentially three types of nanny gigs. Type A, I provide “couple time” a few nights a week for people who work all day and parent most nights. Type B, I provide “sanity time” a few afternoons a week to a woman who mothers most days and nights” (26). Nan prefers these types for obvious reasons: her workload is lessened and she respects the women involved for their devotion to working and mothering. Yet McLaughlin and Kraus focus their narrative on Nan’s dreadful interaction with “Type C,” illustrating, through Nan’s reactions to the ridiculous situations and treatments she witnesses, how unchallenged privilege can erode feminist gains for all women. “I’m brought in as one of a cast of many to collectively provide 24/7 ‘me time’ to a woman who neither works nor mothers. And her days remain a mystery to us all” (26).

Nan’s sense of humor conveys overarching ambivalence over her role as emotional and physical caregiver. As a young woman who plans on raising children of her own some day, Nan wonders what role career may or may not play in her life as she mothers and develops as an individual. The influence of Nan’s mother’s feminist activities (she runs a woman’s shelter) and her own emerging career in child development factor into her awareness of how domesticity affects her and those around her. Nan is particularly attuned to class differences; she grew up in a middle-class New York household that “daydream[ed] of extra storage space” (96), yet she works in the world of wealth and excess by performing devalued and underpaid work. Because she simultaneously inhabits disparate cultures and roles, uncertainty and ambivalence contribute to her fluid critical perspective. Like Joanna in *Stepford*, Nan fears losing her own identity upon entering the world of Park Avenue mothers; like other strong figures observed in this study, such as Celie, Sofi, and Ginny, her fears of losing subjectivity in the face of power are understandable.

This uncertainty is particularly problematic for Nan as she enters the typical Park Avenue mother's kitchen where she holds proud ownership of the appliances, but "never actually eats here" and could not, Nan suspects, find the flour (7-8). In its representation of cold, sterile domesticity, the kitchen, then, is similar to that of a Stepford wife. The typical employer's appearance of anorexic thinness mirrors how a Stepford woman, once murdered and changed into a robotic Stepford wife, does not eat. This progression of images evokes a paradoxical attempt at control and detachment on the part of the Manhattan mother, who also controls what her child eats, as she makes clear as she covers "the Rules":

This is a very pleasant portion of the event for any mother because it is a chance to demonstrate how much thought and effort has gone into bringing the child this far. She speaks with a rare mixture of animation, confidence, and awesome conviction--she knows this much is true. I, in turn, adopt my most eager, yet compassionate expression as if to say, "Yes, please tell me more--I'm fascinated" and "How awful it must be for you to have a child allergic to air." So begins the List. (7)

In her attempts to match the mother's sense of animation and enthusiasm for the particulars of rearing micromanaged children, Nan seems to consciously alter her behavior in order to perform as prospective employee. To do so, she must temporarily subvert her feminist ideals and suppress her personality during the interview, but afterward, Nan's feminism and cynicism are reawakened. The need to alter her personality in response to the mother's performance of perfection wears off once she evaluates her own performance amidst the reality of poverty--hers included--on the subway ride home. "Just how does an intelligent, adult woman become someone whose whole sterile kingdom has been reduced to alphabetized lingerie drawers and imported French dairy substitutes? Where is the child in this home? Where is the woman in this mother? And how, am I, exactly, to fit in?" (11).

This question is at the heart of the novel's understated complexity. Like that of *The Stepford Wives*, the novel's plot is straightforward. Yet the nine-month time span of the narrative metaphorically critiques how paid domestic labor is considered a "labor of love." Typically, domestic laborers are expected to devote themselves physically and emotionally to the needs of the household. The nine-month symbolic gestation period of *The Nanny Diaries*, with its painful conclusion, mimics and thus critiques the metaphorical surrogacy inherent in some forms of paid domestic labor. Just as surrogacy is an emotionally confusing, but nonetheless technically productive scenario for those involved (differing desires are met and unfulfilled by participants), paid domestic labor is based on a similar set of fluid rules. According to Hondagneu-Sotelo, the emotional nature of paid domestic labor prevents this work from gaining legitimacy, even in terms of how employers view themselves. Sotelo states that appreciation for caring work is often expressed in terms of pseudo-familial bonds (10). Yet these pseudo-familial, or maternal, bonds are increasingly "absent from the occupation" as a result of stressful lifestyles and a "general discomfort with domestic servitude" (11). Nan's description of the interview process reflects this dichotomous attitude.

[During the interview] we will dance around certain words, such as "nanny" and "child care," because they would be distasteful and we will never, *ever*, actually acknowledge that we are talking about my working for her. This is the Holy Covenant of the Mother/Nanny relationship: this is a pleasure—*not* a job. We are merely "getting to know each other," much as how I imagine a John and a call girl must make the deal, while trying not to kill the mood. (McLaughlin and Kraus 3)

The prostitution imagery underscores how traditional women's roles are reinforced through sexual and economic oppression. The image of call girl and John making a deal is paralleled with the process of a mother and a nanny bartering over how a child will be raised. Both these images reflect a perverse courtship in which both parties perform sisterhood in a situation which will ultimately prevent it.

The tumultuous gestation period of employment, marked by continued exploitation of the nanny's body and maternal interests, is followed by a forced expulsion (Nan is finally, unjustly fired) and sense of (re)birth (she resigns herself to beginning a new chapter of her own life after being forced out of Grayer's). The prologue also serves as a sort of argument as its cynical, humorous observations about privilege, the nature of paid labor, and motherhood are borne out in the details of the story. The story confirms her assessment of how "these rooms are destined to become the burden of my existence" (5). Over the course of three sections, "Fall," "Winter," and "Spring" we observe how this burden deepens through Nan's eyes. As the burden deepens, the emotional kinship between Grayer and Nan increases; their positions within the household are similar in their utter lack of power and subjectivity. The treatment that she and Grayer receive forms a dichotomy of micromanagement and detachment. Grayer is emotionally neglected yet rigorously prepared for entry into the "right" preschool; Nan's requests for adequate pay and normal working hours are ignored while she unwittingly becomes embroiled in the unwinding of the Xes' marriage and in the attempts to meet Mrs. X's increasingly outrageous domestic and personal demands.

McLaughlin and Kraus explore the difficulties of sisterhood formation between modern women through Nan's vacillating compassion towards her employer. Nan's deepening physical and financial burdens mirror her increasingly problematic emotional and intellectual state. Even though Mrs. X is essentially villainous, Nan is often sympathetic towards her. Nan's friends and family believe that she is much too concerned, and that Mrs. X's treatment of Nan amounts to abuse, but due to the nexus of her relationship with Grayer and her financial predicament, she suppresses her desire to aggressively correct the situation. McLaughlin and Kraus construct Mrs. X as a flat character whose unhappiness is at times understandable and more often well-

deserved, based on her treatment of others; in her vacillating sympathy and hatred of Mrs. X, Nan serves as her foil. As she finds herself thinking of Mrs. X as less an exploitative employer and more as a woman, Nan invokes what Hondagneu-Sotelo describes as a desire for “personalistic relations [through which employees seek] some recognition of their humanity” (201). Yet she simultaneously desires a decrease in her personal knowledge of the Xes. Like the Latina domestic workers of Hondagneu-Sotelo’s study, Nan has “no illusions that a personalistic relationship with [Mrs. X] signifies the friendship of equals” and likely feels that Mrs. X sees her, like some of the Latina domestic workers, as a “robot” or “disposable” (McLaughlin and Kraus 201). She is fully aware of her own oppression, but she is just as aware of the limiting and oppressive systems to which Mrs. X has unquestioningly subscribed. For example, when Mr. X’s lover, Ms. Chicago, pulls Nan into her attempts to break up the Xes marriage, Nan’s outrage is not limited to her predicament; she in fact “roots” for the Xes marriage to work out not just for Grayer’s sake, but also for Mrs. X. Despite the caricatures of privilege and excess, McLaughlin and Straus create characters that enhance the complexity of the situation for both laborer and employer, yet which ultimately deny the possibility of sisterhood formation.

