

“Crafting” the Race House of the Domestic Individual: Political Subjectivities,
Hierarchy and Value in the Crafting and Do-It-Yourself Labors of Domestic Fiction,
1850 - Present

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Abstract

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‘Crafting’ the Race House of the Domestic Individual: Political Subjectivities, Hierarchy and Value in Crafting and Do-It-Yourself Labors of Domestic Fiction, 1850 – Present is an interdisciplinary cultural studies project that argues for the continued relevance of the domestic individual as she seeks to buttress or completely renovate the (contemporary and historical) race house. Throughout the project, I examine the constitutive function of crafting and do-it-yourself (DIY) labors in domestic fiction and DIY narratives in order to explore how domestic individualism remains a generative model of civic self-production, especially in relation to an increasing wariness of the capitalist market in the twenty-first century. I read contemporary narratives of crafting and DIY as a motivation to delve deeper into the history of women's domestic labor in the United States while examining the importance of literature for comprehending the contemporary DIY crafting subject. In doing so, I seek to understand the longevity of the domestic individual in American literature, despite the fact that this figure is commonly linked only to 19th century sentimental fiction. I take the presence of crafting as a persistent thematic in American women’s writing (of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries) as an impetus to bring these fields together in new and productive ways. The recent

popularity of the DIY movement (and its formulation as a distinct ethos and political project via craftivism) provides an occasion to consider how the value of crafted objects and the virtues of creating them are narratively constructed.

My first chapter reads contemporary DIY/craft narrative against the Feminist Commodity Chain Analysis in order to assess whether and how DIY constitutes a unique identity category that provides a space for political invention in the present moment (and as a specific instance of what political subjectivity looks like in neoliberal consumer culture). I analyze DIY narratives such as *Craft*: magazine and Levine and Heimerl's *Handmade Nation* in order to posit an epistemology of DIY that generates space for deeper historical and theoretical engagements with DIY in the crevasse between critical dismissal (DIY as a mere instantiation of the neoliberal subject) and compulsory celebration (craft as inherently emancipatory, empowering and/or political) that characterize contemporary accounts of DIY. Chapter two locates the political potential of crafting by historicizing the use of women's domestic labors and crafting as narrative devices and also as a primary means for female writers to be politically active during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I read Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* alongside and against African American women's fiction such as Francis Harper's *Iola Leroy*, Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces*, and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* in order to reconfigure the political utility of the domestic individual as these novels utilize domestic labors and spaces in different ways to reimagine standard boundaries of inheritance and configure new models of self-possession. These investments travel into chapter three, "Housekeeping in/of the 'Race House': Crafting and Household Labors of the Domestic Individual in Contemporary American Fiction," which introduces Toni Morrison's concept of the race house as a structure that might help to domesticate what has been articulated as an elusive race-free paradise. I ask,

through an examination of various works of contemporary fiction, what it means to do housekeeping labors in and of the racial house, thinking especially about the role of the domestic individual in this process. The final chapter reads Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* as an instance of a contemporary crafting narrative that demonstrates the much more diverse possibilities of these labors in the present – especially through the figures of the protagonist's parents: Mah, a garment worker, and Leon, a tinkerer/handyman/maritime laborer. Rather than dismissing the DIY subject as merely another instantiation of the neoliberal subject, this chapter takes the reimagination of the crafting subject in *Bone* as an opportunity to extend one's understanding of the crafting subject in the present moment.

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Finally, I dedicate this project to my immediate family, whose presence makes me feel like the luckiest person in the world. Specifically: my parents, Lois and David, who have

modeled for me both a love of reading and also a propensity for being crafty, handy and inquisitive; my amazing, honest, strong and intelligent younger sister and best friend, Alice, who always inspires me in her own incredible endeavors; Michael Viola, without whose love, laughter, intellect and encouragement this project never would have materialized; and finally, my children: Malaya Ruth, who has made this process immeasurably more joyful with her empathetic, fun, wacky and curious nature, and her younger sister or brother, who has kept me constant company in these final eight months of reading, writing and revising.

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Preface

The title of this dissertation is meant to evoke my sense of the ongoing presence of the domestic individual in American women's fiction of the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries and her ongoing role in redesigning or completely reconfiguring the race house. Throughout the project, I explore how domestic individualism remains a generative model of civic self-production, especially in relation to an increasing wariness of the capitalist market in the twenty-first century. This became apparent to me as a leisure reader of contemporary do-it-yourself (DIY) narratives and as someone who has been attentive to the ongoing presence of domestic and crafting labors in American women's writing for quite some time. Locating these thematics in relation to race and home came to the project in the writing of my final chapters, through the structure of Toni Morrison's race house in her essay, "Home." In this, she explores what it entails to take "an elusive race-free paradise and domesticate it," which has proven to be a productive framework for thinking through many and diverse volumes of domestic fiction.

In its present form, what I hope this dissertation has accomplished is to argue that transformations in citizenship and neoliberal economics provide a compelling context for renovating the domestic individual,¹ situating her in a broader cultural context of contemporary literature and art, and considering her role in either buttressing or undoing racial constructions of home (through her participation in craft and homemaking labors). I explore, in chapters two and three especially, how Gillian Brown's formation, which she develops and tracks in relation to nineteenth century domestic fiction, travels much beyond this originating context. I note the centrality of crafting and domestic labors to these narratives (both fictional and DIY), how they

¹ Gillian Brown describes the domestic individual as a mode of personhood that develops alongside and according to the same tenets as possessive individualism, but differs in its focus on interiority and the domestic individual's distance from the marketplace.

construct the domestic individual, how they define how she operates as a political subject and finally how they explore different ways of operating within the race house.

My first chapter provides a foundation for thinking through contemporary craft and DIY narratives that absolutely inform contemporaneous literature, of which crafting activities occupy formative symbolics and constitutive roles. I utilize Priti Ramamurthy's exploration of the Feminist Commodity Chain Analysis - through her readings of both a Land's End Catalog as well as ethnographic research in rural South India – as a foundation for thinking about how DIY narratives enable an odd reproduction of FCCA that, instead of culminating in a critical commentary of globalization, actually works to create racialized and gendered value for and knowledge about DIY practices and products. This occurs also in the way that DIY narratives make use of strategic omissions - of sweatshop laborers and their mass-produced products – to produce DIY's Other. This analysis allows for an exploration of what it means to be a political subject in consumer culture as I examine the ways in which DIY might function as a unique identity category. Further, I outline an epistemology of DIY that foregrounds the ways in which gender and race are bound up in and influence the value of craft objects. This chapter presents a critique of contemporary DIY practice in order to push it forward. As such, I reject simplistic analyses of DIY that either disregard these practices as quintessential examples of neoliberal subjectivity or that uncritically celebrate them as inherently emancipatory or political.

I conclude chapter one with the assertion that literature is an essential, but largely unexplored, site of craft knowledge – despite the increasing interdisciplinarity of craft theory. With this transition I move into an analysis of the political imperatives of African American women's writing of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in chapter two. I explore how these political objectives are developed through a domestic individualism expressed with

recourse to crafting and household labors. I begin with readings of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to establish how household and crafting labors are imagined as political in the abolitionist endeavors of her novel. Through her illustrations of ideal and deficient domestic individuals Stowe demonstrates the variable potential of the home. She also explores how women were figured as political subjects in this mode of sentimental domestic fiction. Ultimately, though, Stowe's endeavor falls short in its inability to imagine a tangible future for the emancipated slaves at the end of her novel.

The chapter then moves into readings of the fiction of Francis Harper, Pauline Hopkins and Nella Larsen in order to discern how domestic labors (or a lack thereof) help to compose a new discourse of black womanhood – characterized through a reconfigured domestic individual. In the evolution of a race-specific but antiracist domestic individual a number of themes emerge: ideologies of white, middle-class domesticity are destabilized as the space of the home is troubled as the sole, or even primary, site for signifying the value of the characters in these novels. The ideology of true womanhood is reconfigured as black women of these novels are shown to achieve an independent self-possession for their roles in formulating inter-dependent communities of collective self-sufficiency. The novels also produce alternative narratives of history as they question the prototypical boundaries of inheritance of this period. Since *Quicksand* (and *Iola Leroy*, to a certain extent) utilize modes of anti-domesticity as a tactic, the crafting and domestic labors of these novels are shown to be both conservative and progressive. An underlying question of this chapter asks how the politics of craft in this period informs our understanding of what it means to deploy craft in meaningful and political ways in the present.

Chapter three focuses on the Toni Morrison's concept of the race house to ask how the domestic individual of contemporary domestic fiction might help to "domesticate" or make real,

the “elusive, race-free paradise” Morrison herself has sought to concretize in her fiction. I read new imaginations of the roles of domestic labors in “completely renovating” the race house in the fiction of Morrison, Alice Walker, Jane Smiley, and Marilynne Robinson. I also draw on Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, to consider how white writers such as Smiley, Robinson and Whitney Otto both do and do not utilize what Morrison calls an “Africanist presence” in their fiction (and to what end). This chapter links to the previous in that it helps to consider how “wider dispositions” that the alignment between individualism and domesticity structures in the readings of Harper, Hopkins and Larsen also relate to questions of legitimacy, authenticity, community and belonging as they concern race and home. This retains and extends the political aspirations and praxis of the domestic individual (as initially imagined by Brown) but in the much wider context of twentieth (and twenty-first) century domestic fiction.

Finally, my fourth chapter reads Fae Myenne Ng’s 1995 novel, *Bone*, as an exemplary instance of a contemporary crafting narrative that demonstrates the much more diverse possibilities of these labors in the present (especially since the protagonist’s mother is a sweatshop laborer). Rather than dismissing the DIY subject as merely another instantiation of the neoliberal subject, this chapter takes the reimagination of the crafting subject in *Bone* as an opportunity to extend an understanding of the crafting subject. By situating DIY crafting practices within domestic sites of hyper-exploitation, the novel troubles simplistic, celebratory discourses of DIY and privileges literary articulations as an arena where connections between racialized-gendered personhood and crafting are taken up.

My readings of *Bone* first explore how the ephemeral temporalities of the sewn objects in the novel demonstrate the proximity of handmade goods to mass-produced objects. This, in turn,

emphasizes the essential connection between acts of production and consumption in the world of crafting, producing a critical rejoinder to DIY that I call “making do.” In the second section, I turn to the non-linear temporality of the novel as a whole, the memories created out of sewing labors and the linkages between formal and informal economies in order to expand on the novel’s critique of the master codes of DIY, citizenship and assimilation. In the novel memories produce crafting subjects who demonstrate the price of adhering to and operating outside of these master codes. In this section, I argue that sewing metaphors and imagery, in particular, stand out in their portrayal of how the physical labor performed by Leila’s mother and stepfather are inextricably woven into their daughters’ lives. I close with a discussion of feminist theories of the subject to elaborate the possibilities of crafting practices for the formation of political subjects.

I originally conceived of this project as an intervention in thinking about the neoliberal subject. In an early project description I sought to reorient thinking about the neoliberal subject by examining neoliberal practices historically as they appear in the realm of DIY and crafting. Even in this earlier iteration I focused on the expansive tradition of literature that foregrounds questions of crafting-related subjectivities (in which crafting is more than a mere thematic). In this sentiment I had in mind the fact that domestic fiction and much women's writing of the 19th and 20th centuries are heavily centered on craft (often figured as “women's work”) as an essential element in the construction of the female subjects of these novels. As such, literature allows for a focus on the crafting subject, rather than the crafted object (which is the primary focus of most studies of American craft). In this earlier mode, my literary study of the crafting subject proposed a means to fill historical omissions in discourses of the entrepreneurial neoliberal subject (the DIY subject) while considering his/her conditions of possibility. In doing so, the

project proposed a sustained engagement with the morality of consumption; the commodity; and the matrix of labor, work and leisure as they relate to domesticity and gendered, racialized subjectivity. I proposed to map these topics alongside a genealogy of crafting to allow for a deep political economy of the discourses of DIY.

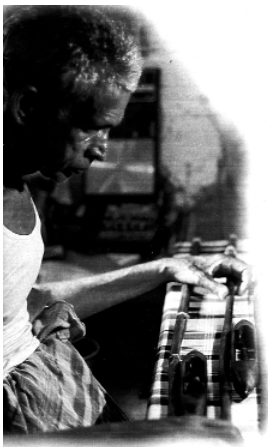
A major impasse that I encountered in this earlier version of my project resulted from a more singular focus on the neoliberal subject. Just as craft historian Glenn Adamson recognizes that stalemates that develop out of overworked debates over the status of craft as art, it became apparent that DIY narratives also suffer from an inherently defensive position (as a result of both the remnants of this art/craft debate as well as suggestions that DIY work represents a quintessential instantiation of the neoliberal subject). As such, my initial writings were more characteristic of a move to expose the affinity between the DIY ethos and neoliberalism. In breaking out of this impasse a number of tangents emerged as central. First, simple omissions or oversights became the productive omissions of DIY discourse that produce DIY's Other. In my readings of *Bone* the similarities between mass-produced and DIY goods allowed me to theorize a more expansive practice of "making do" that elaborates the convergence of production and consumption for handmade objects. However, it is my focus on the continued relevance of the domestic individual and her operations in the race house that turned this project in its most unexpected and productive direction. This preoccupation departs the most from my original schema while still allowing for a consideration of what resistance to neoliberal capitalism looks like in a way that moves beyond simple patterns of consumption. Instead of examining neoliberal practices at a micrological level, literature operates as a privileged arena for modes of resistance to the regime of neoliberalism, while still maintaining a focus on crafting and household labors

(including DIY practices). In this way, feminist and antiracist cultural practices move to the fore as modes of intervention and resistance.

Finally, my work on these topics would be only partial if I weren't to mention my own connections to crafting labors. I stated earlier that part of the genesis of this project emerged out of my own leisure reading of DIY narratives: magazines, how-to books and the like. I have also taught sewing classes in a variety of venues: middle school after-school programs in Eugene and Portland, Oregon and (for the past six of my eight years of graduate study) at a twice-weekly drop in sewing and ESL class at Southwest Youth and Family Services in Seattle, Washington. Living in Seattle during graduate school has itself provided ample exposure to DIY culture: from the long-standing bi-annual Urban Craft Uprising to the more informal Punk Rock Flea Market and the ever-increasing number of boutiques and farmer's market booths that sell DIY products. My knowledge of these craft venues and objects has grown even as I have sought to minimize these interactions - as they tend to provide many and divergent distractions from coursework, research and writing. My family has a community garden plot (P-Patch), I occasionally sew items for myself, my daughter and other family and friends. I make jam from the prolific and invasive Pacific Northwest Himalayan blackberries. I host craft parties and learned to sew (and can jams and pickles) from my mom, whose mom (and her home economics teachers) taught her these skills. I mention these varying "credentials" to emphasize my intimate connection to the DIY practices of which I write and critique. Which is to say that I am, in some ways, more sympathetic to the DIY writings than might appear throughout this project. My irritation with the racially exclusionary practices and writings that characterize so much of DIY, even in a relatively diverse locale such as Seattle, has been a primary motivation for this project.

Chapter One:
 “Crafting” the DIY Subject: The Hierarchy, Value and Political Subjectivities of Crafting Labor
 in Consumer Culture

I begin with the juxtaposition of two images to immediately frame some of the contradictions that emerge in the crafting discourses that I explore in this chapter. Each image was featured in its original publication as a means to celebrate the toils of these laborers and others like them. On the left, an Indian weaver depicted in a *Lands’ End Direct Merchants Catalog*, as presented in Priti Ramamurthy’s essay, “Why Is Buying a ‘Madras’ Cotton Shirt a Political Act? A Feminist Commodity Chain Analysis.” On the right, a North American “indie crafter” binding books in the craft anthology *Handmade Nation: The Rise of DIY, Art, Craft, and Design*. “Mudaliar”² (fig. 1) is exalted in the catalog as “weav[ing] magic into the cotton cloth called Madras”³ and Deb Dormody (fig. 2) is praised as part of a “vibrant movement of artists,



Beauty from the
 toil of the hand.

Figure 1: "Mudaliar" from the *Lands’ End Direct Merchant Catalog*



Figure 2: Deb Dormody from *Handmade Nation*

² Ramamurthy places this man’s name in quotation marks to note that, although the authors of the advertisement use this as his first name, Mudaliar is actually the name of a caste group, not a first name.

³ *Lands’ End Direct Merchant Catalog*, 1995, quoted in Ramamurthy, 736.

designers working in traditional and nontraditional media... capturing the attention of the nation".⁴ The narratives accompanying these images both celebrate crafting labor in order to create value for their hand-built commodities. Contributing to this goal is the general aesthetic of the two workers with their similarly hunched over posture, hands at work and eyes focused on the object.

The formal similarities between these figures evoke classic photographs of the revered American craftsman – whose image can be found in countless magazines, anthologies, and documentary photography devoted to celebrating him.⁵ This archetypal posture features a laborer at work (typically a man), shot from a barely noticeable downward-looking camera. His hands are persistently at work, his eyes are almost always cast downward, and his surroundings fade into the background so as to further emphasize his labors. It is uncommon to see another laborer at work in the background. These formal qualities tell the story of a serious craftsman-individual with carefully honed skills creating a beautiful, functional and unique hand-made object. Although classically disqualified from the title “craftsman,” perhaps Dormody (regarded as an amateur in comparison to the craftsman) and Mudaliar (an industrial wage laborer) still consider themselves artisans who, in the words of Eudora Moore (writing in 1977 on behalf of the California-based craftsmen movement), “work creatively with their hands because it gives them joy, because it is fun, as they expressed it, because they ‘had to’.”⁶ When pausing to consider the motivations of these craftspeople/workers one must ask what kind of political subjects they represent. This question, in particular guides my exploration in this chapter.

⁴ Levine and Heimerl, back cover.

⁵ See especially photos from the U.S. Farm Security Administration, Office of War Information and the Works Progress Administration collections, pictorial and graphic representations of American life between the years of 1935-1944.

⁶ Quoted in Adamson, Glenn. *The Craft Reader*. Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2010, 215.

The differences in these images do not undermine the skill of each of these workers as projected through their classic pose and the celebration of their labors in the accompanying text; but rather, reveal how gender and race are co-constituted and regulate the circulation of value in their craft-related industries. The light in Dormody's studio is attractively diffused on her face, she is at work but appears very comfortable and at ease. Carefully displayed supplies surround her, her hair is styled and she wears a cheerful floral dress in various shades of green. On the other hand, Mudaliar's surroundings are sparse with bare walls and indistinct boxes stacked in the corner. His hair is graying, his shiny and perspiring skin sets his wrinkles in relief and communicates the heat of his surroundings, as does the simple short sleeve shirt he wears. Mudaliar's wrinkles, dark skin and greying hair help readers of the catalog to solidify their image of what a subcontracted laborer for a multinational corporation looks like: brown, poor and overworked, whereas Dormody's age and complexion are quite similar to the models wearing the Lands' End clothing for sale in this catalog. Dormody's labor appears akin to a leisure activity whereas Mudaliar's work is distinctly legible as wage labor, even without the narrative reassurance that he "makes a decent living."⁷

Finally, there is a timeless quality to Mudaliar's image, especially as it is rendered in black and white amidst a catalog of full color clothing ads. The monochromatic image of Mudaliar allows the reader to imagine that he might even be a contemporary of Gandhi and so his craft is essentialized through the gendered and racialized timelessness of the photograph. Adding to this endeavor, readers are told that he learned the skill from his father, who in turn learned from his own father, and also that Mudaliar and his family live in the small village of

⁷ Especially since the reader is assured that although Mudaliar would never wear the Madras cloth he weaves as "It costs too much," he "makes a decent living for himself and his family, and is now semi-retired" (*Lands' End Direct Merchants catalog* p. 11 in Ramamurthy 736).

Panapakam “where cloth has been woven for milleniums”.⁸ On the other hand, Dormody’s styling and attire, as well as the full-color photograph, evoke the contemporary. That her dress has a vintage look adds to her and her product’s quality as quirky, creative, and unique. The present tense of her image communicates that she is part of a community of do-it-yourself (DIY) crafters whose practice is modern, inspirational, even revolutionary (not antiquated as Mudaliar’s). This is in keeping with the message of *Handmade Nation*. The introduction tells readers how crafters like Dormody “appreciate the generations of makers who came before us and from whom we draw inspiration and support” (xi). In turn, they “are setting the groundwork for future generations, leading by example and showing the creative paths you can take” (xi). That Dormody embraces traditional crafting methods but transforms them into her own makes her practice modern and innovative – a lifestyle that she *chooses* to live. By contrast, Mudaliar’s description and image suggests that he is performing an almost innate cultural practice that has not changed “for millenniums.”

Handmade Nation celebrates a modern American craftsperson who is predominantly female and white.⁹ It is partner to a documentary film by the same name. Both versions focus on handcrafted objects produced in the United States by people working in DIY communities of Milwaukee, Brooklyn, Portland and other U.S. cities. In this volume, interviews with and photos of the makers accompany images of crafted objects. Across the various interviews, gender is seldom remarked upon explicitly, although it builds much of the DIY-ers’ claim to political

⁸ *Lands’ End Direct Merchant Catalog* p. 11 in Ramamurthy 736.

⁹ A simple thumbing through of the images in this catalog supports this assertion. Other theorists of the contemporary DIY movement (Nicole Dawkins, Jack Z. Bratich, Heidi M. Brush and others) have made similar observations.

practice in this and other DIY publications.¹⁰ For example, Whitney Lee observes that her latch-hook rug art (female nudes whose images are taken from pornography) has a particular female-gendered appeal. She writes, “Many people could relate to my art on a personal level because they used to make hook rugs themselves,” continuing that she likes that her work “references women’s artwork that was created to be placed on the floor and walked upon”.¹¹ The textual connection Lee makes between hooking rugs and the position of latch-hook rugs within the degraded history of “domestic arts” adds to the value of her handcrafted objects within a postfeminist milieu. It is just one of many examples of how an ironic but also nostalgic femininity in the images and text seize the gendered possibilities of craft objects in order to augment the value of DIY commodities.

Gendering shapes the reader’s perception of Mudaliar as well. Primarily, that he is denied the masculinity of the other male “cotton people” in the Lands’ End catalog. Likewise, in this catalog as well as *Handmade Nation*, race is co-constituted with gender to communicate the roles of these workers. The two white men are coded as tough and rugged.¹² And although Mudaliar is bestowed the privilege of a first name, Vadivel, on this page (unlike the other catalog page in which he and his family appear) he alone does not meet the gaze of the camera. In this context, his posture - evoking the revered craftsman when considered in relation to Dormody - reads as diminutive and passive. The white workers stand tall and meet the viewer’s gaze, whereas in all three of images of Mudaliar (two of which are the same photograph merely flipped as a mirror

¹⁰ See Jean Railla’s response to the resurgent interest in crafts in “Why Making Stuff is Fashionable Again”, *Craft* Volume I.

¹¹ Lee, Quoted in Levine, Faythe, and Cortney Heimerl. *Handmade Nation: The Rise of DIY, Art, Craft, and Design*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2008, 106.

¹² Such as Larry Hancock, standing tall in a button front shirt with a cowboy hat as he works his expansive fields or Charlie Newman who walks alongside his powerful cotton gin in work boots and a ballcap.

image) he is always seated, hunched over and looking at his work. The white workers have thick arms, round bellies and smiles. Mudaliar is gaunt and serious. These characteristics combine to send a message that real American workers are independent and satisfied with their labor whereas, overseas, brown workers live in a culture of persistent poverty – even when paid “well” by multinationals like Lands’ End.

The other two men stand tall, and are pictured from head to toe whereas Mudaliar and Rita Hendrick (the only female worker pictured) are disembodied.¹³ The intertwined gendering and racialization on this page help the reader make sense of the laborers whose work manufactures the clothing in this catalog. In this construction “real” (white) men “work hard, talk straight” and produce raw materials that are then passed on to women and feminized (brown) men to turn into final products: cotton shirts, pants and other garments, mirroring a global division of labor where goods move between multiple sites and the laborers in each location are often selected based on racialized and gendered ideologies.¹⁴ In both the Lands’ End catalog and *Handmade Nation* images of these workers and DIYers are framed by carefully wrought text that guides the reader’s interpretation of the pictorial representations in such a way as to augment the value of the goods in these catalogs.

I have selected these images to open this chapter for the way in which they represent what Glenn Adamson, head curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and preeminent theorist of craft history, refers to as an “expanded field of craft.” Rather than understanding craft as a movement, a field, a fixed set of disciplines, or a set of trades, his most recent work seeks to reconfigure craft as a set of concerns or as a problem to be thought through

¹³ Mudaliar is shown from the torso up and Rita peeks through folds of cloth to show only her shoulders and head.

¹⁴ See Wright, Melissa W. *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

again and again. Adamson’s intervention responds to a great deal of debate over the connotations of craft over the past 15 years. Arguably one of the most prominent effects of these discussions occurred when major institutions of craft patronage and education in the United States such as The American Craft Museum and California College of Arts and Crafts both dropped “craft” from their names, becoming the Museum of Art Design and California College of the Arts, respectively. Lacey Jane Roberts, a craft theorist and artist who employs craft techniques in their own work, writes, “these institutions’ actions demonstrated that the public image of craft is in shambles—the word itself evokes stigmas and stereotypes that museums and schools are hesitant to be affiliated with” (183).¹⁵ Adamson’s efforts, then, participate in a trend to resuscitate the connotations of craft within the art, design and even craft world. In doing so, he offers this simple but open-ended definition of craft in the introduction to *The Craft Reader*, “the application of skill and material-based knowledge to relatively small-scale production” (Adamson 2). This short definition, placed alongside the images above and situated within current and historical debates over the status of craft, allows me to posit an epistemology of DIY that foregrounds the ways in which race and gender are bound up in and influence the value of craft objects. To take DIY seriously as a cultural practice and discourse is to ask after its aspirations as an identity category – a space for political invention in the present moment.¹⁶

¹⁵ Roberts’ best-known work may well be a bright red knitted “& Crafts” guerrilla installation above the main entrance to the California College of the Arts. Their primary field of interest involves the queering of craft and a merging of “craft with objects of violence and control to examine large structures of power and how they might be interrupted by ways of making that are often labeled as gendered, amateur, and low” (Artist Statement, <http://laceyjaneroberts.com>).

¹⁶ As Judith Butler writes, “Clearly, identities *can* appear as so many inert substantives; indeed, epistemological models tend to take this appearance as their point of theoretical departure. However, the substantive ‘I’ only appears as such through a signifying practice that seeks to conceal its own workings and to naturalize its effects. Further, to qualify as a substantive identity is an arduous task, for such appearances are rule-generated identities, ones which rely on the consistent and repeated invocation of rules that condition and restrict culturally intelligible

As I mentioned above, major changes in the way “craft” signifies occurred between 1998 and 2003 - the same period in which amateur and semi-professional domestic craft, under the new label of DIY, experienced a (commercially-validated) revival in the United States. At the same time, the apparel manufacturing and component industries (under which many segments of DIY practice would fall) have experienced a severe decline, with employment dropping “by more than 80% over the last two decades”.¹⁷ This chapter asks how these seemingly disparate trends – in the domestic apparel industry; in DIY (commonly perceived as hobby or amateur craft); and in the smaller, handmade artisan craft industry - are connected. Further, I point to the absolute instrumentality of analysis of the narratives that circulate around the crafted objects and crafting subject in comprehending how value is created for DIY objects and also how DIY functions as an identity category. When Adamson writes about a “material-based knowledge” he refers primarily to knowledge based in the raw materials used to create the craft objects – knowledge of different types of physical material: clay, yarn or wood, and how they may best be used. He attends less to the materiality of the raced-classed-gendered craftspeople producing

practices of identity. Indeed, to understand identity as a *practice*, and as a signifying practice, is to understand culturally intelligible subjects as the resulting effects of a rule-bound discourse that inserts itself in the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of linguistic life. Abstractly considered, language refers to an open system of signs by which intelligibility is insistently created and contested. As historically specific organizations of language, discourses present themselves in the plural, coexisting within temporal frames, and instituting unpredictable and inadvertent convergences from which specific modalities of discursive possibilities are engendered.” (*Gender Trouble* 184)

¹⁷ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. This study, published in 2012 also writes, “From 1996 to 2011, the U.S. apparel manufacturing industry experienced many job losses—averaging 323 mass layoff events per year. During that period, the largest number of mass layoff events occurred in 1996, when the apparel manufacturing industry initiated a total of 706—leading to the filing of 67,511 initial claims for unemployment insurance benefits.” It is unclear why the article did not include a full 20 years of data, as this would have allowed for a better observation of the effects of NAFTA on this industry.

these goods, whose positionality is a tool used to shape and create value for the craft objects just as surely as their needles, thread, glue and looms.

It is with these investments in mind that I delve into a brief history of crafting, culminating in what many are calling the “DIY movement.” I detail this history in order to chronicle both a series of strategic narrative omissions that I will argue are essential to creating the DIY and crafting subjects of these histories as well as the way in which what *is* written about craft is under-theorized as a means of shaping and creating value for the crafted objects. As I have progressed in this study, it has become increasingly apparent that many of the statements about and claims made for DIY that are taken as the substance of the matter are often throwaway phrases that don’t actually get at the real significance of these practices. As a result, DIY is rarely taken seriously by those outside its ranks. On the other hand, within the DIY community, it can be argued that these practices are perhaps taken *too* seriously. This observation of the dead ground between critical dismissal and an overabundance of compulsory praise, leads me to believe that what is lost is an important opportunity for thinking through what it means to be a political subject in consumer culture - as DIY offers a rich field of practice worth serious attention.

My sources provide events to populate this history of crafting, fodder for interpreting DIY’s epistemology, as well as a framework for pursuing what is left out of these DIY histories and to what end. In doing so, I converge a series of discourses that are not often read against each other: celebratory narratives of DIY and craft, art historical and theoretical work on craft history and a feminist commodity chain analysis. The feminist commodity chain analysis may seem to be the apparent outsider in this list but it is – in fact – not common to find DIY narratives with a real awareness of craft history, nor is the realm of DIY (and the domestic labor

underpinning DIY) treated in much historical or theoretical work on craft. I privilege Levine and Heimerl's *Handmade Nation* as a site in which to read the contradictions embedded in the terms "hand-made" and Do-It-Yourself as well as Glenn Adamson's extensive work on the history of modern craft in his three volumes: *Thinking Through Craft*, *The Craft Reader* (an edited anthology) and *The Invention of Craft*. This chapter begins with a history of crafting that culminates in contemporary practices of DIY, focusing on the allure of DIY as read through *Handmade Nation*, *Craft Magazine* and other publications promoting the craftsman and DIY lifestyles. I then move into a summary of Ramamurthy's feminist commodity chain analysis (FCCA) in order to set up my analysis of DIY as an odd reproduction of FCCA that also "weaves subjects from a range of social positions and locations into the fabric of consent" (Ramamurthy 750).

I focus first on how gendering and racialization (in particular, the Othering of factory-based crafting labor) create value for DIY and other handcrafted goods. Accompanying this move to expose, I consider how DIY might be considered an identity category that allows for a consideration of what political subjectivity looks like in consumer culture. Since DIY objects make little sense if separated from their narratives. This study departs from the typical analysis of craft (or art) objects that may seek to interpret these objects based primarily upon their aesthetic qualities. As the epigraph below suggests, DIY objects are made intelligible as such through the narratives that accompany them. One assumes that this embroidered image of Angela Davis (fig. 3) registers as a work of craftivism because of Davis's history as a high-profile political prisoner and staunch advocate of prison abolition and racial justice. Perhaps this could be discerned through the image alone. However, an important dimension is added to this object through its affiliation as DIY (broadly) and more specifically as a practice of craftivism.

DIY's Allure and Omissions



This lovely image was sent to me by a lovely Swedish woman named Julia who is working on a film about craftivism and DIY... I love this image of Angela Davis that she sent because not only is it beautiful, but it also speaks to the many different ways that people see craftivism. In a word, it's a celebration. A crafty one, if you will.

Betsy Greer, "Craftivism, Angela Davis and Craft as Therapy"

Figure 3: Angela Davis as DIY

When Carla Sinclair, editor-in-chief of *Craft: Redefining Traditional Craft Magazine*, writes about the "new craft movement," she provides a fairly standard account of contemporary DIY in the United States. She writes in the inaugural issue of *Craft*,

The new craft movement encourages people to make things themselves rather than buy what thousands of others already own. It provides new venues for crafters to show and sell their wares, and it offers original, unusual, alternative, and better-made goods to consumers who choose not to fall in step with mainstream commerce. Crafting empowers people by allowing them to create something useful, if you need something, just make it yourself. (7)

While Sinclair privileges the term "craft" to describe the practices in this publication, the concept and practice of Do-it-Yourself (DIY) are also present throughout the issue (both explicitly and also in phrases such as "make it yourself"). A whole vocabulary has proliferated around practices of DIY since it began circulating in its current form - in the early 1990s (even though craftspeople and hobbyists have, clearly, been "doing it themselves" throughout the entire history of crafting that I trace). To clarify, I will use DIY to mark the resurgence of practices and communities collated around the activity of creating, repairing and repurposing objects by hand, with a specific focus on practices of domestic and entrepreneurial crafting: what others have

called by names such as “fabriculture,” craftivism or women’s work.¹⁸ “Makers” and “indie crafter” are terms often used in tandem with DIY where “maker” denotes those who pursue more technologically-oriented endeavors and “indie” locates practices of crafting with anarchist or other political orientations (similar to “craftivist” but with some important differences). In contemporary usage, “crafter” often marks the hobbyist who engages in highly commercialized (and generally degraded) activities such as scrapbooking, but also knitting, crochet and many other practices that overlap with DIY. Finally, craftsman/woman/person and artisan all denote a crafting professional – more closely linked to the studio craft movement championed by successive generations (from the trans-Atlantic Arts and Crafts movement at the turn of the 20th century, to the American craftsman championed by the Works Progress Administration of the 1930s and 1940s, to the counter-cultural and utopian studio craft movement of the 1960s and 1970s). If, after this attempt at naming and description, these terms and the categories they represent still appear indistinct, it is because are. The differences and similarities between these terms necessarily overlap and, as a result, further illustrate the contradictions, hierarchies and different valuations bound up in and perpetuated by craft and DIY writing.

Writing in 2009 for *American Craft* magazine, Dennis Stevens agrees, stating, “Craft in the 21st century is a nebulous and slippery topic. As the confluence of several different generational interpretations of a single term, ‘craft’ presents us with a series of distinct yet connected sets of knowledge and values. Although each meaning refers to the production of objects by hand, a common definition for craft remains elusive” (1). Stevens then summarizes how studio craft is still recognized as valuing “skill, connoisseurship and tradition” with a need

¹⁸ See “Fabricating Activism: Craft-Work, Popular Culture, Gender” by Jack Z. Bratich and Heidi M. Brush, Betsy Greer *craftivism.com*, and Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: The Dinner Party home page, “Curatorial Overview” on women’s work.

for “educational and professional hierarchies.” On the other hand, he writes, “diy craft emerges from a culture that does not seek professional validation within traditional art methodology but rather is motivated by joining with others *socially* in shared, creative activity. Further, diy often relies upon an ironic or satirical approach to forms of domestic creativity that the feminists of the 1970s (otherwise termed second-wave feminists) strictly sought to reject” (emphasis added, Stevens 1). Stevens’ motivation for clarifying these differences is to position DIY within a larger cultural context of “generational movements” in order to adequately “acknowledge and understand” the “values and aims” of DIY craft practitioners. I depart from Stevens in that I note the murkiness of DIY craft (among a variety of other related terms) and their relation to each other *not* to settle or clarify a particular relational understanding. In fact, I would argue that any definitive marking off of boundaries is not entirely possible, nor productive. Rather, these observations allow me to pursue the work that DIY and craft do as a result of the slippages in the ways that these categories operate in relation to each other. DIY is both a subset of craft and also a rubric under which craft emerges. This animates my analysis and allows me to ask after the intentionality and productivity of both DIY and craft narratives – especially in relation to the value of craft and DIY objects, as well as the possibilities for DIY to operate as a distinct identity category of political engagement.

As Stevens and Adamson note, DIY is frequently perceived to be an inferior, amateur subset of the field of craft. At the same time, DIY is itself a broad field that includes practices ranging from large-scale do-it-yourself endeavors involving auto repair or home renovation with a masculine flare (à la Bob Villa), to smaller-scale DIY crafts employing feminized skills such as knitting and embroidery. More recently, technologically-oriented DIY involves hacking and repurposing software or using various other computerized technologies to build both virtual and

tangible objects. Of this spectrum, this project is interested in the realm of historically “feminine” techniques collated under the titles of “traditional” or “domestic” crafting (domestic or household labor, domestic arts) and, in particular, the recently “invented” and much-celebrated union of DIY crafting and activism that has been dubbed craftivism.

Sinclair distinguishes DIY crafting from other modes of DIY as projects where aesthetics are as important as function, requiring “‘craftier’ skills, materials and an emphasis on the visual outcome” (7). I would add that these projects are distinctly domestic, as they appear primarily in the home or in small-scale entrepreneurial ventures - in contrast to industrial crafting operations. And yet, domesticity and the domestic realm as theoretical and historical concepts go very much uninterrogated in writing about DIY.¹⁹ This isn’t to say that DIYers are unaware of the domestic underpinnings of their practices. Rather, they precisely *know* these foundations in order to recast them in (frequently ironic) ways in order to add value to DIY practices and commodities. By utilizing fragmented or decontextualized histories they appeal to a certain consumer base and create the foundation of a DIY identity.

The current appeal of DIY is described by Nicole Dawkins in her ethnographic study of Detroit’s DIY community. She writes,

What is important to Handmade Detroit is not necessarily *what* is made, how skillfully it is produced, or even whether it is transacted through gift or economy but, rather, this ‘unique’ *connection* between individual acts of creation and the *transformation* of self, city, and social world. In this context, making material things (and somehow exchanging

¹⁹ For instance, Roszika Parker’s *The Subversive Stitch* (1983) as well as Gillian Elinor’s *Women and Craft* (1987) populate a catalog of writing on women’s craft and domesticity that DIY writing has - as of yet - not engaged in any significant detail.

these things with others) is positioned as *an inherently moral and meaningful practice*.

(263, emphasis added)

This short description, paired with Sinclair's, opens onto a number of the themes that I will elaborate upon in this chapter. First, that DIY as an identity category operates primarily through the narrative of social transformation and connection. Secondly, whereas art and (traditional) craft objects are more likely to be evaluated based on their aesthetic properties, DIY objects make little sense as a distinct category without their accompanying narratives. Here Dawkins as well as Sinclair name DIY as a "movement" - or a means to connect and be transformed - that happens through the making of the DIY object.

Differences also emerge regarding the quality of DIY goods and how this is evaluated. Sinclair presumes that DIY objects are "better made" than the mass-produced goods that flood the marketplace whereas Dawkins asserts that the connection DIY creates between individual creativity and a transformed world is more important than the individual characteristics of a DIY item (its quality level or what it is). In this instance, I would characterize Sinclair's celebration of DIY as an example of a throwaway line that is commonly taken as the substance of DIY (uncritically celebrating DIY as encouraging, new, original, unusual, alternative, better, empowering, useful and individualistic), while Dawkins assesses these individual acts of creation more even-handedly.

Examples of DIY craft projects in the inaugural issue of *Craft* (2007) align with the more simplistic trends of narrating DIY. They include how to embroider a skateboard, felt an ipod cocoon and recycle "a dud pair of shoes into awesome knitted boots" (Sinclair 7). The deployment of "useful" in the context of the rest of the issue turns this concept on its head, marking the DIY subject as an economically privileged hobbyist with a racially-inflected "indie"

white aesthetic (e.g. someone who owns an iPod and has the spare time to knit and felt a unique, hand-crafted case for it). In doing so, the magazine proclaims how the DIY crafter expresses her individuality and is empowered through the act of creating something for her own use. Whereas Adamson's writing on craft theorizes the emergence (and possible dissolution) of craft as a discipline, the DIYers featured in *Craft* are more intent on producing narratives that promotes the virtues of the handmade ethos, thereby creating an aura of creativity, originality and feel-good consumerism around their products.

Sinclair does not take an overtly political position regarding the making of crafted objects; whereas political investments explicitly motivate the works of Jean Railla, Betsy Greer (I will discuss Greer at greater length in relation to "craftivism" and other practices of politically-inclined DIY) and many others within the DIY community. And yet, as I hope to demonstrate in this chapter (and this project as a whole), the status of craft as a practice of leisure, labor, activism or some combination of these categories, as well as the relationship of the crafter and crafted object to formal and informal economies, are a politics that are implicated in every crafting activity. Ultimately, then, the "DIY renaissance" in Sinclair's essay is celebrated as a leisure activity that evolves traditional crafting practices to an imagined location both outside of and even against the wage labor system. Vacated from this history (and in craft history as well) are crafts destined for the mass market produced by wage laborers, those who produce these items that "thousands already own" (Sinclair 7). Rather than understanding these as simple oversights, I seek to develop them as productive omissions that create racialized and gendered value for and knowledge about contemporary craft and DIY.

Uniform Narratives of Progress in DIY, Craftivism and Craft Histories

One version of DIY's history appears in *Handmade Nation* with a passing reference to "the generations of makers who came before us and from whom we draw inspiration and support" (preface). The anthology features a hand-lettered timeline of "The New Wave of Craft" that chronicles DIY craft between 1994 and 2007 (when the book was published). The timeline maintains a geographical scope of the United States and Canada to highlight the founding moments of craft-oriented events, publications, websites, brands, shops, and gatherings. It begins with the publication of *Venus Zine* and the "She's Crafty" column in *Bust Magazine*. These two (initially self-published) magazines offered a second-wave feminist perspective on popular culture, with DIY crafting as one of many foci including music, celebrities, fashion and sexual health. The timeline culminates in 2007 with the appearance of the Senior Editor of *Craft* magazine on the CBS Morning Show and The American Craft Council show opening its doors to young, emerging designers. Thus, the trajectory is one from small, independent crafting operations emitting feminist ethos and a more radical and grassroots do-it-yourself perspective to greater commercialization; a growing investment in popular appeal; and information about how, where and why to *buy* DIY rather than *do* DIY. This DIY history is meant to be a partial account, a history of the contemporary - which is consistent with most writing on DIY. It is the very partiality, the slippages and apparent oversights, of these accounts that I examine to ascertain how knowledge about DIY is produced and the multiple ways this knowledge augments as well as diminishes the value of differently-produced handmade goods and political identities that emerge out of these activities.

Craftivists such as Betsy Greer produce craft discourses that also help to discern a contemporary epistemology of DIY. Greer is a hobby crafter (who doesn't rely on crafting for her primary income) and author of *Knitting for Good!: A Guide to Creating Personal, Social,*

and Political Change Stitch by Stitch. She is credited with coining the term “craftivism” and writes in *Knitting for Good* that “the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s helped me approach life with a DIY attitude and aesthetic. I believed I could make things and try things, from writing a fanzine to playing music in a band to all sorts of other things that girls weren’t typically encouraged to do” (13). It is implied that this background lead her to discover the concept of “craft + activism = craftivism,” which she writes about in her essay “Activism is Not a Four-Letter Word,” featured in *Handmade Nation*,

I could knit my own clothes, thereby dictating my own fashion sense instead of following someone else's. I could spend money on ethically produced products and weed out the not-so-savory companies that were branding everything in my house from toilet paper to spices. I could knit blankets and vests and hats and scarves (as well as other things) for people who could really use them, both in my local community and abroad. I could stand up as an activist without having to stand on a street corner with a sign. I could start to change my life and make smarter choices and find partners in (crafty) crime and slowly change my life into one that's still fighting for change, but in a positive caring way instead of via anger. My friends and I could start a revolution – just by making things one stitch at a time with needles and machines and patches. (90)

For Greer and others who perform craftivism (such as “yarn bombing,” the practice of wrapping parking meters, lampposts and bike racks with knitted or crocheted textiles), DIY crafting in all its various forms is understood as inherently political. It is a means to “speak in other ways” by stitching, weaving, knitting or crocheting the “questions you want to ask, things you want to yell, problems that keep you up at night.” For Greer, this other mode of speaking is more powerful than overt discourse because “in order to create change in people’s hearts, you need to first

disarm them by catching them off guard.”²⁰ Likewise, Jack Z. Bratich and Heidi M. Brush include craftivism as an essential part of what they call “fabriculture.” They support Greer’s tactics when they ask, “What, then, do we mean when we talk about the politics of crafting? Is it limited to issue-based quilting, radical knitting circles, and public knit-ins? If knitting offers subversive possibilities, it is hardly restricted to explicit radicalized forms” (Bratich and Brush, 248). Through the work of Bratich, Brush, Greer, the UK-based Craftivist Collective, and others, craftivist practices have become quite popular in DIY circles. Thus, I contend that in many ways the craftivist ethos influences and even regulates the operations and claims of a much greater sector of DIY.

While craftivism may seem like a return to early manifestations of a second-wave feminist DIY spirit as found in *Venus, Bust*, punk zines and the Riot Grrrl movement, Greer is quick to remind readers that her crafty version of politics must be palatable, non-confrontational and – above all – nice.²¹ According to Greer, DIY is political for its “harnessing of dissent in a non-confrontational way” (90). She sees “craftivism” as “a more positive, more useful, force” than other forms of activism.²² In these surface-level accounts, craftivism is defined as inherently political, empowering and frequently individualistic. As stated by Greer, “In a time of over-ease and overuse and overspending, I can take back control over where my money goes, over what my outfit is, and over how my life is lived” (90).

²⁰ Greer, Betsy. “Craftivism for All, 100%. Silence is Our Weapon,” 13 December 2011, www.craftivism.com.

²¹ See the web archive of a heated debate over the meaning of the Etsy Craftivism Team where Greer enters repeatedly to assert her authority over the debate as “someone who started writing about craftivism 7 years ago when it was a concept in my head and a completely made-up word” and to remind everyone not to fight or get angry.

<http://craftingagreenworld.com/2009/04/04/what-is-craftivism-division-over-the-definition-explodes-an-etsy-team/>

²² www.craftivism.com

Craftivists often invoke the feminist DIY of the 1980s and early 1990s (especially the Riot Grrrl and feminist punk subcultures) that implored young women to be vocal in their struggle against patriarchy, capitalism, racism and homophobia. In these accounts, these foundational DIYers often did so in “crafty” ways: constructing zines and screen-printed hand-sewn patches to communicate these messages. As Stefanie Moore wrote in her zine *World without Lard*, profiled in Allison Piepmeier’s *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism*,

I fight like a girl. I fight like a girl who refuses to be a victim. I fight like a girl who’s tired of being ignored + humoured + beaten + raped. I fight like a girl who’s sick of not being taken seriously. I fight like a girl who’s been pushed too far. I fight like a girl who offers + demands respect. I fight like a girl who has a lifetime of anger + strength + pride pent up in her girly body... I fight like a girl who *fights back*. So, next time you think you can distract yourself from your insecurities by victimizing a girl think again. She may be me, and I fight like a girl.

Here, fighting “like a girl” is evoked initially in a pejorative sense but is reclaimed through the text of this zine as a legitimate form of resistance to be taken seriously. For Moore, “figh[ting] like a girl” is a means to challenge patriarchal notions of legitimate white female behavior: being nice, turning the other cheek, being quiet. Conversely, Greer invokes the dissent of political crafting only to reinscribe norms of femininity in her insistence on politeness, positivity and usefulness. This perspective is reminiscent of the nineteenth century ideals of true womanhood. In Greer’s version, craftivism frequently operates as a neoliberal subjectivity where political practice is based on individual consumption and consumer choice.²³ Thus, rather than posing an

²³ According to David Harvey, “Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating

alternative to DIY's commodification, craftivists (as well as non-craftivist crafters) amplify this trajectory by enhancing the appeals of ethical consumption within the broader "DIY Renaissance."

Nicole Dawkins, a cultural anthropologist, arrives at a similar conclusion in her 2010 study, "Do-it-yourself: the Precarious Work and Postfeminist Politics of Handmaking (in) Detroit," writing,

Bracketed by and through individualistic desires for pleasure, (consumer) choice, and autonomy, this imagined "handmade" city is not a radical site of new or unlimited social and political possibilities—particularly for the individuals and communities excluded or marginalized by these discourses—but, rather, stands to replicate the neoliberal values and serve the interests of post-Fordist capital, which it seems at first to confront. (279)

Dawkins interviewed and solicited questionnaires from a broad cross-section crafters – not just those who self-identify as craftivists – in reaching this conclusion. However, she notes that even those crafters who didn't see themselves as espousing a particular political position still often do reference political or ethical values in their craft narratives. Of one DIYer who grows her own vegetables and states that politics "rarely come into play" in her work, Dawkins observes, "For this woman, the seemingly political aspects to rejecting commercially produced foods and goods by doing-it-herself were downplayed and even discounted; the things she made were not guided by an explicit political consciousness or some kind of solidarity for greater societal change but, rather, for individualized pleasure and personal satisfaction" (278). As others have also concluded, while the majority of DIYers may not self-identify as "craftivists," the ethos of

individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (*A Brief History of Neoliberalism* 2).

craftivism that is consumer-oriented and based on individual action and choice is a large part of DIY practice in general - marking an important aspect of the epistemology of DIY.

As I mentioned above, accounts of the “new craft movement” have a decidedly of-the-moment focus. In *Craft*, Sinclair summarizes DIY history when she writes about the “DIY renaissance that embraces crafts while pushing them *beyond traditional boundaries* through technology, irony, irreverence, and creative recycling, or by using innovative materials and processes” (7, emphasis added). When Sinclair writes about this “exploding craft movement,” she implies an evolution of crafting – but provides few details about the “traditional” practices that DIY evolves or transforms. Rather, her main point is to celebrate how craft empowers the entrepreneurial subject, allowing her to explore her own unique identity and sometimes even make a little money on the side. At the same time, the very phrase “the new wave of craft” is a characterization that relies heavily on its reference to a previous craft movement that DIY claims to revise. While, DIY narratives typically leave out the details of crafting history they do subtly locate select elements to build DIY as a distinct identity category.

Consider Greer’s suggestion that practices of “craftivism” emerge in 2002. She provides a brief description of handmade political effigies that serves as her primary example of overtly political DIY - or, as she describes it, “more traditional and time-tested methods of dissent” that “never felt right” for her personally (90). In her writings on craftivism.com Greer makes more efforts to track the long and rich history of craft in political work, such as the short-lived *Womanhouse* show staged by students of Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro in the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts (employing craft skills such as crochet and

sewing) as well as the 19 year Greenham Commons Women’s Peace Camp.²⁴ These details do not appear in her shorter *Handmade Nation* piece. As the most active spokesperson of craftivism, Greer does not model deep historical inquiry as a prerequisite to craftivism.²⁵ Instead, one observes something more like what Glenn Adamson describes as craft’s “inherently defensive position” in regards to art. In order to consider what a more detailed crafting history might produce for DIY narratives I also ask why these histories are often greatly condensed in DIY accounts. I turn to art historical writings whose aim is to document craft practices as they have existed and evolved for generations. Accessing a fuller history of crafting practices builds a more complete understanding of the “traditional crafts” and how they are and aren’t a part of DIY’s roots. This too is a selective history. While art historical writing on craft may include some instances of “domestic” or “amateur” craft, they primarily focus on objects whose status is sanctified by museums, art galleries or other exhibits.

