

**Girl, Goddess, and Grown-Up:  
Enacting the Feminine Feminist According to The Neodomestic Movement**

by  
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## **Abstract**

This analysis explores the respective relationships of second-wave, third-wave and post-feminisms to femininity, in the contemporary neodomestic genre. Nuancing feminism's ongoing 'housewife' debate, it questions the way in which power operates according to neodomesticity, with respect to the body, the home, and the heterosexual relationship. The central cast of characters which collectively constitute neodomestic femininity, including the 'domestic goddess,' the '50s housewife,' the 'perpetual girl,' the 'artist,' and the 'grown-up,' as well as those which delineate what she is not, 'the censorious feminist,' and 'the mother,' are examined in order to elucidate the feminine-feminist identity championed by neodomestic discourse as a new and powerful feminist subject position.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
<b>Chapter 1: Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
Literature Review	6
Theoretical Framework	21
Methodology	30
Conclusion	44
<b>Chapter 2: ‘Homework’: Defining a Genre</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Chapter 3: ‘Control Freaks’: Neodomestic Feminism as Fantasy of Control</b>	<b>61</b>
The Mother—Mythic and Material	66
The Grandmother, Remembered	74
The Husband—Real or Anticipated	76
The Self-as-Image	84
Conclusion	91
<b>Chapter 4: ‘Home-Made’: Recipes for Reconstituting Innate Femininity</b>	<b>94</b>
Embodied Knowledge: Smell and Taste	96
Abstracted Bodies: An Emotional Aesthetics of Taste	105
Domestic Storytelling: ‘Natural’ Femininity via Consumption	110
Conclusion	122
<b>Chapter 5: ‘Home-Schooled’: Lessons in Neodomestic Praxis</b>	
Elucidating the Neodomestic Philosophy of Homework	124
The Home, Personified	131
Reconnecting with One’s Inner-Girl	137
Body-Projects: Identifying with One’s Home	141
Conclusion	150
<b>Chapter 6: Conclusion: Towards a Neodomestic Movement</b>	<b>152</b>
Bibliography	160
Illustrations	171
Appendices	179

## List of Illustrations

Illustration	Description	Page
A	The iconic 1950s-era housewife	171
B	The Neodomestic	172
C	The ‘ethnic’ Neodomestic	173
D	<i>Stitch ‘n Bitch</i> (2000)	173
E	<i>Happy Housewives</i> (2005)	174
F	Darla Shine	174
G	A Visual Lesson in the Creation of Sacred Space I	175
H	A Visual Lesson in the Creation of Sacred Space II	175
I	“Sprinkling clothes by hand to dampen for ironing”	176
J	Garten: still-life with fruit	176
K	Lawson: pretty in pink	177
L	<i>How to Be a Domestic Goddess</i> (2000)	178

## **List of Appendices**

<b>Appendix</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Page</b>
A	Corpus: Publication Information	179
B	Corpus: Sub-Genre and Country of Origin	180
C	Corpus: Cultural Significance	181

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Nigella Lawson, in her best selling 2000 cookbook/lifestyle manual *How to Be a Domestic Goddess: Baking and the Art of Comfort Cooking*, expounds on the pleasures inherent in the act of baking: “feeling good, wafting along in the warm, sweet-smelling air, unwinding, no longer being entirely an office creature” (2001: vii). The ‘fairy cake,’ a “plain bottomed prettily iced cupcake,” is a favourite treat of Lawson’s—the cover of her manual bears its image; it allows her to play the part of domestic goddess as she succumbs, “pre-rationally,” to the tiny cakes and decorates each one with fifties-pistachio-green-coloured icing beneath a pale-pink rice paper rose (2001: 39). Inevitably her dinner guests, for whom Lawson has whipped up a batch of individually iced ‘fairy cakes’ upon her return from work, also fall for the “imagination and artistry” of her creations, validating her domestic efforts to accentuate one of Lawson’s principal claims: “the reason making cakes is satisfying is that the effort required is so much less than the gratitude conferred” (2001: vii).

Equally important to Lawson’s manifesto is the claim that prowess in the kitchen allows women to enact a sexualized yet innocent vision of femininity: “the unexpressed ‘I’ that is a cross between Sophia Loren and Debbie Reynolds in a pink cashmere cardigan and a fetching gingham pinny” (2001: vii). Lawson does not want to suggest the kitchen be women’s only place, perhaps because she herself is career-oriented, or because she does not want to incur the wrath of her feminist-identified readers. She does, however, imply that her version of domestic femininity exists in complex relation to both a previous mode of domesticity, and the (second-wave) feminist critiques of that

mode. Drawing on these discourses she constructs domesticity as above all, symbolic, stating “this is hardly a culinary matter, of course; but cooking, we know, has a way of cutting through things, and to things, which have nothing to do with the kitchen. This is why it matters” (2001: vii). What emerges from Lawson’s whimsical and seemingly innocent celebration of sweetness is actually a well-defined prescription for appropriate feminine behaviour, one which likely challenges the readers’ own understanding and experience of what it means to be feminine.

Femininity is an elusive concept. Although feminist scholars have made countless attempts to identify its essence, free it from stereotype, and break down the system of patriarchal binary thought which structures it, there is no consensus on what it means to be or to act feminine. Popular brands of feminism compete to produce and promulgate a definitive cultural mode of femininity, often in the form of icons such as the ‘superwoman,’ the ‘50s housewife,’ or the ‘grrrl,’ and the results are both contradictory and confusing. As Dorothy Smith notes, femininity is an indeterminate, socially constructed phenomenon; the concept itself groups miscellaneous instances of that which it describes under the heading ‘feminine.’ The label is their only coherence (Smith 1988: 37). Despite its lack of theoretical consistency as a concept, femininity functions as a descriptor because it refers to actual, lived practices: we know what it is and we can produce examples (1998: 37). The neodomestic movement, typified by Lawson’s tome, is one cultural site in which there is no shortage of stock imagery, vying to provide a dominant, easily recognizable, if not as easily enacted, femininity. Emerging at the cusp of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, neodomesticity alters the face of femininity as envisioned in popular consciousness, declaring ‘feminine’ the new ‘feminist.’ This

analysis seeks to identify and analyze the ways in which neodomestic discourse conflates feminism with femininity, and the resulting implications of this synthesis.

Pop culture representations of women since the early nineties have increasingly spotlighted a hyper-traditional femininity, one which glamorizes, sexualizes, and reasserts the importance of acts of ironing, cooking, caretaking, and otherwise keeping an immaculate and tasteful home. This celebration of domestic labour (often referred to as 'drudgery' and the very source of patriarchal oppression in texts of a previous feminist era), presents a state of diminished autonomy and power as a compelling new feminist mode of existence for a community of women. One of the most persistent themes of post-feminist cultural production generally, and in neodomesticity specifically, is the "retreatism" scenario, in which "a well-educated white female professional" downplays her "empowerment" by "withdrawing from the workforce (and symbolically the public sphere)" to fulfill her true feminine nature and "devote herself to husband and family" (Tasker and Negra 2005: 108). Working women are targeted by neodeomestic texts as a stereotypical, gendered group whose true needs, goals and desires centre around the domestic sphere, the locus of a femininity typically "devalued" or "neglected" in more explicitly feminist cultural production. Because neodomesticity evokes the discourse of both post-feminism and the third-wave celebration of "disparaged elements of girl culture and accoutrements of femininity" (Sharrock 2003: 62), simply condemning neodomestic texts as anti-feminist or misogynist, although tempting, cannot adequately address the complexities of the genre. Neodomesticity is a particularly powerful articulation of the attack on autonomous womanhood because of its relation to a now idealized and mythologized past.

Feminist theorists have investigated contemporary domesticity, in terms of the way it constitutes female sexuality (Kingston 2004), and classed and raced identities (Skeggs 1997, Brooks 2000). The relationship between domesticity and consumption (Lury 1996), domesticity and modernism (Johnson and Lloyd 2004), and even domesticity and feminism (Brundson 2005) have also received critical attention. While these approaches insightfully address (neo)domestic ideology and its relation to compelling social constructions of womanhood, they ignore one of its less obvious implications. The strategies employed by neodomestic discourse to effect the ontological shifts, for example regarding the nature of sex and gender, which allows for the conflation of feminism with femininity, necessarily involve the 'girling' of adult women. This is certainly an unusual route to feminist empowerment, what one might call 'autonomous' or 'grown-up' womanhood, and it requires further investigation.

Neodomestic femininity, what may be envisioned on one level as a state of 'perpetual girlhood,' is more than simply an attitude or a personal philosophy adopted by individual women who, like Lawson, may actually like to clean or cook. Such a characterization ignores its systemic nature and political consequences. Neither is it the mere extension of actual adolescence into the lives of adult women. Girlhood, like femininity is a discourse. It exists in, among other sites, the language of neodomesticity, where real political struggles are played out (Mills 1997: 43). Written and visual allusion to costumes or dress-up, make-believe, play, comfort, safe or private spaces, a retreat from the workforce, family and foremothers, prettiness, softness, sweetness, and cleanliness (whiteness) not only reference the class, racial and gender identity of women implicated in the genre, but speak to the way in which they are positioned as immature,

timid and oblivious to the outside world, or in other words, as childlike. The work of the neodomestic text is to articulate such a subject position as both desirable and empowering for its adult readers. Unlike third-wave feminism, which employs the universal 'we' of feminism with caution and even trepidation, acknowledging the necessity of the 'we' for political mobilization while understanding that such a move risks universalizing a single feminist experience (Siegel 1997), the discourse of neodomestic femininity celebrates an outdated and exclusive sisterhood. It is a sisterhood of white, middle-class, heterosexual women for whom housework, the true work of womanhood according to neodomesticity, is a choice.

The 'girling' of representations of women can be observed in many pop-cultural, post-feminist sites such as reality television, heterosexual self-help for women, and 'girl power' brand marketing. As in the discourse of neodomesticity, these texts adopt the language of feminism in which to couch blatantly antifeminist sentiments. They render the threatening figure of the competent, professional, adult woman "safe" by depicting her as fundamentally still a child, playing on popular post-feminism's "double address" which celebrates women's achievement of legal rights and increased visibility in the public sphere while expressing dissatisfaction with the (anti-housewife) rhetoric of second-wave feminism, the very idiom which enabled these advances (Tasker and Negra 2005: 108-9). Lawson, a successful business woman, bestselling food writer and international television personality, employs this strategy in referring to herself as 'irrational,' encased both within the protective walls of her kitchen and a layer of pastel knitwear, and intently dedicated to the enactment of innocence through delicate, pretty, domestic tasks. While bright, close-up images of Lawson's elaborate culinary

handiwork grace every second or third page of *How to Be a Domestic Goddess*, the only photograph of the author herself appears in soft focus on the book's back cover. Lawson could, however, be the poster-child for the generation of adult girls who 'buy' her work, in both senses of the word—women who are not only (willfully) oblivious to the arguments of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, but who even seek out what Anne Kingston terms "mystique chic": "an illusory refuge from the drudgery of the corporate workplace, a nostalgia for a way of life many women born after 1960 had never known, which [makes] it the most potent form of nostalgia" (2004: 66). The fact that *The Feminine Mystique* was re-released in 2001, nearly forty years after it was first published, attests to a renewed cultural questioning of the significance of domestic labour in women's lives, and its function in delineating contemporary femininity.

### **Literature Review**

Laura Kipnis, in her recently published polemic *The Female Thing: Dirt, Sex, Envy, Vulnerability* (2006), contentiously claims that contemporary women are complicit in their own disempowerment; "*the inner woman*," an unanticipated opponent to feminism, is foisting a self-imposed traditionalism on modern, white, middle and upper-class women, fettering the very champions of women's liberation and empowerment to traditional modes of femininity (2006: viii-x). In her chapter entitled "Dirt," Kipnis interrogates the relationship between cleaning and the feminine psyche in terms of notions of physical and metaphoric purity and contamination, and their implications on women's experience of their bodies and sexuality. She argues that women's apparent propensity to perform the vast majority of domestic labour, their

invariable gravitation towards dirt, is yet another form of ‘female-on-female sabotage,’ not a result of unmitigated male power and social privilege. Women furtively enjoy highlighting the incompetence or apathy their male partners exhibit in performing the routine domestic tasks, such as scrubbing the bathtub, wiping down countertops, or even simply getting their dirty socks into the hamper, which they are cajoled or hounded into performing. More importantly, women delight in sharing these anecdotes of their partners’ domestic ineptitude, and of their own often frenzied going over of men’s substandard work, with female friends. Kipnis states: “it’s unclear whether the real domestic problem between the sexes is that men *won’t* clean or that women *will*” (2006: 91).

There are several ways in which one can approach the body of writing on domesticity, from those produced in the nascency of the second-wave feminist movement to the most recent works noted above, as well as the theoretical literature on femininity which provides the context in which the exploration of domesticity is necessarily situated. Modern feminist thought on the topic has evolved within and through several distinct periods: the second-wave, the third-wave, and arguably, the contemporary post-feminist era.<sup>1</sup> Second-wave feminism recognized domestic arrangements as a source of significant public interest and concern, at least among women, and established domesticity as a credible topic of multidisciplinary academic

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<sup>1</sup> Some first-wave feminists, such as Charlotte Perkins Gillman, did also address domestic labour as an issue of feminist concern. The group known as the ‘domestic feminists,’ for example, proposed the “complete transformation of the spatial design and material culture” of American homes and neighbourhoods (Hayden 1981: 3). Domestic feminists challenged the physical separation of private and public space as well as the domestic and political economies, divisions which incurred the consequence of women’s isolation in their homes, where their survival was dependent on the domestic services with which they could provide their husbands (1981: 3). A highly innovative collective, the domestic feminists proposed radical alternatives to the standard Victorian architectural design: kitchenless homes, day care centres, public kitchens, and community dining clubs (1981: 3). Their vision never materialized on a mass scale, however, and this debate remained on the periphery of the first-wave feminist movement.

research. In their attempts to determine the very ontological nature of ‘gender,’ feminists espousing both sides of the heated essentialism/social constructivism debates were alike mobilized to map out gender roles, and by virtue increased the visibility of women’s labour. Although feminist scholars eventually undertook projects to uncover the untold history of the ‘ordinary woman’ (Matthews 1987, Ogden 1986, Strasser 1982), the predominant tone of the second-wave was decidedly ‘anti-housewife’; widely held was the belief that women’s prescribed roles as wives and primary caregivers contributed significantly to their oppression under patriarchy (Greer 1970, Firestone 1970). The resulting feminine/feminist dichotomy which underlies much second-wave writing can still be observed in some current feminist thought (see, for example, Kipnis 2006).

Third-wave feminism(s) takes contradiction and plurality as a guiding theoretical principle; the possibility of identifying how women, as a group, do or should experience domesticity therefore does not elicit significant attention. Rather, femininity is examined according to the intersection of race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality and ability, and as such, cannot be universalized. Although there is an intentional lack of consensus regarding what femininity means, looks like, or feels like, the accoutrements of ‘girl culture,’ for example hyper-feminine clothing styles or activities such as knitting or baking, are celebrated in third-wave popular and academic forums alike, in a subversive project of recuperation (Baumgardner and Richards 2000, Karp and Stoller 1999). Post-feminist musings on domesticity, conversely, tend to take a reactionary stance in opposition to a perceived lingering second-wave pedantry (Fox-Genovese 1996, Wolf 1993). Often this takes the form of a self-proclaimed power struggle

between post-feminists' espousal of a liberal feminist perspective, the goals of which are now enshrined in law in the West, negating the need for feminism altogether, and the radical, "gender feminism" of the second-wave, which is scorned as prudish in its alleged anti-male, anti-sex rhetoric. The inherited feminist/feminine binary is itself held up as intrinsically oppressive, at least to the faction's white, middle-class, heterosexual female audience, as, according to its logic, the only subject position open to the 'average' woman, she who is particularly invested in the domestic sphere and the enactment of 'femininity,' is that of victim.

Employing a periodized frame is not to argue for a teleological reading of the field, as the same debates continue to trouble contemporary scholars and popular authors as they did their second-wave predecessors. The following literature review is structured to reflect not only the debates within the three periods of feminism identified above, but also across them, in order to tease out their thematic and theoretical relationships.

Pseudo-academic and journalistic tracts on the topic of domesticity, like Kipnis,' are steadily appearing on bookstore shelves, and are garnering significant popular acclaim. These texts critically explore the neodomestic movement in the form of satirical cultural critique. Characteristic of this body of work is the admission, by the tracts' female authors, of complicity in the neodomestic ideology. Anne Kingston, author of the bestselling work, *The Meaning of Wife* (2004), introduces her investigation of the "insidious battle now being waged over female identity" with a three page confession of her fascination with the late Princess Diana, a symbol of all that constitutes the experience of wifehood today: "enchantment to fairy tale wedding, to

motherhood, followed by disenchantment, adultery, betrayal, revenge, and divorce” (2004: xiv). Although a professed follower of Martha Stewart, Caitlin Flanagan, in her recent, *To Hell with All That: Loving and Loathing our Inner Housewife* (2006), declares that according to neodomestic discourse, femininity necessarily becomes little more than a “drag queen ethos,” in which it is communicated through “exaggeration and cartoon” (2006: xix). Flanagan tackles the increasingly ‘obvious’ paradox of contemporary femininity: the greater the real social power accrued by women today (i.e. the right to live and work as men do), the more attracted they are to the “privileges and niceties of traditional womanhood,” while neglecting the very responsibilities which allowed them these privileges (housework and childrearing) (2006: xix). Despite the fact that the pseudo-academic and journalistic texts are written to be above all, commercially viable, entertaining reads, their analysis of the state of contemporary domesticity is generally thorough and astute.

These works explicitly reference an earlier generation of popular domestic questioning, principally Betty Friedan’s foundational text, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), in which the author famously gives voice to the “problem that has no name” (Friedan 2001: 15). Academic inquiry into domesticity also makes inevitable reference to Friedan, often as a simple, reverential nod to the feminist ‘pioneer.’ Despite the fact that *The Feminine Mystique*’s numerous shortcomings have been thoroughly expounded upon in subsequent feminist critique—for example, the way in which Friedan both universalizes the experience of white, middle- or upper-class wives, denying the lived reality of working-class and non-white women, and essentializes masculine and feminine gender traits in her celebration of the former and repudiation of the latter (see,

for example, Hollows 2000, Meyerowitz 1994)—her legacy and contribution to second-wave feminism is rarely conveyed as less than profound. Friedan channeled women's discontent into activism, which significantly contributed to the tangible legal and social successes of second-wave feminism. Arguably published because of its potential to reach a new audience (the only genre to successfully tap into the suburban housewife market at this time was the cookbook) rather than the publisher, Norton's, desire to promulgate Friedan's particular brand of feminism (Bradley 2003: 5), the work's central claims rang true among its millions of readers. Specifically, Friedan claims that it is impossible for women to find true satisfaction or achieve full personhood when living vicariously through husband and child, confined in the private sphere to the role of housewife and mother. The media, particularly women's magazines, play a central role in manipulating women into believing quite the opposite, and the culture of consumption they engender encourages the satiation of women's needs and desires, those persistently precluded by the enactment of traditional femininity, through the consumption of household goods. *The Feminine Mystique* retains its power to inspire approbation among female audiences, even today; as Anna Quindlen notes in her introduction to the book's 2001 edition, in reference to the forty years' time elapsed since its first publication: "so much has changed, and too little, too, so that rereading the book now feels both revolutionary and utterly contemporary" (Quindlen 2001: x).

The continued relevance of Friedan's work to the study of domesticity, and to my own research on the neodomestic movement, is found precisely in her focus on both the nature of female personhood and the way in which the media shape female identity and desire, as issues of feminist concern. Friedan alludes to the connection between

domesticity as a way of life and the impossibility of achieving mature adulthood for women, an identity, she notes, which is distinct from actual, physical maturity: “our culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfill their potentialities as human beings, a need which is not solely defined by their sexual role” (Friedan 2001: 77). When women are defined primarily by their sexual and reproductive functions within the heterosexual family unit, they are precluded from ever truly ‘growing-up.’ Despite the fact that the mass media coverage of *The Feminine Mystique*, at the time of its publication, brought second-wave feminism to millions of women who would otherwise have little connection to the movement, Friedan did not retreat from condemning the media, positioning it as the central location through which “the feminine mystique” was propagated and a chief source of women’s oppression in its construction of restrictive, domestic femininities (Bradley 2003: 4, 17). Although her theorization of media effects—*The Feminine Mystique* champions the likes of Harold Lasswell’s “powerful effects” theory in which the media are all-powerful in their ability to manipulate viewers (Bradley 2003: 17)—may appear somewhat outmoded, Friedan continues to inspire a new generation of feminist writing. Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* (1991), for example, posits that beauty culture functions in the same way and for the same purposes as Friedan’s “religion” of domesticity (Wolf 1991: 66). Friedan’s perspective situates *The Feminine Mystique*, and the work it spawned, squarely in the realm of communication studies.

Friedan’s mode of address, and the way in which it captured the imagination of a generation of women, is also of consequence to my analysis. Many of the techniques Friedan employed to capture a mass audience are also exploited by authors of the

contemporary neodomestic genre. Although Friedan would be more accurately described as a labour journalist and political activist than a housewife at the time of *The Feminine Mystique*'s publication, she resolutely situates herself in the suburban home and downplays her professional achievements in order to appeal to her target audience. She also uses the personal voice to express a sense of urgency and zeal, offering her readers 'individual' strategies, in step-by-step form, to assist them in solving what outwardly appears to be an insurmountable problem: the plight of the housewife (Bradley 2003: 22).

More activist, second-wave works such as Alix Kates Schulman's, "A Marriage Agreement" (1970), a text widely reprinted in the likes of *Life* and *Ms.* magazines and numerous feminist anthologies, have also left an imprint on both popular and academic ruminations on domesticity. Schulman attempts to redefine traditional sex roles by intricately mapping out and assigning every domestic task, from cooking to cleaning to childcare and childrearing, equally between herself and her husband. A 50-50 division of domestic labour between husband and wife is intended to undermine the accepted belief that paid labour is more valuable than domestic labour, and that the privilege of earning an income necessarily allows a man to impose the entire burden of domestic labour, including childcare, on his wife (1970: 6). Marxist feminists also examined the issue of housework, in the form of the 'domestic labour debate,' which spanned a decade beginning in the early 1970s (see Seccombe 1974). They attempted to theorize the reasons for which women continue to bear primary responsibility for housework and childrearing in modern industrial societies, and questioned the relation of women to the

production of labour power, attempting to impose existing Marxist categories onto “human activities hitherto unanalyzed by them” (Kaluzynska 1980: 40).

Feminist sociologists, such as Ann Oakley, followed Schulman’s endeavour to both map out and compute the housewife’s duties. Oakley, in her study *The Sociology of Housework* (1974), explores the housewife’s attitudes regarding the inevitable, ceaseless rote of her everyday life, in order to both amend the sexism inherent in the discipline of sociology, and recognize the intrinsic value of women’s work. Sociological studies of women’s labour in the home are still undertaken because of their continued relevance (see Hochschild 1989, Maushart 2001).

Not all second-wave texts, however, subscribe to the housework-as-the-very-source-of-female-oppression school. In her 1972 article, “The Women’s Movement,” Joan Didion expresses contempt for second-wave feminism’s propensity towards “sullen public colloquies” about the inequities of domestic labour:

they tott[ed] up the pans scoured, the towels picked off the bathroom floor, the loads of laundry done in a lifetime. Cooking a meal could only be “dogwork,” and to claim any pleasure from it was evidence of craven acquiescence in one’s own forced labor. Small children could only be odious mechanisms for the spilling and digesting of food, for robbing women of their “freedom” (1972).

Didion challenges the notion that it is possible to build a feminist movement on such trivial inventories, particularly when they are interpreted literally, rather than as a metaphor for the position of women as an underclass within society. Although keeping score may strike a chord with the ‘average woman,’ the act fails to capture the larger point of feminism as a political movement: to make the “inductive leap from the personal to the political” (1972). In retrospect, such inventories of domestic labour were hardly trivial; they forever altered the way in which women’s work in the home was

both envisaged and valued. No longer did housework exist in the abstract, as a woman's natural duty to her husband and her family, and the activity with which she happily filled her day while waiting for her husband to return from his 'real' job. These early debates elucidated the relationship between the public and the private spheres, particularly regarding centrality of the domestic, sexual and reproductive labour performed by women in the home, to the survival of the system of separate spheres. Despite Didion's vision for a movement which transcends the cataloging of domestic duties, what she calls a list of 'half-truths,' authenticated merely through repetition, domestic arrangements remain a central subject of feminist debate; as Kipnis succinctly states: "the recent history of feminism is, among other things, a protracted argument about who does the cleaning up" (2006: 91).

In addition to the above noted texts, there exists, to a lesser extent, a scholarly body of research on the topic of contemporary domesticity. Lesley Johnston and Justine Lloyd's *Sentenced to Everyday Life: Feminism and the Housewife* (2004) credit Catherine Hakim, and her 1995 article published in the *British Journal of Sociology*, "Five Feminist Myths about Women's Employment," with sparking the debate. Hakim claims that feminist sociology has created "a new set of feminist myths to replace the old patriarchal myths about women's attitudes and behaviour" which buttress the belief that women are passive victims who have little or no responsibility over their situations (1995: 430). She posits a classification of adult women into two sub-groups, those who have chosen to pursue a career in the public sphere, and those who have chosen marriage as their career and who hold odd jobs on an irregular basis. As a result, she claims, feminist commonplaces, such the assumption that inadequate childcare is a barrier to

female employment or that women who work part time are exploited by low wages and few benefits, lack statistical and theoretical accuracy (1995: 450). Regardless of the veracity of Hakim's findings, which were contested in the following issue of *BJS*, much feminist domestic research is revisionist in nature, undertaken to give both the historical housewife, and her living contemporaries, due credit for their traditionally undervalued labour (Matthews 1987, Johnston and Lloyd 2004).

Charlotte Brundson, in "Feminism, Postfeminism, Martha, Martha and Nigella" (2005), explores the relationship between feminism and the domestic resurgence she has observed on television of late, in particular the relationship between receiving domestic instruction and the enactment of a feminist identity (2005: 111). She locates the neodomestic trend within a greater cultural post-feminist moment, where young women ironically enact traditional modes of femininity in order to disassociate themselves with second-wave feminism's "personally censorious, hairy, and politically correct" ideology (2005: 112). Brundson's work not only provides a compelling analysis of the way in which (neo)domesticity operates in a post-feminist climate, but also an explanation of the increased visibility of the ironic, hyper-feminine domestic figure in popular culture: to facilitate this disidentification with second-wave feminists and erect in their place, the new "feminist in the kitchen" (2005: 111). Research on the topic of domesticity is frequently subsumed within a greater analysis of contemporary femininity; they are, indeed, inherently connected. When analyzing the work on domesticity, one also inevitably encounters reference to the feminine/feminist dichotomy, whether it be an assertion of its obsolescence or an affirmation of its continued cultural relevance.

It is possible to interpret the history of feminist research and criticism as a continual process of elucidating the relationship between the feminine and the social and political world, or more precisely grappling with femininity as an identity fundamentally connected, yet almost antithetical, to the goals of any particular feminist project. Brundson argues that because the study of femininity necessarily constitutes a part of the feminist cannon, it is both justified by feminism (no other framework would allow for academic work on the topic) and undermined by it, as some, particularly academic, feminisms approach cultures of femininity with derision. In such cases, feminism functions as the “politically correct form of femininity” (Brundson 1998: 356). The second-wave assertion that gender roles are socially constructed and mapped onto biological sex in order to give the appearance of natural or innate differences between men and women, rather than evidence of actual biological sex differences (an accepted feminist “truth” later challenged by theorists such as Judith Butler (1993)), underpins the understanding that in order to produce a feminist identity, it is necessary to reject a feminine one (Hollows 2000: 10). Early proponents of this view, such as Friedan (1963) or Germaine Greer (1970), privileged and aligned themselves with typically masculine gender traits while rejecting overtly feminine ones, in order to establish a feminist credibility (Hollows 2000: 14). Although contested, this anti-feminine bias persists today in feminist discourse. The book jacket of Kipnis’ latest work boasts that it follows in the tradition of Friedan and Greer’s eminent works, and while *The Female Thing* does not explicitly privilege masculine traits over feminine ones, an unsympathetic and scathing critique of femininity is the result of her exposé.

A significant faction of second-wave feminists also embraced the feminine. Theorists as diverse in theoretical orientation as Susan Brownmiller (1975), Andrea Dworkin (1981), Susan Griffin (1981) and Carol Gilligan (1982), maintained an essentialized view of gender identity in order to hail the superiority of innate feminine characteristics, the root of woman's virtue, over man's violent and power hungry nature (Hollows 2000: 10). While the feminist-feminine dichotomy clearly posed as much of an issue for second-wave feminists as did 'patriarchy,' it remained a largely under theorized and self-evident category of being in this literature, in both its essentialist and social constructivist forms (2000: 17).

Contemporary post-feminists such as Katie Roiphe (1993), René Denfield (1995), and Christine Hoff Sommers (1994), cite the early "anti-sex," "anti-male" feminist theorists, Susan Brownmiller and Andrea Dworkin, as propagating the belief that womanhood must necessarily be equated with powerlessness and victimhood (Kinahan 2001: 41). A central issue in the debates surrounding femininity is clearly who gets to control its meaning. Second-wave feminism of the 1970s and 80s did struggle to take ownership of the dominant mode of femininity, proposing the alternative 'feminist' identity as a means to end women's objectification on the grounds of sex, as well as to do away with the 'housewife' role forever (Brundson 1998: 359). Because feminist identity was, and in some feminist circles may still be, understood as incompatible with traditional femininity, the role of feminism becomes to transcend, or somehow purge society of, traditional femininities in order to unleash women's true potential (1998: 359). Popular post-feminists object to this radical "gender feminism" from which they feel alienated, on the grounds that the "equity feminism" of their mothers' generation is

nothing less than their birthright (Kinahan 2001: 44). Like conservative post-feminisms, the texts which attempt to map out the territory of third-wave feminism, such as Rebecca Walker's, *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (1995), and Barbara Findlen's, *Listen Up: Voices from the Next Feminist Generation* (1995), generally characterize it as "the project of feminist 'daughters,'" a "young" feminist generation born into the movement.

Unlike the post-feminist insistence on taking back meaning, however, there is a distinct resistance in this body of literature to imposing a single understanding of femininity on women, and it instead allows for a multiplicity of meanings. Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake state that

the lived messiness of the third wave is what defines it: girls who want to be boys, boys who want to be girls, boys and girls who insist they are both, whites who want to be black, blacks who want to or refuse to be white, people who are white and black, gay and straight, masculine and feminine, or what are finding ways to be and name none of the above (1997: 8).

Third-wave feminism unabashedly links femininity with girlhood while exploding the relationship between girlhood and biological age. Third-wavers employ the term 'girl' in reference to adult women, celebrating it as a viable identity for the feminist identified woman. Angela McRobbie notes that it is not surprising that women today often refer to themselves and others as 'girls,' when there is little social consensus regarding what and who a 'woman' is; uncertainty as to what it is to be a woman increasingly permeates society as a whole (McRobbie 1993: 408). Today, there is a greater degree of fluidity about "what femininity means" and about "how exactly is it anchored in social reality" because young women have been "unhinged" from their traditional gender position. The

relationship of femininity to feminism, as represented in popular culture, remains as ambiguous today as it was thirty years ago (1993: 408).