The Nanny Diaries makes the sociological issues studied by theorists like Mary Romero and Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo accessible to a wide readership through Nan. Ultimately, through her overt criticism and complex interaction with this type of work, Nan reveals to a potentially uninformed audience how domestic service is hidden, exploitative labor. This is particularly useful as the trickle down effect of the upper classes impacts more and more of the middle classes and women who are attempting to balance work and home successfully. Specifically, Nan critiques the nature of paid domestic labor and race through her awareness of how her interaction with Mrs. X compares to that of other nannies and housekeepers she

encounters. She reveals how her employer and others like her rigidly adhere to the doctrines of white supremacy, capitalism, and patriarchy, noting during the interview process, for example, her employer's prejudice: "Nanny Fact: in every one of my interviews, references are never checked. I am white. I speak French. My parents are college educated. I have no visible piercings and have been to Lincoln Center in the last two months. I am hired" (McLaughlin and Kraus 4). Nan is aware of how race affects her and others: she is hired with no problems because she is white, but she is regarded with suspicion by other nannies because she is white. One of her earliest experiences with Grayer in public involves her feeling excluded by the other nannies who are "Irish, Jamaican, or Filipino. They each give me a quick, cold appraisal and I get the sense that I won't be making a lot of friends here" (36). Nan's whiteness is an anomaly in a field historically dominated by racist assumptions and practices. Hondagneu-Sotelo's study reveals that a preference among employers for non-whites is based in part on fear--they "are unlikely to reveal family secrets" as they exist beyond the limits of social, lingual, and economic circles. Also, Latinas are also deemed to have a strong work ethic, are "naturally" caring, and are "more submissive than whites" (55-56). Such dichotomous racist assumptions were practiced by the mayor's family in *The Color Purple*, when Sofi was chosen for "employment." As exemplified through the employers for whom Nan has worked after a truncated hiring process, racism also prevails in more traditional, overt ways in a contemporary era.

Nan's feelings of exclusion and difference reflect how the divisiveness of racism and xenophobia intensifies the isolating nature of domestic labor. This is particularly evident at the apex of Mrs. X's neglect of Grayer, where Nan has the opportunity to interact with Connie, the X's Latina housekeeper, and Sima, another Park Avenue nanny, who has left her native Central-American country. Nan's interactions with them reveal different social and economic anchors

which attach these women to paid domestic labor. Connie and Sima's situations correspond to Hondagneu-Sotelo's assessment of how globalization and immigration reifies the racialization of paid domestic labor; these minor characters complete the realities of oppression and heartbreak that Nan's experience exposes. After a weekend off, Nan returns to the X's apartment finding Connie caring for Grayer by herself. "I was here all weekend. Mr. X didn't show, and she [Mrs. X] don't want to be alone with Grayer. She made me come all the way back from the Bronx at eleven Friday night. I had to take my kids over to my sister's. Wouldn't even pay for a taxi. She didn't say boo to that boy all weekend . . . Last night [Sunday] I finally just told her I had to go home, but she didn't like it" (McLaughlin and Kraus 164-5). When Nan wonders why Mrs. X didn't call her, Connie says derisively "What? And let the likes of you know she can't get her own husband home?" (165). Although Nan is certainly sympathetic towards Connie, it is clear that Connie justifiably feels not only the sting of her weekend labor but resentment towards Nan for the value Mrs. X places in her whiteness and middle-class background.

During her encounters with Sima, Nan is further confronted with how, according to Mary Romero, "middle-class American women aim to 'liberate' themselves by exploiting women of color--particularly immigrants--in the underground economy, for long hours at relatively low wages, with no benefits" (98). Sima has become a nanny out of sheer necessity; after immigrating to America from San Salvador, where as engineers Sima and her husband could not find work, Sima's husband returned with the children, "because [she] could not work and take care of them" (McLaughlin and Kraus 172). Nan spends "the afternoon with a woman who has a higher degree than [she] will ever receive, in a subject [she] can't get a passing grade in, and who has been home less than one month in the last twenty-four" (173). Through her succinct assessments of highly political and emotional scenarios such as these, Nan's voice seems to

mirror those of sociologists like Hondagneu-Sotelo and Romero. Her interaction with Sima illustrates the effects of what Hondagneu-Sotelo terms the “globalization of contemporary paid domestic work” in which women like Sima leave their own nation, community and family to perform paid domestic work (19). Those origins often include a “relatively high status” in terms of education level and targeted career in her home country, a country “that colonialism made much poorer than those countries where [women like Sima] go to do domestic work. Thus it is not unusual to find middle-class, college-educated women working in other nations as private domestic workers” (19). Finally, her isolation in America, away from her husband who could not find work, illustrates that “the development of service-based economies in postindustrial nations favors the international migration of women laborers. Unlike in earlier industrial eras, today the demand for gendered labor favors migrant women’s services” (19). Because women like Sima are isolated through the compounded effects of globalization, racism, and domesticity, strategies for emotional and physical survival while dealing with “transnational motherhood” are necessary (24). Sima, for example, chooses not to look at family photos very often, as it is too painful to be reminded of the gravity and injustice of her situation. Like some transnational mothers, she deals in part with the emotional void of being separated from her children by bonding with her charge, and by engaging in the “rhetoric of comparative mothering” (26), a process of evaluating and judging the employer as less fit than she; this type of rhetoric allows the transnational mother to justify her presence in the home of her employer and her absence from her own home.

Nan engages in the rhetoric of comparative mothering, but she does so seemingly in preparation for her own maternal experiences. Symbolic of a hopeful future for young women of her generation, Nan uses comparative mothering to analyze and critique not just her contentious

employer, but the multivalent oppressors of capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy. Although McLaughlin and Kraus construct Nan as a mother-in-training whose humorous lessons make her appealing to readers, her various maternal influences, including negative influences like Mrs. X, suggest that the domestic is inescapable. Mrs. X is fulfilling the traditional maternal role of teaching someone how people act in a particular sect of society. The idea of a sisterhood forming between these two women, and other women like them, holds little potential for success, but the failure of this sisterhood is nonetheless useful in reaffirming that the political and personal are interdependent. Young women of Nan's generation may not fully grasp that personal choices are political and that political changes affect women personally, but Nan understands this. Through creating a humorous, relatable character who realizes feminist truths through comparative mothering, these authors have crafted a wide reaching subversive text that may reveal similar truths to its audience.