To open *The Craft Reader*, a 641 page anthology of writing about craft that includes everything from excerpts of Marx’s *Capital* to Annie Albers’ how-to writing on the

²⁴ <http://womanhouse.refugia.net> and <http://radicalcrossstitch.com/tag/greenham-common-womens-peace-camp>.

²⁵ This has somewhat shifted recently as Greer embarked on a project in February 2014 to document 48 acts of “historical craftivism” – one for each week of the remaining year. She writes, “So... last year I decided I needed a new project for 2014. This project was to write here every week about 52 historical acts of craftivism! Then 2014 happened and then I had surgery and then all of a sudden it was... February. Hmm... Undaunted, here goes 48 acts of historical craftivism. And since I’m busy, you’re busy, and we’ll all busy... I’m limiting myself to 2 hours a week researching said act. Why am I doing this? Because I’ve found myself getting into the rut of hitting refresh all too often on my email, Facebook, Twitter and I need something else to do on the internet. Because this is what I’d like to do my PhD about, but am not sure if anyone would ever give me money for said PhD... So I figured, why not just do it anyway? Because craftivism is not new, just the portmanteau is. Because I want to be inspired again. Because I am healing from a stupid disorder and this is my balm. Because I want to share these stories with someone, anyone. Because, because, because of all these things and more. Because maybe over the course of these 48 weeks, someone else besides me will learn something.”
<<http://craftivism.com/blog.html/welcome-to-48-weeks-of-historical-craftivism/>>

fundamentals of weaving, Glenn Adamson provides this handy summary of the usual means of describing modern craft history,

With the onset of the industrial revolution in the late eighteenth century, craft began to suffer an irreversible decline – a process of deskilling and workplace alienation. In response, reformers and preservationists, most notably those associated with the Arts and Crafts Movement, emerged to rescue it. Though they were not able to maintain craft's economic value, they did raise awareness about its aesthetic importance and thus paved the way towards its rebirth as a distinct art form. Today more than ever, the artisan's place in culture is threatened by new technologies, from the Internet to rapid prototyping. But a few institutions and individuals have been able to maintain a viable position for craft, partly by building new bridges to the worlds of contemporary art and design. (2)

Adamson then asserts that while there is some truth to this narrative that “underpins the logic” of many diverse craft institutions: magazines, museums, schools, etc. it can (and should) also be debated on almost every point. To begin, craft skill has not simply eroded since the advent of the industrial revolution but has rather flourished and continued to develop. Secondly, the Arts and Crafts movement didn't merely aim to preserve craft skill but was also “modern and political,” inventive and even at times a “corrosive and distorting cultural force” (2). Next, elevating craft to the status of art both restricts the scope of cultural practices in which craft is involved and also “blinds us to the potential radicality of craft's nonart status” (2). Finally, the idea of “building new bridges” between art, craft and design primarily serves to construct boundaries between fields that have always been related to each other anyway. This narrative of craft history is decidedly professional, keeping at the margins the domestic realm of handmade objects as well as the many other locations of craft skill that Adamson has since come to recognize in his

“expanded field of craft” as described in his 2012 keynote address “Goodbye Craft.” And yet, as we have already and will continue to see, similar narrative moments (in both the dominant narrative as well as Adamson’s contestation) shape the telling of DIY histories of handcrafted objects as well. Take, for example, Bratich and Brush’s section on “Politics and the Popular” in their “Fabriculture” essay. They write, “Fabriculture is not only a type of labor but a type of subjectivity—it has an *ontological* quality. It withstood capitalism’s founding violence. Its current popularity is a sign of its strength, not in its incorporation into new modes of value creation but in its endurance despite capitalism and patriarchy. Its resurgence is a moment in a cycle, a warp and woof in the rich tapestry of species history” (Bratich and Brush 253).

Glenn Adamson’s earlier monograph *Thinking Through Craft* explores the role of craft in Modernist art and presents a more extensive, nuanced narrative of craft to trouble the standard history given above. The chapters in *Thinking Through Craft* are organized around a cluster of interrelated core principles put into relation with each other through craft: supplemental, material, skill, pastoral and amateur (4). Each principle develops Adamson’s insistence that craft be thought of as a way of doing things, as something “in motion” and multiple rather than a means of classifying objects, institutions or people. He does away with overworked discussions about the status of craft as art (it is) while also rejecting the tendency to think of craft as a collection of objects to be endlessly celebrated. Ultimately, Adamson arrives at a conclusion that the best work on craft understands craft as a collection of practices that constitute a problem that must be thought through again and again. Additionally, he considers how craft’s inferiority (relative to art) may be the most productive thing about it.

In this piece, Adamson largely disregards the works of DIY crafters and craftivists - as well as handmade goods created in industrial settings, the handmade as tourist kitsch, as well as

“morally-bankrupt” handcrafted objects that carry a designer label (e.g. a Louis Vuitton leather handbag).²⁶ As with other art and craft historians, he studies well-established works of craft/art rather than venturing to consider crafted objects with less institutional validation. By contrast, his recent work as editor of *The Journal of Modern Craft* and his recently published *The Invention of Craft*,²⁷ pursue a more interdisciplinary perspective on handcrafted goods, that open onto some of the categories mentioned above. Adamson’s expanded field of craft contains promising possibilities for creating more democratic histories of crafting labor. And yet, it is curious that rather than pursuing a more expansive and inclusive discipline of craft, Adamson prefers to dispense with the category altogether – much like the schools and museums that dropped “craft” from their names not much more than a decade earlier. For all his astute observations about the centrality of craft in modern art and culture, Adamson (like the craftivists) in both what he says as well as what he omits, forges an epistemology that recreates the very hierarchies he seeks to challenge.

As a final move in this section, in order to better comprehend the role of history in shaping DIY’s epistemology, I borrow the concept of “the time of History” from Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “The Time of History, the Time of Gods.” This essay explores the constructedness of “a godless, continuous, homogeneous time” (the time of History²⁸) as a dominant form of historical consciousness that allows for the formation of the modern subject who tells a singular

²⁶ I borrow here from Adamson’s own descriptions of what an “expanded field of craft” might include in his “Goodbye Craft” keynote address presented at the Smithsonian in November 2012.

²⁷ A sequel to *Thinking Through Craft*, in which Adamson focuses on how craft developed an oppositional stance as it was “invented” as industry’s Other during the Industrial Revolution.

²⁸ Chakrabarty uses History to denote this dominant form of historical consciousness, whereas history or histories mark subaltern formations. I use the same distinction when referencing Chakrabarty in this chapter.

story of human evolution.²⁹ Chakrabarty explores History as a constructed discipline – rather than the natural way to organize events over a period of time. His discussion of History’s reliance on a secular temporality to perform all kinds of magic (such as “the appearance of successfully assimilating to itself memories that are, strictly speaking, unassimilable”) is useful in unpacking claims made for DIY in writings of its history while locating the positivity of what is left out of DIY and art historical narratives of craft history (56). In short, Chakrabarty explores the constructedness and functions of the narrative dimension of history.

One might argue that DIY’s history of crafting is constructed out of the temporality and imagination of “secular history” that, for Chakrabarty, cannot accommodate other forms of memory. Chakrabarty’s “time of History” is inhospitable to unassimilable memories, heterogeneous (so-called “primitive,” “pre-modern” or “pre-capitalist”) temporalities, or questions of difference (other than as serialities that are accounted for in order to be managed or assimilated). The time of History is not a “site where pluralities contend”, or where “other temporalities, other forms of worlding, coexist and are possible” (57-58). To illustrate this interpretation, I return to the *Handmade Nation* anthology, from which I excerpted Greer’s essay on craftivism.

In DIY narratives, as I have noted, crafting is almost exclusively discussed and received as a positive, liberating, life-affirming, exciting, empowering affair. When these narratives do attend to other modes of creating items by hand, it is in the occasional reference to the mass-produced (but often still hand-made) products that everyone should resist by making or purchasing DIY goods. Occasionally, the person making these goods receives attention as well,

²⁹ Chakrabarty, Dipesh. “The Time of History and the Times of Gods” in Schwarz, Henry, and Sangeeta Ray eds. *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2000. 37-39.

as an object of pity or someone the craftivist might help. As Deb Dormody explains it (in the text accompanying her photo, fig.2), “Buying from an indie crafter is a great way for someone to purchase something and feel good about it... When buying from big-box retail stores, you can guess what person has made it in a foreign country and what that work was like, but you probably don’t want to think about it”. Dormody concludes, “In terms of the movement’s longevity, I think that it will certainly have staying power with customers who are concerned about global economy issues and keeping the local economy strong” (Dormody quoted in Levine and Heimerl 10). With these assertions Dormody places DIYers who create feel-good products into a history that aligns with capitalist temporalities and narratives of progress.

In contrast to the time of History (in which DIY participates), Chakrabarty writes, Subaltern histories, thus conceived in relationship to the question of difference, will have a split running through them. On the one hand, they are ‘histories’ in that they are constructed within the master code of secular History and use the accepted academic codes of history writing (and thereby perforce subordinate to themselves all other forms of memory). On the other hand, they cannot ever afford to grant this master code its claim of being a mode of thought that comes to all human beings naturally, or even to be treated as something that exists out there in nature itself. Subaltern histories are therefore constructed within a particular kind of historicized memory, one that remembers History itself as a violation, an imperious code that accompanied the civilizing process that the European Enlightenment inaugurated in the eighteenth century as a world-historical task.

(55)

Whereas the subaltern “is that which constantly, from within the narrative, calls into question the various global narratives that aid particular forms of domination” (56), what Dormody

accomplishes with her nod to other modes of (non-DIY) production is a retelling of “a single human history,” in which local, handmade DIY economies represent the highest evolution of hand-crafted goods.

Similarly, the history of craftivism produced by Greer echoes key moments from Adamson’s synthesis of a typical craft history while tailoring these moments so that craftivism emerges at the pinnacle. As a part of her definition of craftivism written for the *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice* Greer explains,

In the pre-Industrial Revolution era, craft skills were needed to clothe the family and maintain a working household. As mass production increased, there became no need to knit sweaters for winter warmth or weave baskets to hold vegetables. Crafts were bypassed by modernity. The do-it-yourself spirit was stifled in the area of wardrobe creativity, and post-9/11, a rising sense of hopelessness to change anything in the world was unleashed. Feminism was still heavily rooted in theory and strength, but enough time had spanned between the economic and social disparities between women and men in the 1970s that women began to look again at domesticity as something to be valued instead of ignored. Wanting to conquer both a drill and a knitting needle, there was a return to home economics tinged with a hint of irony as well as a fond embracement.

Cloaked in a semblance of concern for “global issues” or “the use of creativity for the improvement of the world” the homogeneity of these narratives reveals that there is no room in the DIY telling of crafting history for complexities of crafting labor.³⁰

Jean Railla, founder of the online art and craft forum “getcrafty.com,” demonstrates the generalizing impulses of DIY histories as they relate to feminist history. In her “Why Making

³⁰ “Craftivism.” *Encyclopedia of Activism and Social Justice*. 2007. SAGE Publications as found on craftivism.com

Stuff is Fashionable Again” – published in the same volume of *Craft* as Sinclair’s telling of the “New Craft Movement” - Railla asks, “So why now? Why after feminism, the Industrial Revolution, and the pervasiveness of the Gap are the young and the beautiful suddenly knitting baby blankets, hand-cranking mango-mint ice cream, and sewing vintage fabric skirts?” (10). Already, her rolling of global feminisms, the Industrial Revolution and corporate globalization into one neat sentence meant to describe this period in which crafting became “ubiquitous” demonstrates Chakrabarty’s assertion that History is not interested in the individuality of events, but, rather, marks individual instances in order to find in them a generality. The generality that Railla pursues is meant to establish a uniform narrative of the progress of crafting labor that is the history of DIY.

Railla presents four theories to explain this DIY “renaissance” which are quite similar to Greer’s explanation above. In short, since people no longer work with their hands anymore (theory one), they turn to DIY as a leisure activity and experience with the tactile world that just “feels good” (theory two). Plus, “feminism was successful” so practicing “typically feminine art forms” is no longer looked down upon (theory three) and – in fact - it even presents an opportunity to make a political statement (theory four). Creating this version of DIY history depends greatly upon generalities (about feminism and craft work) that exclude histories and other instances of crafting labor that don’t easily fit into narratives such as Railla’s. Written out of DIY History are crafting labors in a domestic sweatshop context, Third World consumers who may actually desire the products they create for First World markets (discussed briefly in Ramamurthy’s Feminist Commodity Chain analysis), DIY crafters who use materials manufactured in industrial settings, and DIYers who are not driven by the ethos of locally produced goods (such as entrepreneurs working on a smaller scale - who perhaps hold

aspirations toward mass production). DIY histories strategically disregard the Others who produce, consume or differently-resist the crafted commodities that DIYers position themselves above and against. The DIYer as a political subject emerges out of these highly productive narrative omissions that are also entirely necessary for elevating the status and value of DIY goods.

Take figure 4, two nearly identical necklaces, one sold by Urban Outfitters and the other by designer, Stevie Koerner, on Etsy: an online marketplace for independently produced handmade goods (with over 200 million members and annual sales of over \$700 million in 2012). The controversy over Urban Outfitters' pilfering of this design from an independent, self-employed designer initially ignited on Koerner's blog, in which she accused Urban Outfitters of not only stealing the design of the necklace but also its name and other copy. Koerner called her necklace "I heart Texas" and touted it as a way to "wear your love". Urban Outfitters labeled them "I Heart Destination Necklaces" and described the jewelry as a way to "wear your locale love."³¹ The story circulated to such an extent that it was picked up by the Washington Post. As

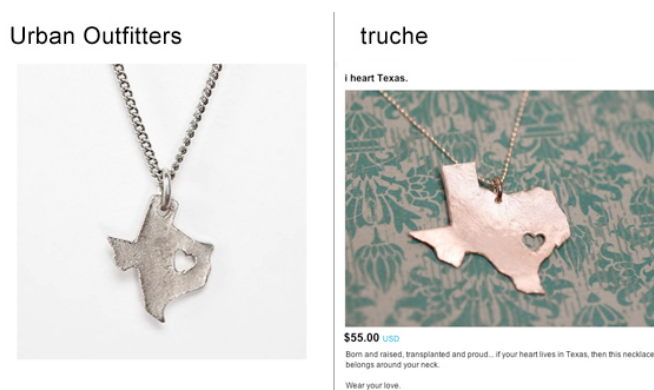


Figure 4: "Urban Outrage" from regretsy.com

³¹ See also the variety of websites dedicated to exposing the pilfering of indie/DIY designs by corporations such as Urban Outfitters, H&M and Anthropologie such as Regretsy's "Etsy or Anthropologie" www.regretsy.com/2011/01/19/new-game or the theft by Urban Outfitters of a DIY design (that is not so original, after all), <http://consumerist.com/2011/05/31/jewelry-design-urban-outfitters-allegedly-stole-not-all-that-original-actually> and blogs.villagevoice.com/runninscared/2010/05/are_brooklyn_fa.php.

this case demonstrates, mass-produced (but still handcrafted) objects are often aesthetically indistinguishable from DIY, further emphasizing the centrality of DIY's value-creating narratives.

The Decomposition and Recomposition of Gender in DIY's Strange Alignment with a Feminist Commodity Chain Analysis

Narratives of DIY and other “authentic” handcrafted goods do the work to distinguish genuine DIY from counterfeit handcrafted items in order to elevate the status and value of DIY goods. To highlight this process, I borrow elements from Priti Ramamurthy's feminist commodity chain analysis (FCCA) as a means to consider how waged and unwaged feminized, “domestic” crafting labor, performed in the informal sector is situated in DIY narratives. I also consider how DIY narratives do and don't consider longer historical narratives of crafting and larger processes of globalization. Ramamurthy clarifies relationships between gender, race, and the economy to analyze how the decomposition and recomposition of gender as well as the productive elision of race and global systems of labor in DIY narratives allows craftivism to happen. This sort of attention to domestic labor, the economy, and the commodity typically emerges out of sociology, anthropology or economics. However, I take a cue from Ramamurthy that commodities are not just objects that mechanically accrue value as they move along the chain of production, but a series of relations that constitute subjects in the process of production and consumption.³² As shown above, DIY narratives often foreground how production figures

³² Literary scholar have made this observation as well - such as Lisa Lowe who writes in “Decolonization, Displacement, Disidentification: Writing and the Question of History,” “Social

prominently in subject formation when they praise the community of crafters created through online and in-person networking that is organized around the sharing of craft skills and/or commerce. For instance, Levine writes in her preface, “the featured makers and essayists are only a small fraction of those who make our community tick, but they show that DIY is not only a term we use, but a lifestyle we live” (xi). The innumerable DIY-oriented publications, blogs, instructional websites, craft fairs and online marketplaces attest to the power of DIY production and consumption to build networks, communities and individual identities. This observation is so commonplace it has become cliché. Aligning the concept of a DIY lifestyle with the observations of the FCCA both recognizes the overuse of these sentiments while also taking them seriously as value and identity-creating cultural narratives.

FCCA builds on this recognition in a more precise and theoretical way. Ramamurthy interrogates the role of production in subject formation in order to “[question] ways of knowing that assume reality is completely knowable and thus explainable through empirical analysis” (738). Accordingly, she asserts that one must account for the cultural dimension of commodities in order to avoid the temptation to attend only to “real” lives, missing the complex and contradictory ways in which these lives are imagined by those who produce (and consume) the commodities under examination. I appropriate Ramamurthy’s privileging of this cultural dimension to assert that since handmade goods produced in a DIY or a sweatshop context often cannot be distinguished through empirical analysis (as in figure 4), DIY narratives already understand and exploit the cultural and imagined dimensions of these commodities. As such, the cultivation of an extensive and unified body of narratives that attest to the virtues of purchasing

space contains a great diversity of objects, and these objects are not merely things but also relations” (121).

DIY goods is an essential node in the chain of production and value creation for DIY and other non-industrial handcrafted goods.

Like the commodity chain analysis developed by World Systems theorists, FCCA is built around close attention to labor and its products. Feminist scholars such as Priti Ramamurthy, Wilma Dunaway and others take up the commodity chain analysis in order to note the many ways women's labors: domestic, informal and unpaid, are not accounted for in a standard commodity chain analysis.³³ In her article, "Why Is Buying a 'Madras' Cotton Shirt a Political Act? A Feminist Commodity Chain Analysis," Ramamurthy argues that the realist commodity chain analysis, does not adequately consider women's labor in the international division of labor. Ramamurthy takes a 1995 Lands' End Direct Merchant catalog (discussed earlier) as an opportunity to read a much different narrative than that intended by Lands' End. The text is written in a journalistic form, telling stories of the men and women who construct the mass-produced clothing featured in the catalog. Like *Handmade Nation*, the catalog seeks to construct a geographically dispersed community of makers in order to promote and celebrate their labors. Ramamurthy stresses that any analysis of how commodities function, circulate and collect value must recognize the "complicity of other discourses to processes of capital accumulation," which is a key element of her critique and feminist revision (741).

"Other discourses," for Ramamurthy, appear in sites such as the catalog, in which she is able to demonstrate how gendering occurs "within and through the process of production" and "constantly articulates with other social striations" (741). While DIY often professes to respond to and intervene in the mainstream corporate (global) commodity chain, Ramamurthy's FCCA

³³ These labors may, indeed, be performed by men but are historically relegated as labor befitting of women: a point that Ramamurthy does not explore in detail, in this piece, but is important to note.

helps to locate how DIY actually fully participates in imperialist modes of production and consumption. Locating DIY as a market subjectivity has strong implications for the participant-theorists of craftivism who see themselves as antagonistic to the global, capitalist, mainstream mode of production, since their claim to operate outside of it is precisely what allows consumers to “feel good about” their purchases. Consider this statement by Annie Mohaupt, a Chicago-based cobbler featured in *Handmade Nation*, “I think people want things that are unique. As the world becomes more and more homogenous, handmade things become more precious. Also, as people become more aware of issues like the environment, worker’s rights, and toxic ingredients or materials in products, they are more drawn to artisan-made goods, which are purchases they can feel good about” (80).

The FCCA encourages a rethinking of the global commodity chain analysis that has allowed Ramamurthy to “address concerns with the uneven impacts of neoliberalism on women’s livelihoods in India and with U.S. gender and race inequality ... [while maintaining a] commitment to anti-imperialist genealogies and politics of representation that does not collapse difference through binary analytics and naturalized moralities” (738). On the other hand, statements like Mohaupt’s reproduce binary analytics where handmade is only artisan-made and never factory produced. In Mohaupt’s version, all DIY products are precious, unique, morally-virtuous. They never use toxic ingredients nor do they participate in exploitative labor practices or environmental degradation. On the other hand, every factory-made item is presumed to commit all of these offenses (and worse). As I will show, concerns and commitments analogous to Ramamurthy’s often fall out of DIY narratives— in particular the articulation of gender with other power relations - especially those related to race. What I find especially important about Ramamurthy’s analysis is the way in which she is able to locate and connect the uneven effects

of the global commodity chain in disparate sites through a reading of the Lands' End catalog. In this reading she challenges economic and productivist readings of commodity flows to show, instead how commodities are “constituted materially and culturally” (750).³⁴

The central irony of putting Ramamurthy together with DIY narratives is the way in which craftivist (as well as broader DIY narratives) *do* attend to female-led patterns of production as well as the process by which commodities circulate. I juxtapose each of Ramamurthy's four main arguments about women's labor and the global commodity chain to the claims made about DIY and crafting subjects. First, Ramamurthy asserts that globalization is not merely “trade-led” (as World Systems Theorists contend) but, rather, is a “female-led” pattern of industrialization. Secondly, even while many now agree that “the global labor process has become feminized,” that the characteristics once used to identify “women's work”: “irregularity, casualization, [and] insecurity” now apply to a much broader spectrum of globalized labor (including labor not performed by women), the realist commodity chain analysis has yet to “fruitfully” incorporate this development into their analytic (740). Third, Ramamurthy suggests more attention to “how states and multinational corporations use gender ideologies to further export-oriented economic strategies” – in some instances “recomposing” gender ideologies and in others decomposing them to suit the needs at hand (740). Finally, a feminist revision to the realist commodity chain analysis would attend to the importance of “the household as an institution critical to the new international organization of production” (740). Ramamurthy's FCCA locates the critical importance of considering women's labor on an international scale and so provides a number of insights into processes of gendering and racialization in DIY narratives

³⁴ Ramamurthy continues, “The close reading of the catalog of a U.S. multinational corporation demonstrates that the global commodity chain is not linear, unidirectional, and closed; it is constantly opened-up and refracted even as it weaves subjects from a range of social positions and locations into the fabric of consent” (750).

of production and consumption. It also allows for insight into the ways that commodities and crafting subjects operate both as materials and as signs.

Like the FCCA, DIY narratives exhibit a keen awareness of women's labor - in ways that a realist commodity chain analysis does not. They are attentive to female-led industries; they comprehend the irregularity, casualization and insecurity of crafting as "women's work"; they too manipulate gender ideologies; and they account for the importance of the household as an institution in the world of production. The product of these strategies is just that: a product with value that is buttressed by its connections to female-led industry, "women's work," and the household. Further, these products are not merely the objects DIYers create and sell, but also the DIY and craftivist subjects themselves.³⁵ Greer's craftivism and Dormody's concern for global and local economic issues demonstrate an awareness of economic inequality and also aspire to some form of societal change via crafting. That these upbeat narratives about DIY products are bound up in the very processes they seek to resist, demonstrates not just a complicity with capital accumulation (as Adamson, Dawkins and others observe) but also the complexity of DIY as an identity category.

Thus, when *Handmade Nation* expresses a "cultural politics of labor's visibility" (Ramamurthy 750) that is raced and gendered and that brings people into conversation with each other, it does so by describing a greatly abbreviated commodity chain that articulates only one or two nodes in a much longer chain. The intentionality of this abbreviation emerges in Dormody's assertion that "you don't want to imagine" what labor was like in other places or, when Mohaupt writes that with "less than two percent of shoes that Americans buy" being made in America,

³⁵ For more on this phenomenon, although not directly related to DIY, see Zygmunt Bauman's *Consuming Life*. Glenn Adamson also writes disparagingly of Tracy Emin's art as "[replicating] her self as a highly successful commodity" (161).

“most of [the shoes] are made in China, where you don’t know what the working conditions are” (Levine and Heimerl 80). At other times, the condensed and partial nature of the DIY commodity chain is quite hidden. For example, in the preface to *Handmade Nation* Faythe Levine writes, “I have documented a community of artists, crafters, makers, organizers, critics, curators, cultural theorists, and historians who work together to nurture entrepreneurialism, preserve feminine heritage, and wield great economic power” (x). The list seems complete; containing those who produce the items (artists, crafters, makers), those who create the sites for commodity exchange (organizers, curators) and even a category for theorists and historians who will analyze these goods in their writing (a category of which Levine is a part). And yet, a very quick survey of the crafters in *Handmade Nation* reveals that, while they do each create their commodities by hand, they source materials from a dizzying array of sites, locating each crafter solidly within a global commodity chain – of which many sectors have not been accounted for in this volume.

For instance, Emily Kircher and Melissa Detlaff both utilize discarded or recycled items in their products: fabric recycled from old bathrobes, linens and t-shirts; bottle caps; pictures from children’s books; and thrifted T-shirts. Their recycling utterly depends upon the waste and excess of capitalist exchange – especially flowing from the big box retailers (Wal-Mart, Target, The Dollar Store, etc.) that are so offensive to DIY crafters. And yet, this indispensable node in the indie craft commodity chain is largely unexplored in *Handmade Nation* and similar publications. The FCCA helps to open up these foreshortened representations of the global commodity chain, exploring more fully how gender and race work together to create value for the objects in this catalog-like anthology.

Viewed from the perspective of the FCCA, the vast majority of DIY celebrations of female-led transformations in labor are revealed to be naïve (at best) and exploitative (at worst).

These statements convey how gender ideologies are decomposed and recomposed in order to position DIY as a testament to the success of feminism by making gender a specific focus of many of these discourses. In Faythe Levine’s preface she relies heavily on a gendered vocabulary of proper feminine etiquette and behavior in which crafters are praised for their capacity to “share,” “motivate,” “give back” and “nurture entrepreneurialism [while] preserv[ing] feminine heritage” (x-xi). This collection of verbs evokes ideologies of ideal womanhood in which women are instructed (and expected) to foster nurturing, non-competitive, selfless behavior. Thus, when Levine writes that “new community members are always greeted with nurturing and encouraging words, advice on running a business, and tutorials on how to get started with a project” (x – xi) and or “It [the DIY community] is a labor of love, appreciation, and respect” (xi) she draws upon nostalgia for normative femininity to build her appeal. In turn, she governs those who seek to be included in this DIY community.³⁶

While these statements adhere to and reproduce a constellation of gender norms they are also said to be linked to feminism and progressive politics by Levine and others – as in Levine’s statement, “Our handmade goods were influenced by traditional handiwork, modern aesthetics, politics, feminism, and art. We were redefining what craft was and making it our own” (ix).

Similarly, Bratich and Brush argue that “fabriculture,” or the recent resurgence of interest in domestic craft – primarily by young women,

complicates conventional notions of activism, *especially regarding gendered politics*.

Craft-work’s communal quality, reconfiguration of time, and reappropriation of spaces provide a rich tapestry for rethinking contemporary activism... Finally, it is tied to a

³⁶ I utilize normative to describe, in the words of Judith Butler, “the mundane violence performed by certain kind of gender ideals” (*Gender Trouble* XX).

broader DIY culture and an activist community in a way that spatially and analogically links experiments in making futures differently (234, emphasis added).

In some ways Bratich and Brush reverse the logic of Levine's nostalgia as they attempt to unhinge many of the binaries that have typically defined craft work. They write,

The resurgence of craft culture thus pushes us to rethink a number of basic bifurcations: a space divided into private/public, a time divided into past/ present, and a technology divided into old/new. Crafting foregrounds and hooks together other binaries, as well (masculine/feminine, technology/ craft, folk/popular, production/reproduction, innovation/repetition, amateur/professional, network/web, art/craft, teacher/student, and producer/ consumer). (255)

And yet, this list of "basic bifurcations" also seems to reinforce gendered norms.³⁷

Additionally, the value-making function of these discourses disallow them from discussing a chain of production in which the craftivist practice of "help[ing] bring about positive change via personalized activism" might be implicated in global processes of capitalist accumulation or neoliberal personhood (Greer). Instead, activities such as "advocating the use of creativity for the improvement of the world [by] sew[ing] scarves for battered women's shelters, and [making] knitted hats for chemotherapy patients" construct a moral global identity in which

³⁷ Less nostalgic work on craft and gender is suggested in Lacey Jane Roberts' essay, "Put Your Thing Down, Flip It and Reverse It: Reimagining Craft Identities Using Tactics of Queer Theory," in which they argue that the application of queer theories can be useful in making virtues of craft's perceived limitations. Roberts turns to queer theory for its "tactics of reclamation, reappropriation, and disidentification" that "give non-normative identities agency as well as question the seemingly stable systems that render them as other" (245). Roberts continues, "These tactics acknowledge stereotypes, transpose them, and then subvert them to form new models of identity" (Roberts 245).

the production and consumption of craftivist goods have only a positive effect on a variety of causes.³⁸

Thus, DIY aligns with what media and communication theorists have called a “postfeminist culture” that “works in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism; crucially, it also works to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer.”³⁹ In this assertion I align with Dawkins’ assessment of Handmade Detroit as forwarding a neoliberal politics through the intersection of postfeminist ethos and DIY communities. Dawkins, importantly, follows Rosalind Gilk in asserting that “rather than an epistemological position or historical shift, it seems more fruitful to situate postfeminism or postfemininity in terms of sensibilities or subjectivity; at the core of this sensibility are “notions of choice, of ‘being oneself’ and ‘pleasing oneself’” (276). Which is to say that the feminism referenced in many DIY narratives is essentially a neoliberal sensibility cloaked in (an essentialized) female empowerment and entrepreneurialism.

For instance, Railla writes in *Craft* Volume 1, “By leveling the playing field between men and women (at least at the bottom rungs of the work-force), feminism opened the door for all of us to value typically feminine art forms” (10). Here, “value” should be read as locating not only a greater status for these art forms but also as an expression of their monetary worth - elevated by Railla’s connection to the “success” of feminism. Similarly, in their section on “Politics and the Popular,” Bratich and Brush disavow the extent to which crafting labor is

³⁸ craftivism.com

³⁹ (Tasker and Negra 2). See recent writing on postfeminism, such as Yvonne Tasker and Diana Negra’s “Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture” and other work in media studies, communication. This concept applies to craft but is seldom considered in this realm as most writing focuses on popular culture such as film, literature – especially “chick lit,” and music – girl groups. One exception is Dawkins’ article, “Do-It-Yourself: The Precarious Work and Postfeminist Politics of Handmaking (in) Detroit.”

incorporated in capitalist enterprise (despite an earlier recognition of this feature⁴⁰) in order to argue for craftivism's strength in resisting both capitalism and patriarchy. All the while, they participate in the project of augmenting the (exchange) value of craft objects by projecting these items as feminist and radically anti-capitalist. In this section, I have mostly discussed what is said and written about DIY in regards to the way in which gender is produced as a means to augment the value of DIY goods. In order to assess the racialized constructions of difference that overlap with and participate in this gendering, I shift my reading practice to what is not or cannot be said by or about these crafting subjects.

“Crafting” DIY’s Other Out of the Global Wage Laborer

Craftivism is a way of looking at life where voicing opinions through creativity makes your voice stronger, your compassion deeper and your quest for justice more infinite.
Betsy Greer, “Craftivism definition” from craftivism.com

According to a report of the global garment industry by the Clean Clothes Campaign, “almost universally it was women making clothes under bad conditions” in locations such as the Philippines, Indonesia, India and China. With the informalization of the global economy – of which Ramamurthy writes – this work is becoming even more difficult to track, as laboring by hand is increasing performed in the home as “homework” or piece work.⁴¹ For these women, making items by hand is a means of subsistence and possibly also a form of leisure. As I began to discuss in relation to Chakrabarty’s distinction between dominant History and subaltern histories, the complex realities and cultural constructions of wage-laboring workers in the global craft industry are written out of DIY history. As a part of this process, the over-employed, under-

⁴⁰ They state at the beginning of this section, “It would be the height of banality to say that the resurgence of craft culture has been commodified” (246).

⁴¹ “Made by Women” from the Maquila Solidarity Network

paid sweatshop laborer (both at home and abroad and predominantly a person of color) becomes the unspoken Other looming over these breathless tributes to DIY.

In these discourses, gender ideologies are composed in such a way as to make female-dominated industry exceptional. As Jean Railla writes in “The Punk of Craft,”

This ethic, this DIY approach, makes crafting so appealing to hipsters (for lack of a better word). There is something decidedly anti-authority in dumpster diving or knitting in an era where cheap goods can be acquired easily, and corporate cultural and rampant consumerism are on the rise. In the age of hypermaterialism, Paris Hilton, and thousand-dollar ‘It’ bags, perhaps making stuff is the ultimate form of rebellion.

From the more comprehensive vantage of the global division of labor, DIY is not extraordinary in the way Railla and others describe it as a female-led industry (rebellious and empowering).

Rather, DIY’s whiteness is what makes it uncommon in a global context where a female-dominated industries that wield great economic power are largely comprised of wage-laboring women of color in or from developing countries who make handmade items for the corporate machines that DIY rails against. Viewed from a perspective that comprehends what “female dominated” industry actually connotes in a global context, the DIY industry (largely composed of middle-class white women in the United States) is exemplary less as a form of rebellion or empowerments and moreso as a female-led industry that is predominantly white.

By way of contrast, Stephanie Syjuco, creator of the now-defunct clothing line “Anti-Factory” makes a more explicit reference to the global commodity chain than most DIYers. She writes in her interview from in *Handmade Nation*,

Anti-Factory has the tag line “Because Sweatshops Suck,” I use that line because it’s straightforward and it automatically positions Anti-Factory as having a political stance as

well as a creative stance. When I looked at other people who were making clothing and affiliating with the craft scene, they sometimes talked about politics on a subconscious level, but they didn't necessarily state their ideas up front. I wanted to make mine apparent. Because each item is unique and handmade, it goes against the grain of mass manufactured products (144).

Additionally, in an interview with *Bust Magazine* she explains, "Being from the Philippines, it's a chilling idea to me that in another life I could have wound up on the production end of my own consumerism."⁴² Even while she presents a wider comprehension of the global commodity chain – perhaps resulting from a more situated knowledge in which she has had first hand contact with women who work in factories in the Philippines - her statement does not deviate significantly from the dominant ways "craftivists" understand their own activism. She displays an awareness of the presence of sweatshops but appears to mention them primarily to augment the value of her own products. Overall, the *Handmade Nation* anthology demonstrates a number of Ramamurthy's arguments through a partial representation of the craftivist commodity chain. As I discussed in the previous section, DIY labor is feminized and discussed in a way that represents it as a female-dominated industry. Syjuco's narrative deviates in that she focuses more on the global nature of the DIY commodity chain, but still within a simplified framework of third world producers and first world consumers.

In these narratives DIY's Other is a laborer whose hands cut, assemble, sew and press the "unethically" produced commodities that Greer, Syjuco and Railla resist with their DIY versions of hand-made goods. These overseas and immigrant laborers (and even their American-born daughters who help them meet deadlines or perform other domestic labor that enables their

⁴² Johnson, Stephanie, "Designing Women," *BUST* magazine, Fall Fashion issue, August, 2006.

parents to work longer and later) work for the “not-so-savory” companies whose conspicuous branding has inspired Greer's craftivism. But what do we get, ultimately, from these moves to expose DIY's underbelly - especially when it's apparent that DIYers like Syjuco are aware of but also benefit from the labors of DIY's Others?

I borrow from bell hooks' 1995 essay, “Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance” to consider the Othering produced in DIY narratives. hooks begins with the assertion that, within debates about race and difference, mass culture “both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgment and enjoyment of racial difference” (21). Produced in the context of the mid-1990s celebrations of multiculturalism (of which hooks is critical), this essay has re-emerged as a touchstone for thinking about contemporary post-racial discourse in the United States. As Minh-ha T. Pham writes, one in which “race is simultaneously articulated through and disavowed by discourses of class, culture, patriotism, national security, talent, and, in the case of fashion, creative license.” Pham references hooks to think about how one model's defense of eye-taping (“to transform is the greatest part of my work,” according to Renn) is not a benign form of creative transformation but rather, an example of yellow face. Renn's creative transformation is “is conditioned by its proximation to racial otherness.” Pham continues,

and yet the language of creative license denies race as a driving and organizing factor in this transformation, it denies both her racial privilege as well as the eye-taping technique as a common cultural practice of racism. This kind of post-racial consumption of race in which the historical violence of racial difference makes no difference at all denies the ongoing reality of racism in the age of postracism. It is conditioned by the many

privileges of whiteness (first and foremost among these privileges, a racially unmarked body).⁴³

While I focus on DIYers who are not overtly concerned with questions of race and difference, their inattention actually emphasizes the importance of hooks' essay as the way in which Otherness and desire for it operate covertly is very much a part of hooks' thesis (a feature that Pham highlights above). hooks writes, "Currently, the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization" (412). I conclude with hooks as her analysis turns upon the themes of decontextualization from Ramamurthy as well as the denial of subaltern histories from Chakrabarty. hooks vets examples in film, advertising, and fiction of the many ways that racial difference is made palatable, "safe," and desirable when signs of difference (kente cloth, dreads) are evacuated of their history and fashioned into consumable objects. DIYers and their various Others - in tandem with the products they create - operate similarly but with some important differences.

DIY's Other takes on a variety of forms: the consumer of mass-produced goods, the producer of these goods as well as activists who protest these objects and the means by which they were produced with "banners and chanting".⁴⁴ I focus on DIY's Other who also produces hand-made goods, but ones that are emphatically not DIY. That DIY's Other is multiple and confounds simple categorization indicates the potential richness of a wider do-it-yourself crafting subjectivity.

⁴³ Minh-ha T. Pham, "Unintentionally Eating the Other,"

⁴⁴ Greer, craftivism.com

DIY's wage-laboring Other is denied a history and decontextualized by DIYers such as those women participating in the Handmade Detroit faire that Dawkins analyzes in her study. Upon explaining that "a number of the forty-some crafters" held full or part time jobs in the service or information sectors (as bartenders, nannies or social media coordinators at advertising agencies), Dawkins writes, "crafters seem to desire the bodily and material labor involved in, for example, spinning raw wool into yarn or knitting yarn into mittens" (272).⁴⁵ Dawkins then turns to Sabrina Gschwandtner (author of *KnitKnit*, a "new-wave" knitting zine) to argue as many others also have, "that the knitting resurgence reveals that despite our dependence on the Internet, 'we are still sensual beings' who desire 'a tactile relationship to the world'." (272). Another quote from a "maker of sculptural beads from suburban Detroit" further illustrates this point, "making things by hand is important 'because it provides a link to the past and keeps us human in these technologically suffocating times'." (272) As these narratives accumulate, they erase the millions of women (as well as men and children) worldwide who still do labor with their hands as their primary means of employment - very much a "bodily and material labor" that "fosters a tactile relationship to the world" but perhaps better described as dehumanizing rather than keeping them human. The looming (and unspoken) presence of so many workers making objects by hand (that are not considered to be handmade, as are the products featured in *Handmade Nation*) allows leisure crafting in the U.S. to occupy an elevated position among other consumer goods. At a fictional location both outside of and against the wage labor system, handcrafting as leisure, as well as handcrafting as wage labor and as work, are all racially-inflected categories in DIY's epistemology.

⁴⁵ One might explore this further by asking how the "bodily and material" labors of bartending and nannying differ from the equally tactile relationships fostered through spinning wool and knitting.

In Deb Dormody's narrative about the intersection of DIY commodities with mass-produced goods (explored above in relation to a generalized history) laborers in sites of mass production are described only as "foreign," refusing them a name, location or history. She concedes that someone "concerned about global economy issues" can "guess... what work was like," but you "don't want to think about it" (10). In doing so, Dormody actively denies DIY's Other a context (ambiguously "foreign") and history ("you don't want to think about it") in a way that demonstrates that she both "knows" the Other and uses this knowledge to recode industrial commodities for her own purposes. Dormody also suggests that many different desires are satiated by this Other. hooks' essay focuses on the pursuit of pleasure and enjoyment from contact with the Other. Clearly Dormody would not exact pleasure from actual contact with these workers. And yet, perhaps due to the influence of the craftivism strain of DIY, Dormody feels obliged to address these workers and the vaguely described "global economy issues" associated with them.

Even without direct contact, there is pleasure to be found in an abbreviated knowledge of the wage-laboring Other to DIY. For hooks, the "commoditization of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling" (366). In DIY narratives, the wage-laboring Other creates the conditions for DIY exchange to be understood as "authentic" and "personal." DIY becomes a more desirable mode of commerce - something to "feel good" about - only by referencing other modes of production, labor and exchange against which it can be leveraged (10). According to Dormody, DIY crafters, "[keep] the local economy strong," produce goods that are "authentic and personal," and allow the consumer a more desirable "personal interaction" (10). The wage-laboring Other here functions to establish Dormody's social justice credentials as she professes

her concern for “global economy issues” and ostensibly provides a means to address them: the production and consumption of DIY goods. In this process, Dormody is commoditized as well.⁴⁶ She produces herself as an object of exchange by imbuing DIY goods with her “personal interaction” making them “authentic” and more desirable than the anonymous goods produced by nameless foreigners. I do not intend to argue here for the virtues of sweatshop labor or the myriad items produced in this context. Rather, I would like to call attention to the way in which Dormody recodes these workers, their labors and the objects they produce to say nothing of them and everything about DIY.

For those DIY-ers or “craftivists” who desire actual contact with the other it is most certainly not the direct, sexual contact that hooks explores in her essay. In hooks’ assessment, from the standpoint of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy, the hope is that desires for the ‘primitive’ or fantasies about the Other can be continually exploited and will occur in a manner that reinscribes and maintains the status quo” (367). In short, contact with the Other is desirable in large part for the way in which it does not disrupt power structures that are already in place. Contact with the Other (whether physical or rhetorical) is sought for the purposes of enjoyment and personal transformation, not to remake the social or political landscape. Just as Pham draws on hooks to locate a contemporary “post-racial consumption of race in which the historical violence of racial difference makes no difference at all [and] denies the ongoing reality of racism in the age of postracism,” so can hooks help to locate how DIY’s knowledge and creation of a gendered and racialized sweatshop Other builds DIY as an identity category that offers a mode of self-transformation alongside its promises of social change.

⁴⁶ As in Zygmunt Bauman’s *Consuming Life*

Thus, it is possible for DIYers who occupy the role of charitably helping “less-fortunate” Others to perform a type of activism merged with crafting. Certainly Greer’s fantasies about the Other are exploited through DIY, as in the following excerpt from her definition of craftivism, “Through activities such as teaching knitting lessons, crocheting hats for the less fortunate, and sewing blankets for abandoned animals, craftivism allows for creativity to expand previous boundaries and enter the arena of activism.” Her ability to be a “craftivist” hinges on both an Other to help (the “less fortunate” and abandoned animals both occupy this category here) and a “traditional” activist whose practices Greer can critique and revise. Towards the end of her definition Greer writes, “In promoting the idea that people can use their own creativity to improve the world, craftivism allows those who wish to voice their opinions and support their causes the chance to do just that...but without chanting or banner waving and at their own pace.”⁴⁷

Contrary to Greer’s stated goals, these encounters are not likely to “start a revolution.” As in hooks, Greer’s encounter with both the activist Other and the “less fortunate” Other is actually meant to leave Greer herself transformed. hooks writes,

The point is to be changed by this convergence of pleasure and Otherness. One dares – acts – on the assumption that the exploration into the world of difference, into the body of the Other, will provide a greater, more intense pleasure than any that exists in the ordinary world of one’s familiar racial group. And even though the conviction is that the familiar world will remain intact even as one ventures outside it, the hope is that they will reenter that world no longer the same. (369)

⁴⁷ craftivism.com

In her definition of craftivism, Greer reveals that her version of activism is based primarily on personal change, stating, “I could start to change my life and make smarter choices... and slowly change my life” (90). She writes later, “Every day can be lived as a testament to our beliefs and ideals, every day can be our own political march. Every act we can change and revise to better align with our conscience is an activist act, as it is making a step toward a more positive environment” (91). Just as DIY’s wage-laboring Other (who may also be this “less-fortunate” Other given the inadequate wages paid to factory workers world-wide) appears in DIY narratives in order to construct the DIY subject, so does an over-simplified version of the activist Other. The simplification and commoditization of Otherness leaves the DIY subject changed and enhanced: creating her social justice credentials and allowing for the construction of the postfeminist, “craftivist” subject. Greer and other craftivists recode the activist subject and industrial commodities in constructing an identity category that offers opportunities for self-transformation, artistic expression and feel-good consumerism.

In these narratives DIY’s racialized Other appears to exist only outside of the boundaries of the U.S. However, she exists and at times appears in DIY narratives in a domestic context as well. For the crafters at Handmade Detroit an inquiry into the absence of crafters of color in the midst of a city where over 80% of urban residents are black elicits both confusion and justification for racial exclusion based on aesthetic criteria. When Dawkins interviewed organizers of the Detroit Urban Craft Faire and Handmade Detroit they willingly acknowledged that “almost all” of the vendors and most of the attendants were white. This seemed a mystery to them as they professed to have judged all submissions to the show in the same (colorblind) way. And yet, Chloe Vousden readily identified that some submissions had “obvious ethnicity in them” while also denying that the “ethnicity” of the maker influenced their selection process

stating, “it’s not as if they were sending in head shots with their applications” (Dawkins 268). Dawkins writes, “clearly what she perceived to be signifiers of ethnicity stood out among the seemingly racially unmarked work of white crafters” (268). Others mirrored this sentiment such as Allison Davey who explained, “although black crafters have applied to be in their show, ‘their aesthetic doesn’t fit in’ because ‘aesthetically, indie craft is very white’” (268).

The “white aesthetic” of DIY is described by Dawkins as a “hard-to-pin-down” and “often characterized by a sense of irony and irreverence that self-consciously subvert ‘traditional’ craft styles and forms” (268-269). True to its name, here *do-it-yourself* “privileges individualism and the assertion of creative authorship” (Dawkins 269). The subverted racial bias and racial exclusion evinced by Handmade Detroit aligns with Dormody’s aversion to contact with DIY’s Other. Instead of occupying the privileged position of willingly not thinking about labor exploitation of women of color worldwide, the DIYers organizing and participating in Handmade Detroit avert contact with a domestic DIY crafting Other by adhering to and promoting a racially-exclusive white aesthetic.

This aesthetic is dominant in *Handmade Nation* as well. Of the DIYers profiled, 28 out of 30 appear to be white (and all but one of these crafters are women). Of graphic representations of people in the DIY commodities themselves, 50% are people of color and all of them are women. Upon noting that 91% of her respondents self-identified as white or “Caucasian” Dawkins asked the DIYers to explain the lack of diversity in their community. A few responders located that there “a certain kind of luxury implicit in having the time, resources, and social capital needed not only to make things but to produce a particular aesthetic or marketable product” (267). One respondent offered a particularly vivid and self-aware definition of DIY, “Oh yes, its white kids who have the luxury of DIY. Most of the Black community has been DIY out of necessity for

years here. Drinking out of a jelly jar because you don't have dishes is poverty. Drinking out of a jelly jar with a cute decoupage picture of a robot because you are privileged enough to differentiate between a store-bought branded set of dishes is DIY". Dawkins continues, "For this respondent, the ability to choose and distinguish between making something out of necessity and making as part of a larger aesthetic or moral calling was a matter of (white) privilege and of cultural capital" (267 - 268).

In Dawkins' study as well as my own, historically-situated DIY narratives that exhibit some consciousness of race and racial oppression are the exception. As such, this example indicates different possibilities within the epistemology of DIY as well as DIY as an identity category. Typically, DIY narratives are received as one of three options. They either seek contact with DIY's racialized Other as a means of self-transformation. Or, they mention this Other (but avoid contact) in order to augment DIY's value as a morally-superior consumer object. Or, they draw on racial difference as a means to collate a particular white aesthetic, or to add "flavor" and "spice" (to reference hooks) to DIY goods. An example of this third move is the yarn-bombing project previously known as "Knitta Please," which included craftivists working under aliases such as "P-Knitty." Magda Sayeg, founder of this knit graffiti project was forced to change her alias to "Knitta" and alter her web domain to "knittaporfavor" in 2009 after a number of crafters of color raised issue with the racial connotations of the (predominantly white) group's name.⁴⁸ Examples like this undoubtedly contribute to Roberts' assertion that "craft must realize that in comparison to other circles of visual and material culture, it is a largely conservative and homogenous body" (187). If this is true, it certainly would result in what Dawkins refers to as a "white aesthetic" as well as situations in which crafters take liberties with racially-inflected

⁴⁸ See "The Elephant in the Room" at <http://rifferraft.typepad.com/make_it/2009/12/the-elephant-in-the-room.html>.

cultural references to build an urban and hip identity (as in “Knitta Please”). According to Lacey Jane Roberts, “Its [DIY’s] insularity has contributed to incredibly homogenous demographics and lacks the more diverse configurations of identity present in other areas of material and visual culture” (187). Here I feel that Roberts over-extends their analysis since “other areas of material and visual culture” is an impossibly broad category. Further, if one were to make this a more specific analysis, racial and gender diversity wane in any category of the fine arts as one moves up the hierarchy of professionalization and prestige (a analysis that is foundational to both second and third wave feminist art critics). This is especially apparent when critics attempt to examine the aesthetics of DIY.