A concept with the potential to inform the void of meaning which has come to characterize contemporary femininity (and as a result, domesticity), particularly in relation to feminism, is that of age. Like gender, age is deeply social, performative, and correlated to asymmetries in social power, status and access to resources (Gardiner 2002). Assumed to be the province of an undefined ‘young’ feminist generation, third-wave and post-feminists alike offer little theoretical insight on the topic; according to Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra, “age is only acknowledged [in post-feminist representation] to the extent that its effects can be erased by cosmetic surgery” (2005: 109). The concept of age is, however, central to an analysis of neodomestic femininity. The genre’s figures are represented in typically adult circumstances, preparing food for a family, doing housework or laundry, and sometimes even in ‘adult’ circumstances (in *Domestic Bliss*, Rita König advises women to “do the housework in your underwear—it’s much easier and boys will love it, especially if you are in your highest heels” (2002: 66)), yet the scenarios are performed, almost played at, and freed from any association with ‘grown-up’ responsibility. An analytical focus on age, as that which is more than simply a matter of developmental predictability, is necessary to complicate, contextualize and depolarize discussions of femininity.

Evident in the popular and academic literature alike is the impossibility of carrying out an analysis of domesticity without taking into account that ‘indeterminate, socially constructed phenomenon’ which we call ‘femininity.’ The figure of ‘the housewife’ pervades both our cultural consciousness and decades of feminist theory and

social commentary. Various she is condemned as oppressed, she is liberated through (second-wave) feminism, her image is 'recuperated,' her contributions to society are celebrated (particularly in the third-wave embrace of all things 'girl'), and she is reinvented as the latest incarnation of the 'real' (post)feminist. I will draw on the ambiguities which surround the concept of femininity, and which continue to complicate any understanding of domesticity, to further nuance the 'housewife' debate through my own consideration of the nature of female personhood, the relationship of the public and private spheres, and most significantly, the relationship of femininity and feminism, in the neodomestic genre.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In elucidating the role of neodomestic texts in the discursive construction of a very specific feminine identity, one which is comprised of discourses of the 'perpetual girl,' the 'domestic goddess,' and 'the grown-up,' among others, I will employ a three-part theoretical framework. Specifically, my analysis will draw together key concepts from Dorothy Smith's application of the concept of discourse in theorizing femininity as a discourse, Angela McRobbie's examination of post- and popular- feminisms, and various threads of the discipline of girls' studies, with particular attention to the way in which third-wave and post-feminism theorizes 'the girl.'

Of basic import to the theorization of neodomestic (post)femininity is a recognition of the fact that women readers of the neodomestic genre adopt this subject position willingly; whether because it affords a sense of pleasure, comfort, or any number of other rewards, this we cannot know with certainty. However too much

feminist theory, in the analysis of an oppressive phenomenon such as that of neodomestic femininity, posits women as powerless victims of a system that they cannot change. Neodomestic readers may be complicit in their own subjugation to the discourse, but also retain a limited autonomy in the willful act of consuming the texts. Dorothy Smith (1988) develops the concept of discourse, as articulated by Michel Foucault, to effectively theorize femininity as more complex than a mode of behaviour imposed on women to deny them access to social power. To perceive femininity as discourse requires a shift away from the way in which it is typically understood, as a normative order which subordinates women, to a set of actual, lived relations vested in texts. These practices and relations which constitute what we understand when we evoke the feminine or femininity is what Smith calls “the original ground” (1988: 37); this forms the basis of her examination of discourse. She claims it is insufficient to explain the phenomena of femininity on the level of meaning, normative pattern or signification because this transforms lived experience into a system of symbols which are then studied as abstractions, removed from the original processes. Femininity is not simply that which women passively accept, or worse, are manipulated into, but a concept which women actively create: “it is a social organization of relations among women and between women and men which is mediated by texts” (Smith 1988: 39).

Textual discourses of femininity index a work process performed by women, which although not highly visible due to its unpaid nature, requires much the same tools, material and skills as does more conventional work. The production of a discursive appearance is accomplished, for example, through the use of technique to create one’s self as an instance of the image. This process is visible in neodomestic texts in the

transformation of the text's author or central figure, through the work of domesticity, into the figure of a stereotypical or iconic housewife, a process which the reader is encouraged to duplicate. Femininity is work one does to construct one's image as closely as possible to this textual ideal (Smith 1988: 44). In looking at discourse, we do not analyze texts at the level of meaning, separate from how they are used, but at the level of interpretation, namely how we read or view them and how our world of social action is organized by them. As discourse, femininity is a web of texts, stringing together the multiple local and particular sites of the lived experience of women and men with the economic market. Smith claims that there is an ongoing dialectic between women's freedom to express themselves stylistically within discourse, and this includes the choice to act in a distinctly "unfeminine" manner, and the pull of the popular media to fully regulate desire and demand. As such, the discourse of femininity constantly evolves as women use, play with, break and oppose the codes with which they are faced. In other words, women are active, skilled decision makers in this process.

Because this analysis of the neodomestic genre implicates a number of feminisms with varying and sometimes contradictory ideologies, it is important to situate the genre in the context of the contemporary popular feminist climate. Angela McRobbie's schema in "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture" (2004) proves particularly useful to this end. McRobbie posits post-feminism as the means by which second-wave feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s are undermined through a manipulation of popular culture, which appears to engage a "well-informed" and/or "well-intended" response to feminism while actually casting feminism as out of date and redundant. This is accomplished through the use of tropes such as 'freedom' and 'choice,' which are

inextricably linked to the category of “young women,” creating a generational divide between those women and older feminists (2004: 259). It is clear from the literature review that this generational divide plays a central role in shaping the particular brand of feminism championed by the neodomestic movement. McRobbie provides conceptual frames through which to understand how power operates in post-feminist women’s genres, such as that of neodomesticity. For example, she explores how the discourse of female individualization operates to construct a new “gender regime,” through cultural products such as self-help guides, in which the second-wave feminist struggles which enabled the relative freedom enjoyed by young women today are erased and replaced with the rhetoric of ‘choice’ and a denial of the social inequalities between men and women which still persist (2004: 260). Among these choices is apparently, the option to exist in a perpetual state of girlhood, an identity from which gender inequalities between men and women need never trouble the mind.

The question of what it means to ‘grow up’ as a woman has preoccupied feminist thought since the time Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*, posing fundamental questions about personhood and specifically, autonomous womanhood (Johnson 1993: vi). More recently, the ‘growing up’ question has become the purview of girlhood studies, where the acquiring and acting out of femininity is demonstrated to be plagued by self-esteem and body image crises, and characterized by poor academic performance and deviant sexuality among girls. The experience of sexuality is one of the central characteristics of girlhood. In contemplating the question, ‘how do we turn girls into women?’ Naomi Wolf observes that in our culture, this process is achieved “through what happens to [girls], and what they choose to do, sexually” (Wolf 1998: xv). Girls’

sexuality is “everywhere on display,” as an article for dissection, proscription, and especially, titillation (1998: xv). Meanwhile, cultural and legal sanctions on the sexual behaviour of girls convey the message that good girls are not sexual. Girls who do express their sexuality are therefore either simply bad girls, if they are active, desiring sexual agents or good girls, who have been victimized by boys’ “raging hormones” (Toleman and Higgins 1996: 206). As Wolf asserts, it is far more acceptable for girls to tell stories of submission to and confusion over sex and sexuality, than to assert identities of “sexual marauders and adventurers, cultural analysts and subversives, fantasists and sapphists, egoists and conquistadors” (1998: xvii). This dichotomy, which effectively limits girls’ own power to assign meaning to their sexual experiences, informs the dominant discourse not only of the ‘proper’ girl, but also of appropriate womanhood.

While girlhood literature sheds light on how girls negotiate the feminine, and generally acknowledges that, like femininity, girlhood is an indeterminate, socially constructed phenomenon, insufficient attention is paid to the consequences of this theoretical position, namely the fact that this state which we call ‘girlhood,’ continues to characterize women’s experience long after the period of actual female adolescence has passed. Instead the ‘slipperiness’ of the terminology is offered as a caveat: it is often difficult to distinguish exactly who belongs in the category, ‘girl,’ as membership is not necessarily determined by biological age. As Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards note, when the term ‘girl’ is employed, it may refer equally to the female child who plays with Barbie dolls and the playful cast of *Sex and the City*, who trail, in their wake, a sense of “eternal girlhood” (2004: 59). Girlhood therefore, is not simply a place from

which adult women come, but a “constantly shifting, discursively constituted sign that comes to mean and represent many things besides ‘young female’” (Eisenhauer 2004: 87). Other theorists reiterate the context specific nature of the term:

it can connote community and inclusiveness among friends (“one of the girls,” “you go girl!”) or denote status (little girl, young girl, older girl). It is an index of age. It can also be an insult (“you throw like a girl”), condescension (“the girls at the office”), or a term of endearment (Jiwani *et al.* 2006: ix).

Contemporary girlhood studies, in their embrace of multiplicity and contradiction as central theoretical preoccupations, are visibly influenced by the principles of third-wave feminism. As such, this work denies the feminine/feminist dichotomy, or at least the significant contentiousness it evoked to earlier feminist scholars, in the attempt to map out the terrain of ‘girl’ and ‘woman.’ Baumgardner and Richards employ the term “girlie,” which connotes ‘sexyness,’ ‘camp’ and ‘irony,’ to signify the intersection of feminism with feminine culture (2004: 60). They use “girlie” much as the gay community uses the term “queer”: in a concerted attempt to reclaim as empowering a once denigrated subject position.

Amid the indeterminacy which surrounds the concept, there are numerous ascertainable theoretical “facts” which constitute the ‘girl.’ The most basic premise and *raison d’être* of girlhood studies as genre, is the recognition that the experience of girlhood is fundamentally distinct from that of womanhood. Girlhood is often enacted through the attempt to perform so called ‘normal femininity,’ although such efforts inevitably fail, given that girlhood is constituted through the very impossibility of being, or becoming, a successfully “grown up” female subject (Griffin 2004: 30). Nonetheless, the ‘girl’ is a sexual, and sexualized (heterosexual) subject. She is also a consuming subject and exhibits a femininity well suited to consumption, evidenced by the anxious

debates over the politics of 'girl power' brand marketing (Griffin 2004: 35). Ultimately, girlhood is theorized as a potentially powerful, feminist subject position, simply because it is a chosen one.

Current girlhood literature therefore posits an understanding of self-aware femininity consistent with Smith's account of discourse, asserting that the experience of young femininity constantly changes as its meanings are negotiated and lived by young women (Aapola *et al.* 2005: 1). The fact that girlhood is theorized as a socially constructed phase of life, rather than a fixed biological process, makes possible the analysis of neodomestic femininity as a set of tensions involving the experience of 'growing up' as a girl/woman, of (hetero)sexuality, and of consuming culture and cultural artifacts, despite the fact that there is little existing research on discourses of 'adult' girlhood. According to Jennifer Eisenhauer, girlhood research can not only complicate our various definitions of what it means to be a female child, but also disrupt the assumptions which inform the "construction of subjects within feminism" (2004: 86).

This is clearly what is at stake in the neodomestic project; neodomestic femininity poses a challenge to conventionally accepted and stereotyped (second-wave) feminist identities. Eisenhauer continues: the way in which feminism constitutes the 'girl' as its "repeatedly othered" subject, replicates the same effective/ineffective, real/imaginary and agent/victim binaries traditionally associated with the hotly contested man/woman binary. This results in a definition of 'girl' in relation to 'woman' alone, without acknowledgement of the complexity of the specific experiences of 'girlhood' (2004: 81). In analyzing neodomestic texts, an exploration of the "othering" or

“disidentification” structures at the core of post-feminist cultural output (Brundson 2005: 114), will be productive in understanding the conflation of the discourses of femininity and girlhood.

While uncertainty regarding what it means to be a woman, or to be feminine, does, as McRobbie posits, permeate all aspects of popular culture, the explicit link between girls’ experiences and women’s adult lives cannot be denied. When it is, the result is a loss of the inherently political connection between the two fields of study (once present in second-wave writing on the subject), characterized by a focus on girls’ experiences in isolation, rather than a mapping out of problems which persist into adulthood, however defined (Ward and Benjamin 2004). In other words, while girlhood literature establishes the link between the experiences of girlhood and of femininity, it does not necessarily explore how this connection is deliberately articulated in popular media in order to undermine adult women’s position of relative social power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The discourse of neodomestic femininity capitalizes on this subtle evasion.

Because neodomestic femininity is an element of post-feminist cultural production, it does not operate in the same manner as the third-wave construction of the girl; a focus on intersectionality is replaced by a more limited, essentialist vision of womanhood. Neodomestic literature is not alone in this ontological slip: as Marnina Gonick argues, despite the assertion by most feminist scholars of girlhood that ‘girl’ is a socially constructed identity which reflects the intersection of race, class, ethnicity, ability and age amongst its subjects, when the category of “girl” is named in research, in education, in sociological and psychological discourses, or in popular culture, it most often evokes the experience of the white, middle-class, heterosexual girl (2006: 122).

This is because preexisting discourses of femininity, age, agency and sexuality, and the social practices they engender, continue to constitute the normative category 'girl' as much as the female subjects who individually claim it (2006: 122). In neodomestic discourse, the 'girl' possesses an 'authentic voice' which is threatened by cultural prescriptions for feminist behaviour. The discourse echoes early girls' studies, often known as first-wave girl's studies, in which feminist sociologists, journalists and educators lament the way in which the strong voices of young girls are silenced by late adolescence as they learn implicit cultural expectations for feminine behaviour (Mazzarella and Pecora 1999: 2). On both sides, culture is credited with producing a social climate poisonous to girls (see Pipher 1994), although both the girl and the poison identified (sexism versus feminism), is quite different according to first-wave girls' studies and neodomestic texts, respectively.

Establishing popular post-feminism as its context, I propose an examination of the discourse of (post)femininity as exemplified by the neodomestic movement. The use of Smith's understanding of the concept of discourse will facilitate my discussion of the power relations and negotiations which underlie and motivate its texts, and elucidate the role of both the 'ordinary' woman, and consumer culture, in the creation of a neodomestic ideology. McRobbie's insightful analysis of the way in which post-feminism, as a pop-cultural phenomenon, interpolates young women and encourages them to adopt an antagonistic relationship towards their feminist 'foremothers,' will inform my discussion of neodomestic femininity as a decidedly anti-feminist trend. Finally, the neodomestic genre's savvy manipulation of the concept of third-wave girlhood, particularly the celebration of domestic femininity as 'choice,' without the

concurrent acknowledgement of the many other viable femininities from which to choose, and its resulting implications regarding the way in which feminism is understood in popular discourse, will be made evident through an in-depth examination of third-wave constructions of the 'girl.'

### **Methodology**

The primary research question through which I engaged the neodomestic genre is: what relationship do its texts posit between femininity and feminism, and how is this relationship constituted? As Liesbet van Zoonen (1994) notes, semiotic and structural analysis is the preferred method of feminist communication research when asking questions of how meaning is created. Equally important as method, however, is the acknowledgment that there exists a distinct epistemology and methodology when undertaking feminist research on the topic of gender (1994: 127). Feminist research radically politicizes the research process itself, both internally, through identifying and exploring the power relations inherent in the research process, and externally, in the production of results relevant to the feminist endeavor, however conceived (1994: 130). The use of personal experience is crucial to the development of a feminist perspective and provides a sound epistemological base for research, when grounded in a critical process of reflection which recognizes the fact that all perspective is politically motivated (Griffiths 1995: 6). The authors of neodomestic texts draw heavily on their own life experience, including (explicitly or implicitly) the ways in which they understand both femininity and feminism; their intention is to produce an empathetic emotional response in the reader.

My relationship to the texts which I analyze, my identity as a (third-wave) feminist, and the ways in which I understand and enact my own femininity therefore motivate and shape this analysis. A heightened sense of awareness of myself as both researcher and consumer of the neodomestic texts is an important aspect in the construction of my corpus. Sometimes referred to as a 'double consciousness' (Mies 1978), this perspective permits partial identification of the researcher with the object of study, allowing for feelings such as victimization and outrage, or perhaps empathy, to coexist with more detached analysis and criticism (van Zoonen 1994: 129).

Intrigued by the neodomestic genre on a personal level, I selected my corpus for this project quite organically, in slow walks down the self-help, cooking, and home improvement aisles of Chapters bookstores, visits to the same sections of the local public library, and perusals of the bookshelves of friends. Specific and significant reference to at least one aspect of housekeeping or housework was the most basic criteria for text selection. Texts focused predominantly on childrearing (such as Jane Buckingham's *The Modern Girl's Guide to Motherhood* (2006)), upward social mobility (such as Camilla Morton's *How to Walk in High Heels: The Girl's Guide to Everything* (2005)), or which failed to frame domestic labour as primarily a gendered and political issue (such as *Martha Stewart's Homekeeping Handbook* (2006)), for example, were intentionally excluded as beyond the scope of this analysis despite the fact that they often exhibit some elements of neodomestic ideology. Furthermore, only texts published in the last decade were considered (see Chapter Two, page 58 for a discussion of the post-millennial nature of neodomesticity).

I carefully examined approximately twenty texts before narrowing down my selection to thirteen, a somewhat arbitrary number chosen simply because I felt the texts which comprise this sample adequately represent the diversity of theme, content and ideological orientation present in the sub-genre as a whole. They include: *Nesting: It's a Chick Thing* (2004) by Ame Beanland and Emily Terry; *The Modern Girl's Guide to Life* (2004) by Jane Buckingham; *Barefoot Contessa at Home* (2006) by Ina Garten; *Feather Your Nest: The Complete Guide to Outfitting, Cleaning, Organizing, and Caring for Your Home* (2004) by Cerentha Harris; *No Place Like Home: Staying In, Kicking Back, and Living it Up* (2005) by Michelle Kehm; *Domestic Bliss: Simple Ways to Add Style to Your Life* (2002) by Rita Konig; *Forever Summer* (2002) and *How to Be a Domestic Goddess* (2000) by Nigella Lawson; *Home Comforts: The Art and Science of Keeping House* (1999) by Cheryl Mendelson; *Playing House: A Starter Guide to Being a Grown-Up* (2005) by Celeste Perron; *Happy Housewives* (2005) by Darla Shine; *Stitch 'n Bitch: The Knitter's Handbook* (2000) by Debbie Stoller; and *Retro Housewife: A Salute to the Suburban Superwoman* (2004) by Kristin Tillotson (see Appendix A for publication details).

As above, neodomestic texts fall under the purview of a variety of sub-genres: cookbooks, 'how-to' household/lifestyle manuals, personal confessions, quasi-academic tracts, advice guides, and amalgams of all of the above. I have therefore selected texts from each sub-genre in order to demonstrate the ways in which neodomestic ideology operates across and beyond genre boundaries (see Appendix B). The texts' various countries of origin also intimate the growing pervasiveness of the neodomestic phenomenon throughout the English-speaking Western world: nine of these texts are

written by Americans, three written by British authors, and one written by an Australian (see Appendix B).

Certain selected texts undoubtedly provide models from which other, more derivative texts emerge. Nigella Lawson is arguably the opinion leader *par excellence* of the neodomestic movement, and is its most widely recognized persona. Her media ‘empire’ approaches that of Martha Stewart’s in scope, consisting of five bestselling cookbooks and a sixth forthcoming publication, three television series and several Christmas specials which are broadcast throughout the world—all of which can also be purchased on DVD or video—and a line of high end “Living Kitchen” products available throughout Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand, and Japan.<sup>2</sup> Nigella, who is recognizable by her first name alone, writes a column for British *Vogue*, adorns the cover of magazines, is frequently interviewed, appears on talk shows such as *Oprah* and *Ellen*, and has hosted a talk-show of her own. The “Nigella Lifestyle” permeates her texts—in her television programs, Lawson is often pictured “dropping off and picking up the kids, shopping for food, [in] photo shoots for her books, writing on the computer, playing with the children, socializing with friends,” and so on (Hollows 2003:182)—drawing attention to the fact that her work is about so much more than simply cooking. In other words, it is not only other cookbooks authors who derive inspiration from Lawson’s texts—although in this research sample, Ina Garten’s text *Barefoot Contessa at Home* (2006), is written in a Lawson-esque vein—but the authors of a variety of neodomestic lifestyle manuals, such as Jane Buckingham, author of *The*

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<sup>2</sup> See Lawson’s official website for details (<http://www.nigella.com>).

*Modern Girl's Guide to Life* (2004), Rita König, author of *Domestic Bliss* (2002) and Celeste Perron author of *Playing House* (2005).

Cheryl Mendelson published one of the first bestselling neodomestic texts, *Home Comforts* (1999), and could be credited with launching the neodomestic movement despite the fact that she is not its best known personality. This household manual has sold over 200,000 copies since its publication in 1999, and was widely reviewed by the likes of *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*—an unusual occurrence for a text on the topic of domestic instruction (Hauser 2000: 2). *People* magazine dubbed Mendelson the “doyenne of dustbusters” and the “reigning queen of a new domesticity” (2000: 3). *Time* magazine credits the author with starting a so-called “Cheryl Mendelson debate”—i.e. “just who does Cheryl Mendelson think she is to tell women how to clean a house?”—which situates her in the “messy centre of a profeminist/anti-feminist argument” (Hauser 2000: 4). Mendelson’s success continues with *Home Comforts*’ sequel, *Laundry: The Home Comforts Book of Caring for Clothes and Linens* (2005), despite the fact that the former text contains a 197 page section on this very aspect of housework. *Home Comforts* and *Laundry* are representative of the spate of texts published to provide detailed instruction on the completion of even the simplest of domestic tasks, among them Cerenta Harris’ *Feather Your Nest* (2004).

Debbie Stoller inspired a whole series of how-to manuals with the publication of her trend-setting text *Stitch ‘n Bitch* (2000), including her own *Stitch ‘n Bitch Nation* (2004), *Son of a Stitch ‘n Bitch* (2007), and *Stitch ‘n Bitch Crochet: The Happy Hooker* (2006), as well as a whole new wave of knitting and crafting books for the ‘hip’ and

sophisticated ‘third-waver.’ She maintains a somewhat iconic third-wave feminist status as the founding co-editor of *Bust*, a magazine which purports to capture

the voice of a brave new girl: one that is raw and real, straightforward and sarcastic, smart and silly, and liberally sprinkled with references to our own Girl Culture—that shared set of female experiences that includes [sic] Barbies and blowjobs, sexism and shoplifting, *Vogue* and vaginas (Karp and Stoller 1999: xiv-xv).

Texts such as Michelle Kehm’s *No Place Like Home* (2005) and Darla Shine’s *Happy Housewives* (2005) adopt her celebration of all things ‘girl,’ although not necessarily her third-wave politics. Stoller’s texts employ a montage of old, kitschy photographs, diary-like confessions of personal information, nostalgia, irony and pop culture references in the expression of her neodomestic sensibilities. Beanland and Terry’s text, *Nesting: It’s A Chick Thing* (2004), which like Stoller’s, is published by Workman, replicates Stoller’s strategy of making domesticity fun and desirable in its compilation of quotes, anecdotes, and kitschy illustration of 50s-era femininity.

Kristin Tillotson’s text, *Retro Housewife: A Salute to the Suburban Superwoman* (2004), likewise capitalizes on the cool-factor of retro-imagery and feminist irony. It is included in the corpus, however, to represent those quasi-academic tracts that appear in the Women’s Studies section of the bookstore and library—Tillotson’s self-proclaimed credentials include a position as a fellow with the National Arts Journalism Program at Columbia University, an “award winning” newspaper column, “Pop Stand,” penned from 1996-2002, in which she often examined “gender issues, past and present” (2004: back jacket). The tone of her text makes a stronger claim to intellectual objectivity than the majority of texts which comprise the neodomestic genre, although as its title suggests, its content celebrates all things (neo)domestic.

The significance of the selected texts was established through factors such as 'best seller' status, membership in a series, association with a greater pop cultural enterprise such as a television show or magazine column, the presence of trademarking, and significant media attention and/or critical acclaim (see Appendix C). While these factors do not speak to the demographic of women who actually purchase the texts, or how they are read once purchased, they do indicate the popularity and salability of the genre itself. The texts' permanence, as cultural artifacts, also permits the study of them as a genre. Neodomesticity is not an ephemeral phenomenon; it is organized, systematic, and here to stay.

In analyzing these texts, I specifically sought out references to mothers (usually of the feminist variety who neglected domestic tasks to the detriment, emotional or otherwise, of the book's author or subject) or grandmothers (who are remembered fondly for their wholesome smelling kitchens, in which they were absolutely proficient); to the hectic and disheveled nature of working women's home lives; to the disparagement of traditional femininity, particularly by 'feminists' (those women who deny their true feminine natures); to the way in which housework is sexy, fun, healthy or glamorous (usually reinforced visually by photographs of the attractive, well dressed author or her stand-in); to the importance of a well kept family home—one's own Eden; and to the necessity of maintaining a happy heterosexual relationship. Often, it is not even necessary to tease out the neodomestic ideology from applicable texts; although it pervades them, from their packaging, to who authors them, to the advice proffered therein, the mere existence of an introduction which seeks to justify the importance of

the domestic realm to the 'modern' woman usually denotes clear membership in the neodomestic genre.

To lend credibility to the study of neodomesticity, as a feminine genre, I looked to the work of feminist media scholars. Feminist theory, although not a homogeneous field, is distinguishable by a focus on gender as both a mechanism that structures our symbolic and material worlds, and our experience of those worlds, as well as a conceptualization of power and relations of subordination and oppression (van Zoonen, 1994: 3). The media have always been at the heart of feminist critique, perhaps because it is a powerful social technology of gender (1994: 41). Feminist communication research is theoretically centred on the intersection of power with a "(historical) understanding of femininity, feminine cultures, and gender identity" (Brundson 1998: 343). Academic feminist research in cultural and media studies, a recognizable cannon of studies dubbed 'women's genres' after Annette Kuhn's 1984 article by the same name, has elicited significant critical and theoretical interest in 'feminine' genres, such as the soap opera, the melodrama, and the romance novel. This research takes as a central concern the issue of femininity and female identity and draws attention to the pleasure inherent in consuming stereotypically feminine genres (Baehr and Gray: 1996, xii). Generally ethnographic in nature, the work on the female audience (Modleski 1982, Hobson 1982, Radway 1984, Ang 1985, and Press 1991) investigates and catalogues the media tastes and usages of the 'average' woman (Brundson 1998: 352). This line of inquiry, although it references fictional texts and genres, is certainly relevant to my analysis of neodomesticity, as neodomestic texts provide female readers with a representation of themselves (albeit stereotypical and outdated), offer a sense of

satisfaction or pleasure, and are purchased on a large scale, in a manner similar to the fictional genres.

Ann Mason and Marian Meyers, in their analysis of Martha Stewart fandom, cite both Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* (1984) and Tania Modleski's *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women* (1982), as theoretical grounds for investigating how and why women use Stewart's non-fiction texts. They suggest that readers actively create meaning through the process of decoding texts (from Hall 1980), therefore content we might consider 'oppressive' can actually produce empowering messages for the audience (Mason and Meyers 2001: 806). This follows from Radway's claim that although romance novels do not question women's need for escape (the motivation for reading the novels), they do provide a distinctly pleasurable escape in their narrative fantasies. These escapes may be temporary, but they nonetheless improve the quality of their readers' lives, helping them take control by addressing their needs, anxieties and fears in certain social and familial situations (2001: 807). Modleski's findings regarding the empowerment potential of the soap opera are similar. This feminine genre generates a fantasy world in which female characters are more powerful than their counterparts on prime time TV, and allows for the crafting of resistant meanings and the challenging of traditional sex roles in the audience's own lives (2001: 808). Romance novels and soap operas do share characteristics with non-fiction feminine genres such as the self-help book and the domestic manual: they all enable women to express dissatisfaction with the current state of gendered interaction in personal relationships while repressing any definitive challenge to "the ways in which the social construction of gender works against women" (Simonds 1992: 48). Although

my analysis of the neodomestic movement is not an audience-based study, this body of scholarly work is useful in that it provides a precedent for the study of non-fictional feminine genres as a valuable feminist enterprise.

In my analysis of the selected texts, I have posed the following questions in the exploration of the neodomestic genre's approach to the feminine/feminist dichotomy, or lack thereof: how do the texts convince readers of their credibility; what 'cues' or symbols are employed by the texts to signal youth or immaturity; how is sexual attractiveness envisioned and what is the relationship of sexuality to domestic labour; how do the texts reconcile girlish femininity with the labour intensive and adult role of homemaker or housewife; what stereotypes, 'givens,' or cultural 'truths' are employed in their construction of femininity; in what ways do the texts implicate the reader, make her complicit, or not, in this particular construction of femininity; what recognizably feminist (second- and third-wave) or post-feminist techniques and concepts are employed, and specifically, to what political end?

Underlying this line of questioning is the implicit assumption that neodomesticity is an inherently manipulative genre. To substantiate this perspective, I draw on the work of Tuen A. Van Dijk, particularly his method of discourse analysis articulated in his recent article, "Discourse and Manipulation" (2006), in which the author devises a systematic theory of the structures and processes involved in manipulative communication. Manipulation by means of discourse is in no way a necessarily strategic or intentional practice, but is made possible by systems, such as the media, which limit access to, or control over, scarce resources, in this instance public discourse, to members of the 'symbolic' elite, such as journalists, scholars, celebrities,

and so on (Van Dijk 2006: 362). Its consequence is the reproduction of, or potential to reproduce, social inequalities. Van Dijk assesses manipulation neither on the basis of intent to manipulate by groups or individual actors, nor on the conscious awareness of manipulation by recipients of any message, but according to its real and potential social consequences (2006: 364).

The discursive strategies mobilized to effect this form of manipulation are numerous. Positive self-representation and negative other-representation, or 'defense' and 'accusation,' is typically employed by a dominant group to present an account of facts oriented in favour of the speaker's or writer's own interests, and to assign responsibility for any perceived negative situation to the Other (2006: 373). The contextual criteria and knowledge relevant to an understanding of the position or perspective of the marginalized group may be incomplete, vague, implicit or totally lacking. In terms of topic selection, semantic macro-structures discursively emphasize those properties or models that are consistent with the dominant group's interest, while de-emphasizing properties inconsistent with those interests. This may account for the fact that there is very little discussion of work outside the home in neodomestic texts, with the exception of reference to women's paid employment as that which inhibits the enactment of their true feminine nature. Furthermore, local speech acts are employed to 'prove' global ones; individual women's experiences which align with the dominant group's ideological position are depicted as representative of those of womankind. Generalizations function in a similar manner. A specific example with lasting impact on people's mental models, such as the iconic spectacle of Diana Spencer's marriage to Prince Charles in 1981, is taken to represent common knowledge, attitudes or

fundamental belief: a traditional marriage and subsequent life of devoted wifedom is one to which all ‘normal’ women aspire.

Examination of the grammatical structures employed in the ‘us-versus-them’ rhetorical strategy, indicates a deliberate use of lexicon, the selection of words with positive and negative connotation, syntax, the use of rhetorical figures, such as hyperboles, euphemisms, metonymies and metaphors, in constructing embedded positive and negative meaning. Visual emphasis, in the choice of colour, font size and style, images, and the layout of text and image on the page, further shapes the way in which a text is interpreted. For example, the persistent use of pink as the neodomestic colour of choice—as background colour, to highlight bolded text, to illustrate domestic objects, etc.—produces an affective response in the reader which evokes a very specific kind of femininity, even before engaging with the written text. As noted above, however, these strategies can also be employed to legitimate persuasive communicative ends.

Victoria Leto DeFrancisco and Penny O’Connor, in “A Feminist Critique of Self-Help Books on Heterosexual Romance: Read ‘Em and Weep” (1995), likewise identify the manipulative qualities of the self-help genre, particularly the way in which it encourages readers to adopt post-feminist, by which they imply anti-feminist, thought. They identify several common rhetorical strategies employed by the genre’s authors to this end, namely: a simple, anecdotal and cliché ridden language style; the extensive use of gender stereotypes; the positioning of women as wholly responsible for interpersonal relationship maintenance; the reinforcement of compulsory heterosexuality; and the intentional omission of social context in order to deny the systemic nature of the problems to which the self-help manual speaks (DeFrancisco and O’Connor 1995: 218).

This research names similar post-feminist and anti-feminist practices and strategies to those which I recognize in the neodomestic movement, and employs them as genre defining characteristics. Following DeFrancisco and O'Connor, my analysis identifies those rhetorical, grammatical, visual, and other strategies which constitute the neodomestic genre.

