A BETTER HOME FOR EVERY BODY:

HOMEMAKING AND LIBERAL INDIVIDUALISM IN 1920S AMERICA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation finds the meaning of twentieth-century American liberalism within the assortment of historical voices who, during the 1920s, promoted the transformation of houses into beautiful, comfortable, well-managed homes. Most prominent among these was Herbert Hoover, and his efforts to promulgate a modern ideal of domesticity coincided with his promotion of an ideology that he labeled American Individualism. Explaining this connection between material culture and political philosophy is Hoover’s belief that “better” homes sustained American liberalism’s presumptions of individual autonomy and consensual self-government. These precursors of civil entitlement and national identity enabled his model citizen to reconcile the antinomies characteristic of the liberal subject: Hoover’s American Individual was, at once, liberated and restrained, singular and identical, distinct from the state and inseparable from it. Hoover’s perception of the better home’s circular function to reflect as well as construct liberal subjectivity was echoed by housing professionals, social scientists, interior decorators, home economists, popular writers, and civic activists. Examining the prescriptive literature these figures authored, the dissertation identifies within their diverse texts a narrative structure and logic that traced the liberal citizen’s, and thus America’s, origin and development to an innate yearning for an appealing home. Perceived as an authentic, metaphysical condition, this desire not only transformed primal drives into productive initiative, but also established the home-loving
subject’s temporal precedence to the political economy. When created and managed through prescribed standards, the beautiful home aesthetically embodied this priority; its décor metaphorically reconciled liberty’s pursuit with a submission to the collectivizing ideals that constituted the nation; and by focusing and educating desire, the home’s beauty and comfort catalyzed a supposedly consensual enactment of the liberal virtues that enabled its inhabitants to become what the better home aesthetically signified. The modern home idealized during the 1920s was thus a product of public policy, civic engagement, scholarly analysis, artistic design, and literary production through which the liberal state created the condition of its own possibility. Although modernizing the home reinforced the traditional role of domesticity in American liberalism’s reproduction, this project prompted professional decorators, housing experts, and home economists to construe homemaking as an allegory for the performance of liberal individualism and, consequently, to frame the liberal subject as potentially androgynous. Emphasizing homemaking’s essential purpose within liberalism’s developmental narrative, white home economists stressed men’s dependency on their wives’ liberal attributes, which the professionalization of household labor served to display. This attempt to depict homemaking as a mode of liberal identity nevertheless failed to establish an identity between the women who worked at home and the men who relaxed there. African-American clubwomen encountered a different paradox when they similarly sought political opportunity in domesticity’s acknowledged function to cultivate liberal virtues and values within citizens who admittedly lacked them. These activists for racial equality confronted a homogenizing racial binary despite the declared inclusiveness of Hoover’s home ownership and home improvement campaigns. Imposed on black citizens geographically, narratively, and aesthetically, racialized otherness helped to make the home an evocative, private space, one that purportedly enabled a liberated and disciplined American Individual to create a progressive, liberal civilization.
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I might have written the majority of this dissertation inside my single-family dwelling, but it reflects the contributions of a large community of mentors and supporters. First, I want to thank my adviser Jackson Lears. I could not have completed this project without the inspiring example of his scholarship nor without his support, patience, and encouragement. Like Jackson, Dorothy Sue Cobble has been involved in this project since its inception. I also owe thanks to Andy Urban and David Brody for contributing their time and intellectual talents to the committee. Although I did not complete the dissertation before their retirement, Nancy Hewitt and Joan Scott made invaluable contributions to its conceptualization. I have benefitted enormously from their mentorship both personally and intellectually. I also want to thank Dawn Ruskai for her constant readiness to offer assistance. At the University of Kentucky, Patty Cooper and Kathi Kern introduced me to women’s history, and they guided my efforts to write a biography of clubwoman Elizabeth Fouse, the master’s thesis in which this dissertation originated. Patty continues to act as an adviser of sorts by always inspiring me with her wisdom, humor, and joy. At both UK and Rutgers, I had the opportunity to work with remarkably generous and dedicated professors, an illustrious list that includes Susan Bordo, David Hamilton, Dana Nelson, Paul Taylor, Deborah Gray White, Jennifer Morgan, Jan Lewis, and David Foglesong. I also made incredible friends and colleagues who have helped to nurture my intellect and my soul. Among these is Caroline Light. She has run many miles with me over difficult terrain both literally and in spirit. Angie Smith was my best friend even before I walked into my first collegiate history class almost three decades ago. This remarkable mother has celebrated every word of this dissertation with me, and as a testament to our friendship, she’s even read sections of it. I am so fortunate to count among my cheerleaders a group of incredibly smart women who exemplify for me the concept of feminist praxis: Thank you Jackie Jones, Heidi Geib, Kim Griese, Judy Dreskin, Jill Kendrick, Kate Elias, Alexis Urriola, and Lisa Alexander. These dedicated mothers
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Introduction

“The highest civilizations have been built,” Herbert Hoover proclaimed, “by nations in which the mass of the population are home-owners and home-lovers.”¹ While Hoover seemed to reiterate a sentiment that had circulated since the earliest days of the Republic’s founding, he uniquely made its realization the objective of federal policy. This dissertation explores the equation that Hoover perceived between fulfilling supposedly primal desires for a dwelling publically recognized as a home and realizing the nation’s potential for material plenitude, individual liberty, and social beneficence. It demonstrates that, in the 1920s, Hoover helped to articulate and promote a shift through which the aesthetically appealing, comfortable, and convenient home supplanted the sentimentally romanticized family as the means of sustaining the synthesis between stability and progress that undergirded American liberalism’s ethical reconciliation between personal freedom and communal order.² Illustrating this metonymic transition, Hoover proclaimed, “The ideal setting for true home life is the detached house with at least some space around it.” In its absence, he cautioned, “the finest flower of family life” will undoubtedly wither.³ Hoover’s warning demonstrates a reversal in the constitutive relationship between the family and its sheltering domicile that culminated in the twentieth-century’s third decade. Relative to escalating cultural and economic modernization, Hoover adamantly believed that only by creating a “large population of families that own their homes” could he achieve his

¹ Better Homes in America, Guidebook of Better Homes in America: How to Organize the 1924 Campaign, with a foreword by Herbert Hoover, Publication 1 (Washington, DC: 1924), 5.
ultimate goals of securing “both the foundation of a sound economic and social system and a guarantee that our society will continue to develop rationally as changing conditions demand.”

Hoover was hardly the first public figure to perceive a connection between home ownership and liberalism’s reconciliation of individual freedom and social order. Beginning in the early nineteenth century, both need and belief led a handful of Americans to flee the cities that were becoming homes to the laboring bodies of unpropertied and increasingly foreign men and women. A cottage in the country spatially removed and shielded white Americans from the commercialism and sexual depravity associated with these urban areas as the burgeoning markets operating within them threatened to dissolve traditional moral constraints and socioeconomic relationships, allowing instead a more fluid circulation of peoples and goods. This aversive response to urbanization originated, historians have generally claimed, in a Jeffersonian vision of democracy with its classical republican fears of decadence, dependency, and decay. Margaret Marsh illustrates this historiographical argument in explaining that the antebellum retreat from the city “was grounded in a political idea: that it was important to retain some elements of the agrarian ethos in order to maintain a society of independent, small property owners and thereby preserve democracy.”

Imagining the ideal home as a bucolic retreat, the first proponents of suburbanization presumed that maintaining a condition of ownership and a close proximity to the natural world would unshackle citizens from the dependency of either tenancy or wage-earning while also shielding them from the artifice of commercialization. They consequently cast male suburbanites in the mold of the self-supporting yeoman farmers who had virtuously transcended the limited scope of their own pecuniary interests and entered a fraternity of men dedicated to upholding the public welfare.

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In addition to linking suburbanization to the nation’s agrarian past, historians have also looked forward to its corporate, urban future. This framework for interpreting the origins of suburbia construes early residential enclaves as symptomatic of capitalism’s development rather than as a republican outcry against the market’s degenerative effects on male independence and civic virtue. As urban populations expanded, the city’s inhabitants overflowed onto the cheaper land surrounding its borders. Facilitating this exodus of corporate employees was the revolution in transportation wherein trains and, then, automobiles moved suburban commuters more swiftly and efficiently across the expanding distances between their workplaces and residences. These earliest inhabitants of suburban communities often used their land and homes to supplement meager earnings; however, the perception of home ownership as an additional means of subsistence was gradually eclipsed in the late nineteenth century with the ascendancy of an American middle class and its spatial and performative modes of delineating, explaining, and protecting its identity and status. If these domestic habits and behaviors helped to consolidate the rising hegemony of managers and professionals, they received further legitimacy from turn-of-the-century innovations in science, education, and psychology that renewed a traditional, ideological belief in the domestic environment’s function as a politically socializing institution that prepared future citizens for civic responsibility. Progressive Era reformers consequently embarked on a vigorous campaign to remediate the unhygienic and intemperate living conditions that threatened to subvert the rationality and embodied self-discipline required for democracy to flourish.

Herbert Hoover’s professed intention to create a nation of homeowners helps to illustrate each of these historiographical frameworks for understanding the history of suburbanization. While he vociferously echoed the arguments of Progressives who touted the domestic

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environment’s ameliorative power and educative purpose, he also revived a republican
conception of the equation between property ownership, economic independence, and
disinterested virtue. Because this spirit of republicanism had rhetorically served to unify citizens
during World War I, it further prompted Hoover and his contemporaries to depict home
ownership as an extension of a masculine, patriotic duty to protect the nation and its dependents.9
Yet, Hoover looked to an idealized past without longing: Rather than invoking the country’s
agrarian heritage as the counterweight to the market’s destabilizing ephemerality, he declared
each to be the foundation of the just political economy he hoped to attain. According to Hoover,
the farms once scattered across the sparsely settled territories of a new nation were the initial
locations, the point of origin, for the expression and further development of a liberal ethos that
catalyzed the progressive unfolding of a history that would continue to lead toward greater
material plenitude, personal liberty, social equality, and communal responsibility. Because home
ownership recapitulated the setting of American liberalism’s beginnings and created a stage for
its further development, it represented more than an ideological mandate to protect citizens’
fundamental entitlements to private property. Rather, Hoover believed that the universal
possession of single-family dwellings safeguarded the initiative and ethical restraints, which
originating in proprietorship, enabled self-governing individuals to uphold the declared ideals that
inspired and legitimated the nation’s founding.

Delving into the connection that Hoover perceived between home ownership and the
preservation of liberalism’s avowed ideals and ethical requirements helps to illuminate why and
with what effects American liberalism became constitutively dependent upon a place called
home. This objective helps to define my dissertation’s engagement in an otherwise capacious
topic. Studies of liberalism generally begin with a rehashing of the historiographical debates that
identify the point of its emergence in the evolution of the nation’s political economy and the path

9 Lands, 948-949, 955.
of its various permutations.\textsuperscript{10} Despite the tendency to place Protestantism, republicanism, and liberalism in a sequential relationship relative to the market’s development and the revolution for American independence, these discourses were more accurately inter-articulated and strategically invoked. While historians have more recently demonstrated Thomas Jefferson’s regard for John Locke’s theories on government, this father of classical liberalism more typically enters the history of American political philosophy with the nineteenth century’s market revolution and the subsequent advent of industrial capitalism.\textsuperscript{11} The accompanying transition to mobile and commodified forms of property and the recognition of waged labor’s inevitability and permanency, particularly in the context of chattel slavery’s legal abolition, resulted in contracts eclipsing land ownership as the acknowledged signifier of independence and equality within market relations.\textsuperscript{12}

Whereas the economic independence created by landed property had presumably enabled American republicans to overcome their particular interests, liberal capitalism seemingly required acquisitive citizens to do just the opposite. As a consequence, a self-interested and decidedly unvirtuous form of individualism supposedly flourished by the end of the nineteenth-century, leading both historical opponents of this “flattened” version of liberalism and the scholars who

\textsuperscript{10} Introductions to studies of American liberalism typically follow a predictable script that begins with Louis Hartz’s assertion of a liberal synthesis, then pivot to a reclamation of classical republicanism’s saliency among the nation’s founders. These seminal texts include Louis Hartz, \textit{The Liberal Tradition in America: An Interpretation of American Political Thought Since the Revolution} (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1955); Bernard Bailyn, \textit{The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); Gordon Wood, \textit{The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969). This dissertation alternatively draws from the interpretation of American liberalism set forth in Wilfred M. McClay’s \textit{The Masterless: Self & Society in Modern America} (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994). McClay focuses on the constitutive tension within American liberalism that caused intellectuals and political thinkers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to vacillate between a self-subordinating consolidation (an impulse that classical republicanism also articulated) and a “masterless” individual’s resistance to this centrifugal pull.


studied them to tilt against a possessive individual in their critical interpretations of America’s Gilded Age and of liberalism itself. The remedies to this archetypal capitalist’s socially destructive, Hobbesian impulses were found in the republican tenets and Protestant morals that remained embedded within American political discourse and culture. In challenging wealth as the preeminent form of freedom’s expression, such efforts to temper a burgeoning possessive individualism coincided with romantic and transcendental inquiries that similarly questioned the nature of man’s inherent liberty and autonomy. Contracts and commodities hardly rendered the subject free, argued those who searched for an internal locus of identity or a Kantian wellspring of authentic value and meaning that distinguished the liberal individual from the instantiating metaphors of property and propriety.

Although the outcry against possessive individualism waned in the early twentieth century, the continued modernization of America’s political economy and culture revived anxious concerns about freedom’s misapprehension and its debilitating consequences for the republic and its citizens. By the 1920s, census figures confirmed that urbanizing areas had eclipsed the western frontier as a new Mecca of opportunity, beckoning both immigrants and the native born with promises of liberty in the form of employment and the enjoyments it afforded. Relative to this demographic shift and economic transformation, increasingly diverse and mobile citizens became less likely to feel bound by an organic connection to the land on which their forebears had lived and labored or by the moral codes of culturally and religiously homogeneous localities. While conservatives decried the loss of fealty to church and community, their progressive counterparts feared that the particular course modernization had taken led only to a counterfeit form of freedom that threatened to undermine the nation’s civic culture and the spiritual vitality

of its citizens. According to its critics, consumerism had rendered American society even more insistently homogeneous, and the standardization of self-expression accompanied an equally stultifying rationalization of production and imperative of efficiency that ensured the availability of cheap goods. Purchase and pleasure hardly liberated twentieth-century Americans or secured their independence. Rather, consumer amusements and acquisitions anesthetized them to new forms of embodied discipline and to the continued concentration of capital that accompanied the shift from entrepreneurial to managerial capitalism. Public intellectuals decried this myopia, and embedded in their complaints of consumers’ immaturity, banality, and irrationality was a concern that citizens had lost the judicious, deliberative skills required of democratic participation.\(^{16}\)

Akin to these historical critics, the historian William Leach similarly finds in this moment of economic and cultural transition a regrettable denigration of the nation’s political ideals. An emergent consumer economy transfigured democracy and liberty into an equalitarian opportunity to want and to buy, he argues; and this “democratization of desire” led Americans to misperceive traditional civil entitlements and obligations as an individualistic, and ultimately alienating, aesthetic pursuit of self-expression and pleasure.\(^{17}\) Leach’s concern for the perversion of liberal ideals and the impact of this degradation on civic culture and identity reveals a widely shared ambivalence about liberty and its presumed inherence within an individuated political subject. The subjects of his monograph, which include Herbert Hoover, struggled to align the personal experience of individual liberty with the politically constructive, economically productive, and socially unifying purpose that it serves within liberal discourse. In his retracing of the origins and


development of American liberalism, the political theorist Barry Shain has reiterated Leach’s narrative of ideological declension by challenging this liberal equation of individual liberty and social progress. The privileging of personal freedom, which had become predominant by the late nineteenth century, was from its onset, Shain contends, “destructive of corporate-based theories of the good.” Informing Shain’s analysis is the opposition he perceives between “individualism, which seeks to liberate the self from restrictive social, familial, religious, and political controls” and a “communal understanding of human flourishing” that necessarily requires placing restraints, even those externally imposed, on the exercise of individual liberty. Because liberal individualism inherently eschews such restrictions, it lacks the ethical means of reconciling personal goals with communal obligations, which Shain argues, Protestantism, republicanism, and enlightened rationalism supplied for the nation’s founders and earliest citizens. Here, Shain questions the contention first articulated by the Scottish philosophers of the eighteenth century and propounded by America’s own James Madison that the individual liberty exercised in a capitalist market could be placed in the service of communal and democratic ends.

Directed at the scholarly trope of an utterly self-interested, unfettered capitalist, Shain’s complaint about liberal individualism illustrates the distinction that Nikhil Singh identifies within this political philosophy. Attempting to reconcile liberalism’s proclamations with its practice, Singh distinguishes between the tendency within the modern nation-state toward the institutionalization of an inherently exclusionary liberalism and the “theoretical universalism of liberalism” characterized by an idealistic and inclusive conception of pervasive freedom. “One of

19 Ibid., 86.
the crucial, unresolved debates among critics and defenders of liberalism,” Singh explains, “is whether political exclusion is inherent within liberalism or whether it is an artifact of historically contingent divergences between theoretical liberalism and exclusionary social practices of liberal societies founded on race, class, and gender inequality.”

Related to this debate is the ambiguity, which so troubles Shain and liberalism’s many other critics, of whether liberalism’s declared reverence for freedom leads to greater social equality and justice. Singh suggests that liberalism’s proponents have attempted to solidify the causal link between freedom and equality by citing two variants of liberal political philosophy, both of which assume an abstract, unconstrained subject and, conversely, advocate the necessity of limiting that agent’s individual freedom. While the market liberalism associated with Adam Smith locates the regulation of conduct in the market’s contractual relations and in the competition it promotes, the political liberalism derived from John Stuart Mill looks to the state to protect and preserve an assumed condition of equality among citizen-subjects. Either the market, representative democracy, or a combination of the two have consequently been invoked to resolve the fundamental “problematic for liberalism,” which asks “how to combine an expansive, even utopian, defense of individual freedom with a stable and cohesive structure of social organization.”

The tension that Singh articulates between an idealization of freedom and the acknowledged necessity of its regulation helps to highlight liberalism’s intrinsic dependency upon the complicity of a self-governing subject. Achieving equality and justice without the state’s excessive interference in adjudicating among competing liberties requires a balanced, voluntary reconciliation of opposing interests among free individuals and between these individuals and the singular community they collectively constitute. Only through the existence of a citizenry engaged in rationally and ethically restrained democratic practices can the liberal

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22 Ibid., 154.
state maintain its legitimacy as an entity that exists only to protect and enhance its citizens’ innate entitlements. For this reason, the intellectual historian James Kloppenberg has argued that self-discipline has always been a key component of liberal political philosophy: Virtue was hardly the characteristically feminine restraint that it became in the early nineteenth-century, that arising from republican and Protestant notions of civic and moral virtue, served to moderate either the excessively passionate or calculated pursuit of interest within burgeoning capitalist markets. To demonstrate virtue’s persistent role within liberal thought, Kloppenberg traces how successive generations of intellectuals have sought to maintain the principal contributions of the American Revolution, which he identifies as autonomy and popular sovereignty.\(^\text{23}\) Enacted through the two variants of liberalism that Singh identifies—market activity and representative politics, autonomy undergirds declarations of freedom, Kloppeberg explains, while also creating a rational and virtuous capacity for self-government that paradoxically delimits the natural condition of liberty and consequently enables the potentially capricious practice of popular sovereignty to function predictably and democratically. The metaphysical possession of autonomy thus serves within American political thought to reconcile the “problematic” contradiction between individual freedom and social order.

In further explaining the significance of autonomy within American liberalism, Kloppenberg points out that its presumption also establishes a capacity for consent, which in mediating between personal and political self-government, initiates the nation’s very formation and perpetual reconstitution. In the context of American liberalism, citizens must consent not simply to legal injunctions and to the governmental institutions that enforce them, but rather to

\(^{23}\) Kloppenberg, 30-34. Kloppenberg defines autonomy in a Kantian sense. According to the political theorist Paul Fairfield, Kant recognized that autonomy, which is ostensibly a private, pre-political attribute, is only possible to exercise or express through political activity. Kant resolved this conception of autonomy as an ontological characteristic whose priority to the state can only be assumed by arguing that political activity resulting in legislation must be representational; it must reflect and therefore manifest the subject’s moral autonomy. See Paul Fairfield, Moral Selfhood in the Liberal Tradition: The Politics of Individuality (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1996), 46.
the individually empowering and socially unifying ideals that these laws supposedly embody. Reflecting on Americans’ fascination with the founding fathers and their textual decrees, the historian Gordon Wood has observed that the United States is a nation uniquely founded upon avowed ideals rather than a shared ethnic or religious heritage. His observation of what Herbert Hoover called “a binding spiritual heritage” reinforces the political theorist Catherine Holland’s argument that, as a nation-state, the United States possesses an essential performativity or insubstantiability that causes its preservation to require a continuous reenactment or re-declaration of those universal truths that America’s progenitors declared to be self-evident. In the absence of heritable constraints or attachments, a self-governing, independent nation depends on enacting citizens who repeatedly affirm their allegiance to all that this collective entity is proclaimed to represent. Yet as this dissertation will explore, the quintessentially liberal ideals that enable citizens to demand freedom, equality, and justice also serve as axioms that render volition synonymous with submission and make the subject’s intrinsic entitlements identical to the constitutional edicts that regulate their use. Yet because the necessary restraint of freedom seems to originate within individual citizens’ autonomy and their right of consent, this

26 Catherine Holland’s introduction to The Body Politic: Foundings, Citizenship, and Difference in the American Political Imagination explores the indeterminacy that accompanies disembodied or non-corporeal and non-ascriptive formulations of the modern, representative state and the resulting compulsion to identify rational truths and constitutional declarations as unequivocal sources of absolute authority. Holland, (New York: Routledge, 2001), xvi-viii, 10-11. Hoover’s quotation appears in William Starr Myers, ed., The State Papers and Other Public Writings of Herbert Hoover, vol. 1 March 4, 1929-October 1, 1931 (reprint, New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1970), 401. Here, Hoover referred specifically to political ideals that he defined as “The great intangibles of the spirit of a people . . . our sense of freedom, of liberty, of security, our confidence of future progress, or traditions of past glory and sacrifice, the example of our heroes, the spiritual enrichment of our people.”
disciplining of the self paradoxically becomes an act of empowerment, and therefore, perpetuates the fiction that the liberal subject is unconstrained by anything other than its own choosing.27

This presumption of consent is embedded within a historicized narrative of political virtue’s cultivation, and in conjunction, these philosophical tenets (consent and virtue) serve to resolve American liberalism’s constitutive antinomy between freedom’s declaration and the necessity of its regulation. Focusing on a private, desiring subject’s transformation into a self-disciplined, public participant, the literary historian Elizabeth Dillon has excavated within American liberal philosophy a narrative structure or “line of fiction” that traces the developmental process through which the individual’s affective motivations naturally lead to rational political conduct that serves the greater good. As Dillon explains it, this sequence of linear development begins with an essential distinction between a private sphere that encapsulates the embodied emotional and sensate dimensions of human subjectivity and a public sphere of rational and contractual procedure among disembodied equals. Qualifying the subject to participate in these regulated relations of public intercourse and exchange is the consensual investment of desire in appropriate objects, which in the period under Dillon’s investigation, was signified through marriage and the propertied means of support this relationship required.28 In

27 The theoretical paradigm for this historical argument about the constitutive inter-articulation of American liberalism and the liberal subject that is staged in the home is drawn from Judith Butler’s exploration of modern subjectivity and its equation with self-determining agency. Butler describes subjection as a paradoxically dependent and regulatory mode of representation. As Butler explains, the “paradox of subjection implies a paradox of referentiality: namely that we must refer to what does not yet exist.” Subjectivity consequently entails a type of primary dependency upon the symbolic forms through which subjectivity is enacted, and this connection originates within and is preserved by desire. Butler goes on to argue that the presumption of a causal subject can only be reflexively figured or engendered through a telling of events that produce rather than describe the postulated source of the subject’s ontology. Yet, a discourse that enacts a subject for the purpose of its reproduction and legitimacy also requires that subject for its enactment. According to Butler, this mutual constituency produces a type of inter-dependency that allows for agency. “The story by which the subject is told is, inevitably, circular, presupposing the very subject for which it seeks to give an account.” Judith Butler, The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 4, 11.

28 I am essentially defining desire as an affective experience of longing that accompanies an individuated mode of subjectivity and that figures what is inevitably lost as something that might be recaptured. A psychoanalytic conception of desire and its function within subjectivity nevertheless inspires this simplification of a complex term. However, psychoanalytic theory itself articulates a meta-narrative that situates the origin of libidinal drives with potentially indeterminate objects within the regulatory structure
untangling the intersection between capitalism, the bourgeois family, and liberal subjectivity, Dillon builds upon the work of Jürgen Habermas to argue that, as the modern family’s catalyst, romantic love signified a type of affective freedom that, supposedly originating in individual autonomy, covered over the male subject’s regulation by the contractual nature of marriage and the obligations of economic support it entailed. Marriage and property ownership consequently enforced a disciplined mode of subjectivity, but these supposedly volitional acts established the liberal subject as preceding the externally imposed political and economic responsibilities that constrained the householder’s freedom. Thus appearing tempered through the pursuit of material or spiritual desires, liberty’s restraint was narrated as a willful exercise in preserving and enhancing the freedom that originated in the individual’s autonomy.

Although Elizabeth Dillon focuses on the liberal fictions circulating within colonial America and the Early Republic, her analysis helps to explain how Herbert Hoover’s efforts both to incite and fulfill desire for a better home functioned to reconcile the antagonism between freedom and regulation constitutive of liberal individualism. If nineteenth-century Americans had construed marriage and the sentimental family as the ultimate expressions of consent and felicity, Hoover’s contemporaries more frequently expressed apprehension about the viability of these hallowed institutions, which a younger generation increasingly seemed to view as

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of the domestic romance. For psychoanalysts, desire originates in a wish to reclaim an object that is perceived as missing. An infant’s acquisition of language and its ability to symbolize demand initiate both this sense of loss and the search for the return of what is believed to be absent, while also prohibiting the renewal of the more fluid, non-individuated state that is prior to the language that initiates subjection. Desire thus defies fulfillment, for the psychoanalytic subject is constituted through loss, making desire indelible to subjectivity. Relative to the operation of desire, the “line of fiction” that I use as a paradigm for explaining the inter-articulation of liberalism and domesticity is essentially a phantasmatic structure in that fantasy prevents the subject from realizing the futility of its quest by focusing desire on objects that are metaphors and metonyms for the missing signifier. I also argue that fetishism is fundamental to an American cultural experience of desire and its pursuit. Fetishism is a refusal of desire’s repression, and it consequently supports a belief that what must be renounced and relinquished can also be pursued and incorporated. Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, Female Fetishism (New York University Press: New York, 1994); Renata Salecl, The Spoils of Freedom: psychoanalysis and feminism after the fall of socialism (New York: Routledge, 1994); Slavoj Zizek, The Plague of Fantasies (New York: Verso, 1997).29 Dillon, 19-25.
impediments to freedom. Given romantic marriage and the sentimental family’s functions within liberalism’s undergirding narrative of ethical development, their apparent weakness destabilized the balance between inherent liberty and the imperative of its restraint. For as Dillon shows, this reconciliation was accomplished by the presumed consent that marriage and family as objects of desire and affective fulfillment signified. Hoover continued to define the family as “the foundation of American life,” yet speaking in the early twentieth century, he depicted this “unit,” and consequently the liberalism of the nation itself, as increasingly dependent upon a home that he declared to be “the sanctuary of moral inspiration and of American spirit.”

Because he believed that a “better” home embodied this evocative and nationally unifying spiritual essence, Hoover deployed this idealized dwelling to reestablish the fictive, sequential relationship between the desiring and inalienably free individual, the economic productivity and political idealism arising from the pursuit of appropriate objects, and a self-governing nation-state founded to preserve and protect its citizens’ generative liberty. Supplying the catalyst and the setting for this narrative, a presumably private space called home assumed the bourgeois family’s role in signifying the possibility of subjective autonomy and freedom, while also ensuring desire’s consensually regulated expression within the political economy.

Implying the presence of an autonomous and consensually disciplined creator, the home preserved an economically acquisitive and ethically virtuous, archetypal citizen whom Hoover called the American Individual. Upon this subject’s generative initiative and consensual self-discipline depended the unique, liberal philosophy that Hoover characterized as an interdependent, personal and political state of “ordered liberty.” “The founders of our republic . . .

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31 Hoover’s promotion of home ownership seemed, in fact, to follow Paul Fairfield’s explanation of Kant’s conception of autonomy: “Only in a society that creates and guarantees for each individual a sphere in which it is free to determine its own values and follow its conscience is it possible for the self to achieve autonomy.” Fairfield, 46.
set up not alone a great political system of self-government;” rather, the nation’s independence was predicated on the individual citizens whose rational, sympathetic, and altruistic capacities for self-regulation had enabled these national fathers to “set up also a revolutionary social system in the relation of men toward men.”

In this unprecedented American system, the freedom to pursue individual interests paradoxically led, Hoover insisted, to the voluntary constraint of those liberties and, consequently, to a respect for equality that enabled citizens to “aspire to a democracy which will express a common purpose for the common good.”

Though Hoover’s emphasis on the significance of leadership and service resonated with classically republican and Protestant idioms of disinterested authority and moral virtue, he framed these merely as “vital developments in individualism” that supported the Darwinian course through which desires for personal accomplishment incrementally led to socially beneficent and politically idealistic ends.

Sustaining the nation’s progressive evolution—its millenarian march toward the attainment of the ideals declared at its origin—depended, Hoover argued, on reinvigorating the desiring initiative that undergirded the individual’s autonomy and also fueled, in a condition of economic opportunity and political liberty, both the founding and the unfolding of American history.

“[S]hort cuts to the millennium” were the offerings of false prophets who attempted to suppress the individual’s natural impulses to strive and to achieve. This repression was true of both socialism and even of the wartime republicanism that had advocated “[t]he submergence of the individual . . . in the struggle of the race.” Antithetical to individualism, these philosophies threatened to “destroy the foundations of our civilization,” Hoover claimed, by extinguishing the characterizing propulsive vitality that “supplied the motivation of America’s political, economic and spiritual institutions.”

32 Hoover, New Day, 180.
33 Ibid., 86.
35 Ibid., 49-50, 63.
Hoover’s explication of American liberalism illustrates Elizabeth Dillon’s claim that desire serves as both the catalyst of and the justification for the liberal state’s creation and development. As Dillon argues, in constituting the liberal subject’s autonomy and in compelling ideologically and economically productive behaviors, the affective force of desire establishes a temporally sequential relationship between citizen and state that enables an initiating citizen to consent to the governing rules and ideals that define the American nation-state. Yet, this metaphysical foundation of autonomy enables the individual to sustain not simply an entitlement to liberty, but also a unique identity that preserves the particularity of a subject that must become incorporated into a collective body politic of abstractly equal citizens rendered identical by their shared commitments. Founded in bodily desires, the presumption of autonomy and the consequent liberty to consent supported Hoover’s logic that an idealized American Individual pursued freedom most perfectly through voluntarily adhering to political and social restraints. Having resolved the paradox of liberty’s necessary regulation, Hoover equivocated between opposing claims without a sense of contradiction in describing his model American citizen. Hoover’s liberal subject was both a singular and social being, simultaneously free and constrained, and motivated by instincts and appetites as well as by a virtuous regard for the entitlements of other individuals and the rational recognition that personal and social interests were always intertwined.

For Hoover, the better home he helped to envision and publicize functioned to substantiate each of these claims about American Individualism and its enacting subject. Intuiting that desire or a domain of affectivity that is potentially destructive to the liberal state also serves to constitute it, Hoover identified the beautiful, comfortable, and convenient home as

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36 Dillon, 39-41, 179-180; Holland, 66-67. Paul Fairfield quotes from Locke: “Man, who could not be free if his will were determin’d by any thing, but his own desire, guided by his own Judgment.” Then explains, the Lockean subject “decides—freely chooses—which course of action it will follow. It does so, moreover, not merely with the aim of achieving maximum gratification for the appetites, but in accordance with an overriding plan of life and conception of the good.” Fairfield, 33.
the attainment of a pursuit compelled by primal longings. As autonomy’s supposed effect, his better home posited a private subject that possessed the liberty to consent to the public regulation of desire that purchasing, decorating, and maintaining a home ensured and that the better home itself aesthetically embodied. These facets of making a home were increasingly dictated by regulatory standards that Hoover and his supporters presented as aspirational guidelines for maximizing the pleasure individuals should derive from their homes, while also bringing personal preferences in line with collectivizing ideals and values. Yet, Hoover’s rhetoric also suggests that the better home he celebrated was constructive rather than merely reflective of its inhabitants’ liberal values, virtues, and entitlements. Because the better home symbolized and preserved these, it embodied all that Americans needed, but so often failed to be. For this reason, Hoover seemed to believe that intensifying the longing for a specific type of home would focus the impetus of desire on liberalism itself.