In this chapter I have largely ignored the aesthetics of DIY – the very category that most catalogs of art and craft use as their guiding principle. Dawkins explains her focus on narrative over aesthetics by stating that DIY lets go of concerns about quality and skill in order to foreground the “‘unique’ connection between individual acts of creation and the transformation of self, city, and social world” (263). In her explanation, also seen throughout *Handmade Nation*, DIY is a significant and unique area of inquiry for the way it is “positioned as an inherently moral and meaningful practice” even though it frequently devolves into an “uncritical celebration of crafting as the means and ends of socioeconomic transformation” (Dawkins 263). Thus, aesthetics (usually the primary focus in writings about craft and especially assessments of their value in evaluations of traditional craft work) are positioned as secondary to the ethical and transformative appeal of DIY objects/commodities.

By contrast, Glenn Adamson and other craft historians very much privilege aesthetic analysis in their treatment of craft. The visual and tactile properties of a craft object are usually a primary focus in writings about craft, especially when assessing their value. And yet, an aesthetic

analysis of DIY does not appear in his work either. If DIY narratives see only the virtue and political potential of crafting as a means of countering mainstream consumerism (however misguided), Adamson, in his chapter on the amateur unwaveringly argues that hobby craft (of which he would include DIY) is completely integrated into larger structures of capitalist ideology - particularly *when* they believe themselves to be “exercising creativity” or creating something “more authentic than what is found at the local mall” (140). In this, his final chapter in *Thinking Through Craft*, Adamson understands amateur as a category as well as a rhetorical technique in craft locating it as a “conceptual structure in which craft’s marginalization has been consciously put to use” (4).

The integration of craft “within larger structures of capitalist ideology” may seem like the same observation as Dawkins, and they would agree that the consumption of DIY products and supplies (even those sourced through recycling) builds new sectors of profit within capitalist industry. Yet, Adamson uses this observation to entirely discredit DIY production as something worthy of inquiry within the realm of craft history. By contrast, Dawkins does not allow the complete integration of DIY in capitalist production to stop her from thinking through the potentials of domestic and “feminized” forms of crafting to still produce many things. Among them, a legitimate site for wider social and political change as well as post-Fordist labor subjectivities that appear to blend labor and leisure: two categories of work – or non-work - with strongly gendered and racialized connotations. Surely this second effect (if not also the first) might also be of interest in Adamson’s “thinking through” craft, particularly as he moves toward theorizing an expanded field of craft. And yet, he writes,

Precisely because they are made so lovingly, homemade crafts betray the degree to which their makers are integrated into the larger structure of capitalist ideology, in which

commodity forms are the primary carriers of meaning. The experience of amateurism may feel like autonomy but in fact nothing could be more predetermined (a fact captured brilliantly by the name of a leading company in the field of how-to advice, ‘Martha Stewart Living’). In this sense too, hobbyism is the antithesis of an avant garde.

(Thinking 140)

Adamson interprets DIY as a form of amateurism fully integrated into the machinations of capitalism and so he passes DIY over as a legitimate site of knowledge production within the field of craft.

Dawkins’ conceptualization of the white aesthetic of DIY, her critical and hopeful stance on the field and Adamson’s inattention to the aesthetic and theoretical merit of DIY bring this chapter to a close by representing two divergent ways of interpreting DIY. I have attempted to occupy a space somewhere both at odds with and in the middle of these analyses by exploring both the extent to which DIY objects, their aesthetic properties, and rhetorically-constructed values are inseparable from the subjects who produce them and also the ways in which DIY can function as an identity category. While the value placed on the handcrafted product created in a factory context often depends utterly upon dislocating the laboring crafter from the object she or he creates, this study of DIY has attempted to demonstrate how the value of DIY goods is greatly augmented as it is positioned above mass-produced goods – both materially and ethically, by the gendered and racialized narratives of the DIY subject.

Conclusion



Figure 5: A pile of threads left over from Anne Elizabeth Moore's "Garment Work."

While mass-manufacturing and artistic crafting (considered here in the form of unraveling and unpicking) are vastly different processes that unfold in dramatically different contexts, "Garment Work" reveals the overlap between them. Through the act of unmaking, [Anne Elizabeth] Moore draws our attention to complexities of production and consumption; in so doing, she asks us to value the labor of the workers who make and sell the garments we buy, and to make informed decisions about the products we consume.

Lisa Vinebaum, "Garment Work: Unpicking the Global Garment Industry"

I conclude with a performance art piece by Anne Elizabeth Moore entitled "Garment Work" that seeks to bridge the apparent gap between the lives of Deb Dormody and "Vadival Mudaliar" from the opening of this chapter. Moore's performances entail the pulling apart of a pair of jeans with her bare hands. Her first manifestation of "Garment Work" was performed in front of a video camera over 36 hours at the Leipziger Baumwollspinnerei, an historic German textile mill. The second piece, performed for 16 days at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, invited audience participation in the deconstruction of another pair of jeans manufactured in Cambodia, where Moore has done extensive work with women in the garment industry through a Fulbright and a subsequent project teaching young women the craft of making 'zines. Each performance concludes with a pile of neatly organized and overwhelmingly tall pile of threads (figure 5). Moore has called "Garment Work" "a meditation on capitalism, integrity, loss, and perseverance" ("Garment Work Preview"). I close with a discussion of Moore's piece in order to consider the limitations of craftivist practices that seek to raise awareness about global labor injustices.

Among the DIY that I have discussed in this chapter Moore's piece is unique as performance art. In this genre, Moore is preceded by other, perhaps more widely known, works such as "The Viral Knitting Project" of Calgary, Canada, and Liz Collins' ten installations of "Knitting Nation." These examples of site-based DIY have occurred in a variety of locations: well-known museums and schools (MoMA New York, The Rhode Island School of Design), DIY gatherings and even anti G-8 protests in Kananaskis and Calgary. They all offer the performance of DIY – often exaggerated as in Moore's refusal of any tools whatsoever (resulting in blistered and bloody fingers) and Collins' use of knitting machines to create giant knitted works such a Pride flag draped over a three story building – as a meditation on current issues relating to textile production world-wide. These performances offer a supplement to and commentary on individual craft practices as they are each situated in public and invite collaboration.

These performance pieces frequently and importantly also incorporate narrative to help bystanders, participants and viewers interpret the works. Moore's installation at MoCA, took place over dialog about the means by which the jeans were initially put together: a factory in Cambodia subcontracted by H&M, the world's second-largest clothing manufacturer. Moore, visitors and museum staff "each contribut[ed] knowledge about the industry, the offshore workers, or local retail labor conditions" (Moore). This dialog helped to situate the project of dissecting a pair of jeans as an artistic process connected to labor conditions both locally and globally. The narrative connected the jeans to labor conditions in local retail (an H&M store is located just around the corner from MoCA) while also evoking the nameless and faceless workers who constructed the jeans overseas. In this way, workers in a global commodity chain are given some history and context. And yet, in one of the most esteemed reviews of this

installation, a piece in *The Journal of Modern Craft*, Moore's work is assessed as "ask[ing] us to value the labor of the workers who make and sell the garments we buy, and to make informed decisions about the products we consume."⁴⁹ An end product of informed consumerism and passively valuing labor re-situates this performance very much within the craftivist ethos and seems to represent the most that craftivism can hope to accomplish. In this instance, narrative both positions Moore's project as potentially breaking out of the craftivist mold (through a dialog that might genuinely contemplate the complexities of global capital and DIY's role in it) while at the same time, firmly resituating it back within a typical and limiting craftivist discourse.

Collins' "Knitting Nation 4" (the pride flag) featured speakers reading from an international Internet poll initiated by Collins that asked. "How do you feel about the rainbow flag?" The public was also invited to reply through an "open-mic event" (Collins). Although "Knitting Nation" professes to be a project that "reconfigures textile fabrication and apparel manufacturing in relation to the human labor behind it, with performance and collectivity as mediating forces" it is less clear how the speakers and open-mic participants contributed to this goal during "Knitting Nation 4" (Collins). As a project that seeks to "[function] as a commentary on how humans interact with machines, global manufacturing, trade and labor, brand iconography, and fashion," simply staging white women operating knitting machines that are commonly utilized in a factory context and supplementing that with spoken word does not seem to achieve these goals. Rather, it appears to be yet another example of using vague notions of racialized and gendered global labor as a veneer to enhance the project's craftivist credentials.

DIY as a field presents an astounding quantity of cultural forms available for possible interpretation: sewn banners, knitted hats bound for donation, performance art and more. It is

⁴⁹ Vinebaum, Lisa. "Garment Work: Unpicking the Global Garment Industry," *The Journal of Modern Craft online*, Berg Publishers. 17 March 2012. Web. 2 March 2013.

often the case that the narratives that circulate around these objects have been rehearsed with such frequency as to become scripted and obligatory. Even performance art that takes DIY as its motivation, exaggerating it to produce something unexpected and conceptual (something that Adamson might even consider befitting the label *avant garde* and worthy of analysis), ultimately still seems trapped by the staid motivations of craftivist narratives. As Ramamurthy cautions, a feminist analysis of commodities must resist the temptation to attend only to “real” lives in order not to miss how these lives are imagined and narratively constructed in a variety of cultural forms. In this chapter I have endeavored to read DIY objects and narratives as a cultural forms that demonstrate the importance of narrative construction to the DIY’s value. In doing so I have presented a variety of examples to unpack how gender and race are central to these narratives, regardless of whether these socially-constructed features of the DIY subject and her Others are an explicit focus or something entirely ignored. While this chapter has primarily offered a critique, my ultimate goal is not to entirely discredit the work of DIY, but instead to present a perspective that seriously challenges the claims made for this site of cultural and knowledge production in order to push it forward. Further, I hope to have demonstrated how surface level readings of DIY miss a great deal about how DIY functions as a unique identity category. I continue this project in the following chapters on literature as an essential, but largely unexplored, site of craft knowledge. It is my contention that the epistemology of DIY – built so much through narrative - can be better understood narratively, historically, theoretically and practically in dialog with literary study.

Chapter Two:
The Politics of Craft and Domesticity in Nineteenth and early-Twentieth Century Domestic Fiction: Domestic Individualism in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Iola Leroy*, *Contending Forces* and *Quicksand*

Ideologies like domesticity become popular, I would argue, not because they provide the masses with a finite and orderly set of beliefs relieving them from the burden of thinking but instead because they give people an expansive logic, a meaningful vocabulary, and rich symbols through which to *think* about their world.

Lora Romero, Chapter 2 "A Society Controlled by Women" in *Home Fronts*, 19

The '60s and '70s feminist approach revealed the historically gendered nature of craft and tied it to domesticity. I grew up in a Martha Stewart-type household, with all the straight white rituals of suburban America that are embodied in craft projects. Feminism helped me to be critical of those things while also implicating me in the critique, and it also gave me a way to think about performance and queer identity. I've had a lot of students – women students – who don't want to have anything to do with feminism... the predominant attitude was, 'It's done, it's in the past, feminism's outmoded.' Feminism has been just as messy and unwieldy and stigmatized, as craft.

Allison Smith in "The Politics of Craft," *Modern Painters*, February 2008, 83

Uncle Tom's Cabin perfects and ensures domesticity in patriarchy. Mothers and mother figures initiate escapes from slavery and determine family safety. As domesticity becomes for Stowe a feminist deployment of nineteenth-century femininity, housekeeping in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* becomes not merely politically significant but a political mode, not representative of any economic order but itself an economic order.

Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism*, 24

These three explorations of the political force of domesticity feature a variety of labors: meals prepared in Rachel Halliday's ideal kitchen in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, public knitting as performance art for the women interviewed in "The Politics of Craft" and the panoply of chores present within the "private sphere" as elaborated and criticized by Stowe in *The American Woman's Home* as well as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. This chapter endeavors to track the cumulation of domestic labors as political practice from the mid-1800s to the 1920s: specifically, as an exploration of the much longer half-life of the concept of domestic individualism. I begin this survey at the apex of sentimental fiction with a consideration of the domestic labors in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in order to examine how the novel functioned as both a work of sentimental fiction and also as a political project. I conclude well after the decline of the genre of domestic fiction

with a selection of women's writing of early twentieth century: encompassing both novels of the African American woman's literary Renaissance: Francis Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Pauline Hopkins' *Contending Forces* as well Nella Larsen's "anti-domestic" novel, *Quicksand*. I consider how domestic ideology and labors were strategically reformulated and rejected first by writers of the Reconstruction period such as Harper and Hopkins and then later in Larson's satires of black middle-class values. It is through this not-always direct route that I insist that the ability to understand how the DIY subject is produced as political builds on the domestic ideology of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Accordingly, I ask how the politics of craft in this earlier period informs our understanding of what it means to deploy craft in meaningful and political ways in the present.

"The Politics of Craft," a distilled interview between Allison Smith and three other women who describe themselves as "conceptual artists whose subject is craft" (80), offers an opportunity to discern how domesticity is both reclaimed and rejected in contemporary DIY discourse. Over the course of the article, Smith and her colleagues make a variety of observations about the relationship between DIY, craft and domesticity. Craft is recognized as an important aspect of national formation when Smith describes her *Notion Nanny* collaborative performance art project that "foregrounds craft as a mode of expression for defining national identity" (80). *Notion Nanny* is a life-size doll modeled after the itinerant (female) trader who would travel the American and British Victorian countryside peddling various handcrafted wares. Smith sees this project as engaging contemporary living history reenactments, whose focus is typically on two things: craft and war. As such, Smith utilizes handicraft as "a metaphor through which to think about the terrain of war" (80). Smith's description is a response to moderator, Julia Bryan Wilson's (a professor of art history at UC Berkeley) observation that "if

craft implies utility, for [these] four [artists/crafters], craft's 'function' is to generate political dialogues" (80). Thus, for Smith, she mobilizes craft politically by evoking the historical relation between handicraft (bookbinding, quilting, ceramics, woodwork), national identity, nation formation and war.⁵⁰

In another article, Smith's *Notion Nanny* is implicitly linked to the domestic arts when traditional craft is described as "conservative, decorative or mute,"

In *Notion Nanny*, Smith offers the gift of listening in order to map and collect stories through traditional skills that may pass away with the next generation. Her quest is not one of mere re-enactment, historical preservation or commemoration however. Instead, Smith is harboring traditional skills, uncovering their secret uses and imbuing them with new messages and meanings, challenging all-too-familiar notions of craft as conservative, decorative, or mute. Vernacular and popular arts and crafts are often celebrated as signifiers for national identity, foregrounded especially in times of national turmoil and division. Rather than a celebration of local traditions in a bid to strengthen national identities, *Notion Nanny* explores the role of craft in the construction of counter-cultural

⁵⁰ The following narrative of Smith's work emphasizes the function of her craft object to these intersecting histories, "The genesis of *Notion Nanny* was Smith's research into the historical phenomenon of peddler dolls, or "notion nannies," popularly displayed under glass domes in British and American households during the Victorian era. Traditionally dressed in a red cloak and holding a basket overflowing with miniature wares, the peddler doll commemorated the disappearing social custom of itinerant traders traveling the countryside, their baskets containing a tiny world of 18th and early nineteenth century material culture. Smith became interested in the way that peddler dolls constitute a particular genre or category of popular art, while at the same time they present, or represent, a cornucopia of popular art traditions in their baskets. This ironic self-reflexivity within the object, an almost uncanny awareness in the doll of her own status, seemed to contradict the idea of the peddler doll as a curiosity or specimen not meant to be played with. Smith wanted to burst the bubble of the bell jar, magnifying the doll and her basket in order to make them more visible. Smith wondered what social histories could be written from the wares the peddler doll exhibited: examples of printmaking, pottery, glassware, metalwork, textiles, and many forms of handiwork. Thus the title "Notion Nanny", suggesting a custodian of ideas as well as objects, is a fitting play-on-words." (<http://www.notion-nanny.net/>)

identities and allegiances. Through her activities, Smith demonstrates how to consciously navigate through traditional avenues of expression in order to produce potentially revolutionary visual histories.⁵¹

The difficulty with even this more in-depth description of Smith's work is that there is no real indication of what these counter-cultural identities and allegiances might look like. All of the artist/crafters in the "Politics of Craft" article are said to produce work that "takes up the global economy and its repercussions on national identity [demonstrating that] it's possible to challenge the status quo without dropping a stitch" (78). However, connections to discernable political projects remain opaque.

For both Smith and Sabrina Gschwandtner, whose *Wartime Knitting Circle* at New York's Museum of Arts and Design evokes more recent histories of craft and war, the interactive-collaborative element of their projects is essential to their understanding of these works as utilizing traditional craft practices in a way that is "politically relevant" (80). Part of this relevance involves the connections they create between contemporary craft/DIY and the War in Iraq. By evoking wartime knitting circles of WWII or traditional artisans whose handicrafts became weapons, garments, tools and other necessary equipment for the Revolutionary and Civil Wars in the context of the war in Iraq, they challenge and disrupt the portrayal of modern warfare as remote, detached virtual reality. When would-be viewers and passive museumgoers participate in these collaborative projects or installations, Smith and Gschwandtner invite meditation of one's connection to modern wars that are designed precisely to minimize reflection and disruption "at home."

⁵¹ Carrington, Sarah and Allison Smith. "Notion Nanny: Tinker, Tailor, Merchant and Maker"

Another possible political dimension of these works is their relationship to or disavowal of feminism. The opening paragraph of this piece explores in some detail the historical and ongoing marginalization of craft in relation to art. This is described as the devaluing of craft “before it was resurrected by ‘70s feminism,” embarrassment at the use of craft techniques, “craft shame,” and the way that the word craft itself has been dropped from major institutions of craft education (80).⁵² The gendered dimension of these labors is linked vaguely in that Second Wave feminist revisionist artists, art historians and cultural critics are credited with “resurrecting” craft from its devalued status. But, as much as this is narrated as a task completed (at least in this early excerpt), it is clear that craft (and to an even greater extent) DIY still languishes near the bottom of a hierarchy that descends from the fine arts to handmade soccer balls produced in sweatshops abroad. Tellingly, after Liz Collins, who teaches textiles at the Rhode Island School of Design, describes how craft is not a “dirty word” for DIYers, Smith responds by distancing their collective practice from other forms of craft practice (studio craft and, presumably also, DIY). She states, “We are conceptual artists whose subject is craft. That’s the difference between our work and studio craft artists; we are working within a theoretical framework. And yet all of us are actively courted by the craft arena – often *more* courted by that world than by contemporary art audiences” (Smith 80). There is, then, clearly still a hierarchy at work (one which Smith actively maintains).

However, it is difficult from this dialogue to determine the standing of craft and DIY, and what exactly feminism has contributed to their current status. Gschwandtner attempts to address this ambiguity directly in the closing when she asks her fellow artists to elaborate their own relationships to feminism. The overall consensus is that “feminism is still relevant” since Third-

⁵² Such as when the California College of Arts and Crafts became the California College of the Arts and the American Craft Museum became the Museum of Arts and Design.

wave feminist theory has “taken up other aspects of identity – sexuality, race, and class,” according to Cat Mazza, who also connects these intersecting power relations to the global economy through her “Nike Blanket Petition,” a 14 x 6 foot hand-crocheted blanket with a large orange swoosh in the center (83). Smith discusses how feminism allowed her to be critical of white, suburban domesticity. Liz Collins states that while her garments “[tie] into queerness” as they “address female sexuality... erogenous zones or areas of comfort, discomfort, bondage, and release,” she “doesn’t know where [her work] falls within feminism” (83).

My goal in unpacking the linkages between craft and politics in this piece is not to provide a definitive map. I don’t believe that one could be drawn from the content of this article, despite its title. Rather, I have sketched the terrain of this discourse to focus on a few prevailing thematics that are meant to suggest the potential of craft to “challenge the status quo:” craft hierarchies; ambiguous concepts of feminism; the relation of feminist theory to the value of craft; and connections between craft, nationalism and war. (78). The remainder of this chapter will focus on unpacking the politics of craft in a nineteenth and early twentieth century literary context. However, I have opened the chapter with this contemporary article to demonstrate one prevailing way in which craft and politics are discussed today. Attending to the assertions, omissions and ambiguities of contemporary discussions of political craft, I suggest that these discourses are irreducibly linked to domestic ideology. This is often made evident in the extent to which this connection is disavowed (e.g. the resuscitative work of ‘70s feminism as a completed task for the valuation of domestic and women’s labors). These links are made even more evident in a genealogy of the ways in which domestic labors have been conceived of as political acts in domestic fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

1980s and 90s Feminist Revisionist Accounts of Nineteenth Century Domestic Literature

As is clear by the opening quotes, I revisit second and third-wave feminist revisionist accounts of nineteenth and early twentieth century American literature in my own interpretations of the role of craft in helping to constructing domestic ideology. I turn to the writings of Gillian Brown, Amy Kaplan, Lora Romero, Karen Sánchez-Eppler and others to demonstrate how the material practices of domestic labor – including many labors conceived as craft/DIY today – are essential to elaborating the political imperatives of these works. Class, race and gender are organized by and organized these practices as well (Kaplan, Sánchez-Eppler, Laura Smith). I begin with Gillian Brown's *Domestic Individualism*, published in 1990, to examine the first phase of revisiting nineteenth century women's writing that reconceptualized certain novels as performing political work. Brown routes her revisionist reading through the contention that the ideology of possessive individualism developed not just in the masculine marketplace and public sphere but importantly also within the so-called "private sphere" of the home. She reads *Uncle Tom's Cabin* as a primary example for the way it leverages a critique of patriarchy within the home while simultaneously imagining a paternalistic response to the question of freed slaves.

The contradictory impulses of this proto-feminist work of sentimental fiction also provide an entry point for Lora Romero's contention that domestic fiction has too often been dismissed as the status quo when compared to the literary works of more revered nineteenth century writers such as Melville, Hawthorne and James. While these writers didn't achieve the commercial success of their female contemporaries, they have been widely regarded as producing more exceptional and revolutionary forms of American Literature. Romero counters the impulse to understand individual works of literature – or entire literary traditions – as something either oppositional or liberating. Her study demonstrates the importance of understanding that these

works can be “radical on some issues (market capitalism, for example) and reactionary on others (gender or race, for instance)” (Romero 4). Thus, Romero argues for the importance of recognizing both the conservative as well as the subversive elements of domestic novels (1). Doing so allows readers and critics to recognize how the domestic novels in Romero’s study were indeed “implicated in one of the most entrenched value systems of early-nineteenth-century bourgeois society” – domestic ideology (6). But, Romero stresses, “that fact does not deplete them of political or imaginative differences altogether; within the discursive parameters which *house* them all, they acquire their own, highly contingent *fronts* for mediating cultural, social, and political conditions” (6). Thus, the subversive elements of sentimental fiction become evident, as do the conservative aspects of more classic works of the nineteenth-century canon.

We see these two impulses in Brown as she proclaims the middle class home as producing an alternative economic system and yet, according to Lauren Wexler, “elide[s] the expansive, imperial project of sentimentalism” (Wexler, quoted in Romero 3). Brown’s understanding of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* as political relies on both a (conservative) sense of home as a site of permanent value as well as a (more radical) critique of Stowe’s political project that resolves in a depiction of emancipated slaves as sentimental possessions. In understanding Brown’s reliance on the home as a site of permanent value, the reader can also see how, according to Romero, “The figure of the domestic woman has haunted us for over two centuries because of her utility for overstabilizing the analytic terms ‘ideology’ and ‘opposition’” (4). As Kaplan notes, domesticity is not a “static condition,” rather “a process of domestication” that “monitors borders between the civilized and the savage but also regulates [conquers, tames] traces of the savage within itself” (582). This assertion buttresses Kaplan’s primary objective to remap conceptions of the nineteenth century woman as model bourgeois subject in order to

“explore how domestic novels produce the racialized national subjectivity of the white middle-class women in contested international space” (600).

Understanding domesticity as a process facilitates both Brown and Romero’s objectives to comprehend the political imperatives of domestic fiction. For Romero, this involves producing “a genuinely analytic interpretation of cultural politics – one which could acknowledge the multiplicity of inequalities in society and the mobility of political meanings produced by the same discourse deployed within different kinds of power relations” (9). For Brown, the malleability of domesticity allows for both its reformist and revolutionary impulses. As a “system of differences,” Brown argues, domestic ideology “works to maintain cultural coherence through differences” (8). She continues,

For example, domesticity in the context of nineteenth-century abolitionism signifies a reformist politics, while in the context of women’ suffrage it appears as a reactionary institution. Though in these cases domesticity denotes certain political orchestrations, on the part of abolitionists or misogynists, this book does not unfold a unitary politics of domesticity: no single system emerges in the operations of the domestic. Its effectiveness as a strategy of self is just that: not a totalizing force, but a working machinery, one that has served and continues to serve many purposes. (Brown 8-9).

Subsequent studies of sentimental fiction, such as Hazel Carby’s *Reconstructing Womanhood*, have expanded this work to demonstrate how African American women writers made use of the political possibilities of domesticity as they “self-consciously appropriate[d] the conventions of the discourse of domesticity in order to communicate their critique of the racism and sexism of the Northern, white middle classes” (Romero 3). A study of such novels will compose the second half of this chapter. In the latter part of this chapter, especially, I seek to explore the ways in

which writes such as Harper, Hopkins and Larsen have worked to destabilize ideology and opposition in their unique extensions of the domestic individual.

To impart these understandings of domestic spaces and activities as mobile, dynamic, in process and open to appropriation on an analysis of DIY demonstrates interesting continuities between crafting activities that took place within (and helped to construct) the nineteenth century “private sphere” and domestic crafting labors today. I build from a contention that discourses on domestic labors were not only more prevalent, but also much richer, in a nineteenth and early twentieth-century context than they are often given credit – at least in contemporary narratives concerning domestic labors. Throughout this chapter, I move more slowly through each of these second and third wave feminist accounts of nineteenth and early twentieth century literature in order to construct a framework for evaluating the relationship between crafting activities, domestic ideology, and the “politics of craft” today. I begin with an extended reading of Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

The Domestic Politics of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*

As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. observes in his introduction to the *Annotated Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Stowe’s novel could be about nothing but the domestic, given the privileging of home in its title. Gates’ intervention focuses on the bedroom over the kitchen as he pursues the oft-overlooked sexual undercurrents of this much-theorized and foundational work of American literature. Despite the sense that sentimental fiction, with its concerns over female propriety, denies the sexuality of its characters, Gates convincingly demonstrates that although, “sentimentality masks sexuality by focusing attention on the outside of the body – tears, sighs, blushes – such that the body itself recedes from focus. Sentimentalism is actually concerned with

the space between the body and the eyes watching it” (Stowe xxi). He continues, “Still, the body is always present, along with its potential for consummation” (Stowe xxi). As such, Stowe effectively utilized the genre of sentimental fiction to “write about sex – especially interracial sex” since, as Gates argues, “Amalgamation was about sex. Race mingling was about sex. Abolition was about sex, because slavery, in part, was about unbridled, unregulated sex, always potentially available in the relation between master and slave” (xx). As Gates, Brown, Romero, Sánchez-Eppler and others demonstrate, Stowe manipulates the conventions of sentimental fiction to leverage political critique in a variety of forms. With intent to take the cultural critique of domesticity, imparted in a literary context, and transfer it to the (equally significant but under-theorized) cultural context of crafting, my focus will remain on the importance of crafting labors within the home (that is, those of the kitchen and the drawing room, rather than the bedroom) in considering the various forms that a politically-relevant domestic ideology has taken (and might continue to take).

To begin, Stowe’s abolitionist and proto-feminist work in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* relied on both an appropriation and refutation of the idea of home as a site of permanent value – a value that is still very much alive in the present.⁵³ Brown makes Catherine Beecher, her sister-in-law, the primary exemplar of the domestic doctrine of “true womanhood” clearing the way for a more radical reading of Stowe’s uses of the conventions of domesticity and sentimental fiction (3). Conversely, Brown also notes that, “Although the feminist critique of domestic ideology [exemplified by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Elizabeth Cady Stanton] rejects the situation of women in the home, it nonetheless retains in its aspirations for women’s enfranchisement and self-determination the domestic definition of self” (4). Brown calls this self-definition “secured

⁵³ See especially Emily Matchar’s 2012 study on the “new domesticity” *Homeward Bound*.

in and nearly synonymous with domesticity” domestic individualism, where domestic individualism develops alongside and according to the same tenets as possessive individualism, but differs in its focus on interiority and the domestic individual’s distance from the marketplace (3).

As Brown demonstrates, domestic individualism manifests itself in many forms and for quite different objectives. Thus, Stowe and Beecher (cast by Brown as dramatically more politically conservative) both make use of domestic individualism. According to Brown, Beecher’s domestic economy complements and seeks to reform the marketplace, whereas Stowe seeks to reform domesticity itself so that it may be prevented from consorting with either the Northern or Southern forms of the marketplace: the capitalist money economy or the slave economy (23). Stowe’s anxiety about the dehumanizing aspects of both forms is evident, according to multiple critics, in an earlier subtitle to her novel: *The Man That Was a Thing* (Brown 23). A concept of the stable and permanent-value of the home (and domestic activities that take place within and construct this space), thus, is essential to the many ways in which domestic ideology was put to use in this period: both by Beecher’s scientific domestic economy that she regarded as a “patriotic and religious duty” (Brown 20) and by Stowe’s “more radical and extensive [domestic] power” that sought an ideal domesticity through the “replacement of the market economy by a matriarchal domestic economy” (Brown 24).

Brown overextends her argument here, in reading the work of Stowe as attempting to supplant the burgeoning market economy with a matriarchal replacement. It isn’t entirely clear why Brown needs to depict Stowe’s matriarchal, domestic economy as one seeking to supplant the formal economy – especially since elsewhere she more effectively interprets Stowe’s political project as one that ameliorates or corrects the masculine domestic economy. Brown’s

overemphasis on Stowe's matriarchal economy as a replacement, instead seeks to distance the antebellum Stowe from Beecher. After the war, however, it's clear that Stowe aligns with Beecher's version of domestic ideology as they collaboratively revise Beecher's earlier *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, co-authoring *The American Woman's Home: Or, Principles of Domestic Science: Being a Guide to the Formation and Maintenance of Economical, Healthful, Beautiful and Christian Homes* in 1869.

Brown's overextension is characteristic of this early mode of revisiting nineteenth century women's writing. The imperatives of this early, celebratory, feminist theory necessitated Brown's grandiose statement about Stowe's political aims - anticipating that if her reading of Stowe aligned too closely with Beecher's domestic ideology it would not be perceived as sufficiently innovative. Particularly since Beecher was (and one might argue) still depicted as a prophet of the oppressive and restrictive domestic ideology of the cult of true womanhood. I don't argue that there were not any differences between Stowe and Beecher's mobilizations of the domestic sphere. Rather, following Romero, that it's much more fruitful to locate conservative as well as progressive elements in Stowe's reformulating of the private sphere. That Stowe sought merely to improve the market economy through a reform of the domestic sphere does not discount her abolitionist political motivations, labors, and accomplishments.

Regardless of whether one perceives it as a replacement or an ameliorative, Stowe's conception of a matriarchal domestic economy was indispensable to her abolitionist project and central to this economy was housekeeping. As Brown argues, "As domesticity becomes for Stowe a feminist deployment of nineteenth-century femininity, housekeeping in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* becomes not merely politically significant but a political mode, not representative of any

economic order but itself an economic order” (24). In other words, the physical, material acts of keeping home were imagined by Stowe as political in her abolitionist struggle.

As I move through the variety of actions in which this political mode was made manifest I return briefly to Romero’s contention that “Ideologies like domesticity become popular... because they give people an expansive logic, a meaningful vocabulary, and rich symbols through which to *think* about their world” (19). Stowe utilized daily housekeeping activities like making biscuits, mending clothes and knitting socks in her abolitionist project precisely because they were familiar to her readership. Her radical move was to reframe them – as they are carried out in quite different ways by Rachel Halliday, Dinah, Miss Ophelia and Aunt Chloe – as a means to characterize the prevailing political orientations of this period: Rachel the prototypical abolitionist Quaker; Miss Ophelia as a symbol of cold, calculated Northern capitalist efficiency; and Dinah and Aunt Chloe as representatives of a hospitable but inefficient, precarious and dangerous (even lethal) Southern plantation economy. Marie St. Clare’s conspicuous lack of housekeeping further vilifies slavery as detrimental also to the character of white women. To paraphrase Romero, Stowe reframes the vocabulary of domesticity for her own purposes. But, rather than demonstrating the inherent value of the home – as Brown suggests – the home’s value is shown by Stowe to be variable and unstable since it depends on a *very* specific agent to efficiently maintain and augment it. Stowe enriches the symbolic site of the home to help her readers think differently about their world by demonstrating how the actions *and* philosophies of particular individuals can either make or break the ideal space of the home.

Chapter 13, “The Quaker Settlement” offers the reader a first glance into the ideal home of Rachel Halliday. It is within this space that one of the most anticipated reunions of the novel occurs: that of runaway slaves Eliza and George. Astoundingly, the actual moment when they

see each other again is severely downplayed by the elaborate descriptions of the housekeeping duties that take place within Rachel and, her husband, Simeon's home. In this short passage, Eliza (in a dream-like state after fainting at the news of George's impending arrival) and George meet once again, "She heard her husband's footsteps; she felt him coming nearer; his arms were around her, his tears falling on her face, and she awoke! It was no dream. The daylight had long faded; her child lay calmly sleeping by her side; a candle was burning dimly on the stand, and her husband was sobbing by her pillow" (149). Given the conventions of sentimental prose one expects more from this much-anticipated event. But, as I hope to demonstrate - and in this chapter especially - Stowe's descriptions of domestic activities do a great deal more work than elaborate emotionally-charged dialog and description in establishing not just the sentiments of significant scenes in the novel, but the political objectives of these scenes as well.

To illustrate, now contrast the brief narrative of George and Eliza's reunion to this description of breakfast the following morning,

The next morning was a cheerful one at the Quaker house. 'Mother' was up betimes, and surrounded by busy girls and boys, whom we had scarce time to introduce to our readers yesterday, and who all moved obediently to Rachel's gentle 'Thee had better,' or more gentle 'Hadn't thee better?' in the work of getting breakfast; for a breakfast in the luxurious valleys of Indiana is a thing complicated and multiform, and, like picking up the rose-leaves and trimming the bushes in Paradise, asking other hands than those of the original mother. While, therefore, John ran to the spring for fresh water, and Simeon the second sifted meal for corn-cakes, and Mary ground coffee, Rachel moved gently and quietly about, making biscuits, cutting up chicken, and diffusing a sort of sunny radiance over the whole proceeding generally. If there was any danger of friction or collision from

the ill-regulated zeal of so many young operators, her gentle “Come! Come!” or ‘I wouldn’t, now,’ was quite sufficient to allay the difficulty. (149-150)

In this passage and throughout the entire chapter, Rachel is almost never encountered without her hands covered in biscuit batter and happily so. In this feature of the Quaker household – as well as the enthusiastic helpfulness of children, husbands and neighbors; conversations persistently accompanied either by the gentle clicking of knitting needles or a bubbling pot; chicken and ham cooking with “a cheerful and joyous fizzle in the pan, as if they rather enjoyed being cooked than otherwise” (149) - Rachel’s home is shown to be an efficient but also loving, peaceful and bountiful place. Has Indiana ever again been depicted as such a just, lavish and benevolent paradise?

This is the “mother-loving abundance” that Brown describes as Stowe’s utopian replacement for to the ills of the marketplace, both Southern and Northern. By privileging housekeeping labors as the means to describe both the temperament and political orientation of her characters, Stowe recodes her abolitionist project as something familiar and accessible to her readership. Although the tasks undertaken by all the residents of the Quaker settlement are quite dangerous – by virtue of their connection with the Underground Railroad in a time after the ratification of the Fugitive Slave Act - they are made palatable, even desirable, through Rachel’s domestic hospitality. In this territory, and – importantly – under Rachel’s careful guidance, the permanent and stable value of the home is undisputed. The domestic practices of other prominent female characters in the novel, however, demonstrate how an incorrect political orientation, lack of affection or insufficient domestic skills can sully this ideal space. Thus, home is an ideal space, but only if cared for by the correct agents. Its value is not stable or permanent, but a

potentiality. Ultimately, though, the abolitionist aims of Stowe's domestic ideal fall short of their potential, as the only agents Stowe depicts as truly realizing this domestic ideal are white.

In another example of white domestic individualism, Miss Ophelia, the foremost model of efficient, even scientific, housekeeping in the novel, rules the St. Clare home with a sometimes-unfeeling orderliness. Whereas Rachel takes civil disobedience – in the form of the community's participation in the Underground Railroad – as a religious mandate and adjusts her household (makes it efficient) to suit this purpose, Ophelia's religious order is one of constant and tenacious, but not primarily politically-motivated, purpose. One wonders if this character wasn't modeled after Beecher. Ophelia is efficient and persistent in order to avoid idleness and conflict – but not necessarily in service of some higher political goal, like the residents of the Quaker settlement. In this way, Ophelia is a more precise model of Brown's domestic individual in that she symbolizes a Northern capitalist efficiency as it is carried out within the space of the home. Ophelia represents the possessive individual reconfigured for domestic life.

When Marie St. Clare presses Ophelia to comment on her dealings with the family's slaves (especially poor sleep-deprived Mammy) and the constitutional differences between men and women (in which Marie once more suggests that everyone besides herself is selfish and inconsiderate), Ophelia turns to her knitting as a response. The following excerpt from Stowe's initial introduction to Miss Ophelia provides an example of her utter contempt for "shiftlessness" (of which Marie is the novel's primary example). For Ophelia, "People who did nothing, or who did not know exactly what they were going to do, or who did not take the most direct way to accomplish what they set their hands to, were objects of her entire contempt, - a contempt shown less frequently by anything she said, than by a kind of stony grimness, as if she scorned to say

anything about the matter” (Stowe 168). In her steely response to Marie, we see this philosophy in action,

Miss Ophelia, who had not a small share of the genuine New England caution, and a very particular horror of being drawn into family difficulties, now began to foresee something of this kind impending; so, composing her face into a grim neutrality, and drawing out of her pocket about a yard and a quarter of stocking, which she kept as a specific against what Dr. Watts asserts to be a personal habit of Satan when people have idle hands, she proceeded to knit most energetically, shutting her lips together in a way that said, as plain as words could, ‘You needn’t try to make me speak. I don’t want anything to do with your affairs,’ – in fact, she looked about as sympathizing as a stone lion. (Stowe 183)

In this scene, Ophelia utilizes her energetic knitting to communicate disapproval and also to serve as a model of productivity and detachment from messy “family difficulties” – such as the question of governing slaves.

With her cousin, Augustine St. Clare, however, Ophelia is more vocal with her opinions. Again, these are more concerned with efficiency and the minimization of waste than her supposed abolitionism. Their first interaction on the topic provokes an extensive meditation by St. Clare on how he arrived at to his particular method of management. It’s debatable if one could call it a method since the St. Clare way is described as a “hurryscurryation” and – insult of all insults - “shiftless” (222). To demonstrate, after just a few days of “thoroughly reform[ing] every department of the house to a systematic pattern” Miss Ophelia approaches St. Clare with despair over her inability to affect the “departments” that depend on cooperation from the servants. She exclaims, “Such shiftless management, such waste, such confusion, I never saw!” to which St. Clare replies with apparent pride, “I dare say you didn’t” (Stowe 221). St. Clare’s

contentment over his seemingly haphazard and luxuriant method of governing slaves stems, we learn, from the fact that, according to St. Clare, “we masters are divided into two classes, oppressors and oppressed. We who are good-natured and hate severity make up our minds to a good deal of inconvenience” (222).

The inconvenience St. Clare willingly endures is elaborated most specifically through Dinah’s affairs in the kitchen. He professes to understand exactly the state of matters in the kitchen, but assures fretting Ophelia that his method of governance is better than her efficient alternative, which he suggests aligns with a Southern class of oppressors whose severity (and outright violence and abuse) help them to enjoy many more conveniences than can be found in the anarchic St. Clare household. St. Clare describes,

Don’t I know that the rolling-pin is under her bed, and the nutmeg-grater in her pocket with her tobacco, - that there are sixty-five different sugar-bowls, and one in every hole in the house, - that she washes dishes with a dinner-napkin one day, and with a fragment of an old petticoat the next? But the upshot is, she gets up glorious dinners, makes superb coffee; and you must judge her as warriors and statesmen are judged, by *her success*.

(Stowe 222)

Nineteenth century and contemporary readers alike would be put off by Dinah’s intermingling of tobacco and nutmeg, not to mention her wrapping of raw meat in a fine tablecloth and later storing the cloth in an out-of-the way drawer for washing later. This response is calculated by Stowe to elicit repulsion from a readership familiar with household tasks like cooking and cleaning. The passage gathers additional significance in St. Clare’s insistence that Dinah be evaluated by the same standard as “warriors and statesmen:” by her successes and not the means by which she achieves them. St. Clare confesses, “Heaven bless us! if we are to go down there,

and view all the smoking and squatting about, and hurryscurryation of the preparatory process, we should never eat more!” (Stowe 222).

St. Clare’s suggests that, for Dinah, her ends justify the means. By extension, the reader is to understand that this logic applies to him (and other “oppressed” Southern slaveholders as well). Ophelia, the symbolic Northerner, reverses his logic with an exclusive focus on the means. Here, she is so concerned with orderliness and process that Ophelia seems to have lost sight of her abolitionist ethics as she laments the waste and excess of St. Clare’s estate. She represents a drive for efficiency (presumably at any cost). Of this scene, Brown writes,

Stowe seeks to reform American society not by employing domestic values but by reforming them... The novel addresses [the] relation between patriarchy and sentimental ideals by explicitly thematizing the intimacy and congress between economic and domestic endeavors, between market and kitchen systems... Stowe’s domestic solution to slavery, then, represents not the strength of sentimental values but a utopian rehabilitation of them, necessitated by their fundamental complicity with the market to which they are ostensibly opposed. (18)

Both St. Clare and Ophelia’s perspectives and the domestic scene in which they are developed demonstrate how Stowe’s reform begins in the “kitchen as a precondition to women’s reform of market economy” (Brown 18). Brown’s emphasis here on “women’s reform” of the market economy (rather than a matriarchal replacement) seems better stated as it’s clear that Ophelia’s orderly methods are meant to supplement, rather than supplant, the formal economy of St. Clare’s estate.

Here and elsewhere Miss Ophelia is a fitting caricature of Northern capitalism: efficiency for the sake of efficiency, growth for the sake of growth. Further, there are many occasions in

which she prefers not to involve herself in the messy and personal details of the slave economy (as in her refusal to respond to Marie's complaints). But, rather than the marketplace, St. Clare and Ophelia elaborate how their respective philosophies are carried out in regards to household management – within the “private sphere” of the home. Extended beyond the realm of the domestic, St. Clare suggests that Ophelia's efficient housekeeping would only result in the brutalities of slavery that Ophelia, an abolitionist, seeks to avoid at all cost. As St. Clare argues, the orderly method of Northerners, like Ophelia, can be just as brutal as the worst operations of slavery. This debate stages Stowe's perspective that one marketplace is not to be privileged over the other – rather, they are both shown to be dangerous to the sacred space of the home. Thus, Stowe attempts to elevate the unadulterated home (free from the corrupting influences of the marketplace) as a reformed alternative domestic model of virtue, love and abundance. As I will discuss later, the potentiality of her utopian domesticity, though, is variable and racially-determined.

Together Ophelia and Augustine exhibit a potential found united in Rachel Halliday and her ideal home: Ophelia her efficient household management and Augustine his caring empathy. By the end of the novel, little Eva's compassion (grown out of her father's) has exerted a sufficient influence on Ophelia so that she relaxes her incessant drive for thrift and organization. This is evident in Ophelia's successful conversion of Topsy from a hapless, wild creature from whom Ophelia initially recoiled from physical contact, to a productive, intelligent missionary in Africa. Near the conclusion of the novel Stowe tells how Ophelia's native New Englanders initially thought Topsy an “odd and unnecessary addition to their well-trained domestic establishment,” but Miss Ophelia was, reportedly, “so thoroughly efficient... in her conscientious endeavor to do her duty by her *elevé*, that the child rapidly grew in grace and in

favor with the family and neighborhood” (458). Thus, Ophelia is shown to evolve toward the position of Rachel Halliday by the end of the novel. As I transition to the next section – in which I explore how Stowe’s logic of sentimental possession allows no other alternative than a happy ending for Topsy *in Africa* – I do recognize that thus far, this reading of housekeeping in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* has taken account domestic labors primarily from the purview of white women. This is precisely because of the racial logic of domestic individualism and sentimental possession.

From (White) Domestic Individualism to a “Residue” of Color in Sentimental Possession and Feminist-Abolitionism

To best understand the workings of sentimental possession – as an abolitionist project as well as one that forwarded an ethic of domestic individualism – it is necessary to consider national expansion and empire during the period in which Stowe was writing. Amy Kaplan calls the intersection of these concerns “manifest domesticity” in her 1998 article by the same name. She argues that one must, “understand the vexed and contradictory relations between race and domesticity as an issue not solely of individual morality nor simply internal to the nation but as structural to the institutional and discursive processes of national expansion and empire building” (583). As Romero notes in her survey of feminist revisionist readings of nineteenth century women’s literature, Kaplan, Wexler and Carby (as well as Karen Sánchez-Eppler) precipitated forward a major shift in the way sentimental literature was interpreted following the earlier resuscitatory work by Brown and others. Together, their work brought to the fore connections between the domestic individual (as a form of personhood that clearly emphasizes an atomized, self-possessed subjectivity and citizenship - carried out within the space of the home) and the larger social milieu of manifest destiny both at home and abroad. As Kaplan observes,

“Domesticity monitors borders between civilized and the savage but also regulated traces of the savage within itself” (582). Kaplan’s (as well as Brown and Sánchez-Eppler’s) focus is primarily on white authors, which prompts me to ask about how African American women’s writing that makes use of or rejects labors of housekeeping relates to this critique. After one more reading of Stowe, this chapter proceeds to ask how domesticity is used, represented, rejected, and reproduced in these African American texts.

Since I borrow the concept of “sentimental possession from Brown, I return to her once more to think through the development of this concept by Stowe. According to Brown, building on the home as a place of inherent value (as *the* site of “mother-loving abundance”) Stowe’s “ethic of sentimental possession shares the liberal ideal of self-realization in property, but secures this goal by replacing market relations with familial ones” (44). Brown’s accounting of the ways in which sentimental possession made sense of, adapted and critiqued the ethics of the fledgling capitalist marketplace reveals the foundations of contemporary notions of self-realization in property, ethical consumption and sentimental fetishism. All of which, I argue, play integral roles in conceptions of the DIY subject, who is also promised self-realization, a means of ethical consumption and a route to “transcend” typical market relations through certain modes of ownership (and production and consumption). In this way, I retain an affinity with Brown, especially as she explores the “cultural endurance of domestic individualism and the power of American literature in promoting that tradition” (8). As precisely the opposite of a depoliticized individual, Brown’s conceptualization of domestic individualism (especially in her readings of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) demonstrates how attending to the “alignment between individualism and domesticity might structure dispositions other than self-interest, such as self-denial and self-protection” (6). The readings that compose the second half of this chapter suggest

even wider dispositions that retain the political aspirations and praxis of the domestic individual – as initially imagined by Brown.

As I discussed earlier, central to Brown's argument about the domestic economy as a "replacement" are the differences she suggests between Stowe and Beecher. According to Brown, "The domestic doctrine Beecher helped to define held women and the home as the embodiment and the environment of stable value. Maintaining a site of permanent value, the domestic cult of true womanhood facilitated the transition to a life increasingly subject to the caprices of the market" (3). In the inherent value of home and in an ethic of sentimental possession Stowe and Beecher coincide, in the scope and purposes of domestic individualism they differ. Stowe was a prominent abolitionist who felt that women deserved a public voice in their own right, and her critique of slavery allowed her to demonstrate the imperfect nature of the home in the South. On the other hand, Beecher publically expressed her perspective that women should only exert their political influence through their husbands and in the act of raising their family (their sons). Thus, she refused to take a public position on slavery. According to Brown, Stowe constructed a utopian matriarchal domestic economy that could shoulder itself from (stand outside of, remain untainted by, even supplant) the corrupting influences of the market, whereas Beecher sought to reform and complement the marketplace with the influence and good housekeeping of the ideal home. Despite Brown's claims to the contrary, Beecher's perspective does make its way into *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, particularly in the character of Mrs. Bird, a Senator's wife, who seeks to influence her husband's political endeavors via her own persuasions (rather than arguing for women's suffrage). It is not surprising that, in at least one small way, Stowe acceded to this more popular sentiment of the period - as found in the widely circulated *Godey's Ladies Book* and other publications.

Because Stowe's political project was both reformist and conservative, it offers much to consider today regarding the political possibilities of crafting labor. In particular, what are the reformist and conservative possibilities of crafting/DIY labors and how are they being harnessed today? In Brown's analysis of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, domestic practices are framed as tools of abolition, but the home is still maintained by Stowe as a patriarchal site. Even when slaves are protected or emancipated, this is achieved through the device of sentimental possession. Characters such as Rachel Halliday and Miss Ophelia were able to weather the formidable political and economic changes of the public sphere because "the domestic sphere provided an always identifiable place and refuge for the individual: it signified the private domain of individuality apart from the marketplace" (Brown 3). On the other hand, domestic geniuses (to paraphrase St. Clare's description of Dinah), like Aunt Chloe and Dinah, rule over domestic spaces like the St. Clare kitchen and Uncle Tom's cabin but are ultimately depicted as possessions, rather than individuals. Even as they gain emancipation at the end of the novel, Stowe is unable to imagine these characters as self-possessed individuals and so must send them to Africa rather than grant a domestic (US-based) future within the confines of the nation for these American-born, English-speaking, domestically-skilled characters. From this dual movement we can learn to identify the reformist, conservative and potentially radical features and possibilities of DIY. Building on these readings in later chapters, I inquire about the sort of transitions facilitated by contemporary DIY discourse – through a consideration of ongoing shifts in the global economy and the role of the household and new forms of domesticity in these processes.

Brown concludes her readings of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with a consideration of the ongoing legacy of Stowe's work. She writes,

Although some racial characteristics may be incorporated into sentimental possession – domesticated into congruence with domestic relations – color remains as the residue of Stowe’s purification of possessive individualism. Stowe’s attempt to extend the liberal inheritance to blacks deed them a dubious self-possession founded on assimilation. That the legacy of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is a history of enfranchisement, racism, and segregation is congruent with the market logic of individualism which sentimental possession both rejects and perfects. (60)

The literary and political contributions of African American women writers in the post-bellum period were some of the very first to have to negotiate this legacy of “dubious self-possession” and assimilation in literature and in life. They did so in myriad ways as they wrote fiction and political essays that advocated for effective reconstruction, criticized its failures, legitimated their presence in the political sphere and argued for the status of African American women as women. As Carby has argued, writers such as Francis Harper, Pauline Hopkins, Anna Julia Cooper, Ida B. Wells and Nella Larsen were forced to “confront dominant domestic ideologies and literary conventions of womanhood which excluded them from the definition ‘women’” (6).