This understanding of manipulative discourse is partially derived from feminist analyses of the self-help genre, such as that of DeFrancisco and O'Connor, particularly in the way in which the genre is understood to react against, use and water down feminist theories to formulate its own, mirroring cultural values and participating in their creation (Simonds 1992: 8). The early feminist self-help, such as Betty Friedan's tract (recall her step-by-step, individualized approach to 'solving' systemic social problems), championed the newly emerging rhetoric of equality for women, urging women to demand the right to be "treated with respect" and to be "listened to and taken seriously" (Faludi 1981: 338). Later versions of the genre however, like those which exist today, actually assert the opposite. Women are encouraged to stop challenging social constraints, to refrain from vocalizing their thoughts and concerns, and to learn "to fit the mold rather than break it" (1981: 339). The same feminism which demanded fundamental social change in women's struggle for equality is employed in the current manifestation of self-help-as-identity-project, which advocates change only in the individual quest for self-perfection. This self-help literature

reifies constructions of gender that second-wave feminism fought against, it continues the misogynist practice of making women responsible—and to blame—for any perceived flaw in domestic arrangements and it endorses a capitalist ideology about the power and centrality of the individual (Murphy 2001: 159).

Feminist thought is so much a part of our cultural milieu that it is easily packaged and commodified; discourses of female agency relating to women's economic, professional and sexual freedom are "effectively harnessed to individualism and consumerism" because they are extremely profitable when packaged and sold (Tasker and Negra 2005: 107). The feminism which emerges from self-help, like the feminism which emerges from neodomesticity, is therefore almost totally unrecognizable.

Van Dijk introduces a series of contextual criteria which allow us to distinguish manipulative from persuasive communication. Manipulative discourse precludes the formation of counter-arguments against false, incomplete, or biased assertions through the omission of relevant knowledge; evokes strong emotion, such as guilt, to play on the reader's insecurities and render them vulnerable; presents fundamental social norms, values, or ideologies, such as freedom, in the abstract so that they cannot be challenged; and stresses the social position, profession, or status of its author(s), those credentials which may induce people to uncritically accept the discourse of an elite person or group (2006: 375). Neodomestic discourse is manipulative because it advocates a subject position, the 'feminine-feminist,' by means of the above mentioned discursive techniques, which is wholly unattainable. This is not to argue that one cannot both be feminine and a feminist, but the texts' prescriptions for achieving appropriate, neodomestic femininity, and its understanding of what and who a feminist is—both of which will be extrapolated in the forthcoming analysis—cannot logically coexist.

## Conclusion

In analyzing the neodomestic movement, I want to avoid what Charlotte Brundson refers to as the “Ur feminist” argument employed by many (post)feminist scholars when analyzing texts which have a central female character and/or are addressed to a feminine audience. We set up an “obvious” feminist reading in which either the text itself or its heroine fails some sort of test: “the heroine is not independent enough, she cares too much about shoes, she is always confined to the domestic sphere, she is always worrying about her looks, or she just wants to find a man and settle down” (Brundson 2005: 113). We then mobilize our own (emotional) engagement with the text to interrogate its harsh dismissal on feminist grounds, and commiserate with the heroine and her complex relationship to patriarchal culture. Finally we announce ourselves as the heroines of the articles we write, as surrogates of the original heroine, and take as our adversaries the more censorious feminists who will not let anyone enjoy the “accoutrements of femininity” or feminine pleasure (2005: 113).

While recognition of the pleasure inherent in the consumption of feminine texts in general, and neodomestic texts in particular, cannot be underestimated, we must also acknowledge the way in which neodomestic ideology, in its articulation of a very specific form of (post)feminist-femininity, has real cultural significance in the lives of women. I often find myself inexplicably attracted to the movement’s soft images of neatly folded white linens, to the possibility of an innocent yet sensual pleasure derived from cake baking, to the professed harmony of a well-set table, and to the possibility of unbounded power in one at least one sphere of life. Yet to live out the movement’s restrictive prescriptions of femininity, even on a ‘part time’ basis, is to necessarily limit

the autonomy one can command beyond the private sphere. The neodomestic woman is always attached: to her (mythic) foremothers, to her mediated image, to her male partner, to her home. Neodomestic texts evoke the myth, the icon, and the fantasy figure of the 'housewife' in order to undermine feminist values, and erect in their place, thinly veiled in the guise of post-feminism, a pervasive contempt for the adult, independent, working woman.

## Chapter 2: 'Homework': Defining a Genre

My mother is a 'homemaker.' I grew up a witness to the perpetual succession of chores which can occupy a woman's day: loads of laundry washed and folded; meals prepared; dishes cleaned and put away. As a teenager, everything about this 'job' offended my burgeoning feminist sensibilities. Domesticity wasn't fair, it wasn't fun, it wasn't sexy, and it certainly wasn't for me.

Not long after settling into my own home, however, I encountered what appeared to be a very different brand of domesticity. On television, Nigella Lawson flirted her way through every episode of her first cooking series *Nigella Bites*, licking her fingers, making 'eyes' at the camera, and otherwise enthusiastically enacting the hedonistic pleasure she takes in preparing food for her friends and family. Others adopted Lawson's model. It is not simply for her Cordon Bleu training, but also her physical beauty and voluptuous figure that fans tune into *Food* network chef and sensuous Italian, Giada De Laurentiis,' cooking show, *Everyday Italian*, which debuted in 2003. The dramatic television series *Desperate Housewives*, premiering in 2004, showcased the lives of Wisteria Lane's five suburban housewives, whose sexual exploits and intrigues rivaled those of the cast of *Sex and the City*. It won immediate success, critical acclaim, and a cult following.

This new domesticity wasn't just about sex, however; it was also about feminism. Amid the back issues, beauty products, hipster fashions and sex toys sold on the *Bust* magazine website—the place to go for a 'third-wave' perspective on pop culture—was a sizeable selection of domestic paraphernalia: a "pink ladies tool kit," an "I'm foxy and crafty" apron and knitting needle "roll up," "girl power gift wrap,"

“Hellraiser Homemaker” recipe cards, and “smart women” pop-up sponges, to name just a few.<sup>3</sup> With a few accessories, I learned, domesticity could be ironic, playful, and compatible with feminism.

Before long, I was the proud owner of an Anne Taintor address book filled with images of 1950s era models in housedresses, bearing captions such as ‘let’s ignore our mothers’ well-meant advice,’<sup>4</sup> a copy of Lawson’s *How to Be a Domestic Goddess*, a pink spatula, and a bundt-pan, which I regularly used. But while these various revamped performances and accoutrements of domesticity were certainly in vogue, there was something unsettling about the femininity which they encouraged. My university roommates, for example, began to affectionately refer to me as ‘mom’ after the point at which my donning an apron and whipping up a banana loaf became almost routine. What was the difference between this third-wave expression of femininity and my mother’s domesticity? I decided to embark on a project of closer examination with regards to the movement I now recognize as neodomesticity. I found a very clear articulation of its philosophy, which I previously only sensed, in its most tangible manifestations: its books.

While you won’t find neodomestic books on one shelf in the library or bookstore, due to the fact that they are located within a multiplicity of (sub)genres, there is ample uniformity in their structure and content to discern a cohesive set of characteristics. Of central import is the philosophy of domestic labour which the texts share, variously characterized under such headings as “keeping house” (Mendelson 1999), “bond[ing] with your home” (Shine 2005), “nesting” (Beanland and Terry 2004,

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<sup>3</sup> These examples are those currently posted on the *Bust* website (<http://www.bust.com/Merchant2/merchant.mv>).

<sup>4</sup> (see <http://www.annetaintor.com>)

Kehm 2005), “feather[ing] your nest” (Harris 2004), and “be[ing] a domestic goddess” (Lawson 2000, Buckingham 2004). These somewhat frivolous descriptors index a multifaceted work process required in the enactment of neodomesticity, which involves physical, emotional, sexual, creative, and intuitive labour. In addition to the cooking, laundry, dish washing, vacuuming, scrubbing, ironing, and yard work indispensable to the upkeep of a property and its occupants, the maintenance of familial relationships and of intimacy with one’s male partner, and the decorating, styling, and entertaining which are essential to creating a home’s sense of ‘lived-in-ness,’ are all requisite duties on the neodestic roster. While often physically demanding, the term ‘domestic labour’ cannot adequately address the symbolic complexities of this process; the term ‘homework’ will therefore serve as their comprehensive substitute throughout this analysis.

Neodestic texts are produced or written by women, for heterosexual, middle- and upper-class women. Although one might assume their intended audience is comprised of ‘housewives,’ or women with ample leisure time to undertake extensive domestic projects, neodestic texts actually target women who are engaged in paid labour. One of the primary purposes of the genre is to persuasively theorize ‘homework’ as a facet of innate feminine nature; women who have already renounced paid labour in favour of domesticity, or who at least acknowledge the value of doing so, do not require further persuasion. The texts explicitly employ traditionally feminist language, such as the discourses of ‘choice,’ ‘pleasure’ and ‘empowerment,’ the reclaiming of a matrilineage, the goddess figure, and/or an authorial voice, in order to tout their immediate relevance to the feminist identified or ‘modern’ (i.e. working) woman. In

these texts, the housewife is no longer a victimized and powerless figure to be pitied, but one who 'holds the reigns' in the most significant and desirable of realms, the home.

Although it provides no analogous degree of satisfaction to homework, the authors of neodomestic texts make no secret of their involvement in the paid labour force, whether they be ambivalent, reluctant, or reformed working women. The ranks of neodomestic authors are replete with successful journalists, editors, academics and professionals. Cheryl Mendelson, for example, holds a Ph.D. in philosophy as well as a JD from Harvard Law school; she both practices law and teaches. Debbie Stoller reminds us of her doctorate in the psychology of women, and role in creating *BUST*, a "feminist magazine" (Stoller 2003: 7). Nigella Lawson earned a degree in Medieval and Modern languages from Oxford, and worked as the deputy literary editor of *The Sunday Times* before her successful career in freelance journalism, publishing and television. This reality exists separately from the persona each author advances in her text, in which a professed paramount dedication to the domestic sphere obscures her continued involvement in paid labour and the economic systems which operate through the media to produce neodomesticity. While Lawson's work has won her honours such as 'best author of the year' at the British Book Awards (2001), for example, she reserves her highest accolades, "brilliant home cook," for her 'genuine' domestic endeavors: cooking for her two children (Lawson 2000: back cover). Darla Shine, a once-television producer for PBS, literally writes her domestic commitment into her text, *Happy Housewives* (2005), interrupting the prose periodically to announce her duty to attend to a household matter of far greater importance than the text itself. In a smug tone, she declares,

Hannah just asked when I'm going to be done writing my book, because she's tired and wants me to lie with her. I have to go put her to bed; I'll be right back ... Okay, she's sleeping, but now Bill just walked in the door. I have to go pay some attention to the hubby (2005: 59).

When making reference to the texts' authors or authorial voice throughout this analysis, it is this persona to which I refer.

The confession of professional credentials does serve a function, although not the one which might be expected: to convince their employed female readers of the error of their ways by evoking pity, frustration, or disgust over the plight of the working woman. It actually allows the authors to connect with the reader and to reassure her that their prescriptions for domestic femininity are not regressive or antifeminist. This effectively curbs any accusation of retro-politics while enabling the authors to speak with experience of the lifestyle which they advocate changing.<sup>5</sup> As did Betty Friedan, the authors use a commonality between themselves and their target audience, in this case professional credentials and success in the public sphere, rather than an intimate involvement in the private sphere, to build the groundwork for their argument of the greater importance of home life.

A cast of figures populate the neodomestic genre's landscape, each of whom represents a complex and relatively unspoken set of assumptions. Among the most significant are the '50s housewife,' the 'domestic goddess,' the 'grown-up,' the 'mother,' the 'censorious feminist,' the 'Martha Stewart,' and the 'perpetual girl,'

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<sup>5</sup> Occasionally, however, the authors do belie a bias towards employment in the public sphere, one in which, as noted above, they are also quite 'at home.' Cerentha Harris, in her chapter dedicated to caring for 'the study' notes: "this is where the business of the house goes on," "this space is all about productivity," "a spot where you can get done what you need to" (2004: 291). She is clearly referencing to the performance of some form of intellectual labour, rather than the physical work of cleaning the space. Presumably, however, the previous three hundred pages of her manual were also about productivity, given the function of the neodomestic genre: to attest to the fact that cleaning, decorating, stocking, and living in one's home are enterprises worthy of as much respect as paid employment.

although the images they evoke tend to overlap and blend together. The genre deploys these figures in the articulation of the ‘feminine feminist,’ as they are a convenient proxy for more explicitly theoretical explanations of the genre’s politics. The following three chapters will examine these figures and the ways in which they interact. Because of their function in communicating the genre’s central assumptions, those which relate to genre-defining content will be briefly examined here.

The figure of the ‘50s housewife,’ currently experiencing a pop culture revival, serves as the model for neodomestic standards of feminine beauty. More precisely, her iconic silhouette encapsulates the racial politics of the neodomestic genre, which exist solely on the level of ellipsis, allusion, and assumption. Like her contemporary neodomestic counterpart, she is young, white, and her fine features are seductively made-up. She has thin ankles, wrists, and waist and slender, long limbs. She wears heels, a smile, and clothing to emphasize her most feminine features and fecund sexuality. Kristin Tillotson’s text, *Retro Housewife: A Salute to the Suburban Superwoman* (2004), reveals the neodomestic emblem’s inspiration in the form of authentic advertisements and pop cultural imagery from the 1950s (see Illustration A). It is unclear whether Tillotson is exposing these images as unattainable myth or nostalgically upholding them as a laudable ideal, but the result is their reification. The line drawings characteristic of neodomestic texts, for example, depict a stylized version of this ideal woman going about her daily chores. This figure is unnaturally tall and slender, with accentuated hips and breasts and eyelashes, tiny feet and an expression of smug contentedness (see Konig 2002: 8, 244; Perron 2005: 118, 168; Harris 2004: 4, 124) (see Illustration B). Even the attempt to bring ethnic faces to the mix is

undermined by ‘doe’ eyes, delicate noses, and thin eyebrows (see Kehm 2005: 18, 51, 116) (see Illustration C). Black women are wholly absent. The figure rather blatantly indicates the reality that only waif-like, white women are capable of true neodomestic femininity.

In any discussion of contemporary domesticity, it is impossible to avoid mention of the phenomenon which is Martha Stewart: the persona, the woman, and her empire. It is in the disparity drawn between Stewart-style domesticity and neodomesticity that neodomestic class politics, which like those of race receive little explicit critical attention, are implicitly articulated. Although abundantly escapist in nature, the neodomestic genre does not purport to instruct a mass audience on the niceties of upward social mobility. While there does exist a large genre of domestic writing, in both manual and magazine form, which serves to promote a lifestyle of wealth and luxury—“immaculate homes, perfectly made beds, elegantly appointed furnishings, gorgeous landscaping, handmade gifts for the holidays, flawless dinner parties for 12, and the time to patiently pursue complex projects or recipes” (Mason and Meyers 2001: 814)—the neodomestic genre instead promotes an identity. The home, as setting, is peripheral to the characterization of the neodomestic figure herself, and the quest to embody an idealized femininity through homework. Neodomestic texts do locate empowerment in the consumption of high end household products, a feasible alternative to actually performing domestic tasks for the genre’s time-starved target audience; consumption alone, however, cannot guarantee neodomestic success. While the texts’ authors repeatedly assert neodomesticity, and the homework which sustains it, does not require a substantial financial investment, the context of these assertions is telling: the

demographic of women to which the genre is addressed are presupposed to have the financial means to abandon paid employment. The purchase of the neodomestic text is in itself an act of conspicuous consumption; many are printed on glossy, high quality paper and are often bound in hard cover. Their luxuriant quality speaks more to the audience to whom they are addressed, than the text's incidental role in championing an upper-middle-class lifestyle.

Stewart's figure exists as the not-so-silent 'other' in the neodomestic genre, her name synonymous with the quest for a somewhat inane domestic perfection—a foil to the texts' own author figures and their implicit value systems. Stewart and the neodomestics are, indeed very different. While Stewart's texts represent a continuation of a centuries long tradition of domestic instruction, in which domestic labour serves the valuable end of ensuring the attractiveness and smooth operation of a household, neodomestic texts are the latest manifestation of popular, post-feminism. The domestic labour neodomesticity advocates is relevant only in the way in which its enactment brings into being a specific gender, class and racial identity. Neodomestic author, Rita König, for example, is lauded as the “Carrie Bradshaw of domesticity” on the cover of her text, *Domestic Bliss* (2002), immediately identifying the text's contents as an exercise in *Sex and the City*-like post-feminist antics, rather than a serious meditation on the most effective method of steam cleaning or the proper care of shower grout.

Stewart envisions her *Homekeeping Handbook* (2006) as a modern version of *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861). To prove her claim, she painstakingly traces the lineage of her tome in its introduction, noting the bestselling and “cutting edge” manuals of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, such as *The*

*Concise Household Encyclopedia, A Woman's Book, and An Encyclopedia of Domestic Economy*, which provided valuable insight and ideas for her own project. Stewart then details the similarities between *Homekeeping Handbook* and Beeton's earlier manual. Both are encyclopedic in scope. Neither are the project of a single woman's creative impulse but are the product of extensive research compiled by a large staff of skilled employees (Stewart 2006: 5). Stewart's text, like Mrs. Beeton's, focuses on challenging housekeeping problems, such as polishing nickel hardware, or sealing stone floors, and the proper management of one's home. She will not assert that housework is, above all, "a labour of love" (Mendelson 1999: xi), or that the well kept home is the source of women's "actual power" (Shine 2005: 88), imbued with the ability to meet all our "physical and mental needs" (Perron 2005: 1). Stewart instead advocates practicality, hard work, and organization.

Neodomestic author Cerentha Harris, who penned *Feather Your Nest: The Complete Guide to Outfitting, Cleaning, Organizing and Caring for your Home* (2004), once worked as a freelance researcher for *Martha Stewart Living* magazine. She sums up the difference between Stewart's and the neodomestic philosophy of homework in one mildly disdainful quip: "it was an interesting place to work, staffed by lots of very smart people who took pressing napkins very seriously" (Harris 2004: 2). Harris objects to the fact that there is nothing explicitly gendered about the maintenance and cleaning advice Stewart tenders, a fact reinforced by the *Homekeeping Handbook's* dedication, which reads: "to all mothers and daughters, fathers and sons, who have a room, an apartment, or a home to care for" (Stewart 2006: 5). This perspective is quite unlike that

offered in the neodomestic text, which turns on the assumption that homework is women's work.

This is not to argue that neodomestic texts do not also provide valuable and informed domestic information. Cheryl Mendelson, in her neodomestic text, *Home Comforts: The Art and Science of Keeping House* (1999), also acknowledges her predecessors with a history of dusting starting with Catharine Beecher, although she employs history as a parable to discredit those feminist historians who, she claims, (incorrectly) brand domestic work as superfluous (1999: 13). Mendelson's work is also lengthy and detailed, containing the same scientific line drawings and charts which characterize Stewart's. It does not, however, locate its authority in the pedigree of the domestic manual genre. This she situates in the personal knowledge and experience passed down to her from both her maternal and paternal grandmother and their housekeeping "styles," of which we read a detailed account of both (1999: 4, 7, 16). Furthermore, Mendelson uses her text as a platform to condemn the poor housekeeping habits of the American middle-class, which she claims, has led to "skyrocketing" obesity, allergy and asthma rates, higher accident rates from "disorderly and untended homes," and children "farmed out" to "indifferent institutional care" (1999: 8). She alludes to the women of Jane Austen, Leo Tolstoy and Charles Dickens novels as evidence of the way in which "defective housekeepers" cause chaos and unhappiness in the lives of those who depend on them (1999: 12). For Mendelson, physical cleanliness is closely associated with moral cleanliness, and the connection is a highly emotional one.

Stewart and the neodomestics diagnose two very different problems; whereas the former addresses the personal or private matter of properly and efficiently maintaining one's own home, the latter engage with the social function of homework, as they envision it, and the way in which it can contribute to a vision of both neodomestic femininity and feminism. This is not the only significant difference between the two types of manual—Stewart's asexuality is another fundamental reason for which her texts cannot be easily subsumed into the neodomestic genre. I have therefore excluded them from the corpus.

The neodomestic genre posits domesticity as of the utmost interest to the 'girl'—feminist or otherwise—who is prominently represented in its texts in various manifestations, rather than the 'grown-up' woman, in whom the responsibility for domestic labour usually lies. Whether readers are encouraged to remember and reincarnate their childhood selves, or to adopt fantasy (including that of oneself as domestic goddess), dress-up, make-believe or play as a strategy to negotiate domestic expectations, the girl serves as a reminder of the idyllic potential of the home. The frequent use of words such as 'bliss,' 'comfort,' and 'tranquility' in neodomestic titles alone indicates the extent to which the 'real' world beyond the home is figured as a stressful and frightening place for women, whatever their age. To be in possession of the body of an adolescent girl, moreover, greatly assists in the task of keeping one's male partner sexually interested, an important aspect of homework. The girl therefore not only functions as a figure in the discourse, but also as a trope often employed to discipline the reader. While neodomestic texts, for example, do not condemn the expression of (girlish) sexuality, they severely limit the way in which it may be

expressed: namely in a monogamous, heterosexual partnership. This paradigm is rarely explicitly pronounced but everywhere implied, in the total absence of any other alternative relationship models. The ‘girthing’ of the adult woman is a central strategy of neodomesticity, and will likewise be examined thoroughly in the following three chapters.

Also contributing to the disciplinary function of the neodomestic genre is its central technique: the recipe. The recipe is a microcosm of the genre’s greater rhetorical stratagem; neodomestic texts are recipes in the sense that they instruct the reader on the ways in which to effectively mimic its central figures. When the genre is understood as a set of very precise directives on the means by which to apply neodomestic feminism/femininity in one’s life, an analysis of this technique is productive in my continued attempt to explicate the power dynamics at work in the enactment of neodomestic identity. Its structure provides a simple entry point into a complex discursive formulation of the relationship between the neodomestic body and subjectivity, such as an instance of tangible proof, for example, of the ability of nostalgic remembrances to evoke a genuine, material effect on the body (as will be examined in Chapter Four). The recipe is closely related to the self-help style, pop-psychology techniques which figure prominently in the neodomestic genre, as a popular phenomenon invested in the quest for female ‘empowerment.’ The texts purport to offer individually tailored solutions to their readers’ (perceived) problems, although the creation of neodomestic ideal-types through a series of cookie-cutter solutions is a more truthful assessment of the proffered solutions. While the cultural ‘meaning’ ascribed to femininity is what is at stake in the neodomestic genre, such techniques also encourage

its female adherents to envision the difficulties necessarily entailed by neodomestic femininity (limited access to financial resources, total responsibility for the maintenance and care of one's home and its occupants, to name a few) as a matter of purely personal concern. Accessible, magazine-style check lists (such as "things you need in your kitchen" (Buckingham 2004: 3)), quizzes (such as the "nest test" (Kehm 2005: 4)), and personality profiles (such as "the chick's eye versus the cock's eye: a bird's-eye view of domestic life" (Beanland and Terry 2004: 62)), interpolate the reader into a familiar discourse of feminine self-help rhetoric. Many of the texts' authors have worked in the women's magazine industry, in which pop-psychology also finds frequent expression, which may partially explain its use as a discourse. Celeste Perron is a former lifestyle director for *Cosmopolitan* magazine, Jane Buckingham is a current contributing editor of the same publication, and Darla Shine aspired to be its editor (Shine 2005: 23). Rita Konig "pens the idiosyncratic column, "Rita Says" in *British Vogue*" (2002: back cover), the same magazine for which Nigella Lawson also writes a syndicated column. Self-help techniques, under the rubric of a more general recipe for neodomestic femininity/feminism, structure and substantiate the genre's insistence that the root of all female discontent is individual, rather than systemic in nature.

Because the logic of these texts is unburdened by the feminist/feminine dichotomy of second-wave feminism, they are written to appeal to women who, like myself, came of age in a post-second-wave feminist climate, for whom the two identities are not mutually exclusive. These women constitute a 'young' feminist generation, whether they be in their twenties, their thirties, or their forties, due to the fact that they espouse (or are assumed to) a very different feminist consciousness than do their

mothers, as children born into the movement.<sup>6</sup> The genre is clearly an offshoot of popular (post)feminism, as described in the Introduction. The fact that this brand of feminism is also the height of fashion, particularly in its effectiveness at selling products to women, from music to fashion to feminine products, also partially explains the explosion of neodomestic texts. As Charlotte Brundson notes, Nigella Lawson couldn't be ironic in the kitchen if Martha Stewart had not already been "super-competent" there (2005: 114). This fact alone, however, cannot explain the emergence of neodomesticity as a distinctly post-millennial phenomenon. One reviewer of Cheryl Mendelson's *Home Comforts*, notes that her work is made possible in a way that would never have occurred in a previous generation, by the widespread entry of women into "the higher echelons of the work force" (Kummer 1999). I agree with Corby Kummer's assessment, although not for the reason he provides, namely: the genre's female readers have come to expect the "professional-level explanations" that the neodomestic genre provides because of their expertise in paid employment (1999). Rather, the genre's existence is made possible by the fact that so many women do work. This reality is the principle obstacle which prevents women from achieving true feminist empowerment, and is figured as the genre's central problem. If women were not working, particularly those in high-powered, executive level position or in industries of significant cultural clout, such as magazine publishing, journalism, and academia, the neodomestic genre and its goal of

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<sup>6</sup> in June of 2000 a whole cohort of women, who were labeled "housewife wannabes" in the popular media, were discovered by a highly publicized *Cosmopolitan* survey which claimed that as many as sixty-eight percent of women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four actually aspire to a domestic life, even before they have children (Kingston 2004: 7). Neodomestic texts clearly do target young women, in whose lives, we might assume, domesticity would yet have little relevance. I myself, however, am in my mid-twenties and am likewise drawn to the texts' celebration of a retreat into a world where one's source of power is derived not from positions of actual social, cultural or economic clout, but from the performance of a certain type of femininity.

convincing women to abandon the work force for their 'original' and 'natural' calling of 'homework,' would be moot.

The neodomestic text judges women by their ability to conform to a narrow definition of idealized femininity based on essentialist presumptions of women's innate responsibility to care for and nurture, the outmoded, mythologized housewife icon of a bygone era, and an inaccurate understanding of the nature of second- and third-wave feminisms. The genre employs a savvy application of post-feminist principles, a large cast of female figures, the recipe-like rhetorical strategies of self-help, and the disciplinary strategy of 'girling' its readers, in the heralding of neodomestic 'femininity' as the newest incarnation of the feminist subject. Chapter Three examines the way in which the collusion of femininity and feminism operates as a logical possibility in the genre through the characterization of feminism as the ability to exert control over others. Three significant relationships are examined: the neodomestic subject's relationship with her mother, with her husband, and with herself, as image. Chapter Four continues this line of inquiry by exploring the way in which feminist empowerment is located in the acceptance of one's innately feminine nature. Neodomestic texts discipline readers to recognize their sensory and emotive responses to food as evidence of the naturalness of neodomestic femininity, and rewrite the 'story' of domesticity through the lens of the recipe-like rhetoric of self-help. Finally Chapter Five examines the way in which the feminine/feminist subject emerges from neodomestic discourse through homework practices. The texts instruct readers on the way in which to transfer the seat of their very identity from the body, which among girls, is its conventional stand-in, to the home, through the recoding of 'homework' as an artistic vocation.

### Chapter 3: Control Freaks: Neodomestic Feminism as Fantasy of Control

“So here we are again, ladies, right back where we started—in the home. But this time, the sistas are doin’ it for themselves” (Kehm 2005: xiv). The chosen nature of the particular brand of domesticity advocated by neodomestic writers such as Michelle Kehm, author of *No Place Like Home* (2005), lies at the heart of the movement’s (post)feminist politics. Domestic labour, what was once “dull and limiting,” is now “creative, and ironically enough, liberating,” because today’s generation of “economically and intellectually liberated” women are no longer obligated, by financial necessity or tradition, to complete it (Kehm 2005: xiii, xiv). ‘Choice,’ or ‘freedom to choose,’ are oft-employed phrases which act as convenient short-hand to connote now commonplace second-wave feminist ‘truths.’ They also symbolically reinscribe ‘homework’ as a privilege, a right and a source of emotional satisfaction. That such catch phrases lose their meaning when devoid of context, or that an activity need not necessarily be ‘feminist’ simply because it is declared to be so by the woman who does it, are technicalities lost on these authors.

Neodomestic texts inevitably open with a crude statement of their authors’ political position vis-à-vis homework, in which a palpable antagonism towards the second-wave feminist privileging of traditionally masculine activities and the public sphere over feminine crafts and domestic labour fuels a compelling ‘new’ feminist call to arms. “By loudly reclaiming old-fashioned skills,” Debbie Stoller declares, “women are rebelling against a culture that seems to reward only the sleek, the mass-produced, the male” (2003: 10). She continues, “all those people who looked down on knitting—

and housework, and housewives—were not being feminist at all. In fact, they were being anti-feminist, since they seemed to think that only those things that men did, or have done, were worthwhile” (2003: 7). Kehm echoes her sentiments, declaring “somewhere down the line, the work that women do was billed as being less important than the work of men. Who started this rumour and why really isn’t the issue at hand here—the issue is that women actually bought into it” (2005: xiii). The reader is therefore implored to alter her preconceived (i.e. negative) assumptions about the experience of domesticity. Historically, they argue, the housewife lacked respect simply because we did not grant it to her; the association of homework with despair, and unappreciated drudgery—“prefeminist housewives being chained to their mops, not allowed by society to have any ambitions beyond making the kitchen floor glisten and getting their families’ whites really white” (Perron 2005: 207)—has very little to do with our current reality.

This ‘new’ feminism is by no means a cohesive or comprehensively developed theory throughout the genre, however. The term ‘feminist’ is employed by different texts in different ways, while some texts make no mention of it at all, preferring the use of synonyms, such as ‘empowerment,’ ‘liberation,’ and of course, ‘choice.’ Neodomestic discourse adopts the third-wave celebration of ‘girl culture’ when convenient (for example, see Kehm 2005, Stoller 2003, Konig 2002), while half-truths and misconceptions that paint contemporary feminism as outmoded and even repressive are invoked for the sole purpose of undoing feminism as we know it (McRobbie 2004a: 259) (for example, see Shine 2005, Lawson 2000). Authors who avoid the term ‘feminist’ altogether do not necessarily remain neutral in their politics, but subtly allude

to the failure of feminism as a movement in its present state by suggesting ways in which women can reclaim a lost sense of empowerment (for example, see Garten 2006, Mendelson 1999). Consistent among all texts is a call, either explicit or implicit, for a re-branding of feminism, particularly with regard to its focus on the systemic and social nature of gender inequality, which neodomestic discourse narrows to the individual, private level. Neodomestic (post)feminism, as a result, emerges as a distinctly local and relational politics. Femininity becomes a feminist subject position when the competencies required to exert power over others, and the way in which those others, in turn, perceive the feminine subject, are mastered in their performance. Locating the potential for women's empowerment in the 'successful' enactment of interpersonal relationships, neodomestic discourse attempts to draw women back into the private sphere and encourages them to examine political issues on an emotional level. This chapter will elucidate neodomesticity's 'feminine feminist' through an examination of the discourse's ultimately unsuccessful attempt to equate social power with the exaggerated sense of both self-importance and importance in the lives of others, derived from the supposed act of exerting control over others, which the figure exudes as the architect of those relationships.