Imperfect Domesticities in *A Perfect Arrangement*

Comparative mothering--the caregiver critiquing the biological mother's absence or perceived neglect--is practiced by Nan in *The Nanny Diaries* and Randi Gill in Suzanne Berne's novel *A Perfect Arrangement*. The characters in these texts help expand the definition beyond transnational motherhood. This concept is central to Berne's methodically paced feminist morality tale and reveals how personal needs and political movements have affected women's relationships with one another and with their own consciences. Like the thematic parallels shared by *The Stepford Wives* and *The Feminine Mystique* and *The Nanny Diaries* and *Domestica*, *A Perfect Arrangement's* concern with comparative mothering in many ways mirrors self-help books such as *What's a Smart Woman Like You Doing at Home?* by Linda Burton, Janet Dittmer, and Cheri Loveless. Such a self-questioning title reflects the concerns of Mirella

in *A Perfect Arrangement*. Her character builds on others examined in this chapter: she is Joanna Eberhart except that she is married to a genuinely concerned husband and has a flourishing career; though an employer of domestic help, she is the anti-Mrs. X; she is a fully matured Nan raising a family of her own, in desperate need of outside help, conscious of the feminist and personal ramifications of balancing mothering, domesticity, and career. She is, essentially, one of the mothers studied in the self-help book for and about women who choose to stay at home with their children rather than pursue a path of “supermom.” Burton, Dittmer, and Loveless’s feminist self-help book for women consciously underscores the idea that all mothers are working mothers. These authors of the *Welcome Home* newsletter assert that women today defy simple categorization “by their work/home choice” and that “If anything unites mothers today, it is not the choices they make concerning the care of their children; it is the exhausting inner turmoil they suffer as they weigh the alternatives. Pushed one way by an intense social and economic pressure to work and pulled another by a dawning realization that they are truly needed by their children, most mothers feel helplessly torn” (135).

Mirella embodies this sense of struggle and imbalance. Her many responsibilities leave her frustrated, uncertain, even bitter towards her home, her children, and her husband. The novel’s opening scenario, in which Mirella attempts to prepare herself and her children for the day, conveys the literal chaos of the morning routine and dramatizes the emotional turbulence that Mirella experiences daily. Here we learn that Mirella perceives domesticity as something to temporarily escape through her career (“the law, unlike her family, was beautifully reducible”) despite her feeling that she had “created them, these obligations, required them into requiring her,” and is occasionally, briefly intoxicated by the idea of staying home “for the simple gratification of setting things to rights” (Berne 6, 13, 14). Even though she occasionally

considers quitting her job and staying home, she does not perceive her choices as “open to reinterpretation” as is the law (6). Instead, that which is appealing about staying home--“block castles, Play-Doh parties, afternoons at the park”--almost at once transforms into a torturous prospect: “Immediately a Sahara of days spread across the table, burying the castles and birthday cakes, becoming a quicksand of dirty cups and dishes, hours draining into the laundry basket, trips to the park that took so long to prepare that by the time everyone was ready, no one wanted to go” (5). Mirella’s internal critique of her own skills, rights, and privileges as a mother and careerist lends her character a realistic complexity.

Because Mirella’s complex reflections are established in the first chapter, her concerns and responsibilities seem to be the most grounded, real, and primary. The novel’s initial emphasis on the female caretaker reflects how, despite cultural advances, women remain the primary caretaker of the home, and it reveals the wide-ranging frustrations which result from this scenario. The novel’s structure reflects a hierarchy of concerns, beginning with Mirella’s, then Howard’s, and finally, Randi’s, who is a paid laborer attempting to insinuate herself inside the family. However, the contents of each chapter--usually devoted exclusively to one character, including Randi--undermines this hierarchy or traditional female-caregiver primacy, revealing a more fluid set of domestic ideologies and interactions. Thus, the novel’s structure and content vie for the very sense of balance that each character, particularly Mirella and her husband Howard, searches for. For example, the second chapter’s emphasis on Howard contrasts with and complements Mirella’s sense of frustration with their domestic scenario. Howard, an architect, keeps young Jacob, a toddler with developmental challenges, at home with him and runs his small architecture firm out of a garage-office. He enjoys time alone with Jacob, with whom he feels content and peaceful, yet he resents having the dual responsibilities of working at

home and maintaining it while caring for his child. His situation, as well as his feelings about it, inverts the typical stay-at-home career scenario.

He helped out; he did his share, more than most men, probably. Still, it was Mirella who packed everything in somehow, Mirella who kept them marching out the door. And if it sometimes depressed him to be part of these uncompromising arrangements, he loved her for being so vigorous . . . though lately he sometimes wondered whether, beneath all her reassuring fortitude, she suspected that disaster could be small and dull and corrosive, and that it might already have come. (75-6)

Through his comparatively calm reflections on his role in the domestic situation, Howard's concerns are distinguished from Mirella's, whose harried observations underscore a sense of limited possibilities. These issues inform and influence Howard's personal domestic concerns, including his need for a better compromise--not simply a reversal--over the daily care of Jacob and Pearl and the upkeep of the house.^{xx} Regardless, both Mirella and Howard feel unduly burdened.

The novel's structure, while supporting the main characters' quest for satisfying compromises, also allows us to perceive the Cook-Goldmans' progressive yet troubled household through Randi Gill's more traditional, yet impressionable and vulnerable, viewpoint. Randi is a young, idealistic domestic perfectionist who methodically improves the Cook-Goldman household while undermining Mirella's sense of ownership of her family and

^{xx} Susan Chira in *A Mother's Place* discusses trends about men who share in childrearing/domestic responsibilities: "In many cases, pragmatism may trump ideology. Studies have indicated that fathers who watch children, cook, do laundry, and wash dishes learned how to do so because they had to, not because they were philosophically committed to feminism. Parents may have wanted to save money on child care or have been uneasy at the idea of placing children in day care. Or fathers may have been arbitrarily assigned to a different shift and had to learn how to manage a household when their wives were not around. In many cases, one study of such families found, both parents continued to maintain that the mother was in charge and the father just helped out, even when the father was sharing much of the child care" (237). Howard's belief that Mirella is the center of the household reinforces these trends of men helping with household maintenance but still relying on the wife/mother to ground the family.

reinforcing Howard's sense of domestic idealism. She makes innocent improvements and infringements, yet these alterations eventually develop a sinister, intrusive overtone. Specifically, Randi begins to think of young Jacob as her own child and even considers kidnapping him. Through her outsider perspective, we see how Mirella's and Howard's quest for domestic harmony informs Randi's search for a definitive--yet ultimately elusive--answer to the question of how much direct interaction with home and family is necessary for individual and familial harmony.