In bridging the temporal and racial gap between the writings of Stowe and those of the African American women’s renaissance of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, I turn to Karen Sánchez-Eppler’s “Bodily Bonds” to think through the many effects of the metaphoric linking of white and black womens’ oppressions in sentimental and political writing of the nineteenth century. Sánchez-Eppler uses the term “feminist-abolitionist” to mark the uneasy alliance between the political endeavors of white bourgeois women’s liberation and black women’s emancipation – a linkage undertaken by white, feminist writers such as Stowe, Sarah Grimké, Lydia Marie Child, Margaret Fuller, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and others. According to

Sánchez-Eppler, the “metaphoric linking of women and slaves uses their shared position as bodies to be bought, owned, and designated as a grounds of resistance, [that] nevertheless obliterates the particularity of black and female experience, making their distinct exploitations appear as one” (31). This interprets the implicit racism that Brown reads in “sentimental possession” as a “dubious self- possession” (marked by a “residue” of color) that Stowe was ultimately unable to incorporate in her attempt to perfect the ethics of domesticity (60). Sánchez-Eppler’s analysis, however, is distinct from Brown’s since she is able to account for the politics of an abolitionist-feminist domesticity as inherently linked to institutional racism and processes of empire. Her structural analysis counters ideals of possessive individualism where racist acts can be interpreted merely as the result of individual pathology in need of reformation.

For instance, Stowe’s longing for an inherent and stable value of the home is evident in her depiction of Rachel Halliday’s home. Ultimately this utopian ideal is only possible for white women who achieve the right combination of affection and politics. The only route Stowe provides for emancipated black women to achieve this ideal is through a process of assimilation and subsequent emigration to Africa. By contrast, Sánchez-Eppler argues (of abolitionist grade school primers and also of Stowe’s writing),

By situating antislavery discourse within an idealized domestic setting [like Rachel’s home] these stories purport to offer moral and emotional standards by which to measure, and through which to correct, the evils of slavery. The problem is that these standards are implicated in the values and structures of authority and profit they seek to criticize. The contradiction inherent in the alliance of abolitionist thought and domestic ideals can be identified, in part, as the conflict between a structural or material and an emotional or moral conception of social reality. Failing to discover tangible and stable grounds on

which to distinguish idealized domestic values from the abhorred system of slavery, antislavery writers [like Stowe] retreat to the realm of the intangible; once they do so their arguments for the difference between slavery and domesticity reconstruct this opposition in terms of the tension between physical and spiritual ontologies and epistemologies. (49)

Rather than conceding to Stowe even a “dubious” self-possession, Sánchez-Eppler demonstrates how Stowe’s best intentions – bestowing freedom upon Tom in heaven, George and Eliza their liberty (on a truly diasporic trek first to Canada, then France and finally settling in Liberia) – betray her idealized private sphere as tainted by “the values and structures of authority [patriarchy, capitalism] that they [sought] to criticize” (49).

Sánchez-Eppler’s primary example for the characteristic feminist-abolitionist retreat to the intangible is that of Tom’s divinely anointed death. He has not received any of his earthly desires – such as his freedom (promised to him but never granted by his first master), reunion with his family or their emancipation. Despite this, Stowe depicts Tom as at peace - even smiling and sublime- upon his death,

At this moment, the sudden flush of strength which the joy of meeting his [Tom’s] young master [George] had infused into the dying man gave way. A sudden sinking fell upon him; he closed his eyes; and that mysterious and sublime change passed over his face, that told the approach of other worlds. He began to draw his breath with long, deep inspirations; and his broad chest rose and fell, heavily. The expression of his face was that of a conqueror. ‘Who,—who,—who shall separate us from the love of Christ?’ he said, in a voice that contended with mortal weakness; and, with a smile, he fell asleep. (Stowe 439-440)

In her analysis, Sánchez-Eppler demonstrates that, “in trying to domesticate slavery, [feminist-abolitionist writers] recast its oppressions in familial terms, demonstrating the complicity of the two institutions and hence the degree to which domestic and sentimental antislavery writings are implicated in the very oppressions they seek to reform” (29). This may sound similar to Brown’s argument that Stowe criticizes both Northern and Southern homes for the infiltration of market values within their sacred domestic space. But, Sánchez-Eppler pushes her analysis further when she hones in on the fact that even Stowe’s reconfigured matriarchal home economy – achievable through the right combination of efficiency, politics and love - is implicated in the processes and structures it is meant to reform. Just as the masculine marketplace is critiqued for its unfettered capitalism, racism, patriarchy, so too might Stowe’s utopian domestic economy be depicted as racially-exclusive and patriarchal (Brown discerns the patriarchy but not entirely to the racism of Stowe’s domestic project). Tom’s intangible freedom is a prime example. Further, Sánchez-Eppler explores how feminist-abolitionist writers used the slave woman’s body as a “useful proxy” in equating their oppressions and treating “indelicate” topics such as the failure of the free woman to own her own body in marriage (34): we see this especially in the character of Cassie.

After this consideration of the limitations of the political endeavors of feminist-abolitionist writers, such as Stowe (and Brown too, but, to a different extent and of a different era), I transition fully to a series of readings of the African American writer-contemporaries of many of the feminist-abolitionists in Sánchez-Eppler’s study. I begin with Francis Harper’s 1896 novel, *Iola Leroy*, and move then to a reading of *Contending Forces* by Pauline Hopkins – reading both as examples of Reconstruction-era political and sentimental fiction. I conclude with Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* as an anti-domestic refiguring of Stowe, Harper and Hopkins’ works.

African American Women's Literary Renaissance as a Political Rejoinder to Feminist-Abolitionist Domestic Reform

In reviewing key instances of domestic labors (or the lack thereof) in *Iola Leroy*, *Contending Forces* and *Quicksand* I ask if and how these texts reject/address the legacies of feminist-abolitionist domesticity in their various uses and acts of housekeeping. As they minimize household labors, are they rejecting certain forms of domestic assimilation – such as that imagined in Stowe's sentimental possession? Where and how is domestic value reassigned in their refiguring of an ideal womanhood? How does their ideal womanhood stand apart from the cult of true womanhood? Finally, how do these novels - that import and reconfigure the domestic individual from sentimental fiction, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* - retain a connection to domestic individualism by demonstrating how this “working machinery” has a much longer half-life? Ultimately, the following readings consider how women are figured as political subjects differently in this body of African American women's writing than in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (and other feminist-abolitionist texts). I consider especially how their various patterns of production and consumption are the same or different from the ideal domesticity of Beecher and Stowe and also from later African American women's writing – like Larsen's.

Iola Leroy

Harper achieves a very different vision of a woman's relationship to domestic labors and politics in *Iola Leroy* – especially in the novel's conclusion. Not only does the novel refuse to banish African Americans to Africa, it doesn't resolve in the “ideal” configuration of heterosexual marriage and the bearing of children as the cornerstone of her domestic sphere either. Even as the novel pushes against these formulations of sentimental fiction (utilized to

different extents in feminist-abolitionist writings) it does hold up the formally-educated African Americans middle class as an ideal, producing a plentitude of characters who prefigure DuBois's talented tenth. *Iola Leroy* also refigures conventions of feminist-abolitionist writing and domestic individualism in her alternative narrative of history and reimagination of the boundaries of inheritance.⁵⁴ Some critics understand the centrality of a mulatta character (Iola) as pandering to white readers.⁵⁵ However Harper's inclusion of mixed-race characters and her gradual omission of white voices as the novel progresses (such that, by the end white characters have entirely disappeared) might better be understood as another mode of reconceptualizing an anti-racist feminist politics – this time offering a model that takes race as its central concern. In this imagination of an ideal African American public and private sphere – that is still very much concerned with domestic relations (such as relationships of equality between men and women, self-reliance and collective uplift) - it is striking that domestic labors are all but absent from the novel. And yet, the figure of the domestic individual still plays a role.

According to Carby, *Iola Leroy* pushed forward an anti-patriarchal project. She writes, “Black men exist as brothers and betrothed who do not engage in the patriarchal exchange of women but are present in a utopian framework that accents the possibilities of relationships of equality” (Carby in Harper xxiv). I take Carby's assertion as a starting point to consider where this framework of equality appears in the novel, asking how it is carried out. And especially, who is doing the housework? Harper's framing of the rights and responsibilities of the newly-emancipated African American community can be conceptualized as a refiguration of self-possession (perhaps in response to assimilationist ethics such as Stowe's sentimental possession,

⁵⁴ I rely initially on Carby's definition of these concepts as they are central to her reading of Harper, Hopkins, Larsen, Anna Julia Cooper, and others. I expand the scope of these concepts to ask about the status of domestic labors in African American women's writing of this period.

⁵⁵ Of which a primary example is Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists*.

which Brown theorizes as a remnant of the patriarchal order that Stowe more effectively criticized in other forms). In other ways as well Harper refigures conventions of feminist-abolitionist writing. But, in a twin rejection of prevailing stereotypes of African American women as either Mammy or Jezebel, Harper banishes both household labors and black women's sexuality from her novel. To explore this as a significant feature of Harper's feminist politics, and the beginnings of a reconceptualized domestic individualism, I begin by considering an instance of sentimental prose within *Iola Leroy* as it symbolizes the virtue of Harper's characters without recourse to their homes or domestic labors. I move then into Harper's focus on education and finally an examination of the few instances of domestic labor – by the novel's uneducated black characters - before transitioning to the work of Hopkins and Larsen.

Harper's vacuum of sexual pleasure has been well-theorized by Carby as necessary in order to emphasize that Iola and Dr. Latimer's union was "based on a mutual sharing of intellectual interest and a common commitment to the 'folk' and the 'race'," rather than base sexual impulses (79-80). In this period Harper not only needed to abide by the modest conventions of sentimental literature but also attempted to unseat various stereotypes of black women via the characters in her novel. Critics have paid very little attention to Harper's limited reliance on domestic labors. Her positioning of all well-educated African American women and men as fundamentally uninvolved with domestic labors prompts a reconsideration of the political potential of these activities – so well rehearsed in Stowe.

As for other writers of Harper's period: Sarah Orne Jewett, Kate Chopin, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman, these regionalist and early-feminist writers utilized domestic labors to different extents and for a variety of purposes. While I don't provide readings of these authors, I will note that the emergence of American literary Regionalism during

the period in which Harper, Hopkins and even Larsen rose to prominence (and the fact that they are not generally classified with this group) both diagnoses a literary-critical apartheid while suggesting that there existed a continued opening for these authors to keep alive and selectively reconfigure some of the conventions of sentimental literature that the figure of the domestic individual makes use of in her political endeavors. This is striking, since even Stowe moved away from sentimentalism as a literary device in her later writings, moving more toward Regionalism (some argue even helping to test out and develop this new genre of American writing).⁵⁶ Rather than devote attention to characterizing the white writer-contemporaries of Harper, Hopkins and Larsen, I instead retain comparisons to *Uncle Tom's Cabin* because of its explicitly political nature and unique development of the figure of the domestic individual, given Stowe's privileging of domestic labors in constructing the characters of her novel.

To return to Harper, although there are but a few instances in which domestic duties appear in *Iola Leroy*, a prominent use of domestic signifiers in constructing characters opens the novel: the politically-veiled discourse over butter and fresh eggs in the first chapter. As is characteristic of the remainder of the novel, it is the "folk" who speak of, perform and are characterized by domestic labors. Take, for example, how Robert Anderson and Aunt Linda's discussions about the freshness of the butter, eggs and fish convey news regarding the latest outcomes of Civil War battles. Robert, one of the few literate slaves in the novel – instructed by his Mistress "on the same principle she would have taught a pet animal amusing tricks" (Harper

⁵⁶ Cindy Weinstein writes, "through empathic narration, a thematics that often recovers women's authority and provides an alternative to patriarchal values, an emphasis on character over plot and recognition of regional characters in particular as psychologically complex, the inclusion of dialect as the way characters speak rather than as a mark of their queerness, and a focus on elements of plot that move readers outside conventional stories of heroism and romance, regionalist texts diversify their readers' repertory of cultural scripts for both men's and women's lives. Stowe makes it clear that regionalism could serve as a literary vehicle for social and cultural change" (134).

16) – describes the news to Aunt Linda using a cleverly coded language, “Splendid news in the papers. Secesh routed. Yankees whipped 'em out of their boots. Papers full of it. I tell you the eggs and the butter's mighty fresh this morning” (Harper 9). Robert adheres more closely to the code when conversing in the marketplace. Back at the plantation, with Aunt Linda, their relative privacy allows for more open dialog. These coded conversations set the stage for Harper’s argument for the abundant intelligence, worth and humanity of “the race.” As we see later, she does not make this a stable characteristic, but rather, a variable potential to be harnessed through the right political orientation. In this way, her tactics overlap with Stowe, whose political message revolves around a variable potential of the home that can only be achieved through the correct emotional (loving) and political (abolitionist) orientation toward domestic labors.

Despite the impression that this initial emphasis on domestic signifiers creates, beyond this conversation, there are few other instances of domestic labors in the novel. The reader doesn’t find any characters knitting or sewing in the parlor or during a political gathering. The protagonist, Iola, is found cooking just once, although she does take a position as a nurse on two occasions, the second of which is as a nurse and companion for a frail fifteen year old girl. As I will explore later, though, Iola’s nursing is depicted as wage-labor, rather than domestic duty, a difference that serves a distinct purpose in the political endeavors of racial uplift in this novel. In order to construct this argument, I first consider how domestic space is and is not – represented in *Iola Leroy*. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate how Harper’s writing begins a reconfiguration of the domestic individual – in which the potentials of “the race” are linked to and expressed through the potentials of the home – before moving on to an analysis of the ways in which Hopkins and Larsen carry this renovation even further.

Chapter 20 opens with an instance of Harper's sentimental prose in Harper, but with a focus on the outdoor setting through which her characters travel, rather than on the domestic space where they arrive. Harper writes,

“It was a lovely evening for the journey. The air was soft and balmy. The fields and hedges were redolent with flowers. Not a single cloud obscured the brightness of the moon or the splendor of the stars. The ancient trees were festooned with moss, which hung like graceful draperies. Ever and anon a startled hare glided over the path, and whip-poor-wills and crickets broke the restful silence of the night. Robert rode quietly along, quaffing the beauty of the scene and thinking of his boyish days, when he gathered nuts and wild plums in those woods; he also indulged pleasant reminiscences of later years, when, with Uncle Daniel and Tom Anderson, he attended the secret prayer-meetings. Iola rode along, conversing with Aunt Linda, amused and interested at the quaintness of her speech and the shrewdness of her intellect. To her the ride was delightful” (175).

Instead of setting a scene of domestic bounty, Harper constructs an ideal outdoor setting for the journey to the politically-charged prayer meeting that these characters are about to attend. Like Stowe's sentimental domestic prose, the reader's senses are called upon to connect the setting first to Harper's characters and ultimately to her greater political motive. She depicts this scene through many of the reader's senses: the soft, balmy feel of the air; the scent of abundant flowers and moss, the sound of insects in a restfully silent night, and the sight of both the radiant moon and graceful, tapestry-like moss. Taste, a prominent evocative sense for Stowe comes last and stands apart from the others in that it is linked to the era of slavery as it is situated in Robert's memory of gathering wild fruits and nuts as a child.

Although Harper, overall, doesn't shy away from naming specific details regarding the brutalities of slavery, here she chooses to link this peaceful setting to pleasant antebellum memories for Robert. In her focus on the inherent beauty of the natural setting and the ability for each of her characters to enjoy it both now and through past memories Harper creates an analogy between the inherent and abiding value of nature and that of her characters. In this scene Harper makes a statement not about the capacity for humans to cultivate pleasant and civilized domestic environs (the singular focus of Stowe) but about the value of her African American protagonists. These include former slaves: "folk" – like Aunt Linda, whose "quaint" speech (depicted throughout the novel in heavy and exaggerated, historically-inaccurate vernacular) might, for some, belie her "shrewd intellect" and Iola – a mulatta who was educated in the North and thought herself white until she was abducted into slavery following her father's death.

Iola's fair complexion serves as a physical reminder throughout the novel of the sexual violation of female slaves during and after slavery (Carby). As they travel through this abundant setting-Harper emphasizes the layered oppressions of female slaves as Aunt Linda and Iola marvel less in the splendor of their natural surroundings and more so in each other's company and rich conversation. Just as the natural environs and appreciation for it correlate to the virtue of Robert, this amusing and delightful conversation is portrayed as something that comes easily to both Iola, a highly articulate and well-trained nurse, and Aunt Linda, who has not received any formal education. As such, the ready conversation that takes place in a setting of natural splendor – which the characters abundantly appreciate (rather than a finely-appointed parlor or sparse and tidy home) - constructs the abundant virtues of these four characters. This approach renovates the figure of the domestic individual as it rejects the space of the home as the sole, or even primary, site for signifying the value of her female (and male) characters. Harper also reverses the

feminist-abolitionist turn to the ephemeral as she depicts her characters enjoying myriad earthly pleasures in this gorgeous natural setting and other rewards such as Iola and Aunt Linda's amusing and interesting conversation. That Robert recalls this splendor even during the time of slavery speaks Harper's message with even more emphasis. Harper's endeavor falls short only occasionally in her over-stylized depiction of folk characters. Harper's sometimes one-dimensional depiction of these characters also comes through in that the "folk" are the only figures who perform domestic labors in the home and (as such) are characterized in large part by such work.

Ten chapters later, when Iola, Dr. Latimer, and other well-educated characters meet for another political gathering, Harper provides only a very brief description of Mr. Stillman's "pleasant, spacious parlors" (246). Instead, Harper focuses on how they "were filled to overflowing with a select company of earnest men and women deeply interested in the welfare of the race" (246). Whereas Stowe took great pains to depict the virtues and vices of her characters through careful and extensive descriptions of their domestic environs and activities, Harper moves through those details with a remarkable speed - essentially ignoring domestic details in order to devote the utmost attention to descriptions of the political convictions and preoccupations of her characters. As if to further emphasize her distance from the post-bellum political imagination of Stowe (and her feminist-abolitionist contemporaries and descendants), the conversation that then takes place in this parlor setting is a debate between a number of the "leaders of the race" including a large group who are visiting from the South. Opening the "conversazione" is a misguided Bishop Tunster, who presents a paper titled, "Negro emigration" with which Dr. Latimer and others fiercely debate after, of course, opening the discussion by politely "speaking favorably of some of the salient points" (246). The thinkers of Iola's circle

take issue with this suggestion as well as the main points of the subsequent paper, presented by visiting Rev. Cantnor, on the topic of patriotism, in which he “assert[s] that the white race of this country is the broadest, most Christian, and humane of that branch of the human family” (249).

These examples demonstrate how Harper must have felt that the pedagogical goals of her novel would be best accomplished by focusing her rhetorical energies toward staging prominent political debates of the period, rather than by speaking her political message through the domestic tasks and settings of the novel. What appears to be a rejection of the domestic individual, in Harper’s near absence of domestic labors, both reimagines standard boundaries of inheritance while configuring a new model of self-possession for the domestic individual. If cooking, sewing, mending and knitting appear not once in the novel, they are abundantly replaced by terms that connote education, debate and uplift, such as book, meeting and school. Bread is almost entirely replaced by “bread-winner” (a role in *Iola Leroy* that applies to both male and female characters).⁵⁷

Nevertheless, it is possible to find a few instances of domestic activities. Thus, the political endeavors of the more educated characters of the novel co-exist with domestic labor in Harper’s redeployment of the domestic individual. Similar to the political discourse of butter and eggs, other scenes also reveal how Harper’s folk characters achieve self-sufficiency through household labors (as they engage in tasks that are quite similar to those they performed as

⁵⁷ On bread - another reversal of Stowe (and antebellum slave narratives) is the instance in which Captain Sellers, a white officer who escaped from prison to join the lines of the Northern army, is sheltered by a free black family. The reader learns that his escape is made successful through the assistance of an aged couple who feed and share with him their cabin before nailing shingles to his feed to throw the bloodhounds off his tracks. Their humble food includes, “some corn-bread, bacon, and coffee which he thought was made of scorched bran. Sellers reports that he never ate a meal that he relished more than the one he took with them. Just before he went they knelt down and prayed with him. It seemed as if his very hair stood on his head, their prayer was so solemn” (52).

slaves.⁵⁸ Now, these labors grant them a self-possession that emerges finally in the autonomous and utopian black community imagined at the conclusion of the novel. In contrast to feminist-abolitionist writings, the inter-dependence and collective self-sufficiency of these folk characters requires little or no contact between the races. In this domestic refiguring of the possessive individual, independence becomes inter-dependence and individualized self-sufficiency becomes a collective endeavor within the black community. The characters who do pursue black-white alliances suffer because of it. In chapter twenty, Aunt Linda teaches a lesson about emancipated slaves who had been coerced into selling their votes for a variety of payments: cash, sugar, flour and meat. While Aunt Linda, Iola and Robert Anderson can surely empathize with fellow citizens who, while newly enfranchised, still struggle to put food on the table, they clearly have no patience for those who would collaborate with corrupt white Southern politicians. In Harper's universe, what goes around come around.

To demonstrate, we are give the example of Uncle Jake Williams who receives payment as sugar and flour only to discover, after serving copious amounts of it to his guests one night, that the bag is filled with sand covered only by a thin topping of real sugar. Next, the reader learns about Uncle Job, whose wife angrily discards the meat and flour he has received as a payment for his vote. Aunt Polly's refusal to use this food, because of the way in which it was obtained, leaves Uncle Job in tears – for whom Aunt Linda (who tells the story) has no sympathy at all. As a project of uplift, these examples instruct the reader that no good will come of dishonest means. As Aunt Polly explains in her “good tongue-lahin” of her husband, ““Oder

⁵⁸ Take, for example, this passage regarding Aunt Linda's cooking, “The next day, Robert, accompanied by Iola, went to the settlement to take supper with Aunt Linda, and a very luscious affair it was. Her fingers had not lost their skill since she had tasted the sweets of freedom. Her biscuits were just as light and flaky as ever. Her jelly was as bright as amber, and her preserves were perfectly delicious” (164).

people,' she said, 'a wotin' ter lib good, an' you a sellin' yore wote! Ain't you got 'nuff ob ole Marster, an' ole Marster bin cuttin' you up? It [the flour and meat] shan't stay yer' (178). Here, especially, domestic space emerges as a place of instruction in terms of how to operate both within the home but also in the public sphere. Aunt Linda's domestic instruction seeks to improve the lot of the entire race.

Harper's parable teaches that dishonest endeavors toward individually prosperous are bound to fail through a variety of checks and balances. If the corrupt whites come through with a genuine bribe, then the black voter must recon with a wife of good character and integrity. And, if both husband and wife take the path of dishonor, then their endeavor will be sabotaged by the deception of their white compatriots. Thus, the enduring message is that community solidarity might be a more difficult route, but that the moral and respectable path is bound to result, with patience, in collective success. As in the scene of the conversazione between those "deeply interested in the welfare of the race" (eg. the educated elite) the autonomy of the black community is central to Harper's utopian tale. Even as Harper writes with full knowledge of the failures of reconstruction, she offers her readers an alternative historical narrative in which her African American characters enjoy tangible pleasures including a reconfigured and independent self-possession within the United States and on their own terms.

In the public realm, it might seem amiss that Harper offers no critique about the inability of black women to vote. Aunt Linda seems fairly satisfied that wives, like Aunt Polly, can exert influence in the public sphere by influencing their husbands. Iola, who demonstrates throughout the novel her willingness to express her opinions in political debate, is also remarkably silent, asking if Aunt Linda felt bad for Uncle Job when his wife threw out the ill-obtained flour and meat. This might, in part, be reflective of Harper's broken alliance with the white women's

suffrage movement. Carby writes that when Harper was forced to choose between the political movement for African American men's suffrage and universal women's suffrage she aligned with the cause that would become the 15th amendment (68). However, since Harper readily demonstrates that black and white voters alike may be prone to corruption and dishonesty, we might read Aunt Linda and Iola's silence on the issue of women's suffrage as more reflective of Harper's belief that political practice must have a wider focus than merely "obtaining the franchise" (Carby 70). As she saw it, even without the right to vote, Harper herself had been active in public debate for nearly forty years and, as she once stated to an international audience, "it was voters... who tortured, burned and lynched black people" (Carby 70). The collective remedy for this behavior is education, as Iola suggests in her other question of Aunt Linda, "if it were shabby for an ignorant colored man to sell his vote, wasn't it shabbier for an intelligent white man to buy it?" (178), suggesting that an educated black man would not make the same error. Whereas domestic activities are very seldom mentioned in the novel, the theme of reading and education cannot be ignored.

The relationship between education and household labors is most visible in Aunt Linda. She is too burdened to learn how to read: first as a slave (who is punished when found with a book) and then as a free woman whose unending labors sustain herself and her husband. Harper has been criticized for her sometimes patronizing portrayal of the folk characters in her novel and Aunt Linda's explanation for her continued illiteracy supports this critique, stating, "Why, Robby, I think it would gib me de hysterics ef I war to try to git book larnin' froo my pore ole head" (156). With most other characters – or, at least the educated ones – there is no linkage made between household labors and education. But, overall Harper responds to and revises Stowe's turn to the intangible in her focus on education over physical labors. There is an

analogous movement in the sense that this is also a shift from the tangible to the metaphysical. The rewards Harper imagines for her characters are fit to be enjoyed in this life and (even the intellectual labors of the most highly-educated) are meant to result also in tangible gains for the *entire* community. Thus, the self-possession of Harper's revised domestic individualism is shown to be a collective endeavor, rather than an individual pursuit. Carby also contends that the "consequences of Iola's changed circumstances were not limited to individual character but represented the circumstances of the race" (74). In this way, also, Harper refigures the narrative devices of her feminist-abolitionist contemporaries and predecessors, who were unable to account fully for the structural dimensions of power and inequality as they related quite differently to race, gender and social class.

It is also important to note that Harper's evacuation of physical labors from her middle-class characters' lives can be (at least partially) accounted for by the dichotomized structure of political debate within which she was situated. Carby writes how Harper was limited by the conventions of the period when she observes how Harper "worked within the parameters of the division between mental and manual labor, symbolized as intellectuals and the folk, that became characterized during the next decade as the schism between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois" (93). For Stowe, it is clear that it was still much too difficult for her imagine tangible rewards for her black characters in this life and especially in her own backyard. So, these characters either attain their rewards in heaven (Tom), or if they remain alive, are exported to Liberia to live out the remainder of their days (Topsy, Eliza and George).

Harper, on the other hand, turns away from physical labors in order to more distinctly privilege mental and intellectual endeavors. It's unfortunate that she reproduces a class divide within her ideal black community, but one also must consider that if, during this period, the *only*

viable options for African American women to earn a wage were domestic labors, perhaps Harper didn't care (or feel it necessary) to describe these options to her readers. Carby writes, "Harper did not confine her text to the limited options available to women in the domestic domain or to blacks in the increasingly circumscribed and political context of the separation of the races (64-65). Harper, instead, believed that "Women... should not be an influence in the domestic sphere only but should enter the 'political estate'" (Harper quoted in Carby 69). This quote indicates that Harper wanted to retain and even merge both "spheres" of influence – even if this desire did not fully manifest itself in *Iola Leroy*.

Contending Forces

By contrast, Francis Hopkins' *Contending Forces*, published just eight years after *Iola Leroy*, includes slightly more accounting of everyday domestic duties such as sewing and cooking. In fact, one of the chapters unfolds around a sewing circle in Ma Smith's parlor. The participants convene to sew garments – the profits of which were to be used to help pay off the mortgage of the one of "the most prominent" churches of color in New England (to which Ma Smith belonged). Over the course of the evening, Ma Smith lectures on "the woman question" and, in so doing, argues that the measure of a black woman's virtue can only be assessed in situations in which she has had a legitimate choice. This reframing of the Jezebel figure (first by Smith's daughter, Dora, and then by Mrs. Smith herself) proves to be of great interest to Sappho – the book's main character - who previously bore a child after being kidnapped and held captive in a brothel for three weeks. The reader, however, does not learn of Sappho's unfortunate history until well into the novel (chapter 14). At this point, Sappho's virtue, kindness and diligence have been well-established in her everyday acts. As with Rachel Halliday (but unlike Iola), Sappho's

high moral standards are primarily developed by way of domestic signifiers – such as her fine embroidery, which transforms her room at Ma Smith’s boarding house from something sparse but serviceable into a lovely, inviting room, complete with an improvised couch, muslin drapes and embroidered curtains and a tablecloth.

Besides Sappho, Ma Smith and her daughter, Dora, are the characters who perform the most visible domestic/crafting labors in *Contending Forces*. In fact, Ma Smith and her lodging house function similarly to Rachel Halliday’s home in that Ma’s lodging house provides a comforting refuge to travelers of high moral standards. On the evening of a party organized in honor of Sappho, the lodge’s newest tenant, Ma Smith’s home is described as warm and tidy, but modestly decorated. Hopkins writes, “Dora lighted the lamps all over the house on Sunday night as soon as it fell dark. In the parlor there was a handsome piano lamp, which was only used on special occasions; it was lighted, and threw a soft, warm glow over the neat woolen carpet, the modest furniture and few ornaments. In a corner stood Dora’s piano, given her on her sixteenth birthday by her brother” (103-104). In this way, Ma Smith’s lodging house is shown to be carefully appointed, but appropriately modest. This balance of moderation and quality aligns with the ideology of true womanhood from which black women had historically been excluded. The quality of true womanhood that Hopkins appeals to here is Ma Smith’s “good taste” that is visible through her unassuming and well-cared for home. Harper calls upon narrative and structural conventions of sentimental literature (such as Iola’s role as protagonist and instructional moral compass and the overall progress of Iola’s life from deprived orphan to wife) to appeal to a variety of readers (Carby 72-73). Hopkins makes use of some typically sentimental plot formulas (Sappho also loses her family connections and is the subject of great misfortune, only to be redeemed in the end through her strong character and unfailing virtue). Hopkins also

employs household labors as domestic signifiers to a much greater extent than Harper and in closer connection to the way Stowe utilized these labors.

Hopkins' use of domestic signifiers expands Harper's imagination of African American collective (and especially female) self-sufficiency by including characters who must work "out of necessity" and accordingly, whose daily concerns revolve as much around making a living as political matters. This is visible as Ma and Dora prepare food the day before Sappho's party. Here Ma explains the power of homemade food, "'Good things to eat,' said Ma Smith, as she industriously beat eggs, sugar and butter together in a large yellow bowl, 'good things to eat make a man respect himself and look up in the world. You can't feel that you are nobody all the time if once in a while you eat the same quality of food that a millionaire does'" (103). While the whisked eggs and butter are not described as if they would rather be there, in that bowl, than anywhere else (as Stowe describes the sizzling ham and chicken in Rachel's kitchen), the reader does perceive, in a more subdued way, how Ma Smith employs her domestic skills specifically to physically and morally nurture her tenants/guests.

Hopkins describes how Ma Smith had cultivated a collection of lodgers over the years who were "respectable though unlettered people, who possessed kindly hearts and honesty of purpose in a greater degree than one generally finds in a lodging-house" (103). This group of "high-toned" and "pretty nice" tenants was a result of Ma's "great desire" to,

make them as happy together as possible, and to this end she had Dora institute musical evenings or reception nights, that her tenants might have a better opportunity of becoming acquainted with each other. She argued, logically enough, that those who were inclined to stray from right paths would be influenced either in favor of upright conduct or else shamed into an acceptance of the right. It soon became noised about that very

pleasant times were enjoyed in that house; and that a sick lodger had been nursed back to health, instead of being hustled into the hospital ambulance at the first sign of sickness.

(Hopkins 103-104)

In Hopkins' imagination of the postbellum era, the enduring and instrumental value of home translates beyond the single-family home to all sorts of lodging places, even a boarding house. Like Harper, Hopkins represents self-possessed individuals as her ideal citizen-subject – as she constructs a variety of female characters who rely on their own skills and labors to be self-sufficient. This echoes Iola's statement that more women should have a job, since happier marriages result when women can support themselves. Both Harper and Hopkins push against Brown's domestic individualism as black women provide the singular examples of domestic virtue in these novels.

Ma Smith as the owner and operator of the boarding house and Sappho, who diligently works from dawn to dusk as a typist within her room at the house, are not the only examples of self-sufficient female characters. Mrs. Ophelia Davis and Mrs. Sarah Ann White operate the First-class New Orleans Laundry in the basement of the lodging house. Ma Smith's daughter, Dora, meanwhile has actually taken up most of the labors of the lodging house as her mother grows older and less capable of the physical labors of managing the rooms. Ma Smith's son, Willie, also supports the house through his employment at a local hotel but, as with Harper, Hopkins' focus on self-sustaining labors concentrates on her female characters. As with Sappho, the reader comes to know Dora's constitution initially through her domestic labors.

Hopkins' introduction to Dora begins with her "Thank heaven that is done," as Dora completes a very full day of domestic chores. However, within a few minutes she has swept her mother up in a bout of cheerful dancing. In this introduction, the reader learns of Dora's capable

domestic skills: she has just spent most of a day washing windows, cleaning paint, tacking carpet, and arranging furniture to prepare a room for their new lodger but responds to her mother that she is “not very tired, mummy dear; only this continual scrub and dig is not always the cheerful work we would like to think it. Still I don’t care as long as the house pays” (81). Ma Smith’s description of Dora’s polite manner and delicate beauty appears only secondarily to her characterization through her capable and good-natured household labors. Hopkins writes, “she [Ma Smith] glanced with loving pride at the graceful figure before her, at the smooth bands of dark-brown hair, now a little ruffled and disordered, and at the delicate brown face, now somewhat puckered and out of sorts from weariness” (80). The order of exposition of Dora’s skills and features is significant as her domestic skills are privileged – but not in the same way that Augustine St. Clare would mention *only* the domestic skills of Dinah. Instead, Dora’s capabilities within the home combine with her physical features to compose a new discourse of black womanhood – characterized through a reconfiguration of the domestic individual. In this, I agree with Carby that Harper, Hopkins and the other writers of the Black women’s literary renaissance wrote not merely as a response to Stowe, but also to an entire cultural milieu that both established a public voice for African American women while “develop[ing] their own discourse of black womanhood” (Carby 39).

In contrast to the divide between intellectual and physical laborers found in Harper, Hopkins’ wage laboring characters also formulate an alternative moral compass for the readers. Countering ideologies of true womanhood, Mrs. Ophelia Davis and Mrs. Sarah Ann White tell a story of “stealing” from their former masters that they understand as anything but amoral. On the day she and Sarah Ann engage the rooms at the Smith house Ophelia explains,

"yas'm, I'm tired o'livin' in white folkses' kitchens... Yas'm, I kin git my five dollars a week with anyone; but ef you puts on a decent dress to go to church with a-Sunday afternoon, the mistis is a-wonderin' how you kin 'ford sech style and you nuthin' but a cook in her kitchen. Yas'm, I've got a silk dress, two of 'em, an' a lace shawl an' a gold watch and chain. People wants ter know how'd I git 'em. I come by 'em hones', I did. Yas'm, when my ol' mistis left her great big house an' all that good stuff--silver an' things--a-layin' that fer anyone to pick up that had sense 'nough to know a good thing an' git it ahead of enybody else, I jes' said to myself: "Phelia, chile, now's yer time!" Yas'm, I feathered my nes', I jes' did. Sarah Ann, you 'member that time, honey, an' how skeered we was fer fear some o' them Union sojers would ketch us. You stuffed yerself with greenbacks, but, honey, I took clo's, too."

"Bless Gawd, Sis'r' Phelia," replied her friend, with a chuckle and a great shaking of her fat sides; "bless Gawd, I disremember how much I did took in that ar pile; but Lord love yer, honey, I'se got some o' that money yet. (105-106)

In addition, Dora's description of her religion, during a conversation with Sappho, offers a striking rejoinder to white women's middle-class values as she explains to Sappho that her religion is "short, and to the point--feed the starving thief and make him an honest man; cover your friend's faults with the mantle of charity and keep her in the path of virtue" (100). This statement catches Sappho's interest and she asks Dora to elaborate, "Then you are not one of those who think that a woman should be condemned to eternal banishment for the sake of one misstep?" To which Dora replies,

Not I, indeed; I have always felt a great curiosity to know the reason why each individual woman loses character and standing in the eyes of the world. I believe that we would

hang our heads in shame at having the temerity to judge a fallen sister, could we but know the circumstances attending many such cases. And, after all we may do or say," continued the girl softly, "the best of us, who have lived the purest lives on earth that mortal can conceive, find at last that our only hope lies in the words of that text—'This man receiveth sinners'." (101)

This statement brings Sappho to tears as she narrates the importance of Dora's perspective, "and if our race ever amounts to anything in this world, it will be because such women as you are raised up to save us" (101). Here, bending the rigid rules of religion (Dora), female virtue (Sappho) and law and inheritance (Mrs. Davis and Mrs. White) is not just permitted, but is actively encouraged and celebrated.

Hopkins' novel is more expansive than Harper's in multiple ways. In addition to her inclusion of household labors and the ability of characters to both perform these labors *and* theorize alternative moral standards and discourses of black womanhood, Hopkins offers a transnational critique of imperialism. Her introductory tale, of the Monfort family of the British West Indies, allows for an exploration of the racial dynamics of imperialism - that relates both to domestic and international colonial endeavors carried about via the early twentieth century mandate of Manifest Destiny. Hopkins was critical - in her fiction and also in public lectures - of the racism that structured imperialism in all its forms. Her overarching message stressed how "current oppression need be understood in the context of past oppression" (Carby 129). In this way, she was able to present an alternative narrative of American history while "questioning the [typical] boundaries of inheritance" made available to black women in this era (Carby 128).

Hopkins utilized a variety of devices to trouble standard paths of inheritance in a way that linked current oppressions to past injustices. In Carby's analysis of the inheritances of African

Americans she focuses on mulatta characters as “vehicles” for Hopkins to address inheritance as it relates to sexual contact between the races. Hopkins also foregrounds the inheritances of violence that underlie these illicit sexual relations. As such, Hopkins rewrites the prevailing concepts of inheritance, in which inheritances are not just monetary and physical (hair, skin, eyes), but also behavioral. Hopkins’ primary example of behavioral inheritance is John Langley, who has inherited from his ancestor, the “villainous and unscrupulous” Anson Pollock, a nature tainted by violence, ignorance and the “worst features of a dominant race with an enslaved race” (ch. 9). In a more extended description of Langley, Harper rewrites history and inheritance such that “following the condition of the mother” (inheriting her physical characteristics and “moral nature”) is depicted as the more desirable path,

Langley's nature was the natural product of such an institution as slavery. Natural instinct for good had been perverted by a mixture of "cracker" blood of the lowest type on his father's side with whatever God-saving quality that might have been loaned the Negro by pitying nature. This blood, while it gave him the pleasant features of the Caucasian race, vitiated his moral nature and left it stranded high and dry on the shore of blind ignorance, and there he seemed content to dwell, supinely self-satisfied with the narrow boundary of the horizon of his mental vision. (ch 7)

Clearly not every mulatto character suffers the misfortune of Langley’s inheritance. His polluted morality, instead, is shown to be the result of the particularly violent lineage on his white, slaveholding side.

In both Harper and Hopkins’ worlds mulatto characters receive multifaceted inheritances from their white ancestors (this is the case in Larsen’s *Quicksand* as well), which are often financial. For Iola Leroy, her inheritance initially allows for her education in the North and goes

on to provide her a significant measure of security such that her choices to work are just that: choices, rather than necessity. Ma Smith, Dora and Harry receive their rightful inheritance as the novel concludes. Since this conclusion is somewhat unexpected, these characters have had ample ability to demonstrate their commitment to the domestic labors that are necessary to sustain them throughout the novel. The point of these comparisons is to argue that the inclusion and sustained use of domestic signifiers (both as plot devices and as a primary means to communicate the character of an individual) is an integral part of Hopkins' exploration of a more complex model of inheritance. Hopkins' model of inheritance thus allows her to traffic in histories of violence, disinheritance, denial, self-sufficiency, sexual relations, race and colonialism. Additionally, the potential of the race and of the home converge more closely in the characters of Ma Smith, Dora and Sappho as reformulated instances of domestic individualism.

Quicksand

Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), published nearly three decades after *Contending Forces*, offers even more to explore relative to themes of inheritance, self-possession and new discourses of black womanhood. Through the protagonist, Helga's, unending search for community, the novel presents a parody and critique of African-American middle class values, marriage and domesticity and black women as exotic specimens (in Helga's sojourn in Denmark). If we compare the endings of the novels surveyed here, Larsen offers the least optimistic resolution for her African American protagonist. The novel falls well outside of the genre of sentimental fiction and might even be called an anti-domestic novel. Here too domesticity performs political labors – primarily as a critique of the institution of marriage, but also as a criticism of middle-class (black) propriety and processes of “uplift.” These critiques are

carried out via Helga's outsider status at Naxos and also the absolutely dismal conclusion of Helga's precipitous marriage to a hedonistic preacher, return to the South and, finally, the suggestion of her impending death.

Like Iola, Mrs. Smith, Dora and Willie, Helga benefits from a sizeable inheritance from a white family member. In Helga's case, it is from her uncle, who sends it along with a letter as he forever severs their ties. While this provides Helga the means to travel to Copenhagen (midway through the novel) and stay with another relative of her late mother, she struggles for the majority of the novel with financial security. This insecurity leads her to take on a variety of labors and roles. By contrast, monetary inheritance provides for both Iola and the Smiths longstanding measures of security. Early in life, Helga's monetary inheritance appears often enough that she is sent to a prestigious black college and is also afforded the ability to cultivate expensive and flamboyant tastes. However, she frequently struggles to sustain herself throughout the novel – especially since so many options for financial security prove to be morally unacceptable to Helga.

Ultimately, in *Quicksand*, inheritance moves to the background as a mode of critique. Helga's monetary inheritance is fleeting. Her physical inheritance as a mulatta marks her as an outsider, but this is not the primary device used to signify her lack of belonging. Finally, her behavioral inheritance emerges primarily in the restlessness she has apparently derived from her father, who deserted her white mother when Helga was a small child. Helga inherits moments of her mother's romantic nature. But, in contrast to Hopkins' historical concept of inheritance, Helga's inheritances are more genealogical and individualistic. As such, Larsen steers Helga toward a mode of domestic individualism that focuses much less on her making of home or community, and more toward a more modern form of domestic individualism that considers

consumption as well as production in processes of the feminization of selfhood and the alignment of the domestic and the individual (Brown 5-7). To demonstrate, I now track various ways Helga's sustains herself over the course of the novel. Each form leads her in and out of the variety of communities (both domestic and abroad, African American and white, urban and rural, Northern and Southern) available to a woman like Helga in the early twentieth-century.

Helga's attempts to sustain herself throughout the novel include her initial, and quite secure, employment as a teacher at Naxos: a boarding school modeled after Tuskegee and similar institutions of the period. Here, Helga finds herself completely stifled with the mechanistic, rigid and conformist processes of uplift found at the school. Further, Helga's mixed-race heritage and lack of family status position her as an outsider, even after she becomes engaged to fellow teacher, James Vale, of a reputable family. Thus, her intellectual labors at this well-regarded, but continuing her labors at this snobbish institution become too great a moral compromise. So, Helga hastily flees from Naxos, with only partial knowledge of the employment difficulties that will result from her precipitous departure (it prevents her from receiving a letter of recommendation). She takes up residence at a YMCA and spends many days soliciting work through various employment agencies. When she has just about run out of funds and after finding that a black woman like herself is seen as qualified for little more than housekeeping positions (but actually not qualified for anything, really, without some form of connection or recommendation) Helga finally secures employment as the personal assistant and editor to Mrs. Hayes-Rore who will be traveling from Chicago to New York to give speeches on women's issues and racial uplift. This position is acceptable to Helga for the short term of her employment and Mrs. Hayes-Rore's referrals and connections lead Helga to secretarial work at an insurance agency and lodging at the home of the stylish and well-off young widower, Anne Grey.

This time, it's not Helga's employment that drives her away but a gradual restlessness in which "all interest had gone out of living" (47). Facilitated by the inheritance check from her uncle, Helga flees to Denmark, where she becomes the exotic and celebrated guest of her distant relatives. She does find employment, of a sort, as she poses as the favored model and muse to a famed painter and acquaintance of her aunt and uncle. This "employment" is cut off after an unexpected and unsavory proposal by the self-assured artist, to which Helga replies that she is "not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don't at all care to be owned. Even by you" (87). Helga is repulsed by the well-connected painter, Axel Olsen's, interest in her as a sexual object and tool of his trade. As Olsen initially explains it, "for me it will be an experience. It may be that with you, Helga, for wife, I will become great. Immortal. Who knows?" (86-87). A short time later he adds, "'You know, Helga, you are a contradiction... You have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest buyer. I should of course be happy that it is I. And I am.' He stopped, contemplating her, lost apparently for the second, in pleasant thoughts of the future" (Larsen 87). Helga understands all of this completely – without Olsen having to explain it to her – as she has already lost interest in this man from whom she initially sought favor. While Olsen's ability to provide for her every material desire might appeal to Helga's aesthetic sensibilities (in the same way as Anne's exquisitely decorated home) Helga makes clear that this also is not a position that she would ever be willing to permanently occupy.

Although not religious or particularly concerned with traditional forms of female propriety, Helga is directed through all of these modes of self-sufficiency by a well-defined moral compass that once more propels her beyond her current location of relative stability into an indefinite and undefined return to Harlem. Helga's final means of "employment" finds her as

the wife and mother of a Southern preacher, who she meets by chance after an emotional final encounter with Dr. Anderson, Anne's new husband, and a former suitor of Helga's (from her days at Naxos – although Dr. Anderson is critical of the institution, unlike James Vale). In many ways this final position is a combination of all of the modes of employment and sustenance that Helga has previously rejected. In the tiny Alabama town where the “grandiloquent” Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green takes his new wife Helga is all of the following: an educator, a beacon of uplift, a sexual possession, an exotic outsider, and a housekeeper. One final new labor – that of mothering – though, forbids her finally any option for escape. Even as she considers deserting her young family she is haunted and called back by the thought of her four small children forever calling out her name. In addition, Helga's (childbearing) labors have been so frequent that she is physically spent and quite ill. Larsen writes,

It seemed hundreds of years since she had been strong. And she would need strength. For, in some way she was determined to get herself out of this bog into which she had strayed. Or – she would have to die. She couldn't endure it. Her suffocation and shrinking loathing were too great. Not to be borne. Again. For she had to admit that it wasn't new, this feeling of dissatisfaction, of asphyxiation. Something like this she had experienced before. In Naxos. In New York. In Copenhagen. This differed only in degree. And it was of the present and therefore seemingly more reasonable. The other revulsions were of the past, and now less explainable. (134)

The long recovery from the birth of her fourth child followed by the impending labors of a fifth leave the distinct impression of her immanent death. Larsen writes, “And hardly had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned from the homes of the neighbors, when she began to have her fifth child” (135). The variety of labors that

Helga occupies and rejects over the course of the novel present the development of many of the themes discussed previously.

While Helga's final appointment offers an amalgamation (of sorts) of her previous modes of employment/production, this is the one station in which her ability to consume is severely restricted. Larsen's final twist in Helga's reconfigured domestic individualism is that, along with the sexual "freedom" of marriage, she is forced into reproductive labor and out of her freewheeling earlier patterns of consumption. But, Larsen's use of and take on domestic labors (both productive and consumptive) develop not just in this final sketch of rural Alabama, where Helga is made exclusively in charge of the entire household: including the children, housekeeping, a garden, chickens, even a pig (120). Helga's initial vision of this new environment and station in life sees in it a respite from the "things" that she has recently decided "hasn't been, weren't, enough for her" as she sees now the opportunity to seize the elusive, "something else besides... that old question of happiness" (116). She is happy to give up the ways of a mobile young woman who can purchase "things" but not happiness. Just before her elopement Helga reasons, "all I've ever had in life has been things – except just this one time" (116). This "one time" is her hazy and emotionally charged redemption the night before at a Harlem church in which Reverend Green was preaching.

Prior to her final retreat South, Helga appreciates well-decorated domestic environments and takes part in their cultivation. Both her lodging room at Naxos and Anne's home in Harlem are described in intricate detail and with close attention to the fine objects that project the character, financial status and taste of their inhabitants. In fact, Larsen's description Helga's room occupy the very first lines of the novel,

Helga Crane sat alone in her room... Only a single reading lamp, dimmed by a great black and red shade, made a pool of light on the blue Chinese carpet, on the bright covers of the books which she had taken down from their long shelves, on the white pages of the opened one selected, on the shining brass bowl crowded with many-colored nasturtiums beside her on the low table, and on the oriental silk which covered the stool at her slim feet. (1)

These objects demonstrate Helga's character as much as anything she says or does in the novel. Likewise Anne's sitting room is richly described and meant to represent not just Anne, but also Helga, who readily and with ample knowledge appreciates the careful details of her lodging house. Finally, during her time in Holland, a favorite activity of Helga's Aunt is to purchase for and dress Helga in an never-ending array of lavish, exotic and garish garments that ultimately feel, to Helga, more like costumes meant to amplify her status as an exotic outsider. With the exception of Helga's final years as a married woman in Alabama, her adventures are always punctuated with careful descriptions of the "things" that adorn Helga and her surroundings. Through Larsen's depictions of these various modes of consumption she suggests that there is a politics of consumption that isn't just about accumulation or conspicuous consumption, but is about consuming in the "right" way. This evokes Stowe's insistence that domestic labors be carried out under the "correct" sentiment, but in Larsen's revision Helga – as domestic individual - allows for an exploration of racialized identity and the impossibly fraught politics of consumption.

Especially regarding Helga's consumption of and feelings toward these "things," Larsen's representation of the condition of the black woman in capitalist modernity. In the words of Carby, Helga depicts the full complexity of the modern alienated individual (170). This

appears in many forms: in Helga's final unhappiness with "things," but especially as Larsen satirizes Stowe's turn to the intangible that is made possible through the religious fervor of her characters. The final result of Helga's constant alienation is a desperate grasping at religious salvation. Whereas this provides a happy resolution for the characters of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (and religion remains a positive device in *Contending Forces* as well –especially when Maebel Beaubean/Sappho seeks the solace of a convent on two important occasions in the novel) Helga's retreat to the spiritual proves to be ill-fated.