The turning-inward such an equation requires is consistent with the post-feminist belief that there no longer exist, in this 21<sup>st</sup> century, significant barriers to women's equality (beyond the self-imposed), a belief generally espoused by the neodomestic text. Barbequing, playing poker, drinking scotch, selecting wine, buying and operating electronics, driving a vehicle with a manual transmission, and any number of other 'manly' pastimes are posited as no longer beyond the scope of possibility for

women (that is, women of a certain socioeconomic class, and not without the help of the instructions provided). These trivial activities purportedly stand as evidence of the wealth of opportunities available to women, even while female readers are implored to never pretend to be like a man, but instead to “learn the things men know to make [themselves] a better woman” (Buckingham 2004: 209). Second-wave feminism is trivialized in the attempt to make it appear irrelevant, in what Angela McRobbie calls a “ritualistic denunciation” which is required of anyone who wants to “count as a girl today” (2004a: 258). For example, Jane Buckingham, author of *The Modern Girl’s Guide to Life* (2004), quips, “as a Modern Girl, I consider the continued use of nylons as a failure of the women’s rights movement” (2004: 175). Stoller plays with puns in her text—“Take back the knit” (2003: 9); “holding your own” (yarn) (2003: 38)—with the same result. The audience, educated in irony and feminist cultural heritage, “gets the joke” (McRobbie 2004a: 259). While the tone of the neodomestic text may be lighthearted, its message is unyielding: to be ‘pro-choice,’ so to speak, when it comes to neodomestic feminist politics, is to assert the imperative for women to trade in their stockings for a kind of power not located in the financial security and social prestige of paid employment—that which is found only in a commitment to ‘homework.’

What emerges from the texts’ opening pages is a muddled and contradictory discourse characterized by clichéd manifestations of second-wave feminism’s language and concepts—“nesting has come a long way, baby” (Kehm 2005: xv)—the expression of a staunch belief that women can do anything men can do, and a reiteration of women’s inherent and distinct, feminine natures. Advice such as the following results: all women *should* own power drills, although preferably ‘cute’ ones—“pink with

rhinestones” or made by Prada (Buckingham 2004: 233). They must operate them “fearlessly,” with a willingness to “chip their nail polish in the name of home improvement” (Beanland and Terry 2004: xviii), but under supervision because “the only thing worse than a bra burner is some dizzy girl doing her bit for women’s rights and making us all look like idiots by short-circuiting the entire house” (Konig 2002: 254).

Neodomestic texts, in their mission to graciously bestow upon disparaged, traditionally feminine tasks such as cleaning, caring, decorating, laundry, cooking, and so on, a project of feminist recuperation, proffer such tasks as the practical means by which to enact its politics. The neodomestic genre identifies three significant relationships through which the feminist potential of ‘homework’ is evidenced: one’s relationship with one’s mother (a complex and muddied relationship which involves also one’s relationship with grandmothers and other mythic ‘foremothers’), with one’s male partner, and perhaps most significantly with one’s self, as image. In exercising control over these relationships through ‘homework,’ women serve to regain the skills, the moral authority, and even the purchasing-power robbed of them by the perceived, second-wave feminist denigration of feminine culture and its domestic manifestations.

Neodomestic discourse does not suggest that domestic tasks themselves, are inherently feminist, contrary to, for example, some second-wave feminism’s insistence that domestic labour is, by its very nature, oppressive. Instead it is the performance of domesticity for those looking on, a spouse, a neighbour, one’s female friend, even a total stranger, which apparently opens the space for new feminist potential. Stoller, author of *Stitch ‘n Bitch* (2003), knits in public spaces, such as on the bus, for example. This is an

effective form of feminist activism because of the response it elicits: men and women alike stare with “openmouthed curiosity” at her performance of an activity perceived to be as archaic as “churning butter” (2003: 9). Their rapt interest in the performance is evidence of Stoller’s power *over* them. She communicates her (explicitly feminist) politics by capturing the attention and imagination of a stranger, if only momentarily. Because feminist potential is thought to be located in the conscious enactment of domesticity, neodomestic discourse reveals both a heightened concern over appearances and a collusion of appearance, or role-playing, with actual selfhood.

### **The Mother—Mythic and Material**

Neodomestic discourse holds ‘the mother,’ by which both one’s real mother, and the figure of ‘mother feminism’ are implied, ultimately responsible for the devaluation and deskilling of women’s work. The authors’ relationship with their mothers is therefore one of considerable conflict, and can be neatly summed up by Buckingham’s ambiguous, catch-all declaration, “I blame my mother” (2004: xiii), a refrain implicitly repeated across the neodomestic texts examined. The mother figure exists as a foil to the modern ‘homeworker.’ She is as an example of misguided faith in paid employment’s potential to serve as a basis for female identity, of benign neglect for the sacred duty of women, to pass domestic know-how from one generation to the next, and even of total domestic ineptitude induced by a second-wave feminist-inspired mass exodus from the home. The mother’s rejection of traditional femininity results not only in her adult daughters’ confusion over the completion of even the simplest domestic tasks—how does one wash a dish, remove a stain, sew a button?—but a loss of oral

history, of memory and of identity for subsequent generations. Buckingham continues, “she gave me confidence, an education, ambition, and unconditional love. She just refused to teach me how to iron (‘Iron? That’s what held women back!’ she would say), or make a bed properly, or stock a pantry, or pick out a decent bra that fits” (2004: xiv). Her concerns are echoed by her contemporaries, such as Harris, who diplomatically asserts, “coming of age under the bright light of feminism in the sixties and seventies, our mothers. . . were often reluctant to pass on the skills they saw as chaining them to the home” (2004: 1). Other authors use humour to make the same argument: “my mother convinced me that only bored and boring little girls needed to have their mothers shell out good money for [a Barbie Dream House] ... I was robbed of the pleasure of owning that pink confection” (Beanland and Terry 2004: 26). Occasionally these sentiments are even echoed with indignation, as they are by Shine, who decries, “our mothers have no idea how they burdened us with liberation and equality. It’s an enormous responsibility to live up to. It’s exhausting” (Shine 2005: 24). A life beyond the home is what ‘the mother’ seeks for her daughter; to embrace ‘homework’ is to rebel against her ambition and reassert control over the trajectory of one’s life.

Darla Shine, in a long winded rant entitled, “The Feminists Sold Us a Raw Deal,” declares her intent of “tak[ing] on the women behind the feminist movement,” those second-wave feminists whom the ‘mother’ represents (2005: 25). The “feminist movement” to which Shine refers is an incomplete sketch of early-second-wave feminism, an artifact of the 1970s as mythic as the ‘bra-burner,’ albeit one of feminism’s most easily recognized manifestations.<sup>7</sup> That Shine’s diatribe is historically inaccurate

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Shine falsely suggests that achieving the ability to participate in the paid labour force, now a reality and a necessity for most women, has been/is the primary, and potentially only real goal of

does not undercut its effectiveness. As Imelda Whelehan argues, the positioning of ‘feminists’ as the cultural oppressors of “normal women” is now commonplace (2000: 4). A contributor to *Nesting* (with a “master’s degree in poetry, not potpourri!”) confesses that she finds her decorating obsession is quite embarrassing, as it “messes up [her] carefully wrought M.O.”: “the epitome of the untamed, undomesticated feminist who spends her time running a home business, not running to Home Depot” (Beanland and Terry 2004: 52). While teaching and practicing law, Cheryl Mendelson lived a “secret life” in which she kept her homework hidden, fearing that if her “passion for domesticity” became known, she would face social ostracism (1999: 3). She declares it is the former occupation, practicing law, which is “boring, frustrating, repetitive, unintelligent drudgery,” rather than the latter, as it is often portrayed in the media (1999: 10). In a rare moment of insight, Shine asserts

my entire generation of women were raised to be more than housewives. It was engraved in our brains at an early age that we could finally be something. Our sisters before us ... opened so many doors for us, and now we were expected to step up. We had to take our places in the workforce. We were expected to be something. Aspiring to be a mom, to get married, was not something we said out loud (2005: 22).

Perhaps what embarrasses these women is the uneasy realization that given the continued state of global gender inequality, their trivial quibbling about the rights of the most privileged minority of women, and related feelings of insignificance are themselves, just plain insignificant. Nonetheless, post-feminists, like Shine, declare

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feminism (singular). She states: “Gloria Steinem is probably horrified to read the recent statistics about women going back home to raise their children. All the hard work of the feminists is going down the drain. Really, what is the point of working so hard toward a career that isn’t conducive to raising a family?” (2005: 26). Shine clearly makes no attempt to understand the nuances and diverse goals of contemporary, third-wave feminisms. As a white, wealthy, heterosexual woman, her concerns are those of a very privileged minority whose husbands have high paying jobs which allow them to veto paid employment. Her shrill demand to install “real choice” and “respect” for the homemaker as the crux of a new feminist movement would therefore be laughable, if it wasn’t so obnoxious.

themselves members of the next ‘feminist’ generation and espouse a radical individualism as antidote to the feminism which allegedly oppresses them. This individualism “pretends the power of self-definition is all about ‘being in control’ and ‘making choices,’ regardless, it seems, of who controls the ‘choices’ available” (Whelehan 2000: 4). Ironically, it is the figuring of the relationship as an interpersonal power struggle that allows for this individualism. The neodomestic ‘homeworker’ wages an epic battle to (single-handedly) wrestle the meaning of ‘choice’ back from her mother(s).

The mother-daughter relationship, however, remains the central trope in depicting the relationship between second-wave feminism and its successors, be they third-wave or post-feminisms. The “wave” metaphor, employed throughout this analysis, is also commonly employed to organize and explain feminism; it has several possible interpretations which likewise connote an age-based, generational relationship. In oceanic terms, it suggests a familial evolution. In a process of tautological reproduction (all waves come from the same water), each future version of feminism contains the ideas of its predecessors, inflected with minor variations and differences based on a new temporal context (Eisenhauer 2004: 83). It is no wonder that post-feminists want little to do with the movement of their predecessors. The use of the term “wave” also connotes militarism, as in waves of troops. Here a future feminist “becomes a recruit and/or a volunteer who continues to fight a war on patriarchy” (2004: 84). Cerentha Harris adopts this language, claiming that the ‘art of housekeeping’ has been lost to women born to feminist mothers, because for those women, homework was “politically loaded, a ripe battleground for arguments about gender roles and equality”

(Harris 2004: 1). The feminist daughter is therefore prohibited from exploring certain destinies because they fall on the wrong side of ‘enemy lines.’ Indeed, according to both wave metaphors, the young are called on and obliged to continue the work of their aged counterparts; the new subjects of feminism enact a predestined legacy, with little command over its parameters and meaning. This generational structure is further complicated by the existence of both the biological mother and figure of “mother feminism” (Henry 2000: 213). Neodomesticity sanctions the rejection of both, condemning the mother as oppressor and entertaining the possibility of feminism as a signifier of a whole range of values and behaviours normally excluded from its purview.

According to neodomestic discourse, the much derided Betty Friedan, even when not explicitly mentioned by name, personifies ‘mother’ feminism. She is envisioned as the force behind which the anti-housewife faction was born. Stoller argues, “taking their cue from Betty Friedan’s influential book the *Feminine Mystique*, feminists were claiming that anyone who spent her days cooking and cleaning and her nights knitting and sewing, all in an effort to please her husband and her children, was frittering her life away” (2003: 6). She suggests, as previously noted, that this is merely anti-feminist rhetoric which celebrates traditionally masculine pursuits and achievements while cheapening feminine ones (2003: 7). Kristin Tillotson declares that the *Feminine Mystique* depicted housewives no longer as “positive role models,” but as “doormats at worst, martyrs at best,” although to the housewives of the time, “the home was less a spick-and-span prison cell than an ongoing project that provided her with a deep sense of purpose and identity” (2004: 8). One might wonder why, then, Friedan’s text became an almost instant bestseller. Scholar Lesley Johnston, however, lends some credibility to

their critiques. She argues that the 'happy housewife' myth that Friedan gave voice to and railed against in the *Feminine Mystique* was not perpetuated in popular culture but was actually "a myth of a myth," created by Friedan herself as feminism's 'spokesperson,' "in the attempt to construct a narrative that would make sense of and dispel the sense of contradiction and tension women felt between public achievement and femininity" (2000: 242). As such, the "story" of second wave feminism was constructed and continues to be understood as an oppositional discourse, a "breaking out" or "leaving home," which may prove less historically accurate than politically or philosophically convenient for contemporary feminism (2000: 242).

Regardless of its potential historical inaccuracy, the oppression-to-liberation shibboleth (Johnston 2000: 242) serves as a convenient starting point for neodomestic discourse as well, in which the formula is altered slightly to read: oppression-to-false-liberation-to-genuine-liberation, which is, of course, found in a return to that once oppressive sphere, the home. Despite the fact that the location of liberation is different, the line between the public and private sphere remains firmly entrenched. Moreover, the route to fulfillment advocated by neodomestic texts owes much in technique and content to Friedan's early work. Friedan encouraged women to develop "life-plans" in which their lives became a project, a remaking of the self, with the ultimate goal of "self-realization" or "actualization" (Johnson 2000: 242). A detailed discussion of the use of self-help techniques will follow in the Chapter Four; however it is interesting to note here that despite their disavowal of her, Friedan has much in common with her neodomestic contemporaries, including her concern over the media's propensity to manipulate image.

Figuring feminism as a mother, scholar Astrid Henry notes, profoundly affects the way in which successive generations of feminists will necessarily relate to one another (2000: 218). If feminism is always passed down from mother to daughter as a gift to be inherited, or a “birthright,” the daughter must necessarily reject or dismiss its fundamental tenets—“bite the hand that feeds [her]”—in the search for the next revolutionary idea (2000: 221). She will seek to individuate herself from both the relational identity of ‘daughter’ and group identity implied by the term ‘feminist’ (2000: 221). This scenario is evident in neodomestic discourse, although with a (perhaps unconscious) reluctance to abandon certain feminist techniques, as noted above. However, it makes no attempt to dislodge the generational structure which is at the root of the conflict. The imagery of the neodomestic text clearly situates its authors as the “girls” of a generic “mother.” It is as if its authors intentionally construct a discursive hierarchy based on markers of age and willfully inhabit the weaker side of the power structure in order to provide further ammunition for their arguments in favour of a ‘new,’ neodomestic feminism.

The professed goal of Celeste Perron’s book, *Playing House: A Starter Guide to Being a Grown Up* (2005), is to help women feel like a “*bona fide* adult” or a “got-it-together-grown up” (2005: 229). Yet the cover art depicts an illustrated woman as a cut-out doll with various cut-out accoutrements, including a tea pot, a vase with flowers, an apron, and an artfully decorated cake on a pedestal stand—everything a little girl would need to play house. In Harris’ text, two butterflies flit whimsically around a woman cleaning what appears to be a window or doorframe (2004: 22). Kehm notes, that when she was “a kid,” she “couldn’t turn in a single piece of homework without stamping

flowers, stars, and butterflies all over it” (2005: 21). It seems her penchant for childish adornment persists, as no illustration in her text is complete without a flower, rainbow or other glittery embellishment. Even when explicitly stating the opposite, the language of the texts also serves to discursively associate their female readers with immaturity. Buckingham titles her manual, which purports to help its female reader “feel more refined, in charge, and together” in navigating “twenty-first-century womanhood,” *The Modern Girl’s Guide to Life* (2004: back cover). Konig is “the design *It Girl*” (2002: back cover), and Ame Beanland and Emily Terry include in their tips and inspiration “for women who seriously play house & garden,” “dare to decoupage” and “how to be a hostess cupcake” (2004: front cover, back cover).

The use of the term ‘girl’ in reference to an adult woman has long been interpreted as a tactic employed to infantilize women, one whose usage has been interrogated and eschewed by feminist thinkers. Its continued use is, however, ensured by critics who dismiss this interrogation as “trivial nit-pickings or as prudish political correctness” (Whelehan 2000: 9), and by adult women who self-identify as ‘girls.’ That neodomestic figures claim the term as their own is certainly disconcerting, according to conventional feminist thought. Yasmin Jiwani *et al.* point out, however, as noted in the Introduction, that the meaning of the term “girl” is context specific and can denote friendship, community, status, age, endearment, or serve as a diminutive, among its many other uses (2006: ix). By refusing to claim the adult marker ‘woman,’ neodomestic texts literalize the power struggle occurring among different political factions to claim the term ‘feminism’ as their own, through the mother-daughter relationship. They may also suggest a location where their readers can resist the

imposition of second-wave feminist politics. Here women are content, like their grandmothers were (or were resigned), to be one of the 'girls.'

### **The Grandmother, Remembered**

In neodomestic discourse, where the mother is demonized, the grandmother is idolized. Mendelson advises that adult women should not consider themselves too old to learn from their grandparents; her Italian grandmother's domestic aptitude was proven in the speed and physical dexterity with which she moved her hands, "faster than the eye could follow when she chopped and peeled" (1999: 42). Stoller's memories of her grandmother also centre around the discipline of her constantly moving hands: "my grandmother sits, straight-backed, in the living room chair, her feet planted firmly on the floor in front of her. As always, her hands are in motion" (2003: 3). The hand-knit socks she produced in copious quantities are still the only thing Stoller's father wears on his feet (2003: 5). The domestic deftness of these women is exhibited in the control they exert over their environments; their supreme reign over the domestic sphere is ensured through the provision of the necessities of life: food and clothing.

Ame Beanland and Emily Terry somewhat bizarrely declare, "old people are hot!" and suggest their readers "take those black-and-white pictures of Grandma and Great-Aunt Ethel out of storage and display them in silver frames for instant ancestry and family-tree chic" (2004: 31). It is not the women themselves which they admire, but the sense of solidarity with "women who lived centuries before" (Stoller 2003: 9), that their likenesses provide. The nostalgic imagery neodomestic texts construct around the lives of women of a previous era, who can no longer attest to the veracity of these

remembrances, conveniently allows the reader to envy the life they romantically envision these women lived. Shine imagines the Italian feasts she would prepare with her grandmother if she were still living, for example, and expounds at some length about how much happier she was than contemporary housewives, despite her lack of time-saving appliances (2005: 20, 203). The specter of her grandmother provides yet another opportunity to illustrate the empowerment potential to be reaped from the enactment of 'women's work.'

When there is no grandmother to idolize, a substitute is found. Celeste Perron's manual contains a recurring blurb entitled "priceless advice from a previous generation" containing quotations from older women of no apparent family connection (see 2005: 48, 203, 226). Ina Garten declares, "I love when recipes are handed down from generation to generation because it means that they really work" (2006: 73); her cookbook, however, does not appear to contain any recipes inherited from her own family. There is a 'Summer Borscht' recipe, in which Garten notes that her grandmother was born in Russia, but the dish's inspiration, she admits, actually comes from a local restaurant (2006: 30). Likewise, Garten loves the old fashioned crumb cakes her grandmother served, but these were bought in Brooklyn bakeries, not home-made from a well-loved recipe (2006: 230). Garten's version of this creation is therefore "as close as [she] could come to [her] memory of that flavour and texture" (2006: 230). Nigella Lawson also attempts to construct a matrilineage through her recipes, although those she uses derive neither from her grandmother nor her mother. Instead there are recipes taken from her assistant Hettie Potter's hand written recipe book which she inherited upon her mother's death. These include a recipe for flapjacks, "such old-fashioned comforting

things, the sort of food you should make from a mother's recipe," or in this case, an employee's mother, as Lawson's own "didn't go in for this sort of cooking" (Lawson 2000: 232). Others are provided by Lawson's Welsh nanny, Heulwen's grandmother ("welshcakes"), from her editor, Eugenie Boyd's mother ("Granny Boyd's Biscuits"), from Beryl Scoffield, the mother of her oldest friend ("Boxing Day Egg-and-Bacon Pie"), and even from assistant-Potter's brother-in-law's mother, Hazel ("Christmas cake"), among numerous others (2000: 75; 204; 278; 248). The recipes listed above are intended for special and festive occasions, a weekend breakfast or a holiday treat—occasions usually spent with one's family. When 'the mother' does not provide the recipe for tradition, neodomestic texts hark back to a time which predates her, and retroactively compile one. Resentment regarding the perceived loss of a matrilineal domestic heritage, which neodomestic authors claim it as their 'birthright,' is assuaged in the resurrection of a forgotten oral history and memory. This salvaged domestic history elucidates a wholly different mode of femininity than that which is currently allowed by feminism.

### **The Husband—Real or Anticipated**

It may appear curious that sexuality would figure prominently in the neodomestic genre; 'homework' is, after all, predominantly comprised of tasks which one could hardly call 'sexy.' Its presence makes absolute sense, however, when understood that neodomestic womanhood exists only in relation to a heterosexual partnership, either real or anticipated. Homework in this discourse is therefore indelibly associated with the experience of sexuality. The woman who embraces homework with the zeal and

earnestness befitting such a 'vocation,' emerges as the genre's archetypal sex symbol. While the heterosexual partner is peripheral to this discursive construction in that it is the neodomestic author and her female readers who define and then judge feminine sexual allure, the heterosexual relationship conveniently serves the fundamental purpose of containing sex within a heterosexual paradigm and taming women's appetites to render female sexuality 'safe.' As we will see, the requirement to limit any discussion of sexuality to the monogamous heterosexual relationship also ultimately undoes neodomestic sexuality, as feminine arousal increasingly emerges in the texts as a masterbatory discourse of 'self-love.'

Neodomestic standards of sexual attractiveness, to which all female readers are urged to aspire, clearly finds its source in the iconography of the '50s housewife,' particularly her specific mix of innocence and sex appeal. Some authors gesture at their own endeavor to embody this image, although their efforts are generally far from successful. The illustrated buxom cowgirl who appears on the cover of Stoller's text adjacent to a photo of the author, dressed in a slinky white slip dress and donning a large white cowboy hat, yarn lasso, and brazen expression, actually makes Stoller, proudly displaying her hand-knit creations, appear quite dowdy (see Illustration D). The same is true for Shine, who is photographed wearing a black strapless tulle dress, high heels, and pearls. Her evening makeup and a pink floral apron certainly allude to the iconic imagery of the 1950s housewife. In fact, she mimics the Cinderella-like figure appearing on the cover of her manual, also in an apron and jewels. This figure exemplifies the desired look with her seductively dark lips, long lashes and sexy mole,

which play off of her feather duster prop from which fairy dust magically emanates.<sup>8</sup> Shine, however, appears garishly dressed up in long-discarded clothing, as if playing dress-up with her daughter who appears in the same shot (See Illustrations E and F). Tillotson remarks that we “return with regularity to [the 50s housewife] “look,”” or at least attempt to, for a reason: “its classic, just like her” (2004: 9). It also serves a distinctly pragmatic end. As the perceived embodiment of male erotic fantasy, the neodomestic figure transforms herself into the icon to become a ‘hot commodity’ in the heterosexual market. One must first entice and commit a male partner, before it is possible to use one’s relationship with him as a platform for one’s feminist politics.

Lawson, the domestic goddess, is the icon’s true embodiment, a self-identified cross between the sensuous Sophia Loren and the wholesome Debbie Reynolds (2000: vii). Media coverage of Lawson generally characterizes her as both a sex-symbol and seductress (a “culinary pin-up” with “pouting good looks” (*Ottawa Citizen* 2007)) and as a reassuring “maternal presence” (second only to Victoria Beckham as Britain’s top “yummy mummy”) (*Ottawa Citizen* 2007), attesting to the cultural currency of the good girl/bad girl figure. She effortlessly achieves the neodomestic ideal, what Tillotson claims is an insurmountable style dilemma for the contemporary woman: to “dress modestly, yet also like a vixen able to erase all of hubby’s workaday woes with one G-rated come-hither greeting at the door” (2004: 8). Lawson shamelessly employs her voluptuous sexuality to sell her products and is hailed as (ironic) feminist heroine for doing so. Even when explicitly described as a (gastro)porn star, of both the soft-core

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<sup>8</sup> Disney’s animated version of Cinderella was released in 1950. As Tillotson notes, “even though it was supposed to be for kids, it also inspired many a young woman to set her pillbox for her very own prince” (2004: 10). The Disney heroine, as a product of the iconography of this period, also models the girlish sexuality to which neodomestic readers are encouraged to aspire. Food writer and cookbook author Bonnie Stern, for example, elsewhere describes Lawson as a “Snow White look-alike” (Stern 2004).

(Lawson has been dubbed “the leading lady of the broil-and-baste burlesque house” (Agrell 2006)), and hard-core variety (“And then there’s the *money shot* at the end of many shows: Nigella, raven hair askew and loosely wrapped in her bathrobe, standing in a darkened kitchen, illuminated simply by the glow of the refrigerator bulb” (Goodman 2003)), Lawson exudes wholesome domesticity in her willingness to cater to men, both in her appearance and in her desire feed to them, an act from which she derives a child-like pleasure.

Domesticity inherently requires neither a monogamous heterosexual partnership, nor a commitment to abandon the paid labour force. The demographic of women to which neodomestic texts are targeted are likely educated and employed outside the home, with the resources to live independently, even with children. The single woman therefore appears as a threat in neodomestic discourse, because of the genre’s commitment to furthering a heterosexist paradigm supported by an entrenched division between the public and private spheres as men’s and women’s proper respective domains. The texts’ authors stress their indebtedness to their male partners, who in providing inspiration (or fodder), support and companionship, enabled them to undertake the writing of their texts. Their dedications, in particular, make this fact apparent: “For Edward, who made a home with me” (Mendleson 1999); “My home is wherever Jeffery is” (Garten 2006); “For John, goddess-maker” (Lawson 2000); “To Marcus: Because every Modern Girl should be lucky enough to have one” (Buckingham 2004), and so on. The authors credit their husbands for their (anticipated) public success as authors, using the opportunity the dedications provide to deceptively emphasize instead their somewhat unrepresentative personas as consummate homemakers.

Konig, who portrays the single woman as one who spends her evenings on the couch watching bad television before desperately crawling into bed alone, provides a recipe for transforming the “totally scary” occurrence of being on one’s own into a “joy” (2002: 15). It includes preparing a delicious meal to add “structure” to the evening, having a “lovely hot bath and get[ing] into your nightie” and “light[ing] some scented candles” (2002: 15). Interestingly, Buckingham gives very similar advice to women already in relationships. In her chapter on “modern-girl seduction tricks,” she states that in order to seduce her male partner, a woman must first feel sensual herself:

block out time to soak in a bubble bath with vanilla candles all around you. When you step out of the tub, wrap up in thick, fluffy towels and take a generous five minutes to apply scented lotion to your legs. Rub it in slowly and deeply, working your way from the top of thighs to the tips of your toes, then give your leg a little squeeze. Instead of getting into those sweats or flannel pajamas, slip into something silky so that you can enjoy how deliciously slippery your skin feels (Buckingham 2004: 288).

‘Sweats,’ it seems, are widely banished from the neodomestic landscape, unless, of course, it is “a fitted zip-up hooded girlie sweat jacket” (Shine 2005: 35). Their gender ambiguity offends neodomestic standards of femininity. Shine declares, for example, “I don’t even own a pull-over-the-head sweatshirt—yuck! I don’t want to look like my husband” (2005: 35). Whether partnered or single, the advice remains the same: embrace and take pleasure in your own body, then exhibit it (after extensive grooming) whenever possible, through clothing which hugs curves and reveals skin. Buckingham provides detailed instructions on the best way to remove body hair, including facial, nipple and pubic hair. She claims: “though I can’t scientifically prove you’ll attract more men knowing you’re smoothed, buffed, defuzzed, and polished all over, it often is a fabulous by product” (2004: 188/286). The more a woman appears like a girl (i.e. with

the trappings of sexual maturity such as hair, excess weight, blemishes, and so on masterfully concealed), the greater her chances of attracting a man. And a neodoestic woman is always occupied with the task of finding or keeping a man. Come afternoon, Shine preens for her husband so that she can greet him “looking good, with [her] life under control” after his “long day” at the office (2005: 2). Just as housewives were once enjoined to change into their stiletto heels and touch up their makeup before their husbands returned from work (Tillotson 2004: 102), achieving a look which exudes feminine sex-appeal is an essential part of the neodomestic housewives’ ‘homework.’ This is true even when one’s own reflection is the only audience to present itself.

Although neodomestic discourse constructs the heterosexual relationship as essential to a neodomestic identity—a house becomes a home by nature of the fact that it is cleaned, decorated and stocked to accommodate and please a male partner—neodomestic texts do not explicate his correlating identity, and he therefore appears as two dimensional and inanimate, as yet another piece of well-chosen furniture. When author of *Barefoot Contessa at Home* (2006), Ina Garten’s husband Jeffery walks through the door at the end of the day, he is the final element of a deliberately set scene of ‘home.’ Although it appears casual, the music playing, the lighting, the placement of flowers and the smell of chicken and onions roasting in the oven (Garten 2006: 11), are intentionally orchestrated to create a sense of lived-in-ness. What results is the appearance of a set in which Garten’s husband enters to play the supporting role. Buckingham’s husband is more like a prop; “your man” she declares, is “the trickiest piece to fit into your home” (2004: 163). While certain authors pay lip service to negotiating shared domestic space with one’s male partner, or “nest negotiations,” i.e.

what you do when “you say ‘silk,’ and he says ‘corduroy’” (Beanland and Terry 2004: 62), a man seems to have very little function in the domestic realm save for his role as ‘other’ to its master, the housewife. As Kehm gleefully declares, “we answer to ourselves, indulge ourselves, and love ourselves” (2005: xiv); *we* are wholly self-obsessed. Even achieving a state of sexual arousal surprisingly does not necessarily require the participation of a woman’s male partner.

According to Beanland and Terry, “what wets a chick’s whistle are her cookbooks and there is nothing [she] crave[s] more than reading a hot recipe between the sheets” (2004: 190)<sup>9</sup>. A contributor to the same text relays her physical response to the pleasures of decorating: armpits, “sweaty with excitement” from the “pheromones” emanating from her couch, she is practically orgasmic at the installation of a homemade light fixture, fashioned from Christmas lights and an old basket, hung in the place of a broken one (Beanland and Terry 2004: 53). Housework, “an especially sensual task” according to yet another contributor, will leave you “flushed and sweaty” if you approach it with the right attitude (2004: 112). In bolded, pink type, the text suggests you send your husband out of the house and sing along to Barry White: “That’s it, baby,” ... “as you glide the Hoover back and forth, back and forth, *uh huh*” (2004: 112). Not only does neodomestic discourse restrict sexuality to a heteronormative paradigm (although the autoerotic qualities of homework prevent undue dependence on one’s male partner for sexual satisfaction), passages such as these also locate sexual arousal firmly within the context of labour: cooking, cleaning, decorating, and maintenance work.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Indeed, fans of Lawson’s cookbooks often note the pleasures of reading her in bed.

<sup>10</sup> Shine, author of the most conservative text examined herein in that it explicitly advocates for women what other texts only obliquely hint at—abandoning paid employment to return to service in the home—is also the most frank regarding the function of sex within the heterosexual family home. Like other

Here, a woman receives the same amount of pleasure, and therapeutic benefits, from housework as she does from sex.

Homework, for example, is good for weight control and healthy hearts (Mendelson 1999: 10). The fact that so called “retro cleaners,” such as “Mrs. Meyer’s brand,” require a little extra elbow-grease in their use partially explains why they can be found at high-end home stores such as Restoration Hardware, suggests Tillotson (2004: 7). Homework also has mental health benefits: music, warm water, and the “clean smell of soap” not only remove dirt, they also clear the “cobwebs” from one’s mind (Kehm 2005: 27). “Sewing, knitting, embroidering [and] crocheting” are all “wonderfully meditative,” “naturally Zen” experiences; some have even called knitting “the new yoga” (2005: 67, 69). Sex, likewise, releases natural endorphins which relieve stress and depression, burns calories, “7,500 a year” to be exact, if you partake in it three times a week, and increases the levels of oxytocin in the brain to increase one’s overall sense of well-being (Buckingham 2004: 303). It is little wonder neodomesticity is a phenomenon of ever-increasing popularity; whether induced by regular sex or even more regular housework, its blissed-out figureheads appear to bask in an enviable and constant state of heady fulfillment. The presence of the male partner does not necessarily contribute to a woman’s sexual satisfaction, but serves to cast doubt on any parallels between the neodomestic feminist and the hairy-arm pitted, lesbian feminist (Murphy 2001: 165),

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domestic tasks, it is work performed by the housewife which grants her both personal satisfaction and economic security. She shares a little anecdote to prove her point: “Last year one of my best friends wanted a new dining room set, but her husband was not opening his wallet. I told her to go home, pay some attention to him, act interested in him, initiate some romance, do some nasty deeds that only married couples should do, and guess what? Two weeks later she had the furniture—and a new diamond ring to boot” (2005: 57). Shine therefore implicitly suggests that heterosexual marriage involves what Carole Pateman refers to as the ‘sexual contract,’ in which “the wife owes the husband obedience, and in return, he protects her” (1988: 51).

who threatens the very institution, heterosexuality, which permits the neodomestic phenomenon.