Hoover’s conception of the desirable home’s role in preserving American liberalism led him to reiterate a familiar historical narrative that began in a mythical American past. According to Hoover, the American Individual was born on a western frontier that supplied unprecedented opportunities to the nation’s pioneering founders. While the prospect of riches had kindled a stimulating and animating spark of initiative among America’s first waves of settlers, accessing this plenitude necessitated an ethos of social cooperation and reciprocity. Accompanying these instrumental and expedient relationships was a sympathetic identity among men that originated in a respect for proprietorship, an entitlement which the frontier’s abundance extended to ever greater numbers. Through facilitating the universal ownership of better homes, Hoover intended to recreate this cornucopia in order to sustain within the pioneers’ descendants both the catalyzing impulse to accumulate wealth and the ethical obligations that enabled its acquisition.

This objective implicitly refutes scholarly conclusions that Hoover’s interest in home ownership was a recapitulation of a classical republican equation between material security,
political independence, and a disinterested, virtuous commitment to the common good. Nor was
the better home a modern euphemism for the sentimental family. Instead, Hoover metaphorically
equated the home with the frontier, thereby construing this unique form of property in decidedly
liberal and implicitly imperial terms. Embedded within Hoover’s explanation of the frontier’s
significance are Lockean assumptions about the source of property’s value. Though many
nineteenth-century republican detractors of the emergent market economy decried the
dependency that followed from the loss of inherited property and proprietorship, its proponents
pointed to the opportunity to accrue property and supplement its value through labor’s
investment. This Lockean admixture of land and labor, in establishing the worth of what was
owned, continued to inform Hoover’s conception of the better home as a special type of property
that was representative of the labor required for its purchase, but also of the desire that made such
labor consensual and infused the home with its excessive value.

In claiming that the better home manifested the avowed source of the American
Individual’s autonomy and consequent ability to consent, Hoover’s efforts to safeguard the
opportunity for ownership represented more than a mandate to protect private property. It
reflected, rather, the importance of maintaining the ready availability of opportunity understood
in terms of property, which the first Americans had enjoyed on the frontier. Economic plenitude,
which Hoover believed that home ownership both symbolized and fostered, served to reconcile
the market and political variants of liberalism identified by Nikhil Singh. A surfeit of opportunity
preserved freedom and facilitated equality, and the satiation that followed a universal ability to
act upon self-interest inevitably led to self-regulation. This logic was reflected in Hoover’s

37 In explaining the meaning of property within the context of American liberalism, Elizabeth Dillon
suggests that, in contrast to England, property was always perceived by colonists, even by debt-ridden
southern planters, as mobile and alienable, which precluded a classical republican understanding of
property from developing. Instead, they devised a more liberal understanding that “the laboring individual
is not limited by an ascriptive social order or the accident of birth, but is able to make his way in the world
on the basis of his own capacity to work.” Dillon, 150.
assertion that, because of the frontier, “[t]he things that we call material are the foundation stones upon which we build the temple of those things that we call spiritual.” 38

Hoover’s contemporary James Truslow Adams held a decidedly different opinion of the frontier’s impact on a national character. While Hoover represented the self-made man and child of the frontier and Adams was a patrician public historian, each asserted that the eighteenth-century expansion into unsettled Western territories had both catalyzed and arrested the nation’s cultural and political development. Their agreement on the frontier’s significance echoed the thesis articulated by Frederick Jackson Turner that tapping this cornucopia of natural resources had molded an exceptionally courageous, optimistic, and democratic national character. It had, Adams proclaimed, bequeathed to the world the “unique gift” of an “American dream.” Reminiscent of Hoover’s American Individualism, Adams’s dream was inspired by “a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.” 39 Yet, reducing this utopian conception of “plenty” to the commodified symbols of wealth and to the techniques of their procurement had sabotaged the nation’s intellectual, spiritual, and moral development, transforming Americans into restless, materially acquisitive philistines. A pervasive Babbittry had consequently turned a once promising nation into a business civilization bereft of artistic culture, cultivated knowledge, and deliberative skills. To transcend the immaturity of the “frontier phase” of the nation’s history, Adams advised that Americans must self-consciously evolve beyond the “disorderly remnants of our frontier experience” through a collective determination of values and pursuit of quality over quantity.40

The materialism, political immaturity, and lack of civility that Adams lamented were, for Hoover, merely indicative of the dialectical interaction between materiality and spirituality that

38 Hoover, New Day, 206.
39 James Truslow Adams, The Epic of America (Boston: Little, Bown, and Company, 1931), 404.
40 Ibid., 412-413.
propelled American liberalism’s progressive development. In contrast to Adams, Hoover perceived “bigger” and “better” as inseparable pursuits, and the dream of absolute freedom and equality that both he and Adams envisioned in a land of plenty ultimately depended, Hoover believed, upon maintaining the opportunity—the incitement of desire and the possibility of its fulfillment—that the frontier had embodied. The political theorist Jimmy Klausen helps to explain this difference of opinion in his analysis of the frontier’s significance in Lockean liberalism’s contractarian theory of consent. For Locke, not only did the American frontier function as the setting for a mythical state of nature, but this supposedly lush and unoccupied wilderness, in providing “room enough,” enabled Locke to conceive an internal locus of causality. Whereas Adams decried the immaturity perpetuated by the frontier, Hoover echoed Locke in imagining this site of plenitude as the source of consent’s possibility. As Klausen argues, an ostensibly unsettled territory allowed the possibility of natural liberty’s exercise by creating an “Archimedean point outside of actually existing politics.” In the absence of an existing state, the dissenting settler became free to “start anew.” He concludes that “Lockean liberalism . . . requires America’s open spaces for the realization of natural liberty’s potential,” for material abundance supplies the condition for the development and exercise of moral autonomy that the liberal subject is postulated to possess. “America is thus that *deus ex machina* by which Locke’s grown child can voluntarily designate his desired political home, having freely established the grounds for his consent to it.” Because of the frontier and its transformative opportunities, the American settler became empowered to cast off the Old World constraints that had once bound him, and similar to a child at the age of his maturity, determine for himself whether “his future political home coincide with either a natal home or the ideal home of travel or dreams,” then “after due deliberation . . . obligate himself to a polity.”

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Examining Hoover’s better home as a metaphor for the hypothetical state of nature that the American frontier embodied enhances how historians have previously understood the domestic sphere’s reproductive function within liberal discourse. Political theorists and historians alike have already demonstrated that the cultivation of a liberal character ideally occurs within extra-political institutions such as the school and the family, which in equipping juvenile citizens with capacities for rational restraint and sympathetic attachment, prepare them to engage effectively in civil and political association. Scholars of both the antebellum and Progressive Era have thoroughly documenting this assumption of the home’s instructive function. As significantly, they have shown that the process of acquiring, representing, and expressing liberalism’s requisite virtues has literally been an engendered one. Alexis de Tocqueville first observed this gendered acculturation to the requisites of democratic self-government during his travels throughout Jacksonian America. While achieving a successful marriage required men to act morally and industriously, it demanded a formerly “free” woman’s confinement “within the little sphere of domestic interests and duties.” Tied by feminine inclination and public opinion to her home, a dutiful wife nurtured the independent householder’s material comfort, moral development, and personal happiness.42 The family abode consequently symbolized for the French observer a male householder’s capacity for independent self-government, but also the selfless virtues of a mother whom nature had supposedly equipped with distinctive attributes that destined her to create and to thrive within a sphere demarcated by her house.

This association between a domestic sanctuary and feminine morality was just beginning to coalesce when Tocqueville penned his narrative in the early nineteenth century, but it would quickly assume the guise of fact through its continuous repetition. Tocqueville’s description of the home’s function conforms to Elizabeth Dillon’s analysis of the discursive role played by

women within liberal discourse: “The private, familial space that women occupy serves as the
origin and staging ground of male liberal identity insofar as the narrative of liberal subjectivity
begins in privacy and moves forward into public roles.” Situated in this “prepolitical realm,”
Dillon continues, “[w]omen’s location . . . can be understood less as an exclusion from the public
sphere than as an inclusion within a liberal narrative.”

Prior to the Foucaultian and psychoanalytic turn that Dillon represents, the historian Jan Lewis first explored how intellectual and political leaders of the early national period deployed gender to articulate a uniquely American political philosophy. Similar to de Tocqueville, these seminal figures argued that women’s moral authority in the household necessarily moderated their husbands’ aggressive pursuit of self-interest. Lewis consequently finds evidence of a competing ideal of femininity that operated in tandem with the didactic function of republican motherhood upon which other scholars have focused. Unlike this maternal, civic educator, the “republican wife” was charged, Lewis argues, with sustaining both civil society and civic virtue by awakening capacities for affection, sympathy, and duty within otherwise licentious and duplicitous men. While these feminine patriots instilled social mores within their sons, they also incited romantic sentiments within their husbands that ensured these citizens’ attachment to the new nation and its political institutions.

By the time of Tocqueville’s arrival, an antebellum reverence for the virtuously moral mother had begun to eclipse a patriotic passion for the republican wife. As Lewis further demonstrates, femininity’s ideological and political function as a source of male restraint persisted in this new idealization, as memories of a mother’s moral example guided early nineteenth-century men to act justly and responsibly when they ventured away from the maternal hearth in pursuit of their individual fortunes. Lewis’s analysis helps to illustrate that, beginning

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43 Dillon, 19.
in the antebellum period with its attendant escalation of market capitalism and domestic imperialism, virtue became detached from its classical republican connotations, feminized, and ideally enacted on a private domestic stage in order to preserve the self-disciplined independence that characterized the liberal subjectivity of white men. Many intellectual historians and political theorists have lamented this nineteenth-century reduction of republican virtue to a Christianized ideal of feminine purity, moral rectitude, and dutiful self-sacrifice. Lacking a gendered critique of liberalism, however, these scholars have failed to understand what Dillon labels the “transfiguring” of virtue within liberal discourse: Virtue remained an essential attribute of liberal subjectivity, but its location shifted to an idealized feminine domesticity that served an ideologically reproductive purpose. This function entailed, Dillon argues, resolving liberalism’s “fundamental antinomy between the embodied, constrained nature of subjectivity and the idea of the subject as free and autonomous.” In the process of reconciling this contradiction—in enabling the subject simultaneously to bear liberty and to choose regulation, “[b]oth gender and the temporality of narrative are resources deployed in liberal thought.”

Yet, feminine virtue functioned so resourcefully within nineteenth-century liberal discourse because of its symbolic conflation with a domestic sphere. Engendered by the inter-articulation of femininity and home, women’s chastity and morality presumably flourished through their spatial containment, while this supposedly private site supplied men with a haven of

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45 For example, Kloppenberg, 35.
46 Dillon, 151. Joan C. Williams articulates the previously predominant understanding of the relationship between femininity, virtue, and political ideology: “Liberalism flattened out into a celebration of self-interest as part of a dynamic in which liberalism’s virtues were re-gendered female and were pushed out of the public sphere of manly civic virtue into the private, domestic, feminine sphere.” Williams, “Domesticity as the Dangerous Supplement of Liberalism,” Journal of Women’s History 2 (Winter 1991): 70. This historiographical argument originates in Ruth Bloch, “American Feminine Ideals in Transition: The Rise of the Moral Mother, 1785-1815,” Feminist Studies 4 (1978): 100-126.
47 Dillon, 19.
escape and recuperation from the ethical transgressions that were required of them in the marketplace and in the halls of government. The historian Jackson Lears has also demonstrated, however, that the iconography of nineteenth-century domesticity conveyed an evocative amalgam of personal fulfillment, emotional connection, and material plentitude. What harbored virtue and induced restraint simultaneously promised to satisfy desires for a lush feminine sexuality and ripe fecundity found in a foreboding natural world. As Lears points out, a sentimentalized ideology of domesticity became “an idiom of control,” one which “created an ideal of unified, controlled, sincere selfhood” that helped to regulate meaning and behavior in a rapidly modernizing world of commodity production and exchange.48

America’s nineteenth-century market revolution was inextricably related to an imperial westward expansion that gave substance to the promised economic opportunities and declared freedoms of white men. Because the pastoralized cottage appeared to assuage longings for repletion through the domestication of an essence formerly and still potentially wild, it epitomized the ability of civilized men to master, harness, and appropriate not only the libidinal impulses within themselves but also those attributed to the wildernesses and indigenous peoples they continued to conquer. The nineteenth-century home and its maternal icon consequently helped to manage ambivalence about liberalism’s reverence for individual freedom. Conceived as a singular, bounded space, the domestic sphere stood as an archaic remnant of the patriarchal householder’s proprietary control over women’s sexual labor and reproductive capital, while it also symbolized the dominance of white men over an uncivilized natural world. In suggesting the satisfaction of libidinal desires, these forms of domination served to refigure the liberal subject’s requisite domestication within the home as the source of white men’s authority and the emblem of their liberty. Together, the nineteenth-century conflation between a chaste mother and the home and the domestic haven’s distinction from the primordial peoples and places that

48 Jackson Lears, Fables of Abundance, 76-78.
established its borders thus supplied the foundation for conceptualizing both the liberal subject and the nation he founded as synonymously autonomous, self-governing, and inviolable. As the means of desire’s gratification, however, the home remained a site suffused with ambivalence, for though it signified the control that white men exercised over themselves and others, it also continued to evoke what threatened to dominate them.

In further exploring the ambivalence of domination, the literary scholar Gillian Brown further illustrates the home’s role in constituting liberal subjectivity as it evolved throughout the nineteenth century’s commercial revolution. Brown reads the post-bellum home as ambivalently and equivocally gendered in that this spatialized ideal attested to a union of manly initiative and feminine morality. The domestic haven, which was created through a decoratively embellished interior, signified not simply a place of retreat and feminine sentimentality, but as significantly, an emergent sense of male, psychological interiority or a locus of authentic experience and value that was believed to be temporally prior to and undetermined by the market. Because of this gendered dualism, Brown argues, the home’s meaning exceeded its familiar, historiographical equation with maternal virtue and the moral, civic, and vocational instruction for which biologically essentialized women were deemed responsible. Instead, this private site home became a locus of “domestic individualism,” which Brown defines as, “at once the separate sphere of women and the correlative to, as well as the basis of, men’s individuality.” In other words, the nineteenth-century home functioned to preserve a Protestant, feminized conception of virtue that coalesced to oppose and facilitate capitalist markets; however, this sentimentalized space also developed to demarcate the interiority of its principle male inhabitant and this

50 As Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen explain in Female Fetishism, a disavowal always accompanies the fetish, for it sustains the oppositions embedded within the relationship between the fetishized object and the subject: The object is what it isn’t, and the subject has what it hasn’t. If viewed through this paradigm, the symbolically analogous better home and American Individual were each fetishistic constructs that in focusing desire, served to transfigure libidinous bodies into the initiating subjects required to reproduce America’s liberal-capital political economy.
individual’s permanency and supplemental distinction from the fluctuations and vagaries of the market, causing Brown to conclude that “domesticity signifies a feminization of selfhood in service to an individualism most available to (white) men.”

Brown’s nuanced reading of the home in nineteenth-century literature helps to complicate the dominant historiographical and theoretical interpretation of the relationship between liberalism and domesticity. Along with her colleague Elizabeth Dillon, she suggests that the home and the values it presumably harbored served a purpose far greater than preserving relationships and attributes that became increasingly inadmissible in a market-driven public sphere. Its domestic counterpart provided a point of escape, critique, and reform; however, domesticity has also been variably imagined and reimagined for the purpose of substantiating and engendering the philosophical construct of liberal subjectivity and its presumptions of autonomy, consent, and ethical capacity. American liberalism retained its pretensions to an idealistic universalism due to this mode of structuring desire. Because a domestic sphere has been posited as American liberalism’s point of origin, the supposed privacy of this domain must be called into question. Rather than preceding the market and the state, the home has historically been a product of publicity through which the liberal, public sphere has created the condition of its own possibility. Relative to this insight, Hoover’s better home of the 1920s crystalizes as a politicized and only fictively private space, articulated and normalized by way of rational debate, civic engagement, scholarly analysis, and literary production.

As this introduction illustrates, demonstrating the connection that Hoover perceived between the better home and American Individualism requires delving into political philosophy and cultural theory to illuminate new insights from familiar historical texts and contexts. This methodology also allows for a weaving together of histories and historiographies that scholars

51 Brown, Domestic Individualism, 4, 7.
52 This claim is a principle argument of Elizabeth Dillon’s The Gender of Freedom. See Dillon, 18.
more often examine separately within delineated categories. To reveal how these intersect, each of the dissertation’s chapters will explore how Herbert Hoover and his contemporaries articulated a connection between reviving the home’s appeal and sustaining liberalism’s presumptions of autonomy and consensual self-government. Collectively, these proponents of a “better,” more beautiful, more comfortable home help to illuminate the inter-articulation of material culture and political philosophy. While the interior space they conceptualized bears its own textual significance, tasteful décor also embodied a prescriptive ideal that its authors endeavored to explicate and legitimize. Taking this effort as its subject, my dissertation focuses on how and why Americans were advised to transform their utilitarian houses into attractive, enjoyable homes, and in these prescriptions, it finds a liberal narrative that structures and unifies the era’s diverse texts on home improvement. Illustrating the developmental narrative that connects Herbert Hoover and his Better Homes in America project to the tastemakers, authors, white home economists, and black clubwomen also examined in this dissertation is a decorating manual published by Laura Thornburgh in 1925. Entitled *Interior Decoration for Everybody*, this fictionalized advice book contributes both the dissertation’s title and a vignette that introduces the topics of its chapters.

In many respects, Laura Thornburgh’s handbook serves as a domestic allegory for the concern that principally shaped Herbert Hoover’s political activities during the 1920s: preserving the tenets of liberal individualism relative to the escalation of consumer capitalism, its mode of corporate production, and the effects of each on civic culture. The dissertation’s first chapter offers a close reading of *American Individualism*, a manifesto that Hoover published in 1921 to explicate the unique political philosophy that, he believed, undergirded the nation’s material progress and spiritual development. Surveying America in the aftermath of World War I, Hoover concluded that his country’s distinctive brand of liberalism was under assault and the nation’s further progress imperiled. Economic recession had catalyzed political and social dissent among
workers, and their protests were fueled by the failure of corporate and federal officials to continue
the cooperative initiatives that had stabilized production and prices during the war. For
inspiration in resolving this domestic battle over limited resources, Hoover drew upon lessons
from American history that seemingly taught the individually liberating and socially stabilizing
effect of economic opportunity. Narrating a developmental account of the past, he traced in
American Individualism the nation’s unceasing, determined progress to its origin on the frontier.
The plenitude found there had enabled settlers to divest themselves of Old World restraints and
pursue innate desires for acquisition, achievement, and authority.

Free to act upon their primal longings, self-interested pioneers had become self-
governing citizens, for determining one’s own fate had required the expedient formation of
cooperative, mutually beneficial relationships. Attaining economic and political freedom had
further engendered within the first Americans a sympathetic recognition of others’ rights to the
same. Given the socially progressive, rational, and ethical effects of liberty’s pursuit found in the
nation’s past, Hoover confidently rebuked the “utterly wrong [critics] who say that individualism
has as its only end the acquisition and preservation of private property—the selfish snatching and
hoarding of the common product.” In an abundant land redolent with the potential for unlimited
opportunity, all Americans developed the ability to “walk in ordered freedom.”

Coinciding with the publication of American Individualism was Hoover’s support for
Better Homes in America, an organization that spearheaded annual campaigns to promote and
facilitate the ownership of well-decorated and well-managed homes. If the measure of the

53 Hoover, American Individualism, 37.
55 Hoover, American Individualism, 71.
nation’s progress depended upon “the sum of progress in its individuals,” nothing both supported and symbolized this evolutionary trek, Hoover claimed, like the universal ownership of single-family dwellings. Historians have offered numerous explanations for Hoover’s interest in affiliating himself and the Department of Commerce with the BHA. A conservative, partisan aversion to legislative and bureaucratic regulation led the commerce secretary to support private housing initiatives rather than the public financing and construction projects that had made some headway during World War I and its immediate aftermath. Believing that excessive government intervention and regulation threatened to impede individual initiative and the economic growth it catalyzed, Hoover brought to the postwar housing shortage an ideological preference for public-private cooperation that characterized his vision of an associational state. This associational network, of which the BHA was an essential part, enabled the modernizing liberal state to appear limited and non-intrusive, namely because it appeared to maintain individual autonomy and interest while also facilitating the consensual self-regulation that American liberalism demanded. Operating within this civic sphere of associationalism, the BHA helped to shape and publicize a modern ideal of domesticity. The BHA disseminated its objectives using media outlets and organizations, and it deployed civic activity, advice literature, public debate, advertisements, and promotional events to educate Americans on every aspect of home ownership from financing to décor. A nationwide Better Homes week of speakers, community events, and practical demonstrations was an annual spectacle that expanded the BHA’s technique of working through textual and associational forms of civic engagement to include staged performances of modernized domesticity.

56 Ibid., 24.
Juxtaposing Hoover’s zealous promotion of American Individualism with his equally ardent celebration of the better home helps to illuminate the constitutive role that domesticity continued to play in American liberalism’s twentieth-century reproduction. Hoover determined that sustaining the instinctive and spiritual sources of the nation’s traditional ideals and its future progress required focusing personal desires on the possession of a publicly prescribed better home, and he used his political capital and authority to that end. The longing to acquire a home of one’s own—a dwelling abundant in charm, comforts, and conveniences—served, in Hoover’s estimation, the same ideologically constructive purpose as the desire to possess the lush plenitude of a virgin land: The home supposedly rekindled modern Americans’ generative initiative and vitality, focused these animating instincts and acquisitive impulses on the founding, national values that a well-appointed and well-managed home supposedly embodied, and tempered their expression through the self-discipline that creating a desirable domicile required. Loving a better home of one’s own consequently legitimized the paradoxical logic of liberal subjectivity, for the discipline this dwelling symbolized was an effect of the longing that constituted autonomy. With opportunity and, therefore, individual freedom and volition secured by inhabiting a better home, Hoover pronounced the preservation of an “ordered liberty” in which the pursuit of self-interest and the consent to rational and ethical regulations sustained a progressive society of equal individuals.

The second chapter delves into the aesthetic principles and decorating techniques that helped to manifest Herbert Hoover’s vision of a better home. The historian Clifford Clark has argued that the design and decoration of single-family dwellings evolved to reflect and serve the family’s structure and function as this institution itself changed both to facilitate capitalism’s development and to temper its impact.\(^{59}\) Spanning the century of rapid modernization that forced

this metamorphosis of the family and its domicile, Clark’s detailed account examines the housing styles and aesthetic principles that an emergent professional class of architects and tastemakers sought to promulgate. This chapter expands upon studies of material culture such as Clark’s by examining the beautiful, comfortable home itself as an extra-political, liberal institution. It uncovers within the decorating advice literature the same developmental narrative that structured Herbert Hoover’s explication of American Individualism. Analogous to the liberal ideals that Hoover celebrated, the aesthetic principles that became normative during the 1920s help to show the inter-articulation of political fictions and domestic spaces, as the former prescribed what the latter substantiated and rendered desirable.

Tastemakers of the 1920s equated beauty with the progressive, aesthetic principles of simplicity, balance, and harmony. The tenet of balance referred not simply to a visual equilibrium, but also to the inclusion of captivating and eclectic points of interest that prevented a requisite dominant theme from having a stultifying effect. Along with these contrasting elements, furnishings and embellishments deemed to exude authenticity and personality also saved the execution of decorative rules from appearing either too staid or too standardized. The decorative principles of harmony and balance thus effected the appearance of individuality within unity as well as the illusion of variety within a prescribed standard of beauty. Describing this simultaneity as a “paradox, to say the least,” the esteemed tastemaker Emily Post explained: “[T]here must be unity, or the room is mongrel; and at the same time there must be diversity, or there can be no interest.”

As Herbert Hoover also argued of American Individualism, Post’s resolution to this implicitly liberal contradiction between individuality and social identity rested on the more fundamental paradox of regulated freedom. While Post acknowledged the importance of personal

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preference in creating an appealing decorative composition, she urged her readers to concede that “there are certain fundamental rules which your house and mine, and every other house of good taste follows.” Through her articles and popular advice manuals, Emily Post joined the tastemakers, professional decorators, home economists, and even advertisers who helped to codify and disseminate these governing principles to the American homemakers who were increasingly encouraged during the 1920s to assume the role of amateur decorator. The axioms they publicized ultimately functioned to delimit opportunities for individual expression that the combination of beauty’s ambiguity and consumerism’s panoply of decorative materials made possible. Yet, this new class of expert advisers reiterated liberalism’s paradoxical logic, touting their decorative rules and techniques as a rationally proven means of creating beautiful interiors that would be both socially admired and personally gratifying.

Yet, enhancing the appeal of prescribed ideals required their execution through the aesthetic elements of color, texture, line, and form. In arousing pleasurable emotions and sensations, these building blocks of décor attached individual longing to unifying and regulatory modes of representation while also engendering perceptions of choice and gratification. Filled with embellishments that set the mood and brought pleasure to its occupants, the sensuously beautiful, tasteful interior consequently effected the presence of desiring and, therefore, autonomous, consensual subjects who rationally and voluntarily pursued their appetites for beauty through a self-disciplined conformity to prevailing decorative standards. Within the decorating manuals of the 1920s, taste served as a euphemism for consent, balancing personal preference with the prescribed rules of good décor. Emily Post again illustrates interior decorating’s analogy to liberal tenets by explaining taste as “a matter of personal choice.” “It is this difference in choice that makes your house different from my house, and both of our houses different from those of our neighbors,” but Post quickly continued that the liberty to choose should place neither

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61 Ibid., 303.
dwelling outside the recognized boundaries of convention. Post’s explanation of taste acknowledged the potential contradiction between the liberty of personal expression and the imperative of social intelligibility, but analogous to liberal discourse, she resolved this opposition by depicting taste as a choice indicative of the decorator’s autonomy.

The conception of taste as a rational choice helps to demonstrate that interior decoration was defined not only as a set of aesthetically appealing principles, but also as a performance of those ideals. As it was described in the domestic advice literature, the practice of interior decoration—the act of transforming a house not simply into a home, but into a liberal microcosm—was construed as an allegory for the voluntary submission to liberal values and virtues. Like Herbert Hoover’s American Individual, the interior decorator enacted a narrative structure that began with a volitional investment of desire and, through the rational and virtuous regulation of interest, concluded with the attainment of the liberal ideals that a well-decorated room beautifully evinced. Professional decorator Bernard Jakway invoked this linear progression when he explained, “[E]verything used in the art of interior decoration is instinct with meaning. . . And whether they will group themselves into a clear and pleasant thought or strike the mind as a meaningless jumble will depend wholly upon the skill with which they are combined.”

As Jakway suggested to his presumably feminine audience, making a home required taste or discretion, and it also required a mastery of the procedures that were commensurate with those that governed economic and political activity in the public sphere. The dissertation’s second chapter consequently uses Jakway’s decorating manual and others of the era to argue that interior decoration enabled women to enact through the making of a beautiful home the liberal

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62 Post, 303. The definitions of taste that appeared in the decorating manuals of the 1920s are analogous to what Gillian Brown has argued of Lockean consent: “In consent, persons appear forever filial: suspended between their desires and whatever cultural authority they do or will embody.” Brown, 29. Notions of taste similarly illustrate what Paul Fairfield explains of the Lockean subject’s moral capacity. As Fairfield explains, “[T]he self examines its appetites both in Hobbes’s sense of reckoning utilities as well as in the further sense of deciding on or judging their worthiness in light of a set of ethical commitments.” Fairfield, 33.

developmental narrative originally scripted for white men. A beautiful, tasteful home necessarily
evined its creator’s personality, which was defined as an enchantingly unique and socially
admirable but judicious application of aesthetic conventions. The home that supposedly signified
the liberal identity of its male owner thus also embodied the interiority of its feminine maker,
rendering his perceived liberalism—his autonomy and self-government—dependent upon hers.64

The dissertation’s third chapter will continue to explore the male homeowner’s
dependency upon the discretion and skilled labor of a feminine homemaker. As the previous
chapter demonstrates, the beautifully principled interior was presumably an effect of the
implicitly liberal attributes and behaviors that tasteful decorating required. While the early
twentieth-century home thus embodied “the telos” of liberalism, it also marked its “origin.”65

What initiated American Individualism’s progress toward an ordained end of complete freedom
and full equality was a declared desire for the home. Although many housing advocates and
social reformers, including Herbert Hoover, proclaimed this truth, doubt suffused their insistence
on the primacy of this male longing. Modern society simply offered too many opportunities for
illicit pleasure. Cozy, comfortable interiors promised to turn men’s wandering eyes away from
the enticements of jazz and gin, and women were consequently urged to fabricate domestic
habitats that would cultivate an affective attachment between men and their homes. This chapter

64 The insistence that décor manifest its creator’s personality appeared everywhere in the contemporary
advice literature. This appearance seems to support the temporal delineation between a culture of character
and one of personality. Most notably articulated by Warren Susman, character encapsulated the stability
and moral rectitude valued by an entrepreneurial, Protestant culture, while personality became the measure
of personal worth derived from admiration in a more modern, secular, and consumerist society of
abundance. References to personality also reflected the innovations in psychology that became popularized
during the 1920s. While acknowledging the importance of these paradigms, this chapter locates the
celebration of personality within the history of liberal political philosophy. As Gillian Brown explains,
Locke perceived appeals to reputation as an essential pedagogical technique in cultivating consent to social
norms. Elizabeth Dillon similarly emphasizes the importance of admiration in Adam Smith’s conception of
the “impartial spectator” that compelled self-regulation through an internalization of societal injunctions.
However, internalizing the gaze of the other also indicates for Dillon how, within Smithian philosophy,
becoming desirable to another creates the possibility of sympathetic identifications among individuals. See
Brown, 30-31; Dillon, 39-40, 154-155.

65 Dillon, 24, 28.
will show that, in the guise of freedom, décor that promised to calm men’s nerves and restore their depleted vitality functioned to support the various modes of regulation that economic productivity and political stability required.

From every quarter, women of the 1920s were beseeched and even admonished to transform their houses into appealing places that their husbands could call home. This charge reiterated a traditional mandate with a modern twist: Twentieth-century men depended less on the example of a private mother’s morality as they did on an increasingly public wife’s homemaking labor. Beginning in the early nineteenth-century, women’s domestic labor was sentimentalized and evacuated of its economic value, portrayed instead as an expression of virtuously disinterested, self-sacrificing care that a male provider’s economic self-sufficiency supported. Historians of nineteenth-century middle-class women have particularly endeavored to counter this representation of women’s unremunerated, reproductive labor and its perceived lack of quantifiable worth. Not only did Victorian mothers help to impart values and work habits that young men would require for entrepreneurial and political success, their domestic labors also facilitated the family’s accumulation of capital both directly through supplementing the family’s income and indirectly through practicing frugality. As significantly, middle-class women mastered social and decorative conventions as a means of translating their husbands’ wages into socioeconomic status. Distortions of nineteenth-century women’s domestic labor certainly reflected and perpetuated traditional relations of gender inequality that, rooted in English common law, enforced women’s legal and economic marginalization. The denial of women’s labor value also coalesced, however, relative to that century’s articulation of liberal discourse. Although men’s developmental reliance on women’s moral and didactic influence could be acknowledged, a more fundamental dependency upon the real and symbolic value that women’s

labor produced was simply inadmissible relative to liberalism’s presumption of male independence and its valorization of self-determination.

This disavowal of women’s labor value—the simultaneous recognition and denial of its productive significance—remained true in the early twentieth century even as women themselves gained more access to public roles and personal liberties. The third chapter begins to examine how acknowledging men’s dependency on not merely women’s homemaking skills but also their allegorical enactment of a liberal character compromised women’s ability to represent themselves as liberal subjects through this performance. Exploring this question necessitates interrogating the use and meaning of space within the early twentieth-century home. As Herbert Hoover articulated, possessing a better home constituted an opportunity to pursue a natural impulse for freedom that, he believed, “liberated the mind and stimulated the exertion of a people.”

Although Hoover construed this productive drive as an impetus either to acquire or achieve, he joined his contemporaries in recognizing the need for leisure, albeit relaxation of the enriching and socially sanctioned sort. Satisfying this human want proved quite simple. Hardworking, hard-charging men simply longed for a relaxing place to sit and read, and if forced to choose between a gentleman’s club and a comfortable chair, they would undoubtedly prefer the latter.

Transforming the home into an appealing respite for men required women’s complicity, more particularly their willingness to subordinate their own aesthetic preferences to satisfy their husbands’ visceral needs. As a consequence, the beautiful home that continued to signify a male proprietor’s labor discipline also newly symbolized the modern man’s respite from the imperative of productivity and the corporation’s rationalizing techniques that so enervated his vitality. Perceived as crucial to good décor, the ubiquitous, comfortable chair was a reward for a job well done; however, this connotatively masculine furnishing also merged a visual emblem of

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67 Myers, 396.
autonomy with a sensual experience of leisure, enabling its recumbent occupant to imagine himself as a consensual rather than a subjugated laborer. Given the perceived dependency of male initiative and rationality on the home’s comfort, fears abounded that excessively liberated women would refuse to perform their spousal obligation of incorporating a lounging spot in their decorative compositions.