From this development, Larsen launches a final scathing critique of both the physical and spiritual existences available to black women in this period. By providing Helga an astounding mobility that allows her a great degree of freedom to change her life circumstances at whim – Larsen unpacks the myriad hierarchies to which black women were subject in this period. The "things" that Helga is able to attain and enjoy represent the glittery promises of capitalism and progress. The illusion that one's lineage no longer matters since anyone can work hard enough to attain material luxuries and their attendant comfort and prestige is demonstrated to be false time and again: from the snobbery at Naxos to Helga's "delicate" nature that evokes pity from her hard-working and hardy female parishioners in Alabama. When Helga finally rejects the allure of materialism, Larsen thrusts her into the only possible alternative space available at the time: that of religion, homemaking and endless child-bearing. Even in her "relative status" as the preacher's wife Helga is secretly looked down upon (but always with the appropriate level of compassion and pity) by the locals because of her sensitive city nature and, ultimately, her inability to subsist in this environment.

In each of her roles Helga offers a vantage of new discourses of black womanhood in the early twentieth-century. At Naxos she is a stylish nonconformist caught in the stark machinery of

uplift. This overlaps with the other teachers' snobbish rejection of Helga's mixed-race heritage. In Harlem she is neither a total iconoclast – in which she might associate with white men (although this isn't *really* an option – as only white women, at this point, really have this liberty) – nor is she sufficiently agitated by the conditions of the race (as are Anne and Dr. Anderson). Helga is impressed with Anne's refined middle class tastes and abundant social life but ultimately cannot slide into this role either as she lacks the financial means. In Denmark, Helga is treated as a pampered exotic specimen. Whereas at Naxos and at some moments in Harlem she was not black enough, in Denmark she is perceived to be a pure conduit of the African race. Helga appreciates the luxurious possibilities that a permanent alliance with her Danish suitor would allow. She could then – to a certain extent - emulate Anne's ideal life as she once perceived during her time in Harlem: "Some day she intended to marry one of those alluring brown or yellow men who danced attendance on her. Already financially successful, any one of them could give to her the things which she had now come to desire, a home like Anne's, cars of expensive makes such as lined the avenue, clothes and furs from Bendel's and Revillon Frères', servants, and leisure" (45). But, Helga has long since rejected those dreams – especially as she discovered and was irritated by glaring inconsistencies in Anne's race pride, in which she "aped their [white people's] clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race" (48). Finally, in Alabama the possibilities for Helga's black womanhood become ever more constricted until they are confined only to her own small private sphere of the home. She might emulate fellow parishioners who trust in "'de Lawd' looking after us all" even as they are all tired and "half-sick" all the time (125). Their womanhood is one of constant sacrifice and waiting for their rewards in the next life. As one

woman who has “had six children in about as many years” describes it, “Laws chile, we’s all ti’ed. An’ Ah reckons we’s all gwine a be ti’ed till kingdom come. Jes’ make de bes’ of et, honey. Jes’ make de bes’ yuh can” (125). Ultimately Larsen rejects all of these options of modern black womanhood as Helga is denied the possibility to ever come home – or truly *have* a home (although she desires it and feels it almost attained on various occasions (30, 116).

As Helga models a different mode of self-possession, her version could be read as entirely individualistic. Rather than attempting to construct a collective solution to the problems facing the black community, Helga frequently acts in her own self-interest as she eventually rejects every person who attempts to connect with her over the course of the novel. The first to fall victim to this trend is her fiancé James Vale (24). Vale is followed by Helga’s dear friend, Anne, in whose home she lives for a number of years. After Anne comes Helga’s Danish relatives and their wealthy and famous friend, Herr Olsen (71). Finally, Helga directs her disdain at her husband and the father of her multiple children, who is entirely self-serving but well-regarded in his community. On a certain level, Helga’s inability to fully settle into a community seems to be a feature of her own personality: one which swings decidedly from extreme positions many times throughout the novel. For instance, Helga’s complete assurance that she will not to return to Harlem to attend Anne and Dr. Anderson’s wedding turns into an absolute resolve that she must, in fact go. Upon receiving their wedding invitation she reflects on the situation of the black American,

Go back to America, where they hated Negroes! To America where Negroes were not people. To America, where Negroes were allowed to be beggars only, of life, of happiness, of security. To America, where everything had been taken from those dark ones, liberty, respect, even the labor of their hands. To America, where if one had Negro

blood, one mustn't expect money, education, or, sometimes, even work whereby one might earn bread. Perhaps she was wrong to bother about it now that she was so far away. Helga couldn't, however, help it. Never could she recall the shames and often the absolute horrors of the black man's existence in America without the quickening of her heart's beating and a sensation of disturbing nausea. It was too awful. The sense of dread of it was almost a tangible thing in her throat. And certainly she wouldn't go back for any such idiotic reason as Anne's getting married to that offensive Robert Anderson. Anne was really too amusing. (82)

But, prompted in part by Axel's self-assured proposal, Helga discovers a profound nostalgia for black Harlem and her former life in America. She describes it as an "incompleteness" and says to herself, "I'm homesick, not for America, but for Negroes. That's the trouble" (92). Her conflicting feeling extend to Denmark as well, which is evident as she departs. Larsen writes, "The last good-byes were said. Helga began to regret that she was leaving. Why couldn't she have two lives, or why couldn't she be satisfied in one place? Now that she was actually off, she felt heavy at heart. Already she looked back with infinite regret at the two years in the country which had given her so much, of pride, of happiness, or wealth, and of beauty" (93). In a more complete analysis, Helga's polar tendencies express instead the failures of these various communities to adapt to someone, like Helga, who does not sufficiently conform to any of their rigid standards.

To return finally to questions of the political imperatives of domestic individualism, *Quicksand* relies heavily on domestic labors and objects within domestic spaces to develop Larsen's various critiques. First is Larsen's use of "things" to convey Helga and other characters' fine and fashionable taste and elevated social status through material objects. On the other hand,

the respectable ladies at Naxos eschew the display of stylish objects, aligning these characters and this community more closely with the ideology of true womanhood (as implied by the name of the school, an anagram of Saxon). In Denmark, Helga herself becomes a fine and exotic thing to be decorated and displayed, and ultimately to signify the cosmopolitan nature of her white hosts. Finally, Larsen links religion to traditional forms of homemaking as she demonstrates the ongoing and very real oppressions suffered by women in this state. Because Helga struggles financially throughout the novel, the domestic is put to more use than in *Iola Leroy* (in which only the marginal characters are occupied by such concerns). Larsen also refigures Hopkins' use of the domestic since Helga is ultimately unable to attain any form of domestic ideal in the novel. Her outsider status prevents her from ever finding and making a home. Finally, Larsen identifies far too many problems with the religious domestic life to make it a site of salvation (as it is for both Stowe and – to a lesser extent - Hopkins).

Through these readings I have set out to build a link between the domestic individual and the labors that characterize her. I began with Stowe to demonstrate how she takes on the form of domestic individualism that most closely aligns with Gillian Brown's original conception - as the combination of household labors combined with the "right" sentiment in carrying them out produce an ideal domestic space for Brown to develop this feminized form of selfhood. While Stowe's domestic individual lays the foundation for later, similarly politicized, iterations, she ultimately falls short in her limited imagination of the future of her African American characters. From this vantage I embarked upon extended readings of Harper, Hopkins and Larsen to consider their ongoing uses of the domestic individual as they reimaged black womanhood through many of the devices of the domestic individual. In these readings I suggest the ongoing centrality of some model of domestic individualism, especially in relation to African American

woman's fiction. In Harper, Hopkins and Larsen's reconfiguration of this figure, her political endeavors are shown to be motivated by collective goals, rather than individual pursuits. This is apparent in Harper's linking of the "folk" who perform domestic labors and the new African American middle-class, with their emphasis on education as a mode of production. Self-possession, too, is shown to be a collective endeavor, rather than an individualistic pursuit – especially in Harper and Hopkins independent black communities. These explorations also exposed reconfigured boundaries of inheritance that link current oppressions to past subjugations, brutalities and injustices. In this way, Harper, Hopkins and Larsen all provide very material grounds for the pains and pleasures of their African-American characters.

Through this careful study I hope to have suggested an ongoing relevance for the figure of the domestic individual in extended readings of the domestic logics of these three novels. This reconceptualized figure has allowed me address domesticity and its practices in a way that avoids the overly-enthusiastic resuscitative work of second-wave feminist literary criticism, while also re-valuing household labors in a way that is not regressive or noxious to the advancements of third-wave feminisms. In the words of Brown, this reinvented domestic individual “[suggests], not just the imaginative productivity of domesticity, but the cultural endurance of domestic individualism and the power of American literature in promoting that tradition” (8). It is with this sentiment that I move into a further consideration of this figure near the turn of the next century and in relation to not just literary production, but also the cultural practices of crafting and DIY.

Chapter Three:
Housekeeping (in/of) the “Race House”: Crafting and Household Labors of the Domestic
Individual in Contemporary American Fiction

“That experience of regret highlights for me the need to rethink the subtle yet persuasive attachments we may have to the architecture of race. We need to think about what it means and what it takes to live in a redesigned racial house and evasively and erroneously--call it diversity or multiculturalism as a way of calling it home. We need to think about how invested some of the best theoretical work may be in clinging to the house's redesign as simulacrum. We need to think about what new dangers present themselves when escape or self-exile from the house of racial construction is announced or achieved.

I risk here, perhaps, charges of encouraging futile attempts to transcend race or pernicious efforts to trivialize it. It would worry me a great deal if my remarks--or my narratives--were to be so completely misunderstood. What I am determined to do is to take what is articulated as an elusive race-free paradise and domesticate it. I am determined to concretize a literary discourse that (outside of science fiction) resonates exclusively in the register of permanently unrealizable dream. It is a discourse that (unwittingly) allows racism an intellectual weight to which it has absolutely no claim. My confrontation is piecemeal and very slow. Unlike the successful advancement of an argument, narration requires the active complicity of a reader willing to step outside established boundaries of the racial imaginary. And, unlike visual media, narrative has no pictures to ease the difficulty of that step.”

Morrison, “Home” 1997 pg. 4

The title and thematic of this chapter borrows heavily from Toni Morrison’s concept of the “race house” as a term that both differentiates between house and home and also addresses the formative role race plays in conceptions of home. Morrison asks, early in her essay/conference address, “Home,” how she might, in her writing, be “both free and situated; how to convert a racist house into a race-specific yet nonracist home. How to enunciate race while depriving it of its lethal cling?” (2). This concept offers a productive transition from the latter portion of chapter two, which focused on the political imperatives of African American women’s writing of the late 19th and early 20th centuries and how they were carried out through a domestic individualism expressed with recourse to crafting and household labors. Morrison’s essay, from which this concept is adapted, concerns her fiction and the way “the racial house”

has “troubled” her work (2). I link her use of this term to the political work of the novels in the previous chapter and the new domestic or “neo-domestic” fiction of this chapter (produced between 1980 and the early 2000s), while asking what it means to do housekeeping labors in the racial house. I ask how the domestic individual of contemporary domestic fiction might help to “domesticate” or make real, the “elusive, race-free paradise” Morrison herself has sought to concretize in her fiction.

Toni Morrison begins by addressing the four ways in which the concept of home has offered her the space to think of “a-world-in-which-race-does-not-matter.” Home helps Morrison clarify her thoughts on racial construction; it provides a space in her novels to “[eliminate] the potency of racist constructs in language” (1). Further, “matters of race and matters of home” have initiated her search for “that elusive sovereignty” and have also prompted her to abandon that search once she “recognized its disguise” (1). Most importantly for my inquiry, Morrison writes how “home” is a term that “domesticates the racial project, [as it] moves the job of unmaterring race away from pathetic yearning and futile desire; away from an impossible future or an irretrievable and probably nonexistent Eden to a manageable, doable, modern human activity” (1). As Morrison makes clear in the quote above, to interpret these priorities as attempts to achieve a color-blind utopia – on one hand – or to minimize the effects of race – on the other – would be to completely misunderstand the efforts of her fiction as well as her arguments in the essay.

By contrast, her conception of the race house connotes the “windowless prison” in which she found herself as “an already – and always – raced writer” (1). Morrison’s use of the house/home antagonism, then, is built on her contention that if she had to live in a racial house, it was important for her to rebuilt it, make it open and “to transform this house completely” (1).

Over the course of the essay, Morrison discusses the different ways in which she has attempted to “sign race while designing racelessness” in *Beloved*, *Jazz*, *Song of Soloman*, *Tar Baby* and *Paradise* (which she was in the process of writing when she composed and delivered this essay). In *Beloved*, for instance, she writes that she “wanted to explore the revelatory possibilities of historical narration when the body-mind, subjectobject, past-present oppositions, viewed through the lens of race, collapse” (4). Whereas, in *Sula*, Morrison “was preoccupied with the culture of gender and the invention of identity, both of which acquired astonishing meaning when placed in a racial context” (4). As Morrison asserts, the “house/home antagonism” is related to the topic of race because “so much of what seems to lie about in discourses on race concerns legitimacy, authenticity, community, belonging. In no small way, these discourses are about home” (2).

It is striking how important the same themes of legitimacy, authenticity, community and belonging are to the novels of Harper, Hopkins and Larsen of the previous chapter, which suggests a continuity in the domestic fiction of that era and contemporary domestic fiction. Morrison goes on to enumerate a variety of homes: an intellectual home, a spiritual home, family and community home, creative responses to exile and so on, concluding finally that “[i]n virtually all these formations, whatever the terrain, race magnifies the matter that matters” (2). As this chapter will concern authors, like Morrison and Alice Walker, who acutely understand the centrality of race in matters of house and home, but also authors who sidestep or minimize race in their construction of a twentieth-century domesticity, Morrison’s intersectional analysis provides an important foundation.

This chapter sketches the landscape of women's domestic fiction of the late 20th and early 21st centuries (1980s to present) in order to complicate the predominant sense within literary and DIY narratives that women's domestic labors were first rejected by the second wave

feminist movement and then resuscitated, reclaimed and revalued in the present. I read literature in this period as an important archive of the history of women's domestic labors that demonstrates the complexities of this work: how it is both feminine and masculine, "properly" domestic and also anti-domestic, and the fact that it never actually disappeared (despite assertions to the contrary⁵⁹). I ask specifically how the sense of crafting and domestic labors as political, that I established and historicized in the previous chapter, is renovated in contemporary fiction. This will emerge both through Morrison's concept of home as "domesticating" an elusive race-free paradise, and also her exploration of the work that the "Africanist personae, narrative, and idiom" does to "enrich" the text of white writers in her collection of essays, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. As before, my exploration focuses on works of domestic fiction, identified by the centrality of crafting and household labors to the development of characters in the text.

My extension of Morrison's work allows for a twin movement in this chapter. First, I explore Morrison's concept of the race house as it relates to domestic labors – asking what it means for the domestic individual to craft the race house and do housekeeping in the race house. I ask how domestic and crafting labors might articulate processes of transforming this house completely. This is a pressing question for contemporary domestic fiction due to the historical failure of the genre to meaningfully incorporate a diversity of characters, cultures and writers.⁶⁰ An intersectional analysis such as Morrison's complicates the genre and calls into question the historical amnesia around domestic labors that suggest the disappearance of these labors at

⁵⁹ See my summary of the standard narratives of DIY history in chapter one.

⁶⁰ This is true, not only true of domestic fiction, but of American fiction at large – as the campaign, #WeNeedDiverseBooks (launched on May 1, 2014) points out. Initiated by a group of activists and writers online, "The hope of the campaign is to bring awareness to the publishing community that readers want books that relay a broader range of experiences and perspectives" (Gupta 1).

different historical moments. As such, I begin by mapping the rise of DIY practices and narratives (from 1990 to present) alongside increased attention to crafting/domestic labors in late 20th and early 21st century domestic fiction (sometimes referred to as new domestic or neo-domestic fiction) and feminist literary criticism. These narratives tend to depict this renewed interest as a reclaiming or resuscitation of domestic and crafting labors, as if they had actually disappeared. As such, they frequently minimize the complexity of crafting and domestic labors. By contrast, this chapter seeks to explore how crafting and domestic labors have been ever-present; can be both properly domestic (according to the ideals of true womanhood) and also anti-domestic; are both feminine and masculine; are waged, unwaged and a mixture of both; can be both conservative and progressive; and finally might reinforce the race house and/or work towards the unmaking or complete conversion of it. In addressing this final option, I especially consider the ways in which domestic/crafting/DIY labors, performed by the domestic individual, are framed as political during this period and suggest the ongoing and expanded political function of domestic literature – especially as related to the race house.

Bridging the Gap in Establishing a Continuity of Domestic and Crafting Labors

Just as I began chapter one with a brief summary of the predominant narrative of the evolution of craft – as characterized by art historian, Glenn Adamson – I bridge the forty-five years between Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) and Alice Walker’s “Everyday Use” (1973) – which I will take up later in this chapter - by way of a standard narrative. This narrative maps an oversimplified history of domestic labors. It describes how feminists and the everyday housewife alike rejected domestic labors at some point in the not too recent past (the 1960s, ‘70s, ‘80s and early ‘90s are all cited), thus making possible the reclaimed domesticity of DIY in the late

twenty-first century. Emily Matchar, author of *Homeward Bound* (a study of the recent explosion of interest in homemaking, craft and DIY) explains, “As homemaking fell by the wayside in the 1970s, ‘80s, and ‘90s, it became unfashionable and uncool. And as women tried to be taken seriously in the workforce, they often felt the need to shun traditionally feminine activities or risk male scorn... But, in the late 1990s, attitudes began to shift” (43). Matchar attributes the shift to a variety of factors such as the influence of the subcultural (and crafty) Riot Grrrls, information sharing on the Internet, the burgeoning foodie movement and its emphasis on slow food, the larger environmental movement, and the recession of 2008. Just as Adamson summarizes a predominant historical account in order to note its shortcomings (in his case, that the industrial revolution did not, in fact, cause the collapse of studio craft) I briefly track multiple iterations of the narrative of domestic labors as they relate to women’s craft, DIY and literature in order to then sketch a more complex history. Adamson argues that industrialization did not result in the demise of craft, likewise, the domestic crafting practices to which I attend never really disappeared either.

Recall from chapter one, Jean Railla’s attempts to explain how women’s craft work was once important as a means of sustenance, until it disappeared, was rejected by second wave feminists and is finally being revalued in the present.⁶¹ Similarly, Matchar explains that whereas “Our grandmothers saw convenience food as a liberation from kitchen drudgery and viewed cheap, mass-produced baby clothing as a relief for hands tired from sewing... Our mothers, busy working baby boomers, gave little thought to the traditional domestic arts – who had time?!”

⁶¹ Railla explains one of her five theories about the contemporary rise of DIY and craft, “Theory Number 2: Feminism was successful. The leaders of the Women’s Movement of the 1960s and 70s rejected the domestic as a symbol of their oppression, but they unwittingly paved the way of all those ironic crocheted sushi rolls that kids love nowadays... By leveling the playing field between men and women (at least in the bottom rungs of the workforce), feminism opened the door for all of us to value typically feminine art forms” (10).

(23). Matchar's book is about how her generation (the "latter end of Gen Y") "increasingly sees things differently... talk[ing] of 'lost' crafts and 'reclaiming' traditional women's work like crocheting and quilting and baking homemade bread" (23). These hobby and sometime-economic activities are part of what "historians and sociologists are calling the 're-skilling movement'... aimed at restoring prestige to historically devalued traditional domestic arts and skills" (23). Matchar sees this being embraced by "modern young stay-at-home parents" as a way to "make homemaking fulfilling in a way it never was for Betty Friedan's desperate housewives" (23). Matchar asserts that since technology has made homemaking "progressively less skilled throughout the twentieth century... it became less satisfying" (23). She wraps up this account of the increasing "nostalgia for hands-on work" with a quote from one "young educated California mom" who testifies that, "if it weren't for her interest in what she calls 'modern homemaking' – canning food, making handmade baby clothes – she 'would probably end up pursuing a career, because [she] would be bored'" (24). While Matchar more effectively accounts for the continued existence of domestic labors from the 1800s to the present,⁶² her examples in this section (and throughout the study) speak only to a narrow white, middle-class segment of the population. Her brief exception to this is a one-page note on African American women and homemaking in her third chapter.

Clearly some themes and contradictions have already emerged in both of these accounts: a shared sense of a once-vibrant domestic arts scene that was – at some point – either "lost" or "rejected" and a recent change in political climate that has made these labors "satisfying," fun,

⁶² Matchar writes of the 1800s when "nineteenth-century Martha Stewarts [like Catherine Beecher and Sarah Josepha Hale]... attempted to make housework seem like the most noble pursuit possible" (34). She also accounts for the "Valium-fogged 1950s housewife, adrift in her suburban home with nothing to do" along with today's 20 and 30-year olds who "[do] needlepoint as a way to kick back after a hard week of dissertation writing," (34).

funky, relevant and fulfilling once more. Authors like Cheryl B. Torsney and Judy Elsley, coauthors of *Quilt Culture: Tracing the Pattern* punctuate these pop culture historical accounts with their “turn back” to women’s domestic labors in an academic context. Published in 1994, the literary anthology is organized around the quilt as metaphor. The publisher’s description asserts that the quilt is one of the “our most compelling symbols of cultural diversity and the power of women.” Elements of the narrative that I outlined above can be readily located in the introduction to this edited volume. Torsney and Elsley write, “For some time now, quilts have maintained their status as both art and craft, partaking in both high and low culture, reflecting the provenance of their individual producers and their historical, ethnic, and geographical contexts ... no matter who we are, we all want to wrap ourselves in a quilt, metaphorically speaking” (1). The next paragraph provides a brief history of the quilt and how it has been alternately revered and criticized. Citing the history of quilts as “the history of our country” the authors mention the adulated work of Betsy Ross (flags are, after all, piecework), while tracking other ways that quilts have “responded” to the “potential for social and political change.” They conclude the sentiment of Oregon journalist, Abigail Duniway, who described quilts as “primary symbols of woman’s unpaid subjection” (2). To respond to Duniway’s perspective the author’s write, “But, quilts in the twentieth century have not become dead cultural artifacts of the past. Rather, as political as well as aesthetic statements, they have taken on lives as texts to be positioned, read, and restitched (or reinscribed)” (2).

With the next paragraph, the authors make an astonishing leap from quilt work at the time of the Revolutionary War, to the perspective of an American suffragette, to the second wave feminist movement of 1960s. It begins,

This reinscription of the quilt in academic culture began rather quietly with the second coming of the women's movement in the late 1960s, the movement's arrival on college campuses as women's studies courses and courses in feminist criticism and the awakening of interest in quilting by the art world, beginning with Jonathan Holstein's 1971 exhibition, "Abstract Design in American Quilts" at the Whitney Museum of American Art, the first exhibition of quilts as art in a major museum. (2)

To link this movement in the world of fine art to literary works of the same period the authors describe how "Soon, twentieth-century writers, Alice Walker ["Everyday Use" 1973] for example, began to stitch quilts into their texts, in some of the same ways that Louisa May Alcott and Harriet Beecher Stowe, to name but two writers, had done in the nineteenth century as the premise for larger social commentary in *Aunt Jo's Scrap-Bag* [1882] and "The Minister's Wooing [1859]" (2). They continue, "Once quilting was redis-'covered,' as it were, by the art community and shortly thereafter, by historians, it took nearly fifteen more years for literary scholars to recognize the relationship of quilting to women's writing and the usefulness of the quilt as a metaphor for textuality" (3). Their historical leap hurdles almost a century of literature and criticism. The historical maneuvers of the introduction to *Quilt Culture* provide yet another example of the predominant narrative of women's crafting labors – this time in the domains of fine art, craft, domestic life, politics, literature and literary criticism. This version, while focused specifically on quilting, can be extended to other practices of women's domestic crafting labors and DIY.

Finally, Kristin Jacobson's *Neodomestic American Fiction*, published in 2010, provides an overview of the genre of women's domestic fiction and follows a similar historical structure of reverence and political application to rejection and ultimate resurrection. Parallels between the

narratives of Railla, Matchar, Torseny and Elsley are evident. Jacobson begins with a quote from Nina Baym stating that “the changes women’s fiction underwent ‘in the late 1860s and 1870s ... signify the fact that the genre [domestic fiction] had run its course’” (15). She follows with the counter-narrative that the rise of Modernism perhaps did not, in fact, signal the death knell of this literary form (15). Instead, according to Susan Edmunds, “the cultural legacy of sentimental domesticity was not rejected, killed off, or supplanted in this period. Instead, it was rearticulated, making the sense of a revolutionary break with the past shared by modern domestic subjects an important but untrustworthy guide for later critics (10)” (Jacobson 15). In this regard, Jacobson aligns with an analysis of the ongoing presence of a rearticulated domestic individual. Jacobson then transitions to fiction of the late twentieth century, with a focus on literature in which home occupies a central position. She asserts, by way of a long list of titles,⁶³ that these examples “[occupy] a central position in much contemporary American fiction” and “testify to an ongoing renaissance in domestic fiction” (16). Jacobson understands the neodomestic genre as emerging in the 1980s and the remainder of her monograph focuses on defining and interpreting this “reconfigured” genre of American writing.

These historical accounts suggest an affinity between the ways that women’s domestic and crafting labors have been historicized in a variety of narratives - traversing the realms of popular culture, art history, literature and literary criticism. Dates and tendencies vary somewhat, spurring questions such as: when *was* craft rejected: the 1960s and ‘70s or the ‘70s, ‘80s and ‘90s? Or, was it merely devalued? Or, did it just become too boring with the increasing

⁶³ Jacobson writes, “The assortment of domestic geographies in the late twentieth century includes the exiled homes in Lan Cao’s *Monkey Bridge* (1997), Cristina Garcia’s *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), and Leslie Marmon Silko’s *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999); the ‘perfect’ yet unsuccessful homes in Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life* (1999) and David Wong Louie’s *The Barbarians Are Coming* (2000)” and eleven more titles, of which only a few will be the focus of her analysis (16).

mechanization of household labors? Who spearheaded this trend: the prototypical (white, middle-class) housewife, “feminists,” working women, or another group altogether? And, again (as I asked in chapter two), who, then, carried out the household labors that were rejected and/or devalued during the intervening period in question?

While labor-saving devices such as the vacuum, washing machine, dryer, sewing machine and dishwasher certainly made previously back-breaking labors quicker, easier and more efficient, someone still had to be responsible for running those machines. And, as Matchar points out, standards of cleanliness and order continued to rise. As such, the time spent on household labors did not diminish quite as significantly as one might imagine (or as these narratives often like to suggest). Further, modern and contemporary consumer culture, in many ways have developed around women as the primary consumers in American society, which has presented an ever growing array of products to be considered, purchased and tested by the household laborer/consumer. As a result, an entire discipline of academic study: formerly known as home economics, now family and consumer sciences, arose to educate women not only in the most efficient and desirable modes of carrying out domestic duties (cooking, sewing, cleaning, nutrition, childcare, etc.) but also in proper (efficient, middle-class, white, thrifty, educated) habits of consumption. So, even if women weren't spending hours a day sewing and mending clothing, doing laundry, beating rugs, churning butter and making biscuits, buying (and doing research about buying) still occupied a great deal of time and energy. Even taking into account the discrepancies of the historical accounts above, its clear that the predominant historical narratives concerning the history of women's domestic labors not only sidestep a large portion of American history but also a significant segment of the US population: working class communities and women of color. As such, Morrison's intersectional analysis of the confluence

of race and home is illuminating and offers promising avenues for literary study as it relates to these crafting and domestic labors.

Living and Laboring in the Race House

My initial encounter with Morrison's "Home" occurred by way of Jacobson's foundational use of the essay in her chapter, "Remodeling Home." She mobilizes Morrison's concept of the "race house" in order to clarify how Morrison's fiction realizes domestic principles. As I summarized earlier, home is a central element of Jacobson's revised genre. For Jacobson, domestic fiction is reconfigured as neodomestic in the form of spatial novels that "posit the home as a key location for narrative action and feature homemaking as a central component of the plot" (9). Three organizing motifs of neodomestic fiction are mobility (through a "productive instability"), relational space (the overlap of public and private) and renovation (9). I focus on Jacobson's chapter on renovation, in which she relies on Morrison's "Home" to examine how, in both *Beloved* and *Paradise*, Morrison "[redesigns] the domestic novel, [which] carries bold potential, as it simultaneously asks us to remodel our understanding of the American family and, by extension, our national identity" (78). For Jacobson, this involves both literal remodeling projects in literary narratives as well as "generic and symbolic restructuring" (78). Key to these remodeling projects is "how race and gender shape the American home's physical and ideological contours" (Jacobson 78). Clearly, Jacobson's theorizing of the reconfigured genre of late twentieth century domestic fiction demonstrates that civic and juridical identities are developed not just in the market, but continue to be correlated in and through the space of the home. This supports my contention that the domestic individual remains a figure of continued relevance for inquiries into the home and its labors in contemporary fiction.

For Jacobson, “Rather than ultimately constructing the home as a trap (or as a haven), both novels [*Beloved* and *Paradise*] deconstruct and remodel the conventional house-home dichotomy, materializing neodomestic ideology through their experimentation with an elusive but productive domestic instability” (79). For Jacobson, a “productive domestic instability” involves embracing insecurity by understanding that sometimes no protection is available (despite the most concerted remodeling efforts) while recognizing the relational and communal aspects of a home (89). The meaning of an “elusive” instability, however, remains unclear and is not sufficiently elaborated in this chapter. Perhaps Jacobson is picking up on Morrison’s description of the “elusive race-free paradise,” which her iterations of home work to domesticate. If this is, indeed, her reference more work needs to be done to align Jacobson’s instability with the intent of Morrison’s “Home” in completely remodeling the race house. While I agree with Jacobson’s understanding of the work Morrison does to undo a conventional house-home dichotomy, overall, Jacobson’s reading tends to suggest that the race house is always a negative space and that a “safe” (79), “ideal” (85) home might be an actual possibility for Morrison. We see this when Jacobson writes that Morrison’s “domestic structures demonstrate qualities of both the race house and the ideal home” (85). Or, when she locates that the house represents an oppositional space, whereas home is a relational space: thereby reproducing the dichotomy that Morrison seeks to unsettle. Despite her emphasis on relationality, Jacobson misses an essential message in “Home”: that of the necessity for a raced home – one that is neither the original race house nor a universal, purified, utopian home. As Morrison observes,

The anxiety of belonging is entombed within the central metaphors in the discourse on globalism, transnationalism, nationalism, the break-up of federations, the rescheduling of alliances, and the fictions of sovereignty. Yet these figurations of nationhood and identity

are frequently as raced themselves as the originating racial house that defined them.

When they are not raced, they are, as I mentioned earlier, imaginary landscape, never inscape; Utopia, never home. (5)

Thus, I would suggest that Morrison's work in "Home" as well as *Beloved* and *Paradise* is to merge a remodeled race house with concretized elements of the utopian home so that it becomes a non-racist, but still raced (or racially-specific and yet also anti-racist) home. As quoted in the epigraph, "We need to think about what new dangers present themselves when escape or self-exile from the house of racial construction is announced or achieved" (4). To perceive the race house as unequivocally negative or the home as a purely ideal space misses the "new dangers" presented by such a framework. As I hope to demonstrate, the concretized elements of the dangers and promises of the race house/home are often expressed through household and crafting labors.

While Jacobson initially recognizes that interpreting 124 Bluestone Road (the home in *Beloved*), as a site of violence that "fails to protect the 'crawling already baby'" doesn't "tell the whole story" of this novel's "domestic geography" (79), she later claims something the opposite. In the subsequent paragraph, Jacobson states that the "residents attempt to construct a safe home and community, but their isolated homes promote precisely the violent relations that they had wished to avoid" (79). By contrast, I read the violence that transpires at 124 Bluestone as an essential element of Morrison's endeavor to "transform the house completely" since violence is sometimes the only available mode of protection in sites entirely littered with "racist detritus" such as the period and setting of *Beloved* (1, 5). To interpret the home as "promoting" violent relations misses the fact that if Sethe had not murdered the "crawling already" baby when confronted by the white men who intend to remand her and her children back to slavery, she and

all four of her children would have been dragged back to Sweet Home or some other terribly abusive plantation. As Sethe describes it, this act of violence is her attempt to “put my babies where they would be safe.” And, in fact, the “whitemen” would not have retreated but for this brutality.

Morrison’s project is enunciated in quite an opposite manner in a beautiful passage found in both Morrisons’s “Home” as well as *Paradise*. She writes about *Paradise*, “In my current project I want to see whether or not race-specific, race-free language is both possible and meaningful in narration. And I want to inhabit, walk around, a site clear of racist detritus; a place where race both matters and is rendered impotent; a place ‘already made for me, both snug and wide open’” (Morrison 4-5). She continues with a vivid description of what this site might look like, which I quote at length,

I want to imagine not the threat of freedom, or its tentative panting fragility, but the concrete thrill of borderlessness—a kind of out of doors safety where ‘a sleepless woman could always rise from her bed, wrap a shawl around her shoulders and sit on the steps in the moonlight. And if she felt like it she could walk out the yard and on down the road. No lamp and no fear. A hiss-crackle from the side of the road would never scare her because what ever it was that made that sound, it wasn't something creeping up on her. Nothing for miles around thought she was prey. She could stroll as slowly as she liked, thinking of food preparations, of family things, or lift her eyes to stars and think of war or nothing at all. Lampless and without fear she could make her way. And if a light shone from a window up a ways and the cry of a colicky baby caught her attention, she might step over to the house and call out softly to the woman inside trying to soothe the baby. The two of them might take turns massaging the infant stomach, rocking, or trying to get

a little soda water down. When the baby quieted they could sit together for a spell, gossiping, chuckling low so as not to wake anybody else. The woman could decide to go back to her bed then, refreshed and ready to sleep, or she might stay her direction and walk further down the road--on out, beyond, because nothing around or beyond considered her prey.' (5)

As Morrison explains of the passage above, "That description is meant to evoke not only the safety and freedom outside the race house, but to suggest contemporary searches and yearnings for social space that is psychically and physically safe" (5).

As with my explorations of the functions and force of domestic and crafting labors in nineteenth and early-twentieth century domestic fiction, it is evident that Morrison "domesticate[s]" her racial project with recourse to household labors. This passage balances an idyllic scene of a woman wandering alone at night without the slightest bit of apprehension since, "nothing around or beyond considered her prey" with mundane thoughts of food preparations, family things, war, or nothing at all. When the woman pauses her sleepless strolling it is to assist a mother with her crying baby. Again, she engages in the unremarkable and common as she stops to help sooth the child through a variety of gentle techniques and then stays on to chuckle and gossip quietly with the mother. To elaborate, the "thrill of borderlessness" is concretized in seemingly mundane, domestic terms: rising from bed; wrapping a shawl; strolling slowly; thinking of cooking, baking, "family things," politics or "nothing at all." Part of Morrison's concretized borderlessness also involves this woman helping to care for the fussy baby of a neighbor - a task that is enunciated more commonly as a burden. Here, the voluntary nature of this wandering woman's task and the easy conversation that follows allow the domestic labors of mothering to be linked to freedom, borderlessness and safety.

As in *Beloved*, violence and safety coexist in domestic spaces. In *Beloved*, both antebellum Kentucky (the location of Sweet Home) and a free state like Ohio (the location of 124 Bluestone and, in 1856, still subject to the Fugitive Slave Act) are places riddled with racist detritus. In sites like these, sometimes protection can only emerge through some form of violence. Despite the title, *Paradise* also features houses/homes of terrible violence. The book itself begins with a scene of mass murder at the formerly safe and isolated Convent: a haven for a diverse collection of women who are survivors of a variety of difficult circumstances: abuse, abandonment, betrayal. In the passage above Morrison might appear to endorse the space outside of the race house as a place of safety and freedom – especially since the scene is set in the all-black town of Ruby (which can be read as a place of self-exile). However, this passage is narrated by a member of the posse of men – all residents of Ruby - who invade the Convent one early morning in order to annihilate the entire population of women who reside there. Thus, this description of a female resident of Ruby wandering in a social space that is “psychically and physically safe” is premised on this man’s intent to visit violence upon all the women of the Convent. The attack is precipitated by the men’s perception of the Convent as a threat to their way of life in Ruby).

The race-free elements of this passage emerge in the concrete universality of the wanderings of this woman’s thoughts. But, the passage is also race-specific in that the setting of *Paradise*: Ruby, an isolated all-black town, and the nearby Convent are both located in 1970s Oklahoma, where the sad reality is that African-American women were (and today continue to be) more than twice as likely as white women to be subject to acts of violence: sexual and

otherwise.⁶⁴ It's undeniable that any woman in 1970s (or contemporary) America can relate to Morrison's yearning for the completely unencumbered safety of this woman's stroll. But, it has been, and continues to be less attainable for women of color – especially black women – because of the twin “risk factors” of being female and black. These introductory readings of both *Beloved* and *Paradise* allow for an entry into a few ways that Morrison has attempted to “domesticate” the race house in her writings. I extend this work through readings of other works of literature in which domestic and crafting labors play a central role. I focus on the role of the domestic individual in performing these tasks while asking how household/crafting labors connote both safety and violence, race-specificity and/or color-blindness (via self-exile, escape or a white universality that purports to be race-neutral). In these two novels, Morrison has worked toward reconstructing the race house completely, in part, through her exploration of the proximity of violence and safety in domestic spaces. In my subsequent readings I focus more intently on the domestic/housekeeping/crafting labors, performed by reconfigured domestic individuals, that explore and participate in the complete remaking of the race house.

Thus, a central question for this chapter –and my primary extension of Morrison's work – is to ask the question of how different kinds of raced writers - especially those who are not “always” and “already” raced (many white writer, for instance) might contribute to the project of transforming the race house completely. Further, what is the role of the domestic individual in this task? Does the domestic individual appear in a renovated form, or does she nostalgically

⁶⁴ The U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics provides many statistics and tables to support this assertion, although the most complete information – organized by race, age, gender and other demographics – is only available dating back to 1996. This source is also limited since it relies on crimes that have been officially reported, leaving out data for unreported crimes (more significant in communities of color, who also fear victimization by or increased skepticism on the part of the officials to whom they would report these violences). Before 1996, it is still possible to draw similar conclusions on the correlatives between gender, sex, race and violence based on the work of feminist organizations such as the Combahee River Collective.

hearken back to a more conservative mode – such as those studied in Brown’s *Domestic Individualism* or Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*. Are the thematics of home that are significant to Morrison evident in these other novels? How are crafting and domestic labors used as a device to depict, describe, and characterize the domestic individual as well as the race house? What role do these labors play in reinforcing or reconstructing the race house/home? I now explore these questions through a variety of literatures published between 1973 and 1997, including: *Housekeeping*, *How to Make an American Quilt*, *A Thousand Acres* and the short story, “Everyday Use.”

How to Make American Quilts: The “Everyday Use” of Handmade Objects in the Remaking and Reinforcing of the Race House

I begin my readings in this section with the juxtaposition of Alice Walker’s 1973 short story, “Everyday Use,” and Whitney Otto’s 1994 novel, *How to Make an American Quilt*. The centrality of the quilt and the labors of making them constitute a significant overlap in these works of fiction. Similar to my study of the domestic individual in earlier American fiction, the process of producing the quilts, as well as the different ways in which they are consumed, are devices that develop the characters and advance the narratives of these two works. Other household and crafting labors appear as well. Walker’s story is frequently cited as marking a return of focus, in literature and criticism, on women’s domestic labors. As I discussed in my introduction, this assessment is not entirely accurate, as quilting, sewing, crafting and housekeeping labors can be found throughout the history of women’s writing in the United States (consider the domestic labors of characters in Anzia Yezierska’s *The Bread Givers* (1925); of Janie and Tea Cake in Zora Neale Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), of Lutie in *The Street* (1946); and various works by many other authors such as Toni Cade Bambara, Paule

Marshall, Mitsuye Yamada, Nellie Wong, even John Steinbeck).

Making "Everyday Use" a touchstone are the numerous critical studies that have analyzed Walker's short story, including four essays in the aforementioned *Quilt Culture*. Cathy Peppers' essay, "Fabricating a Reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a Quilt of Memory and Identity," argues that the "recurring image of Baby Sugg's quilt represents the changing relationship between Sethe and Denver and the larger black community" while situating *Beloved* "within a black feminist tradition that offers a corrective to white feminist practice" (87). Peppers then reference's "Everyday Use" in order to further demonstrate how the struggle between sisters Dee/Wangero and Maggie over their Grandmother's quilts also represents the clash between a white feminist reclamation of black women's writing and a black feminist tradition. While the sisters are both African American, Dee represents, for Peppers, the "insensitive feminist critic" since "the quilts would serve only to fulfill the desire for 'instant heritage'... [whereas], they represent for Maggie her lived connection to her 'heritage'" (87). Peppers concludes the reading by noting that "[t]he white feminist critic is reminded that a reading of black female identity forged through 'traditional' white (female) separatism (from men) would betray a respectful reciprocity by seeking to reconstruct the identity of the 'other' woman in the image of the 'same'" (87).

This analysis is reminiscent of Sánchez-Eppler's "Bodily Bonds" in that Peppers also attempts to locate "domestic, amalgamating, and appropriative strategies" that characterize the white feminist critic's (or feminist-abolitionist's) recourse to black culture through African American lives and characters (Sánchez-Eppler 25). Sánchez-Eppler concludes her study with an example of how the divine redemption of Harriet Beecher Stowe's Tom is one of many attempts by feminist-abolitionists to, "transform the body from a site of oppression into the grounds of

resisting that oppression” (25). She continues, “The discovery that these efforts to liberate the [black] body result in its repression and annihilation attests to the difficulties and resistance inherent in acknowledging the corporeality of personhood. The bodies feminists and abolitionists wish reclaimed, and the bodies they exploit, deny, or obliterate in the attempted rescue, are the same” (Sánchez-Eppler 25). Naming *Beloved* as a “corrective” to white feminist practice and likening one of Walker’s characters in “Everyday Use” to an insensitive white feminist surely exploits, denies and obliterates as Peppers seeks to reclaim these works for her own purposes.

Peppers’ reading reproduces these tendencies as she likens Wangero’s efforts to obtain the family quilts to “insensitive” feminist critics who appropriate the heritage of black women for their own, narrow purposes. This reading feels forced since Peppers grounds her analysis in a story that doesn’t actually seem to promote anything like white separatism – especially considering Walker’s extensive theorizations of Womanism and Womanist prose – as an alternative feminism that privileges the experiences and perspectives of black women.⁶⁵ Not to mention the fact that Walker’s story does not feature any white characters. This isn’t to say that Dee/Wangero is immune to the pressures and influences of what bell hooks has called White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy – or even a kind of renovated “feminist-abolitionism” that appropriates the experiences, bodies and objects of “folk” for political or cultural purposes that either exploit or have nothing to do with them (“folk” in this story would be Mama and Maggie, at least from Wangero and Hakim-a-barbar’s perspectives). However, to equate Wangero’s desire for the family quilts as the *same* quest for “instant heritage” as certain white feminisms also denies Dee’s lived experience, since she grew up in the very same rural household as Maggie. Maggie, the homely older sister who didn’t benefit from advanced educational

⁶⁵ Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.

opportunities like Dee, however, didn't "get out." Thus, Wangero's perspective as having "transcended" this experience offers a cautionary tale through its biting critique of African American "progress" that disavows the communities from which subjects like Wangero have emerged. While it's possible to draw some parallels between Wangero's overzealous black nationalism/naïve Afrocentrism and a white feminism that also makes much too little distinction between actual history and a reclaimed, coopted version, Walker's story is more complex. Naming white feminism and Wangero's actions as one in the same is misleading and misses an important lesson about the "new dangers" presented by Dee's attempts to escape or exile herself from the race house.

Cheryl B. Torsney reads Dee/Wangero as similarly "assimilated," but interprets her desire for the quilts as an attempt to turn an object that represents the "cultural tradition" of her family into a commodity (87). Torsney borrows the title of Walker's story for her own essay and, accordingly, it is the central literary artifact in a personal reflection of her experience as "white Northern Jew" teaching African American literature to her "mostly white" students at Delta State University in Mississippi. She writes how critics have "faulted Dee/Wangero for trying to 'preserve' her past in the sterile, academic hanging out of the family linen as though it is the formal blazon that people like me make it out to be in our scholarship." Torsney continues, "I used to fault her too" (15). However, by the end of the essay Torsney has discovered another layer to this character. She reinterprets Dee/Wangero not as "some monstrous devourer of cultural treasures, but rather as a deeply conflicted young woman searching for her self in two different marginalized cultures, wanting familial memories for intellectual warmth yet able to treat them only as impersonal commodities for display" (17).

Before her "re-envisioning" of 'Everyday Use' (alongside an anecdote about visiting with

and purchasing a quilt from a female inmate residing in the prison where her husband worked) Torsney writes that she “thought it was [her] duty to teach [her] students about their own lives and history, about their oppression and racism” (17). Upon her re-reading she proclaims this intention, “false from the outset” (Torsney 17). She continues, “[l]ike Dee/Wangero, I wanted not so much to teach as to insist on their according me, albeit tacitly, an access to their past since I couldn’t cope with my own: I wanted a quilt. And since I didn’t have one, I’d pay for one” (Torsney 17). Her reading of these quilts as commodities is productive in that it locates more accurately the function of these craft objects in consumer culture. Rather than treating them as direct conduits to something as complex as one’s ethnic, racial and/or familial heritage (as Peppers tends to do), Torsney suggests a few different ways in which the quilt might operate – both for those who have had an actual hand in creating the quilt and also for those who acquire these objects as possessions.

And yet, Torsney draws from Dee/Wangero’s black experience to interpret her own in a way that also suggests a revised affinity with feminist-abolitionists. My revisiting of the work of Sánchez-Eppler, and the fact that the majority of literary criticism on craft work in fiction has been written from the perspective of white women, suggests not only the dire need for more attention to race when considering domestic labors in fiction, but also that there exist compelling reasons to consider the renewal of another formation prevalent in 19th and early 20th century American Literature: the domestic individual.

As I consider this figure I transition to a reading of *How to Make an American Quilt* by way of Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*. In her first essay, “Black Matters,” Morrison explores the purposes and results of the “Africanist persona” in novels written by white authors. She insists that “equally valuable” to scholarly work into the “mind, imagination, and behavior

of slaves” is “a serious intellectual effort to see what racial ideology does to the mind, imagination, and behavior of masters” (Morrison 12) – especially in texts that are ostensibly “only” about white characters and society. Morrison’s study primarily concerns 19th and early 20th century authors (like Henry James, Edgar Allan Poe, Gertrude Stein and Willa Cather) whose inclusion of black or African characters have been frequently interpreted as “signify[ing] little or nothing in the imagination of white American writers. Other than as the objects of an occasional bout of jungle fever, other than to provide local color or to lend some touch of verisimilitude or to supply a needed moral gesture, humor, or bit of pathos, blacks made no appearance at all” (Morrison 15). For late 20th century authors, like Otto, there is often more of a gesture to include African American characters with more blatant centrality to the narrative and in, perhaps, a more meaningful way. Despite this development, it often not any easier to discern the status of these works in making or reconceptualizing the race house.

The opening chapter of *How to Make an American Quilt* indicates that a young woman named Finn will be the narrator. She is a twenty-six year old a graduate student in history who has recently become engaged and moves in with her aunt and grandmother in search of answers for her conflicted feelings about love and marriage. Finn’s sentiment at the close of this first chapter, “Well, I am ready to listen,” however, indicates that this is not primarily her story (6). This is despite the fact that the prologue is focused exclusively on her personal history and suggests that the rest of the novel will also tell her tale. This is, actually, the orientation of the 1995 film based on the novel. Winona Rider plays Finn and the film focuses on her struggle to reconcile her conflicted feelings about her upcoming nuptials. The screenplay and the book differ significantly in this regard as the short (four page) Prologue to the novel is the only chapter that provides specific details about Finn’s life. The film, on the other hand, invents a pre-marital

affair for Finn and offers scenes of her engaged in her dissertation writing, presence in the sewing circle, interactions with Aunt Gladly and her Grandma Hy, and other daily activities.

While Maya Angelou plays Anna Neale in the film, her name is not featured as one of the five actors listed on the front cover of the DVD.

Anna Neale (a friend of Finn's great aunt Gladly Joe) has promised Finn a "long talk" one day. The reader discovers at the very end of the novel that Anna "finally made good on her promise to have a long talk with me, quite by accident, I think" (178). Thus, all the stories of the novel, the intimate details and explanations – that seemingly could only be known by the characters themselves or, perhaps, by their most trusted confidants - are found to have originated from 73 year-old Anna's perspective. Finn "merely" relates Anna's revelations to the reader. The entire novel, then, has apparently been constructed through an elaborate game of telephone in which each of the women in Anna, Gladly Joe and Hy's quilting circle have revealed to someone else an intensely personal and foundational story about of their lives. Sophia's chapter, for instance, tells how she inadvertently recreated the exact conditions of her mother's failed marriage despite her very strong conviction to do just the opposite. One presumes that these stories have been told to Anna directly – as is likely in the case with Gladly Joe or Anna's daughter, Marianna. The rest of the womens' stories have instead been passed on to Anna through another character and finally told to Finn. The film depicts all of these tales as emerging during the sewing circles while Finn is in town, although the book makes Anna out as the sole harbinger of each woman's stories.

The reader is removed once more from the origin of the women's stories through Otto's composition. Otto takes the crazy quilt (an improvisational patchwork quilt constructed out of pieces that lack a repeating motif) as a metaphor throughout the novel for how the women's lives

have been pieced together. The characters work collectively on a crazy quilt throughout the novel and their feelings toward this type of pattern – that isn't really a pattern at all – reveal essential elements of their character. The piecing of the novel fits this motif as well since each story/chapter/square is composed of multiple layers of narrative/text/fabric (even though the stories are written in first person so as to appear to be originating directly from the character herself). Of particular interest is the way that every other chapter is focused on telling the life story of a different character. Each of these “story” chapters is prefaced with a much shorter “instructions” chapter. If each of the main chapters is a quilt block in the crazy quilt, then the prefatory chapters serve as sashing that interrupt and define the main story chapters/blocks.

This is all significant for my analysis since Anna and Marianna are both black women telling their life stories to their white friends and acquaintances. All of these narratives are finally related to the reader through the voice of Finn. Finn interprets these women at the end of the book, “Anna and Marianna are stuck, being both black and white; being neither black nor white; and while they do not particularly like white people, they eventually grow to accept Glady Joe, Constance, and the memory of the boy from Chicago [Marianna's father]. One could say they appear more comfortable with their difficult beauty” (176). This statement presents an observation and analysis of Anna and Marianna, revealing that Finn is not an unbiased narrator, but instead composes the tales of all the women in the novel through her own perspective.