### **The Self-as-Image**

The manipulation of one's image or public persona—or the more generic iconic image of the 'housewife' or 'homemaker'—constitutes perhaps the most important relationship in neodomestic discourse, speaking to the genre's intrinsic narcissism. The salvaging of the cultural meaning of 'homework,' particularly from those censorious 'feminists' who debase femininity, so that it may be redefined by those who perform it, is the central means through which neodomestic feminism operates. That the focus on superficial appearances which therefore results has the unfortunate effect of prohibiting an adequate exploration of the experience of actually living this politics, is an issue not addressed by the genre. Shine, for example, is wholly obsessed by the social perception of how the housewife looks, behaves, and interacts with other women, rather than the more substantial issue of what a housewife is. Like the above noted authors, she too suggests that women's work bears a self-imposed bad-rap: "when did we women decide that we wanted our image to turn from happy homemaker to desperate housewife?" (2005: 5). Domestic advice manuals function, according to Sarah Leavitt, like "a kind of fun-house mirror, distorting reality to show a society as some people wish it could be," reflecting cultural ideals rather than realities (2002: 5). Shine envisions a world in which all women are in shape and well dressed, keep immaculate homes, cook healthy dinners, are intimate with their husbands and loving with their children. She juxtaposes this vision to the world as portrayed by the popular television series, *Desperate*

*Housewives*, which she claims promotes “drug abuse, adultery, statutory rape, murder, bad mothering, and the basic breakdown of,” that popular catch-all phrase, “family values” (2005: 5). Shine clearly posits the latter vision as closer to the actual reality of women’s lives today and repeatedly pleads, “is this really the image we want?” (2005: 5, 11). She urges women to “come together to promote the image of the happy housewife” (2005: 6) because they receive “no positive promotion” (2005: 11). When the housewife looks good on paper, the reality of her lived experiences becomes less important.

Lawson literally wrote the book on how to be a ‘domestic goddess.’ But readers with the intention of actually transforming themselves into a domestic deity (whatever that is) through reading Lawson’s cookbook, will be sorely disappointed. Lawson explains, “what I’m talking about is not *being* a domestic goddess exactly, but *feeling* like one” (2000: vii). Scholar Joanne Hollows comments that in this way, Lawson offers her female readers the opportunity to *imagine* feeling in control of their lives. Women frequently experience a perceived lack of control over ‘the self’ as a result of exclusion from the very process of constructing ‘the individual,’ and Lawson’s fantasy of control offers a means of hypothetically reclaiming it (2003: 185). In participating in the phenomenon of neodomesticity, writers such as Lawson are in absolute control over the image, if not the reality, of a domestic identity, and invite their female readers to remake themselves as a reflection of this image. Buckingham, for example, reiterates, “being a modern (a.k.a. “mock”) domestic goddess isn’t about doing it all: it’s about taking shortcuts to give the impression of having it all” (2004: 2). Neodomestic texts provide the reader with simple instructions and practical advice on getting the housewife ‘look.’

Buckingham opens her manual with a chapter entitled: “The Only Thing You Should Ever Fake ... Being a Domestic Goddess” (2004: 1) The following eight chapters, however, delve into different aspects of domestic ‘goddessry’; one is therefore left with almost four hundred pages of image manipulation techniques, rather than advice on again, actually embodying the correlating identity. Buckingham provides a “cheat sheet for fabulous entertaining” (2004: 51), in which she suggests spritz[ing] lemon-scented cleaning product in less than perfectly clean rooms as “just the scent of a cleaner might make your guests think you spent hours scrubbing”(2004: 26). She proffers advice on how to make a luxurious looking “hotel-heavenly bed” (2004: 41), and transform a guest room into “B&B shape for weekend guests” (2004: 43). Also included in these image-embellishing techniques is the way in which to sound ‘smart’ at gallery openings, which involves “squint[ing] your eyes a little, throw[ing] your hand on your hip, and slowly sip[ping] from your Chardonnay glass to signal deep thinking” (2004: 124). The domestic goddess is a feeble façade, only sustained when the elaborate performance to convince an audience of its existence proves effective. Ironically, the effort required to achieve this ‘empowering’ deception necessarily translates into the imperative to constantly serve others.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Unless, of course, another woman is hired to perform the domestic labour upon which the image rests. Buckingham relates the story of a friend she envied for the way in which she kept her immaculate home: with “fresh flowers in clean glass vases in every room, and freshly folded towels in her bathroom ... rolled in a basket, just like the B&Bs do it. The second I would sink into her (vacuumed) couch, she always offered me something freshly baked or freshly squeezed from her kitchen” (2004: 2). That is, of course, until Buckingham discovered her friend secretly kept a housekeeper. The sheer magnitude of the labour which neodomestic texts advocate requires one to either adopt it as a full-time commitment, or hire help. In this way, neodomestic prescriptions for domesticity encourage the exploitation of and dependence on an underclass of women, as was the case in the Victorian era. As, Stephanie Coontz notes, “the middle-class Victorian family depended for its existence on the multiplication of other families who were too poor and powerless to retreat into their own little oases and who therefore had to provision the oases of others” (1992: 11).

Buckingham subtly articulates the link between the compulsion to serve and personal dissatisfaction in the very attempt to deny such a connection persists today. She declares, “while I’m certainly not saying we want to backslide into the domestic misery of the fifties, there is a renewed emphasis on niceties, like arranging flowers, creating a welcoming guest room, or having at least one recipe we can impress a date with” (2004: xiv). As their intended audience, the house- or dinner guest reaps the benefits of a woman’s domestic labour. The imperative to oblige and accommodate others at the expense of one’s own more pressing interests persists, regardless of ‘reassuring’ declarations such as “the effort required is so much less than the gratitude conferred” (Lawson 2000: vii). Buckingham, for example, confesses “I live in fear that my mother-in-law will recognize my complete failings as a wife and mother and encourage my fabulous husband to dump me for someone who majored in home ec” (2004: xiii). Playing a game of ‘make-believe’—both in the sense that one enjoys homework, and that one has actually performed it properly—emerges as a strategy to reconcile neodomestic prescriptions to one’s domestic reality, providing that one’s audience believes the charade. Clearly, the “sistas” really are not doing it for themselves after all.

Studies continue to indicate that women, even when employed, perform the vast majority of unpaid labour within the home, to the tune of seventy to eighty percent (Maushart 2001: 10). As Susan Maushart notes:

beyond the lip service paid to ‘equal marriage’ by both men and women, the contemporary family remains primarily, and profoundly, organized around gender. Beneath the veneer of its sleek post-feminist contours, the divisions of labour within the family remain rigidly gender-specific. Females within marriage are strenuously, overwhelmingly, outrageously responsible for the physical and emotional caretaking of males and offspring (2001: 9-10).

Justifying the burden of the domestic workload as a conscious choice, or perhaps even as a pleasurable, leisure-like activity, lessens the blow of often single handedly caring for the home and its occupants, duties still indelibly ingrained in social consciousness as 'women's work,' long after the supposed attitudinal and tangible changes perpetuated by the second-wave feminist movement have failed to materialize in women's private lives. Seemingly easier to alter than entrenched patterns of behaviour are the meanings which surround them. Neodomestic texts substitute the discourse of oppression and servitude once associated with domestic labour with one of one of personal satisfaction through the command of a perfected image. For example, Stoller asserts that when second-wave feminists viewed traditionally feminine activities such as knitting as "simply part of a woman's societal obligation to serve everyone around them," they failed to acknowledge that "knitting serves the knitter as well" (2003: 9). Women today, another author notes, have opportunities their foremothers never dreamed of: "the opportunity to find, fill, and fluff [their] very own, very special nests" (Kehm 2005: xv). This statement actually highlights the conspicuous congruency between women's personal lives, past and present, rather than any distinct break between the figurative then and now, given that the freedom to decorate one's home is not exactly radical. The assertion is also historically inaccurate.

Penny Sparke notes that since industrialization, it is women's aesthetic decisions which "have determined the nature and appearance of the home and its contents" (1995: 6). The most striking feature of the 1950s kitchen, for example, was the introduction of colour, decoration, and other 'feminizing' details such as "potted plants and knick-knacks" (1995: 194). By 1960, appliances such as the Frigidaire were available in six

colours including “Sherwood Green,” “Stratford Yellow,” and “Snowy White” (1995: 195). The increasing availability of plastics in the form of vinyl floor covering and upholstery made it very simple to frequently change the look of the kitchen from pink, to light green, pale blue, grey, turquoise or soft yellow, depending on what was particularly popular or appealing at any given moment. The use of colour served to emphasize the importance of beauty over utility in the feminine space, as well as to provide sensorial escape from the monotony of that space, as the names of colours—“lagoon blue,” “Bermuda pink,” and “sand yellow”—suggest (1995: 195). For the women who occupied these spaces, experimenting with design was an active resistance to the dominant (masculine) taste culture and an expression of the simple desire to articulate creativity and personal style.

With instructions on sewing projects, such as “sex-kitten slip covers” (Kehm 2005: 72) or “silk heart pillow” (2005: 75), replete with fringes, pompoms, ribbons and satin roses, or the do-it-yourself (DIY) wallpaper, composed of anything from old photos to line drawings, to sheet music, to love letters (2005: 21), the means by which Kehm advocates adding a “woman’s touch” to one’s “nest” is very similar in both ethos and technique to the above mentioned vinyl reupholstering projects of the 1950s. Rita Konig, author of *Domestic Bliss* (2002), also emphasizes the importance of aesthetics over, or at least as a compliment to, function. Accordingly, in addition to the usual household supplies, one’s utility closet should be “filled with lovely things and looking vaguely pretty” (2002: 251). Although there is little satisfaction to be gleaned by sewing a button back on a coat, for example, Konig asserts that “if it means going into the closet and using your beautiful jars filled with buttons and threads you can pretend for a bit

that it is a pleasure” (Konig 2002: 253). Through fantasy, domestic labour receives a ‘makeover,’ and is transformed into its much prettier and friendlier incarnation, ‘homework.’ These projects and strategies are a product of their creators’ imagination and handiwork, utilizing stereotypically feminine colours and/or textures to “customize and add a unique flair” to the domestic spaces inhabited by predominantly by women (Kehm 2005: 21), thus recuperating femininity as a viable subject position of the ‘empowered’ woman. They are also, however, nothing new.

Explicitly labeling domestic pet-projects as a uniquely liberating ‘feminist’ experience might be though. Neglect in disclosing its indebtedness to a long lineage of domestic writing is characteristic of post-feminist cultural production, in general, and the neodomestic genre, in particular. The accolades which adorn the texts’ back and inside covers celebrate their supposed innovation: “*Finally*” a complete guide to “outfitting, organizing, and cleaning your home” (Harris 2004); “chicks everywhere are *discovering* personal style” (Beanland and Terry 2004); “chic *postmodern* advice” (Konig 2002); “*Home Comforts* is something *new*” (Mendelson 1999). Few texts make reference to the generations of domestic manuals which precede their publications, despite the fact that the content of contemporary manuals differs little from those of previous generations, such as Lydia Maria Child’s *The American Frugal Housewife* (1828), or Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *The American Woman’s Home* (1869) (Leavitt 2002: 4).<sup>12</sup> On the inside cover of *How To Be a Domestic Goddess*, we read that the

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<sup>12</sup> The contemporary forms of femininity which emerge as discourse from such texts can be traced even as far back as the emergence of moveable type and the resulting “organizational and commercial developments which brought about a mass market for books and magazines” (Smith 1988: 41, 43). Like their predecessors, neodomestic texts connect “the production and distribution of clothes, furnishings, education, etc., the skills and work (paid and unpaid) of women, and the norms and images regulating the presentation of selves in social circles” (1988: 43).

*Mirror* dubs Lawson a “veritable Mrs. Beeton for the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” although writing cookbooks is the only obvious, and perhaps only existent, similarity between the two figures (Lawson 2000).<sup>13</sup> The total absence of context regarding the genre of domestic writing mirrors the way in which neodomestic writers partake in a pick-and-choose form of feminism. Within academic feminism, Henry argues, there is a recognition of the intellectual lineage between ideas and theorists, even when those connections are made through critique. Because the popular feminism which typifies neodomestic discourse is written for a mass audience, and is therefore not held to stringent academic standards, its authors can deny their debt to intellectual predecessors, and claim status as vanguards of a new movement (Henry 2000: 217). At the helm of this movement is the perfectly crafted image: what the neodomestic housewife should look like, what she should feel like, how she should relate to other men and women, but never what she is.

### **Conclusion**

Neodomestic authors seek out, in the words of Whelehan, “those issues which most closely affect their personal life or those of their peers and propagate a mood of anxiety if not to say moral panic around them” (2000: 35). Here, those issues are the way in which conventional ‘feminism’ devalues both women’s work and the qualities associated with femininity, deludes women into thinking that paid employment is compatible with a satisfactory sexual relationship, and destroys the relationship between generations of women. In suggesting feminism find expression predominately through relationships, neodomestic discourse enacts an ironic reversal of the now trite feminist

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<sup>13</sup> Mrs. Beeton is the now famous British author of *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management*, published in 1861. Oxford University Press reprinted the text in 2000, the same year as Lawson’s text was published, as an Oxford World’s Classics.

mantra ‘the personal is political,’ by urging women to think of the source of their social and political clout as emanating from the home. As Shine declares, homemakers of today are not “uniformed, soap opera-watching hags who vacuum all day and have no idea what’s going on in the world” as they are portrayed by ‘feminists’ (2005: 27). Rather, they are “better educated and more powerful than those of any other generation”—“family matriarchs” who comprise a “huge voting power,” and possess considerable “spending power” (albeit via their “husband’s wallets”) (2005: 27). If a central question of femininity, as suggested in the Introduction, is who gets to control its meaning, the neodomestic text subversively asserts its supremacy over such meaning-making processes. Neodomestic feminism encourages women to subtly assert their power over others in disguise: its figure is a feminist ‘daughter’ but also the vanguard of a ‘new’ feminist movement; she exudes sexuality, but like a good girl, never asks her male partner for sex; she employs childish devices such as dress-up and make-believe to assert an authoritative womanhood; and she exists as an image, yet one over which she is always decisively in control.

The genre’s feminist politics therefore come into focus in terms of what they are not. Neodomestic feminism is not politically regressive (although neither is it progressive)—it simply revives a powerful feminine cultural history. It does not posit an antithetical relationship between (hyper)femininity and empowerment as does second-wave feminism. Finally, it is not self-consciously engaged in the debates regarding race, class and sexuality which preoccupy third-wave feminism, although this position in itself makes evident the texts’ race, class and gender politics. Although exclusive, for a select group of women neodomesticity could present a compelling

prospect for the successful enactment of an empowered, chosen femininity. It unfortunately does not take into account the fact that mere power over others cannot guarantee feminist 'empowerment,' particularly because of the degree to which neodomestic texts advocate willful adherence to oppressive standards of beauty culture, which also delineate the appropriate expression of female sexuality, and the expectation of heterosexuality, among other prescriptions—evidence of the true scope of the power which circulates culturally to negatively influence the course of women's lives. As a relational politics, neodomestic feminism fails to provide the necessary tools for its adherents to contend with gender inequality as an organized, collective political force. Rather, the genre proposes the local, emotional management of intimate relationships as (an inadequate) substitute for systematic social action.

#### **Chapter 4: 'Home-Made': Recipes for Reconstituting Innate Femininity**

Most neodomestic texts contain recipes, even when culinary instruction is not the express purpose of the publication. The ability to produce a specific type of meal, namely homemade, is posited as central to the neodomestic identity. David E. Sutton discusses the way in which food can be analyzed as a cultural site, or a point of identification, from which displaced peoples remain connected to their homelands (2005: 305). He notes that immigrants often experience a particularly jarring sense of disorientation upon arrival in Western urban environments because the landscape is likely very different from the less developed or rural environments from which they have left. The relocation thus leads to feelings of estrangement, loss of social relatedness, and “loss of the ethic of care seen to characterize relations at home” (2005: 305). A traditional meal becomes the “tangible site for memory” which can facilitate a return to a feeling of ‘wholeness’ through one of ‘fullness’ (2005: 305). This scenario may prove to be a useful metaphor in understanding the neodomestic compulsion to recreate the meals of childhood in order to access the domestic space from which women have removed themselves, both physically, by working outside the home, and emotionally, in eschewing ‘homework’ as a meaningful vocation or way of life. It is in women’s ‘relocation’ to the worlds of industry, business and politics, neodomestic texts implicitly argue, that their more important occupation as caregivers, responsible for the family’s emotional maintenance and continuity, is neglected or even abandoned. A homemade family meal enables a re-entry into women’s original homeland, the private sphere.

Rachel Bowlby attempts to unpack what it means to be domestic, through an examination of the word itself in its “extra-theoretical, everyday existence” (1995: 74). She notes that home is not its first or natural place but a secondary development, as one must become domestic. Home is the (lost or abandoned) place of origin to which one returns or reinvents in the process of domestication (1995: 75). Bowlby elaborates,

In [the] narrative of nostalgia, home is imagined as a place of peace, stability and satisfaction that has subsequently ceased to be; but also as a withdrawal or seclusion from a “real” world envisaged as a source of the energy or the troubles or the mobility that are absent from the home (1995: 76).

To ‘domesticate’ is therefore to bring something perceived as “wild, precivilized, and verging on the non-human,” such as a wild animal or a foreign culture, “into line with an existing order,” or an idealized version of that order (1995: 75). The neodomestic homemaker, in this way, requires ‘taming’. She must undergo changes. She must learn to cook.

The recipe form is here employed as a means of instructing women on the subject of their supposedly innate feminine natures. Neodomestic discourse posits the body (a “biologically determined, fixed, and ahistorical” entity) as a “unique means of access to knowledge and ways of living” (Grosz 1994: 15)<sup>14</sup>. ‘Homework’ is a hunger, a need like any other corporeal, human need. As Cheryl Mendelson notes, it is cyclical and recurrent: “over and over, you need to sleep, eat, shower, change, laugh, relax, learn, and entertain” (1999: 17). This chapter seeks to articulate the relationship between femininity and feminism posited by neodomestic discourse by exploring the way in which the genre artificially fixes feminine gender traits to femaleness, or biological

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<sup>14</sup> According to Elizabeth Grosz, this is a common theoretical strategy among as large and diverse a group as “Marxist feminists, psychoanalytic feminists, and all those committed to a notion of the social construction of subjectivity,” such as Juliet Mitchell, Julia Kristeva, Michèle Barrett, and Nancy Chodrow (1994: 16).

womanhood. Although innate, this bodily knowledge must be reactivated through instruction. Neodomestic discourse provides instruction through the equally 'intuitive' language of food and its sensory and emotive effects. A focus on the corporeal nature of these effects obfuscates the historical reality of women's socially constructed relationship to the domestic sphere. This strategy is bulwarked by the genre's use of the prescriptive rhetorical techniques of self-help discourse, through which the genre seeks to fully 'domesticate' its readers.

### **Embodied Knowledge: Taste and Smell**

As a symbolic medium, food and its related consumption habits clearly demarcate boundaries between social classes, cultures, genders, and occupations, in addition to the more quotidian cycle of seasons, rituals, and times of day (Lupton 2005: 317). Indeed, feminist historian Janet Theophano notes that the same recipes can at once "signify an eternal (ongoing) connection to the past" and highlight "changes in social life" by their association with "a culture of origin" (2003: 50). Recognizing that the eating habits of working women and their families are symbolically and physically different from those of homemakers, neodomestic discourse provides the means by which women can correct this disparity in the form of the recipe. Preparing a familiar meal, particularly when comprised of those dishes belonging to the category of 'comfort food,' effects a discernable change in its creator's body. According to Nigella Lawson, a woman who "waft[s] along in the warm, sweet-smelling air" of her own making is able to fully 'unwind,' or transform from the alien state of "office creature" into that of a more natural femininity (2000: vii). Those who consume the fruits of culinary labour

are likewise transformed. While the grounds for this transformation may not appear initially obvious to the reader, her assertion may have a physiological basis in reality.

Smells have the power to “evoke what surrounds them in memory,” or in other words, the past situations, emotions, sensations, people, and so on, which we metonymically associate with those smells. Smell becomes their emotionally charged symbol (Sutton 2005: 310). Lawson, for example, declares that baking banana bread “fills the kitchen with that aromatic fug which is the natural atmospheric setting for the domestic goddess” (Lawson 2000: 33). She adapts her banana bread recipe from a book entitled *Old-Fashioned Baking Book: Recipes from an American Childhood*. Its source sheds light on the way in which neodomestic discourse conceives of the domestic goddess as one who exists nostalgically, not as a result of the aroma her cooking produces, but through the relationship between sensory perception and memory. In other words, the smell of bread itself does not evoke the specter of the domestic goddess, but the association many people either have, or imagine to exist, between the sweet smell of freshly baked bread and childhood, conjures her image. For those who now bake the bread, its ‘fug’ is a tangible reminder of their mothers’ love for them. More precisely, the memory of the ‘mother’ reminds (or enlightens) the reader that preparing food is as intrinsic as caring for one’s young.

Other senses have a similar effect on the memory. It is through taste, rather than smell, for example, that Darla Shine remembers her grandfather. As a young girl, he used to make her sweet, milky coffee in the morning to accompany “the best buttered roll, warm from the bakery up the block and filled with sweet homemade butter” (2005: 104). When Shine declares, “I can still taste [that buttered roll] today,” she suggests the

vividness with which she remembers her grandfather, rather than the roll itself. As one food author, Theresa Lust, declares in reference to taste memory, “the hunger is in the memory, not the biscuit, berries and cream” (qtd. in Sutton 2005: 310). Neodomic discourse effectively ties the vague concepts of ‘cooking from scratch’ and ‘homemade meals’ to idealized images of childhood, mothers, grandmothers, and family life (Short 2006: 105) because of the way in which memory is accessed through sensory perception.

Jennifer Fisher describes a communion process or “interoceptive politics,” in which one may actually ‘taste’ these memories, through “the tactics of cooks to attract, include and actually *become* those who eat their food” (1997: 8). This transubstantiation is the result of an intentional act on the part of the meal’s producer. Fisher thus theorizes the capacity of the æsthetic experience to contribute to knowledge production.<sup>15</sup> While image manipulation may be a central strategy of neodomesticity, as discussed in Chapter Three, the discursive control exerted here, in the preparation of food which actually embodies its creator, appears to function on a much deeper level. The physical experience of neodomestic femininity involves what Fisher calls, the ‘haptic’ sense. This sense, “comprising the tactile, kinæsthetic and proprioceptive senses,” “describes aspects of engagement that are qualitatively distinct from the capabilities of the visual sense” (1997: 6). For example, the pang of hunger or feeling of fullness after a meal entails a haptic perception, the perception of “the visceral workings and felt intensities of our interior bodies” (1997: 6, 7).

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<sup>15</sup> By æsthetic, Fisher refers not to the term’s more conventional meaning as a particular attitude, criteria of judgment or theory of art, used somewhat akin to the term ‘style,’ but “its more dynamic sense” as a relational form involving “sensory mediations of social states and cultural formations” (Fisher 1997: 4). An æsthetic experience is one which involves sensory and corporeal experience. It has an inherently political dimension in that the æsthetic involves the negotiation of agency in such experiences (they are performative).

These theorists envision the housewife's labour in producing food quite differently from conventional feminist critique, which posits "the endless cleaning and cooking for an immediate consumption that leaves neither record nor surplus" as confining women to a state of immanence (Bowlby 1995: 78-9). According to the latter perspective, the house is the literalized metaphor of the public/private, outside/inside dichotomy which such critiques condemn; the housewife is confined within the walls of the home, which delineate the boundary between her artificial habitat and the 'real' world beyond (1995: 78)<sup>16</sup>. The connection between women and their bodies and women and the material world which the term 'immanence' implies, is often understood by second wave-feminist writers as a limitation, even a scourge. Elizabeth Grosz, for example, declares that this misogynist line of thought "confines women to the biological requirements of reproduction on the assumption that because of particular biological, physiological, and endocrinological transformations, women are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and *more* natural than men" (1994: 14). Fisher, however, notes that a haptic aesthetic can account for the "powerfully immanent dimensions" of aesthetic experience in acts of production without eviscerating the role of power in their enactment (1997:11). She upholds the validity of the outside/inside boundary in reference to the physical body, precisely because of the way in which it can highlight the extent to which it is possible to manipulate what appears to be a natural system.

Neodomesticity's embodied theory of femininity via the recipe, however, eviscerates the social constructedness of the relationship between women's bodies and the ability to bear, nurture, love and feed others. Despite the apparent need for women

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<sup>16</sup> In neodomestic discourse, the home does exist in a dichotomous relationship with the outside world. Where the former is safe, comfortable, loving, the latter is dangerous, frightening, and cold.

to be 'retrained' in these arts, hence the existence of the genre, its authors staunchly adhere to the essentialist principle that gender traits and identity are innate and correlate to biological sex. Lawson, for example, suggests that baking is an inherent skill one only need to tap into; *How to Be a Domestic Goddess*, she declares, is a book "about baking, but not a baking book – not in the sense of being a manual or a comprehensive guide or a map of a land you do not inhabit" (2000: vii). Cleaning, or at least the desire for cleanliness, is also the natural purview of women. According to Jane Buckingham, "men, biologically speaking, aren't as prone to pick up on dust or crumbs lying around" because of the fact that "the rods in their eyes aren't as long as [women's] so they don't notice details" (2004: 165). The recipe, as an instance of Fisher's "introceptive politics," contains the potential to disrupt these essentialist assumptions regarding the nature of the female body; however it is employed in neodomestic discourse simply as the key to unlock the opposite, long-forgotten reality.

Pre-packaged, pre-cooked foods, labour saving appliances, and even the nefarious convenience of restaurant take-out, all tools of the time-strapped working woman, bear the blame for the state of the contemporary meal and women's negligent attitude towards its preparation. Meals produced as a consequence of these technologies cannot elicit the same physical response as do home-made meals, because of women's diminished role in their creation. It is, however, the very time saving technologies characteristic of the modern kitchen that make a romanticized and nostalgic longing for 'real,' labour-intensive cooking possible. As Frances Short illustrates, the mistrust of modern conveniences is characteristic of every generation, in which some faction invariably mourns the passing of their predecessors' domestic ways. When electric

stoves were first introduced, for example, they were widely rejected by women of all classes, who felt that the open hearth could be the only “true centre of home life” (2006: 106). For at least a decade, the stove was therefore used only in public places, such as school and shop cafeterias. With the introduction of ‘instant’ foods in the 1950s, social critics “spent years gloomily monitoring the disappearance of old-fashioned good cooking” and accused the housewife of “losing her way, forfeiting her skills, [and] mindlessly surrendering to packaged foods whenever they beckoned” (2006: 106). Ironically, this is the very ‘golden age’ for which today’s critics nostalgically long.

Perhaps resistance to incorporating modern technology into the kitchen, both then and now, is a result of the way in which we conventionally understand that space: as the moral or spiritual centre of the home. Ina Garten refers to the kitchen as the “heartbeat” of the home (2006: 18), while Kristin Tillotson calls it simply the “heart,” symbolizing “home, warmth, food – and Mom” (2004: 58). It is the centre which feeds the rest of the home, itself also represented as a sacred space, as indicated by neodomestic texts’ frequent references to heightened states such ‘bliss’ and ‘nirvana’ (Konig 2000: back cover). Lawson declares that “baking stands as both a useful metaphor for the familial warmth of the kitchen we fondly imagine used to exist, and as a way of reclaiming our lost Eden” (2000: vii). Baking bread, in particular, allows the “baker to see herself in an almost biblical light as a valiant woman whose children shall rise up and call her blessed” (2000: 292). Garten’s text bears a full page photograph of a large bowl containing her “honey white bread” dough, a soft, voluptuous mound in which she rests her fist after kneading it (2006: 56). A second full page image reveals the final product, thickly sliced and ready to be devoured (2006: 59) (see Illustrations G

and H). Together they constitute a visual lesson in the creation of sacred space; ‘bliss’ does not exist independently in its constituent parts of flour, water, yeast or sugar, nor can it materialize from that which is machine-made. ‘Homework,’ which begins in the kitchen, transforms the house “into that much-needed sanctuary” (Harris 2004: 1), and allows one to keep alive the memories of mothers and grandmothers. But the kitchen’s beating heart must emanate first from its present female occupant.

It is unlikely that Lawson, who simply wouldn’t want to live without her KitchenAid mixer (2000: viii), or Garten, who usually buys her bread from the store (2006: 57), would be so quick to wax nostalgic if the preparation and clean-up of meals still necessitated a forty-four hour per week commitment, as was customary in the 1900s (Short 2006: 107). And only a small minority of people, notes Stephanie Coontz, would actually encourage a return to a time of segregated gender roles and legal inequality as was the case in the 1950s, despite the fact that the model this system provides remains the accepted standard through which to build male-female intimacy and to accommodate domestic obligations (1992: 3). Yet a focus on the physicality of ‘homework,’ as simply the logical extension of ‘normal’ feminine gender traits enacted in and through the body, is essential to neodomestic discursive coherence.

Imelda Whelehan argues that we have entered into an era of “retro-sexism” in which “nostalgia for a lost, uncomplicated past,” peopled by ‘real’ women, i.e. women who don’t attempt to adopt the character traits and/or lifestyles which are ‘natural’ to men, results in the defensive reinvention of representations of women, “from the banal to the downright offensive,” “against the cultural and social changes in women’s lives” (2000: 11). Popular culture of the 1950s, such as television sit-com reruns, is a

persistent source of our notions of the traditional family, with a “breadwinner father, full-time homemaker mother, and dependent children” (Coontz 1992: 23). Coontz notes, however, that this ‘traditional’ family to which we look as evidence of the nuclear family model’s deep historical roots, was actually a unique phenomenon brought about by the particular economic and social climate of post-war America. It was, in effect, an anomaly.<sup>17</sup> In previous generations, the age of marriage and first-time motherhood was higher, as was the rate of divorce, while the fertility rate was lower and women were more likely to achieve a greater degree of educational parity with their male counterparts, as we are today (1992: 25). Where in previous generations women left domestic work to servants if they had the means, women of all classes in the 1950s “created makework in their homes and felt guilty when they did not do everything for themselves,” as housework was recoded in the popular consciousness as an expression of a woman’s femininity and individuality (1992: 27). Despite the time saving appliances and convenience foods which emerged in this era, the amount of time women spent performing domestic labour actually increased from previous generations (1992: 27). Tillotson remarks that to today’s “harried” working women, the 1950s housewife led quite an idyllic life. They were able, she declares, to “do the dishes, bake a pie, then polish the coffee table until [they could] see [their] face in it. What a luxury!” (2004:

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<sup>17</sup> It is also of interest to note that the nuclear family model which emerged from the 1950s actually understood the relationships between generations very differently than does the neodomestic genre, despite the fact that the latter claims to refer back to the model of this earlier era for inspiration. This was the first generation to “pride themselves on the “modernity” of parent-child relations, diluting the authority of grandparents, denigrating “old fashioned” ideas about childraising and resisting the “interference” of relatives” (Coontz 1992: 9). Grandparents, aunts, and other family members were denied access to the intimate family circle of husband, wife and child. The ‘traditional’ family which neodomestic discourse advocates restoring actually rebuffed the experiences and input of an older female generation. Ironically, it is more accurately the second-wave feminist insistence on reclaiming the mother’s or grandmother’s knowledge through a revival of the concept of a matrilineage, rather than any notion of traditional family life, upon which this aspect of the neodomestic genre rests.