If praise and blame failed to prompt women’s cooperation, acknowledging men’s, and therefore a liberal society’s, reliance upon women’s skilled labor and rational choices in the household enabled homemakers to claim a new source of power. Focusing on home economists, the fourth chapter explores women’s efforts to translate their knowledge and ability as makers of a domestic, liberal microcosm into political and social equality. Organized into a profession in the late nineteenth-century, home economics had become a prescriptive and regulatory force in white, middle-class women’s lives by the 1920s, as its practitioners used classrooms and popular publications to articulate more modern ideals of domesticity and to dictate the homemaking methods required to attain them. Scholars have generally examined the profession’s ambivalent and even detrimental effects on women’s traditional tasks and responsibilities: Home economics rationalized women’s household labor, introduced an ethos of efficiency into the home, promoted labor-saving devices and consumer products that raised housekeeping standards, and added multiple roles and obligations to an already burdensome and undervalued form of gendered work. Elevating the social and civic importance of women’s domestic labor also led these aspiring professionals to hold homemakers accountable for resolving problems rooted in the systemic inequalities that rapid economic development had exacerbated.

Despite the truth of this critique, the fourth chapter examines the modernization of women’s household labor as symptomatic of liberal discourse. Applying the principles of scientific management to women’s household labor served to render homemaking equivalent to the tasks performed by men in the corporate and industrial workplaces. By positing an essential
identity between public and private labors, home economists challenged their perceived opposition, and even more importantly, these nascent feminists contested women’s historical inability to claim for themselves liberalism’s qualifications and entitlements. Reorganizing domestic space and professionalizing women’s household labor seemingly enabled homemakers to mirror the productive initiative and the consensual self-discipline that characterized liberal subjectivity. While a spatial and sensate delineation between labor and leisure effected these characteristics for men, home economists endeavored to signify women’s autonomy by dividing domestic labor into managerial and rote components. This internal dichotomization served to establish the rationality that purportedly allowed women to choose the instrumental rationalization of their admittedly constant labor.

Through these strategies, home economists contested a hierarchical public/private distinction, while also conceding to the spatialized boundary and temporalized relationship between these domains that liberalism’s “line of fiction” required. The literary historian Cathy Davidson has suggested that the spatialized division of feminine experience within a private sphere is a trope of academic rather than historical creation and, more significantly, one that conceals as much as it reveals about women’s actual experiences. With this proposition, Davidson intervened in a debate among scholars of women’s labor, political, and literary history who have endeavored to determine whether or not a separate, domestic sphere actually existed, and in disproving its facticity, to investigate how its ideological operation variably impacted the lives of non-white and non-elite women. Davidson’s intervention marked a historiographical turn that began to repudiate the initial portrayal of women as “hostages” in their homes who, barred from economic opportunities and political roles, conceived a compensatory feminine world of

“love and ritual.” Despite this debate over the extent to which the nineteenth-century valorization of maternity and domesticity described and impacted a diversity of women’s lives, its contributors have largely agreed that these ideals influenced the scope and the character of women’s political activism. As significantly, domestic ideology shaped the rhetoric that these reformers devised in demanding an expanded role in public life and legislative protections from the state.

When situated within this history of women’s political activism, home economists’ rhetoric illustrates that reasserting a distinction between public and private realms of experience seemed both more necessary and more difficult in the early twentieth century. A paradigm of separate spheres is undoubtedly less applicable to understanding the constraints experienced by voters, consumers, and increasingly, remunerated workers. However, this chapter makes the argument that home economists reiterated the logic deployed by their nineteenth-century foremothers that, rooted in liberalism’s developmental narrative, emphasized women’s superiority over wayward men who depended upon women to regulate their desires by attending to their affective needs. These professionals consequently seized upon liberalism’s plotline, arguing that desiring men became qualified and equipped for participation in the public domain

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due to women’s requisite demonstration of judicious self-government, which their home-making labors rather than their maternal morality evinced.

The ultimate limitation of this political strategy and its paradoxical consequences revives a historiographical and theoretical discussion of how domesticity and femininity function to construct a liberal subject traditionally imagined as white and male. The historians Linda Kerber and Jan Lewis initially pursued this line of inquiry in the context of revolutionary and antebellum America. Their debate focused on the historical veracity of Carol Pateman’s foundational argument that gender constitutively disqualified women from the rights and protections of liberal citizenship. Kerber’s work on the Early Republic has emphasized the new nation’s inheritance of the English common law tradition and its system of coverture. Legal inequality denied women an independent civil identity within the developing liberal democracy, she has argued, and their subordinate status served to secure the extension of universal political equality to white men. Reinforcing this subordination was a republican view of femininity as contrary, if not inimical, to self-governing citizenship. This pejorative depiction of women persisted despite the idealized republican mother’s post-revolutionary revival of civic virtue and this figure’s political obligation to engender personal restraint and political stability. Jan Lewis alternatively questioned this assumption of women’s inherent exclusion from the liberal body politic in her conceptualization of the republican wife, arguing that “[w]hen courtship and marriage are infused with political meaning, women inevitably and inescapably become political beings.”

Lewis’s argument paved the way for feminist scholars, including those already cited in this introduction, to question how inter-articulated feminine, maternal, and domestic ideals have coalesced in historically specific contexts to serve as techniques for buttressing the development of liberal capitalism, and specifically, for symbolically producing a philosophical presumption of rational, male agency. Not only do their collective insights frame gender as a continuously evolving relational construct, they also call into question the assumed masculinity of liberal subjectivity by asking instead how the liberal subject has come to be understood as not simply male, but more significantly, as consensually and rationally self-governing through particular idealizations of femininity and domesticity.

By professionalizing women’s household work and depicting it as identical to men’s labor, home economists challenged a previous generation’s idealization of homemaking as an expression of care. They nevertheless confronted a different type of disavowal that paradoxically both inspired their strategies for asserting women’s equality while also impeding them. The attempt to emphasize the causal significance of women’s liberalism faltered on the home’s significance as a site of male leisure and comfort. As a consequence, a private sphere that was admittedly created through the rational expression of women’s initiative embodied neither their autonomy nor the entitlement to privacy attached to it. Working constantly to satisfy the needs and appetites of others, modern homemakers of the 1920s were instead authorized to steal only brief minutes of rest in a small chair tucked into a corner of an efficiently organized, utilitarian kitchen. Homemakers’ responsibility for staging liberalism’s developmental narrative thus denied women the ability to represent themselves as its main character. The paradox that modern homemakers confronted—a liberal performance that precluded a liberal identity—originated,
then, not in their exclusion from liberal subjectivity, but from their productive role in constituting its possibility.\textsuperscript{74}

Home economists were not the only educated professionals to advise homemakers that modernizing their labor and improving their homes offered a viable means of establishing women’s equality within the liberal body politic. The dissertation’s fifth chapter examines how black clubwomen similarly seized upon the home’s constitutive purpose in forwarding their demands for racial justice. The leaders of the National Association of Colored Women became active participants in Herbert Hoover’s associational state through promoting clubwomen’s involvement in his Better Homes in America campaign. While historians have noted the NACW’s interest in housing reform during the 1920s, they have often represented clubwomen’s emphasis on home ownership and home improvement as an anachronistic and even elitist program that proved largely out of step with the more militant tenor of African-American political activism that followed the postwar World War I migration to urban centers.\textsuperscript{75}

Both African-American migrants and their rural counterparts needed clubwomen’s assistance, if not their critical appraisals, in accessing homes that met emergent federal standards. Ardently providing each in equal measure, clubwomen sought to remediate the material and systemic effects of racism that created a deficit of adequate, affordable housing for black Americans. In the BHA’s annual campaigns, these social reformers and civil rights activists

\textsuperscript{74} The questions that inform this project, if not the topic itself, began to coalesce many years ago when I first read Joan Scott’s \textit{Only Paradoxes to Offer} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). Through the various permutations of my scholarly interests, I have been inspired by Scott to understand the specific paradoxes that politically active women have confronted when they have attempted to figure themselves in relation to a prototypical model of citizenship that has privileged and entitled white, heterosexual men at the expense of white women, gay men, and all ethnically or racially minoritized peoples.

found a platform for imploring public officials to provide municipal services in black neighborhoods.\textsuperscript{76} Despite illuminating the unique obstacles their constituents faced in acquiring better homes, clubwomen also continued a tradition of placing the onus of reform on those inhabiting the economic and social margins. Elite and middle-class blacks of the nineteenth-century had embraced the tenets of self-help and self-sufficiency; in the context of Progressivism, their sons and daughters articulated a Darwinian paradigm of racial uplift that similarly responded to racial discrimination through attempts to refute its justifications. Clubwomen of the 1920s continued to advocate the adoption of characteristically middle-class behaviors, values, and aspirations, which embodied by the better home, challenged the degrading and racially homogenizing stereotypes that negated their conscientious, bourgeois displays of respectability.\textsuperscript{77} By supplying a venue for enacting middle-class norms, the BHA’s annual competitions enabled clubwomen to cultivate interracial alliances and to highlight the many similarities they shared with white organizers.

A close reading of clubwomen’s rhetoric demonstrates, however, that creating a better home was not simply a middle-class performance but also a liberal one.\textsuperscript{78} Defined by enumerated standards, the better home’s architectural body and its décor promised to effect a symbolic identity between white and black homeowners that, by obscuring the recognition of racial otherness, would establish African Americans’ inclusion in a liberal nation-state presumably

\textsuperscript{78} On the complex intersection between the activism of black elites during the Progressive Era and liberalism, see Kevin K. Gaines, Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Claudia Tate’s path breaking analysis of black female authors uncovers the radical political demands embedded in their nineteenth-century valorization of domesticity. Claudia Tate’s, Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).
founded on the possession of ideals rather than race. 79 Embodying these principles and their implied possession, a standardized home cast black men and children in the characterizing mold of Herbert Hoover’s American Individual. In doing so, this domicile also signified for its black inhabitants a temporal and spatial progression from desire’s consensual regulation to the state’s rational preservation. Embedded within the discourse of home improvement, this developmental narrative captivated NACW leaders, and they continuously reiterated its logic in urging African Americans to improve their homes. In arguing that the representation of black citizens’ autonomy, entitled liberty, and ethical capacity depended upon the creation of better homes, the NACW’s leaders sought with renewed energy to reform the domestic skills of black women during the 1920s. Their justifications for this project illustrate that, like white home economists, clubwomen hoped to empower themselves and their constituents politically and socially by asserting homemaking’s generative role in liberalism’s line of fiction.

If enhancing the domestic prowess of black homemakers offered a means of representing black Americans as liberal citizens, this strategy was undermined by the decorative techniques that rendered the better home beautifully appealing. In a 1930 address, NACW President Sallie Stewart confronted the inherent limitations of the domestic reform campaign she so zealously promoted. Despite their modernization, American homes continued to evince, she argued, a deficit of beauty that impeded the nation’s evolutionary progression toward becoming a promised land of personal liberty and social equality. Reminiscent of James Truslow Adams, Stewart linked a consumeristic standard of domesticity to a history of brutal conquest, and unlike the Charles W. Mills, “Racial Liberalism,” PMLA 123 (October 2008): 1380-1397. Mills expands upon Carol Pateman’s critique of social contract theory by arguing that the ostensibly egalitarian and inclusive social contract that initiates the liberal state’s formation and its protective function is predicated on the existence of racial hierarchies. As significantly, the contract itself becomes a tool of domination that perpetuate those inequalities. Mills consequently rejects the distinction between “ideal” and “nonideal” liberalism, arguing that the former entails a type of solipsism that literally whitewashes the various oppressions and appropriations that have facilitated the possession of rights and property for whites. As Mills asserts, “Whites contract to regard one another as moral equals who are superior to nonwhites and who create, accordingly, governments, legal systems, and economic structures that privilege them at the expense of people of color.” Mills, 1386, 1384-1385, 1390.
dwellings arising from European cathedrals and museums, the homes that symbolized the
nation’s relative immaturity and materialism perpetuated white incivility and black inequality.
Stewart’s critique calls attention to the persistence of an imperialist ethos within the neo-classical
aesthetic conventions of the early twentieth century. Not only did black women’s labor
frequently facilitate white homemakers’ efforts to attain the escalating requirements of household
management, but even more perniciously, the racialized body metaphorically helped to effect the
perceived desirability, individuality, and liberty of décor that also conveyed balance and restraint.
A harmoniously unified interior expressed its maker’s self-discipline, but also a wish to cast off
the enervating imperatives of economic rationalization and social normativity by incorporating
objects and elements evocative of sensuously exotic and primitive peoples and locales. In giving
expression to these longings, racially animated furnishings, accessories, designs, and colors
signified desire’s generative presence and thus proved essential in effecting the autonomy and
possible volition of the better home’s white occupants.80

The racialized aesthetics of the better home created a paradox for black clubwomen that
differed from the dilemma confronted by their white counterparts. Through participating in the
dialogic and very public redefinition of the ideal home, white women transcended their
nineteenth-century status as signifiers of property and privacy.81 With the beautiful, comfortable
home now serving this symbolic function, white home economists reaffirmed the ideologically
reproductive function of women’s domestic labor, and they emphasized the liberal attributes that
homemaking women enacted in the process of transforming houses into objects of male desire.

80 Charles Mills argues that African Americans need not reject liberal ideals, but rather the “mystified
individualistic social ontology that blocks an understanding of the political forces determining the ideals’
restricted and exclusionary application.” This recommendation reflects his argument that “relations of
domination and subordination centrally constitute the social ontology.” Mills, 1387, 1388. This chapter
contends that black women issued just such a challenge by using maternalist and evangelical rhetoric to
critique the metaphysics of individuality upon which a liberal, social ontology was predicated. For the role
of race in the evolutionary discourse of civilization, see Gail Bederman, Manliness and Civilization: A
Cultural History of Gender and Race in the United States, 1880-1917 (Chicago: University of Chicago
Press, 1995).
81 Dillon, 18-19.
They consequently urged women to aspire to the more modern and seemingly empowered, feminine ideals of household manager, informed consumer, and skilled decorator. In their similarly inspired efforts, black clubwomen found that they, who had never experienced the privilege of an idealized sequestration within the private sphere, remained locked in the signifying role that white women had escaped. A political strategy dictated by the logic of liberalism was thus stymied by the ways that racialist theory and imagery served to manifest its individualistic mode of subjectivity through the fabrication of a desirable domestic interior. Within the prescriptive literature, sensuously appealing and personally representative decorative elements were frequently equated with peoples imagined as governed by their bodies, and this metaphorical association made it possible for the bodily desires of white Americans to yield disembodied political identities. In this way, the presence of a racial other, situated narratively outside the course of American progress yet metaphorically inside the private recess of the desirable home, sustained equivocations about the white liberal subject’s regulated liberty, enabling either him or her to be at once dominant and dominated. Due to these inter-articulated disavowals, the NACW leaders who sought to insert themselves into liberalism’s developmental narrative faced a racially specific variation of the inability to be what difference functioned to make. They consequently argued that African Americans’ only hope of real equality lay in challenging the individuated and independent nature of liberal subjectivity itself and in conceptualizing a home whose beauty would embody a more racially inclusive archetype of American identity.

Culminating with an examination African-American clubwomen’s critique of Hoover’s American Individual and this liberal subject’s most cherished possession, this dissertation finds the meaning of twentieth-century American liberalism within the assortment of historical voices who contributed to the modern home’s aesthetic conceptualization and production. It seeks to demonstrate that, by the early 1930s, dwellings that evinced the defining attributes of a home
were proclaimed to symbolize the initiating autonomy that had enabled the nation’s founding fathers to place voluntary limits on their own natural freedoms. Through this consensual regulation, these men had created an unprecedented government committed to the preservation of citizens’ opportunities and thus to the binding ideals of liberty, justice, and equality that joined all Americans in a progressive advancement toward economic abundance and spiritual repletion. This productive investment of an animating desire presumably enabled Americans uniquely to reconcile their personal liberties with socially collectivizing rules of restraint. While this consensual demonstration of liberal virtue not only qualified citizens for membership in the body politic, it also engendered liberalism’s ambivalent synthesis of oppositional states wherein the nation’s citizens could claim to be simultaneously liberated and obligated, individual and communal, diverse and identical, economically acquisitive and benevolently altruistic. By embodying the possibility of this resolution, Hoover’s better home enabled him to dismiss as temporary the “disheartening occurrences” of the nation’s persistent imperfections that were apparent “every hour of the day,” all arising from the fact that liberty’s pursuit sometimes took a “malevolent or selfish” turn. As white women and black women separately discovered, however, egoistic striving was hardly the sole cause of the illiberal relations of domination and difference they endeavored to eradicate. The real obstacle to their equality perhaps resided in women’s supposedly empowering obligation to invest homes with the affective value that transformed their longing inhabitants into liberal citizens.

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82 Myers, 399.
Chapter One: A Better Home for Herbert Hoover’s American Individual

John Norton entered his New York City apartment one evening in 1925, bursting with eagerness to share the news of his promotion with his wife Jane. Although he felt some trepidation about removing her from the metropolis and occupation she so enjoyed, John remembered Jane’s initial expressions of desire to return to their southern roots and build a home of their own. Jane was predictably thrilled at the prospect of realizing the couple’s shared dream, and with her usual conviction, resolve, and practicality, she began to plan for the responsibilities of home ownership. Her preparations began, as was Jane’s method, with the collection of information. To her delighted surprise, Jane discovered that homemakers and prospective homeowners could avail themselves of numerous services and materials for only the small investment of postage. An announcement in the Sunday newspaper particularly captured her attention. The Department of Agriculture’s Bureau of Home Economics planned not only to provide expert advice on multiple aspects of home making and home building, but also to dedicate one of its specialists to working with Better Homes in America.

Jane could not retrieve a pen quickly enough. She immediately wrote to request information and was gratified by the receipt of numerous bulletins and a “very delightful and helpful letter from one of the specialists.” The reply suggested that Jane address further inquiries directly to Better Homes in America, which sent “booklets with much practical counsel,” to the Commerce Department’s Division of Building and Housing, and to the department’s Bureau of Standards.1 A bemused Jane also found herself sending unlikely requests for information about household fuel to the Bureau of Mines and the Department of Interior. These various bulletins supplied an abundance of information that, by addressing the literal nuts and bolts of homemaking, also “found a most interested reader in John.”2 Jane might have taken the initiative

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2 Ibid., 53.
in seeking out advice and opinions from specialists in housing related industries, but John quickly realized that the process of constructing a modern home was a joint endeavor. Though this indulgent husband expressed only polite interest in matters of household furnishing and management, John truly appreciated the references that guided his ability to judge whether or not “good materials and sound workmanship were going into the building of those houses” he and Jane toured.³

These reference materials also disclosed the even more gratifying knowledge that the Nortons could easily finance the home of their dreams. Attaining their longed for home required only an informed investment, and Jane and John felt completely confident in their abilities to act reasonably and deliberately upon their desires, particularly “with the government of the United States vouching for [the] authenticity” of the information guiding their decisions.⁴ The Building and Housing Department’s How to Own Your Own Home proved especially helpful in teaching the first-time investors how to finance their dream. Very early in their courtship the Nortons had given voice to inchoate longings for a home and as a consequence had agreed upon disciplined spending habits in the first days of their marriage. John diverted a portion of his salary to purchasing shares in a savings and loan institution, while Jane’s smaller paycheck was divided between this house fund and a savings account.⁵

If John’s promotion brought the financial opportunity to put this savings to use, a building boom in the burgeoning southern city where he and Jane were to make their home further enabled the young couple to act upon their hopes and dreams. The availability of new construction influenced the Nortons’s decision to purchase rather than build, as did the new zoning ordinances that regulated suburban expansion and increased the prospect of reaping a profitable return on their investment as the city’s population increased. Having ascertained the

³ Ibid., 88.
⁴ Ibid., 53.
⁵ Ibid., 89.
soundness of their prospective home’s construction and examined its features from every possible vantage point, the informed and level-headed couple handed over their down payment and placed their signatures on a short-term mortgage and a second that matured more slowly.⁶ And so began the next chapter of the Nortons’s adventure in homemaking. Jane’s experiences in furbishing her previous apartments foreshadowed the success to come, leaving readers with little doubt that desire, initiative, reason, and conviction would carry the Nortons progressively and happily forward toward a bright future in Allville.

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The organization from which Jane Norton sought information, Better Homes in America, was a government sponsored home ownership and improvement campaign that, by publicizing a more modern form of domesticity during the 1920s and early 1930s, both intensified and shaped the Nortons’s personal desires for a quintessentially private space.⁷ In the years prior to his presidency, Herbert Hoover served as the BHA’s nominal leader. The newly appointed Commerce Secretary found in this educational initiative a means of carrying out his agenda to use the government’s authority and resources to stimulate the economy through a controlled expansion of building and construction, while also shifting the resolution of a postwar housing shortage away from public financing options. To this end, policymakers working within the related agencies and divisions of Hoover’s rapidly expanding commerce department promoted industrial efficiency, encouraged cooperation among participants in the business of housing, and

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attempted to develop new financing techniques, all of which the BHA helped to publicize. Focused on bolstering private enterprise, these technocratic strategies laid a foundation for the indirect federal support of an emergent ideal of home ownership that would become increasingly essential to the long-term growth of the nation’s economy.\textsuperscript{8}

Hoover also perceived home ownership as a primary means of facilitating economic and cultural modernization without compromising traditional sources of social and moral stability. Born in 1874, Hoover came of age at a pivotal moment in the nation’s history, and he joined his contemporaries in an ambivalent project to preserve the essentials of an American heritage while also embracing the future that threatened them. Although Hoover retained an anachronistically Victorian attachment to the home’s spiritual and sentimental value, he primarily believed that owning a better home helped to support both the development of consumer capitalism and the preservation of agrarian values. As the introductory vignette illustrates, investing in a house compelled John and Jane Norton to work and to save; yet for these aspiring proprietors, transforming an architectural structure into a home also stimulated consumer spending. The BHA consequently sought to formulate a prescriptive set of homogenizing standards that, by restraining the perceived needs and wants fueling consumerism, enabled Americans such as the Nortons to resist making irrationally impulsive or dangerously independent decisions.\textsuperscript{9}


\textsuperscript{9} As Martin Fausold wrote, “Many historians have come to agree that [Hoover] was a leading, if not the dominant, figure in adapting the ordering ideas of the Progressive period and World War I to the corporatist formulas of the 1920s which were further refined by the New Deal.” Martin Fausold, The Presidency of Herbert C. Hoover (Lawrence, KS: The University of Kansas Press, 1985), 15.
Despite their accuracy, these prevailing interpretations of Hoover’s interest in Better Homes in America stop short of explaining why he ardently believed that preserving an exceptional nation’s progressive teleology depended upon owning a better home. A closer examination of Hoover’s fixation on home ownership and home improvement reveals that any of the categories historians have used to describe him—a “forgotten Progressive,” a quintessential corporate liberal, a dogmatic conservative ideologue, or an innovative state-builder—still limit his influential role in the larger framework of twentieth-century American liberalism. Though Hoover’s zealous attempts to shape the nation’s ideological development have been frequently dismissed, his public statements and policies demonstrate an almost messianic intent to revive a unique philosophical doctrine that he labeled American Individualism. Hoover attributed his country’s unrivaled material and ethical progress to this defining creed and its attendant mode of political subjectivity. As he repeatedly professed in his public statements, a requisite condition of material abundance catalyzed freedom’s rational pursuit, which in turn, necessitated the formation of pragmatic, cooperative associations among acquisitive individuals. Out of this mutual pursuit of personal opportunity arose a sympathetic recognition of shared entitlements that eventually engendered a commitment to universal, liberal ideals. These volitional restraints enabled self-interested individuals to constitute a corporate, national body founded on the equal protection of their liberties. Attaining this paradoxical state of “ordered liberty” ultimately led, Hoover believed, not only to economic progress and a higher standard of living, but also to “a

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11 This phrase is borrowed from Joan Hoff Wilson’s foundational biography, Herbert Hoover: Forgotten Progressive (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1975).

12 Demonstrating his disregard for Hoover’s efforts to articulate and contribute to American political philosophy, William E. Leuchtenburg describes one statement in American Individualism as “pellucid.” In this tone, he continues, “As in his orations, however, most of American Individualism offered nothing that could not be heard at a weekly Kiwanis luncheon.” See Herbert Hoover, The American Presidents, ed. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. and Sean Wilentz (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009), 66.
better, brighter, broader individualism—an individualism that carries increasing responsibility and service to our fellows.”

The chapter that follows reads Hoover’s prescriptive statements on suburban home ownership in conjunction with his paeans to American Individualism. Exploring this intersection illuminates how the physical structure of a house, rather than the family metaphorically equated with this abode, became the means of preserving American liberalism in the early twentieth century. Construed as a space of primal longing, Hoover’s modernized better home served a traditional, ideologically constructive purpose: This architectural body sustained the “line of fiction” that structures American liberal discourse. Within this undergirding, developmental narrative, desire supplies the animating, metaphysical essence of subjective autonomy, and its apparent expression transforms the unavoidable acquiescence to economic, social, and political imperatives into what seems to be acts of consent. Hoover represented the acquisition of a better home as just this type of volitional investment. Construed as the manifestation of desire and the discipline required to attain it, the better home supposedly manifested the rights, values, and virtues already possessed by its creators. Yet, in also framing this idealized abode as the metaphorical embodiment of all that American citizens should long to have and to become, Hoover acknowledged that the better home effected the American Individual’s characteristic entitlements and compelled the performance of the ethical behaviors required by this mode of liberal subjectivity. This representative domicile thus functioned within Hoover’s rhetoric as both the consequence and the cause—the origin and the outcome—of a self-governing initiative that defined the American Individual and that progressively yielded economic prosperity, political idealism, and social altruism.

14 Dillon, 15.
While Hoover’s celebrations of the better home reveal a circular construction between liberal subjectivity and domesticity, this professed liberal disavowed his American Individual’s constitutive dependency on the better home. Just as Hoover admitted that this space supposedly fulfilled needs for a comforting succor and required obedience to socially stabilizing and economically productive norms, he also insisted that the better home instantiated its proprietor’s initiating desire, the source of the liberal subject’s presumed autonomy and capacity for consent. Because it supposedly manifested this generative, pre-political substrate, the better home created the illusion of a temporalized, causal relationship between an archetypal American’s freedom and this citizen’s submission to economic and political imperatives. Consequently, Hoover promoted the ownership of an idealized dwelling that sustained entwined liberal myths, one that casts consent as desire’s consequence and another that aligns the pursuit of individual interests with service to the general welfare. A publicly articulated and prescribed representation of desire, the better home testified to the factual existence of these philosophical fictions, and for this reason, Hoover believed that renovating the home and preserving American Individualism were inseparably conjoined projects.

**Hoover’s Public Sphere of Self-Governing Association**

Founding a modern republic of home owners was not Hoover’s expressed intent when he sailed triumphantly into New York City’s’ harbor in September, 1919, after his wartime years of tireless humanitarian service. He stepped off the steamship’s gangplank far more intent on enjoying the comforts of home than on creating the same prospect for all Americans. Hoover jestingly explained his decision to retreat from the public spotlight by citing the seven-room

15 This chapter explores the function of fetishism in the articulation of American liberal discourse. Fundamental to this psychical mechanism is the operation of a disavowal, which simultaneously acknowledges and denies a truth through an object that substitutes for the original object of desire. Consequently, a fetishized object, or space as I interpret the home, allows contradictory statements to be held in ambivalent tension, enabling an oppositional either/or relationship to become an equivocal both/and. Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, _Female Fetishism_ (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 44-46.
“‘palace’” under construction on Stanford’s campus, a project that he and Lou Henry Hoover had undertaken for the opportunity to “‘build a better house than anybody ever built before.’” Yet, retirement eluded the mining executive turned statesman. Having departed from a theater of war, he returned to a homefront beset with social conflict. Hoover believed that lasting peace and prosperity required reinvigorating the nation’s unique political philosophy. What follows explicates his conceptualization of American liberalism in order to illuminate why Hoover identified owning a better home as the means of preserving his country’s founding ideals.

Upon Hoover’s return, the worst economic depression in thirty years gripped the country, and President Woodrow Wilson turned to his “master of emergencies” to help resolve the economic and social crisis. Hoover had served as Wilson’s advisor during the postwar treaty negotiations, and according to John Maynard Keynes, he alone had brought “reality, knowledge, magnanimity and disinterestedness” to “the ordeal of Paris.” The economist’s American contemporaries heralded Hoover with similar acclaim, and he was regarded as a potent political force and potential presidential candidate despite his lack of formal experience or partisan affiliation. Hoover’s reputation as a self-made millionaire, disinterested public servant, and skilled administrator seemingly qualified him to heal the anxieties and alleviate the deprivations that had attended war while also ushering the nation into a modern era. This admiration of Hoover’s administrative abilities was supported by a widely circulated mythology of personal fortitude, moral virtue, and incisive objectivity that overshadowed more critical depictions of

16 Irwin, 251. A detailed description of this house and its construction can be found in Paul V. Turner, Mrs. Hoover’s Pueblo Walls: The Primitive and the Modern in the Lou Henry Hoover House (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004). Hoover’s house was indeed a three-story palace with fifty additional rooms than the seven he claimed, which amounted to a $170,000 investment for the Hoovers. Clements, The Life of Herbert Hoover, 30-31.
18 Quoted in Leuchtenberg, 44.
Hoover as socially awkward, politically combative, tiresomely pedantic, morally rigid, and egotistically insecure.\(^{19}\)

At President Wilson’s request, Hoover lent his extensive abilities to the task of repairing an economic landscape disconcertingly similar to the one he had witnessed in war torn Europe. “Having come out of a gigantic laboratory of fierce ideas and clamor for change,” Hoover recounted, “I could not fail to observe many of the same fires in my own country.”\(^{20}\) Explaining the similarities that Hoover perceived were the thousands of labor strikes that engaged millions of industrial workers during 1919. These protests against rising prices, stagnant wages, and deplorable labor conditions added fuel to a xenophobic fear of foreign radicalism that led the government to deport thousands of immigrants suspected of leftist dissent.\(^{21}\) With his country in the throes of this Red Scare, Hoover took charge of Wilson’s Second Industrial Conference. His determined efforts to reach a voluntary accord between labor and management reflected, however, Hoover’s increasing fixation on preserving the liberal imperatives of individual liberty and volitional regulation. Forcing enlightenment could not become the work of government, and this ardent conviction caused Hoover to decry excessive state involvement in the economy’s management and regulation. “[T]he adoption of such methods,” he warned, “would strike at the very roots of American life and would destroy the very basis of American progress.”\(^{22}\) Because this foundation was a “spirit of independence” that fueled initiative, it proved incompatible with government bureaucracy that, instead, “spreads the spirit of submission into our daily life and

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\(^{19}\) Wilson, 15; Leuchtenberg, 18.


\(^{21}\) David J. Goldberg, Discontented America: The United States in the 1920s (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

\(^{22}\) Herbert Hoover, The New Day: Campaign Speeches of Herbert Hoover, 1928 (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1929), 165.
Cultivating a willingness to submit to economically and socially productive regulations alternatively described the government’s ideal role. Hoover consequently viewed the federal government as a clearinghouse for the statistical information that would enable industrial leaders not only to operate their businesses more efficiently and plan more effectively, but also to comprehend the rationality and gratifying effects of self-restraint. These ideological convictions affected Hoover’s ability to address and identify systemic inequalities and instabilities within the American economy that the rapid and uncoordinated postwar demobilization had exacerbated. The same ideological dogmatism shaped Hoover’s reaction to the next decade’s unemployment crisis. By 1921, the immediate postwar boon that had elevated both consumer prices and corporate profits at the expense of labor gave way to recession and unemployment. In his new role as Secretary of Commerce, Hoover called for a gathering of industrialists, social scientists, and token union representatives to “give consideration to an expression of the measures that would tend to prevent the acute reaction of economic tides in the future.”

When the economy began to rebound the following year, Hoover exuberantly proclaimed the success of his initiative: “We have again demonstrated that independence and ability of action amongst our own people that saves our government from that ultimate paternalism which would undermine our whole political system.”