Morrison addresses this topic in *Playing in the Dark* (her exploration of the influence of the “Africanist” presence in American literature) when she writes,

As a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer. The fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the

writerly conscious. It is an astonishing revelation of longing, of terror, of perplexity, of shame, of magnanimity. It requires hard work *not* to see this. (17)

This is precisely the purpose of Anna (and Marianna) for Finn in the novel. As Finn readily acknowledges in the prologue, her primary (if covert) intent in staying with her Grandmother and Aunt is to gain access to Anna. Finn states that she has “lost track of the sort of girl that I am. I used to be a young scholar; I am now an engaged woman. Not that you cannot be both – even I understand that – yet I cannot fathom who I think I am *at this time*” (Otto 6, italics in the original). Her aunt Glady tells Finn that “this strikes her as ‘healthy and sensible’ – to take a minute or so for yourself, to take a little time to think” (Otto 6). It is after this statement that Finn reveals, “[t]he true source of my interest during this visit, this impasse in my own life, is Anna Neale, another one of the quilters and my aunt’s oldest friend” (Otto 6). As Morrison states in her prologue, “I was interested, as I had been for a long time, in the way black people ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them. In fact I had started, casually like a game, keeping a file of such instances” (*Playing* viii). Otto’s inclusion of African American characters might well be added to such a list for the way that Finn explicitly seeks out Anna to help her think out who she is “*at this time*.” As such, Finn’s character appears to do more housekeeping of the racial house, than work to remake it. She can’t yet “think about what it means and what it takes to live in a redesigned racial house and evasively and erroneously - call it diversity or multiculturalism as a way of calling it home” (Morrison, “Home” 4). Otto’s inclusion of Anna and Marianna seems to add diversity to the race house, but not to remake it in the way Morrison suggests.

If the explicit purpose of Finn’s visit (and her telling of these stories) is self-exploration, Anna’s story chapter and its preface are of particular interest – especially because of the

centrality of the quilt in her story. Thus, I return to the motif of quilting that I began to explore in relation to “Everyday Use.” While the quilt provides an organizing thematic for the entire novel, Anna’s chapter, entitled “Tears Like Diamond Stars” (which is also the name of a type of quilt that Anna has constructed) makes the most use of the quilt as signifier. Curiously, the prologue to this chapter, “Instructions No. 6,” is the only “Instructions” chapter/prologue that does not begin with instructions about how to create or care for a quilt. Instead, it begins with two stories from the global south. The first is a “South African myth regarding a being called *Sikhamba-nge-nyanga*, which translated means ‘She-who-walks-by-moonlight’,” who is “protect[ed] and nourish[ed]” by “customs” that, if broken will cause her to “return to nature” (Otto 127). The second, a “Guyanese story,” “says of black slaves that the only way they can be delivered from ‘massa’s clutch’ is to *see the extra brightness of the moon in their lives. The darkness will always be there, but they can use the light of the moon as hope.* The light of the moon. The dancing buffalo gal with the hole in her stocking” (Otto 127, italics in the original). These “instructions” conclude with the statement, “One can survive without liberation but one cannot live without freedom. You know it is essential to find one’s freedom” (Otto 127).

The narrative voice appears to take the form of second-person, speaking directly to the reader, as a set of how-to instructions typically would. However, this is not actually the case for this preface (even though the beginnings of the other “Instructions” chapters work in this way). For instance, Gladys Joe’s chapter starts with, “What you need: You need a large wooden frame and enough space to accommodate it. Put comfortable chairs around it, allowing for eight women of varying ages, weight, coloring, and cultural orientation” (Otto 7). While Marianna’s chapter opens, “Take a variety of fabrics: velvet, satin, silk, cotton, muslin, linen. . . . Puff them up with: down, kapok, soft cotton. . . . Lay between the back cloth a large expanse of cotton batting; stitch

all together with silk thread... The stitches must be small, consistent, and reflect a design of their own” (Otto 161). After these initial “instructions,” the remainder of each preface transitions to a second-person narration that, rather than addressing the reader, speaks to the character about herself. This is the form of the whole of the “Instructions” chapter regarding Anna.

The effect is to produce a strangely instructive voice that reveals to the reader essential elements of the character’s life and persona in the form of telling that person about herself. These instructions concern Anna,

Here are some things you know: That the English adopted slavery from the Spanish... You know that it was not uncommon during the Depression for a wealthy woman to hire out to a poor woman the drudgery of quilting. And that that same wealthy woman could still enter that quilt in a competition solely under her name – no thank-you or acknowledgement to anyone else... More things you know: That only you can tell your story. (Otto 127 – 129)

As I have already discussed (but what the reader cannot confirm until the final pages of the novel), the source of these details – as well as the stories of all the other women in the book – is Anna. This narrative voice is not just awkward, but also revealing.

With Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* in mind, the awkwardness of Otto’s narrative voice can be situated as yet another instance in a long history of American literature in which white writers have included an “Africanist” presence as a “fundamental fictional technique by which to establish character” (*Playing* 80). Morrison notes that this presence is used in ways that are at times, “complicit in the fabrication of racism” and at other times, work to “explode” and “undermine” racist ideology (16). As she explores these options through a survey of classic American literature, Morrison reveals how the Africanist presence has become essential to the

way Americans have chosen to depict themselves throughout history. Morrison writes, “What became transparent were the self-evident ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence” (*Playing* 17). The “choked representation” emerges in a number of the details that I have just discussed: the contradictory narrative voice that simultaneously tells Anna about herself while also proclaiming that “only you can tell your story” (Otto 129). Morrison also explores shifts in narrative voice in relation to Ernest Hemingway’s two narrative voices in *To Have and Have Not?*. In Morrison’s reading, the silencing of Wesley, a black character, also forces Hemingway to adopt an odd form of narration – “set[ting] up a curiously silent mate-captain relationship” (73) since the cost of “humanizing, genderizing” Wesley is that Harry (the white protagonist) would be “positioned – set off, defined – very differently... Harry would lack the juxtaposition and association with a vague presence suggesting sexual excitement, a possible threat to his virility and competence... He would, finally, lack the complementarity of a figure who can be assumed to be in some way bound, fixed, unfree, and serviceable” (Morrison 73).

Otto’s “choked representation” emerges also in the setting apart of Anna’s story through her prefatory chapter that begins with the mashing together of a series of stories about South American and African slaves (along with a quote from the classic American folk song, “Buffalo Gals” – originally published in 1844 as “Lubly Fan” by John Hodges, a blackface minstrel). Anna’s is the only “Instructions” chapter that begins this way. Accordingly, it does less to reveal something essential about Anna’s character as to make her appear more exotic. Since the source of all these details is Anna’s “long talk” and she *is* the leader of the quilting circle, it is more fitting that Anna’s knowledge of quilting be utilized as a preface to the other characters.

Additionally, since Anna is not only the leader of the circle but also the source of quilting knowledge and experience, it would be strange for her to begin with instructions to herself. And yet, the tropes that emerge in the prefatory stories of Anna's chapter: the South African woman's "return to nature" as well as the association of darkness with evil (the "massa's clutch") and lightness/whiteness (the light of the moon) with deliverance and hope are all too familiar as common imaginations of blackness in white, American writings about black characters.⁶⁶

Further, since Finn has explicitly conveyed her desire to connect with Anna, Anna's exoticism aids in the construction of Finn's persona as eclectic and open-minded – or, as Morrison might write, more free. As each of the story chapters in the novel concern love stories of each of the characters, Finn is positioned as the sole beneficiary of the hard-learned lessons of the entire cast of older women: those of Anna and her grandmother's generation, as well as Marianna (who is of Finn's parent's generation). Thus, Finn can more legitimately express reservations about getting married in a way that was unacceptable in her grandparents' generation and is depicted as foolhardy and misguided when her father and mother first declare that they don't believe in marriage, only to later get married and divorce. Finn, by contrast *knows* that she can be both a "young scholar" and "an engaged woman" and has the liberty to take time to herself to think through her reservations. Through Anna's tales, Finn accesses the privilege of unreserved certainty that she can possess both a lover and a career. Curiously, Anna and Marianna are the only two other characters in the novel who admit to a similar desire. Anna

⁶⁶ Likewise, when Anna begins telling her story (in first-person) at the beginning of the "Tears" chapter she is likened to a shadow, "[t]o know my story, thinks Anna Neale, is to understand my superimposition on the world, to see that I am in the world as a shadow, as film laid upon the more vibrant picture. All underneath my image are people with families, children, husbands, houses, college degrees; all of one color. I am placed upon them as an architect uses an overlay sheet to illustrate the details of the structure he will build – and just as quickly, the overlay sheet can be again lifted, removing all traces of detail, leaving the bare structure" (Otto 133).

conveys a longing for “a man of her own with whom to have another child,” acknowledging a loneliness of her adult life (Otto 156). Marianna, on the other hand, attains a career and affection – but only as an expatriate in France. However, she never marries any of her lovers (this is depicted as an unfortunate loss, an indication of her “inability to love”) and she eventually returns to Grasse and gives up her career (Otto 174).

These depictions of Anna and Marianna are in line with Morrison’s critique, whereby she notes how the “Africanist personae, narrative, and idiom moved and enriched the text in self-conscious ways, [which has allowed her] to consider what the engagement meant for the work of the writer’s imagination” (*Playing* 16). With this in mind, I return to the question of how the quilting labors in these two narratives contribute to (or interrupt) the work of domesticating the racial project through the relationships between the quilts and the characters in these novels. I venture to expand upon Morrison’s essay by focusing on one scene in Anna’s chapter that, like “Everyday Use,” tells the story of the threatened inheritance of a family quilt. I suggest, though, that Walker’s quilt story doesn’t engage in a “choked representation” of the Africanist presence. Foremost, as an African American author, Walker - like Morrison - has not had “the same access [as white or non-black writers] to... traditionally useful constructs of blackness” (*Playing* x). Morrison elaborates,

Neither blackness nor ‘people of color’ stimulates in me notions of excessive, limitless love, anarchy, or routine dread. I cannot rely on these metaphorical shortcuts because I am a black writer struggling with and through a language that can powerfully evoke and enforce hidden signs of racial superiority, cultural hegemony, and dismissive ‘othering’ of people and language which are by no means marginal or already and completely known and knowable in my work. (*Playing* x-xi)

As such, I explore how Walker (like Morrison) has invented new ways to make use of domestic and crafting labors and objects in ways that “learn how to maneuver ways to free up the language” from the “sometimes sinister, frequently lazy, almost always predictable employment of racially informed and determined chains” (Morrison *Playing* xi).

I first elaborate Otto’s representation of Anna, by turning to the most significant quilt featured in *How to Make an American Quilt*. “The Life Before” is a quilt imagined and constructed by Anna’s great-great-grandmother and passed on to her Aunt Pauline, with whom she lives after the death of her (black) mother and disappearance of her (white) father. Aunt Pauline lives in the home of a wealthy white couple in San Francisco and works as their domestic. The husband has inherited enough money that he does not have to work and can instead pursue his interest in astronomy. He responds to young Anna’s curiosity in the stars by letting her gaze through his telescope and answering her questions. The wife of the house “lusts” over “The Life Before,” but purely for its unique aesthetic qualities and not in the least for the family stories that each of the appliques of “animals, birds, men of dark brown, hovering angels blowing trumpets” (among other figures) relate (Otto 134). On many occasions the wife asks to purchase the quilt from Pauline so that she might display it in her home. Pauline refuses since she has promised the quilt to Anna, who will allow the quilt and its stories to remain in the family. But, this changes one day, after Pauline hears the husband chuckling when Anna proclaims that she will visit the stars. He responds, laughing, “Now, that is not likely, is it?” (Otto 135), which infuriated Pauline. She becomes determined to buy a telescope for Anna so that she may pursue her interests apart from the husband’s “lighthearted” condescension. Knowing also that she possesses the skill to make something as beautiful as “The Life Before,” Pauline sells the quilt to the wife for a \$15, after initially asking for \$25. Of the paltry price, the

wife reasons, “Pauline, given current events [although they have been “relative untouched” by the recent crash in the stock market], you can certainly understand that I don’t have twenty-five dollars” (136). Meanwhile, Pauline observes how the wife has recently purchased a new silk dress and a ruby and pearl bracelet. When Anna learns of the sale she is legitimately distraught. Not three years later she has lost all her interest in astronomy. Adding to the tragedy, Pauline overhears the wife telling her friends about the quilt, “I’ve never seen anything quite like it... Oh, it is *very* different. There are some stories that even go along with it... Well, I don’t remember them offhand, but I could find out...” (Otto 135). But, in the end Anna is redeemed when at sixteen she leaves this home without warning, taking the quilt with her, which pleases Pauline greatly. Now it is the wife’s turn to grieve. Pauline repays her the \$15 and in a saccharin voice offers to sew another in place of the original. To which the wife responds, shaking her head and wailing, “I wanted *that* one” (138).

Similar to “Everyday Use,” this tale demonstrates the friction between characters who value these quilts for vastly different reasons. The wife sees only the ornamental qualities, is not disturbed by her “theft” of Pauline and Anna’s history (as Anna describes it), and is understood by Anna to have been “unabashedly immoral” for buying something like that quilt. The other perspective, represented in these stories by Pauline and Anna values the quilts for the history represented in them, of which the quilt serves as a reminder. Mama and Maggie, of “Everyday Use” feel similarly to Pauline and Anna, whereas Dee/Wangero’s desire for the family quilts represents a mix of these two vantages.⁶⁷ Pauline, Maggie, and Mama are also able to attach to the quilt memories as well as knowledge of the labors that produced them. For Maggie, this allows her to relinquish her connection to the object, since she is ultimately satisfied in her

⁶⁷ I elaborate the tension between the craft object as commodity and that which is prior in chapter four. In these terms, all valuations of the quilt represent the craft object in modernity.

knowledge that she could produce others like it. Pauline feels similarly, although Anna describes how after her sale of the quilt Pauline, “mourns it in silence because a Christian woman is not supposed to feel longing or regret for worldly things. Being that things of the spirit will sustain us over things of the flesh. But Pauline is lost, distracted, and distanced by the theft of her history, appropriated by someone for whom the quilt is an ornamental object and nothing more” (Otto 138). Again, we see a retreat to the intangible as the mark of salvation for Otto’s African American character, demonstrating a proximity between the feminist-abolitionism of Stowe and Otto’s use of black characters in her novel.

Anna and Mama, while possessing quilting knowledge on the same level as Maggie, ultimately refuse to allow someone they deem unworthy to take final possession of quilts in these stories. In Walker’s story, since Wangero is also a granddaughter to the quilters, one can explore the question of the dangers of escape or self-exile from the race house, while considering how hand-crafted objects might help to “domesticate” Morrison’s “elusive, race-free paradise.” This gets back to my initial motivation in examining these two works of literature: to consider the differing functions of hand-crafted objects in Otto and Walker’s fiction. In addition to the quilt, in “Everyday Use,” Mama and Maggie’s unfeminine, even anti-domestic, use and making of the home space position them in opposition to their stylish and attractive daughter/sister, Dee. The sparse poverty of the three bedroom home, built in a pasture and with hide-covered windows, in which Mama and Maggie continue to live exists in sharp contrast to the hints of Wangero and Hakim-a-barber’s home (it is implied that they live together although Mama never ventures to ask if they have indeed been married). Wangero exclaims how she will use the top of the butter churn as “a centerpiece for the alcove table” and will “think of something artistic to do with the dasher” (56). Wangero intends to hang the family quilts, rather than put them to “everyday use,”

as if this is the only way one could truly appreciate them. She calls the quilts “priceless” (57).

In these comments Walker makes a satire of Wangero’s perspective, evident also when Wangero advises her sister at the end, “You ought to try to make something of yourself, too, Maggie. It’s really a new day for us. But from the way you and Mama still live you’d never know it” (59). Walker reveals the superficiality of Wangero’s transformation when she offers details about how Dee *had* been offered a quilt by Mama when she left for college, and also that she had vowed (in a letter) that no matter where Mama and Maggie “‘choose’ to live, she will manage to come see us. But she will never bring her friends” (51). By contrast, on the day in which she brings Hakim-a-barber home she makes a production of snapping photograph after photograph of Mama, Maggie and their cow. All of the photos prominently feature the once-despised house. Wangero reclaims the home as something aesthetic, but non-functional. It is meant to be displayed and serve as evidence of her upward mobility.

In addition, as Wangero objectifies the house and other functional objects she makes the assumption that she alone possesses the refinement, education and taste to truly appreciate their beauty. However, Walker demonstrates the fallacy of this presumption throughout the tale when Mama, too, notices the time-worn beauty of the objects that Wangero covets,

When she [Wangero] finished wrapping the dasher the handle stuck out. I took it for a moment in my hands. You didn’t even have to look close to see where hands pushing the dasher up and down to make butter had left a kind of sink in the wood. In fact, there were a lot of small sinks; you could see where thumbs and fingers had sunk into the wood. It was beautiful light yellow wood, from a tree that grew in the yard where Big Dee and Stash [Aunt Dee’s first husband, Maggie recalls] had lived. (Walker 56)

Likewise, although Wangero’s bright, flowy dress is so “loud” it hurts Mama’s eyes, when she

moves closer, Mama also admits to herself that she likes it. Mama doesn't miss any detail of Dee/Wangero's attire, from her gold earrings to the noise of her bracelets and the style of her hair. In contrast to Wangero's objectification of the house (including the functional objects within it: the quilts and parts of the butter churn), the signifying and functional value of the house for Mama and Maggie is evident through Walker's description of the activities that take place in it: Mama "breaking ice to get water for washing... eat[ing] pork liver cooked over the open fire minutes after it comes steaming from the hog" (48), the hanging of quilt frames on the front porch in order to quilt the two heirlooms in question, Mama and Maggie chewing snuff in the clean swept yard, "just enjoying," as Wangero drives off (59).

To return to Morrison's terms, Wangero's upward mobility represents the "new dangers" that present themselves when attempting to escape the race house. Her new life attempts to be race-specific, but the specificity is shown to be superficial – especially when she accuses Mama of not understanding her/their heritage at the end of the story. Although I presented critiques of Torseny's use of this story in her essay, I agree with her final reading of Wangero as dually marginalized. When Morrison contends that "legitimacy, authenticity, community, [and] belonging" are about both race and home it's evident that even while Dee has lost (or, perhaps could never fully access) community and belonging in her childhood home, Wangero struggles to claim authenticity or legitimacy in her adopted culture. Wangero's cobbling together of cultural traditions (heritages) means that she is an outsider on many counts. Like Helga in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, she seeks legitimacy, authenticity, community and belonging via objects/"things" that can be purchased and accumulated.⁶⁸ As in *Quicksand*, this technique is

⁶⁸ As I have discussed elsewhere, a correlative in contemporary culture is DIY's "remedy" to consumer culture in the opportunity it offers for consumers to purchase an experience. By positioning craft work as inherently meaningful (and often inherently political as well) there is a

destined to fail from the outset.

Otto expresses Anna's desire for the quilt and telescope in simpler terms - as a longing for both "her history and her future" (Otto 138). Her quest is similar in that it is expressed through a longing for particular objects: the telescope (future) and quilt (history). Is it that, like Anna, Dee/Wangero also seeks both her history and a future? For Wangero, her history might be signified by the quilts, clabber, lid and photographs, while the future would be represented by her earrings, bracelets, college education and flowy dress. Ultimately, though, this evaluation is incomplete as it too easily allows commodities (or, for Helga in *Quicksand*, "things") to stand in for complex formations such as family history or a legitimate future. As this short story demonstrates, Dee/Wangero is skilled at accumulating the items she desires. From Maggie's vantage, "She thinks her sister has held life always in the palm of one hand, that 'no' is a word the world never learned to say to her" (47). Merging Mama's past with a legitimate future for Maggie, Dee/Wangero and even Hakim-a-barber will be more complicated than the acquisition of objects.

On the other hand, Mama and Maggie's life is not a utopia either. Mama's description of her domestic labors demonstrates the hard, backbreaking work in which she engages. Further, in her imagination of being reunited with Dee on a television program, "of this sort," Mama reveals that she does not conform to a more mainstream standard of beauty and wit. She describes, "the way my daughter would want me to be" as "a hundred pounds lighter, my skin like an uncooked barley pancake. My hair glistens... Johnny Carson has much to do to keep up with my quick and witty tongue" (Walker 38). But, Mama reflects, "This is a mistake... Who ever knew a Johnson with a quick tongue? Who can even imagine me looking a strange white man in the eye? It seems

presumption that the activity of making these goods takes part outside of or beyond the purview of the market.

to me I have talked to them always with one foot raised in flight, with my head turned in whichever way is farthest from them. Dee, though. She would always look anyone in the eye. Hesitation was no part of her nature” (Walker 49). “Everyday Use” is an uplifting story, by most accounts, in which the quiet underdog (Maggie) is redeemed by Mama in the end. It is especially light considering the stories that bracket it in *In Love and Trouble* (“The Child Who Favored Daughter” that concerns domestic violence and sexual abuse and “The Revenge of Hannah Kemhuff,” in which all of the children of Hannah die of starvation). And yet, the details Mama provides about her daily life and interactions with the white community lend the story a somber note. The modest cabin where Mama and Maggie live might depict a race-specific but not a non-racist paradise. It does present a better alternative than Dee/Wangero’s self-exile, as Wangero is shown to be educated but naïve (or perhaps ungrateful or oblivious). Further, her search for community and authenticity is shown to be overwhelmingly superficial. It is the domestic/crafting labors, primarily, that elaborate this distinction. Walker doesn’t present a handy formula to achieving this aim. But, the conclusion of Mama thrusting the quilts into Maggie’s arms, followed by their sitting together on the porch “just enjoying” – combined with the diversity of other short stories in the volume (that explore multiple facets of the black experience) – suggest a genuine searching for and attempt to domesticate some form of Morrison’s elusive race-free paradise.

By contrast, Otto attempts a story of mostly well-realized integration (as demonstrated by the multi-racial composition of the sewing circle). But, the diversity of the sewing circle ultimately reveals less about Morrison’s project of remaking the race house and more about the reflective purposes of Anna and Marianna in the story. Otto’s housekeeping of the race house comes through in her use of black characters to establish Finn’s character, her reliance on

common tropes of blackness, and the ultimate orientation toward the young white woman (Finn) in the telling of Anna (and Marianna's) stories. In this regard, the title, *How to Make an American Quilt*, is fitting. Otto's intent appears to have been for "American" to signify the diversity of experience in US history (as demonstrated in the multiple prefaces that reference histories of slavery and settler colonialism). In my reading, however, "American" instead represents the work of utilizing Anna's character as essential to the novel but not central - as Anna functions, ultimately, toward the development of Finn's persona. As stated multiply in Gladys Joe's prefatory chapter, with each reference to slavery, "But that is another story" (Otto 10-11). This sentiment is repeated three times in two pages, each time following a reference to histories of racist exploitation in US history. Each of these assertions reorient Otto's (brief) focus from an "Africanist" presence and history back to the experience of the white characters. Through these examples, I hope to have demonstrated that Otto's novel does more (house)work on the maintenance of race house than housekeeping that might dismantle and reconfigure it. It is from here that I move into a final section of this chapter that explores two other examples of contemporary white domestic fiction that provide a different (more promising) orientation to and relationship with the race house.

American and "Un-American" Housekeeping in *A Thousand Acres* and *Housekeeping*: Implications for the Complete Remaking of the (Patriarchal, Class and) Race House

Unlike *How to Make an American Quilt*, Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* and Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* do not feature African American characters, or any other of people of color (save one very minor character in *Housekeeping*). In some ways, this makes these novels an unlikely pairing with the rest of this chapter. However, Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* as well as "Home" provide many openings for considering novels that exclude even the most

marginal of black characters or characters of color. Following Morrison's argument in *Playing* means that one would take seriously the fact that an Africanist presence exists even in novels populated entirely by white characters. As Morrison states,

Explicit or implicit, the Africanist presence informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American literature. It is a dark and abiding presence, there for the literary imagination as both a visible and an invisible mediating force. Even, and especially, when American texts are not 'about' Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation. (46)

Further, Morrison's intersectional analysis of the way that the house/home antagonism concerns race, in "Home," is meant to extend to various other power relations, especially those concerning class, gender and sex. This is especially evident when Morrison enumerates the various formations and terrains of home, culminating in, "the devastations, pleasures, and imperatives of homelessness as it is manifested in discussion of feminism, globalism, the diaspora, migrations, hybridity, contingency, interventions, assimilations, exclusions. The estranged body, the legislated body, the violated, rejected, deprived body – the body as consummate home" (2). When Morrison writes of "homelessness" she expresses a concern that in the process of redecorating, redesigning and reconceiving of the racial house in her own writing she might be forced to forfeit a home of her own. She asks, "Would life in this renovated house mean eternal homelessness?" ("Home" 2). Bringing together Morrison's theorizations of home, race and American literature in the context of contemporary, white domestic fiction allows for an exploration of housekeeping in and of the racial home. I again ask how household labors index safety or violence, race-specificity or color-blindness as well as the ongoing search for legitimacy, authenticity, community and belonging. In the forthcoming examples, *Housekeeping*

explores intersections between the class and race house whereas *A Thousand Acres* takes the patriarchal house as its focus and offers an opportunity to extend to the race house as well.

In many ways, the housekeeping and crafting labors in *Housekeeping* and *A Thousand Acres* are antithetical, although they both still operate within and participate in the race house. The household labors in *Housekeeping*, especially with Aunt Sylvie at the helm, might well be considered anti-domestic. Similar labors of keeping house in *A Thousand Acres* fall more precisely in line with the ideals of true womanhood in that they are performed in order to cultivate and maintain harmony and the appearance of a happy, healthful and prosperous (white, straight, patriarchal, middle-class “American”) home. Accordingly, a rigid stratification of stereotypically masculine and feminine labors is more apparent in *A Thousand Acres*. Men are scarcely present in *Housekeeping*. This doesn’t result in Sylvie, great-aunts Lily and Nona, Ruth or Lucille taking on stereotypically masculine labors (as in “Everyday Use”). The rural setting of *A Thousand Acres* and “Everyday Use” accounts for some of this difference.⁶⁹

Despite the divergent housekeeping labors, the outcomes of each novel are similar as they both culminate in the dissolution of the characters’ households, which, tellingly, is not depicted as a tragedy in either novel. In both works housekeeping labors constitute the characters’ strongest recourse to keeping their families intact. Before discussing the details of these two novels, I return once more to Jacobson, this time in her brief reading of “un-American” housekeeping in neodomestic fiction. Jacobson’s reading emerges at the conclusion of her first chapter, “Remapping Domestic Fiction,” in a section that attempts to locate the “cultural foundations” of (neo)domesticity. Jacobson cites the “ambivalent endings” of many works of

⁶⁹ *Housekeeping* takes place in the town of Fingerbone, Idaho, where goods can be readily purchased in town. Shopping trips are funded by a modest inheritance from Ruth and Lucille’s grandmother (Sylvie’s mother). None of the girls’ caretakers hold a job at any point in the novel.

neodomesic fiction (including *Paradise*, *Housekeeping*, *Beloved*, *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*, *The Poisonwood Bible* by Barbara Kingsolver and Joy Williams' *Breaking and Entering*) as a means by which the neodomesic genre "highlight[s] instability" (35). Given the diversity of writers in this list, it seems unusual, to say the least, that Jacobson seeks out a universal "cultural context" from which "these ambivalent endings and neodomesic fiction more generally emerge" (35). In doing so, Jacobson provides an overview of "conservative visions of the contemporary home and family" that characterize the United States from 1980 to the early 2000s. Among these characteristics are the married woman's unpaid "second shift" in the home and a revival of "conventional domesticity" that "continues the promotion of stereotypical roles related to gender, sex, class, and race" (36).

While Jacobson's aim is to broadly characterize prevailing trends in the United States that account for a renewed interest in domesticity, she also participates in re-homogenizing her reconfigured genre. She writes that since neodomesic fiction "reflects, provokes, and theorizes distinctive responses to conservative visions of the contemporary home and family... when such neodomesic recycling appears, it is frequently perceived as un-American" (38). And yet, the novels that she uses to depict this "un-American" housekeeping are predominantly writers of color (and, to a lesser extent, stories about white characters whose poverty places them outside of the mainstream). The race and class characteristics of her examples raises questions about the degree to which she has truly reconfigured the genre. Jacobson's primary examples of "un-American" housekeeping include Mrs. Nguyen's "'refugee' housekeeping" in *Monkey Bridge*. She also cites Grandma Fleet and Indigo's gathering of refuse (including string, scraps of cloth, bits of wire, vegetable and fruit seeds) from the town dump and various other garbage piles in *Gardens in the Dunes*. Jacobson wraps up this section with an example from Dorothy Allison's

Bastard Out of Carolina, in which a “white trash” family exemplifies “domestic thrift and living on the margin” (like Grandma and Indigo, they also scour trash for useable items) (38 - 39).

Importantly, the outcomes of these forms of “un-American” housekeeping differ for each novel. In *Monkey Bridge* Mrs. Nguyen is said to have transformed the Protestant ideal of living humbly as the path to “true independence”⁷⁰ into her “mobile, ‘refugee’ style of housekeeping” (Jacobson 39). Jacobson concludes that the housekeeping in *Gardens in the Dunes* “marks them as not fully American; hence the ‘need’ to send Native children to boarding schools and away from ‘dangerous’ domestic habits” (39). Finally, Aunt Raylene’s living on the margin in *Bastard out of Carolina* “affords a certain freedom [in which] [d]omestic thrift and living on the margin both empowers these characters and marks them as outsiders” (Jacobson 39). By using the immigrant, poor white and Native American households as her primary examples of “un-American” and unstable domesticity, Jacobson reveals that she doesn’t sufficiently theorize a reconfigured genre. Further, her reading of these examples of living on the margins only seems to be “empowering” for the white characters of Allison’s novel. As Morrison notes in her discussion of the Africanist presence in early American literature,

The need to establish difference stemmed not only from the Old World but from a difference in the New. What was distinctive in the New was, first of all, its claim to freedom and, second, the presence of the unfree within the heart of the democratic experiment – the critical absence of democracy, its echo, shadow, and silent force in the political and intellectual activity of some not-Americans. The distinguishing features of the not-Americans were their slave status, their social status – and their color. (48)

⁷⁰ Jacobson quotes Catherine Beecher for this sentiment.

In Jacobson's reading, the distinguishing feature of the "un-American" nature of the housekeeping in these novels is also their "social status" – especially "their color." To truly reconfigure the genre of domestic fiction would require Jacobson to reconsider how her examples of un-American housekeeping reinforce, rather than contest, the conventions of standard domestic fiction.

For instance, when Morrison asks in *Playing in the Dark*, "What does positing one's writerly self, in the wholly racialized society that is the United States, as unraced and all others as raced entail?" (xii), she asks literary theorists, like Jacobson, to consider what it would mean to label conventional domestic ideology (with all of its homogenizing and policing tendencies) as the "un-American" form. As Morrison writes,

What Africanism became for, and how it functioned in, the literary imagination is of paramount interest because it may be possible to discover, through a close look at literary 'blackness,' the nature – even the cause – of literary "whiteness." What is it *for*? What parts do the invention and development of whiteness play in the construction of what is loosely described as "American"? If such an inquiry ever comes to maturity, it may provide access to a deeper reading of American literature – a reading not completely available now, at least, I suspect, because of the studied indifference of most literary criticism to these matters. (9)

Thus, my readings of *Housekeeping* and *A Thousand Acres* are meant to explore the use of mundane, household labors in relation to the questions above. What does it look like to do housekeeping in or of the race house? What are the outcomes? How might these domestic and crafting labors work to transform this house completely? How and, in what ways, does the domestic individual reappear?

Both *Housekeeping* and *A Thousand Acres* revolve around sisterly relations. As I mentioned, the household/crafting labors are often quite divergent. Nevertheless, characters in both novels attempt to use these labors, at different moments and in different ways, to reestablish their faltering families. In *Housekeeping*, the relationship between sisters Ruth (the narrator) and Lucille (her younger sister) is threatened not by their mother's suicide and subsequent swapping out of custodians (first their grandmother, then two great-aunts and finally their aunt Sylvie) but, rather, by Lucille's eventual discontent with Sylvie's unconventional demeanor, guardianship and housekeeping. In *A Thousand Acres*, a recasting of *King Lear* set in Iowa, the issue of the inheritance of the titular 1000 acre family farm precipitates the demise of the families of adult sisters Ginny (the eldest and narrator), Rose and Caroline (the youngest). In both novels, the oldest sisters (Ruth and Ginny) are more passive than their younger siblings. They are less likely to speak up or disturb the status quo. In *Housekeeping* it is Lucille as well as Aunt Sylvie who turn to household labors as a tactic. For Lucille, sewing and keeping up her appearances serve as a mode of transformation. For Sylvie, housekeeping labors offer a last-ditch effort to maintain custody of Ruth. In *A Thousand Acres*, both Ginny and Rose keep house as a strategy, but Ginny's efforts are more heartfelt. In the end, Ginny abandons her crusade, finding refuge in the anonymity of the city and pursuing an anti-domesticity that she can attain as a wage laboring apartment dweller (described as "the changeless eternal" of "A toothbrush, a beat-up sofa bed, a lamp I found in a trash bin...and a cardboard carton to set it up on, a hot-water kettle, a box of teabags in the refrigerator, two bath towels...") (Smiley 334).

Morrison, once more, is instructive. In her reading of Bernard Bailyn's *Voyagers to the West* she unpacks how the lead character only achieves authority and autonomy after relocating from London to the life of a Mississippi planter. She writes, "Once he has moved into that

position [to assume absolute control], he is resurrected as a new man, a distinctive man – a different man. And whatever his social status in London, in the New World he is a gentleman. More gentle, more man. The site of his transformation is within rawness: he is backgrounded by savagery” (*Playing* 44). So too, does the non-existent, but still formative presence of “Africanism” help to provide a renovated “background of savagery” against which the domestic individuals of these novels stand apart. In contrast to the novels in Morrison’s study, this “background of savagery” is embodied not by the scarce presence of non-white characters (in *Housekeeping* a transient Native American woman appears once) but by the characters who promote practices of conventional domesticity. This is true also in *A Thousand Acres*, where all of the characters (both major and minor) are white.

Morrison’s theorization of the purposes of the Africanist “background of savagery” aligns with Amy Kaplan’s “Manifest Domesticity” in which she argues that a major underlying purpose of nineteenth-century domesticity is to imagine the nation as home and buttress it against a sense of the foreign as alien and threatening (savage). Kaplan writes,

Another part of the cultural work of domesticity might be to unite men and women in the national domain and to generate notions of the foreign against which the nation can be imagined as home. The border between the domestic and foreign, however, also deconstructs when we think of domesticity not as a static condition but as the process of domestication, which entails conquering and taming the wild, the natural, and the alien.

Domestic in this sense is related to the imperial project of civilizing, and the conditions of domesticity often become markers that distinguish civilization from savagery. (582)

Kaplan’s focus remains in the nineteenth-century and she is primarily concerned with remapping readings of women’s writing in this period in order to understand how “their narratives of

domesticity and female subjectivity [are]... inseparable from narratives of empire and nation building” (584). Morrison elaborates this topic with greater attention to legacies of slavery and racism in the United States (her focus in *Playing*, too, is nineteenth-century literature, by both male and female writers). Morrison writes,

I want to suggest that these concerns – autonomy, authority, newness and difference, absolute power – not only become the major themes and presumptions of American literature, but that each one is made possible by, shaped by, activated by a complex awareness and employment of a constituted Africanism. It was this Africanism, deployed as rawness and savagery, that provided the staging ground and arena for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity. (44)

Whereas Kaplan explores how domestic fiction “produce[s] the racialized national subjectivity of the white middle-class woman in contested international spaces” (600), Morrison suggests that even broader universalisms of American identity: autonomy, authority, newness and difference, absolute power, are made possible through the utilization of a “constituted Africanism.”

Of course, these quintessential elements of “American identity” are transformed within the context of domestic fiction.⁷¹ This is the primary argument of Gillian Brown’s *Domestic Individualism*, as she explores how the possessive individual develops and flourishes not just within the public sphere, but also within domestic space. As Kaplan notes, Brown focuses on the model bourgeois subject, which I have endeavored to expand. Accordingly, a backdrop of savagery (that might take the form of the market, patriarchy, slavery, violence, abuse, poverty)

⁷¹ Kaplan does cite Morrison at the close of her essay, asserting how “colonialism underwrites the racial politics of the domestic imagination” (602). She continues, “The ‘Africanist presence’ [Morrison’s term] throughout *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is intimately bound to the expansionist logic of domesticity itself. In the writing of Stowe and her contemporary proponents of woman’s sphere, ‘Manifest Domesticity’ turns an imperial nation into a home by producing and colonizing specters of the foreign that lurk inside and outside its ever shifting borders” (Kaplan 602).

produces transformations for the female domestic protagonists of these novels. Morrison's race house, then, is constructed, maintained, remodeled, but not completely reconfigured when these domestic individuals undergo transformations that benefit from and help to construct an "Africanist" rawness/savagery. By contrast, the race house might be completely remodeled through transformations that call this dichotomy (gentleman/lady vs. savage) into question.

The race house is troubled in *Housekeeping* when the background of savagery emerges as the domestic forces of "improvement" that captivate Lucille and ultimately drive Sylvie and Ruth out of town and away from her forever. In *A Thousand Acres* savagery is located within the home in the form of abusive fathers as well as mothers who fail to protect their children. Since these fathers and mothers are respected within the larger community – based upon their successful farms and the appearance of domestic harmony - "respectable society" is the menacing force in *A Thousand Acres* as well. In this way, these novels depart from Kaplan's framework. The pedagogical role of conventional housekeeping in both novels demonstrates its limitations, violences and dangers. Rather than attempting to conquer and tame "the wild, the natural, and the alien" through the civilizing process of domestication, these novels demonstrate how conventional practices of domesticity cannot effectively buttress the home from "savage influences" – since the savage influences are the forces of conventional domesticity. As Kaplan writes of early American domestic fiction, "Through the process of domestication, the home contains within itself those wild or foreign elements that must be tamed; domesticity not only monitors the borders between the civilized and the savage but also regulates traces of the savage within itself" (582). These twentieth-century revisions of the genre (and renovations of the domestic individual) demonstrate how the standards and expectations of conventional domesticity represent the savage forces keeping the race house intact. I conclude this chapter

with a few readings from each novel to illustrate how the renovated domestic individual might either live in a redesigned race house and erroneously call it home, or work to reconfigure the race house entirely.

The turning point in the relationship of the two sisters in *Housekeeping* arrives when Lucille, the younger sister, embarks on a part of self-righteous “improvement.” Having finally passed into the care of their formerly transient and aloof, but still caring, aunt Sylvie (whose housekeeping and care might, generously, be called unconventional – if not haphazard) Lucille, and Ruth initially find her demeanor strange and at times unnerving, but acceptable. After setting out on a fishing excursion and staying past the point at which they can safely hike home, Lucille and Ruth are forced to spend the night huddled together, outdoors and in the cold. Upon returning home the following morning, Sylvie is unconcerned, which sends Lucille into a silent, purposeful and irreversible fury that culminates in her rejecting Sylvie’s guardianship to move into the spare room of her home economics teacher, Miss Royce. Initially Lucille endeavors to coax and finally drag Ruth along. But when Ruth, out of her characteristic indifference, absentmindedly creates a minor detour in Lucille’s path, Lucille leaves Ruth forever behind. The scene unfolds with great reliance on domestic labors and other signifiers of crafting labor.

The first indication of Lucille’s transformation is when, after the sisters are out of the house all night, she forces Ruth to be made presentable in order to take a seemingly purposeless excursion into town. They visit the drugstore, order sodas and chat with a pair of older girls over sewing patterns and fashion magazines. When Ruth tires of this exercise and admits to wanting to go home Lucille commands her to stay, stating “Don’t! That’s *Sylvie’s* house now.... We have to *improve* ourselves!... *Starting right now!*” (Robinson 123, italics in the original). Later, Lucille returns home with a sewing pattern and four yards of fabric with which to make the jacket and

skirt. She tells Ruth, "It will all be coordinated... It will go with my hair" and Ruth informs the reader, "She was deeply serious" (125). This is Ruth's final opportunity to join Lucille's scheme for "self-improvement," but she quickly fails to display the same focus and commitment as Lucille. The terminal argument ignites over a collection of leaves pressed between the pages of their deceased grandfather's dictionary. Ruth (who has been behaving increasingly like Sylvie) is curious about the ephemera whereas Lucille's single-minded focus on the sewing project drives her to first shake the collection from the pages (they have been classified alphabetically) and then crumble the pressed flowers between her hands in a furious and infuriating attempt to regain Ruth's attention. Lucille's crushing of the flowers collected by her grandfather symbolizes her rejection of the past in order to progress in her path toward self-improvement.

Later in the novel, Sylvie, too, appears to venture down this path of self-improvement when her unconventional housekeeping takes a brief turn toward the orthodox. This occurs after she realizes that her ongoing custody of Ruth depends on cultivating the appearance of conventional domesticity – abandoning her deep-seeded and odd housekeeping habits that frequently blur the boundaries between inside and outside (by inviting in cats and sparrows or sweeping leaves within the house into a tidy pile in the corner of the kitchen). After some of the townspeople witness Sylvie and Ruth returning from another out of doors overnight excursion (as they return to Fingerbone in a freight car) Sylvie receives a concerned visit from the Sheriff. She is also visited by "neighbor woman and church women," who have never before entered the house but now bring "offerings" of casseroles, coffee cakes, knitted socks and caps and comforters (177, 179). As a result, Sylvie gives up her hoarding of tin cans, newspapers and other disposables and makes a brief and heartfelt attempt to make the house "presentable." To this end, Sylvie stays up an entire night cleaning. When Ruth wakes the next morning she finds

the house in a completely different state, “the kitchen table was cleared and scrubbed and there was a bowl and a spoon and a box of cornflakes and a glass of orange juice and two pieces of buttered toast on a saucer and the vase of artificial daisies” (198). It isn’t just the appearance of the kitchen that has (temporarily) shifted, but Sylvie’s entire demeanor. When Ruth comments, “This is nice,” Sylvie replies (as would a conventional housewife), “What a mess... Now, you eat breakfast. You’ll be late for school... I’ll help you brush your hair” (189).

Unlike Lucille, whose shift toward conventional domesticity is entirely heartfelt, Sylvie indicates that she completely understands the performative purpose of her labors when she explains to Ruth, “You’ve got to look nice” (Robinson 189). This scene might not seem so strange if it weren’t for the fact that – ever since her arrival – Sylvie’s housekeeping has grown increasingly eccentric. In crisis, she calls on the conventions of white American domesticity to signal to the watchful eyes of the sheriff, neighborhood and church ladies that she has reformed. The scene is so carefully composed that it presents something like a television breakfast commercial, except that Sylvie “was filthy with newsprint and there were cobwebs in her hair” (Robinson 198). Ultimately, though these last-minute housekeeping efforts are unsuccessful as Sylvie is informed that they will have to attend a hearing regarding Ruth’s custody. As Ruth already knows, “It was not the theft of the boat... nor my truancy... It was not that Sylvie had kept me out on the lake all night... It was that we returned to Fingerbone in a freight car. Sylvie was an unredeemed transient, and she was making a transient of me” (Robinson 177). Unlike Lucille, Ruth does not cite Sylvie’s unconventional housekeeping as one of her areas of fault, perhaps because she has begun to think more like Sylvie with each passing day.

Thus, Ruth and Lucille develop divergent interpretations of Sylvie’s behavior as the novel progresses. As I have mentioned, both sisters are initially upset by Sylvie’s erratic patterns

and activities. For instance, early in the novel they are surprised to see her tottering on the tall, perilous railroad bridge in the middle of the day. Ruth and Lucille are present to witness this since they have been skipping school for over a week at this point. Sylvie reports that, “I’ve always wondered what it would be like,” an unconvincing explanation that the girls interpret as threatening abandonment (via suicide, like their mother, or some other form) (82). As Ruth explains, “We were very upset, all the same, for reasons too numerous to mention. Clearly our aunt was not a stable person. At the time we did not put this thought into words. It existed between us as a sort of undifferentiated attentiveness to all the details of her appearance and behavior” (82). Their secondary element of concern is that Sylvie is not, in fact, upset with their truancy, a further indication of her instability.

Later in the novel, after Lucille has moved out, the degree of Ruth’s transformation is evident when she utterly understands Sylvie’s anti-domestic logics. This emerges in her description of the neighborhood and church ladies who visit their home. Ruth’s narration demonstrates that it is the logic of these other women that is strange and absurd (not Sylvie’s). Ruth observes, “The visitors glanced at the cans and papers as if they thought Sylvie must consider such things appropriate to a parlor. That was ridiculous. We had simply ceased to consider that room a parlor... Who would think of dusting or sweeping the cobwebs down in a room used for the storage of cans and newspapers – things utterly without value?” (181). Further, Ruth explains, “Sylvie only kept them, I think, because she considered accumulation to be the essence of housekeeping, and because she considered the hoarding of worthless things to be proof of a particularly scrupulous thrift” (181). It is telling that Jacobson, who includes an extended reading of *Housekeeping* in her study, does not also label this instance of taking the

Protestant ideal of thrift and virtue “too far” or “un-American” (although Sylvie, too, finds value in garbage).

One more example demonstrates the differing domestic logics of Sylvie/Ruth and the other female residents of Fingerbone,

“The kitchen was stacked with cans, and with brown paper bags. Sylvie knew that such collecting invited mice, so she brought home a yellow cat with half an ear and a bulging belly, and it littered twice. The first litter was old enough already to prey on the swallows that had begun to nest on the second floor. That was good and useful, but the cats often brought the birds into the parlor, and left wings and feet and heads lying about, even on the couch. Of course the ladies who came to our house had killed and scalded and plucked and gutted and dismembered and fried and eaten fowl beyond reckoning. Still, they were startled by these remnants of swallows and sparrows, as much as by the cats themselves, which numbered thirteen or fourteen” (181).

Although Sylvie rids the house of the cats, mice, sparrow remains, paper bags and cans by the end of the novel, even her best domestic efforts are unsuccessful. This causes her ultimate abandonment of Fingerbone with Ruth (but not before setting their house aflame). Ruth presents this knowledge (of the root of Sylvie’s transgressions) alongside an explanation that “Fingerbone was moved to solemn pity” of their affair since “[T]here was not a soul there but knew how shallow-rooted the whole town was. [Since] [i]t flooded yearly, and had burned once” (177). For these reasons, “a diaspora threatened always,” suggesting that Fingerbone wasn’t so “pleasant and ordinary” and challenging its desire to “live on” (178). In this way, wanderers (like Sylvia and now Ruth as well), “whose presence suggested it might be as well to drift, or it could not matter much, [were] met with something that seemed at first sight a moral reaction, since

morality is a check up on the strongest temptations” (178). I have provided these details of Ruth’s explanation in order to note the extent by which Sylvie’s vagrancy is understood to be not merely a hazard to young Ruth, but to the entire town.

In the end, Sylvie and Ruth embark on a path of eternal homelessness with only a modicum of fear (on Ruth’s part). Ruth explains, “For we had to leave. I could not stay, and Sylvie would not stay without me. Now truly we were cast out to wander, and there was an end to housekeeping” (209). Whereas Morrison finds the threat of eternal homelessness a worrisome prospect, Sylvie and Ruth ultimately are comfortable being “so unlike other people” (214). As Sylvie assures Ruth as they contemplate crossing the train bridge out of town, “It’s not the worse thing, Ruthie, drifting. You’ll see. You’ll see” (210). They live in each new location only for a short while – Ruth working until people begin asking too many questions, at which point they move on (214). While Ruth becomes more similar to Sylvie in stages throughout the novel, she remembers that it was the considerable terrors of “the crossing of the bridge that changed me finally” – not her mother’s abandonment that left her in the habit of always waiting, or something more nebulous that originated in her very conception (215). The backdrop to her transformation (as well as Lucille’s), without the embodied Africanist presence (of which Morrison writes), is shown to be the civilizing forces of Fingerbone.

As such, it is Lucille, not Ruth or Sylvie who is imagined as haunted at the end of the novel. Years after they have left Fingerbone, presumed dead since no one imagines that they might have survived the long and windy walk across the expansive train bridge, Ruth conjures Lucille’s new life as either in the kitchen of their former home “snuggling pretty daughters” or “tastefully dressed” and waiting for a friend at a restaurant in Boston. Despite these comfortable and conventional appearances, Lucille is always imagined as incomplete, eternally searching (as

with Helga in *Quicksand*). Ruth describes this in the final sentences of the novel, “No one watching this woman... could know how her thoughts are thronged by our absence, or know how she does not watch, does not listen, does not wait, does not hope, and always for me and Sylvie” (219). Through the ambiguity of this conclusion, where Lucille is either overwhelmed by loneliness or tragically not watching, listening, waiting or hoping for Sylvie and Ruth, the reader understands that Lucille’s alignment with conventional domesticity does not provide her the solace promised by her cultivation of this pleasant outward appearance. One can readily extend this conclusion to all the tidy, presentable women of Fingerbone.

By offering/exploring a protagonist who is contented with unconventionality, in a novel that precisely marks the limits of white, middle-class domesticity, Ruth’s character demonstrates anti-domesticity as a strategy toward remaking the race/class house. Whereas Jacobson reads Sylvie’s antidomesticity as “suggest[ing] a darker side to leaving the home-as-haven behind,” I discern something the opposite (32). Jacobson implies that Lucille may have escaped the “darker” fate of Ruth and Sylvie, but Ruth’s descriptions of Lucille at the end of the novel actually shows Lucille as occupying the less desirable fate. This is buttressed by the fact that Sylvie’s nature is such that other transients and outsiders (including an elderly Native American woman on travelling in a box car, 171) are depicted as friends or kindred spirits, rather than as threats to the sanctity of the house of order (to which Lucille adheres).

A final instance of domesticity that might be said to remake the race house happens (also) over breakfast in *A Thousand Acres*. If the above examples from *Housekeeping* are meant to demonstrate how Sylvie and Ruth’s deviant/transient domesticity aligns with the work of completely renovating the race house (in its rejection of conventional domesticity), then this instance of Ginny acting like “a ninny” (343) in her total capitulation to her father (via domestic

activities), and her subsequent rejection of this role, explores how the race house can be remade through critiques of the patriarchal home that are leveraged through domestic labors.