Randi's traditional idealism about family life offers the most definitive contrast to the complexity of Mirella and Howard's lives. Complicating this contrast are emotional similarities between the couple and Randi. Mirella struggles with a sense of ownership over her family; Randi quickly adopts this same attitude, attempting to redefine herself in terms of her position and influence within their family dynamic. Howard contemplates the difference between image and reality as he creates homes; similarly, Randi believes that "everyone has an inner landscape . . . [and] it is essential to human happiness to match your inner and outer landscapes" (54). Her active creation of this mantra within others' home space eventually proves problematic. A runaway from an unhappy working-class home, Randi re-imagines herself as a caretaker of others, a position imbued with relative power. Randi's formative memories of going to others' homes with her single mother later influence her negotiation of acceptance and transgression within the boundaries of another's home: "Remember, her mother had hissed, before she headed up the stairs, this is somebody else's house. In the downstairs bathroom of that house Randi had found three little pink soaps in the china soap dish. The soaps looked like rosebuds, so pretty that she put one in her mouth" (33). The rosebud, as metaphor for Randi's limited agency within the boundaries of home, foreshadows and reveals her outsider perspective as she subversively

attempts to own that which is not hers, including a home space. Striving for balance between transgression and acceptance characterizes Randi's new life: she feels slighted by her mother, who has upset the boundaries of traditional family life by remarrying and having a baby. In return for this perceived betrayal, Randi runs away from home, declares herself a tragic orphan, and seeks acceptance within others' homes. While she resists and resents the flexibility and control others have over her life, she strongly believes that home is "a place where life can stay the same if you want it to, or be different, because you belong there, you made it, and you get to decide what happens" (39). In order to maintain this illusion of control over her place within a home, she capably lies and then constantly re-imagines truths for her own benefit.

Among the emotional benefits of creating her place within an extant family structure, she performs comparative mothering, which begins before she ever witnesses parenting behaviors. Randi is preoccupied with the differences between her parenting philosophies and the perceived philosophies of her employers. Her parenting philosophies have been formed, it seems, by reacting against her own upbringing and by reveling in the nostalgic imagery and practical advice of women's magazines. Like Ginny in *A Thousand Acres*, who lost her mother as a teenager, and who later found some degree of solace in the domestic advice of women's magazines, Randi finds an alternate source of maternal comfort through nostalgic, domestic images she finds in magazines. This preoccupation reveals how image and practicality are intertwined concepts of the dynamic of home. Much like Mirella rigidly conceives of her identity as mother *and* lawyer, Randi simplifies differences in order to address her own complex emotional needs. She mistakenly believes that the Cook-Goldmans are "rich" though they are essentially middle class; through this false perception, Randi reifies her position within the household, justifying her resentment and awe of the family. Thus, Randi's naive philosophies

about home and parenting--and her position within the Cook-Goldman home--are simply reaffirmed when she finds their house in a disarray, discovers that Howard is a stay-at-home parent while his wife commutes, and marvels at the irony with which they consciously poke fun at their own domesticity; for example, their dog's name is Martha, for Martha Stewart, so that Mirella can "order Martha to sit" (44). Because Howard and Mirella do not fit her preconceived notions of family life, Randi believes that her mere entry into the home justifies her conscious and subconscious attempts to gain control.

Berne reveals through Randi's attempts at agency the seductive nature and relative power of domesticity. Just as Randi re-imagines her past and creates her present and future through lying, she consciously reshapes the Cook-Goldman household according to her own traditional ideology, altering its dynamic while regulating it from her relative position of power. Through her increased agency over its practical functions, she feels in control of its image as well. Though she cannot change, nor attempt to change, the basic gender role reversals of Howard and Mirella's careers, she infuses the home with a sense of traditional security and regularity. Both Howard and Mirella feel a sense of relief after they hire Randi; the house is mercifully straightened and methodically cleaned, the children are cared for, and there is a general comforting sense of order restored to the home. Howard in particular appreciates these infusions of regularity. "Although by now Randi had cooked well over a dozen dinners at home, he continued to feel a mild euphoria at the thought of a plate of food on his placemat at the table" (91). Randi's domestic presence soon translates into even more traditional gender roles for Howard and his employee. When Randi greets Howard at the door one day, he notices that she does so in "the way wives on fifties television shows used to greet their husbands at the door with slippers or a cold beer. And suddenly it was exactly what he wanted, this instant of banter

in the cool hallway, the simplicity of it” (139). Howard becomes so accustomed and attached to Randi’s presence and conscientious domesticity that when Mirella discusses firing her because she and Jacob are too close, Howard reacts almost violently. He cannot bear the thought of their home returning to its previous state of chaos; Mirella thinks he may hit her for demanding Randi’s expulsion (231-233). This intense reaction to Randi’s possible dismissal suggests a similarity between Randi and Howard, who are both preoccupied, more so than Mirella, with the ways that image and practicality function together within the household dynamic. Howard’s reaction stops well short of the murderous conspiracy of the Stepford Men’s Association, but the potential for the dynamics of household power to change once again sparks a similar sort of disturbance.

Howard’s increasing dependence upon and complex reactions to Randi’s presence in the household further reveal an emotional depth and consideration of home that is lacking in other modern male characters examined in this study. His character’s complexity contrasts with the reactionary, flat characters and possibilities found in *The Stepford Wives* and *The Nanny Diaries*. He is not physically or sexually abusive like Albert or Harpo Johnson, or Larry Cook. Yet superficial characteristics connect him to the men of Stepford, including the power to create and define home spaces through architecture, an intense awareness of traditional concepts and locations, and an uncertain participation in a non-traditional domestic scenario. However, unlike the ruthless Men’s Association of *The Stepford Wives* and adulterous Mr. X of *The Nanny Diaries*, Howard’s more participatory approach to domesticity is not based on a need for power or maintaining tradition.

Berne’s construction of Howard as methodical, thoughtful, and introspective suggests that feminist changes can positively affect contemporary men in terms of how they view and

interact with domesticity. His expectations of domestic harmony originate from his particular personality which desires order and calm; his creative tendencies include reevaluating and contemplating his vision of home, including his own as well as the ones he creates as an architect. Their home is a result of his vision; he has methodically remodeled the colonial structure himself, exploring his “nesting instinct,” “peaceful[ly] . . . suspending this time [of remodeling] in a reverie of detail” (22). Similar to Randi’s attempts to consume domestic imagery in order to figuratively and literally control domesticity, Howard is preoccupied with both overall image and detail. This is exemplified in his making a birdhouse for Mirella after she orders him out of the house. He undertakes the “idiotic project” selfishly thinking of hurting himself for sympathy, understanding “that he was full of self-pity, that he was unseemly and clownish, a forty-two-year-old man sitting on a sawdust-covered floor, wishing that his wife would come looking for him. He understood that he should fall upon his knees and beg her forgiveness. He understood and did not care” (164). He notices, once his temporary resentment and anger calm, that “he’d forgotten to cut a trapdoor in the floor, with hinges and a latch, so that every now and then the birdhouse could be cleaned out. Too late. Too bad . . . The birdhouse looked more or less the way he wanted it to look. From a distance anyway, it looked like the birdhouse Mirella had wanted in the catalogs” (164-5). This blatant imagery of domesticity and emotional housekeeping neglected for the sake of image clarifies for Howard how troubled his relationship with Mirella is, confirming his earlier uncertainties. Despite his flaws, including having an affair while Mirella was pregnant with Jacob, Howard’s introspective nature causes him to be a sympathetic, dynamic character. Yet Howard’s construction of a birdhouse which cannot be used or cleaned embodies the patriarchal power to create but a cultural failure to maintain domesticity.