Hoover’s conferences in the immediate postwar period served as a model for those he would convene throughout the decade. Emphasizing the ameliorative potential of voluntarism, cooperation, and local initiatives, Hoover sought to implement an approach to political economy

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23 Ibid., 162.
24 Ibid., 45.
25 Ibid., 45-46. For a discussion of these conferences, see Clements, The Life of Herbert Hoover, 37-44, Chapter Eight.
that he began devising early in his engineering career. In the mines of Australia and Asia, Hoover had forged an esteemed reputation as a brilliant technical expert and stringent administrator, and he developed a distinctive managerial approach that endeavored to attain long-term goals by incorporating technological innovations, rationalizing managerial practices, reinvesting capital, and providing more adequate compensation for miners. This first-hand experience in the mines offered Hoover a ground level view of industrial capitalism’s operation, and there, he began to decipher the interdependence of capital and labor and to devise managerial practices that, in revealing this mutuality of interests, would theoretically promote the voluntary compliance of both sides. Hoover brought this instrumental, technocratic approach to the administrative roles he assumed during World War I. Whether in the mines or on the diplomatic battlefield, the advisability of self-regulation required no explanation for Hoover, only the rational recognition of mutual, long-term interests and shared goals.\(^{26}\)

Working in the halls of government, the conferences that Hoover convened sought to regulate the business cycle by fostering voluntary compliance with self-imposed regulations. They enacted Hoover’s conviction that a government staffed with university-trained civil servants could supply the statistical information that would enable corporate officials to avoid wasteful procedures and to make rational, judicious decisions regarding the development and execution of standards for manufacturing, building, and trade. While Hoover’s conference model attempted to direct local initiatives and private resources more effectively through national coordination, it also functioned to preserve the role of reason in public discourse more generally and to ensure that rational debate continued to determine both economic and state action. Ostensibly an exercise in pragmatic, deliberative democracy, the conferences consequently attempted to integrate emergent corporate identifications into a national tradition of civic association and to

further develop and discipline these group affiliations through the institution of unifying and regulatory standards that rationally realigned self-interest and social welfare as well as economic behavior and political ideals. The appearance of volition enacted at the conferences thus modeled Hoover’s ideal of a horizontally organized, democratic political economy that diffused both socialist demands for redistribution and progressive calls for active government regulation.²⁷

The historian Ellis Hawley has coined the term “associationalism” to describe Hoover’s vision of the cooperative solutions that would be collectively conceived and enacted within a civic domain that mediated between the competing interests of the state, the economy, and the individual. As Hawley has written, Hoover believed that associationalism deployed “appeals to science, community, and morality to bridge the gap between the public interest and private ones.”²⁸ Hoover himself argued that trade, industrial, civic, and voluntary associations were “mixtures of altruism and self-interest.”²⁹ Not only did organizational activity provide “an opportunity for self-expression and participation in the moulding [sic] of ideas,” it also functioned as a “school of public responsibility.”³⁰ If appropriately guided, he believed, associations would realize the expediency of cooperating with other interest-based organizations to achieve mutually beneficial objectives. This rational pursuit of interest inevitably led, Hoover believed, to the

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²⁷ Hawley argues, “The real faith of the Hooverites was not in statist coercion but rather in publicly endorsed agreements that had an approved yet extralegal status and would therefore lend quasi-official standing and protection to private compliance efforts. It was through such agreements, they believed, that a fruitful balance between order and liberty could be achieved.” Ellis Hawley, The Great War and the Search for a Modern Order: A History of the American People and their Institutions, 1917-1933 (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1979), 86, 54-57; Albert Romasco has written, “[T]he practice of co-operation, as seen by Hoover, was not considered as a diminution or denial of individualism, but an essential adjunct to it.” Albert Romasco, The Poverty of Abundance (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 19. See also Alan Brinkley, “The Two World Wars and American Liberalism,” in Liberalism and Its Discontents (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 91.
²⁹ Hoover, American Individualism, 42.
³⁰ Ibid., 42-43.
gradual evolution of a more altruistic perspective wherein “[t]he same forces that permeate the nation at large [would] eventually permeate these groups.”

Conceived as a simultaneously self-interested and consensually disciplined mode of civic engagement, associationalism reflected Hoover’s abiding fealty to the nation’s liberal tradition. This twentieth-century statesman was hardly the first to remark upon the ideologically constructive role that strategic alliances and communal fellowships played in a volatile climate of political democracy and market expansion. Initially observing their function was the nation’s most famous foreign visitor, Alexis de Tocqueville, during his travels throughout antebellum America. As the intellectual historian James Kloppenberg has written of Tocqueville, the original articulator of America’s individualistic brand of liberalism “advanced a hard-headed assessment of the unsentimental calculations of self-interest that such habits [of religion and association] must struggle to restrain and redirect.” A century might have separated Tocqueville and Hoover, but the parallels between their perceptions of American liberalism’s virtues have proven undeniable for historians as has their mutual assessment of the intrinsic connection between interest and ethics. Hoover echoed Tocqueville’s belief that “[o]nly within the relatively equal social and economic conditions of antebellum America could the practice of deliberation and the

31 Ibid., 43. Paul Fairfield discusses the impact of Darwin’s theories on the “new liberals” of the late nineteenth-century, particularly on their efforts to conceptualize a social dimension of individualism and a more virtuous, altruistic motive for moral conduct than hedonism, egoism, and utilitarianism. Fairfield, Moral Selfhood in the Liberal Tradition: The Politics of Individuality (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1996), 54-59.

32 Ellis Hawley best articulates this synthetic perspective in his description of corporate liberalism as an alliance between the state and the emergent corporation that coalesced to preserve liberal ideals during periods “when strong concerns about market failure [were] accompanied by anti-state impulses and popular idealization of certain private elites.” For Hawley, Herbert Hoover best evinces this blending of the modern and traditional as well as of the private market and the public state that is at the heart of the corporate liberal synthesis. Ellis Hawley, “The Discovery and Study of ‘Corporate Liberalism,’” Business History Review 52 (Autumn 1978): 314. Elsewhere, Hawley argues that, through organizations such as the BHA, Hoover attempted “to reconcile his conflicting roles as a bureaucratic expansionist who was also a declared foe of ‘big government.’” See also, Hawley, “Herbert Hoover, the Commerce Secretariat, and the Vision of an ‘Associative State,’ 1921-1928,” 134; Romasco, Chapter Two.

33 See for example, Romasco, 19.
ideal of reciprocity flourish.” Of primary importance to Hoover was thus maintaining the economic opportunities that stimulated and enabled not only an egalitarian pursuit of individual interest, but also the development of the socially binding ideals and attachments that precluded unrestrained egoism. The personal achievement of acquisitive motives required social cooperation, and these collective efforts engendered an ethic of reciprocity, sympathetic identifications among participants, a pragmatic approach to problem-solving, and a template for democratic deliberation.

**American Individualism and the Problem of the World**

Described by James Kloppenberg as virtues unique to liberalism, the democratic practices and values that Tocqueville observed in the early nineteenth century were exactly those that Hoover sought to rehabilitate. When Hoover returned to the United States in 1919, he perceived himself to be occupying a pivotal moment in the history of his nation that seemingly required a reiteration and clarification of his country’s founding principles in a new socioeconomic context. Hoover consequently seized upon the preservation of American Individualism with an evangelical purpose. Although he professed a conviction that Americans still possessed the “finer qualities” evinced by their antebellum forbears, he doubted their commitment to the unifying political ideals that the spirit of independence and the necessity of neighborly cooperation had historically undergirded. Educating Americans on the veracity and rectitude of their nation’s unique brand of liberal idealism consequently became a guiding objective of Hoover’s public statements and policy initiatives throughout the 1920s.

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Published in 1922, *American Individualism* was part tribute and part treatise. Writing this manifesto at the seeming dawn of a New Era, Hoover endeavored not to depart from his nation’s political and economic traditions, but rather to develop innovative techniques for realizing their meaning and purpose. In the words of one admiring biographer, [Hoover] “was convinced that, in one hundred and fifty years of separation from Europe, the American people had developed a way of life that surpassed all others in history.” The father of the frontier theory himself, Frederick Jackson Turner, declared that, in *American Individualism*, Hoover had articulated “the platform on which all genuine Americans can stand.” Given Hoover’s popularity in the early 1920s, most Americans echoed Turner’s praise of Hoover’s brief exposition on American political and economic philosophy. A reviewer for the *New York Times* proclaimed that, despite the manifesto’s deficits in “precision and felicity of expression,” Hoover’s “little book deserves to rank . . . among the few great formulations of American political theory.”

As Hoover explained it, his elevated opinion of American political philosophy and its progressive effects were formed through extensive travel. The comparative experience of living and working in foreign climes had transformed him into an “unashamed individualist” and cultivated an unshakeable “faith in the essential truth, strength, and vitality of the developing creed by which we have hitherto lived in this country of ours.” Hoover recalled watching President Wilson sign the Treaty of Paris with great foreboding, as he pondered the treaty’s

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39 Hoover, *American Individualism*, 7. In a 1930 address, Hoover explained, “I have lived among many peoples and have observed many governments . . . It is from these contrasts and these experiences that I wish . . . to speak upon the institutions, the ideals, upon the spirit of America.” William Starr Myers, ed., *The State Papers and Other Public Writings of Herbert Hoover*, vol. 1 March 4, 1929-October 1, 1931 (reprint, New York: Kraus Reprint Co., 1970), 395-396.
“fearful consequences” for the success of liberal democracy.\textsuperscript{40} “I did not come away exultant,” he remembered, having later seen the failure “of this gigantic crusade to impose American ideas and ideals upon Europe.”\textsuperscript{41} For Hoover, the seed of representative government had failed to take root due to the “the deep-seated tribal instincts of nationalism, imperialism, age-old hates, memories of deep wrongs, fierce distrusts and impellent fears.”\textsuperscript{42}

Such were the generative components and consequences of the “social philosophies” that, in contrast to America’s brand of liberalism, had produced only inequality and injustice. Intractable forms of social, economic, and political domination had repressed “the urgent forces which drive human society,” and unleashed by war, these threatened in its aftermath to devolve further into irrational desperation.\textsuperscript{43} While Bolshevism represented one of many theories that promised to assuage this despair, it was “an economic and spiritual fallacy” that instead had inflicted “inconceivable misery” through “destroyed production and moral degeneracy.”\textsuperscript{44} Rationality and the cultivation of the “finer instincts” proved impossible in such an environment where demagogues disguised “the bestial instincts of hate, murder, and destruction . . . in the fine terms of political idealism.”\textsuperscript{45} Kindling the fear and frustration born of unsatisfied desires, such leaders incited for their own specious purposes a mob that “does not think but only feels.” “It is one of the most profound and important of exact psychological truths,” Hoover warned, that the “[a]cts and ideas that lead to progress are born out of the womb of the individual mind” rather than the maelstrom of emotion. This indictment reveals Hoover’s strongest objection to the absence of individual autonomy and rationality: Without any consensual, constructive limitations

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 469.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 479.
\textsuperscript{43} Hoover, American Individualism, 1.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 36.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 6-7.
on its energies and passions, “[t]he crowd is credulous, it destroys, it consumes, it hates, and it dreams—but it never builds.”

Revolting from the inequities that had ultimately fueled the irrational, reactionary politics of postwar Europe, the first American settlers had built an inherently progressive, moral polity. If Hoover acknowledged that colonists had arrived on the American frontier bearing remnants of their Old World heritage, he also declared that they had, over the generations, been reborn in their new land and had crafted their own unique political economy. Their bequest was a “special social system” devised “from materials brought in revolt from conditions in Europe.” Of this “American system,” Hoover proclaimed, “[n]ever had these principles and ideals been assembled elsewhere and combined into government.” Unlike the dissent that Hoover so feared among working-class radicals, opposition to the divine right of kings and the entrenched privileges of inherited wealth had quickly taken a more constructive and rational direction due to the material plenitude that the settlers had encountered. Not only did an abundance of natural resources enable the American colonists to cultivate an unprecedented equality of wealth, but it also yielded the volitional self-restraint that fundamentally distinguished the New World from the Old and its elites’ irrational propensity for domination. Amid the material abundance that gave free reign to stymied initiative and desires for liberty, Americans realized the instrumental necessity of cooperation and they forged harmonious relations with their neighbors founded on the recognition of fundamental similarities and mutual interests. From these formative conditions, Hoover concluded, the settlers developed a reverence for the principles of liberty, equality, and justice, and they consensually created a government to protect and foment these liberal ideals.

An ideological heritage of liberal idealism thus distinguished America from all other nations, and its very possibility originated for Hoover in the ethical effects of unobstructed

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46 Ibid., 24.
47 Ibid., 12; Myers, State Papers, 398.
initiative. Despite the liberties that settlers enjoyed, the nation’s political philosophy had hardly evolved into “individualism run riot with no tempering principle.” Rather, the freedom of self-determination pursued by the “pioneers of our American Individualism” had gradually become the “fair chance of Abraham Lincoln,” and this progression fueled the self-made Hoover’s own “faith in the essential truth, strength, and vitality of the developing creed by which we have hitherto lived in this country of ours.” The individual’s ability to act in accordance with his interests ultimately led, Hoover proclaimed, to “that firm and fixed ideal of American individualism—an equality of opportunity.” The emergence of this principle proved to Hoover that Americans had “long since abandoned the laissez faire of the 18th century—the notion that it is ‘every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost.’” Confident that Americans had surpassed this egoistic form of individualism, he declared, “[T]he principle [of equal opportunity] is so strong within us that domination of the few will not be tolerated.” Due to this “tempering” axiom, a type of “progressive individualism” had coalesced, one that insisted “each individual be given the chance and stimulation for development of the best with which he has been endowed in heart and mind.”

A self-disciplining respect for opportunity not only forged a sympathetic identification among self-interested individuals, it also led to the development of a more highly evolved social conscience. As Hoover perceived it, America’s unique variant of individualism had solved “[t]he problem of the world,” which was “to restrain the destructive instincts while strengthening and enlarging those of altruistic character and constructive impulse.” American Individualism consequently offered a way out of the debilitating impasse between individuality and community,

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48 Hoover, American Individualism, 8.
49 Ibid., 20, 10, 7.
50 Ibid., 7, 8-9.
51 Ibid., 10
52 Ibid., 53-54.
53 Ibid., 4.
54 Ibid., 15.
between want and restraint, by guiding the development of a progressive nation founded on and unified by the principle of rationally self-interested and self-regulated striving. Enjoyed by the many rather than the few, the pursuit of individual liberty had paradoxically led to “the embracement of the necessity of a greater and broader sense of service and responsibility to others as a part of individualism.” More than “an economic creed,” American Individualism encapsulated a fundamental commitment “to provide opportunity for self-expression, not merely economically, but spiritually as well.” For these reasons, Hoover believed that this distinctive philosophy supplied “the only safe avenue to further human progress.”

The Ethics of Desire

Yet, preserving American Individualism depended upon sustaining the feelings and desires that had propelled its development. Material acquisition, deference to the right of opportunity, and an altruistic commitment to the social welfare—these evolving motives of human behavior were, for Hoover, expressions of an animating essence inherent within each individual. Identifying desire as the progenitor of the liberal individual’s entitlements and virtues evinces not only Hoover’s engagement with more modern, psychological conceptions of subjectivity, but also with the constitutive role of affectivity within liberal discourse itself. In his examination of morality within liberal doctrine, Paul Fairfield suggests that the individual’s defining characteristics—autonomy, a capacity for rationality and consent, and freedom from the subjugating forms of authority located in patriarchal, political, religious institutions—rests upon the avowed possession of “a deep human nature” or “an inner citadel . . . upon which no trespass may be allowed and in virtue of which the person is awarded absolute value.” This “metaphysics of individuality” creates the possibility of presupposing both an innately entitled and a morally autonomous subject, one capable of both dissenting against injustice and of consensually

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55 Ibid., 11.
56 Ibid., 37.
57 Ibid., 9, 8, 13.
establishing protective, representative political entities. Although numerous historical permutations have shaped its particular form, “the assumption of a ‘true self’ originates, according to Fairfield, in medieval religious doctrine that linked a nascent conception of rights and dignity to the possession of “an eternal soul-substance fashioned by a divine creator.”

The literary theorist Elizabeth Dillon similarly highlights the soul’s importance in the development of American political philosophy. Focusing on the “crucial proto-liberal assumption” conceived by Puritan colonists, Dillon underscores how their doctrinal insistence that “each individual has the capacity to privately contract a relationship with God without the intervention of mediating authorities” created a paradigm for conceptualizing a subjective condition of political autonomy. Puritanism consequently supported the development of a liberal public sphere by “relocat[ing] divine authority into a private realm and thus creat[ing] a similar condition of private authority from which the right to criticize the state emerges.” Dillon cites the unchallenged assumption of a divinely endowed, spiritual autonomy in the public depiction of Anne Hutchinson’s antinomian crimes against church elders. There, she locates a pivotal historical moment at which “[p]rivacy is no longer entirely external or marginal with respect to the public order, but begins to serve as its grounds.” Dillon thus follows the historical trail of the American liberal subject’s conceptual origin beyond the contractual relations of economic actors operating within an emergent capitalist market. A division between the public and private coalesced to help safeguard this subject’s property and person; however, Dillon also traces the roots of this spatialized distinction to the Protestant revolution. Its insistence on an intimate communion with and knowledge of the Divine endowed the hedonistic, calculating subject of the market with a creative, moral capacity for political virtue. Created by the particular intersection

58 Fairfield further argues that the postulation of an individual’s potential for moral autonomy is fundamental to liberal discourse in both its classical and neo-classical articulations. For example, what Locke locates in the capacity for rational deliberation, Kant finds in an innate will. Fairfield, 5-6, 30-50, 90-114.
59 Dillon, 65, 67, 69, 75.
of Protestantism and capitalism within the British colonies, a metaphysics of individuality thus encompassed both moral autonomy and egoistic rationality, rendering each fundamental to the conception of American liberal subjectivity.

Almost three hundred years after Anne Hutchinson’s exile, Herbert Hoover continued to invoke the importance of “the universal divine inspiration of every human soul.” “Our individualism insists,” he reiterated, “upon the divine in each human being.”

From this introjected reservoir emanated a “divine spark” that potentially ignited a “ferment of spirituality, service, and mutual responsibility.” Kendrick Clements has argued that such testimony bears witness to an ethical framework that secularized the Quaker values governing Hoover’s childhood. Making implicit reference to his religious heritage, many of Hoover’s public statements support his biographers’ conclusions that Quaker tenets of introspection, cooperation, and tolerance shaped Hoover’s ideological beliefs. Though the statesman no longer attended meeting, Hoover refused to renounce completely his childhood faith in the divine, the promised millennium, and an ethos of disciplined sacrifice, and he invoked these remnants of his early religious training to bolster American Individualism’s moral authority. He confidently celebrated “the profound purposes of the American people,” for “these principles and ideals grew largely out of the religious origins and spiritual aspirations of our people.”

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60 Hoover, American Individualism, 26.
61 Ibid., 27-28.
62 Clements locates the residual effects of a devout Quaker childhood in the value that Hoover accorded to self-disciplined work, thrift, plain living, a utilitarian maximization of resources, and applied effort. Hoover also perceived, Clements argues, that the balance between order and liberty must be maintained through the working of an “inner light” rather than the moral authoritarianism he experienced from church leaders and pious relatives. This perspective predominately shaped his perception of the government’s role in economic and environmental policy, which Hoover perceived as intertwined. Clements, Hoover, Conservation, and Consumerism, 20.
63 For example, Fausold writes, “His Quaker individualism required the discipline of self and cooperation of others.” Fausold additionally traces Hoover’s liberal belief in equality to Quakerism’s tenet of an inner light. (4) See also, Albert Romasco, 17-19.
64 Myers, State Papers, 399, 397.
Such statements reveal the undeniable influence of Hoover’s devout upbringing and, perhaps, a strategic pandering to more faithful audiences. Looking more deeply into the liberal tradition also suggests his reliance on a latent, positivist assertion of natural right and law to legitimize declared political ideals. In his explications of American Individualism, however, Hoover’s invocation of a “divine spark” more often functioned to create a motive for consenting to ethical restraints that exceeded the impetus to maximize interest or pleasure. While Hoover repeatedly invoked the rational and morally productive consequences of acquisitive, utilitarian impulses, he also sought a more inspired foundation for deliberative, political action that was intrinsic to rather than coercively imposed upon the subject. This intent led Hoover to rely upon widely circulating Protestant idioms; yet, religious discourse also enabled Hoover to identify a source of law that was both external to and inherent within the subject and, consequently, to establish a motive for consent that was a duty, but also a compelling and animating desire.65

Conceiving desire as the intrinsic source of the American Individual’s moral authority and political autonomy, Hoover not only reiterated the faith of his Quaker forebears, but he also reflected the intellectual influence of the Darwinians and Freudians of his day. “Spirituality with its faith, its hope, its charity” was hardly a static possession, but rather a dynamic, internal energy that could, like more tangible forms of property, “be increased by each individual’s own effort.”66 “The great propelling force of progress is right ideals,” and these, Hoover insisted, were “moulded” [sic] from instincts of “kindness, pity, fealty to family and race; the love of liberty; the

65 Explaining this logic is the “Other Protestant Ethic” that, as Jackson Lears has identified, “coexisted (and . . . interpenetrated) with the Protestant Ethic of Control.” Ecstasy, fusion, fluidity, transcendence—the visceral experience of boundless union with a divine creator both reacted to and challenged the stringent self-control required of early American settlers intent on deciphering the truth of their own salvation. Lears, Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America (New York: BasicBooks, 1994), 46-48. Wilfred McClay argues that a symptomatic desire for transcendence paradoxically accompanies individualism’s imperative of self-mastery. Attending each historical effort to define a new variant of individualism, this moment of revelation—of boundlessness—created the foundation for articulating the moral codes necessary to circumscribe an otherwise licentious pursuit of self-interest. McClay, The Masterless: Self and Society in Modern America (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

66 Hoover, American Individualism, 26.
mystical yearnings for spiritual things; the desire for fuller expression of the creative faculties; the impulses of service to community and nation.”67 This passage shows that propulsive, primal possessions—instincts, yearnings, desires, and impulses—undergirded the development of governmentally protected entitlements to economic opportunity and political liberty. Ensuring the altruistic denouement of the nation’s evolution thus required cultivating more elemental forms of intrinsic aspiration and even acknowledging how “instinct dominates in our preservation.”68

As Hoover’s efforts to entwine the instinctual, the spiritual, the economic, and the political make evident, he, like others of his generation, spoke of desire and its pursuits in the idioms of vitality, force, and initiative. By the turn of the twentieth century, the stifling decorum required by middle-class conventions and the enervating ease of modern life had tipped the balance between these inter-articulated, psychological and material modes of experiencing and attaining abundance. Fears about over-civilization, emasculation, and lost authenticity expressed rebellion against the impersonal laws of science and political economy that now seemed to compromise the possession of freedom they had once enabled. It was in this cultural context that Hoover joined his peers in yearning for a metaphorically Christian rebirth that sought “regeneration [in] the recovery of lost energy.”69 The vital initiative that characterized Hoover’s American Individual hardly required recovery; it needed only release from the bonds of fear and assistance in finding its appropriate path and most productive form of expression.

Ever the mining engineer, Hoover consequently set out to excavate the “underlying forces” that form the “permanent and persistent motivation of our civilization.” His task required digging “far deeper,” beyond the “imaginary” or the “superficials of our political and economic structure,” to the “force” of the nation that “springs from the one source of human progress.”

67 Ibid., 16.  
68 Ibid.  
we examine the impulses that carry us forward,” Hoover continued, “none is so potent for progress as the yearning for individual self-expression, the desire for creation of something,” a longing that he also framed as “the great urge of the constructive instinct.” Determining the initial form of such longings was the indisputable fact that “the greatest human happiness flows from personal achievement.” From “the deepest of human emotions” nevertheless arose “the resolution of our people for equality of opportunity, for freedom from domination, for maintenance of initiative and liberty of action.” Here, a generative wellspring of feeling conferred a self-regulating, ethical capacity for sympathy, but it also endowed the individual with a type of metaphysical priority and inalienability, both of which led to “the inspired charter of the rights of men.” Essential to Hoover’s explication of American Individualism was, then, his assumption that desire’s sequentially evolving expression could take an ethical, altruistic course. This belief explains his persistent, nearsighted readiness to “profess undaunted faith in those mighty spiritual and intellectual forces of liberty, self-government, initiative, invention, and courage, which have throughout our whole national life motivated our progress, and driven us forward.”

Consistent throughout the 1920s, Hoover’s rhetoric on the American Individual’s sanctity and ethical potential inspired Walter Friar Dexter to revive Hoover’s original treatise on the subject. Writing on the eve of Hoover’s 1932 re-election bid and amidst economic crisis, the president of Whittier College endeavored to remind despairing voters that, even in the face of unprecedented deprivation and despair, if “our civilization is to survive . . . the relationship between the individual and society” must be thoroughly understood. The problem that Hoover grappled with so self-consciously and knowledgably, Dexter explained, was finding the “ideal

70 Hoover, American Individualism, 3, 13, 21-22.
71 Myers, State Papers, 226.
72 Ibid., 397.
73 Ibid., 384.
balance” between upholding constitutional guarantees of life, liberty, and happiness and preserving “the welfare of our people as a whole.” Hoover’s was the dilemma confronted by every liberal American leader: “[T]he opportunity of the individual must not be stifled and the progress of society must not be disrupted.” Dexter’s flattering exegesis delved into the logic, presuppositions, and details of Hoover’s American Individualism to demonstrate why this doctrine, and its most famous representative, held out hope of attaining the elusive equilibrium between individual liberty and national well-being even in the face of unprecedented economic depression. The journalist Elmer Davis, who reviewed Dexter’s apologia, warned prospective readers that “[t]his is to be a book which deals only with words, and regards deeds as of no bearing on a man’s philosophy.” He cited several discrepancies between Hoover’s actions as chief executive and the “cloudier passages” of his public writings on which Dexter focused. This contrast illuminated the gulf between “the smug Hoover of 1928 who knew the answer to everything” and the president who had been humbled by history. While Dexter’s campaign biography appeared to Davis as detached from the current economic crisis as the man whom he attempted to exonerate, it reiterated and even further developed the assumption of an ethical and rationally consensual subject that structured Hoover’s account of American liberal individualism.

For a nation-state founded on the principle of individual liberty to survive, Dexter argued, the nature of this freedom must be understood and, therefore, so must the liberal subject who inalienably possessed it. It was essential for prospective voters to comprehend “the significance of our American Individualism in that the government was made for man and not man for the government.” Because this dependency proved that American Individualism was neither “a form of government” nor a political “tool,” it made knowledge of this “spiritual principle’s”

76 Dexter, 140.
essential meaning all the more important. American Individualism “is a way of life,” Dexter proclaimed, one that “involves every physical and mental activity of a people who are concerned with the development of a liberal political philosophy.”

Like Hoover, Dexter perceived American individualism as the purest form of liberalism not simply because of the preeminence placed on personal liberty, but more precisely because this significance arose from the “reasonable value [placed] on the individual.” To this end, the professional educator turned to colleagues in the fields of psychology, philosophy, and the physical and biological sciences to argue that Hoover’s conception of the individual subject’s intrinsic worth and thus its autonomy was “not only believable, but intellectually tenable as well.”

Citing these experts served to reconcile a lapsed Quaker’s implicitly doctrinal references to a “divine spark” with contemporary scientific and philosophic interpretations of a “universal personal force, or power that is at once creative, constructive, and cordial.” While the possession of this vital impulse individuated the subject by supplying the foundation of its particularity, it also served to universalize the individual by imparting an identity that connected it to similarly animated individuals. Due to this impulsive force, Dexter explained, “There is a oneness of all life; there is a power of life that is personal; this power dwells within man as a creating, unifying and personalizing force.” He continued in this vein to describe how this animating “power of life” made possible the American Individual’s unique simultaneity of particularity and identity:

“If a human being is created and sustained by this universal force he at once becomes intrinsically valuable in and of himself. He becomes an individual because he observes sooner or later that he is a unit of life separate and distinct from all others. This is true because he finds creative processes of life at work within his body. . . . This feeling of personal worth does not, as it might seem to imply, rob him of a sense of social consideration. On the contrary, it leads him to see the same power and processes in others because they too draw on the same

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77 Ibid., 115.
78 Ibid., 71.
79 Ibid., 77.
80 Ibid., 74.
81 Ibid., 76.
reservoir of universal energy. He measures every other person by his own standard of values."\(^{82}\)

Here, in what constitutes the foundation of individuality also lies the origin of the autonomous, generative subject’s sociality. One needed only to reflect on Biblical, historical, and empirical evidence to ascertain, “If the individual considers himself intrinsically valuable he will without doubt consider others of equal importance.”\(^{83}\)

Yet this animating, universal force imparted more than intrinsic value and moral potential to the subject; it also imbued the individual with an impulse to seek truth, an impulse that served as another source of ethical liberalty. Defining this natural desire as initiative, Dexter argued that the essential urge to decipher “right relationships” originated in the individual’s “spiritual nature” and compelled a pragmatic pursuit “to discover through experience and experiment that which makes for effective living.”\(^{84}\) It was this innate, unstoppable compulsion to search for truth that entitled individuals to freedom, for as Dexter explained, “This inherent quality gives the individual a right to express initiative because it determines the nature of the liberty which he demands and the methods by which he acquires it.” Dexter’s latter claim attests to his assumption that the utilitarian, human impulse to decipher the actions that will maximize comfort, happiness, and productivity—“the right to respond to his environment”—will have a paradoxical effect by both empowering the subject with freedom and simultaneously circumscribing the enactment of that possession: “This attitude will individualize his personality. But . . . it will also socialize him. And by doing so will make him free.” In other words, the subject “cannot enjoy freedom derived through a search for truth and be a selfish individualist.” Tocqueville’s “self-interest properly understood” thus represented for Dexter a freedom pragmatically and “properly evaluat[ed],” and from this reflection inevitably followed the virtues of gratitude, tolerance, and

\(^{82}\) Ibid., 78.
\(^{83}\) Ibid., 103.
\(^{84}\) Ibid., 81, 95.
social conscience. While these expressions of empathetic connection prompted the subject to “[want] every other individual to have the same privileges and opportunities which he himself enjoys,” engendering a “fraternalistic individualism,” they also fostered a “reflective sympathy” or the capacity to extend assistance to those regarded as unlike oneself.

In elucidating the sympathetic and rational bases of the relationships among free individuals, Dexter followed Hoover by reiterating a developmental narrative that presupposed a sequentially valuable, rational, and consequently moral subject. As retold by Dexter, American Individualism’s line of fiction originated in a subject animated by an affective core of vitality and an instinctive initiative that had evolved into an inherent faculty for reasonable behavior; this rationality led to pragmatic and sympathetic identifications with similarly valuable others, and eventually to an ethos of mutual helpfulness and service. Dexter’s elaboration on this developmental sequence helped to recast his acknowledgement that the pursuit of freedom must always be constrained. If a constitutive creativity and vitality yielded the American Individual’s intrinsic value and innate authority, these forces also “help[ed] to guide moral conduct.” The universal energies that constituted the autonomous individual thus endowed this subject with a particularizing liberty and power, and consequently, with a socializing “ability which would give him self-control, self-mastery, and self-direction.” Due to this tendency toward morality, Dexter argued, Herbert Hoover could creditably and ambivalently propose “the thesis that life is a ‘social concern and one of authority,’ and the antithesis that it is an individual concern and one of freedom,” and “[take] the side of neither.”

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85 Ibid., 121, 89, 96. As Tocqueville wrote of this regulated form of liberty in Democracy in America, “[American moralists] do not, therefore, deny that every man can pursue his own self-interest but they turn themselves inside out to prove that it is in each man’s interest to be virtuous.” Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, trans. Gerald E. Bevan (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 610-611.
86 Ibid., 92, 102, 106.
87 Ibid., 110.
88 Ibid., 78, 77.
89 Ibid., 73.
This ambivalence or the apparent reconciliation of liberty and regulation was enabled by the claim that authority resided within an initiating subject. “The individual becomes an individual,” Dexter declared, “because of this ability to limit and at the same time control his activity according to the principles of mental, physical, and social growth” that accompanied the impulse to discern truth. “A person thus equipped may justly demand,” he continued, “the right to freedom of expression and freedom of action because these will always be subservient to the ideal of balanced processes in both thought and action.” Because this subservience originated within what was essential to the subject, the individual could not only engage freely in ordered relations of “mutual cooperation and helpfulness,” but also pursue entwined personal and national aims that inevitably “demand[ed] an assumption of responsibility out of which grows self-restraint and self-reliance.” It was only common sense that absolute freedom precluded the attainment of desires, goals, and convictions. As Dexter argued, “When an individual begins to make plans because of the liberty which he enjoys he assumes responsibility, for there are few, if any, plans which do not involve limitation of time, space, and effort. These limitations at once influence the acceptance of duty which demands restraint—not from without but from within—self-restraint.”

Dexter’s reference to the “acceptance of duty” makes evident how volition mediated between the American Individual’s role as a vital, initiating force and the admission that this subject could enact its freedom only in the context of a pre-existing political and economic order. Labeled self-restraint in Dexter’s text, his declarations of the American Individual’s express consent admitted to an inescapable imperative of regulation, while it also denied that this discipline originated in a juridical and potentially punitive source external to the subject be it either the state or a vengeful deity. “[O]rdered freedom largely depends,” Dexter concluded, “upon the ability of individuals to restrain themselves,” and because this discipline originated in a

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90 Ibid., 120-121.
creative vitality that assured the individual’s intrinsic worth, rational behavior, and moral authority, this “obedience to law [was] the result of inward impulsion rather than outward compulsion.” Restraint exercised in the course of pursuing the fruits of liberty was thus “dynamic, purposeful, and constructive.” A vote for Herbert Hoover, Dexter declared, would enable liberalism’s developmental narrative to continue unfolding by protecting the material opportunities and political entitlements that “help[ed] every individual to respond to the creative urge or upthrust of his life.”

Dexter’s explication of Hoover’s American Individualism shows that preserving this doctrine’s ethical veracity required not simply sustaining the affective source of the individual’s self-regulating liberty, but as significantly, ensuring the appropriate investment of these catalyzing instincts and impulses. The constitution instituted, for example, “a national aim;” however, as Dexter acknowledged, the full meaning of the rights and responsibilities it delineated exceeded this documentary representation. This intangibility prevented education from precisely conveying what the constitution articulated, and in order to be imbibed “as an ideal or an aim for each citizen, its spirit must be communicated through emotional responses as well as by means of intellectual contacts.” Only through these means could a national ideal become a personal conviction. Piquing this emotional response required attaching constitutional principles to the subject’s natural initiative in order to render public goals synonymous with private desires. Uniting individual longings with national objectives ensured progress, Dexter explained, because “[a]n aim prevents deviation from a chosen course of action, or it acts as a stimulus in denying place to irrelevant activities.” Dexter’s reference to stimulus signals the necessary presence of personal desire in carrying out public pursuits, and like Hoover, he grappled with American

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91 Ibid., 121, 137.
92 Ibid., 122.
93 Ibid., 78.
94 Ibid., 97.
95 Ibid., 97-98.
Individualism’s constitutive dependency on a desiring, initiating subject who consequently possessed an authoritative capacity to consent, but also the potential to pursue less rational and constructive forms of freedom.