126). It is likely that Tillotson intends this statement to be read with a degree of savvy, post-feminist irony, although her text is so lacking in nuance, that even when subtly critiquing the neodomestic insistence on nostalgia, she reinforces it. The 'retro' housewife role, and by extension the neodomestic identity, appears desirable precisely because Tillotson and her neodomestic contemporaries make it so.

In reality, the mid-twentieth century housewife's commitment to homemaking was also not always freely chosen. After the second world war, women were obliged to abandon the paid labour force in which they had "entered new jobs, gained new skills, joined unions, and fought against job discrimination," thus forfeiting a significant measure of independence, responsibility, and income (Coontz 1992: 31). Women who did not seek fulfillment in marriage and motherhood, or who could not adjust to homemaking, "were labeled neurotic, perverted or schizophrenic" (1992: 32). Sometimes they were institutionalized and administered electric shock treatments as incentive to "accept their domestic roles and their husbands dictates" or as treatment for the "dangerous emotional disturbance" which not wanting a marriage or family was thought to constitute (1992: 32). In neodomestic discourse, the methods of persuasion are far more subtle.

The taste and smell of food provides an entrée into an interior world that can only be accessed through the senses. Few would argue that these senses are not innate, or do not contribute to the way in which we experience the world. As Debora Lupton notes, food and eating are "central" to our "experience of embodiment, or the ways in which we live in and through our bodies, which itself is inextricably linked with subjectivity" (2005: 31). When the senses evoke experiences which exist only

nostalgically, however, we must call into question their efficacy in theorizing a 'feminist' subject, as they are employed in this discourse.

### **Abstracted Bodies: An Emotional Aesthetics of Taste**

In addition to traditions of the past, the creation of future tradition is another central preoccupation of the neodomestic genre. Both the taste and smell of homemade meals are also instrumental in this process; however the discourse surrounding these traditions shifts from pure sensory perception to a focus on feelings. Mendelson articulates a central assumption of the neodomestic genre in regards to the function of food: "good meals at home satisfy emotional hungers as real as hungers in the belly, and nothing else does so in the same way" (1999: 37). The ability to sooth and comfort those around you, argue Ame Beanland and Emily Terry, is contingent on knowing how to prepare "at least one delicious home-cooked meal that warms the belly and reminds you there's no place like home" (2004: 159). These assertions function to ideologically restrict the ability to properly 'nurture' to women who cook for their families.

Lawson, for example, recommends consistently baking her Christmas-Morning Muffins every year for the sake of creating a meaningful family life through shared ritual. She declares, "there's something so warmly reassuring in knowing that soon this cinnamon-sweet smell of baking and oranges will come to signify Christmas morning to [your family]" (2000: 277). Shine implores readers to build new traditions with their children which centre around the kitchen, in order to demonstrate to them "what's important in life" (2005: 103), by which she suggests a communion with loved ones through the collective preparation and consumption of food. When prepared from

scratch with the intent to nurture, food is imbued with and comes to embody its creator's love. A contributor to *Nesting* comments, "ask any good soulful cook: including a pinch of love is the secret to doin' it right" (2004: 159). Another notes, "given honest flour, pure water, and a good fire, there is really only one more thing needed to make the best bread in the world, fit for the greatest gourmet ever born: and that is honest love" (2004: 158). They suggest that the taste of food prepared with love bears its mark.<sup>18</sup> The physical and the affective dimensions of the neodomestic figure are fused as she herself becomes every recipe's central ingredient. The work of neodomestic discourse therefore shifts to the more difficult task of effectively persuading the reader that the latter dimension, our emotional responses, are also intrinsic gender characteristics, as innate as taste and smell.

While it may be deemed 'natural,' the neodomestic discourse of food preparation is exclusive in that only those initiated in the genre will likely fully comprehend the authors' meaning with respect to aesthetic judgments of taste. There is a recognizable type of food that the neodomestic reader is encouraged to prepare, in look and in taste. It is not chic, expensive, trendy or adventurous, but simple, wholesome, traditional and conservative. Mendelson declares, "for a home to feel solid, meaningful, dignified, and warm, you must have the means and skills to produce good, nutritious food, to dream up pleasant menus, and to set the table and serve the food in an attractive manner that is familiar and comfortable to guests" (1999: 37). By 'good,' and 'nutritious,' Mendelson refers very specifically to: "a triad comprising—at minimum—of one 'meat' or other

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<sup>18</sup> It comes as no surprise that Garten's *The Barefoot Contessa Cookbook* (1999) and Lawson's *How to Be a Domestic Goddess* appear in a list of valuable cookbook resources provided by Beanland and Terry to instruct readers in the method of preparing this 'love-food,' despite the fact, they assert, that it is thought that "good cooking relies more on intuition and natural flair than textbook technique" (2004: 158).

protein, one starchy food, and one or more fruits and vegetables” (1999: 49). Garten proffers an anecdote from a recent party at which she was seated next to “the CEO of a major international corporation” (2006: 90). This unnamed gentleman saved Garten the initial panic of selecting an appropriate topic of conversation by declaring that the worst dinner parties are those given in his honour by his employees. His hosts never fail to spend a fortune on ingredients and slave over complicated recipes, which rarely turn out to their satisfaction, all in an effort to impress. Garten iterates the moral of the story: “at the end of the day, everyone—even the CEO of a major international corporation—just wants a simple, delicious meal and a good conversation with friends” (2006: 90). For entertaining and family meals alike, she suggests a well-planned menu of comforting and non-pretentious foods which can be prepared in advance, such as “a roasted capon with carrots and potatoes” (2006: 90).

According to Gary Alan Fine, sensory judgments, such as the preference for these comfort foods, are grounded in “feelings”: “social relationships, face-to-face negotiations, social structures, and organizations” (1995: 246). The perception of both taste and smell is one of those experiences which we know, but possess, in most situations, an insufficient vocabulary to articulate because they are bodily experiences, consciously transformed into cognition of the sensory state only after the fact (1995: 246). We must therefore rely on context, Fine argues, comparing sensory experiences to both previous ones and to the ways in which those experiences were understood and critiqued by others, to articulate gustatory aesthetic judgments (1995: 247). It is not only the physical response of the body to sensory stimulation which therefore encourages neodomesticity’s turn to nostalgia, but the perceived lack of context in

relation to sensory judgments (the female audience for whom the texts are written is assumed to be wholly alienated from the kitchen, possessing no previous experience with which to contextualize the material provided) which justifies the use of nostalgia as its substitute.

In relation to culinary instruction, an imaginary conversation is encouraged between the neodomestic text's authors, their abstract culinary foremothers, and the reader herself. Shine for example, declares in reference to the Peppered Flank Steak recipe given to her by her butcher, "Sounds easy! I'll let you know how it tastes ..." which she immediately follows with "It's yummy—good!" (2005: 110). Lawson has declared that continuing a "conversation" with her (deceased) mother and sister was a central motivation for embarking on her career as a cookbook writer (Lynch *et al.* 2002: 93). The reader is encouraged to further adapt the recipes provided according to their own likes and dislikes, which increases the impression of a dialogue between cooks. In reference to her recipes, Lawson states,

cooking is not just about applying heat, procedure, method, but about transformation of a more intimate kind; none of us cooks without bringing our own character to bear on the food in front of us. Just as the recipes that follow have been toyed with, changed, fiddled with to become my food, so I expect them to be remodeled in your own kitchen (2002: vii).

Celeste Perron frames the recipes she provides not as fast rules but as guidelines on the preparation of a variety of basic dishes or 'staples' which are more like "formulas" for constructing one's own unique meal. When the reader commits them to memory, she can play with them until she determines a preferred method and its resulting dish (Perron 2005: 58). Recipes are always helpful, but cooking is ultimately more about innate 'common sense,' "a little bit of this and a little bit of that" (Shine 2006: 111).

Empowerment is located in the ‘tweaking’ of others’ recipes, adapting them to suit individual tastes, because it allows for one to recognize and begin to trust one’s own ‘feel’ for the cooking process. This form of recipe is a metonym for the overall rhetorical structure of neodomestic discourse; encouragement for the reader to closely follow the texts’ prescriptions for appropriate feminine behaviour, until they become second nature, is the technique by which ideal neodomestic femininity is discursively constructed.

Similes and metaphors explicitly link foods to emotional states, such as Lawson’s Happiness Soup, which with regard to its “sunny, mood-enhancing yellowness,” the author declares “to eat this is to feel cheered” (2002: 28). Beanland and Terry provide recipes for salad dressings which “thrill” (2004: 177) and “cowboy cookies” which are “lust at first bite” (2004: 185). One commentator titles the story of her quest to uncover her late father’s secret salad dressing recipe, “dish fulfillment” (2004: 191), while another compares her mother’s recipe collection to “impulsively chosen lovers”: “less appetizing in the cold light of day” (2004: 189). In virtually every recipe provided by Shine, the word “love” justifies its appearance in the collection (2005: 130, 131, 134, 136, 139, etc.). The conflation of an aesthetic judgment of ‘taste’ with emotional states is at once a precarious strategy for establishing a community of knowledge, as it is just as impossible to know how another person experiences happiness, love, lust or fulfillment as it is to understand how and what they taste. It is also a logical one, given the fact that eating is, for many, an extremely emotional experience. What emerges from the discourse is an emotional aesthetic of taste. The genre’s readers are provided with a sensory language through which to construct the

identity of provider, hostess, caregiver, and so on, which corresponds to a specific and recognizable bodily response. In this way, neodomestic “food talk” (Fine 1995: 248) is a privileged discourse; one must be initiated as a member of the specific discourse community to appreciate it. The recipe, or collection of recipes, becomes a story its reader “tell[s] themselves about themselves” (Theophano 2003: 70). Those dishes which taste good are the ones which also feel good.

### **Domestic Storytelling: ‘Natural’ Femininity via Consumption**

While there appears to be nothing particularly repressive about domestic storytelling, the rhetorical subtext of this genre subtly impresses upon the reader a rigidly coercive vision of appropriate femininity. The neodomestic text implicitly asks the reader, who is assumed to be an intelligent, although misguided working woman, the loaded question, “but can [you] cook?” (McFeely 2000: 1). It is a question which highlights the degree to which culinary proficiency, above all other skills, has long been associated with genuine womanhood. It also serves the function of putting women in their proper, female, place (2000: 1). In this context, the recipe takes on the form of ultimate self-help technique. It mirrors the feminine-style rhetoric of the self-help genre, and begs of the reader adherence to the same prescriptive behaviours which the genre endorses. In particular, women are held solely responsible for the maintenance of interpersonal relationships, therefore when conflicts arise within the family, they are expected to concede culpability and change their behaviour accordingly (DeFrancisco and O’Connor 1995: 222). For self-help to function as a discourse, women must admit that they are the source of relational problems, and are therefore cast either as

masochists, or simply as their unintentional “own worst enemies” (Simonds 1992: 177). Buckingham, for example, declares, “I dread the day my son asks me whether all families eat out of Chinese food containers three nights a week” (2004: xiii), and finds her inspiration for home cooking in the “pathetic” realization that her local takeout restaurant knows her order by the sound of her voice over the phone (2004: 19). Feelings of guilt and failure are manipulated, or even manufactured, so that the self-help author can later assist the reader in assuaging these feelings.<sup>19</sup>

The recipe also serves a similar pedagogic function as a self-help manual: to instruct readers on the way in which to appropriately “manage and perform heterosexuality” (Murphy 2001: 160). Self-help literature provides clear guidelines on how to act ‘as a woman’ or ‘as a man,’ a dilemma which is presented as a major source of confusion in post-sexual revolution relationships, where roles have been obscured by second-wave feminism (Grodin 1991: 409). The recipe affords women the means to achieve their assumed primary goal, as depicted in self-help culture, the ability to “procure and keep” a man (DeFrancisco and O’Connor 1995: 22). Perron, for example, provides a heavier, “guy friendly” category of recipes which promise to ‘wow’ the lucky male recipient of one’s culinary effort, and allow the cook to “do that proverbial win-his-heart-through-his taste-buds thing (or at least keep him around for a while after dessert)” (2005: 80). Lawson includes a recipe entitled “Blueberry Boy-Bait” in her manual and claims that the proof is in the pudding, which she describes as “desirably yielding” (2000: 126).

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<sup>19</sup> Advertising discourse functions in a similar manner (see, for example, discussion of advertising and post-feminism in Gill 2007, Chapter 3).

The feminine-style rhetoric which typifies the discourse of self-help, and also figures prominently in the neodomestic genre as a whole, attempts to conjure a state of egalitarianism; the author therefore addresses the text's reader as a peer (Ellingson 2000: 73). Occasionally, the now defunct second-wave feminist language of 'sisterhood' is also evoked, as is the case in *Happy Housewives*, where Shine makes frequent reference to her 'feminist sisters,' 'career sisters,' and 'housewife sisters' (2005: 11; 25). This is an attempt to empower the audience, to interpolate readers into an imagined community of neodomestic women, and to spur them to action in their own lives (Ellingson 2000: 74), although it clearly also functions to delineate who counts as a 'sister' in the discourse. When purveyed under the auspices of feminism, therapeutic rhetoric serves to radically depoliticize and confound the movement by discouraging "citizens from contextualizing their personal problems within structural power dynamics" (Rockler 2006: 247). Existing power structures are not denied, but instead upheld through the prescription to fix oneself in order to function more effectively within them (2006: 247). Because social and political conflict is downloaded onto families, and from there onto women as their emotional figureheads, the experience of oppression is privatized. Women who fail to rectify their problems therapeutically, or recognize them as inherently psychological, are left with no one to blame but themselves (2006: 247).

Naomi Rockler argues that while second-wave and third-wave feminisms alike are characterized by a shared focus on the individual versus the system as a whole, they are often, and for the most-part, accurately, represented as emblematic of the tension between the desire to enact systemic change versus personal empowerment, respectively (2006: 248). Post-feminism, she argues, takes the individualism of the third-wave and

its therapeutic rhetoric “a step further” in its blatant rejection of the reality of gender inequality; women exist in unequal circumstances only as a result of their own incompetence/lack of work ethic/poor choices/denial of their inherently feminine natures (2006: 250). This is clearly the case in neodomestic discourse where one’s total dedication to ‘homework’ is considered merely a matter of priorities.

Despite the fact that neodomestic discourse calls on women to break the silence and cease denying their genuine love of all things domestic, its use of therapeutic rhetoric actually encourages isolation among women, due to the way in which it precludes the possibility of collective feminist action through a celebration of women’s self absorption (Rockler 2006: 261). Rockler quotes Bonnie Dow, who declares:

Given that competitions from women and their isolation from each other are key barriers to the kind of gender solidarity that would pose a profound threat to patriarchy, the triumph of individual feminism is an important rhetorical/ideological strategy (2006: 261).

As previously noted, the neodomestic author’s ‘I’ speaks directly to the reader’s ‘you,’ in the simulation of friendly conversation (Ellingson 2000: 69). The promotional material on the cover of Shine’s text, for example, appears as a personal note to the reader, opening with “Dear Desperate Housewife” and closing with “Love, Darla” (2005: back cover). Rita Konig also pens her introduction with the express purpose of establishing a personal connection with the reader. She declares, “most of *us* lead chaotic lives”; “*we* need to learn how to gain the most benefit from the little free time *we* have,” and so on, also closing her tête-à-tête with the intimate, “Love, Rita” (2002: 6, 7 emphasis added). While the text’s linguistic devices generate an impression of interaction between reader and author, the text actually offers no real means for the reader to respond or be heard (Ellingson 2000: 84). In a rejection of “feminist

conceptualizations of personal empowerment as intricately linked to social structures, institutions, and the lives of others,” empowerment here is framed as an individual and isolated act (2000: 85). This is consistent with the neodomestic vision of a new feminism as discussed in Chapter Three, where empowerment is located in the maintenance of control in one’s interpersonal relationships.

The solutions presented in the self-help book are generally short and “read like quick fixes” (DeFrancisco and O’Connor 1995: 218). Problems are oversimplified and categorized, insinuating that they can be easily remedied by the reader herself (1995: 218). The recipe form epitomizes the self-help genre’s easily digestible, formulaic instructions for solving complex social and relational problems. The way in which neodomestic subject matter is subsumed under tidy chapter headings, such as ‘cleaning,’ ‘cooking,’ ‘decorating,’ ‘hostessing,’ and so on, obscures the way in which the physical maintenance of a home, when combined with the psychological and emotional facets of this labour, preclude the feasibility of such a simple, formulaic approach to ‘homework.’ Inductive reasoning characterizes the texts’ feminine-style rhetoric (Ellingson 2000: 72). Readers are encouraged to infer the meaning of the anecdotes, “pithy sayings,” and enlightened insights of texts through identification with the authors, in relation to their own lives (Ellingson 2000: 72). Whether it be Buckingham’s “MG [Modern Girl] Tip,” Perron’s “Smart-Girl Secret,” or Beanland and Terry’s “a little birdie told us. . .” column, the reoccurring elements of these texts allow for the imparting of their authors’ most poignant insights in bite-sized installments.

The ‘simple-steps’ formula is another rhetorical technique borrowed from the self-help genre which again is symptomatic of the neodomestic genre’s insistence on

eviscerating context. Shine, for example, declares on her text's front cover: "I was a whining, miserable, desperate housewife—but I finally snapped out of it ... you can too! In 10 Easy Steps!" (Shine 2005). Perron shares her six steps to "a home you're much more into, and hopefully, totally proud of and passionate about" (2005: 3). König's text is divided into eleven chapters, each one a "simple way," as the subtitle reads, for the reader to "add style to [her] life" (2002: front cover). Even when not explicitly framed in the language of 'simple steps,' charts, lists, and bullet points break up each text into linear and methodical instructions on the transformation of one's life, one's home, one's yard, one's relationships with others, etc. The contents page of Cerentha Harris' text is designed to look and read like a list in a child's school book, with the chapters numbered and neatly written, double spaced, on lined paper. Cursive fonts often appear in neodomestic texts in headings, lists of instructions, or necessary ingredients or products, as they appear in Harris' text, giving them the appearance of a list thoughtfully penned for a teacher's approval (for further examples, see Kehm 2005; Perron 2005; König 2002; Shine 2005; Beanland and Terry 2004). Not only does this suggest that domestic proficiency is simple enough even for a school girl to achieve, it also gives the reader the impression of an expert-approved and individually tailored solution to a perceived problem.

Despite the very complexity of the relationships which neodomestic rhetorical prescriptions address, particularly women's relationship to both their male partners and to the domestic sphere, the texts frame such prescriptions as facile and 'obvious' in order to obscure the artificiality of their imposition on readers' lives. While neodomestic texts may present compelling arguments for the innateness of the brand of femininity they

advocate, justifying this subject position as also inherently feminist presents greater challenges. Self-help rhetoric assists in bridging the gap between what is often conventionally understood as innate, such as the feminine ‘drive’ to nurture, and that which is understood as unnatural or deviant, such as women’s quest for social or economic power beyond the private sphere—a reality of feminist activism. Murphy cites Paul Lichterman’s theory—self-help acts as a practical mediator for women between feminism and the ‘modern relationship’—as a possible alternate approach to evaluating the genre (2001: 160). Evidently a fundamental goal of neodomestic discourse is to envision and endorse a new feminism which does not prohibit a simultaneous performance of the femininity still required in the enactment of the ‘modern’ heterosexual relationship as its authors envision it. Self-help rhetoric recodes femininity as an empowered subject position, while dulling feminism’s threatening potential to undo neodomesticity’s careful discursive construction of innate femininity.

Self-help readers often choose an individualistic rather than social approach to problem solving, declares Murphy, as a concrete solution to individual women’s problems is something the feminist movement never presumed to provide for women (2001: 166). She continues: “feminism is great at naming the problem, and in the past it has been very good at pointing the finger at the oppressor, but it has never promised to produce happiness. Self-help does (even if only in the form of soup). Self-help vows to make the modern (read influenced by feminism) relationship work” (2001: 166). This explanation is problematic, however, as the predicaments which arise, particularly in the neodomestic genre, are inconsequential, benign, and/or easily solved.<sup>20</sup> Ironically, what

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<sup>20</sup> Recall the “nest negotiations” (Beanland and Terry 2004: 62) discussed in chapter three, which provides advice to couples who cannot come to an agreement with regards to their interior décor. Buckingham

intolerant and rigid therapeutic discourse provides is the perception of choice. Self-help makes the ‘modern relationship work’ primarily through the imperative to consume.

In asserting the centrality of the individual, self-help necessarily endorses a capitalist ideology (Murphy 2001: 159). Women are encouraged to embrace their inner domestic goddess and relish enacting her role as an antidote to economic constraints (such as the continued presence of a discernable wage gap for women in many industries). Scarcity itself becomes imaginary. And yet, while money is irrelevant, the domestic goddess lifestyle is obtainable only through shopping (McGee 205: 102). From the moment of initial purchase of a neodomestic text, to the enactment of its prescriptions, the reader is urged to consume. Perron, for example, identifies the types of household investments women should undertake, depending on their goals and tastes. If you entertain frequently, “your investment item should be a top-quality sound system” (2004: 5). If you spend a lot of time at home, you should purchase “a comfy couch that’s big enough for you and your boyfriend to snuggle on” and “the best flat-screen TV on the market” (2005: 4). Each chapter of *Playing House* ends with a shopping guide to assist its readers in locating these items; the guide at the end of the first chapter is itself, ten pages long (2005: 41-51).

The cleaning techniques upon which Harris expounds are indicative of the type of home her reader is assumed to keep. For example, she provides detailed instructions on how to clean leather and metal finishes, art and collectables, the home-theatre system, the piano, and the fireplace (2004: 162-179). Beanland and Terry’s text is punctuated by “chick lists” which are comprised of the items they believe every woman should have.

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proffers similar advice on dealing with the “testosterone habits that affect your chic home,” such as a male partner’s unwillingness to fold towels in three, as opposed to simply in half, in order to conceal the seams, as is the proper way in which to fold towels (2004: 163-5).

These include: “a reading nook, with a library of beloved books and an ultra-comfy, just-my-size chair to curl up on”; “a chandelier”; “luxurious soaps and potions sink- and tub-side for aromatherapy and pampering”; “a set of nice table linens”; “stationary for scratching down stylish greetings and thank-you notes”; and “a beautiful bottle or tin of something deliciously refined and gourmet—like a limited run, estate-bottled olive oil or balsamic vinegar, or English tea biscuits in a vintage tin,” among others (2004: 42, 123, 183). Such items are extensions of the woman, identifying both the way in which she prioritizes her ‘self’ and understands that ‘self.’ A more detailed analysis of the relationship between the home and neodomestic subjectivity will follow in the next chapter; here the carefully accessorized home provides the ‘natural’ habitat of neodomestic femininity. The mention of luxury items points particularly to a discourse of ‘toys.’ The discourse of femininity structures desire by articulating it according to “objectives,” “means and methods,” which are “established in its media and available as commodities” (Smith 1988: 47). The more household luxuries a woman has to play with, or more specifically, the fewer those items she is obliged to share with her husband, her family, and so on, the happier she is.

Angela McRobbie suggests that consumer culture has replaced the social institutions of family, education, medicine and law traditionally held responsible for both reproducing the category of “youthful femininity” and controlling its excesses (2004b: 1). It speaks to women in the very profitable language of popular feminism, which allows for the possibility of gender “re-inscription” as well as “re-subordination” (2004b: 2). Neodomestic figures’ ability to control the excesses of femininity through the cultural practice of shopping and consumption allows them to prove themselves as

“reassuringly real women” (2004b: 14). Shine, for example, frames her consumption practices, which centre around the maintenance of a youthful appearance and physique, as a form of professional development for the housewife. She expends significant resources on keeping up ‘a look’: “yoga, the gym, eating healthy [organic], staying fit, keeping a cute ‘do, wearing makeup, buying the latest trends,” and so on (2005: 34). These practices allow her to retain the sexual interest of her husband; they are therefore for the greater good of the family unit. She contrasts herself with women whose consumption practices are wholly self-interested, women who are “not really there,” who stay “out all day shopping, playing tennis, going to the salon,” but who never “cook a meal” or “clean their own houses” (2005: 6). Their domestic absenteeism is not primarily due to their consumption habits, because consumption is a part of the “hard work” and “commitment” required of ‘homework’ (2005: 34). Rather, it is the fact that their consumption choices are defiantly employed to sever any connection to the home, rather than to cement it, to which Shine objects. They assert their femininity beyond the parameters of the home.

The link between consumption and domesticity which neodeomestic texts sanction is hardly new. Bowlby declares:

For almost as long as the middle-class ideology of domesticity has existed, consumerism has provided a bridge, or at least a very brisk walk, between the home and the outside world. From nineteenth-century department stores to twentieth-century supermarkets, via the development at the turn of the century of brand-name goods and the vast expansion of advertising in all the media which enter the home—newspapers and magazines and later radio and television—consumption has been intimately bound up with the changing forms of domestication (1995: 86).

This latest instance of the domestic ideal embraces shopping’s continued celebration in popular culture as the prototypical feminine activity. Hillary Radner argues that it is,

however, “no longer the recreational activity of the bored housewife who must incarnate her husband’s wealth and success” but a means through which “a woman externalizes her “self-worth” as properly her own” (1995: 64). Indeed, as Susan Bordo notes, when the language of femininity is “pushed to excess” or “shouted and asserted,” as it is in neodomestic discourse, it “deconstructs into its opposite and makes available to the woman an illusory experience of power previously forbidden to her by virtue of her gender” (1993: 179). Whether this empowerment is illusory, as per conventional feminist thought, or ‘real,’ as proponents of neodomesticity would argue, the discourse of consumption contributes to the genre’s endorsement of its specific brand of innate femininity as it equates the act of consumption with a correlating feeling—pleasure, contentment, and so on—which finds expression only in the exaggerated expression of gender.

Despite the genre’s insistence that a life of ‘homework’ (including consumption practices) constitutes the only true avenue for women’s emotional fulfillment, consumption clearly also serves to fill an emotional void precipitated by the very monotony its authors deny exists. In stitch ‘n bitch parlance, for example, the purchase of yarn is called SEX (“stash enrichment expedition”) (Stoller 2003: 116), suggesting a trip to the local craft store merits more excitement than the execution of the actual project itself. It is the consumption of food, rather than goods, however, through which the true pleasure of consumption can be most easily universalized and communicated to the reader. Shine declares, for example: “some of my most peaceful moments are spent in a mental fog wandering up and down the isles of Costco for hours with my coffee, tasting all the samples, and buying a lot of stuff we don’t need” (2005: 172). When in a

“gloomy” mood, Konig recommends eating a delicious pâté kept in the cupboard for that very purpose, or replacing “the baked beans on the top of your baked potato with some crème fraîche and a small pot of caviar” to “instantly feel better” (2002: 107). Konig also suffers no qualms in encouraging her readers to bribe themselves to complete their ‘homework.’ Before a homework session she suggests planning a post-cleaning “lunch date” as a reward (2002: 250). A cookie and coffee break, mid-clean, is also a nice incentive to keep going (2002: 250). Buckingham skips the cookies and goes straight for “a glass of Chardonnay” as her reward (2004: 44). These are not necessarily the comfort foods advocated by neodomestic discourse, and are likely enjoyed alone, which subtly points to their consumption as a potential mode of escapism or dissent in reference to the prescribed responsibility to perform all domestic labour in the home. It is more likely, however, that they merely serve as a reminder of the apparent ability of ‘homework’ to satiate innate, feminine needs, as do the little gustatory treats.

Neodomestic discourse actually undermines its carefully constructed argument vis-à-vis the innate nature of neodomestic femininity by suggesting that it can be bought. While readers may recognize this, and subvert the authority of the text by interpreting the information provided in a manner not intended by its author, neodomestic discourse actively attempts to counter critical readings by encouraging the reader to isolate herself within her home and her heterosexual partnership, oversimplifying complex social issues, eviscerating social context, and denying the existence of power struggles and hierarchies.

## Conclusion

Consumption is a process that never ends. Perron is frank about this reality, asserting under the heading “never stop feathering your nest,” that “the thing about doing your home that you should come to terms with is that you’re never going to be totally finished” (2005: 41). Just as the self-help reader is instructed to continually seek an expert outside herself in order to affirm her own power to solve perceived personal problems (Ellingson 2000: 67), the neodomestic reader is urged to constantly consume in order to achieve a blissful home in which there is no cause for emotional disturbance. As Radner notes, this model of consumption as means to optimal emotional health

depends not on the generation of new models of femininity but on a rereading of old models. The old model, the pre-feminist model, is retained, in fact reinvented, replacing the feminist model of a woman-centered culture that rejected a femininity grounded in patriarchy and consumption (1995: 64).

Consumption is, as Betty Friedan first identified, one force which drives women back into their homes. “Subjection to the lures of commodities” (Bowlby 1995: 87), relegates women to the sphere of immanence in the same way as does the constant cycle of domestic labour, while neodomestic discourse discourages the use of embodied knowledge to explode the relationship between the female body and femininity, as is well within its power. Rather it attributes the same purpose to consumption as it does to (culinary) production—to resurrect as reality, through the home, what only exists nostalgically: the domestic homeland, one’s own girlhood, a connection to the sacred, freedom from relational conflict, happiness, and ‘real’ femininity. Moreover, because nostalgia discursively functions through sensory perception, at the level of the “‘natural,’ pristine body” (Pitts 2005: 232), it is a very difficult discourse to counter. One cannot argue with the ontological reality of one’s body. Or can we?

The following chapter will examine the physical and emotional practices through which one may intentionally enact a feminine-feminist identity. Such practices allude to the reality that one is not born a neodomestic woman, but as Simone de Beauvoir intimated, becomes one.

## Chapter 5: 'Home-Schooled': Lessons in Neodomestic Praxis

“Every night soak your panties and bras before you go to bed, then in the morning give them a quick wash, rinse them off and hang them out,” declares Rita Konig, with regard to the proper laundering of the “lacy” and “delicate” items which are women’s underwear (2002: 255). Knowing how to properly launder one’s clothes, Jane Buckingham assures, will save you the “humiliation” of wearing an outfit “that screams, “I shop in the sale bin at Loehmann’s”” (2004: 26). Cheryl Mendelson provides a detailed schedule of other labour-intensive tasks which must be performed daily, including cleaning “sinks and tubs after use (including drains and taps),” and “the floors in high use areas,” such as the kitchen and entranceways, refilling “vaporizers and humidifiers,” and emptying “trash and garbage containers,” in addition to bed-making, meal preparation and clean up, and general ‘neatening’ (1999: 21). She frowns upon the now commonplace *ad hoc* attitude towards homework—which robs the home of the ability to comfort and engage its occupants—and instead recommends keeping a datebook “devoted entirely to” one’s weekly, monthly and seasonal homework routines (1999: 7, 20). Although the tasks involved in such routines are vast, one should not expect to receive much help in their execution. Darla Shine, who likewise provides an easy to emulate breakdown of her homework routines (2005: 75-8), asserts that,

if you wait around for your husband to come home and start mopping the floor, you’ll really become desperate. Give it up already. I told you to stop nagging your husband. You’ve just got to stop expecting him to do his share around the house. It isn’t going to happen. It’s your job anyway, so just do it (2005: 86).

And don’t forget to do your “hottie homework” either, reminds Buckingham; “a little extra erotic appeal”—acquired by regularly reading up on new *Cosmo*-style sex tips—is

just as valuable as being “smart” when it comes to your intimate relationships (2004: 285-6).

These are some of the many identity forming neodomestic practices. The pursuit of self-mastery, of control, and of power is the ultimate objective of neodomestic femininity as an empowered, feminist subject position—an endeavor allegedly enabled by such a ‘homework’ practices. The sheer amount of time neodomestic regimens require, however, actually prohibits many conventional routes by which to accomplish these goals, among them, namely full-time paid employment. The practical function of homework in contributing to this purported end, therefore, requires some explication.