Berne's construction of Howard as a complex participant in an evolving domestic paradigm reflects the novel's representation of a feminist perspective. Howard's voice is one of several, including Randi's and Mirella's, competing and participating in redefining family and home. Randi, the novel's most unstable character, is the most connected to traditional ideals of gender roles and home space. Her well-intentioned boundary transgressions threaten the tenuous collective progress that Mirella and Howard attempt towards redefining how their family will operate amidst contradictory forces, including their own feelings about traditional gender ideology. Mirella and Howard's resentment and mistrust of traditional approaches are embodied in a minor character, Alice Norcross-Pratt. She participates in a "backward search for femininity" (205), a phrase coined by Ruth Cowan in her book *More Work For Mother*; Cowan uses this term to reference Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*. Alice's seemingly pre-feminist characteristics mark her as antagonistic to Mirella and Howard, but more so than Randi, although the two women share many characteristics. Randi is obsessed with basic history and her own questionable colonial ancestry; Alice Norcross-Pratt is a direct ancestor of the religious center of New Aylesbury, the 350-year-old New England township the Cook-Goldmans call home. She is a hyper-conscientious stay-at-home mother, a model of motherly and domestic devotion. Her interactions with Mirella serve to exacerbate Mirella's guilt over not staying home with her children and more effectively managing their activities. Alice's interactions with Mirella also serve to ground Mirella further as a realistic representation of mothers' complex plight as studied in *What's a Smart Woman Like You Doing at Home*. Her personal and professional concerns with feminism, mothering, and domestic responsibility are intertwined and complex; she is deeply troubled when representing a stay-at-home dad in a divorce case and is almost defensive when she engages with it. In comparison, Alice's interactions with Howard are more directly

contentious; she leads the town's conservative opposition to the Town Common Project for which Howard is the principal architect and planner. She initiates a petition against the development, invites Mirella to sign it (she declines) and is a prominent speaker at the proposal meeting which effectively ends Howard's hopes of completing the project.

The Town Common saga represents an opportunity for the characters and for readers to explore the current and future implications of historical, political events. The Town Common "was planned for the last parcel of open land left in town" (Berne 29) and thus parallels Mirella and Howard's separate and mutual attempts at domestic redefinition. As Mirella is bedridden with her new pregnancy and Howard prepares for his presentation to the Town Common committee, each are physically and emotionally isolated; both, however, despite their differences (Howard is uncertain about their expanding family, while Mirella attempts to forgive Howard for his past discretions), contemplate what it must have been like living in New Aylesbury as settlers. Howard considers the intense loneliness and uncertainty which must have plagued the settlers as they established homes; his temporary emotional withdrawal into the past directly relates to his outsider status in both his own home and in his community (224). Mirella, fearful of losing her family and unborn children, imagines the tragic domesticity within those homes but temporarily seeks solace in such a vision: "it seemed to her that more than anything in the world, she would like to live all alone in such a place" (232). These separate intense reflections on the past foreshadow their eventual reconciliation and isolation from the community.

Their choice to maintain their family in spite of potential community rejection can be read as a clever denunciation of suburbia's monopoly on the American landscape. Their relative isolation from their neighbors is punctuated by the novel's climactic foray out of the house and into the yard. The garden and yard figure prominently in the novel as an extension of the home;

unlike the home's private interior, the garden and yard are communal and vulnerable. The issue of comparative mothering between Randi and Mirella reaches its apex in this external home space; Randi's ultimate transgression takes place here. The "blowup" that occurs between Mirella and Randi inverts what Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo describes as a traumatic and unexpected experience for the employee (116). Mirella holds the sympathetic position although we see the event unfold from both women's perspective. Found by her estranged mother, Randi hides with Jacob inside the tepee she has bought for his birthday. Mirella, ignoring her doctor's orders, essentially escapes the confines of her bed, bedroom, and house. She finds them in the teepee together as Randi is literally nursing Jacob. Traumatized and enraged by what she sees, Mirella initiates a violent confrontation, pulling Randi out of the tepee by the hair and beating her. The confrontation certainly ends Randi's association with the family as it simultaneously causes Mirella to miscarry. Her sense of guilt overwhelms her as she begins recovering. Again, Berne emphasizes the primacy of the female caretaker; Mirella feels responsible for everything that has happened, including the death of the family dog, Martha, who was killed in the midst of the action. While the miscarriage is the prominent and obvious concern for Mirella and Howard, Martha's absence thereafter from the garden and home signals a new beginning for the family.

The couple's eventual renewed sense of dedication to each other and to the health of their family is symbolized in the space between the house and Howard's home office. Howard and Mirella work in the garden and yard together and take turns planting with the children. Like the Town Common, which the town has fiercely protected and preserved, the yard/garden area becomes a sanctuary. However, unlike the Town Common, the couple find renewal and rebirth amidst a previously tragic setting; they are not mired by tradition or history. Thus, the garden/yard is a sort of alternate space, existing beyond the personal and public spaces of home

and work and representative of the process of domestic redefinition that the novel recounts. Lessons have been learned: Mirella knows now the merits of her mother's advice, of "not expecting too much . . . a solid piece of advice, unromantic but shrewd (Berne 298). Mirella has thus begun working from home, they are searching for an older, more respectful nanny, and the couple is considering moving to shorten Mirella's commute. Howard, we assume, has also learned lessons, but these are not explicitly recounted or reflected upon.

A Perfect Arrangement presents domesticity and family as potentially changeable constructs, as does *What's a Smart Woman Like You Doing at Home?* Both texts promote change and flexibility in the face of formidable ideology. Berne leaves readers with a burnished image of a revitalized family who have paid dearly for a failed experiment in non-traditional domesticity. Mirella's perspective concludes the novel; framing the novel with the female caretaker's perspective emphasizes again that despite feminist advances, the mother's role and voice are primary in this story of a family's life. This female/feminine primacy is also emphasized in *Smart Woman*. The authors convincingly call for a redefinition of domesticity which moves beyond the limited stereotypes that do not reflect women's realities; in doing so, they may overstate the case of women whose strong desires are to stay home. Despite its feminist message and attempts to demythologize motherhood and careerism, *Smart Woman* also relies on problematic notions of inherent femininity in mothering and domesticity. The text does not suggest that men can or should participate more in domesticity and parenting; in *A Perfect Arrangement*, a gender-neutral domestic care situation is attempted but ultimately modified.

Both *The Nanny Diaries* and *A Perfect Arrangement* present readers with convincing complexity how easily domesticity can be reduced to rigid, ineffective traditions and how difficult significant cultural and personal change can be. These works question how feminism

affects domesticity and vice versa; the answers are elusive and intricate, particularly in a contemporary setting where balancing career and family involves constant negotiation and frustration. In each text domesticity is situated amidst a seemingly perfect setting which harkens back to the dystopic suburban landscape in *The Stepford Wives*; this similarity suggests how the promise or threat of change within the home can potentially not only create serious violent fissures in social reality but can ultimately undermine sisterhood formation. Kraus and McLaughlin's sarcasm and dark humor exposes some unsolved problems of an incomplete feminist revolution which an exploitative over-class or plutocracy further undermines for others in less privileged circumstances. Berne's reflection on family questions the limiting dichotomies that modern women must navigate. Both texts ultimately reject the monolithic image of the modern happy housewife heroine and the perpetuation of this image through their own complex portrayals of younger women; both underscore the ways simplifying complex choices and circumstances prevent more promising and useful understandings of the process of change.