**An Abundance of Opportunity**

Hoover found a resolution to the potential contradiction between personal desire and unifying national aims in the right to opportunity that he extolled. Fundamental to the ethics of American Individualism, opportunity was a comprehensive term in Hoover’s discourse: It referred to a material condition and a political entitlement, a stimulant to longing and a constraint upon it, the prerequisite of individual interest and the root of sympathetic sociality. Believing that American society had been founded upon “the attainment of the individual,” Hoover dedicated himself during the 1920s to protecting the potential of every individual “to take that position in the community to which his intelligence, character, ability, and ambition entitle him.”

Almost a decade after penning these words, Hoover, the presidential candidate, reiterated, “If I could drive the full meaning and importance of maintaining equality of opportunity into the very consciousness of the American people, I would feel I had made some contribution to American life.” Informing this pledge was Hoover’s fear that frustrated aspirations and material want would make Americans vulnerable to the same political radicalism and emotional irrationalism that gripped postwar Europe after the dissolution of its autocratic political regimes. American Individualism and its characterizing reverence for opportunity had alternatively originated, as Hoover explained it, in the freedom that an open frontier and its plenitude offered to every individual to act on his inherent initiative.

Arguing in the vein of Frederick Jackson Turner, Hoover identified the unsettled western frontier as the original cornucopia that initiated the evolutionary development of the nation’s

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97 Ibid., *The New Day*, 204.
distinctive political philosophy. In his rendition of the nation’s founding, the animating force of dissent that troubled Hoover in the working-class radicals resurfaced in the early settlers’ quest to escape political and economic domination. Yet, the vast frontier and the opportunities that it supplied for material security and independence transformed destructive, revolutionary impulses into a constructive impetus for self-determination that gave rise to the political ideals and institutions that sublimated more primal desires for power. “The American pioneer is the epic expression of [our] individualism,” Hoover explained, for “the pioneer spirit is the response to the challenge of opportunity, to the challenge of nature, to the challenge of life, to the call of the frontier.” It was through this Darwinian struggle against “the forces of nature on a new continent” that “[o]ur individualism [became] rooted in our very nature.” 98 Arising from this exertion of might was, Hoover later declared, “a system unique with America—an expression of the spirit and environment of our people—it is just American.” 99

Pioneers’ elemental battles in a state of nature thus not only strengthened the American Individual’s characteristic initiative, but also engendered the restraint that tempered its expression. Reminiscent of Tocqueville, Hoover acknowledged that the cultivation of an uncivilized land required the formation of strategic alliances. Though important, the egoistic pursuit of property was an insufficient foundation for sustaining American liberalism’s ethical presumption of a rationally and consensually self-regulating subject. More than pragmatic cooperation was required to transform economically self-determining individuals into the collectively self-governing citizens of a sovereign nation. Although regarded by liberalism’s classical theorists as the site of irrational, destructive competition, the frontier as Hoover imagined was a fertile plain where both rationality and sympathy were cultivated through the

98 Hoover, American Individualism, 64-65.
99 Myers, State Papers, 398.
satisfaction of acquisitive appetites. The opportunity it allowed to act upon desires for attainment and achievement enabled true leaders to rise to the fore and propagate for others what they had reaped. Only through the fulfillment of these primary impulses, Hoover believed, could “[t]he inherited instincts of self-preservation, acquisitiveness, fear, kindness, hate, curiosity, desire for self-expression, for power, for adulation” be placed in the service of “good” rather than “evil.”

Hoover’s own biography helps to illustrate the purpose of natural abundance in supplying the opportunities from which the American Individual’s ethical nature developed. Hoover’s assiduously crafted public image portrayed the orphan from the Iowa frontier as an archetypal American despite a twenty-year absence from his native land. Flattering depictions of Hoover’s early life recount a tale of immense fortitude in the face of significant hardship: the early death of his parents, the stern religiosity of the uncle who acted as their surrogate, the determination to acquire a college degree, and the tremendous effort to succeed at Stanford University despite early, educational deficiencies. Inculcated with the values of his pioneering parents, Hoover was hardly felled by these obstacles. These formative experiences instilled a mettle that enabled Hoover to explore the untapped natural resources of countries with still open frontiers. Honed in marginally civilized environments, the innate vigor, bravery, perseverance, and practical intelligence that Hoover possessed in such large measure established this modern day pioneer as one of the most preeminent architects of the burgeoning mining industry.

Compelled by the force of his initiative rather than fortune or fame, Hoover traversed the globe in his ascent from mining engineer to self-made millionaire. In the words of the journalist

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100 In *Fables of Abundance*, Jackson Lears articulates the theoretical framework for understanding the frontier as a manifestation of plenitude that evoked in Hoover’s Protestant forebears’ sexualized and atavistic longings both to possess and to be possessed. Also on the founding fathers’ encounter with a presumably unsettled territory, see Holland, Chapter Two; Jimmy Casas Klausen, “Room Enough: America, Natural Liberty and Consent,” *Journal of Politics* 69 (August 2007): 760-769.

Will Irwin, Hoover’s Stanford classmate, close friend, and biographer, Hoover explored untapped and uncivilized frontiers “from the equator to the artic” where he “planted a nucleus of American methods [and] created a demand for American goods.”¹⁰² Not only had Hoover the imperialist introduced American techniques, machinery, and values to these foreign outposts, but on them, this exemplary American had also “stamped his character.”¹⁰³ The indelibility of this imprint suggested to Irwin that Hoover’s experience abroad had wrought a “deepening of his powers,” which he described as a captivating, “subtle aura of mastery and integrity,” and this foundational balance of authority and restraint served to channel “a mental energy growing and rising so steadily as to overflow every boundary.”¹⁰⁴ It was an animating force that propelled Hoover’s meteoric rise to international acclaim, while also ensuring that he “remained as Yankee of the Yankees—as American as baseball or apple-pie.”¹⁰⁵

Hoover, the Yankee, was comfortably ensconced in the bastion of London’s upper-crust civility with his wife and two young sons when war erupted in Europe. Hoover’s decision to relinquish not only his executive position, but also the investments that promised to yield highly remunerative wartime dividends marks a significant turning point in his personal narrative because of what it illuminated about the man who would become known to his loyalists as “the Chief.” Will Irwin recalled that, upon deciding to renounce his commercial interests, Hoover declared, “‘Well, let the fortune go to hell.’ “I felt then, I know now,” Irwin explained, “that I had witnessed a significant moment in history.”¹⁰⁶ Such passages reveal Irwin attempting to incite admiration for the selfless acts of heroism and service that Hoover evinced both before and during the war by deploying familiar, classical idioms and ideals to portray his boss as the epitome of civic virtue. Irwin wanted the world to know that Hoover “had tossed aside his

¹⁰³ Ibid., 112.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 105-106, 71, 118.
¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 115.
¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 135-136.
business and business opportunities . . . was serving without salary and paying his own traveling expenses; and he seemed bent on fighting even fame.” Wealth had satisfied Hoover, and financial security had conferred an independence that enabled Hoover to set aside his personal, pecuniary interests and to pursue instead the common good in a spirit of disinterestedness. Hoover would go on to serve during World War I in several humanitarian capacities, allowing himself to be conscripted, first, in the provision of aid to Belgium and, then, in the initiative to conserve and allocate foodstuffs on the American homefront.

This republican ethos of service also frames Irwin’s representation of Hoover’s selfless decision to accept an appointment as Harding’s Secretary of Commerce. During his eight-year tenure, Hoover worked tirelessly to expand the responsibilities and economic influence of his relatively minor department. Ironically, Hoover’s political opponents had regarded the rising politician as safely contained within a veritable bureaucratic dungeon, but under Hoover’s assertive, vigorous, and occasionally antagonistic leadership, the Commerce Department experienced a remarkable growth in its size and scope during the 1920s. Hoover’s activities as Secretary of Commerce can best be described as an effort to keep open through human ingenuity and invention the natural frontier that had been declared closed. Reflecting on his accomplishments in the Commerce Department that he intended to build upon if elected president, Hoover told the enthusiastic voters who gathered in Madison Square Garden in 1928: “The first necessity of any nation is the smooth functioning of the vast business machinery for employment, feeding, clothing, housing, and providing luxuries and comforts to a people. Unless these basic elements are properly organized and function . . . [t]here can be no advance in the fundamental ideals of a people.” While Hoover conceded that he might “talk of business,” he

107 Ibid., 175.
engaged in such utilitarian topics only because he viewed “prosperity merely as the rich soil from which spiritual virtues as well as education and art and satisfactions in life can grow.”

Given this perceived dependency of American Individualism and its potential for altruism on material abundance, sustaining economic opportunity was of utmost importance to Hoover. As Secretary of Commerce, Hoover consequently applied himself to opening industrial and scientific paths to achievement. “There will always be a frontier to conquer or to hold as long as men think, plan, and dare,” he promised. Corporate and technological innovations thus represented for Hoover not a departure, but rather a modern manifestation of a founding American spirit. Hoover perceived himself as uniquely equipped to create new economic frontiers, for he viewed this undertaking as the task of an engineer. Engineering was not simply an occupation for Hoover, but an ethos he wholeheartedly embraced and one that shaped his professional, humanitarian, and political activities. Hoover’s propensity to think, speak, and act in a managerial idiom makes him representative of the generation of men who came of age at the turn of the twentieth century. To men such as the penniless Hoover, engineering offered a source of esteem and path to leadership within a rapidly modernizing and fluid culture. These twentieth-century innovators nevertheless expressed a deep ambivalence about the economic wealth that they endeavored to generate through science rather than physical conquest. Jackson Lears has explored this obsession with controlled productivity as a variation upon a distinctively American fixation on self-control rooted in Protestant culture and the simultaneous desire for and

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110 Ibid., 143-144.
112 On Hoover’s political orientation as a “social-control Progressive” relative to an ethos of engineering that coalesced in the early twentieth century, see Joan Hoff Wilson, 35-41. Kendrick Clements’s conclusions support Wilson’s early analysis of the extent to which Hoover’s professional assumptions and occupations shaped his approach to political economy. He explains that Hoover developed “a belief common among American engineers—that technical advances and efficiency could benefit everybody without deleterious side effects. He saw himself not as a conservative defending the interests of capital against labor, but as a progressive offering an advancing standard of living to everyone.” Clements, *Hoover, Conservation, and Consumerism*, 27. See also 46-47, and Clements, *The Life of Herbert Hoover*, 198. A similar analysis appears in Blaszczyk, 116-118.
fear of an implicitly feminine plenitude embedded within it. As nineteenth-century forms of pursuit and containment declined, a managerial ethos coalesced in the service of creating new material signifiers of abundance through implicitly masculine, rationalized and technocratic forms of domination. This shift toward more instrumental and utilitarian modes of reasoning nevertheless incited among its proselytizers a need, as Lears writes, “to locate a transcendent source of meaning, a secure basis for values in a society whose religious and moral foundations were increasingly problematic.”

Herbert Hoover located this source in the nation’s liberal values, and this conviction and the aims it inspired informed his contributions to the nation’s rapidly evolving political economy. “Liberalism is a force truly of the spirit,” he proclaimed, “a force proceeding from the deep realization that economic freedom cannot be sacrificed if political freedom is to be preserved.” Hoover’s intent to transcend the disenchanted instrumentalism he promoted was no rhetorical ploy, and recognizing its ideological purpose complicates histories such as Allen Brinkley’s examination of Hoover’s economic and political policy during the interwar period. Brinkley argues that the successful implementation of technocratic management techniques during World War I helped to alter the perspective of many progressives on the relationship between the economy and the state. Exemplifying Brinkley’s argument, Hoover emerged from his wartime experience convinced of the government’s potential role in facilitating economic development and stability. The levels of industrial output attained during the war suggested to Hoover and many of his liberal contemporaries that a unity of purpose and the government’s practical involvement in economic affairs potentially yielded greater industrial productivity, economic stability, and social harmony. Alliances between political and industrial leaders began to deteriorate in the war’s aftermath, however, as the renewed pursuit of individual interests

113 Jackson Lears, Fables of Abundance, 204.
associated with liberalism eclipsed a more classically republican emphasis on the common good that had resurfaced during the war.\footnote{115}

As historians such as Brinkley have noted, Hoover believed in the protection and promotion of those private interests; however, this critique of his pro-business agenda misses the relationship Hoover perceived between interest as the animating force of initiative and American idealism. The spirit of Spartan sacrifice that Americans had evinced during the war neither should nor could persist beyond the necessities wrought by war, Hoover argued, for such externally imposed and enforced deprivations and unreasonable restraints “would have destroyed the initiative of our people and undermined all real progress.”\footnote{116} An ailing economy with its unpredictable business cycle nevertheless threatened the same consequences, causing a productive competition among individuals to devolve into a Hobbesian battle over limited resources. The architect of America’s modern brand of liberal capitalism sought to arrest the nation’s devolution into a warring state of nature by restoring high levels of production, employment, and consumption. Attaining this calculus led Hoover to diagnose the source of the nation’s economic woes as a matter of unsystematic planning, uncoordinated distribution, inefficient methods of production, and a destructively competitive market. As a remedy, Hoover prescribed rationalized methods of production and compliance with newly devised industrial standards.

To the mind of this ardent liberal, the iron cages of rationalization and standardization paradoxically preserved the individual’s creative initiative and impulse toward production if logically and voluntarily embraced. According to Hoover, self-interest led inevitably to self-regulating forms of cooperative organization as evinced by the rise of the corporation.\footnote{117} The

\footnote{115} Brinkley, “The Two World Wars and American Liberalism,” 88; Clements, Hoover, Conservation, and Consumerism, 3.
\footnote{116} Hoover, American Individualism, 49.
\footnote{117} Of Hoover’s perception of the corporation, William Leach has written, “In accord with Simon Patten, [Hoover] thought capitalism was potentially the most moral system in the world and the international
individualistic pursuit of profit had catalyzed collective forms of financing and production, and
the recognition of this mutual dependency promised to engender a commitment to greater social
cooperation that potentially restrained profiteering and advanced the development of American
liberalism’s more altruistic ideals. Rather than dominate and oppress, the corporation unified and
empowered, for it was “the result of our individualism,” a direct “outgrowth of the spirit of
adventure, of individual initiative, and of individual enterprise.” Such striving was inherently
regulatory, however, for the corporation was capitalized by “the aggregated small savings of our
people.” Those capitalists who depended upon this investment consequently had to become
“more sensitive to the moral opinions of the people in order to attract their support,” while at the
same time, the corporation’s profitability equally relied upon attracting consumers who happened
to be “the same kind of people they employ.” Hoover concluded that the reality of this inter-
dependency or “the sense of mutuality with the prosperity of the community” ensured that self-
interest would always remain bounded by the instrumental necessity of constraining those
interests.  

Statements such as these help to show that Hoover deployed corporate, managerial
techniques to restore conditions of economic growth as a means of preserving the uniquely
American form of individual liberty and social equality that, he believed, plenitude created.
Hoover’s tactics for stimulating and stabilizing the economy reflect an approach that Charles
Maier has termed “productionism,” and their ultimate outcomes support Maier’s critique that this
means of promoting economic growth to create the appearance of expanding opportunity and
aggregate wealth actually disguises increasing inequality.  

capitalist—the man with the widest grasp of things who always ‘cooperated’ with others and who thought
in ‘social harmonies’—the most moral individual of all. It was in the government’s interest, therefore, to
assist business endeavors because they would lead to the creation of a better humanity.” Leach, Land of
355.

118 Hoover, American Individualism, 45, 39-41; The New Day, 159.
was hardly the consequence Hoover intended. “[T]here is vastly wider field for gains to all of us,” he explained, “through cheapening the costs of production and distribution through the eliminating of their wastes, from increasing the volume of product by each and every one doing his utmost, than will ever come to us even if we can think out a method of abstract justice in sharing which did not stifle production of the total product.”

“The only road to further advance in the standard of living is by greater invention, greater elimination of waste, greater production and better distribution of commodities and services,” and this increase in concerted effort led to an implicitly Edenic world without want, “for by increasing their ratio to our numbers and dividing them justly we each will have more of them.”

Regarded by Hoover as panaceas for economic scarcity, standardization and efficiency reduced outlays at the expense of neither capital nor labor. Through these methods of economization, profits rather than prices would rise, Hoover naively argued, enabling capital to pass along the financial benefits of greater earnings and reduced costs to labor in the incentives of higher wages and affordable goods. Unaware of the looming economic crisis, he continued to promote corporate productivity on the campaign trail. Touting his record as Commerce Secretary, Hoover advised his listeners on the “joint effort” through which labor and capital would continue to “steadily increase the production of goods by each individual and . . . at the same time decrease the cost of goods.” This mutual pursuit of inter-dependent interests supposedly yielded both an individually liberating and socially equalizing effect. “As we increase the volume of goods,” Hoover explained, “we have more to divide, and we thereby steadily lift the standard of living of the whole people.”

120 Hoover, American Individualism, 35.
121 Ibid., 32-33.
122 Hoover, New Day, 181.
123 Ibid.
The imperative of preserving the liberal state’s idealistically self-restrained creators in the context of material abundance created a quandary for Hoover and many of his contemporaries: They grappled with the importance of simultaneously inciting the egoistic interests that a commodity-based abundance served and channeling those acquisitive desires into behaviors and ideals beneficial to the political economy. The historian Kendrick Clements has written that Hoover joined the era’s economists and social scientists in trying to understand and mitigate the cultural, political, and social consequences of the increasing leisure and affluence that Americans across the socioeconomic spectrum enjoyed in the 1920s. Clements has also speculated about Hoover’s engagement with Thorstein Veblen’s critiques of the emergent consumer economy. In the spirit of Veblen, consumerism’s more conservative detractors harped upon the “conspicuous consumption” of items bearing social merit rather than value added by labor and the effect of industrialized mechanization on an instinct to produce and the pride it engendered. Perceiving an irresolvable conflict between labor and capital, commercial capitalism’s critics also castigated what Veblen called the vendibility exhibited by capitalists in the pursuit of profits that precluded any positive impact on the community at large.

Hoover shared such producerist concerns about the demoralizing effects of industrial labor on working men and women, and in republican fashion, he fretted that the license and irrationality associated with consumer decadence would compromise the virtues of American civilization.¹²⁴ Having observed the failings of other cultures and political systems, however, Hoover more liberally concluded, “Our problems are the problems of growth. They are not the

problems of decay.” Adaptation to change was consequently in order, for modern consumers compelled by desire exhibited a malleability in the pursuit of their material interests that aroused in Hoover and his contemporaries fears similar to those evoked by working-class protesters’ emotional volatility and perceived credulity. Linking Hoover’s concerns about consumerism and working-class radicalism was his self-proclaimed intent to preserve American citizens’ capacity for self-restraint, for the individual’s autonomy, rationality, and volition were jeopardized in each instance. Hoover’s dilemma places him squarely within the transition between what Jackson Lears has described as a psychology of scarcity and one of abundance that marked the turn of the twentieth century. His attempt to reconcile morality with new forms of liberty recapitulated his liberal forefather, John Locke’s, struggle with money’s impact on the independent individual’s character. While economic relations of exchange had given rise to and continued to support political relations of equality among white men, they also precluded this identity of possession and interest by inciting wants that, in surpassing basic needs, threatened the reason and volition to which economic behavior ideally led. Relative to this dilemma, local institutions, a culturally pervasive Protestant spirit of sacrifice and self-denial, as well as contractual and domestic idioms of restraint had tempered the potentially hedonistic impact of economic growth in agrarian America. Yet, a morality that served in one century to facilitate the market’s expansion proved inappropriate to that task in the next. New modes of acquisition and accumulation were needed as were attendant behaviors, values, and standards of morality.

The economist Simon N. Patten stood at the forefront in articulating these. The historian William Leach has argued that Patten “supplied . . . the perfect ethical rationale for the constant production of new goods or for what later came to be called a ‘full growth economic system.’”

125 Myers, State Papers, 401.
126 Peter Berkowitz, Virtue and the Making of Modern Liberalism (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 87-88. As Berkowitz writes of Locke: “Money enhances the value of the right of property but also creates new opportunities for its abuse, and so heightens the need for virtue.”
127 Lears, Rebirth of a Nation, 64-67, 246-247.
128 Leach, 244.
The corporation served this goal, and because its function was a reflection of economic law, it possessed a moral legitimacy and purpose. In his theories of political economy, Patten returned to Adam Smith’s equation between hedonism and sympathy and to this seminal, free market proponent’s oft neglected assumption about the symbiosis of production and consumption. He consequently articulated a consumption-based theory of modern morality that fundamentally departed from implicitly Calvinist and republican concerns about consumer depravity, luxury, and decadence. Patten vehemently eschewed the ascetic self-denial preached in the Presbyterian churches of his Midwestern childhood, arguing instead that, only in the absence of externally imposed, juridical restraints, could people act more rationally and morally. This conviction reflected Patten’s fixation on an economic law of marginal utility that, as he defined it, placed the catalyzing force of human desire for pleasure and for “the new” in the service of economic growth and allowed this intrinsic longing to unfold in an ever-shortening cycle of wish fulfillment to an inevitable point of satiation. Satisfying visceral desires for novelty, enjoyment, and comfort led not, however, to inertia and stagnation, but rather to a redirection of this animating force into humanitarian and altruistic pursuits. The key to morality consequently lay in unleashing, expressing, and pursuing something vital and elemental within man himself. Even in its most libertine and hedonistic form, then, individualism inevitably led for Patten both to expedient forms of cooperation, to disciplined labor, and to the evolutionary development of self-regulating ideals such as compassion and sympathy that eased relations among autonomous individuals in a liberal society.129

Documenting Herbert Hoover’s engagement with Patten’s work has eluded historians, but the economists and social scientists who advised him were undoubtedly familiar with one of the era’s most innovative thinkers. The biographies of Hoover and Patten share some superficial

129 Donohue, Chapter Three; Leach, 231-244; Lears, Fables of Abundance, 113-117, 129; Ibid., Rebirth, 247, 266-267.
similarities given their respective ages and devout Midwestern upbringings; yet, while Patten renounced his faith and his agrarian roots, Hoover secularized his mother’s Quakerism and continued to celebrate the values that, he believed, originated on the American frontier. Hoover’s conceptualization of political economy nevertheless reflects the pervasiveness of Patten’s theories in shaping the ethical effects of abundance. Hoover adamantly insisted that opportunity enabled men to act on their intrinsic desires for self-determination. As the modern manifestation of material plenitude, consumerism ensured the progressive transcendence over traditional, hierarchical forms of regulation rooted in patriarchal authority, localized provincialism, religious dogma, and intractable class relations. Surmounting these sources of dominion enabled the political ideals of liberty and equality to continue flourishing, and as significantly, preserved the volition upon which a polity of self-governing individuals depended.

In his public statements and policy initiatives throughout the 1920s, Hoover proposed that corporate production and consumerist modes of property accumulation sustained the individual initiative that, in turn, engendered the embodied discipline, cooperative virtues, and acknowledged right of opportunity characteristic of nineteenth-century individualism. Rationalized labor was not an end, but rather a means to acquire “better homes, automobiles, radios, and a thousand things for the family that were utterly unknown a generation ago” and continued to remain inaccessible elsewhere in the world. Although he celebrated the acquisition of this standard of living and the discipline its attainment required, Hoover disavowed the significance of the commodities themselves: “[T]hese tangible things which we can reduce to

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130 What Donohue argues of Patten could be claimed about Hoover: Intending to eliminate pain and cost from the production and distribution of surplus value, “Patten was far more interested in constructing a blueprint for an economy without conflict rather one for a consumer-oriented welfare state. Nevertheless, his rejection of producerist notions of equity and his surplus economy thinking inevitably pushed him in a consumerist direction. . . .Patten, however, looked at the economy as both a system of consumption and a system of production.” Donohue, 95, 97. Kendrick Clements notes that, while Hoover’s awareness of Patten’s theories eludes documentation, the two men grappled with the same problems. Clements, Hoover, Conservation, and Consumerism, 54; Ibid., The Life of Herbert Hoover, 201.

131 Hoover, New Day, 69-70.
statistics and comparisons are but a part of America.” Modern possessions and pleasures instead ensured the progressively evolving manifestation of “[t]he great intangibles of the spirit of a people.” Statements such as these construed American’s unprecedented socioeconomic mobility as evidence of the conjoined material and spiritual enrichment that followed from longing’s fulfillment. As Hoover assured his more skeptical, conservative listeners, “[T]he whole purpose and ideal of this economic system which is distinctive of our country is to increase the standard of living by the adoption and the constantly widening diffusion of invention and discovery amongst the whole of our people.” “Our economic system is but an instrument of the social advancement of the American people,” he explained, one that “add[s] to the security and richness of life of every individual. It by no means comprises the whole purpose of life, but it is the foundation upon which can be built the finer things of the spirit. Increase in enrichment must be the objective of the Nation, not decrease.”

**The Better Home that Herbert Hoover Built**

Believing in the ideological significance of material riches led Hoover to amass unprecedented influence over the economy’s management during the 1920s, while doing so in ways consistent with his repeated warnings about the dangers that an expansive, regulatory bureaucracy represented for individual initiative. Hoover’s intervention in the housing industry, which he perceived as essential to the economy’s general health and vitality, particularly

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132 Ibid., 401. Blaszyczyk argues for example that Hoover promoted through a standard of living “the idea of a carefully planned and efficient materialism.” She further explains that Hoover hardly perceived a standard of living as “a stifling weapon of social control.” Rather, the Commerce Secretary viewed an “idealized model against which the realistic and attainable goals be set” as providing for “the most advanced level of physical comfort.” Blaszyczyk, 115, 134.


134 Hoover perceived the department, according to Richard Norton Smith, as “a dynamic laboratory for his theory of a federal government eager to encourage private associations as the surest path to progress for all without domination by any.” Richard Norton Smith, 98. Historian Alan Brinkley has argued that Hoover used the Commerce Department to create “a cooperative relationship among labor, capital, and the state.” Brinkley, “Historians and the Interwar Years,” 120. See also, Clements, *The Life of Herbert Hoover*, Chapter Fourteen; Clements, “Agent of Change: Herbert Hoover as Secretary of Commerce,” in *Uncommon Americans*, 93-105.
illustrates how the Commerce Secretary envisioned his department’s role in promoting economic growth and ideological stability. In the early 1920s, construction was somewhat analogous to the Wild West of the economic frontier: It was a chaotically unsystematic enterprise that abounded with untapped potential for creating new jobs and investment opportunities and for fueling the growth of related industries and consumer markets. One of Hoover’s reports as Secretary of Commerce highlighted the rationale for the government’s interest in housing and its essential relationship to economic development: “With incomes rising steadily as a result of increased productivity in the nation’s industries, and with the widespread ownership of automobiles, enabling more extensive suburban development, the opportunities for a worthwhile advance in home living standards and for increased home ownership of single detached dwellings, is [sic] particularly great at the present time.”

A team of experts assembled within the Commerce Department’s Division of Building and Housing studied such minute issues as well as more comprehensive topics including building codes, zoning ordinances, and financing tools. By “trying to bring about a wider consideration of the values of home ownership, and help disseminate information that will help home buyers and builders in solving their problems,” the division served Hoover’s conviction that “it is to individual home ownership that we are to look for the driving force that must be behind real advances in our standard of living.” Authorized only to gather data, organize conferences, and make recommendations, the Division of Building and Housing rejected wartime initiatives to alleviate a critical housing shortage through publicly-funded programs for industrial workers and

135 “Better Homes and Decreased Costs through Elimination of Waste in Construct,” 11 January 1928, 36, Commerce Papers, Box 64, Building and Housing, 1928, file 01225, Hebert Hoover Presidential Library (hereafter cited as HHPL). In a 1921 memorandum, Hoover explained, “With a housing shortage on the one hand and an idleness of labor on the other, the subject of homes and general construction received my early attention upon becoming Secretary of Commerce, for the waste of unemployed labor is the greatest of all wastes and the proper housing of our citizenry is a factor for human efficiency.” Commerce Papers, Box 67, Building and Housing, Miller, F.T. Building—Memoranda, 1921, June-August, file 10265, HHPL.
136 John Gries, “Department of Commerce and Housing,” 4 November 1922, Commerce Papers, Box 64, Building and Housing 1922 May-December, file 01218, HHPL.
returning veterans. Under the direction of John Gries, it instead functioned to bolster private enterprise by facilitating cooperation among manufacturers, architects, contractors, local business representatives, and municipal officials. While the Division continued to support the objectives of the Own Your Own Home campaign first sponsored by the United States Housing Corporation, then ceded to the Department of Labor, it privatized the program, allowing real estate brokers and manufacturers to pursue financial profits under the auspices of public service.137

Better Homes in America, Inc. replicated many of the initiatives associated with the Own Your Own Home program, although the organization adamantly asserted its own lack of commercial or political interest. Organized in 1922 and incorporated the following year, Better Homes in America was an educational, non-profit organization established to promote home ownership and home improvement. What would become a nationwide campaign began its life as a promotional event and educational project conceived by Marie Meloney in her capacity as editor of The Delineator, a popular women’s magazine owned by the Butterick Publishing Company. Meloney’s public effort to improve a private space served its purpose too well, and the enthusiastic response generated by her campaign left its creator fretful that contractors, manufacturers, retailers, and women’s clubs might co-opt her initiative for either financial or political gain. These concerns prompted Meloney to approach Herbert Hoover for assistance in transforming her personal initiative into a public service agency.138 The newly appointed Secretary of Commerce enthusiastically embraced Meloney’s proposal, and when the good friends and wartime humanitarians collaborated to transform the BHA into a nonprofit

corporation with Hoover acting as nominal president, Meloney extended the scope of her endeavor and retained a leadership role in the new organization.\textsuperscript{139}

Despite the BHA’s avowed independence, the organization became a “‘collateral arm’” of Hoover’s Commerce Department. Inspired by Ellis Hawley’s examination of state-building during the inter-war period, historians have described the BHA as one of many proto-state organizations or “‘adhocracies’” that Hoover employed to manage a rapidly modernizing nation and rationalize the cyclical operation of its economy without excessive state intervention or bureaucratic regulation. With Hoover acting as the organization’s leading supporter and the professional administrators of the Division of Building and Housing also serving on the BHA’s board of directors, the organization was, as Hoover’s publicity agent acknowledged, “exactly the thing needed to shove the whole housing and better homes ideas of the Department over.”\textsuperscript{140}

Until the decline of the BHA’s public influence and the severing of its close ties to the federal government in the early 1930s, the organization functioned both to create and satisfy public demand for home ownership. Emblematic of Hoover’s belief in the power of associational activity, the BHA also enabled Hoover to stand by his conviction that, because “we are or should be a country of local community action,” the government must only “stimulate and assist local action” and “avoid every suggestion of nationalizing these questions.”\textsuperscript{141} The BHA more than accomplished these objectives, and Hoover praised the organization in 1926 for “demonstrate[ing] once again that the spirit of association which has flourished throughout our history from the earliest log raisings and corn huskings to the present day is as strongly ingrained

\textsuperscript{140} Donald Wilhelm, Memorandum for the Secretary, 22 June 1922, Commerce Department Bureau of Standards, Commerce Papers, HHPL; Hutchison, “Shaping Housing and Enhancing Consumption: Hoover’s Interwar Housing Policy,” 89. Hoover described the BHA as a “collateral arm” of the commerce department’s building and housing division in a letter to Coolidge, 9 January 1924, Commerce Papers, Box 65, Building and Housing, BHA, Inc., January-June 1924, file 10233, HHPL.
\textsuperscript{141} Hoover, Report to Harding on Dept. of Commerce’s efforts to ameliorate housing shortage, 9 February 1922, Commerce Papers, Box 63, Building and Housing, Jan-April 1922, file 01217, HHPL.
in the American people as their individualism.” 142 In thanking the organizers of the 1930 Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, Hoover similarly assured, “It is obviously not our purpose to set up the Federal Government in the building of homes.” 143 At the same time, the BHA facilitated the Commerce Department’s efforts to exert its influence over a problem with a “distinctively national character.” 144 Although “the Government could not directly enter upon the business of building and dealing with homes,” it could help structure the BHA’s educational programs to preserve the “free initiative” of the American people and “organize the finer instincts of industry and commerce.” 145

Identified publically with Hoover’s dynamism and directed professionally by a staff of professional technocrats and public servants, Better Homes in America expanded its influence across the country. In pledging the Department of Agriculture’s support for the program, Secretary Henry C. Wallace acknowledged that the BHA had become more than a mere organization; it was a “movement.” 146 Participation in the BHA’s annual campaigns certainly supported this label, for it defied every established boundary. The BHA’s diverse collection of eager supporters included the young and the old, men and women, the wealthy and the aspiring, the native and foreign born, black and white citizens, rural farmers and urban apartment dwellers, and those divergently motivated by either public interest or personal profit. Whereas the first campaign in 1922 had involved only 500 communities, a decade later, 9,772 acknowledged

142 Better Homes in America, Guidebook for Better Homes Campaigns in Rural Communities and Small Towns, no. 11 (Washington, DC: Better Homes in America, October 1926), 5.
143 Myers, State Papers, 374.
144 Hoover, report to Harding.
committees either built or reconditioned over 800 demonstration homes.\textsuperscript{147} Even after the stock market’s crash and the onset of economic depression, Better Homes in America remained active and continued to provide a “unique service” that satisfied “an enthusiastic local demand,” as James Ford, the BHA’s former executive director, wrote in his 1933 report to the group’s board of directors. Ford urged the board to continue the organization’s work despite its dwindling financial reserves and Americans’ generally dire economic straits, citing how the BHA’s assistance “results in remarkable and extensive improvements in homes, [and] mobilizes the voluntary service of more than 100,000 individuals annually in the promotion of home improvement in their own communities.”\textsuperscript{148}

The BHA’s emphasis on domestic reform and civic education, the moral overtones of its recommendations, and its targeted populations of rural, working-class, and immigrant citizens have also suggested to historians that the Progressive Era’s assimilationist objectives persisted in the age of declining political and social idealism that followed World War I. Speaking and writing in idioms resonant with Progressivism, the BHA’s staff of university-trained technocrats endeavored to make a visually homogenizing and, implicitly, a morally regulating standard of living available to an ever increasing number of native born and immigrant citizens whose flow into and across the country intensified perceptions of a nation in flux.\textsuperscript{149} While stimulating construction promised to return idle laborers to work and distracted these potential political insurgents from radical, “foreign” ideas, improving the quality and quantity of the homes they constructed served to cultivate American values and attitudes within their wives and children. “Overcrowding, insanitation, ugliness of house, grounds or furnishings, and needless drudgery in

\textsuperscript{147} Hutchison, “American Housing, Gender, and the Better Homes Movement,” 104-105.
\textsuperscript{148} James Ford, Report to Board of Directors, Better Homes in America, 9 December 1933, JST Papers, Box 2, File “Better Homes in America, Inc., Correspondence, 1923-33, HHPL. Before assuming the directorship of Better Homes in America, Ford served as a professor of social ethics at Harvard and as the director of the Homes Registration and Information Service of the United States Housing Corporation.
\textsuperscript{149} This is Regina Lee Blaszczyk’s argument, which traces its historiographical lineage to Joan Hoff Wilson’s 1975 biography of Hoover. Blaszczyk, 113-135.
housework”—these were the deficits of tenements and outdated houses that, according to Hoover, diminished “self-respect and productive activity” in their inmates.\footnote{Hoover, “Press Release for Better Homes Week,” 12 May 1924, Commerce Papers, Building & Housing, HHPL.} Promoting home ownership and formulating the scientific standards that would improve the home’s physical structure, aesthetic appeal, and management consequently consumed the BHA’s organizers. They sought to carry out President Calvin Coolidge’s endorsement, one penned with Hoover’s assistance, to fulfill a need for “homes in which homelife can reach its finest levels, and in which can be reared happy children and upright citizens.”\footnote{Hoover to Calvin Coolidge, 9 January 1924, Commerce Papers, Box 65 Building and Housing, BHA, Inc., 1924 Jan-June, file 01233, HHPL.}

Many shared Hoover’s assessment that adequate, appropriate housing preserved in an increasingly heterogeneous citizenry the upright values and disciplined behaviors upon which social stability depended. The architect Grosvenor Atterbury argued that a working-class man needed “in his housing the equivalent of his cheap shoes and ready-made clothes.”\footnote{Grosvenor Atterbury to James R. Angell, President of the Carnegie Corporation, 9 August 1921, Commerce Papers, Box 64, Building and Housing, 01228, HHPL.} Atterbury referred not to the quality of these homes, but rather to the affordability derived from reducing the cost of their production. His proposals included standardizing housing construction by moving the process from “the field into the factory” and, there, organizing the “wholesale production of housing on the principles of shop manufacture.” He needed, of course, financial assistance to execute this plan, and his appeal landed on the desk of James Angell at the Carnegie Corporation. Atterbury assured the foundation’s president that neither personal nor financial interests motivated his appeal. Rather, his proposals to help ameliorate “the present paralysis in the so-called housing problem,” originated in the “belief that the quantity production of cheap dwellings on lines determined by really highly skilled designers and experts in all departments would . . . have an educational value in introducing standards of simple good taste and honest construction
that would do much toward advancing the cultural education of wage earners, as well as their health, social standards and contentment.”