Like every morning since her mother's death, Ginny arrives at her father's farm house (the one she grew up in) to prepare him breakfast. This morning is supposed to be different as Ginny had planned to "let him have it" about driving to his youngest daughter's office in Des Moines last week, "looking for trouble" (115, 112). Going through with this would amount to an astonishing deviation from her typical role as his daughter, to "serve his food silently" and do her "job," which "remained what it has always been – to give him what he asked of me, and if he showed discontent, to try to find out what would please him" (115). On this morning, early in the novel, Ginny reflects how "At that moment, standing by the stove with my arms crossed over my chest, waiting to pour him more coffee, that seemed like a simple and almost pleasant task" (115). By the end of the novel, however, Ginny's perspective has shifted significantly. Her transformation happens after a dramatic series of events. First, Rose forces her to remember the incest their father committed against both of them for years when they were teenagers. Then, her youngest sister leverages a lawsuit against Rose and Ginny for custody of the farm. After that, Ginny conspires to poison her sister (by preparing for her a jar of homemade sauerkraut and bratwurst contaminated with a local noxious plant). Finally, Ginny leaves her husband of over a decade, departing, symbolically, with "the meat broiling in the oven and the potatoes and sprouts boiling on the stove" (33). Ginny rejects the former naïve placidity of her domestic routine as daughter, sister and housewife for a solitary life. In doing so, she relinquishes her claim to the farm, as she rents an apartment and works as a server at Denny's. In this, she rejects the lure of her husband Ty's attitude that intrudes on her this morning at breakfast: soothing her, "counseling [her] to let things slip over me like water or something else harmless but powerful"

(115). In this moment, she is not yet capable of confronting her father: “the monolith that he seemed to be” (115).

Her father tests Ginny on this morning over the eggs he is normally served for breakfast - possibly without knowing her intent to confront him (although its likely that he would have expected Caroline to have reported his visit to Ginny). After bluntly expressing his displeasure that she is late (arriving at 6:30 am, rather than the normal 6:00, even though he has recently retired and “there were no fields he was hurrying to get to”) he reminds her that “Nobody shopped over the weekend” (113-114). Ginny realizes immediately that she is being asked to make a choice: to “keep him waiting or to fail to give him his eggs” (114). She considers, “I could push past him, give him toast and cereal and bacon, a breakfast without a center of gravity, or I could run home and get the eggs. My choice would show him something about me, either that I was selfish and inconsiderate (no eggs) or that I was incompetent (a flurry of activity where there should be organized procedure)” (114). Her description of the requisite “organized procedure” connotes both the proper workings of the farm (the masculine realm of her father, husband and brother-in-law) as well as conventional white domesticity, in which labors within the house are also meant to be carried out according to carefully considered scientific efficiency. In stating her choice, Ginny proclaims, “I did it. I smiled foolishly, said I would be right back, and ran out the door and back down the road” (114). In this decision Ginny describes how “The whole way I was conscious of my body – graceless and hurrying, unfit, panting, ridiculous in its very femininity” (114). These feelings are shaped by her sense that “It seemed like my father could just look out of his big front window and see me naked, chest heaving, breasts, thighs, and buttocks jiggling, dignity irretrievable” (114).

The astonishing thing to Ginny, over which she later marvels, is not that her father has given her this offensive test. Nor does she contemplate her self-perception as she carries out the second of these two choices (naked, without dignity, “ridiculous” in her femininity). She does reflect, though, that she consented to taking the test at all, since she later realizes that she might have avoided it altogether by simply walking across the road to her sister Rose’s house to borrow some eggs. In this reflection, she reveals the extent to which she has internalized her father’s patriarchy, an affliction from which she is never fully able to recover. And yet, the ending of the novel reveals how her remaking of her new house attempts a different model of an anti-patriarchal home.

Throughout the novel, household and crafting labors are portrayed quite pleasantly and are often used to depict the affection both Ginny and Rose feel for Rose’s daughters as they prepare meals with them and assist with various sewing or crocheting projects. The savage side of these labors, though, is the harmony that they convey to anyone outside the family. In fact, this mirage stays in place for many within the family - as neither Caroline nor Ty ever know the truth about the father’s abuse of Ginny and Rose (which includes both sexual and other physical abuse). But, this isn’t entirely true, either, as Ginny and Rose both note at different moments that the physical abuse, at the very least, is rampant in the entire community. They know that even if the other neighboring adults knew about it (their mother’s friends as well as their father’s) their father would likely still be respected for keeping his house in order. Or, that no one would intervene out of respect for his authority (91). When Ginny reveals her abuse to Jess, a friend, neighbor and former classmate, his response is to link it to his own experience, having been disowned by his own parents after fleeing to Canada to escape the Vietnam War draft. He replies to Ginny’s revelation, “they have aimed to destroy us, and I don’t know why” (198). Thus, the

abuse Ginny and Rose (even Jess) suffer is shown to be endemic to the entire community and not simply the regrettable act of a deviant (and, in the moments of sexual abuse, inebriated) father. The critique of patriarchy in *A Thousand Acres*, thus, is systemic and can thus be extended to other methods of systemic/institutional violence.

When Ginny rejects the patriarchal house she too faces the prospect of eternal homelessness. As in *Housekeeping*, this is not an entirely negative prospect, but more of a means to a particular end, which is to escape the violences of the patriarchal house. In Morrison's terms homelessness contains "pleasures" as well as "devastations." Ginny describes her new home/life first as an "afterlife." She explains also that, "for a long while it didn't occur to me that it contained a future" (334). However, by the close of the novel Ginny reconciles with Rose before Rose dies of a lingering cancer. Her two daughters, Pam and Linda, move in with Ginny (since their father committed suicide before their mother's death) and they all "get along smoothly" (369). Even though Ginny will be burdened for the next fourteen years with a \$34,000 tax bill on the sale of the farm and its properties, which failed to flourish under the care of Ty and Rose, she is content and can imagine a future for herself. She has transformed against the backdrop of a savage patriarchal violence and has begun to remake a new house/home. Upon meeting Ty one last time before the close of the novel, Ginny observes that he "did look different." In the "catalog of American men" that she has encountered over the past two and a half years working as a waitress, men in "every variety, size and color... Ty looked like the settled ones, those with habits of such long standing that they were now rituals" (338). Ginny continues, "That, I had come to realize, was the premier sign of masculinity and maturity, a settled conviction, born of experience, that these rituals would and should be catered to" (338). With this knowledge, she

has removed herself from a home life in which she will be asked to perform these rituals, do this catering.

Further, Ginny reflects that each “vanished person left [her] something: anger, a riddle, remorse. She even gains something from the memory of her “dead young self... which is her canning jar of poisoned sausage and the ability it confers, of remembering what you can’t imagine” (370). This revelation leads into Ginny’s final sentiments, which close the novel,

I can’t say that I forgive my father, but now I can imagine what he probably chose never to remember – the goad of an unthinkable urge, pricking him, pressing him, wrapping him in an impenetrable fog of self that must have seemed, when he wandered around the house late at night after working and drinking, like the very darkness. This is the gleaming obsidian shard I safeguard above all the others (371).

A Thousand Acres is frequently interpreted as a work of feminist literature that successfully conveys the perspective of two sisters who have been the victims of incest. For instance, Susan Ayres writes in her article, “The Silent Voices of the Law,”

Smiley’s challenge to *Lear* results in a new reality, the father’s incestual abuse of his daughters, and serves Smiley’s purpose of ‘gain[ing] an acquittal for the daughters.’ By adding the incest theme, Smiley’s re-writing is ‘[her] own Lear,’ which succeeds where Shakespeare fails in giving voice to the suppressed Regan and Goneril. Smiley’s novel foregrounds women’s stories [and]... successfully shows the reader Ginny and Rose’s point of view – their story about patriarchal violence. (Ayres 35)

For this critic writing on the theme of literature and law, “Reading works such as *A Thousand Acres*, which provides a counter-point to dominant reality, can make lawyers and judges attuned

to silenced voices and perspectives, what Ginny calls ‘the gleaming obsidian shard I safeguard above all others’.” (Ayres 35).

I don’t dispute that this novel highlights female perspectives and presents a critique of the patriarchal house. However, as much this novel’s critique of patriarchal violence does intersect with Morrison’s ambitions toward remodeling the racial house, especially in its critique of conventional domesticity, Smiley’s reliance on the symbolic of a “gleaming obsidian shard” as something dangerous, sexual and evoking darkness, also reveals that Smiley too enjoys a moment of “playing in the dark” as she concludes her novel. Like the rituals that Ginny associates with masculinity and patriarchy: “settled conviction[s] born of experience,” “rituals [that] would and *should* be catered to,” this conclusion also participates in the rituals of the race house. Ginny has successfully rejected the labors of housekeeping the patriarchal house. However, when the lessons she has learned through her father’s violence are expressed through stereotypical racial signifiers, this demonstrates the continued work that needs to be done to completely remodel the race house as well.

In drawing this chapter to a close, I return to one of Morrison’s sentiments that I used to begin this chapter. In reflecting on her own goals as a writer Morrison writes,

What I am determined to do is to take what is articulated as an elusive race-free paradise and domesticate it. I am determined to concretize a literary discourse that (outside of science fiction) resonates exclusively in the register of permanently unrealizable dream. It is a discourse that (unwittingly) allows racism an intellectual weight to which it has absolutely no claim. My confrontation is piecemeal and very slow. Unlike the successful advancement of an argument, narration requires the active complicity of a reader willing to step outside established boundaries of the racial imaginary. (“Home” 4)

Like Morrison's own writing, the work of *A Thousand Acres*, *Housekeeping* and "Everyday Use" in attempting to concretize a literary discourse of liberation from the race, patriarchal and class house is also sure to be "piecemeal and very slow." As such, this chapter provides an extended exploration, rather than easy answers. I hope, however, to have achieved "active complicity" with Morrison's goals in examining the role of household and crafting labors in "step[ping] outside established boundaries of the racial imaginary."

Chapter four:
Temporality, Memory, “Making Do” and the New Political Subjects of DIY in the Crafting
Subjects of Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone*

[Rosa] visited us often on Salmon Alley. She and Mah stayed up late copying dress patterns, talking about Miss Tsai, making festival food. Rosa taught us how to crochet and made each of us a lace shawl; we called her Auntie. (Ng 165)

When I suggested Chinatown, Nina said it was too depressing. “The food’s good,” she said, “but life’s hard down there. I always feel like I should rush through a rice plate and then rush home to sew culottes or assemble radio parts or something... I don’t want to eat guilt.” (Ng 26)

As the epigraph demonstrates, the do-it-yourself (DIY) crafting activities in Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone* offer conflicting experiences for the three daughters of this novel. On one hand, Auntie Rosa teaches the girls to crochet and makes each of them lace shawls. In this way, the crafting labor in *Bone* is similar to DIY as an activity that cements bonds between friends and produces useful items. On the other hand, the sewing skills that Mah passes on to her new friend are directly related to the countless mass-produced commodities that they create in the sweatshop in which they both work. In the second quote, the two sisters, Leila and Nina, prefer not to eat in New York’s Chinatown because of the anxiety and guilt that this setting evokes. This, in turn, demonstrates how the labors of Mah and Auntie Rosa also permeate the lives of the subsequent generation, so much so that the mere act of consuming food in Chinatown provokes the anxious guilt of their crafting wage labor.

Given the commonplace presentation of DIY as liberating, uplifting, and affirming; anxiety and guilt might seem odd ways to describe the crocheting, sewing and tinkering that appear in *Bone*. In DIY narratives these crafting activities are most always associated with leisure and relaxation.⁷² The generative potential of the crafting narratives presented in *Bone* is

⁷² Or, if crafting is recognized as stressful, this is portrayed as a worthwhile trade-off for realizing the bourgeois, bohemian and neoliberal ideal of creative entrepreneurial labor. This is detailed in the article, “That Hobby Looks Like a Lot of Work,” in which Etsy crafters describe

that for characters like Leila, Nina, their mother (Mah), Leila's stepfather (Leon) and Mah's friends, crafting is simultaneously relaxing, stressful, rewarding, hard labor, a leisure activity, exhausting, enriching, an income, a means to convey love and also to cement friendship and familial bonds. This chapter explores how the merging of so many divergent experiences and emotions through both the production and consumption of crafted items is evident in the novel and suggests a wider possibility for the formation of crafting subjects than is evident in the typical DIY narrative.

In this analysis I privilege Ng's 1995 novel, *Bone*, as an occasion to expand the possibilities of DIY (and household labors) as political practice, recognizing DIY as a unique identity category formed through the activity of creating handcrafted goods. Whereas chapter one asked how DIY narratives might represent an emergent political subjectivity that encompasses much more than surface-level celebratory discourses allow, this chapter takes the reimagination of crafting labor in *Bone* as an opportunity to extend an understanding of the crafting subject. *Bone* is the story of a Chinese-American family living in San Francisco's Chinatown in the years bracketing the suicide of the middle daughter. Sewing imagery prominently organizes memories and time in the novel. By situating DIY crafting practices within domestic sites of hyper-exploitation, the novel troubles simplistic, celebratory discourses of DIY and privileges literary articulations as an arena where connections between racialized-gendered personhood and crafting are taken up. At the heart of these connections are the actual

working days of 13 hours or more. According to the article, "Such experiences were the focus of an essay, much-circulated among so-called Etsians... In it, the journalist Sara Mosle... argued that Etsy was profiting off unrealistic expectations held by many women. 'What Etsy is really peddling isn't only handicrafts,' Ms. Mosle wrote, 'but also the feminist promise that you can have a family and create hip arts and crafts from home during flexible, reasonable hours while still having a respectable, fulfilling, and remunerative career'."

crafted objects, the labor that produces them, the economies within which they circulate and the “individual and collective identities”⁷³ that are produced in and through these labors.

Bone, Ng's first novel, opens with a short introduction to Leila (the narrator) and her immediate family. Leila tells the reader, “We were a family of three girls. By Chinese standards, that wasn't lucky. In Chinatown, everyone knew our story. Outsiders jerked their chins, looked at us, shook their heads. We heard things” (3). These descriptions of her family are related as “bone[s] for the gossipmongers” that both remember and foreshadow the most significant events of the novel: Ona's suicide, Nina's escape to New York, Leon moving out, and Leila and Mason's sudden elopement. Leila's naming of these details as “bones” also previews the way in which elemental objects such as bones, blood, paper, food and cloth frame Leila's memories.⁷⁴

The first section of this chapter interrogates how the short-lived temporality of sewing objects demonstrates the proximity of handmade goods to mass-produced objects while emphasizing the essential connection between acts of production and consumption in the world of crafting. This produces a critical rejoinder to DIY that I call “making do.” In my second section, I turn to the non-linear temporality of the novel as a whole, the memories created out of sewing labors and the linkages between formal and informal economies in order to expand on the novels' critique of the master codes of DIY, citizenship and assimilation. Memories produce crafting subjects who demonstrate the price of adhering to and operating outside of these master

⁷³ As Priti Ramamurthy writes in her article, “Why is Buying a ‘Madras’ Cotton Shirt a Political Act? A Feminist Commodity Chain Analysis,” “Production produces more than just commodities; individual and collective identities are constituted in the process of production. Feminist commodity chain analysis examines how gendering takes place within and through the process of production, and constantly articulates with other social striations” (741).

⁷⁴ Many reviews of *Bone* foreground the contextual/metaphorical function of these basic, elemental objects to the development of the novel. See for example Lowe, Kim and Waller. With the exception of Lowe's brief discussion of the sewing machine, these articles and chapters do not consider or the sewn objects in the novel.

codes. In this section, I argue that the sewing metaphors and imagery, in particular, stand out in their portrayal of how physical labor performed by her mother and stepfather is inextricably woven into Leila's life. Finally, I close with a discussion of feminist theories of the subject to elaborate the possibilities of crafting practices for the formation of political subjects.

As detailed in previous chapters, DIY narratives also make proclamations about the transformative power of crafting labor. However, substantial examinations of how these new subjectivities actually emerge out of DIY are not common. Perhaps these explorations are not possible given the genre of writing that produces these narratives emerge: magazine articles, blog posts, the occasional anthology. If this is true, then literary texts that feature analogous labors offer an ideal site for extended meditations on how subjects develop in and through crafting labors. As such, this chapter builds on my recognition (in chapter one) that the celebratory and simplistic narratives that overwhelm descriptions about DIY do more to restrain the possibilities of these practices than to realize their far-reaching potential. This exploration of the subjects that emerge in *Bone* helps to imagine and fill in details about how political subjects might be formed out of crafting practices and to what end.

As I began to discuss, elemental objects in *Bone* elaborate the characters and their potential political subjectivities through the labors attached to these objects. Just as a craftivist political practice is said to emerge through the act of creating something, so are the subjects of *Bone* produced through their crafting labors. Betsy Greer, who coined the term "craftivism" writes, "Through a seemingly simple act of making, craftivists can bring about change in the world, be it tiny or tremendous... Craftivists' hands are their strength and their work is their voice and through them, craftivists help open the minds of others, giving them the permission

and acceptance to create.”⁷⁵ In Greer’s statement, which is representative of her essay as a whole, making objects creates change just by virtue of it having happened. Elsewhere Greer does specify what should be created, but overall the process of production is described in vague terms without attention to the form or purpose of what is actually created. Thus, to differentiate my analysis from proclamations that the act of making something by hand is in and of itself inherently political, I analyze both the production and consumption of handcrafted object in *Bone* through the short-lived temporality of the handmade items, the variety of labors that produce them (both “real” and abstract) and the economies within which these (un)commodities traffic. By more concretely elaborating how both the realms of production and consumption emerge crafting subjects, *Bone* emphasizes this process as relational, complex and contradictory. To say otherwise severely constrains the possibilities of these practices – such that the DIY community appears to be homogeneous, harmonious, and single-minded, which is really not at all the case. These sections organize the chapter and I begin with the crafted objects in *Bone*.

“Completion” and the Production of Memory in Hand-crafted, Ephemeral Objects of *Bone*

In *Bone*, the diversity of objects produced and consumed over the course of the novel might well be collected under the rubric of DIY. Mah creates garments for herself as well as her daughters while also sewing clothing in a factory context. She cooks elaborate meals and mixes home remedies for her family and friends. Leon (Nina and Ona’s biological father) tinkers with a variety of items, among them Mah’s sewing machine, fluorescent lights in the Baby Store, and small home appliances like lamps, radios and speakers (and he always seems to leave these projects unfinished). Leila and her two sisters help Mah sew clothing both at the factory and at

⁷⁵ <<http://craftivism.com/blog.html/2013/06/craftivism-101>> 2013.

home. Leila also creates craft projects for the children at her school, such as the giant outline of a dragon that students fill in to celebrate Chinese New Year. Finally, Mason is a professional mechanic who does side jobs for family and friends. Just as I marked out an arena of DIY in chapter one that can be described as handcrafted objects created by amateurs employing historically feminine labors, I maintain many of the same boundaries here. Thus, I do not focus on Mah's cooking so much as her sewing. However, I do extend these boundaries to include the mechanical work Mason completes on his cousin's car for the way that it complicates the notion of an alternative (DIY) economy that exists outside of and in contrast to the formal economy built on wage labor. Likewise, Leon's DIY tinkering is useful to consider the status of "unproductive" labor in the formal economy – troubling the very same divide between formal and informal/alternative economies. This expanded purview is an essential element of the way *Bone* is able to rethink the DIY subject.

Among this diversity of handmade objects, a feature that most of them share is that they are intended to be short lived. Rather than continuing to accrue value as time passes they will be used up and discarded. These ephemeral objects: children's clothing and trendy items (like the coulottes and shift dresses sewn in Tommie Han's factory), exist in contrast to an heirloom quilt or couture gown that will increase in value even as they also degrade with time. All of the garments Mah sews: those made to fill an order in Tommie's shop as well as those she sews for her family (often made from patterns copied from one of Tommie's orders), will become worn out, too small, or will fall out of fashion. Mah is not a famous designer and often her hand-made clothing mimics the patterns out of which hundreds of thousands of identical items will be produced. For these reasons and others, no one will collect these garments or carefully preserve them like the gowns of First Ladies or the "unique" creations produced for famous fashion

houses. Instead, these dresses, shorts and other items are made to be worn, stained, wrinkled, laundered, shrunk, grown out of, and finally donated, thrown out or recycled into rags. Their genesis is grounded in use and understood by Mah as such. In *Bone*, value is determined primarily by use, rather than (formal, economic) exchange. We see this in the way Leila describes Mah's creations, where the emphasis is on completion and completion is not just a meal on the table or garment pressed, hung and ready for wear, but also the ultimate consumption of these items. This emphasis applies equally to Mah's elaborately cooked meals, the girls' handmade flouncy dresses and the endless bundles of garments sewn for Tommie's shop. By contrast, when DIY narratives explain the alternative economies in which they take part, use *seems* to be privileged over exchange. But, even as use-value is celebrated, it is undermined by the absence of any real investigation of what happens to the handmade objects once they are produced.⁷⁶

While the concept of completion appears throughout *Bone*, the actual term is featured once, right in the middle, at the nadir of Mah's suffering. The sewing ladies appear (as they will during many of the most trying times in the novel) with just the right words and advice to soothe Mah in her grieving. They offer tranquility through "completion." As Leila remembers,

I heard Luday use Mah's personal name, and the intimate sound of it made me think about Mah as a young girl... Hearing her personal name must have soothed Mah. She nodded, listening as they told her what she had to do. They knew all the necessary rituals

⁷⁶ There are many examples in Chapter One that makes this point. Among them is Nicole Dawkins' observation, "What is important to Handmade Detroit is not necessarily what is made, how skillfully it is produced, or even whether it is transacted through gift or economy but, rather, this 'unique' connection between individual acts of creation and the transformation of self, city, and social world. In this context, making material things (and somehow exchanging these things with others) is positioned as an inherently moral and meaningful practice." (263)

to get through this hard time. I considered the odd course of our affinity: how often the sewing ladies were a gossiping pain and equally how often they were a comfort. Bringing the right foods was as delicate as saying the right words. The sewing ladies knew, in ways I was still watching and learning from, how to draw out Mah's sadness and then take it away. Completion. Luday kept saying the word, as if repetition was a way of plucking the pain out. 'Completion. Completely. All of it.' I don't know how to explain the effect the word had on me. Something about the way Luday said it was calming, her mouth rounding to mean 'full,' her lips meeting in a thin line to mean 'still.' That was completion: change." (105-106)

In the following sentence another one of the sewing ladies, Soon-ping, advises, "'Finish one thing before starting another,' She meant, Finish your grieving before beginning the New Year" (106). As is perfectly described in this passage, subjects in the novel are changed and constructed through the repeated act of completion – or, total consumption. While this passage deals little with craft objects – the hand-made items here are the "right foods" whose preparation is as delicate a process as choosing the right words to soothe this seemingly unassuageable pain – this concept becomes more developed through the completion, ("finish[ing] one thing before starting another") of a wide variety of handmade items in the novel. In this way, completion operates as an alternative to "lasting-ness" – which names the privileged temporality of DIY – and is characterized by narrative descriptions of the durability and quality of DIY goods, even as they may not, in fact, possess these characteristics.

Above, the "right" foods and words precipitate an emotional shift in Mah. Thus, instead of increasing in value through careful preservation ("lasting-ness), the handmade objects in the

novel retain value as memories⁷⁷ and build the crafting subjects of the novel *even as* they are falling apart. Here emerges a major distinction between the subjects that emerge out of DIY narratives and practices and those constructed in *Bone*. DIY narratives commonly claim that DIY handmade objects possess greater value than mass-produced goods by virtue of their meticulous, intentional, individualized production (described as a careful process that results in “longer-lasting” and “better made” goods). In turn, the very activity of producing DIY objects contains liberating potential for these makers. This is shown in Greer’s statement, in which craftivists not only attain “strength” and a “voice,” but also bring about “change in the world” through the act of crafting. The expectations placed on the handcrafted objects in *Bone* differ in significant ways. These objects are expected to be used up and diminish in (monetary, exchange) value. They are not tasked with changing the world. However, being used up and decreasing in value does supply strength and a voice of sorts for the crafting subjects in *Bone* in the sense that the privileging of an ephemeral temporality (resulting in completion) produces the memories in *Bone* while articulating an alternative to “lastingness.” Through these differing expectations, the objects in *Bone* offer more complexity and wider possibilities for the formation of crafting subjects.

Another aspect of the different expectations placed on crafting in *Bone* is the way in which completion also explores the proximity of handmade goods to mass-produced commodities (a likeness that is generally disavowed in DIY narratives). In proximity they pursue a tension within the category “commodity” that is central to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s interrogation of the work of subaltern history. He writes,

by thinking of the category ‘commodity’ as constituted by a permanent tension between ‘real’ and ‘abstract’ labor, Marx, as it were, builds a memory into this analytical category

⁷⁷ This may be the case for DIY goods as well, but it is not possible to determine when narratives about DIY cease at the moment of exchange.

of that which it can never completely capture. The gap between real and abstract labor and the force ('factory discipline,' in Marx's description) constantly needed to close it, are what then introduce the movement of difference into the very constitution of the commodity, and thereby eternally defer the achievement of its true/ideal character. (92)

In focusing on the temporality of the objects in *Bone*, I explore how the time that elapses between their production and consumption/completion reveals them oscillating between handmade and mass-produced, between wish-image⁷⁸ and commodity. As Chakrabarty elaborates, "The transition from 'real' to 'abstract' is thus also a question of transition/translation from many and possibly incommensurable temporalities to the homogeneous time of abstract labor, the transition from nonhistory to history" (92). *Bone* offers a vantage into the way that Mah, Leila, Mason, Leon and the sewing ladies' "real" and "abstract" labors produce ephemeral goods that translate into the "master code" of commodities. But, they also defer this achievement, as handmade goods in the novel are sometimes consumed without translating into this idiom. As such, the ephemeral temporality of handmade object-commodities in *Bone* begins to explore a "movement of difference" and internal tension that builds the memory of which Chakrabarty writes.

At this juncture, I slow down to note the limitations of Chakrabarty's theory of the production of the commodity, labor and history for thinking through the consumption of hand-crafted objects in *Bone*. Chakrabarty, like much DIY writing, operates almost exclusively in the realm of production in order to theorize the writing of subaltern history (which includes a

⁷⁸ According to Walter Benjamin, "To the form of the new means of production, which in the beginning is still ruled by the form of the old (Marx), are images in the collective consciousness in which the old and new penetrate. These images are wish images; in them the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social order of production" (24).

consideration of how commodities are produced and hold within themselves the tension of real and abstract labor). Although Chakrabarty's inquiry is focused on questions of production, he does turn briefly to the world of exchange by way of conclusion. He writes, "History cannot represent, except through a process of translation and consequent loss of status and signification for the translated, the heterotemporality of that world. History as a code comes into play as this real labor is transformed into the homogenous, disciplined world of abstract labor, of the generalized world of exchange in which every exchange will be mediated by the sign 'commodity'" (95). This constitutes an opening for thinking about consumption by way of the concepts of translation and exchange. I take this opening to expand Chakrabarty's work as I connect the operations of production and consumption in *Bone*.

Predictably, many (or even most) DIY objects have a short-lived temporality as well. However, their life-span is narratively extended as it is framed in relation to other (presumably non-DIY) commodities. This temporal extension in many ways establishes the ethos of DIY practice, which is often built around these objects being "better made" and "longer lasting"⁷⁹ - descriptions that only make sense when set in contrast to mass-produced goods (which are implied to be cheaply-made, flimsy, and disposable). While DIY narratives are ostensibly concerned with temporality, drawing focus to the life-cycle of an object, this emphasis rather seems to disappear after the moment of exchange. Which is to say that DIY objects also contain a "memory" of diverging, heterogeneous temporalities; but, to attain status as DIY, these

⁷⁹ Sinclair writes, "The new craft movement encourages people to make things themselves rather than buy what thousand of others already own. It provides new venues for crafters to show and sell their wares, and it offers original, unusual, alternative and better-made goods to consumers who choose not to fall in step with mainstream commerce. Crafting empowers people by allowing them to create something useful, if you need something, just make it yourself. And make sure you check out craftzine.com for more crafty resources" (Sinclair, "The Crafting of Craft" Volume 1, Issue 1).

narratives must deny an object's "movement of difference" – cutting off their exploration at the point of exchange such that an exploration of the actual temporality of these objects is not allowed. By utilizing a temporal appeal that operates by way of contrast and in relation only to production ("longer lasting," "better made") and then shifting focus away from the objects' temporality (as they undergo the process of consumption), the ultimately ephemeral character of these DIY commodities becomes submerged. With scant consideration of what happens to these DIY objects after the moment of exchange (whether or not they are actually useful, better made and longer-lasting), it is, thus, impossible to discern DIY's actual relationship and proximity to the mass-produced object. Likewise, if one cannot speak of the process of completion, promises of "lastingness" are undermined, as these appeals appear to be just a clever veneer.

Some commodities in *Bone* disappear after their completion while others remain in focus through much more of their life-cycle. For instance, no one in the novel actually wears the coulottes produced for Tommie Han's shop although there are many scenes in which they are sewn. Leila is promised a pair for the first day of school, but this scene is not detailed in the novel. Instead, sewing skills (production) – honed by Mah in a sweatshop context - are transferred to other homemade garments for the family whose completion (consumption) is more thoroughly explored. This linking of mass-produced and home-made objects through Mah's sewing labor also allows for an exploration of the split between "real" and "abstract" labor as it applies to the objects in this novel, which I will discuss in the next section. While DIY objects and the handcrafted items in *Bone* both share a fleeting temporality, it's readily apparent that crafting subjects in *Bone* don't deny this ephemerality by making similar claims about the long-lasting, high quality of these handmade goods. That they will be used up is an important element of their nature. Missing also are explicit proclamations about the transformative power of

crafting. As I have hoped to preview, the way craft is discussed is quite different. I elaborate this as the distinction between “making” and “making do.” This distinction is legible in the way the commodities are both produced and consumed, their temporality (short-lived, marking time and ordering memory), their value (both commercial and non-commercial), and the economies within which they circulate (formal, informal, and an overlapping mix of the two).

“Making do” as the Convergence of Production and Consumption

Chapter thirteen opens with Leila’s description of the best years for her family, a time when they all had “a lot of hope,”

There was a time when Salmon Alley was our whole world and we all got along. Leon pronounced it “get long,” and there was something about the way the English words came out – slow and solid – almost like his voice was building something. It was as if he were talking about one of the Confucian virtues: loyalty or filial piety or sacred ceremony. “To get long” meant to make do, to make well of whatever we had; it was about having a long view, which was endurance, and a long heart, which was hope. (176)

Here we see Leila describe the essence of “to get long” as “mak[ing] do” or “mak[ing] well” of whatever they had. By inserting the implied “something” between the two elements of each phrase, it’s possible to discern the activity of “making do” as having one foot in production and the other in consumption. The very process of “making [something] well” describes the quality of production: producing something in such a way that it will endure for its purpose, whatever that may be. “Making [something] do,” on the other hand, entails taking that handmade object – or whatever is presently at hand – and making it suffice for a particular function. This locates the process of purposeful consumption. The way Leon converges these two realms begins to

characterize the ethos of what I call “making do” – that shapes how the crafting subjects produce, consume and are themselves produced in the novel.

Another important component of the process of “making do” is the ability to endure. Importantly, endurance is built over a “slow and solid,” “long” time. Just as Luday iterates “completion” in a way that is calming to Leila and Mah (and is spoken in a way that implies slowness, “her mouth rounding to mean ‘full,’ her lips meeting in a thin line to mean ‘still’.”) Leon also speaks these English words slowly, building the ideas syllable by carefully-formed syllable. By contrast, the actual activities that happen as time builds are characterized by speed and quickness: Ona and Nina running down the alley (working toward completion), Mah finishing a dozen(!) coulottes in just over an hour (production), Leon devouring his elaborate welcome-home dinner (completion). It’s almost as if these objects are produced and consumed so quickly that they are not even afforded the opportunity of translation into something else (such as the “ideal” commodity with its accompanying promises and propensity for fetishization). Leila mentions endurance again on the next page as she describes the scene of the sewing factory during this particular August, when the ladies flew through a coulottes pattern described as “easier than eating rice” (177),

Walking into the factory felt like walking into the cable-car barn. Every machine was running at high speed: the Singers zoomed, the button machines clicked. The shop vibrated like a big engine. Everything blended: oil and metal and the eye-stinging heat of the presses. The ladies pushed their endurance, long hours and then longer nights, as they strained to slip one more seam under the stamping needle. (176-177)

In the first iteration, endurance signals a “long view,” described in a way that implies slowness. Leila’s emphasis on both Leon and Luday’s drawing out of English words creates this

implication and presents an alternative model of translation, where the English words aren't simply standing in for their native Chinese, but actually enact new, situated meanings for these words. When Leila repeats this sentiment (of endurance) the reader sees that the slowly built endurance is composed of hurried deadlines that collect into long hours and "longer nights." The contrast between an endurance that builds slowly and everyday activities and objects that move hurriedly: flouncing, zooming, vibrating, stamping, rushing, snapping, and clicking, is carried out in the complex, or "many and possibly incommensurable,"⁸⁰ temporalities of the handmade objects in *Bone*. As the characters in the novel construct (produce) these objects and use them up (consume) - in the process of making do - the subjects themselves are produced.

Further, to describe the production of a mass-produced commodity as "easier than eating rice" emphasizes how the often-atomized dimensions of consumption and production are, instead, brought into convergence. This occurs over many occasions in the novel. Here, the sewing of the culottes is easier than eating rice because of the simplicity of the pattern. By contrast, Mah and the sewing ladies will languish over other orders, such as the fully-lined linen shift dresses with a row of buttons down the front. As Leila describes it, "Tommie was a nervous wreck, He was late on his order, but the ladies paid him no mind; languid and slow, they took long tea breaks and cracked melon seeds delicately between their teeth" (177) Again, Leila relies on a description of consumption to relate the ease or difficulty of production. We see here, just as sewing metaphors are central to the construction of Leila's memories, so is the linking of production and consumption.

In these excerpts, the capacity to "make do" and endure is possible through a collection of short-lived (heterogeneous) pleasures and fast-paced work. Producing handmade objects,

⁸⁰ Chakrabarty, 92

consuming them and, in fact, privileging their ephemerality, makes it possible to endure the hardships in their lives. In Leon's words, "to get long" means more than just agreeability or bare subsistence. It signifies endurance (a long life) and "a long heart," which was hope (176) – in short, to endure with hope and companionship. In this way, the crafting subjects of *Bone* actualize the promises of crafting labors heralded by DIY narratives, while also revealing infinite contradiction and complexity within this subject formation.

To return to the way that not just value, but also memory, emerges out of the process of completion, Mah fully understands the short-lived temporality of the garments she sews and so devises shortcuts to fool Tommy. The consumption of these trendy garments by fashionable consumers—made possible through Mah's speedy production of dozens upon dozens of them—allows the Leong family to (financially) "make do." But "making do" also means much more than the small measure of financial security ensured by Mah's work at the sewing factory ("making do" with her paycheck). Like the promises of DIY evangelism, Mah's sewing secures both financial rewards as well as emotional enrichment (love, affection, friendship, etc) – we see this second aspect especially in the garments Mah sews for her daughters. And yet, even when Mah has stayed up late to sew fancy dresses for Ona and Nina (taking the time to make them well) the dresses are not treated like precious, breakable creations. Instead the reader finds the girls running around the street wearing them, playfully twirling the full skirts. The girls' using up of the dresses (handmade objects that operate as something other than a commodity) builds endurance. Since endurance in the novel is made up of the accumulation of quickly used-up items, leaving behind only Leila's rich memories, the items Mah sews cannot be treated preciously (136). They become valuable in the process of being completed, enjoyed, consumed and crystalized into remembrances that build the events of the novel. As these few examples

demonstrate, the items Mah sews are both commodities produced and exchanged through labor in the abstract (the coulottes, counted and paid for by the dozen) and the products of “real” labor that have not been translated into the idiom of commodities (they are made explicitly for the family to use them up). Another dress that Mah sews for Ona offers an opportunity to explore the oscillation of these two categories of production and consumption (the entire process of “making do”) in this one handmade object.

When the reader finally arrives at the day of Ona’s death, in chapter eleven, Leila retreats into the “refrigerator-safe” coolness of the girl’s bathroom in an attempt to “freeze time” (136) – or slow down the now moving-too-fast pace of this day. The bathroom stall evokes a memory of Leila’s childhood, when she found Ona sobbing there one school day. Leila describes Ona as “hiding... her socks around her ankles, her dress a mess” (136). Leila is then overcome with a regret that instead of consoling her young sister she instead worried more about Mah, “I didn’t ask why she was crying; I only scolded her for ruining the dress Mah had stayed up all night to finish” and, we learn on the next page, that Leila had helped to sew as well. But, Mah is not actually on Leila’s side, asking Leila later that day where she learned “such meanness” (137). This memory is Leila’s first taking on of the guilt of Ona’s death that will visit each family member. But even more than that, it reaffirms the pace of the handmade objects in the novel as creating memories as these items are used up. Leila’s recollection of the dress conjures images of her staying up late with Mah to finish this once “perfect and pressed white dress” that Mah hung “right above Ona’s bed so that it would be the first thing she saw.” The memory continues not with a nostalgic vision of Ona trying on the dress the next morning or serenely, proudly, or excitedly displaying it on her walk to school. Instead, Leila’s memory jumps to her discovery of the ruin of this dress.

As such, the dress functions multiply: as an index of Ona's secret pain, of Leila's relationship to her sisters and to her mother, and especially of the way that handmade objects are and are not allowed a revered (fetishized) position in *Bone*. First, Leila fetishizes the dress as a symbol of Mah's sewing skill and love. The dress appears as a manifestation of Mah's expert sewing skills (honed in the factory and transferred to the home) as she creates something beautiful and precious for her daughter. In this way, the sweatshop labor slides into handcrafting for the family. But, when Leila reveals her over-protective feelings about the dress – granting it an intrinsic value above its functionality – she is scolded. Mah refuses this fetishization and reminds Leila to value the person (Ona) over the object. And yet, Mah's lesson ultimately doesn't stick, since, years later - after Leila and Ona have grown and after Ona's suicide - the dress reappears, standing in once more as a symbol of their mother's love, of Ona's secret pain (linked now to her suicide as well as this childhood scuffle) and finally of Leila's shame and regret over inappropriately valuing this dress, mistreating her young sister and disappointing Mah. In this way, the dress is fetishized in the manner of a traditional commodity – revered for the way that it transforms from a mere object into a symbol of love and affection.

Out of this scene we can read two important aspects of the handcrafted objects and the crafting subjects produced in *Bone*. The first is the way Ona's dress operates as a montage of unreconciled ideational elements that, “interrupts the context into which it is inserted” rather than “fusing into one ‘harmonizing perspective’,” (as developed by Walter Benjamin in his *Arcades Project* and synthesized by Susan Buck-Morss, 67). The second important aspect involves this dress exploring a version of the temporal split of subaltern history as it constantly negotiates between the “master code” of modernity and a time that Chakrabarty refers to as “precapital” (93). The dress does so by marking a fault line between commodity and handmade

“uncommodity” as it operates as both these categories in the novel. As this section began by developing a distinction between making and “making do,” I weave together these aspects of Ona’s dress to further differentiate the “making do” in *Bone* from the making of DIY.

Ng’s sparse, direct prose works well with Benjamin’s theory of montage as “dialectical image” since the varying temporalities of not just the objects in the novel, but the novel itself, often produce a sense of discontinuity and meanings that cannot be fixed (Buck-Morss 67, 55). I begin with a series of quotes to locate the features of montage that I explore in *Bone*. First, Benjamin understood montage as having both destructive as well as a constructive elements.⁸¹ We see this in Ona’s dress as it deconstructs a rigid dichotomy between commodity and that which is not yet commodity (an item that operates exclusively as a functional object - if this can even be said to exist),⁸² while simultaneously constructing a model of the handmade object that exhibits the features of both. Further, Benjamin writes that, “Literature submits to montage in the feuilleton” (13). The exposition of *Bone*, appearing in chapters that almost read as installments: each with their own distinct (and somewhat complete) temporality, can be likened to the genre of the feuilleton. But, more significant than this formal feature of *Bone* is the way the dress (as well as other handmade objects in the novel) oscillates on the “threshold” of the commodity form. As Benjamin explains, “All these products are on the point of entering the market as commodities. But they linger on the threshold” (Buck-Morss 13). For Benjamin, “all these products” include “the reproduction of nature as photography,” “creation of fantasy [that] prepares to become

⁸¹ “When Benjamin praised montage as progressive because it ‘interrupts the context into which it is inserted,’ he was referring to its destructive, critical dimension (the only one that Adorno’s observations recognize). But the task of the Arcades project was to implement as well the constructive dimension of montage, as the only form in which modern philosophy could be erected” (Buck-Morss 77).

⁸² “Value and commodity enter on a brief engagement before the market price makes their union legitimate” (Benjamin 898).

practical as commercial art,” “architecture as engineered construction” as well as the *feuilleton*. Benjamin calls these products the “residues of the dream world,” or “wish symbols” that “the development of the forces of production” has shattered (Buck-Morss 13). As artifacts that “linger on the threshold,” between commodity and that which is prior,⁸³ these examples are useful in locating the way handcrafted objects in *Bone* exist in close proximity to mass-produced commodities. At times they operate as something prior to, or in excess of the commodity form. At other moments they are undeniably commodities. Sometimes they linger in between.

The risk, however, of developing a concept of the crafting subject that emphasizes the difference inherent in “real” labor is that this recognition can become just another way of producing value for the handcrafted object - pushing it over the precipice on which it lingers into the realm of the commodity. The same can be said of proclamations about how relationships are solidified in and through the act of crafting. Thus, rather than “fracturing from within” signs that herald the (seemingly inevitable) emergence of abstract labor, these narratives instead facilitate the process (Chakrabarty 95). However, this passage in *Bone* cannot be divorced from the rest of the novel and especially the particular impetus for this memory – Ona’s suicide. Thus, Leila’s pleasure at helping her mother is also tied to Nina’s narrative of the hard lives in Chinatown: the pressure to rush through dinner and then hurry home to sew culottes that for both of them equates dining in New York’s Chinatown with “eating guilt.”⁸⁴ When coupled with the myriad forms of crafting labor (food, car repair, fashion – discussed later), even the fetishized aspects of

⁸³ Taking Chakrabarty into account, ‘precapital’ is not simply *before* to capital but actually exists “within the temporal horizon of capital” while also disrupting it (93).

⁸⁴ Importantly, this is another example of the convergence of production and consumption (the eating/consumption of guilt that is associated with the constant sewing/production of items inside Nina and Leila’s home).

Ona's dress cannot shake their internal tension, holding onto the trace of what the commodity form cannot enclose.

I quote Leila's narrative of the making of Ona's dress to pursue the lingering and tension between "wish image" and commodity. In doing so, I seek the location and characteristics of the threshold at which a handmade object becomes a commodity - or if such a threshold can even be pinned down. Ng writes,

Now, I saw Ona's white dress, its scalloped neckline, the puffy sleeves, the long sash bow in the back. I knew every part of that dress. I remembered the bolt of fabric on the table at National Dollar Store and how the lady cut the yardage with one long pass of the scissors she wore like a necklace, and the fabric soaking in the bathtub at home and drying on our roof, the bright smell of wind on it as I took it down and folded it into squares. Mah laid the fabric on the kitchen table. The pattern was a scaled-down version of the dress they were sewing at Tommie's. Mah used pig-pink butcher paper from Hop Sing's. I sat at my dinner place and watched her cut out the dress. She let me sew the long sash on the Singer, and while I turned and pressed it, she sewed the dress front to the dress back and worked on the neckline and the sleeves. I kept her company till way past midnight while she hemmed the new white dress. Mah hung the perfect and pressed white dress right above Ona's bed so that it would be the first things she saw. (137)

In the first sentence, Leila reveals her intimate knowledge of sewing by precisely naming each aspect of the dress. It is clear here, as in other places, that she possesses a thorough comprehension of the skills interred in the dress, gained through her nearness to Mah's sewing labor. Although this seems like a detailed description: as she lists the type of neckline, sleeves and decorative sash on the dress, the next sentence reveals that these details are, in fact, cursory.

As the remainder of the paragraph demonstrates, to “know every part” extends much beyond an inventory of features (however specific). To “know every part,” for Leila, involves awareness of where the fabric was purchased, how it was cut, where the material was soaked, dried, folded and laid out as it prepares to take the shape of the pattern. Leila produces, as well, tactile knowledge: the smell of the drying fabric, the color of the pattern paper, where she sat while it was cut, which smaller tasks she was *allowed* to complete, and what Mah was doing in the meantime. Leila can recall exactly where the dress hung once complete. As such, Leila’s comprehensive knowledge of the production and eventual consumption of the dress is yet another example of the process of making-do.

To think of the dress as montage elaborates the comprehensive discontinuity of the handmade objects in *Bone*. In montage, Buck-Morss describes ideas as necessarily “discontinuous.” She writes, “As a result, the same conceptual elements appear in several images, in such varying configurations that their meanings cannot be fixed in the abstract. Similarly, the images themselves cannot be strung together into a coherent, non-contradictory picture of the whole” (55). Leila’s description above, as it follows the progression of the dress from fabric on a bolt to Ona’s “perfect and pressed” white dress, might be thought of as continuous for its linear chronology. Yet, a discontinuity emerges when considering the various elements of the dress, which ultimately cannot be made coherent and non-contradictory. In this passage, the dress toggles between industrial and homemade, fetishized commodity and something merely to wear/use up. In other words, the dress as a conceptual element appears in several images.

It originates from within the world of commodities as the fabric is purchased at a local discount store – as such, the “real” labor contained within this cloth has already been translated

into labor in the abstract, facilitating Mah's purchase (the heterogeneous labor of weaving the fabric is made homogenous through precise calculations that ensure profit and allow for a uniform pricing: \$1 per yard). This process of abstraction, however, is not an explicit part of Leila's meditation as she does not dwell on where or how the cloth was produced. This is similar to the way that DIY narratives selectively exclude similar details even as they describe the sourcing of their materials.⁸⁵ Likewise, the very shape of the dress follows a pattern intended for mass-production. But, unlike the other dresses made from this pattern, that Mah will then turn over to Tommie's shop, the "real" labor that Leila emphasizes in this paragraph remains untranslated into the "master code" of capitalist modernity. It remains untranslated since it never enters into a formal process of exchange. In other words, Mah's labor is not made abstract in order to prepare the dress to be exchanged as a commodity (as has already occurred with the fabric). Here we see the dress lingering on a threshold. Ona's dress is, in some ways, a commodity – adhering to a master code of modernity, where commodities carry "certain universal emancipatory narratives" (Chakrabarty 92), where contradictory ideational elements are fused into a singular "harmonizing perspective" (Buck-Morss 67) and where time progresses in a linear fashion. Thus, the dress operates as commodity according to certain material properties: the fabric, the pattern, and also more abstractly as a fetishized symbol of Mah's love. Before exploring the way this dress operates as something other than a commodity, I reference

⁸⁵ For example, Carla Sinclair can write about the genesis of *Craft: Magazine* in a way that precisely names mass-produced goods that are sourced for DIY, but that entirely discounts the labor contained in these objects. She writes how *Craft:* evolved from the more technology-oriented *Make:* magazine by focusing on DIY projects that "involved 'craftier' skills, materials and an emphasis on the visual outcome. Some of these include hacking action figures, knitting steel medieval armor, making notebooks out of floppy disks, and building lamps out of vintage hardware" (7). Here, the process of recycling or repurposing materials is very much encouraged, without actually exploring the lives of these materials before they were discovered as and transformed into DIY "raw" materials.

the idiom of DIY to think about how even handmade objects like Ona's dress (constructed out of untranslated "real" labor, not prepared for formal market exchange) also operate as commodities through the very narratives that position this dress as an untranslated uncommodity.

Faythe Levine's introduction to *Handmade Nation* opens with the following example of how DIY makes use of the emancipatory narratives inherent in the commodity form – those that produce “the standard teleologies one normally encounters in Marxist historicism: that of citizenship, the juridical subject of Enlightenment thought, the subject of political theory of rights, and so on” (Chakrabarty 92). Chakrabarty notes that these are all narratives with a “practical utility” but that ultimately produce quite the opposite of the rights that they promise (92). We see this when Levine writes, “This is... my opportunity to tell you why creativity and the DIY ethos are so important to me, and why I think that both can empower you and change your life” (ix). Here Levine writes about how practices of DIY produce a new (and better) crafting/laboring subject: she is empowered, her life is changed. This discussion focuses on the production side of DIY, and is accompanied by an abundant photographic display of the handmade DIY objects discussed in this volume.

By contrast, (but still operating within the world of craft and DIY) Julia Bryan-Wilson's much shorter article, “Sewing Notions,” assesses many more facets of how the hand-crafted object operates. She weaves together crafted objects as political devices, as art (both “outsider” and institutionalized), and as enterprise (so-called “indie” and also industrial). Bryan-Wilson writes,

Major exhibitions such as ‘Radical Lace & Subversive Knitting,’ trumpet the political potential of craft, and in some respects resurrect the 1970s feminist reclamation of domestic labors like embroidery as a ‘radical’ act. But there are differences between how

craft was incorporated into art in the 1970s in important works like Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*... and the rhetoric regarding contemporary hand-making. For today craft is not only an artistic trend being rapidly institutionalized; it is also a thriving enterprise that exists within a larger geopolitical context of mass production. (73)

Published in *Artforum* – an international magazine of contemporary art – Bryan-Wilson's assessment is remarkable as it is a much more complete and even-handed assessment of the state of modern craft than the typical DIY account, such as Levine's. As such, it moves closer to the work of *Bone* in demonstrating the proximity of hand-crafted, DIY goods to the mass-produced object. As Bryan-Wilson concludes,

Indeed, the lines between manufacture and handiwork are not necessarily clear at all; journalist and author Leslie T. Chang reports that it takes two hundred pairs of human hands to make a single pair of tennis shoes. The very notion of 'women's work' that compelled Chicago has now shifted, given the feminization of the global labor force. This shift means that some earlier feminist uses of craft in art - as an institutional critique of gendered hierarchies or as a political recuperation of the decorative and the low – have been rendered somewhat beside the point. The real state of craft today is multiple: It consists of young urban stitch-and-bitchers, to be sure, but more significantly, it is dominated by women making consumer objects in factories in China and elsewhere. (73)

In the segment on Ona's dress, this hand-made garment operates as a DIY-like commodity when it takes on meaning in excess of a functional object. This occurs when the memory of the dress unsettles a flood of memories and emotions dating back to Leila's childhood and also when the dress stands in as a symbol of Mah's love (so much so that the damaged dress prompts Leila to injure her sister). This follows the logic of DIY commodities in multiple ways. First,

while DIY objects are something that the consumers can “relate to” and “feel good” about, Ona’s dress also conveys emotions as it becomes a symbol of Mah’s love and Ona’s distress. But, while producers of DIY commodities focus intently on how they are “empowered” and find their lives changed,⁸⁶ the handmade commodities in *Bone* are not beholden to the same (increasingly scripted) proclamations. Even while DIY narratives such as Levine’s announce DIY as the creation of “an independent economy free from corporate ties” (ix) it is apparent that this is not at all the case as DIY’s existence is intimately bound up in the process of exchange. As Bryan-Wilson’s assessment makes clear, this is a legitimate critique of DIY that is becoming more commonplace.