CODA

Many women now do not think of domestic life as a “comfortable concentration camp,” as Betty Friedan wrote in “The Feminine Mystique,” where they are losing their identities and turning into “anonymous biological robots in a docile mass.” Now they want to be Mrs. Anonymous Biological Robot in a Docile Mass. They dream of being rescued - to flirt, to shop, to stay home and be taken care of. They shop for “Stepford Fashions” - matching shoes and ladylike bags and the 50’s-style satin, lace and chiffon party dresses featured in *InStyle* layouts - and spend their days at the gym training for Wisteria Lane waistlines. (Maureen Dowd, “*What’s a Modern Girl to Do?*”)

Maureen Dowd’s recent article about the current state of feminism--published in the *New York Times* online edition and entitled “What’s a Modern Girl to Do?”--joins the critical conversation that other writers like Susan Douglas, Meredith Michaels, and Judith Warner have recently engaged in. This discussion began almost fifteen years ago with writers such as Susan Faludi and Arlie Hochschild, and later with Susan Chira and Sally Helgesen. Like my study, Dowd’s article reveals how traditional definitions of femininity, of which domesticity is a part, are being culturally disseminated as ideal for all women, not just mothers who have made “the choice” to stay at home. Works like my project and Dowd’s article examine the reasons for and potential consequences of this dissemination in imaginative literature and in the actual lives of women. Raising such questions is important to women’s lives because it is an attempt to bridge the gap between feminist theory and praxis. By engaging in a literary analysis of recognizable and popular works of fiction, and by emphasizing how these works represent domesticity--a more inclusive category than motherhood, marriage, and career--I hope to help critics like Dowd steer the conversation about the state of feminism towards a useful but under-explored discourse.

Discourse on how feminisms and domesticity intersect can be especially useful if it encourages both scholars and readers to reconsider and possibly redefine these terms on individual and cultural levels. One way that I have attempted such discourse is through

examining a variety of texts, authors, and characters that appeal to a broad audience, particularly women of different races, classes, generations, and sexual orientations. Amy Erdman Farrell takes a similar approach as she justifies her study of *Ms.*, noting that the magazine’s ““popular feminism”” is “widespread, common to many, and . . . emerges from the realm of popular culture” (5). In choosing fictional texts to ground my study of domesticity and feminism, I favored works that were familiar to me as both an audience member and a scholar; finding this intersection of the popular^{xxi} and the critically acclaimed^{xxii} is perhaps what allows these works to “emerge” in ways that can both reflect and affect women’s lived experience. As a third-wave feminist, I find such subjects both emotionally resonant and politically meaningful. Another factor that contributes to the texts’ emergence is that they were promoted heavily in the media^{xxiii}. Every novel I studied, except for two (*A Perfect Arrangement* and *So Far From God*), has been adapted into film, often very successfully^{xxiv}. In fact, as I noted in chapters one and five, *The Stepford Wives* has been adapted into film twice. The vast differences in the two adaptations that I mentioned in chapter one may be indicative of shifting cultural attitudes towards feminism. Though a study of the remake did not fit well in this study, such a possibility is worth exploring.

By pairing a male-authored work of fiction with an important female-authored non-fiction text, this study attempts to redefine the scope of domestic fiction in contemporary

^{xxi} *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *A Thousand Acres*, and *The Nanny Diaries* were *New York Times* Bestsellers, and *The Joy Luck Club* was listed for nine months on the *New York Times* Bestseller List.

^{xxii} *The Color Purple* was a Pulitzer Prize Winner and A National Book Award Winner; *A Thousand Acres* won the Pulitzer Prize, while *A Perfect Arrangement* was a *New York Times* Notable Book

^{xxiii} *We Were the Mulvaney*s was an Oprah Book Club Selection.

^{xxiv} *The Nanny Diaries* is in pre-production and is listed on Internet Movie Database (imdb.com) with a 2007 release date.

America as a genre which, like third-wave feminism, favors inclusion, rather than exclusion. I paired *The Stepford Wives* with *The Feminine Mystique* in chapter one because I read *The Stepford Wives* as a critique of Friedan's adherence to traditional definitions of masculine and feminine perspectives--for instance, her tendency to read more "radical" feminists as male bashers. In *Inside Ms.: 25 Years of the Magazine and the Feminist Movement*, Mary Thom provides another example of how Friedan's definition of feminism was in many ways exclusionary. Thom states that Friedan condemned "lesbian rights as a feminist concern" and saw the movement's direction as "anti-male." "Friedan told Associated Press reporter Dee Wedemeyer, 'I guess I have some historical sense of pride,' having authored *The Feminine Mystique*. 'I'm not going to give the "Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval" to people I think are misleading the movement'" (52). In structuring the chapters in this way I have attempted not only to study the books' representations of domesticity but also to use *The Stepford Wives* to deconstruct overly stratified categorizations of who can advocate feminism. Despite including an author like Friedan, who can both catalyze and divide feminists, my third wave, poststructuralist feminist approach is meant to help connect generations of writers and critics.

Levin's and Friedan's texts provide different examples of how certain women might advocate feminism. Similarly, all the works that I study contain characters that ultimately advocate feminism, though the form of this advocacy differs based on the characters' identities and background. In spite of such differences, one trait that these characters share is their rejection of victimization. They *survive* oppression, abuse, and loss, rejecting stereotypical characteristics of femininity such as weakness, subordination, and deferment of identity. Most of the characters successfully connect to other female characters through personal relationships, thus rejecting the isolation that often results from patriarchal conceptions of domesticity; they

belong to a connected womanhood, regardless of which familial metaphor(s)--motherhood, daughterhood, and/or sisterhood--apply to their particular relationships. Most of them revise their perspectives on domesticity as part of their survival and personal renewal. However, there are certainly exceptions to the positive strides that many of these fictional characters share. Mrs. X--a static, unsympathetic character--seems to cling to her role as Park Avenue housewife, despite her unhappiness. But Nan offsets Mrs. X's complicity with oppressive power structures by moving forward with her life. However, unlike Nan, Fe and Joanna do not survive oppression and injury. Fe's sisters experience a politically and emotionally resonant afterlife, but Fe herself does not return in a spiritual sense. Though her legacy seems limited, particularly in comparison to her sisters', her horrific death promotes a legacy that is more grounded in reality for readers. Likewise, Joanna, who is murdered at the conclusion of *The Stepford Wives*, could be read as a sacrificial model for heroic feminism. Although her murder renders her voiceless, her character embodies the tenacious spirit of feminism. The injustice of this violently enforced, permanent silence is likely to motivate readers to consider the ways in which domesticity and feminism directly impact their lives. Ultimately, all the characters in this study participate in advocating feminism through their engagements with and revisions of domesticity.