As Atterbury’s remarks suggest, the BHA’s advocates believed that living in a well-designed and well-furbished home supplied educational and aesthetic benefits that engendered self-restraint within those who pursued this ideal. Examples abound of Hoover’s belief that both disciplined labor and consumption followed from the desire to own a home of one’s own. This longing not only compelled a man “to work harder outside his home,” but also “to spend his leisure more profitably.” “It is mainly through the hope of enjoying the ownership of a home that the latent energy of any citizenry is called forth,” Hoover elsewhere proclaimed, and this “desire for home ownership has, without question, stimulated more people to purposeful saving than any other factor.” Hoover similarly argued that pursuing a primal longing for a home “develops thrift and self-denial; a thing of lasting value is kept in the foreground and all energies are bent toward attaining it.” For the home to become truly a source of “lasting satisfaction,” however, its creation demanded more than hard work. It also necessitated “careful observation and forethought” as well as a sound, rational grasp of the principles and standards developed by the housing experts and home economists whom Hoover assembled in the Commerce

153 Grosvenor Atterbury to James R. Angell, President of the Carnegie Corporation, 1 September 1921, Commerce Papers, Box 64, Building and Housing, 01228, HHPL. Even Hoover himself turned to private financing rather than government subsidies for his housing initiatives, requesting funds from the Laura Spelman Rockefeller foundation to support Better Homes in America and to Chicago philanthropist Julius Rosenwald to capitalize an experimental mortgage program for working-class families.
154 Hoover, quoted in How to Own Your Own Home, ed. John M. Gries and James S. Taylor, no. 7 (Washington, DC: Better Homes in America, 1924), 2. This quotation helps to illustrate the similarities between Hoover’s conclusions and the ethical trajectory of consumerism developed by economist Simon Patten. Patten supplied the theoretical framework for conceiving how the instrumentality of rationalized labor could metamorphose into rational idealism as the desire for pleasure inevitably evolved beyond commodities and their visceral enjoyment and sought more enriching forms of satisfaction in the family and its home. In this respect, what William Leach argues about Simon Patten is also true of Herbert Hoover: “A steady purchase of ‘new’ goods transforms people into ‘better human beings’ by removing the differences among them and by forming the grounds for a new unity and harmony in American society.” Leach, 239.
Department’s divisions and affiliated agencies.\textsuperscript{156} Attaining these markers of a better home further required Americans “to make the best use of the devices which modern civilization has placed at their disposal,” and when pursued for this purpose, the “accumulation of goods” by consumers had a positive value in “[s]o far as it is well planned, in good taste and wisely undertaken.”\textsuperscript{157}

While Hoover argued that the desire to own a home enforced new forms of embodied discipline, he also insisted that home ownership ensured the evolutionary transformation of self-interested, acquisitive impulses into the political idealism that bound diverse citizens into a unified nation. Hoover repeatedly grappled throughout the 1920s with the recognition that actual citizens frequently failed to conform to the American Individual’s defining characteristic of rational restraint in the pursuit of their liberties. “[I]t is true,” he confessed in \textit{American Individualism}, “we do not realize the ideal; not even a single person personifies that realization.”\textsuperscript{158} On the campaign stump six years later, he remained cognizant that the altruistic potential of American Individualism had not yet been realized: “We cannot ever afford to rest at ease in the comfortable assumption that right ideas always prevail by some virtue of their own.”\textsuperscript{159} Ensuring the persistence of these virtues required reigniting rather than repressing the energies of American citizens, and this assumption caused Hoover to warn, “For the next several generations, we dare not abandon self-interest as a motive force to leadership and production.”\textsuperscript{160} Hoover consequently defined his challenge as one of stimulating and focusing the longing that, he believed, incited all action, and increasing the supply and improving the quality of American homes promised to serve this purpose. The shortage of dwellings that Americans faced after

\textsuperscript{158} Hoover, \textit{American Individualism}, 16.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid., 69.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., 17.
World War I had proven so destabilizing, for example, because it spawned “that unrest which inevitably results from inhibition of the primal instinct in us all for homes.” This assumption of a “universal yearning for better homes and the larger security, independence and freedom that they imply” helps to explain the constitutive relationship that Hoover perceived between better homes and American Individualism. He consequently directed his own political energies toward creating the homes that would stimulate within a new generation of Americans the same spirit that had “carried our pioneers westward.”

Just as the open plains had supplied the fertile ground where an ability to pursue opportunity had evolved into an avowed right of all Americans, the acquisition of a better home represented for Hoover the twentieth-century’s manifestation of this entitlement. Of owning a well-built, comfortable home Hoover declared, “[E]very American family is entitled to this experience once in a lifetime.” Yet in surveying the altered landscape of postwar America, one of his contemporaries expressed a lament that Hoover undoubtedly shared: “The real horror of the slums in our great cities is that there are no homes there, only human beings crowded indiscriminately into one room.” America was consequently on the brink of devolving, Hoover feared, into “a nation of tenants.” To avoid this absence of proprietorship and its impact on American Individualism, the newly appointed Commerce Secretary pledged to ameliorate a postwar deficit of one million homes, a promise that he reaffirmed eight years later during his bid for the presidency. “The true conception of America is not a country of 110,000,000 people,” he told a gathering of supporters, “but a nation of 23,000,000 families living in 23,000,000 homes.”

161 Hoover, “The Home as an Investment.”
162 Irwin, 251.
Republican presidential nomination boasted that, under his watch at the Department of Commerce, “3,500,000 new and better homes” had been constructed. Akin to the frontier’s bounty, these domiciles preserved American Individualism’s distinguishing characteristic, for as Hoover asserted, “We shall not have full equality of opportunity until we have attained that ultimate goal of every right-thinking citizen—the abolition of poverty of mind and home.”

“Only from confidence that this right [of opportunity] will be upheld,” he declared in a different context, “can flow that unbounded courage and hope which stimulates each individual man and woman to endeavor and to accomplishment.”

Having satisfied these basic impulses to act on individual yearnings and interests, homeownership subsequently engendered self-restraint. The readers of Charleston, West Virginia’s Daily Mail gleaned this developmental logic in an advertisement bearing the caption “Why Should One Own His Own Home.” This notice of a BHA essay contest quoted Abraham Lincoln who, for Hoover, exemplified and preserved, the uniquely American right to a fair chance: “Property is the fruit of labor, property is desirable, it is a positive good in the world. That one should be rich, shows that others may become rich, and hence is just encouragement to enterprise and industry.” When stimulated by the prospect of opportunity, however, personal interest led to sympathy rather than greed, for as the quotation continued, “[L]et him not, who is homeless, pull down the home of another, but let him work diligently and build one for himself, this by example showing that his own shall be safe from violence when built.”

As Hoover explained it, Lincoln’s seminal role in the history of American liberalism entailed promoting the liberty of proprietorship and consequently a restraining ethic of mutual respect and reciprocity. This objective had prompted the nation’s savior to open new areas of western soil to free men, and

167 Myers, State Papers, 401.
168 Hoover, New Day, 204.
169 Charleston Daily Mail, 28 February 1926, Better Homes in America, Own Your Home, 1921-24, file 01269, HHPL.
continuing Lincoln’s legacy, Hoover argued that the achievements of his Commerce Department were similar to his forebear’s Homestead Act and promotion of the railroad. In conjunction with the automobile, the rows of suburban houses now planted on the ideologically fertile ground of subdivided farmland ensured the “wider diffusion of property ownership” that preserved the freedom and equality to which all men were naturally entitled.\textsuperscript{170}

As a manifestation of opportunity, the possession of a better home thus preserved the logic of Hoover’s American Individualism. Homes that met the standards that defined a better home purportedly testified, Hoover averred, to the presence of a “strong creative instinct” among “self-reliant” Americans and a compelling desire to “strive ever for something better, and ever to make the best use of what they have.” They were a “fitting symbol of the ideals and aspirations of the family which it shelters.”\textsuperscript{171} Nothing embodied this progressive striving so well as a modernized, better home nor the courage, invention, and initiative that “are alone the property of individuals” that “abide alone in the individual mind and heart.”\textsuperscript{172} To the delegates who participated in his Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, Hoover issued this directive:

\begin{quote}
[E]very one of you here is impelled by the high ideal and aspiration that each family may pass their days in the home which they own . . . This aspiration penetrates the heart of our national well-being. It makes for happier married life, it makes for better children, it makes for confidence and security, it makes for courage to meet the battle of life, it makes for better citizenship. There can be no fear for a democracy or self-government or for liberty or freedom from homeowners no matter how humble they may be. . . . To own one’s own home is a physical expression of individualism, of enterprise, of independence, and of the freedom of spirit. We do not in our imagination attach to a transitory place that expression about a man’s home being his castle, no matter what its [sic] constitutional rights may be.\textsuperscript{173}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{170} Hoover, “Property Ownership—Address Telephoned from Washington to Dinner of Academy of Political Science, NYC, 9 March 1925, 1, “The Bible,” file 425A, HHPL.
\textsuperscript{172} Hoover, American Individualism, 14.
\textsuperscript{173} Hoover, Memoirs: The Cabinet and the Presidency, 257.
Just as a desire to marry and have a family led men of earlier generations to accept attendant obligations, home ownership was, as Hoover construed it, a supposedly consensual activity. Compelled by an essential longing, acquiring a home necessitated labor discipline in exchange for economic security, emotional satisfaction, and visceral gratification. “Private property is not a fetich [sic] in America,” Hoover declared; rather, the “right of property is a useful and necessary instrument in stimulation of initiative to the individual . . . that he may gain personal comfort, security in life, protection to his family.”174 The volitional self-regulation that ensured the fulfillment of these primary needs and desires created a foundation for perceiving the identity among citizens—the individual possession of a common right to self-determining freedom—that liberalism’s abstract understanding of equality required. This fundamental sameness was signified, Hoover declared, by the rows of houses lining the nation’s suburban streets. Supplying these to an even greater number of Americans would ensure, he proclaimed, that the pragmatic and sympathetic restraint of individual interests would continue to evolve into a reverence for the ideals that inspired the nation’s founding and established the government’s purpose.

Yet, the better home that Hoover envisioned testified to more than its inhabitants’ virtuous subscription to freedom, equality, and justice; it also metaphorically embodied these national ideals. In other words, this domicile not only required the focused initiative characteristic of American Individualism, it also preserved this animating force and the rational habits and political principles to which it led. “[A] higher and finer type of home life” served, in Hoover’s estimation, as a type of beacon “to which we can hold fast.” It was a guidepost that he regarded as necessary for navigating “the restless, shifting currents of our modern life,” wherein Americans confronted with a disorienting flood of rapid change felt “sometimes at a loss for

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ideals and standards to help us keep our bearings.”\textsuperscript{175} Reiterating this sentiment, Walter Dexter reminded prospective voters that Secretary Hoover had done much to promote home ownership because he viewed the home as “‘the throne of our highest ideals.’” “‘From the homes of America,’” Dexter further quoted, “‘must emanate that purity of inspiration only as a result of which we can succeed in self-government.’”\textsuperscript{176} For this reason, Hoover’s foreword to the BHA’s 1928 guidebook explained the organization’s “final objective” as facilitating the creation of a “happy, healthful home life and the human qualities required to attain it.”\textsuperscript{177} Once elected to the presidency, Hoover continued to expound upon the essentials that the home both harbored and exemplified, calling it “the sanctuary of our loftiest ideals.” “The bettered home surroundings . . . have brought to the average family,” he proclaimed, “a fuller life, a wider outlook, a stirred imagination, and a lift in aspirations.” Far more than an instructive environment, the better home was “the source of the spiritual energy of our people.”\textsuperscript{178}

These passages show Hoover equivocating between whether architectural bodies or actual bodies instigated and enacted the values and virtues that he defined as characteristic of American Individualism. Conducted through the Commerce Department’s activities and through organizations such as Better Homes in America, Hoover’s efforts to enumerate and demonstrate the better home’s specifications suggest a belief that kindling a desire for a dwelling that purportedly embodied liberal ideals would restore an affective investment in liberalism itself. The better home as an especially endowed and specifically designed space thus served a circular function in Hoover’s rhetoric by appearing as both the impetus and the effect of liberal citizenship. In other words, the better homes that supposedly reflected the values and virtues unique to American citizens also reified the possessions that their inhabitants were declared to

\textsuperscript{175} Hoover, “The Home and the Nation.”
\textsuperscript{176} Dexter, 161.
\textsuperscript{177} Better Homes in America, Guidebook for Better Homes Campaigns in Rural Communities and Small Towns, no. 17 (Washington DC: Better Homes in America, September 1928), 3.
\textsuperscript{178} Hoover, Excerpt from acceptance speech reprinted in The Home Modernizer, June 1929, Presidential Papers, Correspondence 1929, March-August, HHPL.
have, but did not always display. Myra Jehlen’s path breaking scholarship helps to illuminate why Hoover conceived the better home as a simultaneously a generative and reflective site in the context of liberal discourse. Regarded as a pre-political setting, the frontier seemed to liberate white men from constraining social, economic, and political relations; yet, this immense, enchanted, and supposedly empty space instantiated liberalism’s presumptions of individual autonomy and freedom through the articulation of a metaphorical identity between the settler and the unsettled land that he claimed as his own. Just as “the entrepreneurial pioneer owned the land and also identified with it,” the proprietor of a better home could claim to be all that his domicile was declared to represent.\(^\text{179}\)

Rooted in the frontier, this history of construing a symbolic identity between an owning subject and space owned suggests that Hoover’s intent to create a nation of homeowners served a purpose greater than qualifying a new generation of Americans for independent participation in the political economy. Hoover articulated a metaphorical equation between the modern embodiment of an excessively valued, primordial form of property and liberalism’s disembodied subject of economic exchange and constitutional entitlement. His conflation of person and place granted the American Individual an ontological authenticity that posited this imagined subject as prior to and independent from material and political modes of representation.\(^\text{180}\) The better home was “the very seat of its being.”\(^\text{181}\) By substantiating a liberal subject’s presumed metaphysical substrate, Hoover’s better home thus functioned within an expanding consumer economy not simply to structure and educate desire, but to misrepresent its necessary regulation as an autonomous subject’s self-determining act of volition. It was through the home’s generative body, Hoover helps to illuminate, that a diversity of necessarily desiring and potentially unruly


\(^{180}\) Paul Fairfield quotes from Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*: “Man, who could not be free if his will were determin’d by any thing, but his own desire, guided by his own Judgment.” Fairfield, 33.

\(^{181}\) Quoted in Miller, 83.
citizens could become the rightfully self-interested and ethically self-governing protagonists in a teleological narrative of American Individualism’s progressive material and ideological development.

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Herbert Hoover’s intent to preserve the public ideal of American Individualism proved inseparable from his agenda to revitalize an ostensibly private, domestic space. His understanding of the home’s simultaneously reflective and constructive function helps to illustrate how a liberal state might depend upon a particular type of subject, but avoid actively creating it through imposed regulations when a natural desire for a home achieved a similar effect in the guise of freedom. As Hoover articulated its ideological purpose, the better home did more than simply socialize citizens to become law-abiding citizens. In the context of consumer capitalism and its attendant effects on the nation’s culture, a hygienic, well-managed, and beautiful dwelling symbolically reconstituted the longingly self-interested and virtuously self-restrained subject that American liberalism has historically presupposed. While a better home signified both the freedom and renunciation that characterizes liberal subjectivity, this architectural body also appeared to resolve this contradiction. Depicted as the acquisition of a supposedly primal desire, Hoover’s idealized home served to reify presumptions about its inhabitants’ autonomy and, consequently, their capacity to consent to the economic and political modes of discipline that creating both a home and a democratic nation required. This “line of fiction”—the sequential progression through which the investment of desire into the creation of a supposedly private space leads to volitional regulation and eventual altruism within the public sphere—enabled Hoover to preserve the resolution to liberalism’s entwined paradoxes: Liberty is most productively and happily enacted through its rational and ethical restraint, and these consensual limitations on freedom enable opportunistic individuals to assume a collective identity and achieve mutually beneficial interests. By creating a body politic of homeowners, Hoover
thus endeavored to achieve his “one supreme end,” which encompassed the goal “that we reinforce the ties that bind together the millions of our families, [and also] that we strengthen the security, the happiness, and the independence of every home.”

Yet, in repeatedly insisting that every American innately longed for a home, particularly a better one that conformed to enumerated standards, Hoover perhaps protested too much. His determined efforts to promote the importance and the pleasure of owning such a dwelling suggest that desire for a better home was neither as natural nor as primal as he claimed. Rather, constituting the initiative of the American Individual were “original instincts, motives, and acquired desires.” Given the indeterminacy of desire’s objects, the task became to transform the home into a symbol of entitlement and independence, and as significantly, to facilitate an identification between a representative domicile and those to whom it belonged. A 1929 poll conducted by a building and loan association helps to illustrate the success of the propaganda campaigns undertaken by agencies such as Better Homes in America and the Commerce Department’s Division of Building and Housing. Replies to a query about motives for buying a house disclosed that association members sought “a sense of achievement in gaining a definite and recognized standing, the pride of ownership and the satisfaction of attaining it, and, more than any other, freedom from the dictation of a landlord.”

The next chapter will further explore how the early twentieth-century’s better home functioned to transform undirected and potentially disruptive and dissenting desires for self-expression, authenticity, security, and pleasure into the motive force of the American Individual’s productive initiative and volitional restraint. In addition to promoting home ownership, Better Homes in America helped to define during the 1920s an increasingly hegemonic conception of

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182 Hoover, New Day, 176.
183 Lands, 949, 957-959.
184 Hoover, American Individualism, 14. Emphasis in the quotation is added.
185 Roger B. Whitman, “To own or to rent—there is no question,” American Home, February 1929, 390.
the beautiful, tasteful home. The organization’s concern for promulgating the standards of taste that defined a distinctively American domestic interior helps to illuminate how aesthetic appeal served to ensure desire’s investment in a dwelling that both embodied liberal ideals and required the enactment of its virtues. It was ultimately the better home’s recognizably tasteful appearance more so than the fact of its ownership that signified the animating presence of a creative, consensually restrained subject. Demonstrating the circular construction of home and liberal subject, interior decoration was construed as both a sensately appealing space and a principled performance, both of which manifested American Individualism’s defining tenets. Undoubtedly imagining the sheer undercurtains that tastefully graced the better home, Hoover proclaimed, “It is the most precious of our possessions that the windows of every home shall look out upon unlimited hope.”

186 Hoover, New Day, 204.
Chapter Two: A Taste for Beautifully Principled Décor

When Jane Norton arrived in New York City as a recent college graduate searching for “experience” rather than “fortune” or illicit adventure, she immediately began scouring the bustling metropolis for “‘a little place of [her] own.’”¹ Her efforts yielded an apartment with a large window, high ceilings, and a neutral color scheme, and these supplied a fitting backdrop for the domestic haven Jane longed to create. She conceived this “ideal room of her dreams” before even leaving her mother’s house, and this vision led her to retain a few cherished possessions that promised to enhance her comfort not only by reminding her of what she had left behind in the South, but also by complementing the architectural features and foundational palette she hoped to find. Animating this clear image of the apartment Jane desired was a healthy dose of natural, youthful vigor, and more importantly, a “home loving” spirit. These vital possessions supplied the enterprise and fortitude that Jane would need to withstand the trials and tribulations of transforming a barren space into the domestic sanctuary this intelligent, earnest young woman intended to make for herself in a vibrant city filled with opportunities for excitement and danger.

Jane needed, however, far more than imagination, courage, and perseverance to embark upon her adventure in homemaking. Before “starting forth . . . to build a new home in a new land,” Jane also consulted several books authored by the era’s most prominent interior designers.² From these texts, Jane compiled a list of principles that she followed with almost religious fervor when decorating her apartment. First among these tenets was that of harmony.³ Following this axiom required that Jane identify a unifying theme, and then, select only those furnishings and accessories that would collectively support it. Not only did the character of each individual room need definition, but the entire apartment begged for a unifying ethos. To determine her

² Ibid., 12.
³ Ibid., 18, 40.
apartment’s motif, Jane had much to take into account. She particularly had to weigh her innate, aesthetic preferences and temperament against any room’s essential purpose and its inalterable structural features. While the decorative ideal of harmony guided Jane’s efforts to unite her motives and her medium, that of balance emphasized the importance of visual equilibrium in avoiding the impression of discord. Also not to be overlooked was the significance of utility. Jane even invented a neologism, “beautility,” to describe the “combination of the useful and the beautiful” that “should be the keynote of every house.”

Harmony, balance, fitness, and utility thus created a foundation of principled ideals from which all of Jane’s decorating decisions followed. These rules served Jane well in an urban environment that afforded the opportunity to make her own decisions. Most important for a young woman with few funds to spare, aesthetic standards armed Jane against temptation. She easily resisted the persuasive lure of the expensive Chinese vases displayed in a storefront window; she quickly recognized the inauthenticity of secondhand furniture advertised as genuine antiques; she posed astute questions to unscrupulous furniture salesmen; and most significantly, Jane tempered her desire for the bright colors that she found so irresistibly appealing. Thus guided, Jane repeatedly avoided “making [the] serious mistakes” that often led to the dire financial, social, or moral consequences potentially suffered by women adrift.

Yet, the interior of Jane’s first home of her own also revealed an otherwise ineffable substance more essential than the rules of décor she proselytized, though one manifested most fully, pleasingly, and pleasurably through these expert dictums. Her apartment expressed this essence through a richly colored, handmade coverlet that Jane had received as a gift from her mother. Jane greatly admired this “family treasure,” the product of an aunt’s handiwork, not only for the authenticity and sentimentality it evoked, but also for its appealing colors and texture.

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4 Ibid., 112.
5 For list of Jane’s rules of interior decoration that Jane followed, see Thornburgh, 19.
6 Ibid., 157.
Bearing these aesthetic and historical attributes, the coverlet enlivened the multipurpose living space of Jane’s small apartment, and she determined to harmonize the room’s other decorative elements around this symbol that connoted youthful vitality as well as an awareness of the coverlet’s connection to familial roots and a tradition of southern craftsmanship.\(^7\) Jane’s quick realization of the handmade object’s significance within the interior of her bachelorette quarters conveyed far more than a fun-loving preference for color, a fealty to her southern family, and a subscription to the rule of harmony. Its prominence within the most public space of her home implied to visitors a linear connection between the fundamentals of Jane’s own interiority and her principled knowledge of how to create appropriate relationships among an eclectic collection of decorative elements. Drawing its theme from artifacts redolent with an authenticating combination of personality and history, Jane’s apartment effectively illustrated an important distinction between the “few general principles every one should know and apply” and “[t]he way we apply them [that] shows our knowledge and good judgment and good taste or our lack of it.”\(^8\)

Over the mantel hung another example of Jane’s knowledgeable discernment. Embellishing this empty space was a distinctive, colorful print that “keyed” the whole room by making its other furnishings and accessories seem “akin.” Jane confessed that “[s]he never could explain it,” but she intuitively “knew that picture belonged in that room.”\(^9\) Through the juxtaposition of this striking adornment and its otherwise spare ornamentation, the mantel illustrated not only Jane’s success at replicating expert declarations of ostensibly timeless principles, but also “that feeling for things that prevented her from making numerous mistakes.”\(^10\) Jane’s contrivance of unity and order could hardly appear excessively oppressive, officious, or mimetic given the striking presence of this unusual accessory. The décor of Jane’s apartment was

\(^7\) Ibid., 15.  
\(^8\) Ibid., 25.  
\(^9\) Ibid., 17.  
\(^10\) Ibid., 18.
consequently both recognizably conventional and uniquely individual. Attained through the
eexercise of Jane’s good taste, this equilibrium signified a southern maiden’s disciplined regard for
her “ancestry” and her obedience to the period’s prevailing tenets of interior decorating. Yet, the
tasteful décor of Jane’s apartment also “struck a note of youth and gayety and spoke eloquently of
the spirit of the girl from the old South who dared to come alone to New York and to make her
own way in the world because she felt there was something more in life than parties and visiting
and being visited.”

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In endorsing the 1922 Better Homes in America campaign, Herbert Hoover
reiterated a traditional assumption about the home’s reflective purpose when he
pronounced, “One can always safely judge of the character of a nation by its homes.”
If the BHA’s most influential advocate promised that the windows of a better home looked
out onto a future of unlimited progress, he also believed that they offered a glimpse into
the inner recesses of the citizens charged with carrying out this exemplary national
mission. These portals into the interior of Hoover’s better home ideally revealed a
carefully planned and thoughtfully arranged decorative composition, for by the 1920s, it
had become a perceived truth and widely imposed expectation that the domestic interior
should embody its creator’s character, values, and principles. The “more” that Jane
pursued in the course of Laura Thornburgh’s manual on interior decoration was,
consequently, not simply a home, but a tastefully decorated interior space, one which
made apparent to its many visitors that there was more to Jane than initially met the eye.
Yet, explicit within Hoover’s insistence on the home’s reflective beauty was a more
troubling admission. Necessarily conforming to the authoritative prescriptions of

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11 Ibid., 19.
12 Marie Meloney, Better Homes in America Plan Book for Demonstration Week, October 9 to 14, 1922
professional decorators and tastemakers, the well-decorated interior of a better home constructively modeled the character in a narrative of liberal development that he believed American citizens must become.\textsuperscript{13}

Focused on the inter-articulation of decorative principles and liberal discourse during the 1920s, this examination of the aesthetics of suburban décor supplements previous interpretations of interior decoration as a lens for examining contemporary responses to modernization and its perceived psychical consequences.\textsuperscript{14} Home improvement and homemaking experts conceded the inevitability of an economy fueled by consumerism, and most seemed to follow Herbert Hoover in construing judicious spending as a potentially democratizing activity that sustained and even extended the American promise of opportunity.\textsuperscript{15} Managing consumerism’s liberating effects nevertheless required defining the purchases that constituted an American standard of living, particularly as heterogeneous peoples motivated by competing interests and preferences both entered and moved within the nation’s newly finite physical borders. Responsibility for making these household purchases fell largely upon women. This obligation to disburse limited familial resources established a legitimate public presence and an acknowledged economic role for homemakers as their domestic labors expanded to include acquiring and assembling the commodities that signified a complex amalgam.

\textsuperscript{13} In \textit{Dwelling in the Text: Houses in American Fiction} (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), Marilyn R. Chandler has explored how American authors constructed “complex analogies between house and psyche” in that they have “portrayed the structures an individual inhabits as bearing a direct relationship or resemblance to the structure of his or her psyche and inner life and as constituting a concrete manifestation of specific values.” Chandler also writes that houses “became a subject of political debate and a means of articulating political philosophies.” Focusing on interior decoration, this chapter explores the intersection of these concurrent observations. Chandler, 3, 10, 13.


of personal comfort, economic security, political stability, and national identity.

Brimming with factory-made products and maternal efficiency rather than virtue, the modern home evinced a necessary permeability between the realms of commerce and domesticity. Americans of the 1920s grappled with their ambivalence about this ambiguity, and the advice literature on interior decoration helps to illuminate their inability, and often their unwillingness, to restore the many binaries that had once ordered their lives and lent certainty to their experiences.

Due to these collapsing boundaries, both the aesthetics and the practice of interior decoration during the 1920s further reveal a struggle to restore the home’s traditional function in the developmental narrative of liberal discourse. The chapter that follows will explore how the decorative principles associated with the English Aesthetic movement, which spawned the Arts and Crafts designs popular at the turn-of-the-century, and Progressivism can be understood relative to the imperative of reproducing the American liberal state and its self-governing progenitors. Running through the popular texts on interior decoration are implicit analogies between the tasteful home and a liberal society. As designed by professional decorators, a beautiful interior metaphorically embodied a liberal microcosm, for as demonstrated by Jane Norton’s apartment, a collection of furnishings, objects, and aesthetic elements functioned together to convey the aesthetic tenets of unity, harmony, balance, and suitability. In conforming to these principles, a well-decorated room gave substance to the philosophical ideal that a community of diverse individuals might constitute a singular entity through their fealty to a common good, and, therefore, assume a more abstract, collective identity.

Within this principled interior, artful points of embellishment prevented an apparent deference to aesthetic axioms from devolving into either a stultifying uniformity or a subjugating adherence to the principles that a homemaker was encouraged and often compelled to follow.
Such captivating, individualistic touches instead conveyed an animating and empowering *je ne sais quoi* within the bounds of principle that saved an axiomatic scheme from appearing overly standardized, mimetic, or determined. This declared manifestation of an individualizing personality effected the illusion of a creative subject’s priority to the rules she followed or an implied temporal precedence and consequent autonomy. Also supplying an inherent source of independence was a presumed hunger for beauty. To transform this innate appetite into taste, decorating experts not only endeavored to cultivate an appreciation for artistic tenets and techniques, they also vociferously argued that aesthetic desires were best satisfied through an informed and rational acquiescence to the principles they explicated. Taste served in this way to resolve the paradox of restrained freedom, and reconciling internal longings and imposed rules, it functioned as a metaphor for consent in the parlance of interior décor.