As cultural critic Micki McGee notes, the terms ‘work’ and ‘labour,’ although used interchangeably in common parlance, are etymologically distinct and connote quite different actions (2005: 140). Drawing on the concepts articulated by philosopher Hannah Arendt, she argues that ‘labour’ designates a finished product, whereas ‘work’ bespeaks both the process and the product of an endeavor to produce, particularly in terms of works of art. Products of labour are rapidly consumed and incorporated into the flow of life, such as those of ‘homework,’ which meet the survival needs of human beings. Labour sustains and reproduces the body, hence its association with the exertion of childbirth, and leaves behind little trace when life is over. Work, on the other hand, entails permanence; it embodies a purpose outside of its creator, allowing a trace of her life to extend beyond the natural lifespan (see McGee 2005: 140-141). I have employed the term ‘homework’ throughout this analysis of the neodomestic genre to signify the activities which neodomesticity entails, although the term might more accurately describe not the activities themselves, but the state-of-being conjured through their

mastery. 'Homework' permits a metaphoric identification between a woman and her home, as that which is more than simply a collection of 'things'; this identification is central to the way in which the neodomestic figure experiences selfhood. It is also a vital source of pleasure for her, with fundamental implications regarding the discursive construction of neodomestic identity as that which can never be fully realized. This chapter will examine the homework practices which delineate the parameters of neodomestic subjectivity and from which emerge the feminine subject. They are not limited to a simple list of domestic tasks, such as laundry, vacuuming or cooking, although these practices are important. Rather, the practices involve more abstract processes learned through the execution of such above mentioned tasks, and include: imbuing the home with human attributes, or building a home to house the neodomestic soul; finding ways in which to take pleasure in all aspects of homework; accepting the fact that like themselves, the home requires constant attention and improvement; and envisioning the home as one would one's own body. The work/labour distinction outlined above provides a useful schema by which to analyze this neodomestic philosophy of homework through which the identity of its adherents is very precisely envisioned.

### **Elucidating the Neodomestic Philosophy of Homework**

The domestic undertakings stipulated by neodomestic discourse—the identity forming cleaning, organizing, shopping, decorating, emotional caretaking, sexual exploits, and so on, which constitute 'homework'—fall squarely in the category of 'labour.' They are ephemeral, often tedious, and serve to sustain domestic life. The

philosophy articulated by the neodomestic genre, however, frequently bestows upon domestic labour the qualities of ‘work.’ Counter-intuitively, readers are encouraged to view their travails as a process of artistic creation. Mendelson, for example, clearly identifies homework as “art” in the subtitle of her text: *The Art and Science of Keeping House*. A contributor to *Nesting* equates homework with a process of self-exploration, erasing all evidence of the physical exertion it also requires:

Home is an attitude that has to do with loving and caring, thoughtfulness, honesty, and authenticity. It is our lives, our families, and our souls that need to be housed. [...] The art of living in today’s world requires us to reach inside ourselves and search for the answers (Beanland and Terry 2004: 13).

Cerentha Harris likewise proclaims homework a form of “high art,” with all its elitist, intellectual connotations, after an epiphany she experienced when working at *Martha Stewart Living* (2004: 2). Martha Stewart is often credited as a powerful force in raising the status of housework to that of an art form.<sup>21</sup> Stewart’s objectives, however, are often misunderstood. She does not, for example, attempt to conceal the fact that the domestic work she advocates, what she figures as the craft of ‘homekeeping,’ often constitutes hard, manual labour. In the home, she declares, “there is always something needing immediate attention and always something more that can be done” (2006: 9), from stripping and waxing floors, to repairing broken china, to inventorying and organizing one’s closets, to washing and storing and otherwise caring for household linens. This philosophy of homework is quite different from Harris,’ for example, who envisions her work in the home merely as a means to an end, which is emotional fulfillment (2004: 3).

Sandra Lee Bartky argues that because housework is one prominent manifestation of the performance of femininity as spectacle, an activity “in which

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<sup>21</sup> This achievement sometimes garners Stewart the designation of “feminist icon” (Stoller 2003: 113) (see also Mason and Meyers 2001: 818), although this accolade is by no means universally acknowledged.

virtually every woman is required to participate,” it cannot be considered an art form (1988: 72). For one, its performers lack the self-determination required in the enactment of an artistic vocation (1988: 72). The “art” of homework is like the “art” of makeup application, it presupposes that unadorned and ill-maintained, the woman’s body, and by extension, her home, is defective (1988: 71). Both actions simply must be done; they are chores. Furthermore, the nature by which women’s creations are judged “reflects gross imbalances in the social power of the sexes that do not mark the relationship of artists and their audiences” (1988: 12). Despite the best efforts of neodomestic trendsetters everywhere, homemaking remains a site of low social prestige and necessarily involves economic dependence on a working partner.

Neodomestic discourse’s conscious and systematic effort to repackage domestic labour as the artistic vocation of ‘homework’ speaks directly to the ongoing and contentious debate regarding the compatibility of femininity and feminism, earlier dichotomized by the second-wave feminist insistence that submission to housework precluded an enlightened feminist identity. Instead, the model identified by neodomestic author Kristin Tillotson prevails, in which empowerment is closely tied to the performance of traditional femininity. In fact, it was the feminine proficiency of the 1950s housewife which first raised domestic “drudgery” to an art form, in order to solidify her reign over the domestic sphere (2004: 80). Neodomestic discourse belies, however, a subtle recognition of the fact that, as McGee notes, the idea of life, or the labour which sustains life, as a work of art, is quite problematic (2005: 140). Because domestic labour is, by nature, constantly subsumed into the flow of everyday life, it must be artificially preserved to achieve art’s requisite state of permanence. Testimonials

regarding the profound ‘meaning’ of homework therefore abound in neodomestic texts, to lend homework a necessary gravity and material record. Mendelson, for example, expounds,

[the] sense of being at home is important to everyone’s well-being. If you do not get enough of it, your happiness, resilience, energy, humor, and courage will decrease. [Creating a home through ‘housekeeping’] is a complex thing, an amalgam. In part, it is a sense of having special rights, dignities, and entitlements—and these are legal realities, not just emotional states. It includes familiarity, warmth, affection, and a conviction of security. Being at home feels safe; you have a sense of relief whenever you come home and close the door behind you, reduced fear of social and emotional dangers as well as physical ones. When you are home, you can let down your guard and take off your mask (1999: 7).

Domestic instruction also unnecessarily transforms the simplest of tasks into complex undertakings as a strategy to confirm its fixedness. It is unlikely, for example, that a reader would require a four page, eight-step tutorial on the proper way in which to wash the dishes (Harris 2004: 84-87), or an illustrated diagram on the correct method by which to hand-sprinkle clothes, pillowcases and napkins with water to dampen before ironing (Mendelson 1999: 340-1) (see Illustration I). Neodomestic texts are a prime example of “femorabilia,” a term coined by Debbie Stoller, editor of *Bust* magazine, to denote “the material culture of femininity” (Peril 2002: 11). When captured on paper for posterity, the acts of washing dishes and ironing napkins gain a degree of substantiation.

In this project of re-branding, neodomestic authors disassociate themselves from that which might be perceived as the busywork of bored housewives. Buckingham, for example, snidely remarks, “the idea of spending eight gazillion hours of my (nonexistent) free time fashioning swan-shaped soufflés and embroidering his-and-hers laundry bags just doesn’t sound like a party to me” (2004: 1). König likewise asserts, “I would not consider for a second taking on any project requiring either a lot of

preparation or Scotch tape and an old toilet paper roll” (2002: 6). These remarks constitute a clear, although unnamed, rejoinder to Martha Stewart-style domesticity. Stewart’s labour is trivialized as that which is extraneous, ‘crafty,’ and disposable in the effort to distance ‘homework’ from that rubric. One reviewer declares Konig, “*Vogue’s* answer to Martha Stewart,” with her offerings of “chic postmodern advice” (Konig 2002: back cover). While it is unclear what is meant by ‘postmodern,’ Konig’s advice is clearly more trendy, lighthearted, and focused on the creation of aesthetically pleasing environments through consumption, than that of her older, more staid domestic counterpart. Konig’s text, however, also advances an unambiguous ‘master narrative’: according to neodomestic discourse, ‘homework,’ is the force which instills soul, essence, or spirit into physical material of the home.

Mendelson partially locates her impetus for writing *Home Comforts* in recurrent visits to homes in which “the predominant feeling [is] sepulchral, dusty, deserted, or even hotel-like” (1999: 6). This undesirable state of affairs cannot be remedied, Mendelson warns, through interior decorating alone, as “too much attention to the looks of a home can backfire if it creates a stage-set feeling instead of the authenticity of a genuinely homey place” (1999: 7). The inauthenticity of the ‘show home’ is a common point of scorn in neodomestic discourse.<sup>22</sup> Ina Garten, for example, questions, “how many times have you seen a gorgeous house in a shelter [interior design/decorating] magazine that looks absolutely soulless?” or in other words, a house that fails to “give a sense that a person with a full, rich life lives there” (2006: 17, 18). Harris echoes Garten’s sentiments, declaring “who wants to live in a house that looks like a furniture

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<sup>22</sup> This is ironic given the degree to which the homes (or settings) in which the texts’ authors dwell appear staged and disingenuous when offered exemplarily (see discussion in Chapter Three, page 81).

catalogue?” (2004: 130). Mendelson’s opening words, “when you keep house, you use your head, your heart, and your hands together to create a home” (1999: 1), serve as a key to unlock the spiritual power of homework. Michelle Kehm phrases the same idea slightly differently, suggesting that a home’s “good energy,” “special vibe” and “ever-so-nesty” quality comes not from the space itself or how it is furnished, but through the creative energy of the space’s occupant (2005: 1). It is, as her very first line reads, “more than a feeling” (2005: 1).

The general consensus among neodomestic texts that “home” is built with effort and creativity, not “a ton of money” used to fill it with “impressive stuff”<sup>23</sup> (Perron 2005: 1), inevitably finds expression among the individual texts’ opening sentiments, indicating the extent to which this features as a central component of neodomestic ideology. Homework is the process of artistic creation through which ‘labour’ becomes ‘work,’ a ‘house’ becomes a ‘home,’ and the neodomestic distinguishes herself from other domestic labourers.

### **The Home, Personified**

In *Planned Assaults* (1987), Lars Lerup notes that the figure of the home has two components. On one level, it exists as a plan, a blue-print, an assembly of parts, and a graphic abstraction that can never be directly experienced (1987: 15). The plan forms the fundamental order and discipline for the family: the landscape of the home in which we conduct our lives, at the perimeter of which is the outside world (1987: 15).

However, despite its “obvious power” over our lives, the plan itself is taken for granted

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<sup>23</sup> While effort and creativity are essential to the creation of home, indulging in expensive domestic luxury items also doesn’t hurt—Perron is the same author who, pages later, suggests purchasing a “top quality sound system,” or “the best flat screen TV” on the market, as noted in Chapter Four (2005: 4).

and rarely consciously experienced (1987: 15). Neodomesic discourse envisions the home as it exists on a second level: as seen from the outside, like in a child's drawing. This home is solid, complete, self-contained and isolated in the environment (1987: 15). As was the case in the Victorian era, this home is a clear articulation of the ideology of separate spheres, which posits a dichotomous relationship between men and women, public and private, culture and nature—or in the language of neodomesicity, reason and passion, or 'soul.' Just as neodomesic discourse posits the kitchen as the spiritual heart of the home, as discussed in Chapter Four, here the whole home takes on the characteristics of a sentient being. Unlike in the pervious chapter, however, where the strategy of employing 'home' as a metaphor for female nature functions to shore up the discourse's contention of its naturalness and to ground the nostalgically inspired theory of innate femininity in a concrete setting, the home in this context operates as a metaphor of the way in which the neodomesic subject should see herself: as in constant need of improvement. The home is an exemplar which instructs the reader on the methods of achieving neodomesic subjectivity.

The similarities between the neodomesic vision of the home and its earlier Victorian counterpart are striking. Victorian women, for example, transformed the functional rooms of male design into "a concentration of spaces that flowed, undulated, and enveloped you"; they were not "built, constructed or ordered, but assembled, arranged, composed, and decorated" (Betsky 1995: 141). Amos Rapoport notes that interior spaces provide "props" to communicate appropriate "behaviours and activities" by functioning as a "setting"—that which "defines a situation, reminds occupants of the appropriate rules and hence of the ongoing behaviours appropriate to the situation

defined by the setting” (1990: 12). The furnishing, drapery, art, bric-a-brac and other carefully selected ornaments which adorned, in abundance, the interior of the Victorian home served precisely this purpose. These props were cues of setting which acted as mnemonic devices to remind the home’s inhabitants of which rules apply and consequently how to act (1990: 12). The built environment therefore affects behaviour, both instrumentally and communicatively in the assertion of status, power, and role it engenders (1990: 11). Ironically, in the neodomestic resolve to instill ‘soul’ in the home through a combined emotive, intellectual, and physical connection with the space and its contents, the reality of the home as little more than a platform from which to launch neodomestic ideology about the rules which govern the feminine behaviors befitting the neodomestic subject becomes apparent.

One of the major purposes of the built environment is to facilitate meaningful interaction between people; this requires patterns and regularities (Rapoport 1990: 13). We can conceive of the domestic environment as consisting of “fixed-feature elements,” like floors, walls and stairs, “semi-fixed-feature elements” such as furnishings and landscaping, and “non-fixed-feature elements” such as people, activities and behaviours (1990: 13). A family inscribes itself on the physical reality of a house through family photographs, memorabilia, furniture, even patterns of dusting (Lerup 1987: 28). They also spatially cut the house into gendered domains: “man space,” “woman space,” “boy space,” and “girl space,” through actions, gestures and behaviours, which are implicitly supported by the home’s architectural design (1987: 28). However it is the “semi-fixed features” which play the most important role in determining the cultural significance of a space and its use (Rapoport 1990: 13). The Victorian parlour, for example, immediately

communicated to guests the inhabitant's actual, or aspired, social status through a complex, visual language (Sparke 1995: 47). The presence of certain standard artifacts, such as "carpets, window draperies, a parlour suite, fancy chairs, a centre table, a piano, and a mantle" was necessary in order to establish the tacit symbolism of classed taste (1995: 47). The arrangement of "knick-knacks," and the degree of elaborateness of the parlour in general, signaled a more specific social position, expressed by its creator and understood by its admirer. The arrangement of the parlour therefore required a significant degree of knowledge on the part of the woman who furnished it, which was garnered through, among other means, the increasing presence of advice manuals (1995: 47). By claiming an identity based on discriminating taste in the selection of each aesthetically pleasing and symbolically significant element of the interior space, women translated their private, domestic knowledge into public, economic authority (Betsky 1995: 141). To be sure, neodomestic discourse also depends on efficacy of the conversion of domestic know-how into some form of (unnamed) authority in the public sphere, as its discourse locates empowerment in the successful performance of normative femininity as exhibited by both the appearance and 'feel' of one's home.

There is a significant difference, however, between the 'work' of the Victorian housewife and that of the corresponding neodomestic figure. Unlike the earlier home-making projects, the prescription to have 'fun' is central to the concept of neodomestic 'homework.' Work—the effort and creativity which forms the basis of the home's soul—ironically constitutes the ultimate leisure activity. The promotional material of Celeste Perron's text, for example, declares, "*Playing House* will help you achieve blissful domesticity with minimum fuss and maximum fun" (2005: back cover).

Likewise, Konig's text is dubbed "the low-stress, high-fun way to entertain, shop [and] decorate" (2002: back cover). Ame Beanland and Emily Terry frame their text as an "adventure" in domesticity (2004: xviii), which connotes naïve curiosity and pleasure seeking. Scholar Joanne Hollows comments that the texts' focus on the pleasure derived from domestic labour, rather than the labour itself, is consistent with the way in which domestic activities are presented as "aestheticized leisure activities" according to the contemporary understanding of middle-class identity (Hollows 2003: 187). She quotes Pierre Bourdieu (1984), who declares that middle-class lifestyle is founded on "a morality of pleasure as duty," "which makes it a failure, a threat to self-esteem, not to "have fun"" (2003: 187). It is therefore only when transformed into 'play' that food preparation, or cleaning, or any other aspect of 'homework,' becomes tolerable, and even desirable. Mendelson for example declares, "you should not try to cook as fast as possible, [as] this creates a false contest between cooking and enjoying yourself and you will soon begrudge the time invested" (1999: 39). Nigella Lawson concurs, stating "the trouble with much modern cooking is not that the food it produces isn't good, but that the mood it induces in the cook is one of skin-of-the-teeth efficiency, all briskness and little pleasure" (2000: vii). Whether interpreted as an opportunity to have fun, or as the making of an artistic masterpiece, or both, the greater the amount of time invested in homework the greater the emotional reward.

This is not necessarily a wholly innovative approach in the recoding of 'housework' as 'homework,' but rather a reiteration of another earlier era's wishful thinking. In Kristin Tillotson's *Retro Housewife*, a series of 1950s era advertisements crudely articulate the same idea. In one, a delighted looking woman declares "IT'S

FUN! to clean the modern way!” while emanating a trail of sparkles which fall on her home’s now-immaculate surfaces (Tillotson 2004: 90). In another, a woman in a pink evening dress prances around the floor with her vacuum cleaner, gleefully exclaiming “whee!” “whee!” (2004: 93). The neodomestic genre is replete with the both prescription to have fun, and the assurance that domestic labour is fun.<sup>24</sup> Konig declares, “your home should simply be about having a good time” (2002: 7) and that “life should be a succession of little treats” (2002: 94). Buckingham provides dinner party menus which are “fun and easy” and invites the reader’s inner chef to “come out and play” (2004: 55, 3), and Garten thanks her assistant, Barbara, “for making every day together feel as though we’re just playing” (2006). Even Shine, who staunchly defends the solemnity of homemaking as the “most important job in the world” asserts, “playing house, and taking care of hubbie are a lot of fun” (Shine 2005: 1, 74). Neodomestic texts advocate deploying this two-pronged understanding of ‘fun’ in much the same manner as they do ‘make-believe,’ as discussed in Chapter Three: framing ‘homework’ in the discourse of child’s play is a strategy both to convince women of the pleasure it provides and to delineate a means by which to cope with the work, if this pleasure fails to materialize.

By imbuing the home with the human attribute of ‘soul’ or ‘psyche’ one can engage with it on a new level. The home is not simply an assemblage of inanimate objects, but something (or someone) which can be played with. The rejection of work, both inside and outside the home, in favour of constant ‘fun’ and ‘play’ obscures the

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<sup>24</sup> ‘Fun’ is therefore employed as a strategy in much the same way as is ‘make believe’ (see discussion in Chapter Three, page 87): when an activity which is supposedly pleasurable and therefore undertaken for its own sake proves to be otherwise, the reader is encouraged to either make it pleasurable, or pretend that it is so. Notice also that both strategies involve concepts associated with childhood, perhaps in order to naturalize their clear disciplinary function.

fact, however, that the homework practices prescribed by the neodomestic genre are, in the words of Dorothy Smith, ‘work’ done to recreate oneself as instance of the discursive image (1988: 44), rather than strategies to actually bring one’s home to life.

### **Reconnecting with One’s Inner-Girl**

According to the discursive image, women’s bodies (or homes) are always imperfect; the attempt to augment them is a negotiation with the text on the local level resulting from the dissatisfaction one feels between the imperfections one sees in one’s self as compared to the text (Smith 1988: 50). This self-imposed (home)work is therefore quite the opposite of child’s play. Neodomestic texts index a work process performed by women, which although not highly visible due to its unpaid nature, requires much the same tools, material and skills as does more conventional work, as well as a considerable amount of time, resources, and thought in the production of the textually-given form upon the body (1998: 45, 50). Neodomestic discourse employs the language of girlhood nonetheless, for the reason that it functions to effectively discipline the female reader. Because girlhood is conventionally understood as a phase of life characterized by ‘becoming,’ figuring the neodomestic subject as ‘girl’ confines her to a liminal state of constantly striving to achieve ideal femininity, but in which it is impossible to ever fully realize full-fledged womanhood.

In detailing the disciplinary practices which “produce a body which in gesture and appearance is recognizably feminine,” Bartky identifies three which are significant: “those that aim to produce a body of a certain size and general configuration; those that bring forth from this body a specific repertoire of gestures, postures, and movements;

and those that are directed toward the display of the body as an ornamental surface” (1988: 4). Neodomestic discourse widely condones all three, which are subsumed more generally under the auspices of pleasure-work, in which ‘pleasure’ or ‘fun’ constitutes the ultimate self-imposed disciplinary practice. The maintenance of a girlish figure, like the maintenance of sexual allure, is a central facet of neodomestic femininity; it is not fun to be fat. Shine, for example, urges her reader to “bring back the woman [she used] to be,” i.e. her younger, slimmer, more attractive self. She is the most callous of the texts’ authors in regards to issues of body image, declaring, “I know you could be beautiful” and “I know you are unhappy about being dumpy” (2005: 31). Her solution: to “get off your ass”; “if you are not stupid, you can lose weight and stay thin” (2005: 39, 46). As Bartky notes, abundance and power in a woman’s body is generally “met with distaste,” unlike the more favourable “taut, small breasted, narrow-hipped” physique, which, to the adult woman’s chagrin, bears a striking resemblance to the body of a “newly pubescent girl” (1988: 4). Shine takes as her mission the regulation of all women’s appetites, which is the only means by which to achieve this girlish physique.

Lawson, who is widely celebrated for both her voluptuous figure and the visible pleasure she derives from eating, clearly transgresses this rule. She is not, however, ‘massive,’ but ‘curvy,’ with an hourglass figure, “sticky-out bottom” and “sticky-out bosom” (Lawson, qtd. in *Ottawa Citizen* 2007). The slimness of her wrists, waist and ankles, coupled by the manner in which she employs her larger physical assets to ‘woo’ her audience, reassuringly confirms her status as suitably feminine and sexually desirable.<sup>25</sup> Lawson’s famous figure reflects more the way in which she envisions her

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Play’ in Lawson’s texts is more specifically envisioned as ‘foreplay’ due to the highly sexualized nature of her writing and her persona (see for example, her recipe for “Slut-Red Raspberries in

audience and her persona, than any degree of resistance to the conventions of beauty culture; like most post-feminist texts, Lawson's work is written for women, but "covertly acknowledg[es] male viewers or voyeurs" (Tasker and Negra 2005: 107). The power dynamic resulting from such a dual audience is concealed in Lawson's a-political and a-historical celebration of 'hedonism,' and obscures the fact that Lawson is still subject to the rigorous disciplinary mechanisms of both idealized femininity and compulsory heterosexuality.

An alternate way in which Lawson signals her 'girlishness' is through the use of the colour pink. In *Forever Summer*, she appears in a two-page photo spread, wearing a tight pink t-shirt, seductively licking a small strawberry ice-cream cone, against a vibrant pink backdrop (2002: 170-171) (see Illustration K). Lawson's mischievous expression, combined with the image's sexual connotations, suggests she fully comprehends the implications of her colour choice. Garten employs colour in a similar manner; as an older and slightly rotund figure, she surrounds herself, still-life style, with pink peonies, ripe peaches, pears and avocados, vibrant strawberries and raspberries and deep red cherry tomatoes, bursting with their own juices (2006: front cover, 27, 35, 128, 131, 172, 174). The lush, newly ripe produce evokes and stands in for the girlish youthfulness, fertility and daintiness which Garten lacks (see Illustration J). There is considerably less irony exhibited in Garten's text than in Lawson's, however much of the symbolic, pink imagery which pervades the latter's texts is also quite ideologically purposeful. Lawson's recipe for "Spiced Pink Soup," for example, exudes "retro charm," and when presented alongside her chartreuse "Chilled Pea and Mint Soup," the

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Chardonnay Jelly" (2002: 198)). Foreplay is also justifiable as an instance of 'work' due to the fact that Lawson employs it in the creation and promotion of her 'self.'

combination of “fifties rose-and-au-de-nile,” is “irresistible” (2002: 22). When served, as suggested, in teacups, this dish allows its maker to *play* the part of authentic 1950s homemaker/hostess. Like Lawson’s inclusion of pink foods in *Forever Summer*, Garten’s choice to highlight her moniker, “barefoot contessa” in pink font on the cover of her text, and her selection of a vibrant two-toned pink stripe to don the hard cover under its jacket, is not a simple expression of her colour preferences. They signify her adherence to a philosophy which Lynn Peril describes as “pink think”:

a set of ideas and attitudes about what constitutes proper female behaviour; a groupthink that was consciously or not adhered to by advice writers, manufacturers of toys and other consumer products, experts in many walks of life, and the public at large, particularly during the years spanning the mid-twentieth century—but enduring even into the twenty-first century (2002: 7).

The prescription to appear eternally youthful is indeed a central facet of ‘proper female behaviour.’

While the colour pink does serve as a convenient short-hand for a specific kind of femininity—according to König, when selecting gifts for ‘girls’ of both the child and adult variety, “you are good” “as long as it is bubble-gum pink, sparkling, and wearable” (2002: 136)—more explicit behavioral cues which signal girlhood pepper the texts. Beanland and Terry declare that every woman should display in her home a framed photograph of herself when she was a child (2004: 42). They also recommend throwing parties where guests are encouraged to make outfits out of aluminum foil (2004: 119) or come dressed as their favourite flower (2004: 229), and provide instruction on “how to be a garden party princess (GPP)” (2004: 228). Kehm likewise suggests a “DIY tea party”: “get out your best china, lacy linens, and white gloves, and have the girls over for a proper English afternoon tea” (2005: 132). Accordingly, ‘proper’ invitations

should be issued, which can be either homemade, or of the drugstore variety, preferably those of a “Barbie or Powderpuff Girls” theme (2005: 139). Noted in my Introduction is Lawson’s fascination with the cupcake, or ‘fairy cake.’<sup>26</sup> She loves to “play with colours and flowers and sugar decorations,” savouring the opportunity they provide to ignite her imagination and artistic talent (2000: 39). Ostensibly for children, adults are the cupcakes’ greatest admirers, according to Lawson, who has a “weak spot” herself for “the white-on-white look” (2000: 39). A larger-than-life specimen, iced in white and topped with a pink sugar rosette, graces the cover of *How to Be a Domestic Goddess* (see Illustration L). Garten’s text features a recipe for “PB&J dessert bars,” intended to appeal to the reader’s “inner child” (2006: 170). Finally, Kehm advises her readers to purchase a little extra paint for the purpose of touching up the walls at a later date in the event of dings or smudges, such as those incurred by a “dinner-party-turned-food-fight” (2005: 17). In isolation, these examples may appear innocuous, as harmless examples of feminine *joie de vivre*; however taken together, they suggest a more organized strategy to distance ‘homework’ from its associations with labour, as we don’t expect, and even take offence at, the requirement of children to perform the potentially exploitive jobs of that nature.

### **Body-Projects: Identifying with One’s Home**

There does not exist the same cultural reticence towards putting girls to work, however, especially when it comes to their bodies. ‘Girls’ of all ages are troubled by

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<sup>26</sup> Lawson has even adopted as her brand’s insignia a stylized illustration of a cupcake atop the capitol letter ‘N,’ enveloped in a horseshoe shaped laurel wreath—perhaps to signify her status as reigning leader of the neodomestic movement. Others have used the cupcake logo to brand themselves, perhaps as Lawson-followers, or as incarnations of the domestic goddess—a photo of such branding appears in the “Nigella-Interviews” section of her webpage, under the heading “Aussie\_chick56’s cupcake tattoo!” (see <http://www.nigella.com/nigella/detail.asp?article=2820&area=10>).

issues of body image, and neodomesticity capitalizes on this fact. The promotional material of Konig's text, for example, claims that the author will demonstrate the way in which to "turn your world around even when you feel fat, lonely and hate all your clothes and furniture" (2002: back cover). Here the use of 'when' as opposed to 'if' suggests that this disconcerting degree of dissatisfaction with one's life is habitual and frequently occurring. With the same sense of inevitability, Buckingham likewise asserts, "the second we start feeling great about ourselves, this thing called Me So Flawed syndrome kicks in and makes us zero in on all the flabby or fashion-challenged problems we are convinced we have" (2004: 170). Rather than utilizing the space the text allows to seriously address such issues, however, Buckingham self-deprecatingly chooses to reduce these concerns to the status of a joke, declaring "don't we have something better to obsess about, like George Clooney or world peace?" (2004: 171). It is the emotional manipulation imposed by the neodomestic genre itself, rather than any innate female insecurity, which attempts to foster a crisis of self-esteem among female readers; like the self-help genre, neodomestic discourse must partially manufacture the problems it purports to address. In sympathizing with readers' assumed insecurities, the texts' authors instruct women on the way in which they should engage with their bodies: as that which requires stringent control, but which does not deserve any kind of sustained, critical interrogation.<sup>27</sup>

The discourse of homework clearly posits the neodomestic figure as a 'worker,' or more specifically as an 'artist' where the artist is "exemplar for the postindustrial worker"—a figure of increasing cultural relevance and visibility since the early 1990s

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<sup>27</sup> A distinct parallel to advertising intended for a female audience can again be observed here.

when it emerged as a management strategy to motivate a “demoralized, downsized and otherwise dissatisfied” workforce (McGee 2005: 128). This artist/worker makes no distinction between labour and pleasure and expects no financial compensation for her efforts (2005: 128). Nor does she receive any. When employed with homework, women constitute not the “*low-wage* reserve industrial labour force” of “Marx’s ‘industrial reserve army,’” but a “*no-wage* labour force” (2005: 130)—a source of consternation for numerous feminist groups since the domestic labour debate of the 1970s. This debate elicited much quibbling among socialist feminists as to the nature of housework as productive or non-productive labour, and its relation to the sustainability of capitalism (see Dalla Costa and James (1973); Secombe (1974); Gardiner, Himmelweit and Mackintosh (1975)). Neodomesticity engages in this discussion only implicitly through assertions of the home’s ability, and function, to daily ‘renew’ its constituent members employed in paid and unpaid labour alike (see, for example, Mendelson (1999: 7)). In the words of Garten, “ a good home should gather you up in its arms like a warm cashmere blanket, sooth your hurt feelings, and prepare you to go back out into that big bad world tomorrow all ready to fight the dragons” (2006: 12). Despite the apparent desire to distance the home from the public sphere, as was the case in the Victorian era, the (neo)domestic space forms the core of the middle-class economy. Because responsibility for its maintenance and reproduction is allocated to women, men are free to engage in productive labour (Betsky 1995: 138). Furthermore, the home is also the centre of consumption, as it is the place which “absorb[s], display[s], order[s], and use[s] all the objects” produced in the public sphere (1995: 138). Generally, however, neodomestic discourse attempts to locate homework in a

paradigm outside of political and economic structures.<sup>28</sup> This is no easy task, particularly as the worker figure is not only the artist, but the artwork itself—encouraged to invest in herself as a form of “human capital” (McGee 2005: 138).

This fact may serve as partial explanation for neodomestic discourse’s unquestioned adherence to and pursuit of conventional physical standards of attractive femininity. Neodomestic home-making projects are reminiscent of the all-consuming ‘body projects’ in which adolescent girls engage, as documented by Joan Jacobs Brumberg (1997). Brumberg suggests that for adolescent girls, the body invariably provides the answer to the questions, who am I?; who do I want to be? (1997: xxiv). For readers of the neodomestic genre, the answer to these questions lies in the home. The connection it forges between the home and the body is explicit. According to Mendelson, for example, effective homekeeping requires a woman to identify herself with her home, a fact well-known to “traditional” women but lost on their modern contemporaries (1999: 9). Of this (mythic) traditional woman Mendelson writes:

her affection was in the soft sofa cushions, clean linens, and good meals; her memory in the well-stocked storeroom cabinets and the pantry; her intelligence in the order and healthfulness of her home; her good humor in its light and air. She lives her life not only through her own body but through the house as an extension of her body; part of her relation to those she loved was embodied in the physical medium of the home she made (1999: 9-10).

Mendelson’s evocation of a traditional role-model is interesting in this context, given that she purports to be a stand-in for this figure.