Studying domesticity and feminism together as I have done encourages a redefinition--or at the very least, a review--of both the ways that home, work, and self function and the spaces, literal or imagined, where these redefinitions can occur. Mona Domosh and Joni Seager, citing Ahrentzen's study of homeworkers--women who work at home rather than at an office or factory--state that "for some, home was a place that represented their 'integrative' selves--that is, their roles as mothers, wives, and workers" (34). This endeavor to integrate identities occurs within many of the characters I study. Joanna attempts this sort of integration, as she labels

herself as a wife, mother, feminist, and photographer, announcing her diversity to Stepford. Suzanne Berne constructs an uncertain conclusion for Mirella Cook, who is last seen attempting a negotiation of her identities (lawyer, wife, and mother) from her home. Celie, Shug, and Sofia ultimately integrate their identities through quilting and sewing together; they construct a durable legacy of sisterhood through their creative acts. Unlike their antebellum ancestors, they cut their own patterns and sew the pieces together; because they are able to do both, they may then identify themselves as survivors, mothers, sisters, quilters, artists, and proprietors. Other characters integrate their identities by connecting with women of other generations, either through storytelling or useful re-imagining. Evelyn and Ninny engage in both of these activities, connecting Evelyn to women who re-defined themselves and integrated their identities as life and business partners into one communally symbolic location. The members of the Joy Luck Club integrate their identities as Chinese and American, and as mothers, daughters, and friends.

These fictional representations also underscore the difficulties of developing an “integrative self” in the home space. Domosh and Seager point out how others in Ahrentzen’s study of homeworkers felt that “the home was a trap that isolated them from the rest of the world. Many women separated out particular spaces within the home as refuges” (34). This resonates with Virginia Woolf’s call for each woman to have “a room of one’s own” in order to be imaginative and whole. While having an actual room to oneself may be impossible for many, women can still carve out some kind of space for themselves where they might integrate their identities as women. They might do so by subversively performing and/or enjoying domestic acts, by avoiding these acts altogether, or by periodically retreating. They might also find their space imaginatively as they read. Engaging with the kinds of fiction that I have studied in this project provides women with a potential refuge space; these kinds of novels both entertain,

which may help offset any negative feelings about the daily demands of domesticity, and remind women that, though they may feel isolated in their particular situation, these writers and their readers can relate. Literature can therefore take a pro-active role in the life of the woman reader by allowing her to connect with characters who advocate feminism and with a community of readers.

Entering imaginative spaces and engaging with the characters therein can also encourage readers to critique other cultural artifacts, some of which may be more prominent in lived experience than opportunities to read. One of these influential artifacts is Martha Stewart, who, according to Sarah Leavitt in *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice*, “brings domesticity to a new level of complicated craft that even her nineteenth-century counterparts did not imagine. To many contemporary observers, the Martha Stewart phenomenon is actually worse than absurd. In its creation of an unattainable ideal, it sets women up for failure” (202). In terms of how modern women might navigate the apparent chasm between being domestic and being feminist, Leavitt asserts that “to be a feminist and a subscriber to *Martha Stewart Living* . . . can be a complicated proposition. One feels the need to qualify the interest in domesticity with a twist on the *Playboy* reader’s insistence that he only buys the magazine for the articles . . . Domesticity has become almost a dirty pleasure, an interest for which one must apologize in public settings” due to “Stewart’s enterprise of hyperdomesticity” (203). Interestingly, Martha Stewart’s recent prison term, with its corresponding decrease in her ubiquity, coincided with the reemergence of the term “housewife.” This term’s return to the popular lexicon was catalyzed by the ABC dramedy *Desperate Housewives*, which presents the viewer with a variety of representations of domesticity. For example, Bree Van De Kamp and Lynette Scavo are each stay-at-home mothers (in season one);

Bree's attempts at domestic perfection mimic Martha Stewart and invert her neighbor's attempts at domestic competency and sanity, yet each character's interactions with domesticity are shown to be problematic. *Desperate Housewives* may provide female viewers with an alternative to what critics have seen as the "MarthaStewartization" of culture. The confluence of events in which these texts have been produced and disseminated--Martha Stewart's imprisonment and subsequent cultural decline occurred at roughly the same time as *Desperate Housewives*' rise in popularity--suggests a need for discourse about domesticity, particularly one that targets and engages a female audience.

Representations of domesticity present images of ways that our culture perceives women and their relationship to domestic space; such representations may in turn influence how women see their own relationship to domestic spaces and responsibilities. Finally, these representations can spur women to reconsider and revise their ideas about how feminism and domesticity function in their own lives, potentially prompting them to advocate feminism. Studies that examine texts and discourses about feminism, domesticity, the connections between the two, and the potential effects on audiences are therefore particularly important. I have attempted such a study with this project. I hope this study provides a good beginning to a larger project that further questions why "a woman's work is never done," as well as how and why feminism, as "women's work," is continuously undone.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aguiar, Sarah Appleton. "(Dis)Obedient Daughters: (Dis)Inheriting the Kingdom of Lear." *He said, she says: an RSVP to the male text*. Eds. Mica Howe and Sarah Appleton Aguiar. Cranbury: Associated UP, 2001. 194-207.
- Allen, Tuzyline Jita. "The Color Purple: A Study of Walker's Womanist Gospel." Bloom. 119-139.
- Anzaldua, Gloria. "*La conciencia de la mestiza: Towards a New Consciousness*." Madison. 560-572.
- Aptheker, Bettina. *Tapestries of Life: Women's Work, Women's Consciousness, and the Meaning of Daily Experience*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1989.
- Berlant, Lauren. "Race, Gender, and Nation in *The Color Purple*." Bloom. 3-27.
- Berne, Suzanne. *A Perfect Arrangement*. New York: Plume, 2001.
- Bloom, Harold, ed. *Modern Critical Interpretations: Alice Walker's The Color Purple*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2000.
- Boesenberg, Eva. *Gender-Vernacular-Voice: The Formation of Female Subjectivity in Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 1999.
- Burton, Linda, Janet Dittmer, and Cheri Loveless. *What's a Smart Woman Like You Doing at Home?* Revised edition. Vienna, VA: Mothers at Home Press, 1992.
- Butler-Evans, Elliott. *Race, Gender, and Desire: Narrative Strategies in the Fiction of Toni Cade Bambara, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1989.
- Castillo, Ana. *So Far From God*. New York: Plume, 1994.
- Charles, Nickie and Felicia Hughes-Freeland, eds. *Practising Feminism: Identity, Difference, Power*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Chira, Susan. *A Mother's Place: Taking the Debate about Working Mothers Beyond Guilt and Blame*. New York: Harper Collins, 1998.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. "Shifting the Center: Race, Class, and Feminist Theorizing about Motherhood." *Representations of Motherhood*. Eds. Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, Meryle Mahrer Kaplan. New Haven: Yale UP, 1994. 56-74.
- Coontz, Stephanie. *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.