Just as the interior of Hoover’s better home metaphorically embodied a liberal society in miniature, its decorator and the desiring, self-governing citizen who consensually subscribed to order in the name of freedom were one in the same. Interior decoration consequently emerges in the advice literature not only as an aesthetic manifestation of liberal individualism’s defining ideals and assumptions but also as an allegory for its performance. Initiated by aesthetic desire’s rational investment in a principled rendering of beauty, the creation of a tasteful domestic interior enacted the line of fiction embedded within Herbert Hoover’s explication of American Individualism. Like Hoover’s historicized retelling of liberal subjectivity’s development, interior decoration narrated the progression from an impulsive, self-interested individual into a rational, self-disciplined citizen who, in pursuit of desire’s objects, reasonably and voluntarily recognized the veracity of laws conceived to preserve an entitlement to freedom. The well-decorated home sustained this plotline: Both beautiful and principled, it cultivated a taste for the declared values and ideals of an American nation-state, attaching a compelling, private quest to a perceived public imperative. This emphasis on the development of taste admitted to a more circular construction
between liberal subject and domestic space, as the well-decorated interior functioned to model and make the character it presumably reflected. Décor thus served a purpose far greater than merely transforming houses into homes; it was deployed to transform the many people attracted to these beautifully furbished dwellings into genuine Americans.

In propagating an image of the beautiful home, the texts that dispensed decorating expertise demonstrate the reversal through which a liberal public sphere creates the private foundation of its own possibility. As significantly, these sources reveal the essential role played by American homemakers in manufacturing the modern symbol of a founding subject’s autonomy. Designing the domestic interiors that molded the characters they were also declared to reflect required women to play the part of Hoover’s American Individual themselves, for according to housing experts and tastemakers, a feminine decorator’s consensually restrained desires for self-expression enabled a tasteful domestic interior to evince the same. While the decorating advice literature followed tradition in defining the aesthetic education of husbands and children as a woman’s civic duty, these sources also readily acknowledged that the dwelling performing this function was the product of a feminine creator’s preferences, personality, knowledge, and discretion.

The aesthetics of the beautifully decorated home reflected this acknowledgment, as masculine and feminine attributes ideally converged within its thematically harmonious interiors. This merger of the characteristically masculine and feminine lent a visual androgyny to the early twentieth-century home, particularly its more public rooms. More important, the better home’s gendered ambiguity calls into question the assumption that American liberalism has been constituted through a gender binary that has itself been effected and enforced through idealizing a private sphere of feeling and care. By the 1920s, the home that was portrayed as a metaphor for an abundant frontier and construed as identical to a male owner’s opportunity and self-governing liberty was also the acknowledged product of women’s self-disciplined labor and a reflection of
feminine autonomy and rationality. In other words, making the better homes that aesthetically embodied the liberalism of their male inhabitants admittedly depended upon the willingness of feminine bodies to act like liberal subjects themselves. For the newly enfranchised of Hoover’s New Era, interior decoration thus supplied a performative means of signifying their possession of the principles, skills, and capacities that had historically qualified white men for equality within the liberal state.

**The Codification of Interior Decoration**

In *The Principles of Decoration*, Bernard Jakway presented a compelling case for the modern significance of interior decoration: “No woman of intelligence is now indifferent to the beauty or ugliness of her home. The economic, cultural and social importance of the art of interior decoration is widely and clearly recognized. And while it is unhappily true that multitudes of houses still exist which no sane man could call either beautiful or comfortable, their existence is for the most part due to ignorance or lack of skill rather than to indifference.”

Laying out this criterion of sanity was the express intent of Jakway’s instructional guide, which published in 1925, was representative of the numerous books, pamphlets, and articles addressed during this era to American homemakers. The knowledge that Jakway and his colleagues disseminated through these texts purportedly enabled women to fulfill their families’ desires for beauty and contentment, and in doing so, to sustain the home’s traditional function as a nurturing and instructive haven. Jakway’s manual helps to illustrate that maintaining the private sphere’s function to engender ethically self-regulating citizens seemingly required decorating professionals to articulate and legitimate unifying aesthetic preferences and principles. He and other nascent experts sought to accomplish this merger by devising a theory of interior decorating

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that enforced their claims to professional status, while also intensifying women’s conventional obligations to maintain and beautify a home.\textsuperscript{17}

Implicit within Jakway’s criticism of homemakers’ general lack of skill and knowledge is an admission that the validity of his own profession depended upon a perception that he and other tastemakers possessed these in abundance. Jakway attempted to establish his own expertise and the professionalism it conferred by burnishing his occupation with the legitimizing gloss of occupational verbiage, scientific axioms, anthropological references, historical allusions, and citations of artistic technique and theory. While he defined interior decoration as “creative work,” it produced, unlike the other applied arts, compositions rather than the individual elements comprising them. “What he does is to select such things,” Jakway explained of the interior decorator, “and to combine and arrange the things so selected in such a way as to fashion a harmonious and beautiful whole.” Interior decoration was thus “an art of selection and arrangement,” one that merged science, philosophy, and art to transform modern architecture’s and industry’s raw products into a cognitively recognizable and aesthetically pleasurable abode.\textsuperscript{18}

Although interior decorating would eventually become a connotatively feminine occupation, Jakway was justified in using the masculine pronoun to refer to those who practiced it during the profession’s formative years. Born in 1878, Jakway was a contemporary of Herbert Hoover, even sharing residency in the state of Oregon, where a ten-year-old Hoover was sent after the death of his parents. While Hoover journeyed on to Stanford, Jakway graduated from the University of Oregon, and like Hoover, married a co-ed. Yet, as Hoover’s chosen profession


\footnote{18 Jakway, 2.}
led him to seek out untapped veins of ore running under the Asian frontier, Jakway focused his energies on probing a very different pulse closer to his Portland home. Becoming a salesman and buyer for J. G. Mack & Co, he assisted in the firm’s advertised readiness “to submit original sketches in color of modern and correct interior decorative schemes for the home, hotel, club and lodge-room.” After a decade of this apprenticeship in the combined art and industry of home décor, Jakway partnered with another seasoned businessman to open a firm that touted both a large inventory of quality furnishings and a depth of experience in their correct selection and usage. Entrepreneurship enabled Jakway to reinvent himself once again in the 1920s as he parlayed the expertise he had acquired as a merchant into an instructional position at the University of California where he taught extension courses on interior décor and established his credibility as a popular author and lecturer on the topic.

Sharing his expertise in *The Principles of Decoration*, Jakway explained the crux of interior decorating to an even larger audience of presumably eager but untutored American homemakers. Adequate funds and early, frequent exposure to fitting examples undoubtedly enhanced the ease of creating a beautiful home. These helpful factors nevertheless failed to outweigh the importance of formulating and following a plan that, in conforming to fundamental principles, inevitably yielded beautiful results. Such was the justification for Jakway’s comprehensive guidebook. In his introductory pages, Jakway echoed the spirit of Laura Thornburgh’s manual in emphasizing that everybody might fulfill desires for an aesthetically appealing home by acquiring the appropriate knowledge and skill. While his instructions implied a democratic promise of mobility by reframing aesthetic standards as an accessible means of attainment, they also regulated this pursuit by preventing the amateur decorator from perceiving herself as “a free agent.” “Beauty and comfort in the home” could never follow, Jakway

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19 *The Pacific Coast Architect*, 4 (March 1913), 793.
20 Ibid., 3 (April 1912), 505.
21 Jakway., 10.
warned, “from chance or happy accident.” These outcomes were instead the result of “the proper employment of reasoned processes. That is, they result only from the practice of an art, using the word art to mean practice as guided by correct principle in the use of means for the attainment of a desired end.”

Though intended to create and beautify, the artistry of interior decoration was, according to its proponents, a thoroughly rational practice governed by defined principles and reasonable motives. Like artists, decorators hardly relied upon “magic or incantation” in designing an interior space, but rather upon their knowledge of the “definite relationships of form and color,” which Jakway described as “not more mysterious than the relationships of words in sentences, and equally dependent for expression upon definite ideas.” To communicate an intended meaning, amateur decorators consequently needed to master the means of expression just as an artist or author would learn to command their respective mediums. Akin to each of these creative professions, interior decorators used the aesthetic elements of form and color, and in conveying “varying emotional values,” Jakway explained, these “constitute the words of the language of decoration, and the science of their function and artistic employment constitutes what we may well call its grammar.” Interior decoration was thus a formalized mode of representation, and the ability to articulate even the most indisputably true ideals or compelling emotions required that “the grammar must be mastered before the work of composition can be undertaken successfully.”

Jakway perhaps gleaned this analogy between literary composition and interior decoration from a decorating guidebook previously published by the art educator Frank Alvah Parsons. According to Parsons, the decorative elements of color, form, line, and texture comprised a “language” or a “standard system of communication between all persons by whom

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22 Ibid., 2.
23 Ibid., 16.
24 Ibid., 30.
these symbols are understood." Just as an author’s success required developing a comprehension of grammar, syntax, vocabulary, and style, an interior decorator’s ability to use an “art language” to convey “facts and truths” similarly depended “on a knowledge of the principles which govern it and upon an appreciation for the niceties in its use.” Given this imperative of rendering artistic expression intelligible, Parsons concluded, “Principles control decoration, and decoration is only possible when it conforms to these principles.”

Elucidating the principles that ideally governed expressions of aesthetic beauty was the guiding motive of Frank Alvah Parson’s illustrious career in art education. Following his European training in the fine arts, Parsons accepted a teaching position in 1902 at the Horace Mann School, which was then an experimental unit of Columbia University’s Teachers College. There, Parsons’s mentor, Arthur Wesley Dow, emphasized the distinction between formalized art production and its appreciation, and this innovative approach shaped Parsons’s own emphasis on the democratic cultivation of taste within both American consumers and industrial representatives. Parsons’s students consequently included not simply art educators, but the salesmen who attended his course on Decorating and Furnishing at the West Side YMCA’s School of Practical Art. A successful graduate tacitly praised his instructor’s positive view of “art in commerce,” paraphrasing in more colloquial terms Parsons’s conviction that “everybody who has to do with the furnishing of a home”—from homemakers to salesmen—“will realize that they are creating an environment, and will study out how they can so make it that it will force out the best traits in the character of the men and women who are to reflect that environment.”

27 Ibid., 8.
29 William Sloane Coffin, “Art in Trades,” Art and Progress 6, no. 2 (December 1914), 60-63.
For Parsons, an education in applied art reflected his perception of the circular construction of a national character and the domestic environment. He brought this understanding of art appreciation’s public significance to his tenure at the New York School of Art, which would eventually become Parsons School of Design. Parsons’s work hardly remained confined to this institution, for like Bernard Jakway, he continued to teach extension courses, lecture, and write on the topic of tasteful décor. Noting the breadth of Parsons’s influence, a eulogist extolled, “His lectures on Interior Decoration have done an enormous amount to improve the taste of persons especially women, homemakers, throughout the eastern portion of the United States.” “There was nothing of the sentimentalist about Mr. Parsons,” the 1930 memorial continued, “but his love of beauty and his desire to spread appreciation dominated his life.”

**The Principles of Beautiful Décor**

The codified principles of good décor, so precisely and carefully explained in the manuals compiled by Frank Alvah Parsons and Bernard Jakway, were widely reiterated in the instructive texts and magazine articles that became more readily available to American homemakers during the 1920s. By the end of this decade, the aesthetic values of authenticity, utility, and fitness had coalesced through their constant repetition into a hegemonic lexicon.

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Though zealously championed by professionals and lay experts of the 1920s, these decorative principles were hardly unfamiliar to middle-class homemakers. As early as the 1860s, elite homeowners had become cognizant of a trans-Atlantic exchange between American and British artists and reformers, one inspired by the English art critic John Ruskin and the decorator William Morris who secularized Ruskin’s moral aestheticism. Collectively, the critics of industrial capitalism’s alienating effects and soulless products celebrated the morally restorative and edifying function of art in the home, and their celebration of simplicity, integrity, and honesty significantly informed a postbellum revision of taste.

These late nineteenth-century proponents of the House Beautiful articulated a moral aesthetic theory that also served the purposes of the Progressives who campaigned for a healthier home. Although inspired by science rather than art, domestic reformers similarly prized the principles associated with Ruskin, Morris, and the Arts and Crafts style they initiated. More frequently, however, their lineage is traced to Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe and to the recommendations these sisters issued in *The American Woman’s Home*, which published in 1869, also reflected a shifting acceptance of art and its enjoyment as consistent with moral discipline. To create both a healthful and beautiful house, Progressive reformers and tastemakers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries advised homemakers to embrace the simplicity and minimalism extolled by the evangelical Beecher sisters and their contemporaries in the Arts and Crafts movement. Requiring restraint, these principles proved particularly effective in combatting a late nineteenth-century cosmopolitan interlude that prized exoticism, sentimentality, artistic complexity, and individual creativity.

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32 This division between the House Beautiful and the Healthful Home is taken from Eileen Boris’s examination of the Arts and Crafts movement. Published in 1877, *The House Beautiful* is a collection of essays written by Ruskin admirer Clarence Cook that touted the social impact of artistry in home furnishing. The Unitarian Universalist minister William Channing Gannett also used “the House Beautiful” in 1897 to celebrate the potential of aesthetics in home design and décor to promote familial harmony. See Boris, 53, 55, 60-61.

33 David Brody, *Visualizing American Empire: Orientalism & Imperialism in the Philippines* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), Chapter Two. Brody situates the development of this aesthetic, which
Victorian furnishings harbor invisible microbes, but a preference for conspicuous excess and superfluous display proved too individualistic and undisciplined in a more ethnically heterogeneous, socioeconomically fluid, and secular nation that increasingly appeared to lack a unifying locus of self-regulating moralism.

In further celebrating the aesthetic manifestation of truth, honesty, and fitness in quotidian objects and domestic spaces, both the Beecher sisters and Arts and Crafts enthusiasts also helped to engender a Progressive regard for functionality and utility in interior decoration. Like Ruskin and Morris, the Beecher sisters decried the relations of production and exchange that characterized a burgeoning market economy, particularly their intrusion into the home. While, within the Aesthetic Reform movement, fitness restored a romanticized, organic connection between craftsman and craft, natural inspiration and human manufacture, for the Beecher sisters, the functional purpose or sincerity of an object imparted a sentimental value that supplanted a commodity’s monetary worth and, as important, stabilized the fluctuation of its meaning. Their insistent equation between beauty and utility consequently reflected a deep ambivalence about aesthetic and sensual pleasure within a geographically expansive and materially acquisitive culture as they and other Americans interpreted the development of a consumerist mode of personal liberty and social mobility through the complex intersections of Protestant, republican, and liberal discourses, all of which decried the loss of moral discipline. Although beauty within the domestic environment had come to be regarded as essential to the family’s overall happiness and moral development, associated with the natural world, it also carried connotations of a sublime, sexual decadence and feminine fecundity that insidiously threatened to derail the moral prized visual clutter and Oriental exoticism, within the context of American imperial expansion. Brody argues, “Middle-class Americans saw their homes as experimental laboratories where the material culture they bought and displayed signified their growing fascination with an increasingly global economy and rapidly changing political world order.” (50) Kristen Hoganson also makes this argument, although she focuses more on Americans’ engagement in a global economy and less on their appropriation of its commodities as emblems of their own domination. Kristen Hoganson, “Cosmopolitan Domesticity: Importing the American Dream, 1865-1920,” American Historical Review 107, no 1 (February 2002): 55-83.
foundation that secured an independent, self-governing nation’s material progress and political stability. Beauty’s duality as an aestheticized longing for both transcendence and regression thus led the Beechers not only to incorporate Christian iconography into the home’s decoration, but also to caution that “the aesthetic element must be subordinate to the requirements of physical existence.”

Whereas a cultural ethos of romanticism had compelled both the Beecher sisters and the more secular William Morris to seek inspiration in and a connection to nature, their modern heirs sought truth in the natural world’s rationality rather than its sublimity. Professional interior decorators of the 1920s consequently departed from their forebears by eschewing the irregularities valued by the nineteenth century aesthetic reformers, and they advised caution in the use of natural materials and emblems. For these tastemakers, exalting and beautifying the rationalizing ideal of function served to reconcile rather than reinforce the perceived opposition between art and industry, while still recapitulating a previous generation’s preoccupation with establishing a criterion for defining beauty and thus for regulating its expression.

According to the recommendations of decorators writing in the 1920s, beauty would inevitably elude any homemaker who attempted to decorate the rooms of her house without first considering their assigned functions. This regard for purpose and appropriateness created a point of origin in the

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35 In her analysis of the relationship between beauty and utility in the domestic fiction of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Gillian Brown argues, “Household furnishings and decorative objects are thus regularly de-commodified . . . in her insistence on use value she differentiates household possessions, the stuff of sentimental associations, from the ephemeral objects in the marketplace.” These useful objects consequently constituted an “extra-market domestic economy.” Brown, 45, 47. In contrast to Stowe’s “Christian purification of market economy,” the Progressive fetishization of use value reflects Clifford Clark’s assessment of a “classic pattern of reconciling two different ideals—art and utility—by combining them” in order to “form a more effective ideal.” Clark notes that, in the twentieth century, the conflation between beauty and functionality within domestic architecture and décor reflected not only an evolving conception of nature, but also a consequent imperative to reconcile art and engineering. Clark, 155.
composition of an interior that conferred upon it a somewhat different type of fitness than that implied by the organic consistency of material, design, and craftsmanship. Conveying this connotation of restraint, Laura Thornburgh perfectly captured the principled convergence of the useful and the beautiful within the better home through the fictional Jane Norton’s rhapsodizing over the “beautility” manifested in her décor.

Like Jane Norton, manufacturers in the early twentieth century deftly manipulated decorative elements to transform the functional and practical into the evocatively beautiful. Invoking the creative forces of science and art, they claimed to wield a seemingly magical power to cast technological innovations in aesthetically pleasing packages. What they produced purportedly embodied a merger of rationality and artistry that endowed otherwise utilitarian products with style, color, and unfading durability. Advertisements for radiators proclaimed, for example, “the useful must also be beautiful,” and when incorporated into the modern homemakers’ decorating schemes, these simultaneously functional and visually appealing commodities promised to transform mere houses into “castles of contentment.” 36 Captivating illustrations and photographs reinforced this rhetorical connection between beauty and practicality. Good Year rubber flooring possessed, for instance, not only durability and convenience, but also a “warm beauty” that together “lessen[ed] the fatigue, [and] increase[ed] the charm, the comfort, and order of the modern house.” As importantly, this pleasing, though tastefully unobtrusive background, helped to imbue the interior with a desirability and personality that ensured a lasting first impression. 37 In this way, even products as hygienic and utilitarian as cushioned flooring embodied the “finer forms and colors of exquisite purity” that beautified the “symbols of [a]scientific attitude toward home sanitation.” 38

37 The American Home, September 1930, 595.
38 Ibid., October 1929, 69.
Like modern floor coverings, bathroom products and fixtures supposedly possessed an affective value that enhanced the pleasure of their convenience. Under the auspices of Herbert Hoover’s Commerce Department, a very different form of waste elimination had increased both the affordability and availability of bathroom furnishings and accessories, leaving homemakers with no excuse for transforming this room into one of the home’s most commodious spaces. For those who failed to understand the social importance of a bathroom’s décor, one manufacturer warned that the bathroom had become “more expressive than the sun-porch.” In outfitting this tellingly essential, modern room, homemakers found within the pages of popular magazines a dazzling array of newly standardized products offered in an equally diverse selection of styles and colors. Church Sani-Seats and their matching bathroom stools appealed to homemakers concerned about both hygiene and beauty by emphasizing their availability in a “complete range of beautiful pastel shades and sea-pearl tints.” Advertisers similarly used color to promote Tepco plumbing fixtures, which beckoned more adventurous consumers with their ability to infuse a bathroom “with the spirit of modern art.” Exemplifying “how various colors may be employed in the creation of beautiful bathrooms,” the design featured in the advertisement offered a “pleasing variation in the color of its appointments and decorative scheme.” “Striking in originality,” the illustrative bathroom attained a “greater interest, beauty and cheerfulness . . . by the artistic blending or contrasting of several harmonious colors.”

The reconciliation of functionality and beauty depicted in these advertisements was the topic of Frank Alvah Parsons’s introduction to a promotional publication for Armstrong floor coverings. Recapitulating the explanations first laid out in his 1916 decorating manual, the esteemed instructor described art as “an essential quality in human life.” While art referred to aesthetically pleasing objects and often to their creation, its meaning also encompassed both an

39 Ibid., June 1930, 351.
40 Ibid., May 1930, 226.
41 Ibid., May 1929, 281.
intuitive and learned ability to appreciate these forms of artistry, a facility that also rendered art “the expression of a knowledge and feeling for functional fitness and for beauty in every made thing.” Characterized by this aptitude for appreciation, interior decoration and design was, through the skillfully evocative manipulation of elements such as color and texture, “the natural expression of this art quality in objects of use and beauty, with a realization of their relation to each other.” Of the decorative, functional products he helped to publicize, Parsons wrote, these manufactured “materials can only be refined and made better in quality through their possession of the art quality, and this art quality is only a harmonious relation of each of the elements used to express any idea.” This representative passage shows Parsons insisting that the functionality of objects and their suitability within interior compositions helped to determine their beauty; however, it also conveys a lack of identity between the functionally useful and the sensuously appealing with the excessive meaning of art serving to enhance and animate the value of the merely utilitarian.

If advertisers and decorators adamantly declared an identity between beauty and utility to engender the perceived value of industrially fabricated commodities, they also vocally insisted upon a similar convergence between the beautiful and the authentic. Following from the Aesthetic Reform movement of the nineteenth century, a progressive theory of design continued to prize simplicity, sincerity, and integrity, but its advocates came to revise and reimagine these ideals in the idiom of authenticity. Scholars of American culture have insightfully helped to explain the pursuit of authenticity that gripped their historical subjects in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Relative to interior décor, celebrating the authentic communicated a rejection of the complexity associated with the overly civilized, excessively embellished, and sensuously decadent aesthetic of the late Victorians. In addition to critiquing the conspicuous

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42 Parsons, The Art of Home Furnishing and Decoration, 15-16.
43 Ibid., 24.
display of wealth and privilege that a profusion of commodities allowed, authenticity further connoted a veracity and permanency that assuaged concerns about the artificiality and ephemerality of industrially manufactured products. Reminiscent of the socialist critique that had compelled Britain’s aesthetic reformers, an editorialist for *The American Home* defined sincerity as “almost a synonym for craftsmanship” in that this inspired mode of artistic production expressed “straightforward conviction” rather than “the artful employment of clever technique to produce an artificial effect.” Reviving preindustrial modes of production was hardly the antidote to the specter of artifice. To ensure “[t]he lasting joy that a real home should be,” the editorialist waxed, a “spirit of true craftsmanship” must lead modern manufacturers “to make the useful and beautiful thing as nearly perfect as it can be made.”

Several manufacturers claimed to fulfill the editorialist’s challenge to preserve sincerity without compromising style. Advertisements for Kohler fixtures proclaimed, for example, a trademark “quality of genuineness” and a “clear and shining beauty,” both of which suffused and exceeded the durable surfaces of the corporation’s industrially fabricated wares. Supposedly crafted by master artisans, Kohler’s manufactured fixtures possessed a declared authenticity and honesty, a “fine[ness] through and through.” As this representative advertisement illustrates, maintaining an organic link between principle, design, material, and function remained imperative, but the value once added by the craftsmanship of artisans had become eclipsed by concerns for the quality of industrialized production and the veracity of salesmen and advertisers. While the genuineness that Kohler products were proclaimed to embody distinguished the company from its competitors, by also signifying a family’s character and values, the advertisement further promised that purchasing Kohler products would help to “decide its standing.”

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45 *The American Home*, June 1930, 351.
disciplinary idiom of quality rather than the unprincipled pursuit of quantity. This metaphorical identity between objects and consumers opened representational opportunities for a new class of socioeconomically mobile consumers. Though no longer linked to an actual craftsman, these industrial artifacts supposedly continued to embody a spirit of sincerity and integrity that rendered their consumers not simply socially admirable, but also recognizably American.

While decorators of the 1920s continued to insist upon the desirability of sincerity and authenticity, they decried the exclusive association of these principles with the Arts and Crafts style, which they believed, had veered too far on the aesthetic pendulum. Illustrating these deviations in meaning, tastemakers of the 1920s often pointed to the Morris chair as an example of all that was objectionable. Modern interior decorators decried this furnishing’s blocky, Spartan structure as unbalanced, unimaginative, and excessively reactionary, and despite reiterating the importance of the simplicity, functionality, and authenticity the chair had symbolized for an earlier generation, these arbiters of taste promoted more subtle and less angular designs. While an adventuresome few identified these principles in the forms of European modernism and native primitivism, decorating professionals of the early twentieth century more commonly equated simplicity and authenticity with artifacts and designs that typified colonial revivalism. A popular genre of architecture and furnishing in the early twentieth century, colonial revivalism represented a distinctive, aesthetic vernacular presumed to be independent of European influence and its associations with a decadent nobility and entrenched class hierarchy.46

Seeking a socially democratic and individually opportunistic nation’s origins in an indigenous past rather than in Biblical injunctions, decorators and tastemakers urged homemakers to acquire either an antiquarian interest in colonial artifacts or a taste for well-manufactured

46 David Brody situates the popularity of colonial revivalism in the context of American Imperialism, arguing that “the rising importance of the Colonial Revival speaks to American interests in the actual practice of empire and the escalating militarism and masculinity that spread with viral-like potency in the late 1800s.” This more austere style “created a jingoistic disposition that would ideologically support [a] growing sense of nationalism.” Brody, 30, 52.
replicas. As one home economist fretted, “The majority of our best work still comes from European inspiration, either past or present.” To combat this Old World influence, she advised educating consumers on the quality of American craftsmanship as well as “[f]urther preparation to meet a growing demand for well-designed and well-made American furniture in the lower-price field.”

An account of the noble effort to restore a colonial farmhouse destroyed by a fire further illustrates this effort to determine and stabilize the course of modernization by reviving the historical foundation of a presumably authentic colonial past. This triumphant story of resurrection began when a “Colonial landmark” mournfully fell victim to “such effete modernisms as furnaces and electricity.” Through the collaboration of a resourceful architect and a “capable woman” who possessed “that inevitable quality of real art,” a new house “rose from ashes.” This phoenix recreated the illusion of the original, even though its design conformed to the latest innovations. Adding to the genuine aura of her rebuilt home, the resourceful homemaker unearthed the “pair of unusual old chairs” and the “authentic dresser.” The preeminent symbol of an American past was, however, the massive hearth—“a great fireplace . . . constructed of fieldstone”—that, in hearkening back to a simpler era, imbued the renovated house’s living room with a sense of timeless permanency and the ideals associated with this figment of the historical imagination.

Comfortable and convenient, the rebuilt home marched in cadence with historical time, but, simultaneously filled with historical signifiers, the revivalist dwellings it typified reconnected contemporary Americans to a past imagined as authentic. It was a tale of unrivaled economic development that originated in the “pioneering spirit” that inspired individual colonists as well as

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47 Voltz, 41; Brooks, 36-38; Clark, 132, 149.
49 Marjorie Lawrence, “A Colonial farmhouse that was rebuilt,” The American Home, February 1930, 435-437, 464, 468.
their heirs, the nation’s industrial leaders. Just as the urge to discover compelled the explorer Hendrick Hudson to leave “the comfortable walls of his Dutch home . . .glisten[ing] with their blue and white Delft tiles,” a similar itch motivated Pardee Tiles to make an improved, modern replica of the “original,” “quaint” decorative coverings that had embellished the walls of Hudson’s Old World home. Consumers could act, as the advertisement implied, on a similar urge for discovery, exploration, and invention by incorporating into their decorative schemes a product that metaphorically embodied the aura of generative initiative inherited from the tile manufacturer’s colonial ancestors.

The aesthetic idealization of authenticity thus conveyed a revered national ethos of daring bravery and bold innovation in the quest for economic opportunity and personal liberty. Purchasing products, decorating interiors, and owning houses that embodied this characterizing “spirit” presumably recapitulated the pioneers’ encounter with a verdant frontier, enabling American consumers of the 1920s to identify with these modern symbols of plenitude and to perceive them as emblems of a more vital possession. Yet identifying with the spirited character in an imperialistic history of unlimited abundance ultimately yielded a regulatory effect. As Walter Dexter explained of Herbert Hoover’s American Individual, this iconic subject’s perception of his role within a historical narrative presumably engendered a broader awareness and a sense of connection to the past that prompted a voluntary curbing of personal interests.

The Principles of Balance and Harmony

Similar to Hoover’s American Individual, then, the better home’s creators were ideally guided by a knowledge of principle, a conviction of purpose, and a connection to the past. These regulatory tenets served to enforce restraint within a righteous people

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50 The American Home, September 1930, 551.
whose virtuous labor produced many material signs of salvation but also too many
opportunities for temptation. American tastemakers and moralists generally agreed in
perceiving aesthetically appealing, principled décor as a remedy for the ambivalent
effects of the economic modernization that sustained material abundance and thus
individual liberty and social equality. As William Sloane Coffin—Frank Alvah Parsons’s
salesman-student—averred, “[T]he function of the interior decorator . . . [is] to act out the
character that they are trying to express.”52 While a skilled decorator took into account a
client’s or family’s needs and preferences when assessing the suitability of décor,
Coffin’s intent here was to underscore the importance of applied art instruction in
demonstrating how the domestic interior should model qualities for the well-decorated
home’s residents to emulate.53 Despite Progressive revisions to Victorian aesthetic
theory, the “character” that interior decoration served to exemplify and thereby to shape
remained a self-governing citizen capable of balancing the needs for order and stability
with desires for liberty and change in order to carry out a progressive plot of entwined
individual and national development.54 Fulfilling this implicitly liberal objective led
tastemakers to incorporate the neo-classical principles of balance, proportion, and
harmony into the aesthetic rules they promulgated.55

By the 1920s, achieving a restful, comforting sense of equilibrium between
oppositional impulses was one of the foremost objectives of interior decoration. In her

52 Coffin, 62.
53 In “‘An Educated Demand:’ The Implications of ‘Art in Every Day Life’ for American Industrial Design,
1925-1950,” Carma Gorman argues that the vocational programs targeting women focused on related art
instruction to educate consumer demand. This strategy exercised, she claims, “an impact on [women’s]
tastes equal to or greater than that of more passively absorbed popular culture influences.” Gorman, 48.
54 What Eileen Boris has written of the Arts and Crafts movement could also be said of Progressive
tastemakers: “That architecture and morality mutually reinforce each other had become a truism of home
decoration.” Boris, 53.
55 Design historian Penny Sparke has illuminated that Elsie de Wolfe found inspiration in the neo-
classicism of eighteenth-century French décor rather than the Aesthetic Reform movement associated with
John Ruskin, and through appropriating and universalizing its principles, she articulated a form of
“feminine modernism.” Sparke, 75.
Personality of a House, the self-trained tastemaker Emily Post reiterated in 1930 the primary means of engineering this sensation of stability that professional decorators such as Jakway and Parsons had described a few years earlier. While bisymmetrical balance entailed mathematical precision in distributing identical objects at equal lengths from a structurally determined axis, its counterpart, occult balance, involved a more subtle form of leveling masses of differing size, weight, and importance. These conceptions of balance—one formal and the other felt—described both a somatic and visual sense of a soothing and instinctively desired proportional equality.

The aesthetic principle of balance also conveyed, however, a more intangible connotation of finding a median between two extremes. Creating an appealing, decorative scheme required the selection of elements that were individually neither too bold nor too boring, neither too original nor too ordinary. Overpowering colors were to be avoided, for example, unless strategically used as embellishments to brighten a subdued background.\(^{56}\) The placement of a bright artifact was nevertheless crucial, for it threatened to attract excessive attention and disrupt the visual field that naturally coalesced around the eye’s attraction to a “fulcrum.” Likening the creation of balance to the simple mechanism of a lever, Jakway elucidated the need for a perceived equality between the decorative objects arranged on either side of this pivotal point. When “the opposing totals seem to be equal in their power of attraction,” he explained, “the mind is at ease, and is conscious of an esthetically pleasing sense of equipoise, tranquility and freedom from effort.”\(^{57}\) A visually striking accessory alternatively aroused the feeling of an enlivening “movement,” and its self-conscious insertion into an otherwise restful space was “calculated to cause unrest, excitement and similar sensations, by creating an interest which causes the eye to


\(^{57}\) Jakway, 170.
move from one thing to another.\textsuperscript{58} Because these points of visual stimulation threatened always to disturb the perception of equilibrium and consequently its somatic and visceral effects, they could have, Jakway counseled, only a “very small part in its decorative treatment.”\textsuperscript{59} As this advice makes evident, equilibrium referred not only to symmetrical identity and proportionate distribution, but also to their sensate consequences, and only a decorator well-versed in the principle of balance could hope to achieve a comfortable stasis between the poles of inertia and mania.