Brumberg locates the source of girls’ obsession with their bodies in a disparity between their biology and contemporary culture, precipitated by, among other factors,

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<sup>28</sup> Although Mendelson gestures towards a closer engagement when she declares homework to be one of the “least alienated” work options available to women (1999: 10).

the loosening of the mother-daughter connection, especially regarding the experience of physical and sexual maturation, and the seizure of authority by doctors and marketers of what was once the important educational function of female relatives and mentors (1997: xviii, xxv). Mendelson's fascination with her home also borders on the obsessive—her manual on the subject is nearly nine hundred pages long—and results from the staunch belief that her legal career could never satisfy her innate, biological female calling, regardless of the fact that economic and professional success is culturally sanctioned, even for women. In this case, reaffirmation of the traditional voice and knowledge of 'female relatives and mentors' does little to impede the use of the home as an expression of identity. The home's décor, state of cleanliness, composition, furnishings, and so on, are the physical manifestations of both its female occupants' current identities and their future aspirations. Perron asserts, for example, that every "girl's" home should be "both beautiful and personal, reflective of who you are" (2005: 5). And Shine chides, "your home is a reflection on you, and if it's a dirty, filthy mess, what does that say about you, your family, your children?" (2005: 71). Failure to identify with one's home has consequences.

Brumberg suggests that girls suffer a greater degree of clinical depression than their male counterparts when entering adolescence, a phenomenon attributable to the frustration experienced by girls with regards to the "divergence between their dreams for the future and the conventional sex roles implied by their emerging breasts and hips" (1997: xxiii). Neodomestic figures claim to have experienced a form of reverse oppression, evidenced by declarations such as: "while my generation was being bred to be superwomen and shoot up the corporate ladder, no one bothered to teach us how to

clean the ladder, fix the broken runs, or look presentable when we reached the top” (Buckingham 2004: xiii). As noted in previous chapters, their frustration is located in their failure to acquire the knowledge that their sex role traditionally dictates and/or requires. However, the emotional dissatisfaction they profess to experience with regards to paid employment and the texts’ focus on the policing of the body as a central facet of domestic femininity, suggests the same troubling ‘adolescent’ identity-crises continue to plague the texts’ authors in adulthood. Women punish themselves for their failures to conform (Barkty 1988: 76). But this behaviour is not tied to a phase of life determined by biological age, however, as Brumberg suggests. Victoria Pitts notes that the technologies involved in the execution of body projects have the potential “to free us from what are seen as the natural constraints of the body,” such as the physical markers of age, and transform the body into a “purely discursive entity” (2005: 230). As the case of the neodomestic body-project illustrates, such technologies do fall short of their purported utopian potential to free women from cultural constraints in order to reveal the body as a “socially plastic” space for “identity exploration” (2005: 230). Nonetheless, it is the socially constructed body of ‘girl,’ particularly in its status as *objet d’art*, through which the work/labour debate rages.

Although Brumberg’s scientific explanation for the widespread adoption of body projects, which she locates in the ‘condition’ of female adolescence, is epistemologically contrary to the way in which this analysis posits the practice as a discursive phenomenon, her analysis points to the specificity of the body-project as a phenomenon which affects ‘girls’—whether referencing an ontological category of being or a state of mind. This is not to suggest that adult women don’t engage in body-projects; the goal of

these projects, however, whether they involve plastic surgery, dieting, hair removal, or otherwise, is to regain an appearance of girlish femininity, which implies that a successfully 'grown up' woman is a veritable impossibility. There appears to be little difference between female adolescent narcissism, in which a girl's body becomes the sight of constant attention and alteration, and neodomestic self-involvement, in which its figures bestow on the home an exaggerated sense of importance by linking it to their own identity. Both groups appear to be caught in what Mary Pipher calls the "imaginary audience syndrome," commonly attributed to teenage girls, who "think they are being watched by others who are preoccupied with the smallest details of their lives" (1994: 60). Shine, for example, admits to the desire to star in her own reality TV show. With a constant entourage of cameras to record her every move, she could "show the girls how to pull off the housewife gig" (2005: 70). Girlish narcissism may be one more means by which to artificially manufacture a record of homework, as cultural artifact, which logically permits an understanding of the labour it involves as 'work.'

If 'homework' is a process of artistic creation, the home is the ultimate canvas upon which women work, and the vehicle which allows all women, not simply those who star in their own television series, to celebrate that 'work.' It usurps the body as women's essential expression of the self, the means by which they visibly announce who they are to the world (Brumberg 1997: 97). Neodomestic discourse employs similes and metaphors in articulating the analogous relationship between caring for one's house and caring for the body to ease the symbolic transition from an understanding of body as 'self' to the home as 'self.' Perron, for example, encourages her reader to "start thinking of caring for your home the same way you think of caring for your body—as a totally

essential and even enjoyable routine” (2005: 208). She continues: “I mean, we shower and wash our faces ... and without thinking twice we shave our legs, do our nails, moisturize our bods, and apply makeup before any sort of night out” (2005: 208). Whether or not the texts’ reader actually engages in these grooming rituals to the degree with which they are described is less relevant than the fact that they serve as a not-so-gentle reminder of the genre’s implicit value system, which posits normative femininity as the standard to which one must aspire (in both body and home). With a similar dissent-prohibiting rhetorical flourish, Buckingham asserts, “think about how you feel right after you’ve put on makeup in the morning. Your face looks brighter, fresher, and more alive, doesn’t it? Well, slicking a spanking-new coat of paint on your walls has the same effect” (2004: 138). Primping and housework can and should be done at the same time. Konig, for example, “quite like[s] to do a home pedicure before vacuuming,” so that in her mind, she is “simply vacuuming to pass the time needed for [her] nails to dry” (2002: 247). The same supplies may even be employed for the two activities, as noted by Buckingham, who instructs readers to use “the Dove facial wipes before you go to bed on your face, and then give the sink a quick wipe with the cloth when you’re done” (2004: 45).

This discourse posits domestic care-taking as an innately feminine skill, even when certain readers require a refresher-course, as was the case with cooking know-how discussed in Chapter Four. Neodomestic expertise is already present in the accumulated specialized skills, the mastery of technique, and the willingness to invest significant amounts of time, consistently employed in the production of the body as an ornamental surface (Bartky 1988: 70). Dressing the body is a task little different from dressing the

home. Kehm, for example, declares that finding and selecting a suitable home “is just like looking for the perfect outfit for the biggest party of the year” (2005: 8). Konig clarifies: “we are perfectly able to get dressed in the morning and put together some sort of look—well, a room is no different” (2002: 7). Styling a room, according to Konig, is intuitive: resources for high end purchases alone do not guarantee an impeccably styled home. Rather, “decorating is much like fashion—you can’t always have the expensive dress, shoes and bag.” You can, however “often have the clever dress from H&M and the Jimmy Choo shoes” (2002: 184). One must therefore decorate as the “stylish woman” dresses: “rarely in an entire outfit from the same expensive designer” (2002: 287). That tacky *faux-pas*, argues Konig, should be left to “the rich woman without a clue” (2002: 187).

For those on a limited budget, Perron suggests “a T-shirt and jeans sort of apartment,” i.e. one in which the main pieces of furniture are simple and inexpensive, providing it also has “great purses and earrings” i.e. more expensive and more interesting accessories (2005: 40). She recommends distributing colour in the home in the same way one would wear it in an outfit, although she withholds an explicit explanation of the way in which to do so, seemingly due to the statements sheer obviousness (2005: 9). Instead she provides the following anecdote from which the reader may extrapolate her own moral:

if the trendy pants cut for a given season include both slouchy men’s-style trousers and fitted cropped ones, [a smart girl] doesn’t buy both styles. Instead she decides which of the two styles fits her attitude and flatters her butt, and then she stocks up on just that style and mixes it with the classics she already owns (2005: 3).

As Dorothy Smith notes, “the woman reader presupposed in the text is no ignoramus” (1988: 47). The technical knowledge required in the practice of selecting stylish clothing appropriate to body-type or skin-tone is well-known to the reader, who is “already familiar with what the effects referenced” by Perron will “look like” and “know how to produce them” (1988: 47). Regardless of whether one catches Perron’s exact meaning, the genre’s cumulative message is plain: any woman who is remotely competent in the enactment of the rituals of femininity, those rituals which make her who she is, will succeed in creating a home which serves the very same purpose. The neodomestic effort to break down the barriers between the home, the body, and the self, is absolute. Their fusion is inevitable. Shine declares that “once you start bonding with your home,” your life will “transform” (2005: 2). You will no longer exist outside of it.

### **Conclusion**

Although the neodomestic discourse of homework is frequently framed in the language of body-projects, it says very little about the actual neodomestic body, other than an incidental reiteration of what it should look like, according to conventional standards of feminine beauty which circulate throughout cultural and advertising industries. It functions to illustrate the way in which the discursive work of homework, learning to competently perform its practices, like the practices of makeup application, constitutes the neodomestic subject. Just as obsessing about the surface, shape, or size of one’s body is not an effective way of expressing discontent with the current state of gender relations and women’s role in contemporary society, however; the espousal of home-as-self does little to further this mandate. While the recoding of homework as a

skillful and fulfilling calling, akin to that of the artist, may be discursively effective—at least on a small scale—the necessity to perform the many aspects of homework which do involve a great degree of manual labour neither disappears, nor do such tasks actually change in any way. In fact, in the attempt to downplay the drudgery of homework and emphasize instead, its creative, artistic, and fun elements, neodomestic discourse does little to alter the more general, denigrated cultural status of domestic labour. As Glenna Matthews argues, while homework remains despised, “it will be performed by someone whose sex, class, or race—perhaps all three—consign her to an inferior status” (1987: xiv). Given this reality, the neodomestic contention that ‘homework’ empowers women fails to be persuasive. The neodomestic subject position, governed as it is by a complex array of disciplinary practices, functions to constrain and inhibit the women who adopt it from achieving a significant measure of social and political power. The metaphoric equation of women with their houses, although troubling, certainly appears somewhat commonplace by our cultural standards, in which the association of women with objects is widespread. Even more problematic is the neodomestic imperative to embrace this objectification, and uphold it as the very foundation of feminine subjectivity.

## Conclusion: Towards A Neodomestic Movement

“Enough is enough. Grow Up. Act your age, ladies” (Shine 2005: 11). So says Darla Shine—with regards to women’s perceived and generally acknowledged reticence to take interest in, and sometimes responsibility for, homework—in her best tough-love, ‘it’s for your own benefit,’ voice. For a genre which balks at the cultural ‘imposition’ of second-wave feminist politics on the lives of contemporary women everywhere, its texts exhibit no qualms in foisting an equally prescriptive and dogmatic ideology of (neo)domestic ‘feminism’ upon its female readers. Shine’s directive to ‘grow-up,’ moreover, is somewhat disingenuous; in no way does neodomestic femininity emerge from the genre’s discourse as an adult subject position.

The neodomestic genre provides the somewhat unexpected answer to Jennifer Eisenhauer’s rhetorical question: “where are all the feminist girls?” (2004: 80). For Eisenhauer, the feminist girl, or “future feminist” cannot exist because she is the “repeatedly othered” subject, constructed in terms of a discourse of the future of feminism, through the tropes of “awakening, growing up and becoming” (2004: 80). Indeed, the construction of the neodomestic ‘perpetual girl’ conforms to these tropes, a fact which enables, rather than precludes, the figure’s feminist subjectivity. The occasion, the right, and the privilege to *choose* girlhood over adulthood, and the private over the public sphere, even when this choice prevents the achievement of autonomy, is that which makes neodomesticity feminist in the eyes of its purveyors. ‘Feminism’ evidently does not signify the same political orientation, set of behaviours and value system to Eisenhauer as it does to the neodomestics. This is the point. Eisenhauer challenges those engaged in ‘doing’ feminism and feminist pedagogy to question what it

would look like if we understood “the ‘girl’ not as a singular state defined by age or behaviour, but as a constantly shifting, discursively constituted sign that comes to mean and represent many things besides ‘young female’” (2004: 87). While an understanding of girlhood as a discursively constituted sign may, in theory, be constructive in diminishing feminism’s exclusivity and permitting a diversity of women to ‘count’ as feminists today, one must also be prepared to welcome instances of girlhood, as the concept is employed in discourses such as neodomesticity, whose capacity to serve ‘feminist’ ends remains questionable, at best.

Figuring feminism as a state of girlhood is one method by which neodomestic discourse works to successfully conflate feminism with an exaggerated and stereotypical expression of femininity. There are many others. A relentless focus on (hetero)sexuality, for example, reduces the neodomestic subject to the level of her body, avowing the reality of innate, bodily knowledge and essentialist assumptions regarding the nature feminine desire—a intentional strategy to authenticate the new feminine-feminist. Equating the illusion of control over those to whom one is most intimately connected, such as one’s husband or mother, with actual social power, is another such strategy. The fantasy of control—over one’s interpersonal relationships, over the way in which one is perceived by others, and even over the cultural meanings ascribed to domesticity—is sustained throughout the genre. Finally, neodomestic storytelling, which articulates the recipe for enacting a feminine-feminist subject position through feminine-style rhetoric and self-help techniques, reintroduces women to their ‘new’ selves. Associating genuinely embodied experiences, such as the taste and smell of comfort foods, with nostalgic iconography of ideal femininity, provides the foundation

for the neodomestic contention that feminine gender traits are intimately connected to biological womanhood. Neodomestic discourse employs the same technique of offering nostalgia as context to frame the emotional responses which derive from and are expressed through homework, such as pleasure, pride, and fulfillment, as likewise intrinsic to biological sex. Understanding one's 'natural' desires, and the way in which they can allegedly be fulfilled through homework, provides valuable insight in the quest for 'feminist' empowerment.

The ultimate domestic fantasy, declares Sarah Leavitt, is the fantasy that women have the power to enact social change through first reforming their own homes (2005: 5). The arbiters of the neodomestic genre wholeheartedly embrace this premise, and attempt to alter the social perception of domestic labour through their texts. As a 'feminist' genre, some form of social change is necessarily the goal of neodomestic discourse. However its prescriptions for appropriate feminine behaviour consistently discourage the formation of the manner of collective consciousness necessary for a movement of this nature. Neodomestic feminism resurrects the dichotomy of public and private spheres, as the proper domain of men and women, respectively, isolates women within their homes, and encourages them to envision neodomestic feminism as a purely local and relational politics. The deep tension between sanctioning the collectivity of a feminist movement and the individualism of neodomestic feminism runs subterraneously throughout the genre.

From a discursive standpoint, reflecting on one's self and one's conduct, a process in which the neodomestic text inculcates its readers to engage, involves "not only an internal reflection" on the part of the reader, but a "shared practice of reflection

on others in the light of a common discursive standpoint” (Smith 1988: 42). However much the genre seeks to define feminism as a state of personal satisfaction achieved via command of a perfected image, the reality of the neodomestic genre’s involvement in the economic systems which endeavor to shape the cultural face of femininity cannot be denied. Neodomesticity is an industry; it provides the products necessary to enact what is supposedly natural, innate and available to all women.<sup>29</sup> Yet it also makes a concerted effort to discursively obscure this fact. The consumption practices neodomesticity advocates actually endorse its specific brand of innate femininity as the genre figures the act of consumption as yet another means through which to express the idiom of gender, rather than acquire it.

Neodomesticity is not about convincing individual women, through an appeal to logic, of the benefits of domestic labour (be they social, sexual, psychic, or otherwise). Rather, its discourse is preoccupied with the promotion of a very particular individual and group identity. It is through homework, and the metaphoric equation of a woman with her home, that the nature of this subject becomes apparent. The genre graciously instructs modern women, who exhibit varying degrees of domestic ineptitude, in the lost art of homework—the domestic skills and expertise unknown to the ‘young’ feminist generation because of their mothers’ negligence in imparting it to them. Whether communicated through the intuitive language of food, or the metaphor of female grooming rituals, these lessons reveal the nature and appearance of the feminine-

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<sup>29</sup> On July 13<sup>th</sup> 2007, for example, Proctor and Gamble announced their partnership with Jane Buckingham in a project to help “women entertain with ease and get their home ready for guests” by promoting the use of their Swiffer products. The press release reads, “this multi-faceted partnership offers consumers special events, tips, recipes and sweepstakes that focus on achieving and maintaining a clean home for at-home entertaining.” A spokesperson for Proctor and Gamble declares, “once [the customer] learns Jane’s tips, women will find preparing for guests much less of a chore.” (see press release at <http://today.reuters.com/news/articleinvesting.aspx?view=PR&symbol=PG&storyID=115009+13-Jul-2007+PRN>)

feminist, and the way in which to reassert one's right, over the censorious second-wave feminist, to determine the cultural meaning of innately feminine practice.

Nostalgia for a prefeminist era, itself an eminently marketable trend as evidenced by the pervasive use of authentic advertisements from the 1950s in a wide array of pop-feminist paraphernalia, plays a central role in the rebranding of homework. Its use is justified by the female reader's assumed alienation from the domestic sphere, as it provides the context necessary for her education. Cheryl Mendelson notes that 'nostalgia' literally means "home sickness," by which she refers to "a genuine desire for a home and its comforts" (1999: 7), although the term could also allude, more ominously, to the home as a diseased or troubled domain. Its ambivalent connotation remains unexplored by neodomestic discourse for the obvious reason that the latter connotation does not advance its vision of neodomestic reality. Other techniques, such as the recipe-like rhetorical strategy of self-help discourse, further assist in the construction of the feminine-feminist group identity, as they are effective in masking the socially constructed nature of women's relationship to the domestic sphere.

Neodomestic discourse is manipulative. It falsely declares neodomestic femininity to be a viable source of female empowerment, and a means to achieve moral authority and even financial security, which validates its status as genuinely 'feminist.' Furthermore, there is no substance to the feminine-feminist subject position. Because feminist potential is portrayed as located in the conscious enactment of domesticity for the benefit of an audience, neodomestic discourse colludes appearance and role-playing with actual selfhood. Readers who embrace neodomesticity and attempt to follow its prescriptions for appropriate feminine behaviour will likely come to recognize

neodestic feminism as equally illusory as both the iconic '50s housewife,' and the mythic 'domestic goddess.'

And yet the phenomenon of neodesticity persists. Leavitt argues that domestic manuals are inherently connected with the construction of national ideologies of class, race and gender, and believes, "beyond a reasonable doubt that these books and their authors [are] connected with the most important cultural dialogues of their day" (2002: 205). In neodestic discourse, this dialogue revolves around the socially prescribed relationship between femininity and feminism. The feminine-feminist is a complex figure in whom contradiction abounds. She is a sensual and (hetero)sexual goddess, an innocent child, and a grown-up girl. Independent and self-sufficient, yet in need of protection, she is socially 'liberated' yet economically bound to her male partner. And although born a 'natural' woman, she exists in a constant state of becoming. More precisely, she exists in a constant state of striving to become, yet never achieving that illusive goal. The neodestic feminine-feminist does not, and cannot, exist.

This reality does not prevent the neodestic practices which purport to engender the feminine-feminist from organizing and shaping our cultural landscape, however. Neodestic discourse extends across the gamut of female-oriented popular culture in this twenty-first century, from domestic manuals to dramatic and reality television programming, to Hollywood movies, to advertising campaigns, to internet chat groups. Neodesticity is a component of the larger post-feminist movement which has come to characterize contemporary pop-cultural production. Irony and kitch make (retro)sexism clever and fashionable. A clear boundary is drawn between the 'old'

and the 'young,' regardless of actual biological age, in the heralding of a new feminist order. Where the former group is comprised of humourless enforcers of trite political correctness, the later group embraces this new sexism because of its very sex-appeal. Despite the isolation neodomestic feminism attempts to foster among its readers, in the encouragement to examine experiences of gender oppression on a private, emotional level as an instance of personal psychological disturbance, neodomestic authors nevertheless employ a collective 'we.' By 'we' they signal all of the 'girls' who prioritize their home lives and intimate relationships over their professional ones; the girls who have discovered neodomesticity's empowered, chosen femininity. This new brand of femininity could not have materialized without the existence of the prefeminist-era housewife, or the second-wave feminist critiques of her mode of domesticity.

Recognizing this, Michelle Kehm declares,

let us take a moment to thank our beloved mothers, and their mothers, and their mothers. It is they who pioneered the road for us, who sacrificed and struggled and vacuumed and valiumed away the days of their lives while building a better, more independent future for their daughters. Without their endurance, patience, and guidance, we might still be dusting in heels (Kehm 2005: xvi).

'We' may be comfortable, but we are still dusting. And vacuuming. And performing all of the physical, emotional, sexual, creative, and intuitive labour which neodomestic homework entails.

Neodomesticity is an exclusive and myopic movement which severely limits the ways in which women can engage creatively, socially, politically, and intellectually in society. The adoption of neodomestic principles and prescriptions for appropriate femininity, by those to whom it bears relevance, would incur a state of diminished autonomy and power under the illusory guise of feminist subjectivity.

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## Illustrations

Illustration A: The iconic 1950s-era housewife



(Tillotson 2004: 95)

## Illustration B: The Neodestic



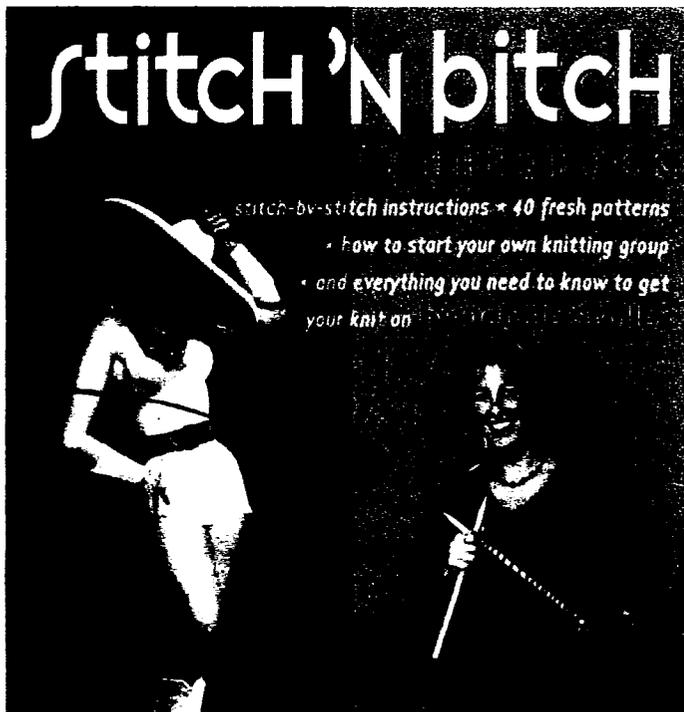
(Harris 2004: 4)

Illustration C



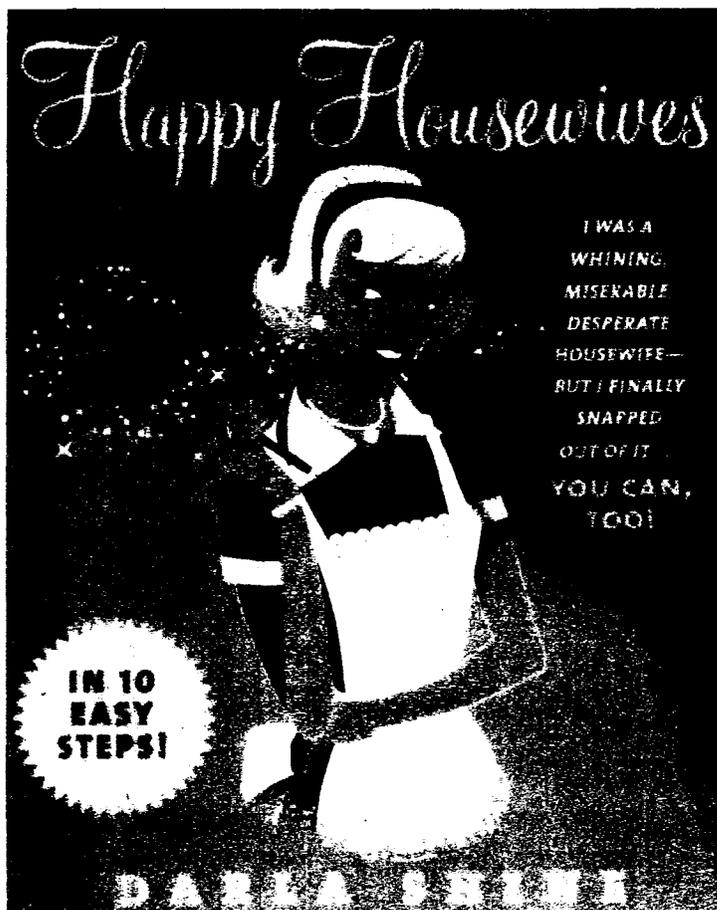
(Kehm 2005: 18)

Illustration D



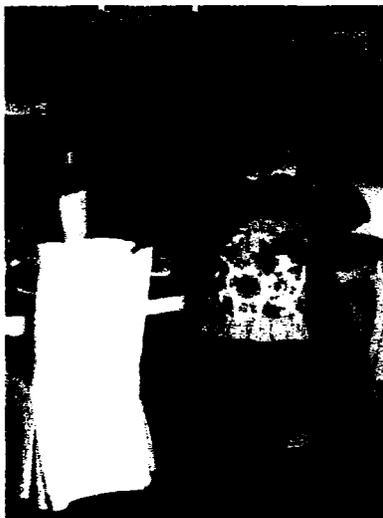
(Stoller 2003: front cover)

Illustration E



(Shine 2005: front cover)

Illustration F



(Shine 2005: back cover)

Illustration H: A Visual Lesson in the Creation of Sacred Space II



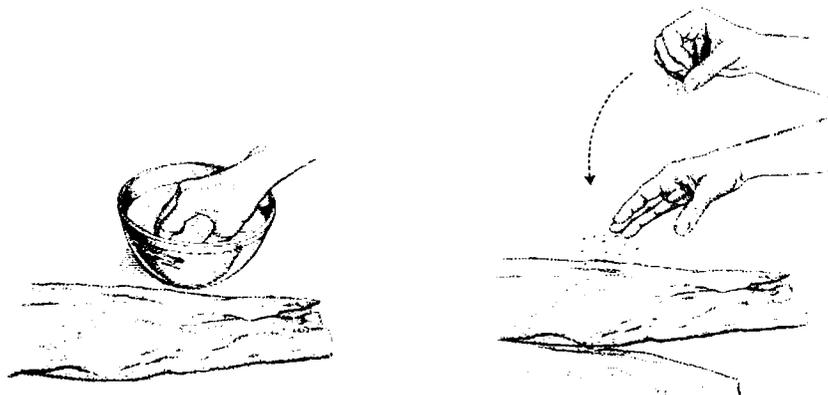
(Garten 2006: 59)

Illustration G: A Visual Lesson in the Creation of Sacred Space I



(Garten 2006: 56)

## Illustration I



Sprinkling clothes by hand to dampen for ironing

(Mendelson 1999: 340)

## Illustration J



(Garten 2006: 128)

Illustration K



(Lawson 2002: 171)

Illustration L

NIGELLA LAWSON



HOW TO BE A  
DOMESTIC GODDESS

BAKING AND THE ART OF COMFORT COOKING

(Lawson 2000: front cover)

Appendix A: Publication Information

Author	Text	Year	Publisher	Sub-Genre*
Beanland, Ame and Emily Terry	Nesting: It's a Chick Thing	2004	Workman Publishing Co	N/A
Buckingham, Jane	The Modern Girl's Guide to Life	2004	Regan Books (HarperCollins)	self-help
Garten, Ina	Barefoot Contessa at Home	2006	Clarkson/Potter Publishers	cooking
Harris, Cerentha	Feather Your Nest	2004	Marlowe & Company (Avalon)	House & Home/DIY
Kehm, Michelle	No Place Like Home	2005	Plume (Penguin Group)	Home Improvement
Konig, Rita	Domestic Bliss	2002	Fireside (Simon & Schuster)	House & Home
Lawson, Nigella	Forever Summer	2002	Alfred A. Knopf (Randomhouse)	cooking
Lawson, Nigella	How to Be a Domestic Goddess	2000	Alfred A. Knopf (Randomhouse)	cooking
Mendelson, Cheryl	Home Comforts	1999	Scribner	N/A
Perron, Celeste	Playing House	2005	HarperResource (HarperCollins)	House & Home/decorating
Shine, Darla	Happy Housewives	2005	Regan Books (HarperCollins)	self-help
Stoller, Debbie	Stitch 'n Bitch	2003	Workman Publishing Co	N/A
Tillotson, Kristin	Retro Housewife	2004	Collectors Press	Pop Culture/Women's St.

\* as identified on back cover of text

Appendix B: Sub-Genre and Country of Origin

<b>Author</b>	<b>Text</b>	<b>Sub-Genre*</b>	<b>Country</b>
Beanland, Ame and Emily Terry	Nesting: It's a Chick Thing	personal confession	USA
Buckingham, Jane	The Modern Girl's Guide to Life	lifestyle manual	USA
Garten, Ina	Barefoot Contessa at Home	cookbook	USA
Harris, Cerentha	Feather Your Nest	household manual	USA
Kehm, Michelle	No Place Like Home	how-to manual	Australia
Konig, Rita	Domestic Bliss	lifestyle manual	UK
Lawson, Nigella	Forever Summer	cookbook/lifestyle manual	UK
Lawson, Nigella	How to Be a Domestic Goddess	cookbook/lifestyle manual	UK
Mendelson, Cheryl	Home Comforts	household manual	USA
Perron, Celeste	Playing House	lifestyle manual	USA
Shine, Darla	Happy Housewives	personal confession/self-help	USA
Stoller, Debbie	Stitch 'n Bitch	how-to manual	USA
Tillotson, Kristin	Retro Housewife	quasi-academic tract	USA

\* as per the criteria I have imposed on the genre

Appendix C: Cultural Significance

Author	Text	Cultural Significance
Beanland, Ame and Emily Terry	Nesting: It's a Chick Thing	second in the <i>Chick Thing</i> series, which is trademarked (see <a href="http://www.chickstyle.com">http://www.chickstyle.com</a> )
Buckingham, Jane	The Modern Girl's Guide to Life	<i>Style</i> network show by the same name, first in <i>Modern Girl</i> series (see <a href="http://www.moderngirlsguide.com/main.html">http://www.moderngirlsguide.com/main.html</a> )
Garten, Ina	Barefoot Contessa at Home	fifth in bestselling <i>Barefoot Contessa</i> series, <i>Food</i> network series by the same name
Harris, Cerentha	Feather Your Nest	derivative text; author also contributes to "Domain" section of <i>Sydney Morning Herald</i> , and is deputy editor of <i>the (sydney) magazine</i>
Kehm, Michelle	No Place Like Home	derivative text; author also writes third-wave travel narratives
Konig, Rita	Domestic Bliss	authority derived in part from mother, Nina Campbell, a famous London designer; rave reviews in <i>Vogue</i> , <i>The New York Times</i> , <i>The Observer</i>
Lawson, Nigella	Forever Summer	third in bestselling series, concurrent <i>BBC television</i> series
Lawson, Nigella	How to Be a Domestic Goddess	second in bestselling series, author's iconic status (see <a href="http://www.nigella.com">http://www.nigella.com</a> )
Mendelson, Cheryl	Home Comforts	bestseller, followed by <i>Laundry</i> (2005)
Perron, Celeste	Playing House	derivative text; author also contributes to <i>Cosmopolitan</i>
Shine, Darla	Happy Housewives	spawned online community of <i>Happy Housewives</i> (see <a href="http://www.happyhousewivesclub.com/hotmama.html">http://www.happyhousewivesclub.com/hotmama.html</a> )
Stoller, Debbie	Stitch 'n Bitch	first in four-part bestselling <i>Stitch 'n Bitch</i> series (see <a href="http://www.bust.com/knithappens/">http://www.bust.com/knithappens/</a> )
Tillotson, Kristin	Retro Housewife	one of a large series of <i>Retro</i> texts (see <a href="http://www.collectorspress.com">http://www.collectorspress.com</a> )