- Cooperman, Jeannette Batz. *The Broom Closet: Secret Meanings of Domesticity in Postfeminist Novels by Louise Erdrich, Mary Gordon, Toni Morrison, Marge Piercy, Jane Smiley, and Amy Tan*. New York: Peter Lang, 1999.
- Cowan, Ruth Schwartz. *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
- Cutter, Martha J. "Philomela Speaks: Alice Walker's Revisioning of Rape Archetypes in *The Color Purple*." *MELUS* Fall-Winter (2000): 161-180 .
- Daniels, E.B. "Nostalgia: Experiencing the Elusive." *Descriptions*. Eds. Don Ihde and Hugh J. Silverman. Albany: State U of New York P, 1985. 76-90.
- Daly, Brenda. *Lavish Self Divisions: The Novels of Joyce Carol Oates*. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1996.
- Dicker, Rory and Alison Piepmeier, eds. *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 2003.
- Douglas, Susan, and Meredith W. Michaels. *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it Has Undermined Women*. New York: Free Press, 2004.
- Domosh, Mona, and Joni Seager. *Putting Women in Place: Feminist Geographers Make Sense of the World*. New York: Guilford Press, 2001.
- Dowd, Maureen. "What's a Modern Girl to Do?" *The New York Times* 30 October 2005. 30 October 2005.
<http://www.nytime.com/2005/10/30/magazine/30feminism.html?th=&emc=th&pagewan>.
 ∴
- Elsy, Judy. "Nothing can be sole or whole that has not been rent': Fragmentation in the Quilt and *The Color Purple*." *Critical Essays on Alice Walker*. Ed. Ikenna Dieke. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999. 163-170.
- Faludi, Susan. *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*. 1991. New York, Anchor Books, 1992.
- Faragher, John Mack. "The Historical Imagination of *A Thousand Acres*." *Novel History: Historians and Novelists Confront America's Past (and each other)*. Ed. Mark C. Carnes. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001. 146-159.
- Farrell, Amy Erdman. *Yours in Sisterhood: Ms. Magazine and the Promise of Popular Feminism*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

- Ferriss, Suzanne, and Mallory Young, eds. *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*. New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Flagg, Fannie. *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*. New York: Fawcett Colombine, 1987.
- Foster, Thomas. *Transformations of Domesticity in Modern Women's Writing: Homelessness at Home*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Freedman, Estelle B. *No Turning Back: The History of Feminism and the Future of Women*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2002.
- Freeman, Mary E. Wilkins. "The Revolt of Mother." *Selected Stories of Mary E. Wilkins Freeman*. Ed. Marjorie Pryse. New York: Norton, 1983.
- Friedan, Betty. *The Feminine Mystique*. 1963. New York: Laurel, 1984.
- Gamble, Sarah, ed. *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Feminism and Postfeminism*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Helgesen, Sally. *Everyday Revolutionaries: Working Women and the Transformation of American Life*. New York: Doubleday, 1998.
- Henry, Astrid. *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third Wave Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2004.
- Ho, Wendy. *In Her Mother's House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-Daughter Writing*. Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1999.
- Hochschild, Arlie Russell. *Second Shift*. 1989. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- Hollows, Joanne. *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000.
- Hondagneu-Sotelo, Pierrette. *Domestica: Immigrant Workers Cleaning and Caring in the Shadows of Affluence*. Berkley: U of California P, 1992.
- hooks, bell. "Homeplace (a site of resistance)." Ed. D. Soyini Madison 448-454.
- *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Boston: South End, 1989.
- "Writing the Subject: Reading *The Color Purple*." Bloom. 53-66.

- Kabir, Shameem. *Daughters of Desire: Lesbian Representations in Film*. London: Cassell, 1998.
- Katz, Tamar. "'Show me How to Do Like You': Didacticism and the Epistolary Form in *The Color Purple*." Bloom. 77-88.
- Kessler-Harris, Alice and Karen Brodtkin-Sacks. "The Demise of Domesticity in America." *Women, Households, and the Economy*. Eds. Lourdes Beneria and Catharine Stimpson. Piscataway: Rutgers UP, 1987.
- Kousha, Mahnaz. "Race, Class, and Intimacy in Southern Households: Relationships Between Black Domestic Workers and White Employers." *Neither Separate Nor Equal: Women, Race, and Class in the South*. Ed. Barbara Ellen Smith. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999. 77-90.
- Lanza, Carmela Delia. "Hearing the Voices: Women and Home and Ana Castillo's *So Far From God*." *MELUS* 23 (1998): 65-79.
- Lauret, Maria. *Alice Walker*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000.
- Leavitt, Sarah. A. *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2002.
- Leder, Priscilla. "Alice Walker's American Quilt: *The Color Purple* and American Literary Tradition." *Critical Essays on Alice Walker*. Ed. Ikenna Dieke. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999. 141-152.
- Levin, Ira. *The Stepford Wives*. 1972. New York: Perennial, 2002.
- Lucero-Trujillo, Marcela Christine. "The Dilemma of the Modern Chicana Artist and Critic." Madison. 619-626.
- Oakley, Ann. *Woman's Work: The Housewife, Past and Present*. New York, Pantheon Books, 1975.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. *We Were the Mulvaney's*. New York: Dutton, 1996.
- Madison, D. Soyini. *The Woman That I Am: The Literature and Culture of Contemporary Women of Color*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997.
- McLaughlin, Emma and Nicola Kraus. *The Nanny Diaries*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2002.
- Pickard, Jen. "Women in the Soviet Union." 1988. *Youth for International Socialism*. 19 January 2006.
http://www.newyouth.com/archives/theory/women/women_in_soviet_union.asp

- Rabuzzi, Kathryn Allen. *The Sacred and the Feminine: Toward a Theology of Housework*. New York: Seabury Press, 1982.
- Rich, Adrienne Cecille. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Bantam Books, 1981.
- Romero, Mary. *Maid in the U.S.A.* New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Rosen, Ruth. *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women's Movement Changed America*. New York: Penguin, 2000.
- Scholl, Diane Gabrielsen. "With Ears to Hear and Eyes to See: Alice Walker's Parable *The Color Purple*." Bloom. 107-118.
- Silver, Anna Krugovoy. "The Cyborg Mystique: *The Stepford Wives* and Second Wave Feminism." *Arizona Quarterly* 58 (2002): 109-126.
- Smiley, Jane. *A Thousand Acres*. New York: Ivy Books, 1991.
- , "Not a Pretty Picture." *Novel History: Historians and Novelists Confront America's Past (and each other)*. Ed. Mark C. Carnes. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001. 160-163.
- Smith, Barbara. "The Truth That Never Hurts: Black Lesbians in Fiction in the 1980s." *Madison*. 646-670.
- Smith, Barbara Ellen. Introduction. *Neither Separate Nor Equal: Women, Race, and Class in the South*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999.
- Straub, Peter. Introduction. *The Stepford Wives*. By Ira Levin. 1972. New York: Perennial, 2002.
- Strehle, Susan. "The Daughter's Subversion in Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*." *Critique*. 41.3 (2000): 211-26.
- Tan, Amy. *The Joy Luck Club*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Thom, Mary. *Inside Ms.: 25 Years of the Magazine and the Feminist Movement*. New York: Henry Holt, 1997.
- Walker, Alice. *The Color Purple*. New York: Pocket Books, 1982.
- Warhol, Robyn A. "How Narration Produces Gender: Femininity as Affect and Effect in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*." *Narrative* 9.2 (May 2001): 182-87.
- Warner, Judith. *Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2005.

Weedon, Chris. *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1997.

Wodak, Ruth and Muriel Schulz. *The Language of Love and Guilt: Mother-Daughter Relationships from a Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Amsterdam; Philadelphia: J. Benjamin, 1986.

VITA

Kalene Westmoreland was born in Goldthwaite, Texas, in 1973, and raised in Comanche, Texas. She is married with three stepchildren. She attended Tarleton State University in Stephenville, Texas, where she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English (*magna cum laude*) in 1995 and a Master of Arts degree in English in 1998. She earned a Doctor of Philosophy in English in May 2006 from Louisiana State University; her interests are feminist theory, popular culture, domesticity, and American literature. She has taught composition and literature for seven years.