The larger arch of this projects offers the opportunity to push against this critique, seeking to explore the ways that DIY doesn’t *just* exemplify the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject, but also mobilizes the “practical utility”⁸⁷ of emancipatory narratives of (gendered) crafting labor within modern political structures. As such, even Bryan-Wilson’s assessment needs to be pushed further in order to deconstruct the persistent dichotomy between home made handmade goods and their foil – the mass-produced, but still handmade, object. Her critique is spot-on in terms of the historical shifts in feminist uses of craft, the feminization of the global labor force and its impact on the critiques and promises of liberation that may be leveraged from within the world of craft. But, in her assessment, mass-produced commodities and handmade art

⁸⁶ Levine writes about the first “indie” craft fair that she encountered in 2003 in her introduction. Of the DIY producers she writes, “A lot of us had no clue what we were doing, but there was this exhilarating energy throughout Wicker Park. Around me were my peers, people who were taking their lives into their own hands and creating what they didn’t find in their everyday lives at school, home and work. We all had a common drive to create, and this was the platform for us to come together and share our work with each other and the public. Many of the hundreds of shoppers who turned out that year talked about how exciting it was to see handmade stuff they could relate to and how good they felt about purchasing work directly from the artist. I knew that something big was happening” (ix).

⁸⁷ Chakrabarty 92

or craft objects still operate as two poles. Likewise, it is worthwhile to examine flatfooted proclamations like Levine's in order to explore what lies below the surface of DIY. Again, it is my contention that routing these questions through literature, such as *Bone*, helps to provide a more well-rounded optic by offering an extended meditation on the handmade object and its proximity to mass-produced goods.

While DIY narratives frequently aim for the "harmonizing perspective" that montage resists, the handmade objects in *Bone* interrupt the temporality and unified perspective of the "master code" of capitalist modernity as they negotiate between commodity and the "precapital." Chakrabarty's thinking through the commodity allows me to ask how Leila demonstrates the price of adhering to the "master code" of modernity when she reveals her dual fetishization of the dress. The very same moment that the dress appears to be acting as a commodity, it also protrudes beyond these boundaries, toeing the threshold of commodity and something else while demonstrating the price of adhering to master codes. When Leila fetishizes the dress as commodity it only results in pain. As an uncommodity it possesses no price, as a commodity would; it is valued for an ephemerality that rejects the temporal logic of DIY objects; and it meditates on the abstract labor (of Mah and Leila) contained within it. Chakrabarty might call these operations "precapital," which he clarifies as "not a reference to what is simply chronologically prior on an ordinal, homogeneous scale of time.... [But, that which] speaks of a particular relationship to capital marked by the tension of difference in the horizons of time" (93). It is something that "exists within the temporal horizon of capital and that at the same time *disrupts* the continuity of this time by suggesting another time that is not on the same, secular, homogeneous calendar" (93). That this un/commodity is marked by a

“tension of difference” with capital offers a view of the dress wavering on the threshold of the commodity form.

And Leila does suggest “another time” of heterogeneous temporalities when she describes the multiple ways that she knows the dress (quoted earlier). This knowing is marked by physical sensations: smell and touch, as well as the building of her relationship with Mah as Mah “let’s her” help with certain elements of the dress. This is different than the dress operating as a symbol of Mah’s love, which I described earlier as one way that Leila fetishizes the dress. Here, I focus on the ways in which Leila treats the sewing labor as a privilege. Leila is pleased at having been allowed to “[keep] her [Mah] company till way past midnight.” But, in other scenes in the novel, similar acts of sewing are a chore and a danger. These acts are a burden when Nina describes the memory of rushing home to sew culottes as “depressing” (26). Sewing becomes something dangerous when Leila scolds Ona for teasing her by slapping her fingers against the running belt of the machine as Leila is sewing. She reminds Ona, “how Repairman Loy’s arm got dragged into the churning motors by his loose sleeve. Your fingers are like sleeves, I warned” (130). On the one hand, Leila spends precious time alone with her mother as they construct Ona’s dress. On the other, Leila is tasked with the responsibility and worry of parenting Ona as she helps complete an order for Tommie’s shop. By marking this work as both a privilege and a chore, the dress can’t be condensed into a symbol of a single emotion or activity. It is unabashedly both. It reveals the heterogeneity of labor that marks the dress as montage.

Likewise, when Mah cooks Leon’s favorite dishes to welcome him home, his devouring (completion) of the food demonstrates the sentiment of “making well of whatever we had” that endures long after the meal is gone (176). Early in the novel, Leon refuses to have dinner with

Mah upon returning from his latest voyage. Leila and Mason anticipate Mah's layered disappointment: not just that Leon is avoiding her but also because "Mah hated wasting good food" (67). This signals a valuing of purposeful consumption that can elaborate both the sentiment of "making well" (Leon's favorite foods that, when made well, communicate the emotions of having missed Leon and being happy to welcome him home) as well as "making do." The "making do" emerges when Mason suggests that they bring his friend Zeke to dinner, to which Mah replies favorably (in the moment before she is made aware of Leon's absence). Leila recalls, "Mah smiled. 'There's a lot of food'" (68). Consistent with the hand-sewn objects in the novel, the value in this meal is realized when it is used up. Zeke understands his role, calling himself "the buffer man." And Mason agrees saying with a smile, "We're counting on you, man. Eat up. Make it look good" (67). Here, again, production and consumption are portrayed as necessarily linked and the quick temporality of eating makes the proximity of these two domains all the more apparent.

If the temporality of meals is some of the quickest in the novel, Mason's car repairs are on the other end of the spectrum, as they will also erode over a much longer time. The vehicles he works on are expensive, collectible models: Dale's gold BMW or Mason's own Fiat or vintage Karmann Ghia, for example. But even these status symbols are double-parked in alleys and taken for long drives to fetch Leon after a months-long voyage. Unlike the car aficionado whose treasures exist primarily to be polished and admired, Leila shuttles the Karmann Ghia to work each day. Mason will attempt to preserve these cars in a way that Mah does not with the garments she sews. However, there is still an ephemerality to these objects in that Mason will work on them time and again. Once more, this handmaking (production) is done with the expectation that the work will erode over time (be consumed), necessitating a repeated cycle of

work, undoing and completion. The numerous instances of this cycle of production and consumption that appear throughout the novel reinforce a process of “making do” that locates the ephemeral handmade items in *Bone* as both commodities and something else.

The Price of Adhering to Master Codes: the Time, Emotions and Economies of *Bone*

These ephemeral objects represent not only the tension within handmade objects as commodities on a threshold but they are also an essential element in composing the temporality of the novel as a whole. The novel overall moves backward in time, telling stories of each family member as Leila, the oldest daughter, remembers them. This backward momentum, though, is regularly interrupted by flashbacks to Leila’s childhood. The series of events that make up the present moment of the novel occur over a relatively short span of time, at most a year or two. Time is marked primarily through objects and events, rather than months or years. Precise dates sometimes appear: indicating that Ona commits suicide just before Chinese New Year, for instance. But, overall the reader can only guess at how much time has elapsed during the contemporary events of the novel. Likewise, quantifiable time is mentioned occasionally, but not often in a way that allows the reader to discern the passing of weeks or months. Leila might mention a stabbing pain in her back that has been going for months (50) or the forty days Leon is out at sea.

These details emerge throughout the novel and create a distinct sense of the way in which a linear, quantifiable temporality punctuates the overall movement of time in *Bone*. Pushing against this, the temporality of the novel (complemented by the wavering temporality of the un/commodities in the novel) is heterogenous: moving back and forth, sometimes slowly, other times quickly, but never in a clean or distinct chronology. Towards the end of the novel Leila

describes this complex chronology as movement that is at once forward and descending, “What I felt was a miraculous feeling of being saved at the very last minute. I thought, Maybe we’ve moved that ocean mile forward” (155). She continues, “Inside the elevator, the smooth descending momentum made me feel as if I was going way deep down into the vacuum-safe depths of an ocean liner, that we were sailing away” (155). A linear, forward-moving progress is complicated in the novel. When something is resolved in the family – in this example, a tense moment between Leila and Nina as Nina returns for Ona’s funeral - this “progress” is sometimes represented as forward movement: “movi[ing] that ocean mile forward” (155). But, in the same breath, the forward progress is also a “smooth descending momentum” into the depths of an ocean liner, in order to sail away.

Evoking Chakrabarty, the reminders of quantifiable time - peppered throughout the indistinct, oscillating chronology in *Bone* - may be considered aspects of the “master codes” governing the production and consumption in the novel. Here, they are visible as they constantly put pressure on the backward and non-linear temporality of *Bone*. These pressures allow the novel to pursue the price of adhering to these master codes of capitalist production. I take the term “master code” with significant revisions. First, Chakrabarty’s use of the term is rarely plural: as in the “master code of secular history” (93). However, he elaborates the concept in such a way as to imply that a master code might locate any category that is “held constant” or made to seem natural, “universal” (78), “objective” or “belonging to nature itself” (73). So, while Chakrabarty writes of *a* master code of secular history, in which he appears to locate just one “code,” he also describes how different codes govern different realms. This is evident when he names other “cultural codes of representation” (73), such as religion, and culture (78). Thus, one might speak of master *codes* that operate within an overarching system/code of capitalist

modernity. In *Bone*, the master codes that can be said to work within capital modernity, but are also worth naming as distinct cultural terrains, are the master codes of citizenship/assimilation and that of the neoliberal DIY entrepreneur. In this section, I explore how these codes exert pressure on the heterotemporality of *Bone* before moving into an exploration of the variety of emotions that are expressed through the crafting labors in the novel. I conclude with an analysis of an alternative economy that operates in *Bone* as a counterpoint to “alternative” DIY modes of exchange. These various explorations unite as elements that are similar to DIY, but that ultimately cannot be assimilated as general instances of the operations of DIY.

The backward movement of the novel emerges as a key element of many literary-critical analyses of *Bone*. It has been interpreted as a condition of melancholia, in which something that has been resigned to the past is kept alive in the present. For Juliana Chang, author of “Melancholic Remains, Domestic and National Secrets in Fae Myenne Ng’s *Bone*,” melancholia “offer[s] an alternative to modern conceptions of time as horizontal and continuous” (111). For Thomas W. Kim, the reversed temporality troubles the logic of the cause-effect relationship, “expos[ing] the metaleptic maneuver which establishes a fictive effect of authority, the maneuver by which hegemonies are authorized and identities established” (44). And, most famously, Lisa Lowe in her chapter “Decolonization, Displacement, Disidentification: Writing and the Question of History,” writes that *Bone*’s backward movement criticizes “the overdevelopment of temporal contextualization as a source of meaning” so that “*causality* as a means of investigation is disorganized” (122). Thus, rather than culminating in the motivation for Ona’s suicide, the novel reveals it as merely a symptom of the Leong family’s “collective condition” of loss (Lowe 122). What Lowe misses in her exploration of the novel’s temporality is that it concludes with an event that can be read as both the first and the last, disrupting the backward momentum of the rest of

the novel. Told in the process of moving out of Mah's apartment in Chinatown, Leila ruminates on the importance of memory, conveyed through the actual gesture of looking back (Ng 193). The importance of this temporal disruption cannot be understated, which allows me to further my argument that backwards is not the best descriptor for the temporality of the novel. It is not linearly backwards. It too moves in many directions complementing the handmade objects that are used up at different paces.

I survey these interpretations of *Bone* in order to highlight how the novel is typically taken up in relation to its temporality and narrative structure. Although these analyses differ significantly in their theoretical approaches to the novel⁸⁸ they are alike in their desire to situate the novel within histories of Asian American immigration and exclusion, racialized and gendered labor (both within and outside of the home) and hegemonic narratives of American national progress. I share their commitment to position *Bone* within a longer historical narrative, this time thinking primarily about how American histories of race, labor, immigration and exclusion are articulated through the crafting labor that figures so prominently in the novel. From this perspective, sewing imagery is not incidental but represents the way that Mah's (over-) employment as a sewing woman shapes Leila's perception of the world. This inter-generational memory is significant for the way crafting subjects develop in the novel. It demonstrates how sewing labor permeates the time, space, and memories of those who engage in these practices and is evident in the heterotemporality of the novel as well as the emotions of the characters. Overall, Leila's inter-generational memory demonstrates the price of adhering to the master codes that traffic within the novel.

⁸⁸ These disciplines include psychoanalysis for Chang, Marxist theory in Lowe, the disciplines of Asian-American studies in Chang and Lowe and multi-ethnic literature for Kim.

To begin, time is often organized by items Mah has sewn (as well as the products of other DIY-like activities). We see this in phrases such as, “the summer of the culottes” (88) or “when the linen shift dress was popular.” Similarly, all of Leila's senses are marshalled around these sewing activities as they measure time: the smell of starched linen so strong that her nostrils feel prickly (75), the scratchy feel of the linen shift dress that was popular one summer, the sound of the stamping needle (70), the officiant with “the distracted expression of a sweatshop presser” (36), the “threadlike strands” of sweet, sticky Hong Kong candy she and Nina share (37). Other DIY activities, such as Mason’s car repair, evoke memories as senses as well, such as Leila’s tenderly-described “faint metal smell” of Mason’s hair.

Facilitated by the various labors of Mah, Leon, the sewing ladies (Mah’s co-workers and friends) and the three sisters, the memory interred in crafted objects, combined with the overall temporality of the novel, explores the price of adhering to master codes such as those of citizenship and assimilation as well as DIY master codes that produce standard and overly-simplistic narratives of the liberatory potential of the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject.⁸⁹ By pushing again these master codes, revealing their limits and the prices of adhering to them, *Bone*, thus, offers a significantly different imagination of crafting labor than that presented in DIY narratives.

While other readings of *Bone* interpret temporality as backward moving, the unfolding of the novel isn’t simply backward, but rather oscillates about key events that open and close each chapter. In fact, “backward” seems an ill-fitting description for the way this designation is used in the novel. Leila remembers, “After Ona jumped, Mah was real messed up. She didn’t think it

⁸⁹ A portion of chapter one was devoted to characterizing the “master code” of DIY, which incorporates limited notions of feminism and environmentalism (through the concept of “ethical” consumption) into a revised notion of the neoliberal entrepreneurial subject.

was a thing to be gotten over” (15). Leila remembers Mah’s words, “Better a parent before a child, better a wife than a husband... Everything’s all turned around, all backward” (15). To interpret the novel as moving backward seems unfitting since Leila then relates that living with Ona’s ghost, the guilt and Mah’s sorrow got “too dark” (15). Although the novel is driven, in part, by the sadness of Ona’s death, the overall feeling is not dark, especially since the ending is not with Ona’s suicide, but instead in a moment of release when life is good on Salmon alley, Leila has gathered the courage to announce her plans to move in with Mason, Mah responded agreeably (“wait and see”), and they all share a relaxing meal together in which Leila can finally see that Mah is not alone. Leila reflects, “I finally saw what Mason had been saying all along: Mah loved Leon” (193). Although it is possible to track a reverse chronology of these moments, the actually unfolding in each chapter moves in many directions, complicating the temporality of the novel and mirroring also how the handmade objects vacillate between commodity and something else – moving also in many directions.

If the temporality of *Bone* resists even a backward progression, this exists in contrast to representations of DIY’s movement, which are oriented towards progress. I explored this orientation toward linear progress in chapter one – turning often to what Jean Railla and others have referred to as the “DIY Renaissance” in which DIY crafting labor (“making stuff” yourself) represents the life-altering apex of the combination of women’s craft-work, feminism, political action and hobby. As I have stated before, this process is described as “positive, liberating, life-affirming, exciting and empowering.” Part of the work of *Bone* is to reconsider the happy, linear movement of DIY progress. Just as the novel offers a response to the movement of time, it also engages with the emotions of DIY as it offers a perspective on crafting labors as cause for both celebration and trauma.

As demonstrated in the short quote above, DIY narratives focus on positive attributes. This writing takes the aspirational crafter as its primary audience. Through how-to writing and descriptions of the work of DIYers, these texts build the ranks, solidify ideology, and expand markets.⁹⁰ The actual uses of these labors and products (again) are largely disregarded. The DIY-like activities in *Bone* exhibit an aspirational element as well. Like the ambitious and enthusiastic DIYer, part of the pleasure of creating a handmade object is the searching out of and collecting of materials for the endeavor. As such, some of Leon's happiest moments come after the discovery of a new object to repair or deconstruct: a scratched pair of speakers from the Goodwill or a stereo for Mah's Baby Store. But, while this brings pleasure to Leon, his aspirations are mostly a hassle for Mah and the rest of the family – as he commonly leaves jobs unfinished and craft aspirations (so valued in DIY writing) possess no functional value in *Bone*. In this way, Leon's handiwork carries the capacity to either divide or bring together the family.

This is evident in the way Leon and Mah “escape into a project,” renovating the lights in Mah's Baby Store. This activity begins to reconstitute his relationship with Mah after Leon moves out of their apartment in the aftermath of Ona's death. They begin the project enthusiastically, shopping together for light bulbs and fixtures, Mah steadying the ladder for Leon. As Leila observes, “Working on the lights, Leon seemed almost his old self, not happy but

⁹⁰ As Glenn Adamson summarizes in his introduction to his “How-To” section in *The Craft Reader*, “how-to writing serves as the basis for entrepreneurship” as well as entertainment (10). He explains, “As is obvious from the sheer volume of instructional publications produced annually, most are never put to direct use. Books are given as gifts or bought on impulse, paged through and left on the shelf. Magazine subscriptions lead inexorably to piles mounting up in the basement or next to the sewing machine. This apparent neglect is important, as it indicated that how-to texts play a largely aspirational part in their readers' lives... If artisanal labor was once primarily economic, in the past century and a half it has been chiefly idealistic and esthetic. There are many exceptions to this general rule; but the fact that instructional literature is avidly consumed but mainly goes unheeded might be viewed as emblematic of craft's situation within modernity in general” (10).

preoccupied. I was hoping he'd see this project through to the end, but half-way through he told Mason that his concentration was gone, that something disconnected between his mind and his heart" (49). After Leon abandons the project Mah runs the business in the dark for some time. When the potential for reconciliation falters, Leila and Mason finish the job for Leon. In doing so, they find that he has stopped just short of the easiest part: installing the bulbs in the sockets (54). Leon's relationship to his DIY endeavors – accessible through the supplies he scavenges as well as how he does/n't complete this lighting project - demonstrates how memories are shaped by crafting activities and the emotions they convey. The prospect of this new DIY endeavor excites Leon. But then, the depth of his grief over Ona's death emerges and becomes visible primarily in his inability to complete the lighting project at the Baby Store.

Here private affect constitutes laborers, but in a way that opens up the category of the crafting subject. Yes, crafting labors can be relaxing, exhilarating, and pleasurable, but they can also be situated in a lifeworld that is saturated with hard work, sadness, guilt and resentment. In short, this crafting labor accesses the infinitely complex mixture of human emotions. As is evident over many events in the novel (Grandpa Leong's funeral, the failed Ong and Leong laundry business, Ona's suicide, Leon's impossibly varied work history, his troubles accessing Social Security benefits and his history as a paper son), as immigrant, so-called "unskilled" laborers, the lives of Mah, Leon and the sewing ladies are difficult. The details of their lives (and the lives of their children, too) run at odds with dominant narratives of citizenship and assimilation. This isn't to say that the lives of DIY crafters are always carefree and pleasant, but that the propensity of writings that depict DIY in this way makes little room for the complex and diverse emotions that emerge in the lives of DIYers and the characters of *Bone* alike.

When Leon loses his concentration and feels that something is “disconnected” he is literally unable to complete the final task of connecting the bulbs to the sockets. This could be read more simply as a clever metaphor, and maybe it is. But, it also demonstrates Leon’s emotional connection to DIY, filling in more details of the process of “making do.” It is evident here that “making do” also includes forms of crafting labor that can’t be performed *only* as labor. Some endeavors are necessarily a fusion of labor and leisure, work and pleasure – requiring an emotional investment. At times, the emotional investment is pleasing (Leon’s happiness in collecting supplies). In other times it signals distress. As such, when Leon’s heartache over the loss of his daughter overwhelms him, he is unable to finish even the simplest final element of this task. Just as Leon’s emotions are revealed to Leila, Mah and Mason through this act of (incomplete/unproductive) crafting labor, Leila understands Mah’s emotions primarily in reference to sewing.

These elements of the novel also make clear that the emotional connection to sewing labor is not a mode of thought that comes “naturally” (as is sometimes implied in DIY writings). Rather, it is through a continued and multi-generational participation in crafting labor that Mah, Leon and the other characters gain skills and, in using them, express a wide range of feelings. Their participation, likewise, helps them to read these emotions in others. Leila understands Mah’s impatience through her “sewing factory voice” (22). She comprehends the scope of Mah’s anger toward Leon in the echo, “rattle and groan” and “tinny hollowness” of Mah “running the Singer without any fabric” (69-70). Finally, Mah’s love is evident in the dresses she stays up late to finish for her girls, which Leila conveys in details only someone with firsthand knowledge of sewing could: the matching dresses in “pink lace over pink satin, a princess neckline, cap sleeves, an empire waist, and a big satin bow in the back” (185). Leon’s DIY, Mah’s sewing and

Leila's knowledge of both the technical details and the emotions these labors references and evoke (learned over many years), pose a critical rejoinder to DIY's narrative of crafting. The multiple and divergent temporalities of the novel combine with this diversity of sometimes-conflicting emotions to build Leila's memories. Her expression of these memories reveals both convergent and conflicting relationships with master codes that tell of just one way of operating in the world (that of abstract and universally-attainable citizenship, compulsory and beneficial assimilation, joyful and liberatory DIY – all aligned with a form of progress as defined by capital modernity).

These depictions of crafting labor in *Bone* are both “a violation” as well as a celebration. This is the very split about which Dipesh Chakrabarty writes in his work on subaltern history as it challenges the narrative strategies of the history and time of modernity. He writes,

Subaltern histories, thus conceived in relationship to the question of difference, will have a split running through them. On the one hand, they are ‘histories’ in that they are constructed within the master code of secular history and use the accepted academic codes of history writing (and thereby perforce subordinate to themselves all other forms of memory). On the other hand, they cannot ever afford to grant this master code its claim of being a mode of thought that comes to all human beings naturally, or even to be treated as something that exists out there in nature itself. Subaltern histories are therefore constructed within a particular kind of historicized memory, one that remembers History itself as a violation, an imperious code that accompanied the civilizing process that the European Enlightenment inaugurated in the eighteenth century as a world-historical task.

(55)

In many ways, the crafting labor in *Bone* exemplifies the constitutive split of subaltern histories as *Bone* marks as partial the DIY history of crafting labor: narrated as a hybrid political statement, bohemian ideal and liberating experience with the tactile world (to paraphrase Jean Railla, founder of getcrafty.com⁹¹). By juxtaposing the domestic and DIY labor in *Bone* to the way this crafting labor is narrated in DIY – it is possible to imagine significantly different political subjects that emerge out of these labors. These subjects both accede to certain forms of DIY crafting narratives (when Mah makes pink fluffy dresses for her daughters she fits easily into the typical mold of a sewing mother) and also mark the same crafting narratives as a violation. It's not that DIY subjects are not formed similarly, but rather, that *Bone* affords an extended meditation on the precise mechanisms by which acts of crafting build these subjects and their relationships to each other.

In another scene, Leila is nostalgic about her mother's sewing when Leon completely disassembles Mah's sewing machine in order to clean and repair it while Mah is away on a trip. Leila feels protective as she remembers, "all the party dresses she'd sewn, all the culottes I'd helped sew. I liked remembering those nights, and I didn't like seeing Mah's machine in pieces all over the floor" (Ng 97). To Leila's surprise, Leon finishes this project and polishes it to a gleaming shine before Mah's return. Much like Mah's party dresses, Leon's successful repair illustrates how DIY labor can demonstrate affection and evoke memories that Leila likes to remember – even as she becomes impatient with Leon or recalls the many nights Mah lost sleep to sewing labor (creating items both for her family and for the factory). In these details, it is evident that the crafting labor in *Bone* carries many of the same features that are celebrated by DIY: it cements familial relations, it accesses important memories, it surfaces alternative

⁹¹ Writing in *CRAFT Magazine*, Vol. 1, 10

economies. In contrast to DIY histories, the crafting labor in *Bone* also defies the “structure of generality within which specificities and differences are contained” (Chakrabarty 82). In other words, these examples cannot become particular instances of a generalized DIY history as Mah, Leila, Nina and Leon’s relationships to DIY and crafting locate emotions outside of those permitted by DIY history.

Importantly, these emotions are even produced when crafting is not a simple act of leisure, but when handmade items (and the skills used to create them) emerge out of an industrial, wage-labored context.⁹² Chakrabarty quotes Paul Veyne’s distinction between specificity and singularity to describe how History assimilates disparate events and temporalities, “History is interested in individualized events... but it is not interested in their individuality; it seeks to understand them – that is, to find among them a kind of generality or, more precisely, of specificity’... The very conception of the ‘specific’ as it obtains in the discipline of history, in other words, belongs to the structure of a general that necessarily occludes our view of the singular” (82). As one thumbs through catalogs of DIY production (such as *Craft: Magazine* and *Handmade Nation*) the images and text are directed at celebrating the individuality of the makers and their products. But as they accumulate, it becomes clear that these careful representations of individuality/individualism produce a generality that allows one to speak of a unified DIY narrative. Consistent with Veyne and Chakrabarty’s reading of specificity and singularity, DIYers individually demonstrate the specificities that compose the general structure of DIY. This general structure, then, makes it difficult to see, or even imagine, singularities that might challenge or disrupt the unified structure of DIY – or, DIY’s master code – as one the falls in line with neoliberal entrepreneurialism.

⁹² The importance of which I will explore when considering how DIY histories seek to locate their crafting labor outside of the formal economy, in section III.

As a fictional work, *Bone* does not explicitly set out to reimagine or write a history of domestic crafting or DIY labor. But, the novel does evoke forms of crafting labor that complicate the history of the DIY renaissance as chronicled by *CRAFT*, *Handmade Nation* and other popular DIY publications. The “singular” expressions of the emotions, acts and products of crafting labor in *Bone* are not legible according to the terms of DIY history. Chakrabarty elaborates, “By ‘singular’ I mean that which defies the generalizing impulse of the sociological imagination... ‘Singularity’ is a matter of viewing. It comes into being when we look on things in such a way as not to see them as ‘particular’ expressions of that which is general” (82-83). Thus, the domestic sweatshop labor in which Mah, the sewing ladies, and even Leila and her sisters participate marks an element of crafting history that is not often surfaced DIY histories. Rather than arguing that DIY histories must take into account (domestic) crafting labor in an industrial context, I instead ask what it would mean to consider the production of crafting subjects in *Bone* as singularities that unsettle the “master code” of DIY history.

Again, sewing, for Mah and Leila, is so many things: cathartic (69-79) and painful (75), a social network (132-133) as well as a profession and an obligation (34-35). Just like the business side of the Hoy Sun Ning Yung Benevolent Association, where Leila locates the death records of Grandpa Leong (Leon's paper father), sewing – even in a factory context - is a mix of family and business (unsettling the dichotomy of public and private spheres).⁹³ This is especially evident when Mah finds Grandpa Leong dead while Leon is away on a voyage working as a presser on a commercial ship. As the only family member in town, Mah becomes fully responsible for all the details of the funeral and burial. When Mah collapses under the pressure and obligations, it is

⁹³ Lowe reads the Benevolent Association as a heterotopia that “expose[s] the untenability of the hierarchized divisions of space into domains of public and private, leisure and work, or legitimacy and illegitimacy.” Like all of Chinatown, it is “a space of multiple functions, in which activities are simultaneous, not hierarchized or temporalized” (124).

the sewing ladies who come to her aid. Leila's description of this scene relies heavily on sewing imagery and references to sewing labor, further emphasizing how the world of Mah's labor informs Leila's memories and the lens through which she views the world. Leila recalls,

The Saturday before the funeral, the Saturday we expected Leon to come home, Mah just broke down. I was at the shop, helping turn the corduroy pockets for the peacoats. She was worrying about whether or not Leon was going to get home in time. "Hope so. Probably," I answered in an automatic tone. Suddenly, Mah bolted up, her chair flipped back, and she was running toward the door. Tommie was just coming in and his arms were full of bulky bundles. Tommie must have seen something that made him drop everything. All I saw was Mah flying into his arms. Production stopped, and everybody stared at Mah sobbing into Tommie's big chest. That was the first time I was in the shop when it got machineless quiet: not a motor rumble or a thread-spool roll, not even a steam press hiss. Only the Cantonese opera was still going, the cat voices screeching on, out of tune and out of context. But the whole machine racket started up, suddenly, and louder than before. (80)

Rather than a scene of anonymous foreigners (as imagined by many DIY accounts⁹⁴), this exchange exposes the decontextualization (and recontextualization)⁹⁵ that must happen for DIYers to construct, claim, desire, benefit from and consume the wage-laboring Other. In terms of singularities and specificities, this scene also elaborates wage-laboring sweatshop workers as singularities that push against aspects of a DIY master code. They possess and use crafting skills for their own purposes (like DIYers) but they are also exploited through the use of the very same labors within Tommie's shop.

⁹⁴ See especially Deb Dormody's description of sweatshop laborers, quoted in chapter one.

⁹⁵ Ramamurthy

This is most certainly not your typical depiction of sweatshop labor, but it is not romanticized either. On the one hand, Mah's co-workers and her boss provide an emotional support system in which the sewing ladies' "cooing voices" ease Mah's sobbing as they offer their "own secret remedies" to her grief (81). In this way, Ng's depiction of the social network of Tommie Han's sweatshop is similar to Lowe's assessment of the ways in which the immigrant women in her study successfully undermine the reduction of their work to that of unskilled, devalued and "interchangeable 'abstract labor'" (170). Each of the sewing ladies are named and described in intimate detail: the snobbish Miss Tsai; Mah's best friends, Luday and Soon-ping who walk Mah to the hospital after a broken needle lodges near her eye (179); and the newcomer, Rosa, who Mah takes under her wing when she begins working at Tommie Han's factory (165). Throughout the novel, the sewing ladies are shown to be equally a comfort and "gossiping pain" (105).

As such, the relationship between the crafting subjects in the novel demonstrates a disruption of DIY's master code - as a singularity that can neither be assimilated into this master narrative as the untold suffering of sweatshop laborers nor a moment of burgeoning worker resistance. As I explored in chapter one, DIY often produces a wage-laboring, sweatshop laborer as a foil to DIY's own "ethical" scenes of production and "better made" commodities. This Other can operate multiply - as the object of craftivism's generosity, or (less often) as a potential ally in the struggle against corporate domination of consumer markets. Thus, when the owner and manager, Tommie Han, is a comfort even as he is shown elsewhere to impose difficult workloads on Mah and the other laborers in his shop, this scene complicates and questions DIY's handy dichotomy of the world of DIY and its sweatshop Other.

While sewing imagery might seem apt to describe the scenes in which sewing actually happens, as this imagery accumulates throughout the novel one realizes that the act of sewing is irreversibly “stitched” into Leila’s life. She can’t explain Ona’s death, her elopement with Mason, why her stepfather resides in a hotel or why Nina fled to New York without referencing some aspect of the act of sewing. And so, Leila invokes sewing imagery to describe much more than just the characters in the novel who work in the sweatshop with Mah. Absolute silence is “machineless quiet” for Leila. Implied sentiments in a conversation are the “underneath thread” of Miss Tsai’s heart. Ona’s risky behavior is best described by the way she liked to slap the exposed sewing belt while Leila worked on a pile of garments for Mah. Men sitting at a bench in the park appear as “scraps of dark remnant fabric” and their poverty is detailed as “tattered collars, missing buttons, safety-pinned seams, patch pockets full of fists” (8). Finally, Leila explains Mah’s close friendship with Rosa by recalling how Mah taught Rosa to sew, including which “secret tricks” would fool Tommie when he inspected garments; and that “when she called us [Leila and her sisters] to come to the factory to iron interfacing or turn sashes, she told us to do Rosa’s too” (164).

As is evident throughout the novel, these womens’ lives are also dominated by sewing labor – even as sewing images often access pleasant memories. This labor is characterized by long hours, performed both in the shop and at home. It is subject to pressing deadlines as well as dangerous working conditions (that send Mah to the hospital on one occasion.). Finally, the work garners low pay that could never sustain a family alone and barely does so for Leila's family even with Leon's second income. Once more, Leila’s description reveals her intimacy with the sewing labor she has learned by way of Mah. The descriptors “motor rumble,” “thread-spool roll” and “steam press hiss” betray the countless hours she too has spent behind or next to a

sewing machine. In summary, in the sewing factory scene and throughout the novel, DIY's wage-laboring Other (via the figures of Mah and the sewing women) is revealed to be infinitely more complex and multifaceted than is generally evident in (surface level) DIY narratives. The moment of Mah's distress on the sewing factory floor displays the intimacy created, in part, through the collective act of sewing together. And yet, the many details of this scene resist being generalized as either an uncommon version of DIY or as the opposite of DIY. Instead, they stand out as singularities that call into question the master code of DIY.

As a critical rejoinder to the celebrated DIY subject, Ng's *Bone* presents domestic sweatshop workers who, at times, engage in DIY-like activities. But, unlike DIY, which attempts to disavow its connections to wage labor, in *Bone* crafting labor is intimately bound to the forms of wage labor that index histories of racialized, gendered exploitation. This labor is infused not just in the memories of the actual workers (DIY's Other), but in the memories of their children and the community as a whole – *this* is the price of acceding to the master codes that circulate in their lives. Lowe, too, discusses how capital invades the space of the home in *Bone* when she writes, “The lives of the Leong family in Ng’s novel are legibly imprinted by conditions of Mah’s work as a sewing woman: from the central motif of the sewing machine in all of their lives, to the vulnerability of the immigrant home to capitalist penetration, to the tense contrast between the father Leon’s difficulty staying steadily employed and Mah’s “over-employment” (168-9). This examination begins to explore “other modes for imagining and narrating immigrant subjectivity and community” that push against the master codes of citizenship, national formation and neoliberal subjectivity (Lowe 172-173). And yet, the way that the myriad labors of hand-making (sewing, Leon’s tinkering, Mason’s repairs) develop the subjects of the novel does not receive extended attention in Lowe’s analysis. Lowe’s reading of

Chinatown names it as a place to “retrieve... a repertoire of forms of memory, time or counterhistory... that enable the formation of new subjects outside official dictations and dominations and make possible horizontal affiliations between such subjects” (127). This exploration of how *Bone* “enable[s] the formation of new subjects” is surely promising for this study. Leon participates in this formation via his suitcase of papers, but Mah alone emerges as the possibility of a new political subject in *Bone*.⁹⁶

Thus, Lowe’s conclusion calls for elaboration since Leila (whose narrative dictates the novel), Leon and other characters in the novel also offer possibilities for the wider variety of political subjects that Lowe’s analysis suggests. My examination has built on this engagement with the political subjects generated out of *Bone* by examining the many ways that Mah as well as the other crafting subjects in the novel: Leila, Leon and Mason, offer unique possibilities for political practice through crafting - suggesting new political subjects of DIY. These new subjects are not the vocal political actors that Nicole Dawkins imagines⁹⁷ or the more passive craftivists

⁹⁶ This is consistent with Lowe’s focus on the Asian American cultural sphere and its distance from “American national culture.” The cultural production of Asian immigrant women, would be the most distant from this formation, a point Lowe makes in her penultimate chapter when she writes, “Indeed, both Lee’s testimony and Ng’s novel suggest that the exploitation of immigrant seamstresses depends exactly upon the cultural, racial and gendered qualities of the workforces, rather than on the reduction of their work as interchangeable ‘abstract labor’ without characteristics that are the material trace of their historical disenfranchisement from the political realm and that differentiate the seamstresses from the concept of the ‘abstract citizen.’” (170)

⁹⁷ In Nicole Dawkins’ “Do-It-Yourself: The Precarious Work and Postfeminist Politics of Handmaking (in) Detroit,” she readily observes a neoliberal rationality at work in DIY narratives that champion the “flexibility,” “autonomy,” and individual satisfaction of their labors (while also grappling with the aftermath of deindustrialization, structural adjustment, and a “personal responsibility system” in which employers are no longer obliged to secure health care, job security or even safe working conditions for their employees). Dawkins studies the neoliberal underpinnings of DIY discourses in order to denaturalize them, question their “exclusionary practices” and, in doing so, “allow for the forging of more inclusive communities and radical labor solidarities both within and beyond the city of Detroit” (280). This final sentiment of the article produces two very recognizable political subjects. The first is a “feminized” and “domestic” crafter who might challenge the exclusionary racial politics of DIY in Detroit by

desired by Betsy Greer and others. Nor are these political subjects recognizable only as the female immigrant laborer (as in Lowe – see 169, 170, 172). Rather the crafting subjects of *Bone* engage in political practices that emerge over time and in unexpected ways – but, in particular, through their calling into question the master codes that exert pressure on their lives. In this section I have elaborated how memories are formed through the complex temporality of the novel and the emotions expressed through crafting labors. To conclude, I consider the economies within which handmade un/commodities are produced and circulate as this further refines the singularities of crafting in *Bone*.

The crafting labor in *Bone* also presents a critical rejoinder to DIY through the problems raised in Ramamurthy's Feminist Commodity Chain Analysis,⁹⁸ as *Bone* dramatizes the importance of considering women's labor (as well as feminized labors performed by both men and women) on a global scale while highlighting processes of gendering and racialization in production and consumption. Whereas the labor available to Leila's parents is circumscribed by their status as Chinese immigrants, the work performed by their children's generation is (somewhat) more open – depending on gender, degree of assimilation to white culture, and other factors. We see this with Mason's cousin, Dale, a successful Chinese-American professional who works in technology and has largely assimilated to the dominant (white) American culture.

Dale's successes are measurable in conventionalisms such as his East Bay house, “tennis-tanned

“including” a wider diversity of crafters in her community – working to undo the effects of a crafting community that sees Detroit as an “urban frontier waiting to be colonized by an emergent [white] creative class” (279). The second political subject is a worker who, harkening back to Detroit's radical union history, forges labor solidarities that might actually confront, rather than replicate, neoliberal values and the “interests of post-Fordist capital” (279). The complexities of crafting in *Bone* both complicate these political formations and suggest alternatives.

⁹⁸ As I detailed in my first chapter, in the FCCA commodities are not just objects that mechanically accrue value as they move along the chain of production, but a series of relations that constitute subjects in the process of production and consumption.

legs,” “perfect haircut” and “smooth English.” These markers of “successful” assimilation and conventional financial success register differently in *Bone*. Mason, who works as a mechanic, rents an apartment in the Mission and knows exactly how to negotiate the conventions of Leila's relationship with her parents, is Leila's preferred suitor. We are told that Dale attended an all-white school outside of the city and Leila knows that she could never be with someone like him, with his smooth and uncallused “Sunday hands” and lack of Chinese “home education” (45). By Leila's measure, Mason's laboring by hand is privileged over Dale's work at his successful new computer company.

From Dale's assimilated vantage (like the DIY narratives from chapter one), DIY practices may be separated along a clear labor/leisure divide whereby these are imagined to be two completely separate realms. Dale can't imagine that Mason (and his friend Zeke) would have taken time out of their weekend to perform uncompensated labor. As a result, Dale is baffled when Mason refuses to accept payment for the repair. Leila understands the transaction for what it is – a family favor, carried out primarily for Dale's mom and not Dale himself (whom Mason has always disliked). Dale's mom does not own or drive the vehicle, but a favor for her son is tantamount to (or perhaps even greater than) a favor to her. As a result, Leila can't help but be annoyed that, as they leave, Dale continues to lounge by his pool while Mason has just devoted the weekend to working on his cousin's car. Instead of expressing this directly to Dale, she remarks later, “Dale should have thanked you too, Zeke” (45), underscoring that if Dale had been appropriately appreciative this “transaction” would have proceeded smoothly, according to the conventions of the informal, domestic economy in which it was intended to operate. Instead, Dale insults Mason, Leila and also their friend Zeke in his insistence on paying Mason.

This passage demonstrates the exchange of commodities within an alternative economy and the way this transaction can be understood in two very different ways. The first understanding – Dale’s - follows the rationality of the formal market (and DIY) where money is *always* an acceptable method of payment for services rendered. By this logic, to refuse payment is irrational, hence Dale’s confusion. The second understanding sees with more clarity how this exchange operates outside of (but still with a relationship to) the dominant capitalist economy. When Dale insists, “No. Really, I’d like to pay you for your time” (44) he insults Mason and Zeke, who have called in favors and worked after hours on Dale’s car, by offering to pay them. Leila, in turn, is confused by Dale’s insistence and wonders, “What was this? If money was a question, Dale should’ve taken it to a shop. Why’d he ask Mason?” (44). The spoken and unspoken back and forth in this scene gets at the multiple, overlapping meanings of the repair.

For Dale it’s a simple business transaction. Or, perhaps, a condescending attempt to “help” his cousin – who he may assume needs the work. By contrast, Mason and the others understand how Mason and Zeke’s labor, instead, functions to solidify the bond between Mason and his extended family, in particular Aunt Lily (Dale’s mother, who is working at the mall during Mason’s visit). But, as Leila explains it, Dale’s distance from Chinese cultural conventions prevents him from understanding that “money was out of the question,” since Mason was doing him a “family favor” (44). Not a mere comment on cultural sensitivity, this transaction, instead, can be understood as an “appeal to models of cross-cultural and cross-categorical translations that do not take a universal middle term [currency] for granted” (Chakrabarty 83).⁹⁹ Chakrabarty’s observation makes room for a non-instrumental (in the

⁹⁹ Chakrabarty also clarifies, “Let me make it clear that the raging Medusa of cultural relativism is not rearing her ugly head in my discussion at this point. To allow for plurality, signified by the plurality of gods, is to think in terms of singularities. To think in terms of singularities, however

capitalist sense) alternative economy to emerge in *Bone*, of which Leon's "unproductive" DIY labors, Mason and Zeke's family favors and Mah's sewing for her family are all a part. In this collision of formal and informal economies, Dale does not see (much less understand) the operations of the domestic economy that completely undergird the formal economy in which he has had so much success.

For Leila, Dale's oversight is chalked up to an annoying ignorance, oblivion or naiveté. But in reading *Bone* against DIY narratives, one must wonder whether Dale isn't just putting on this act to save a buck, or if he patronizes Mason in assuming that Mason needs the money more than he does. In this sense, Dale doesn't take it to a shop because he wants to "help" his cousin. Like craftivists, he operates without any real regard for the actual needs or desires of his "needy," "less-fortunate" cousin. One might contrast this example of an alternative economy with alternative DIY economies that are imagined to be disconnected from systems of wage labor. The seeming inattention to the many ways in which formal economies circulate even within domestic sites could be read as a simple omission or oversight. And, naming these as omissions does indeed trouble DIY's desire to exist outside of the formal economy (as in Bryan-Wilson's critique above). Even in the ways that DIY does construct something like an alternative economy based on barter or untranslated exchange,¹⁰⁰ it is still inflected by the racialized and gendered labors and economies that inform these exchanges. But, like Dale, these "oversights"

– and this I must make clear since so many scholars these days are prone to see parochialism, essentialism, or cultural relativism in every claim of non-Western difference – is *not* to make a claim against the demonstrable and documentable permeability of cultures and languages. It is, in fact, to appeal to models of cross-cultural and cross-categorical translations that do not take a universal middle term for granted. The Hindi *pani* may be translated into the English 'water' without having to go through the superior positivity of H₂O. In this, at least in India but perhaps elsewhere as well, we have something to learn from nonmodern instances of cross-categorical translation" (83).

¹⁰⁰ Consider DIY's various forms of alternative economy such as: barter, trade, gift economies, sewing for family and friends.

might also be purposeful, both buttressing DIY's value as *the* ethical alternative to purchasing mass-produced goods while promoting DIY as an ideal marriage of labor and leisure.

Even while DIY wants to think outside of circuits of production (as wage labor is not typically included as an aspect of DIY) it is still intertwined with circuits of capitalist production and consumption. In Greer's world of craftivism, to be DIY and political, goods are constructed either for her own use or, if they are made for someone besides the person making them, they provide an alternative to the wage labor system. As the DIYer understands it, these objects allow her to be a fully realized autonomous individual who can circumvent cycles of corporate branding through her crafting labor. She further operates outside of cycles of mass production as she donates her surplus objects to "people who could really use them" or uses her knitted objects in acts of "crafty crime."¹⁰¹ However, the crafting and domestic labor in *Bone* marks the untenability of this opposition, revealing how DIY is not only invested in the formal economy in ways it might not like to admit, but also how DIY operates by and perpetuates master codes of its own.

As I mentioned earlier, this DIY master code works within the larger system of capital modernity. As the crafting subjects of *Bone* depict an immigrant and first generation Chinese-American community, the pressures of the master codes of citizenship and assimilation also come to bear on this narrative. To name these codes via the temporality of the novel, emotions – as they connect to crafting labors, and the "alternative" economy depicted in the novel, also reveals that there is a price to be paid for acceding to these codes. Dale and Mason's relationship is permanently strained. The labors of Mah and Leon permeate their family life to such an extent that emotions become legible primarily through sewing and other DIY labors. Finally, the

¹⁰¹ <http://craftivism.com/blog.html/2013/04/craftivism-and-donation/>

heterogeneous temporality of the novel conveys to the reader the dizzying experience of moving by discordant temporal codes. Working within and against these master codes positions these aspects of *Bone* on a fault line between crafting labors as generalizable aspects of DIY and those singularities that resist generalizing impulses – that suggest another way of operating as subjects in the world of crafting.

Conclusion

Ramamurthy writes, “A study of consumption, not just production, and how they are co-constitutive and gendered, is necessary to map how commodities connect people in distant locations and enable them to imagine and perform their place in the world” (742). This quote, which also appears in chapter one, echoes with even more meaning after this examination of the role of the hand-crafted un/commodities and crafting labors in the formation of crafting subjects in *Bone*. The crescendo of these readings, as previewed on the first few pages of this chapter and referenced throughout, is a reconsideration of who may become a crafting subject and what types of activities constitute this formation. Thus, I close with a turn to feminist critiques of the subject to think in another way about how *Bone* locates an identity category built out of crafting labor (posing a critical rejoinder to the way in which these processes are typically understood in and through DIY narratives).

Feminist critiques of the subject – a debate cast primarily in the 1990s, but with ongoing relevance today – provide a useful vantage for thinking about the formation of identity categories, their limits and potentialities. I turn to this body of work not only because much DIY professes feminist aspirations (especially craftivism), but also because DIY offers intriguing possibilities as a category constructed through a particular set of labors. In the updated preface to

Judith Butler's foundational *Gender Trouble* she asserts that since "subjects [are] produced through certain exclusionary practices," "feminist critique ought also to understand how the category of 'women,' the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought" (5). While not all DIY explicitly understands itself as a political project (in the way of craftivism, for instance), the discourses that constitute a recognizable DIY ethos do make use of emancipatory narratives of the commodity and do rely on master codes of modernity (characterized by progress, linear temporality, the autonomous individual) that are most surely "produced and restrained" through the structures of power out of which "emancipation is sought" (Butler 5). Particularly in narratives like Levine's (quoted earlier) that proclaim the "exhilarating energy" and feel-good shopping experience of Indie craft fairs as a primary venue of DIY community and subject formation.

Butler takes the identity category of "women," often understood as the target of feminism, as her focus. She notes how this type of feminist practice does not often embrace the contestation that results when the normative foundation of their category are questioned, opened up and experience attempts at resignification. This is typical also in the field of DIY, the larger domain of craft, and the more narrowly-focused category of craftivism. In the field of craft, embracing contestation might mean welcoming practitioners who don't fit the typical profile of the professional craftsman (DIY often provides this challenge within traditional craft guilds/magazines/establishments). For craftivism, this could mean embracing forms of political crafting that are not "nice" or "quiet," and that contest the foundations of conventional charity work. For DIY, (the most open of these three categories) this might mean recognizing the value, labor and validity of mass-produced handmade goods, perhaps even resulting in the formation of solidarities with industrial laborers (arguably artisans themselves).

Since DIY already understands itself as a non-normative identity category without a “natural” foundation, there’s intriguing potential there. But, DIY can’t yet call itself an identity category of radical openness, a “site of feminism where unanticipated meanings might come to bear,” for DIY has not yet been “emancipat[ed]... from the maternal or racist ontologies to which it has been restricted” (“Contingent Formations” 16). This is especially evident for the ways in which one can trace out a DIY master code that operates within the master code of capital modernity. And yet, if DIY already understands itself as an identity category produced through multiple and divergent labors, the crafting practices depicted in *Bone* contain the potential to greatly expand the possibilities of this category.

I close with a final quote from *Bone*, from the middle of the novel, to articulate how one of the central promises of DIY, the building of relationships, might be realized in a new and more diverse way,

Ona was a counter. She counted the one hundred and forty times our pet rooster crowed in his short life; she tried to keep count of the number of culottes Mah sewed one summer (Mah sewed faster than Ona could keep count). She counted off the days till Leon was coming home, and then she stood at the mouth of the alley, counting the cabs that went by. Every night that Leon was gone, she'd count out ninety-nine kisses to keep him safe, to bring him back. Ona was right about the counting. Remembering the past gives power to the present. Memories do add up. Our memories can't bring Grandpa Leon or Ona back, but they count to keep them from becoming strangers. (Ng 89)

While only marginally concerned with crafted commodities and crafting labor, this selection is representative of the extended and complex meditation on the formation of crafting subjects in *Bone*. In the previous section I pursued the construction of memories through the novels’ non-

linear temporality, sewing labors and alternative economies. In the first section of the chapter I argued for an understanding of hand crafted objects and mass-produced commodities as existing in close proximity – overlapping and moving between these categories in a way that also elaborates the convergence of production and consumption: what I have called the process of “making do.”

In this excerpt, Ona’s counting *up* of the coulottes Mah sews and of the days of Leon’s arduous overseas labor depicts another mode of creating memories in the novel. Leila’s remembering of Ona’s careful and systemic enumeration of labors and objects produces memories that “give power to the present” while keeping alive past relationships. When Ona reconfigures these labors – quantifying them in an orderly fashion – we see Mah and Leon’s labors from the vantage of a child. Her counting is a game that is both playful and also revealing of her concern for Leon – when she counts (her kisses) as a superstitious ritual. Here, Ona “makes do” as she produces a game out of her parents’ labors. This game, in turn, is “made well” as it allows Leila to preserve, collect and remember aspects of all of their lives. This game and the counting activities the comprise it, become a part of her own life as well. This complex remembering once more emphasizes how relationships are built and sustained through collective crafting memories attached to the heterogenous objects and labors themselves.

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