Just as the inclusion of anything excessively individualistic unsettled the cognition and sensation of balance that characterized a beautiful interior, it also more disturbingly violated an essential aura of harmony. Interior decorators regarded compositional unity or commonality of purpose as the most important and comprehensive of the decorative principles, and they deemed beauty impossible to manifest in harmony’s absence. Fashioning a harmonious interior began with reflection and forethought. In planning the room’s decorative scheme, the homemaker needed first to survey the inalterable structural features of the spatial canvas, while next ascertaining its predominate purpose, a functionality that encompassed both the activities for which the room was to be used as well as the mood to be evoked within the individuals who gathered there. Herein lay “the general problem of the decorator,” which was “to invest his room, as a unit, with the degree of repose and steadiness essential to comfortable living, while he at the same time invests it with whatever degree of lightness, animation and subtlety best accords with the purpose of the room and with the needs and tastes of its occupants.”\textsuperscript{60}

Given the importance of a perceived equilibrium in ensuring the visceral experience of contentment, attention to harmony enabled the skilled interior decorator to avoid disorienting inconsistencies within and among a home’s various rooms. While attaining harmony required a

\textsuperscript{58} Parsons, The Art of Home Furnishing, 21.
\textsuperscript{59} Jakway, 169-170.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 177.
deference to inalterable, spatial features and personal preferences, it also entailed subordinating a room’s individual pieces to a unifying theme, idea, or purpose. Homemakers were consequently instructed to select and arrange decorative elements that together “present[ed] themselves to the mind as a unity, with a single aim, design and purpose.” Without exception, contemporary tastemakers agreed with Bernard Jakway that colors, furnishings, and accessories must create this impression of a unified collectivity. “How satisfying and pleasant a composition can be,” wrote Harold Eberlein, when “contrived from a number of furnishing units, not one of which possesses any outstanding excellence above other objects of its sort.” A well-decorated room derived its “quiet and modest distinction” not from individual articles, but instead, as Eberlein explained, from their conscientious “arrangement and combination” that yielded a “common effect of all taken together.”

To create the illusion of this “common effect,” interior decorators devised techniques that homemakers could adapt to their specific conditions regardless of their skills or means. The least sophisticated method, the repetition of visually similar objects enabled the novice decorator to create an impression of both balance and harmony. Bernard Jakway nevertheless cautioned that an overly evident dominant theme exuded an air of either contrived inauthenticity or even unappealing insipidness. He consequently urged his readers to master the more advanced concept of “principality,” a technique that entailed “making one element of a composition first in importance, and all other elements subordinate.” A homemaker’s skill proved crucial in executing this means of effecting harmony, for as Jakway warned, “[N]o decorative feature should be given principality unless it is intrinsically worthy of the attention thus forced upon it.”

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61 Ibid., 80.
63 Jakway, 86.
64 Ibid., 89, 90.
Yet, the force of this influence was ideally sensed rather than seen. In a truly harmonious interior, Jakway explained, “The dominant element must accordingly be related to the subordinate elements so cunningly that it appears to pervade the room rather than to rule over it,” leading Jakway to counsel, “[R]eject the obvious and find pleasure in the subtle.” Jakway’s advice was echoed in one of the numerous publications published by Better Homes in America, which disseminated his instructions to an even broader audience. Akin to the BHA’s broader agenda to strengthen unifying national ideals through the creation of emblematic homes, effecting harmony within those dwellings required defining “a dominant element or center of interest,” a point of cohesion “just strong enough to tie all parts of the room together, giving that feeling of oneness.”

The technique of principality proved especially vital in creating a sensation of “oneness” because the decorative objects and articles themselves were necessarily diverse. Here, the principles of harmony and balance entwined once again in Jakway’s explanation of “unity in diversity.” Too much unity relegated family members and guests to the doldrums of “monotony and ennui,” but as Jakway also warned, too much variety subjected them to “confusion and fatigue.” Tastemakers consequently encouraged amateur decorators to avoid matching sets and, instead, to seek out distinctive decorative objects, for such embellishments piqued interest and heightened the allure of more utilitarian furnishings by injecting the appropriate amount of zest and snap. Carefully selected and strategically positioned points of variation supplied definition within a decorative composition. By enhancing and distinguishing the aesthetic elements of color, line, texture, and form, the adroit use of contrast, rather than disrupt balance and harmony, proved essential in clarifying an interior’s undergirding principles and overarching purpose.

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65 Ibid., 90, 105.
67 Jakway, 177.
68 Ibid., 107.
Personality, Vitality, and Appetite

If employed correctly, the decorative technique of contrast also enabled the skilled interior decorator to express her individual preferences while also remaining steadfast to the motives and principles guiding her work. This reconciliation of personal preference and prescribed principle was an essential, though fraught, balancing act, causing the pages of advice manuals to be laden with dire warnings that incautiously or ineptly arranged furnishings either exposed the homemaker as a fraudulent imitator, or at the other extreme, as excessively “powerful, bold, somewhat crude, of pronounced individuality, and obvious.”

Speaking to the imperative of resolving the potential opposition between liberty and law, Bernard Jakway reminded his readers that decorum and decoration shared a Latin root that, in “meaning to be fitting or becoming,” established a fundamental identity between prescribed convention and artistic production. Jakway likened this resolution to a woven fabric: “The art [of interior decoration] is like a two-ply web, wherein general esthetic principles are the warp threads that run from one end of the fabric to the other, giving it strength and continuity, and individual needs are the weft threads that shoot across and back, in and out, binding the warp together and giving pattern and meaning to the whole.”

Elaborating on the acceptable role of individual liberty in the domestic interior’s principled composition, Frank Alvah Parsons further explained, “Personality should not interfere with the fundamentals of selection or arrangement which are necessary to good taste. The larger facts are not determined by personal preference, but the way in which they are interpreted varies with personality.” Jakway and Parsons spoke for their colleagues in attesting that good décor both exhibited decorative principles and accommodated particulars. Pointing to the interpretative function of personality, Parsons further illustrates how

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69 Ibid., 67.
70 Ibid., 76.
71 Ibid., 286.
72 Parsons, Interior Decoration, 250.
decorators invoked this newly popular psychological concept to reconcile a regulatory adherence to aesthetic tenets with an evocative aura of self-determining individuality, both of which beautiful décor ideally embodied.73

Born in 1872, Emily Post bridged the twelve-year span between Frank Alvah Parsons and Bernard Jakway. Her path to professionalism predictably took a much different course than her contemporaries, for Post was very much a genteel child of the Gilded Age who would become a professional woman of the twentieth century. Constrained by her class and her gender, Post relinquished dreams of pursuing fame on the theatrical stage and of following her beloved father into the field of architecture. She instead conformed to the dictates of duty, becoming a socially accomplished wife to Edwin Post, who personified the excesses of early twentieth-century speculative capitalism, and devoting herself to an upper-class regimen of visiting and acting the hostess. Post was wrested from this personally enervating role when her husband’s philandering led to a humiliating, well-publicized divorce that catalyzed her work as an author.

Although indelibly associated with her etiquette manual, Post wrote extensively throughout her lengthy, illustrious career, publishing numerous novels and essays. The book dearest to heart was, however, a compendium of advice on domestic architecture and interior décor entitled *The Personality of a House*, which she dedicated to her deceased father and son, the architects to whom Post paid tribute in her exhaustive manual. Like many domestic experts of the early twentieth century, Post lacked formal training, but her guidebook showcases its author’s extensive knowledge and confident grasp of her subject. Exposure to the best homes in

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73 Historians have argued that interiors of the early twentieth-century reflected a shift in purpose from a didactic function of molding character to a representational one of expressing personality. See for example, Karen Halttunen; Volz, 31-35. In making her argument, Volz cites Warren Susman’s foundational monograph *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1984), to explain that infusing a home with personality served to counter consumerism’s homogenizing impact. Janna Jones similarly argues, “The manuals explained to their readers the value of possessing the singular and rare artifact, for such a treasure was a sign of individuality and ensured that the home would have a unique signature.” Jones, “The Distance from Home: The Domestication of Desire in Interior Design,” *Journal of Social History* (Winter 1997): 323.
America and Europe supplemented the instruction in architectural principles that Post gleaned from the tutoring of her doting father, the eminent architect Bruce Price. After her father’s death, Post began preparing model interiors for one of his associates, assembling cardboard replicas of interior designs with cigar boxes and papier-mâché furniture. What began as a hobby evolved into a part-time job with Post earning commissions from the associate’s clients as well as the members of her own extensive social network.74

Unlike Bernard Jakway, Emily Post addressed her readers more “frankly and from an essentially unprofessional point of view,” causing her advice on imbuing a house with personality to very much reflect her own. Despite a personal enthusiasm for the Enneagram as a model of personality, Post’s description of a home’s unique persona was much more idiomatic. “The house that does not express the individuality of its owner is like a dress shown on a wax figure,” Post chided in her inimitable style; “[N]either is animated by a living personality.” For those perhaps too easily tempted by these department store displays, Post declared, “[Y]our home . . . should unmistakably suggest you,” and “[i]ts personality should express your personality.”75 This decorative mode of self-expression promised to infuse the home with “qualities that enchant” and lend it “beauty, taste, sympathy and appealing manner so as to be satisfactory to you and to me and to everyone else.”76 Imbuing a home with personality required originality and creativity: “No one could ever be interested in unvarying repetition—except as a cure for insomnia,” Post admonished. Yet, the expression of personality also depended upon a decorator’s willingness to “follow definite and immutable laws of form and proportion and—most important of all—suitability to situation and to purpose.” For a collection of individual pieces “assembled with

75 Post, 2, 3, 10.
76 Ibid., 1, 2.
taste and skill, is far more likely to produce a room of personality,” Post explained, “than is one which is precisely matched.”

Post’s celebration of individuality and her insistence on conformity hardly reflected an inconsistency in her thought. Because personality referred to personal longings, attributes, and preferences communicated through the home’s décor, it enabled the adherence to principle that Post also advised to appear simultaneously individualizing and standardizing, liberating and regulatory, expressive of the self and appealing to society. Like Herbert Hoover’s American Individual, Post’s interior decorator understood that the principles circumscribing her freedom of self-expression were also paradoxically the means of its socially admirable manifestation. Yet, personality was not the only characterizing, personal essence that interior decoration conveyed. Every room of a home’s interior, Frank Alvah Parsons reminded, was not simply a space to be used and enjoyed, but also “a personal creation and a form of self-expression.” More to the point, décor functioned to “sometimes give just the note that makes the room the visible expression of the inward thought of the person who occupies the room.” The embodiment of thoughts that distinguished a man as a man, “The house is,” Parsons averred, “but the externalized man; himself expressed in colour, form, line and texture . . . the house is his house. It is he.” As Parsons’s emphatic words suggest, the interior of the modern home reenacted a primordial shelter, but it was also construed as identical to the interior of its presumed creator. When passing a house that exuded a charming personality, admirers walked, Emily Post fantasized for her readers, “very, very slowly, trying to see as much of it as we can, and ardently

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77 Ibid., 11, 315, 313.
78 Illustrating the paradoxical connotations of personality as a simultaneously liberated and regulated mode of self-expression, Carma Gorman uses personality and character interchangeably, reflecting its paradoxical usage in the topics of her analysis—the textbook *Art in Every Day Life* and its authors, Harriet and Vetta Goldstein.
80 Ibid., 250.
81 Ibid., vii.
wishing that we might see it all around and inside too." Post’s imaginings illustrate, that, while the charming home’s architecture attracted interest and admiration, its exterior design more importantly beckoned passerby to peer into an interior space where personality and principle were on display, but so too was a substance more essential, though intangible.

Described by Post as “the smiles of a house,” the windows of a personable home that beckoned the curious to peek and the invited to enter create a lens for looking into the perceived identity between a home and its creators. While Post here referred to the windows’ structural placement and proportion, she also “warn[ed] against enshrouding drapery that obscures all light.” Widely disseminated to American homemakers, this advice on window treatments, particularly its emphasis on the simplicity of their design and their functionality in regulating rather than omitting what entered the family’s haven, illuminates a generational shift in aesthetic standards, a Progressive concerns for health and hygiene, and a demographic shift to more homogeneous suburban communities. More modern styles of window treatments also symbolized an altered understanding of the home’s role in demarcating the boundaries between public and private spheres of gendered experience. The heavy, opaque curtains that once darkened Victorian windows had screened middle-class families from the noise, dirt, and congestion that accompanied the commerce conducted on teeming city streets. Modern women were alternatively advised to cast off these elaborately festooned creations and to replace them with sheer fabrics that filtered natural light and fresh air into suburban domiciles that signified a democratizing American entitlement rather than the rigid, class pretensions and physical boundaries that had prevailed in the nineteenth-century metropolis. “Fancy curtains, bound with colored ribbons and patterned in color, are in dangerous taste,” Post advised, suggesting

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82 Post, 1.
83 Ibid., 7.
84 Ibid., 464.
instead that window treatments be constructed of “net, scrim, filet, chiffon, silk gauze, [and] organdie.”\textsuperscript{86} Out of these lighter and semi-translucent fabrics, modern homemakers learned to fashion glass curtains, pleated side draperies, and simple valences that were deemed essential for “regulating light, framing a view, accentuating color” and, generally, beautifying the interior of any home.\textsuperscript{87} This home economist’s recognition of the aesthetic purpose that curtains must serve found its echo in a decorator’s admonition that “[n]othing is more damaging to the appearance of a carefully planned room than wrong curtains.”\textsuperscript{88}

In helping to create the appropriate atmosphere, curtains enabled modern families and their guests to feel comfortable and restored rather than ensconced and stifled. As demonstrated by tastemakers’ justifications, curtains were viewed as integral to creating an environment in which modern men and women might experience physical enjoyment, emotional pleasure, and mental quietude. Fundamental to the creation of what Bernard Jakway described as the “perfect room,” curtains supplied an illusion of interiority that satisfied essential, visceral needs “of shelter, of protection, of freedom to live our lives unhindered by nature or by man.”\textsuperscript{89} Although man might instinctually crave fortification against the elements, he was also indelibly and inescapably shaped by their force. The full power of the sun’s brilliancy had sent men searching for cover since the dawn of time; however, light was also indisputably the catalyst in unleashing a

\textsuperscript{86} Post, 466.
\textsuperscript{87} Richardson, 432.
\textsuperscript{88} Emily Burbank, \textit{Be Your Own Decorator} (New York: Dodd, Meade, and Company, 1922), 231.
\textsuperscript{89} Jakway, 161. Clifford E. Clark, Jr., explains this evolution in the home’s perceived function at the turn of the twentieth century. The infusion of both Darwinian and Freudian principles and logic into the cultural lexicon altered, rather than substantively changed, the modern home’s purpose. While the home ideally continued to protect its inhabitants and to mold the values and behaviors of the family’s younger members, these traditional directives shifted to accommodate a seemingly more tumultuous and competitive environment as well as the assertion that innate drives and instincts equipped modern men for this struggle. Nineteenth-century aesthetic values that included the natural, the organic, and the sincere consequently assumed different connotations as the home’s protective and didactic functions evolved to accommodate a host of newly identified external and internal threats to the family and its individual members. Clifford E. Clark, Jr., \textit{The American Family Home, 1800-1960} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 151-155.
“flood of physical and psychical energies.”90 “Our vital energies flow and ebb with alterations in the intensity and the brilliancy of the light,” Jakway explained, and for this reason, “we must expect to find that our esthetic reactions are similarly affected by the same factors.”91 Yet, to those who might dispense with window treatments altogether, he warned, “Brilliant light, like pure color, rapidly exhausts nervous energy. It is fatiguing physically and unendurable esthetically.”92

A means of balancing the enlivening and enervating effects of light required an astute decorator, one who understood both the aesthetic importance and function of curtains in manipulating luminosity and its impact on mood and vitality:

“In the degree that a room is to be used primarily for rest after labor and for recuperation from the effects of activity and excitement the amount and brilliancy of the light should be reduced to the minimum required for the physical comfort of the eye; while in the degree that it is to be a scene of animation and gayety, occupied by people who have energies to expend and who demand joyousness, vivacity and social contact, the amount and brilliancy of the light must be increased to the maximum permitted by the physical comfort of the eye.”93

Acknowledging that the rooms of a smaller modern home must serve multiple functions, Jakway placed the solution for admitting the proper amount of light firmly “within the control of the decorator.” She needed only to hang undercurtains or sheers in combination with shades or panels that could be drawn across the window at will.94

In this extended discussion of window treatments, Jakway reiterated a concern for evoking and conserving vitality, one that also pervaded his justifications for the significance of harmony and balance. Yet, Jakway also labored over capturing another immaterial source of personal animation that complemented this essential reservoir of energy—the desire for beauty. This animating impulse fundamentally differed from the individualizing essence that professional

90 Jakway, 190.
91 Ibid., 189.
92 Ibid., 190.
93 Ibid., 192.
94 Ibid., 191.
decorators defined as personality. Their praise for personality presumed a desire to be desired, and the duality of its meaning served to recast a compliance with social dictates into a paradoxical act of feminine self-determination.\textsuperscript{95} While the wish to be regarded as enchanting and charming was regarded in the advice literature as a powerful source of motivation, so too was the craving for beauty itself. Repeated warnings of the dangers posed by this love of beauty also ambivalently conceded the generative significance of a woman’s fancy. Expounding on this desire, Frank Alvah Parsons framed the “[l]ove of beauty and the desire to create” as “a primal instinct in man.”\textsuperscript{96} “[M]an intuitively desires to create and to possess beauty,” he further explained, and “[t]his desire is equivalent in man’s higher self to the appetite for food or drink or rest in the realm of physical existence. It is just as general, just as clearly defined, and just as important to man’s realization of himself.”\textsuperscript{97}

Acknowledging this appetite, decorators such as Parsons invoked desire’s force to explain the evocatively beautiful interior’s constructive power and their profession’s importance in making it so. Embedded within their declarations of beauty as a compelling impulse was, however, an implicit recognition of the incommensurability between beauty as a dynamic force and a static form. Fretting over beauty’s intangibility and indeterminacy, Bernard Jakway turned to the dictionary’s authority for defining beauty as “‘an assemblage of graces or properties pleasing to the eye.’” The trained professional lamented that this description proved too insubstantial to be satisfying; its ambiguity offered “no nourishment” to the novice and, implicitly, no models for training the eye to ascertain what it should recognize as beautiful. He conceded, “Beauty is in fact beyond definition, and there are no physical norms of the

\textsuperscript{95} Penny Sparke has also explored how decorating manuals ambivalently both incited women’s aspirations for social advancement, public admiration, and self-realization, while also prescriptively determining the appropriate expression of taste. She attributes this ambivalence to the fact that “[a]s women became increasingly defined as consumers in this period the act of ‘desiring’ became as important as that of consuming.” Sparke, “The ‘Ideal’ and the ‘Real,’” 68. Janna Jones shares this conclusion in her article, “The Distance from Home: The Domestication of Desire in Interior Design.”

\textsuperscript{96} Parsons, Interior Decoration, 3.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 13.
 Rather than a definitive characteristic attached to particular objects, beauty connoted the possession of an aesthetic appeal that assuaged a primal hunger for pleasurable sensation. “Like electricity, or like the life-force itself,” beauty was felt rather than seen. “[W]e can experience it,” Jakway explained, “but we cannot tell what it is.” Here was an admission that Jakway’s readers were all too capable of telling or recognizing the presence of beauty when they encountered objects that whetted their appetites and became perceptively animated by the force of this desire. That beauty was a sensate, personal, intuitive form of knowing contradicted Jakway’s efforts to stipulate its specific, universal meaning. To obfuscate this equivocation, Jakway endeavored to delineate “the conditions under which [beauty] appears,” which he assured were “fairly constant.” The need for certainty and tangibility led Jakway from the dictionary to the natural, behavioral, and social sciences, for these emergent sources of authority helped to explain how various aesthetic elements evoked emotions and assuaged desires in such a way that determined beauty’s apprehension.

Tranquil and restful, cheerful and stimulating, dainty and feminine—each emotional state was associated with a specific palette of colors, forms, and textures. It was the function of these evocative elements not only to bring into concert the individual components of a decorative composition, but also to harmonize homemakers’ innate desires for beauty with the principles and ideals prescribed by decorating experts. The function of interior decoration was to express meaning; however, as professional decorators acknowledged, the perceived veracity and legitimacy of this representational mode depended upon an affective investment that aesthetic elements facilitated. “Beauty,” as Jakway enthused, “appears in the presence of diversity in unity.” This purveyor of principle nevertheless confessed that, to be recognized as beautiful, this tenet required an “imaginative or sensuous expression.” Taking this “first step toward beauty”

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99 Ibid., Fundamental Principles, 79.
entailed assembling “a diversity of hues, tones, lines, forms and textures” that exuded an effortless and organic perception of unity that exceeded the function of these decorative elements to convey a dominant theme.\footnote{Jakway, “Some Aspects of Interior Decoration,” 30-32; Ibid., Fundamental Principles, 79.} Among these foundational “words” of décor, texture particularly demonstrates Jakway’s awareness that the legitimacy of the principles he expounded depended upon an intensification of desire. The significance of texture within a beautiful interior rested, according to Jakway, “in part upon [its] physical characteristics and in part upon association of ideas.”\footnote{Ibid., Fundamental Principles, 74.} Due to its sensuality, however, texture carried an emotional import that “has roots that lie below mere association, in states too purely metaphysical for discussion here.”\footnote{Ibid., 73.} It was the decorator’s task to establish the proper connections between the primal forces that texture brought to the fore and the ideas that it served to symbolize.

Of all the decorative elements that aroused desire and elicited emotion, none wielded a power comparable to that of color. Tastemakers generally agreed that color offered the most affordable and, consequently, the most accessible way to effect beauty. With a flick of the brush, “magic colors” imbued the homemaker of modest means with the power to “transform every nook and cranny . . . making them do whatever [she] determine[d] they should do.” When “[u]sed adroitly,” this author exclaimed, “color is the wand of magic, at whose transforming touch shabbiness, gloom, and discord disappear.”\footnote{Jacqueline Verneuil, “New color schemes for old,” The American Home, November 1928, 137.} A contemporary agreed that “cold and cheerless” rooms would become “warm, vivid, [and] livable” when the light of color touched their surfaces. As significantly, color provided a “feeling of unity” where a mixed collection of furniture threatened discord.\footnote{Margaret Fleming, “The Magic of Color in a Room,” The American Home, October 1928, 48.} These comments illustrate again the significance of visual appeal and sensate pleasure in both effecting decorative ideals and securing their perceived legitimacy. Although color’s transformative capacity excited these feminine tastemakers, it produced only...
ambivalence within Frank Alvah Parsons who regarded color as a necessary expressive form, but also as a potentially ominous “power in nature.” Because the emotions and energies evoked by vivid, intense hues were often excessively strong and even irrational, they could not always be trusted to guide the process of selection. To avoid such disastrous results, the correct use of color required a judicious moderation grounded in an informed understanding of color theory.\(^{105}\)

If decorators regarded paint selection as simultaneously productive and imperiling, they expressed even more ambivalence about an expanding selection of wallpaper. Cheaper, more durable, and more attractive than the material their mothers had used, wallpaper supplied modern women with another economical way to enliven a tired, drab room. According to a proponent of its use, new styles of wallpaper exercised a bewitching force that, by enhancing the appeal of an interior space, promised to transform “a sordid pumpkin into Cinderella’s coach.” The power to change a scullery into a ballroom and thus a maid into a princess was hardly magical; wielding this “witchery” simply required understanding how different textures, patterns, and designs altered a room’s atmosphere even when its other elements remained unchanged. Given wallpaper’s transformative potential, its enthusiast stressed caution, urging her readers to select appropriate shades and designs that would create a balanced impression—either a print “subtle and pleasing that it is welcome in the most conservative home” or for the less subdued, a pattern “cheery and original looking, of rather modern design, but not exciting nor restless.”\(^{106}\)

**The Golden Rule of Taste**\(^{107}\)

Like other aesthetic elements and decorative materials, wallpaper’s “witchery” effected a synthesis of desire and reason wherein supposedly innate longings for beauty were channeled into rational forms of expression. To ensure this merger, decorators manipulated the sensuality of

\(^{107}\) Eberlein, 7.
interior decoration’s aesthetic elements, but they also cited an instinctive ability to recognize the
categorical truth of these axioms. Parsons described balance or the “perfect equalization of
attractions,” for example, as a natural preference, explaining “the feeling for this quality is an
instinct inherent because man is a part of a created whole in which there are general laws
touching every element of the universe.”108 Bernard Jakway joined his colleagues in finding the
genesis of rationality in the visceral, somatic, and cognitive responses that arose from either
observing the natural world or reflecting on historical examples. Proportionality was, Jakway
insisted, an intuitive preference due to the ballast that heavier, broader foundations supplied in
natural objects such as trees, mountains, and even the human form, while curved lines evoked a
similarly organic or innate appeal.

Likewise, humans would always tend toward harmony in their domestic environments, as
this “basic esthetic quality” was both “pleasing and convincing.”109 Making a case for the
aesthetic value of harmony that appealed to reason and to the senses, Jakway argued that the mind
sought always to order and to categorize by creating associations among similar objects.
Determining a dominant, unifying motive in a domestic interior consequently originated not in an
expert’s dictates, but in “the mind’s insistence upon the principle of subordination.”110 “It is a
law of the mind,” Jakway further explained, “that, other things being equal, we must attend to the
strongest stimulus; and if the dominant element is permitted to catch and hold the eye and
constantly to obtrude itself upon the mind, whether by reason of its size, shape, color or position,
it will inevitably shut out of consciousness the subordinate elements of the composition, which
are no less essential to the beauty of the whole, since they insure the necessary effect of
diversity.”111 True harmony consequently implied an organic consistency in which the individual

108 Parsons, 78.
109 Jakway, 99.
110 Ibid., 84.
111 Ibid., 90.
pieces of an interior “appear to the mind to have grown together in the process of expressing a common idea.” Yet, desire’s investment in the decorative principle of harmony entailed more than a natural proclivity for mental classification. Further proving the rectitude of creating unity among diverse elements were the psychological and emotional effects that accompanied cognitive apprehension:

“Psychologically, repetition is associated in the mind with the ideas of succession, order and regularity, and hence with the sense of repose and quiet well-being which always results from order and regularity in the affairs of life. On the other hand, change and non-succession are associated with the ideas of disorder, irregularity and disquietude. . . . Monotone is tiresome, and to normal persons unendurable. The eye is never satisfied unless the visual field presents a diversity of tones. However, it must first of all be an orderly diversity, as otherwise the effect would be so incoherent that the mind could recognize essential tonal likenesses only with a sense of effort. Disorder is never an aesthetic quality, but is rather the most fecund source of ugliness.”

Jakway’s reflections on “ugliness” thus reveal a perceived reciprocity between body and mind with the instincts and the senses determining the apprehension of reason and reason evolving to serve emotional and visceral needs.

This mutuality of reason and feeling was the essence of taste, for as defined by decorators, taste was of the mind, but it also originated in the needs, instincts, and intuitions.

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112 Ibid., 135.
113 Ibid., 95, 119.
114 In her examination of pattern books published in the late nineteenth century, for example, Linda Smeins associates taste with social class. Whereas taste was once the exclusive province of those who set an example for others to emulate, its meaning shifted in the late nineteenth century to reflect the democratization of aesthetics that accompanied consumerism and the development of a professional and managerial class. Taste consequently shifted from the entitlement of the wealthy to an appreciation for beauty that originated within the consumer. As Smeins argues, taste has and continues to reinforce class distinctions, while facilitating the perceived development of and identification with an expansive middle class. However, construed as originating in an aesthetic appreciation for beauty that could be cultivated, this conception of taste revived and democratized an historical understanding of taste as a faculty necessary for self-governing citizenship. According to Gordon Wood, the founding fathers associated political virtue “with politeness, good taste, and one’s instinctive sense of morality.” As their self-conscious use of socially and politically unifying republican idioms declined after the revolutionary war, these articulators of American political ideology turned to Scottish Common Sense philosophy for inspiration in equating taste with a “moral sense.” A refined appreciation of beauty and decorum supplied the “social adhesives” that ensured social peace and economic prosperity. Smeins, Building an American Identity: Pattern Book Homes & Communities, 1870-1900 (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1999), 147-148; Gordon Wood, Revolutionary Characters, 105.
Bernard Jakway defined taste as an appetite or a “relishing” that one sought always to satisfy, albeit in sublimated form. Linked in this way to an individual palate, taste implied a “fancy” or “predilection;” however, Jakway also referred to taste as a “faculty” or “an unerring sense of fitness” that could be cultivated and improved through appropriate instruction. A “complex of knowledge, appreciation, discrimination and judgment,” taste was above all an “irreducible minimum” in the art of interior decoration. Parsons concurred both with Jakway’s insistence on the fundamental importance of taste and with his conception of cultivated taste as the integration of a demanding “aesthetic sense” and a more rational “state of mind or of consciousness.” The elevation of primary preferences into an acculturated attribute, taste prevented, as Parsons explained it, “an appetite for aesthetic things” from devolving into the “atrocities” committed through the unchecked, “over-zealous desire for beauty.”

Emily Post joined the male decorators in conceiving taste as a socially commendable point of equilibrium between self-expression and self-restraint. “Good taste might properly be defined,” Post assessed, “as nice perception of the standards of suitability, form, proportion, scale and color, and the harmonious relation of each to the other.” Taste was not to be confused, however, with “the opinion of the majority,” particularly when that number included “the uncouth millions pouring yearly into this great melting-pot, our United States.” “Imagine the manners and tastes of the majority, and consider what the charm of living would be,” Post admonished,

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115 Ibid., 3.
116 Ibid., 4, 288. In establishing the foundation of the American Individual’s moral conscience, Walter Dexter described social conscience as “the determining factor in questions of right and wrong” that was often perceived to originate in a “‘taste faculty.’” Although he conceded with critics of faculty psychology that this judgment might not be innate, he argued instead for cultivating an “inescapable responsibility for truth.” “Most of us do learn to distinguish the difference between right and wrong,” Dexter claimed in accord with professional decorators, “as we assign value to action in terms of the motives that impel or the results that ensue.” Dexter, 94.
117 Jakway, 3.
118 Parsons, Interior Decoration, 13.
119 Post, 302.
“should the majority be the criterion of culture.”

For the grande dame of decorum, taste facilitated the acquisition and display of both “charm” and “culture;” its connotative restraint transformed desire into desirability, making taste indispensable to expressing the personality that Post insisted a beautiful home must exude.

Connecting the display of personality to the possession of good taste, Post spoke directly to concerns about homemakers’ autonomy, both its absence and its inappropriate expression. In the advice literature of the 1920s, fears abounded that these consumers and newly enfranchised voters would be excessively swayed by experts’ injunctions, fashion’s whims, or neighbors’ judgements. Jakway particularly worried about “the more unsophisticated among housewives of this class.” Given a general lack of education and cultural exposure, this group of women failed to “admit the need for a cultivated taste because they do not recognize the authority, or indeed the existence, of any norms or standards of artistic judgment higher than their own preferences.” Their more affluent counterparts tended, on the other hand, to act too repetitiously and mimetically. Yet, as Jakway and his colleagues admonished, neither indulging in mimicry nor “the vagaries of inept and undisciplined fancy” could ever attain the desired aims of beauty and comfort.

Lacking the foundational support of taste, women instead became vulnerable to the wrong type of guidance and yielded to the temptation to “copy [a] friend’s house or [a] next door neighbor’s.” Theirs was a type of inauthentic and, therefore, unappealing imitation that began with the misguided question, “‘What are they using?’” To be truly inviting, this critic chided, a

120 Ibid., 303. Industrialization and immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries catalyzed a similar emphasis on the cultivation of taste and taste education, just as their attendant ills, which intruded into the home, also incited and justified demands for greater public education. On taste as an aesthetic form of temperance in the late nineteenth-century, see Sparke, “The ‘Ideal’ and the ‘Real’ Interior in Elsie de Wolfe’s The House in Good Taste, published in 1913,” 65. See also Bergland and Gorman.

121 Post, 4-5.
home must evince something more substantial than the preferences of “[t]hose mysterious persons called ‘they.’”

Even the technocrats affiliated with Hoover’s housing conference chimed in on the dangers of being overly influenced by the inconstant, external forces of public opinion and social judgment. Too much credence given to rapidly changing fashions, one committee reported, “[gives] many people the feeling that there are no laws governing good taste, that taste is the whim of the moment and of some particular person. The logical conclusion to them is that there are no permanent values, no real investment values, ugliness is as valuable as beauty, and change, in order to be like one’s neighbor, is a fair standard of living. All of these conclusions are essentially unsound and uneconomical.” Even copying a professionally designed interior was potentially “dangerous,” for “[t]he perversion of a fanciful idea used by a decorator under particular and individual conditions often has produced a decorative horror by the time it has reached the public.” The replication of a well-designed interior thus potentially committed “actual violations of fundamental laws of design” that threatened to exile the perpetrator “far beyond the bounds of good taste.” While such models created by professionals might appeal to a homemaker’s aesthetic sensibilities, good décor needed also to reflect an individual family’s particular circumstances and preferences.

Yet, between the poles of pitiable ignorance and flagrant disregard, tastemakers hoped to reach a middle ground by improving the homemaker’s taste. Writing for Better Homes in America, the home economist Elsie Richardson assessed the dilemma in simple terms: “A home without color seems to represent a colorless personality, while a home with too much color becomes gaudy and speaks of poor taste.” This vacillation between these extremes would end

123 Report of the Committee on Home Furnishings and Decoration, 111.
124 Ibid., 114.
“[t]he more highly the tastes are cultivated,” for given a more informed palate, “less contrast in color and decorations is necessary to satisfy.”

Richardson’s assurances that knowledge both must and would breed moderation was widely reiterated. Frank Parsons acknowledged, for example, that “the standard of beauty depends entirely upon one’s own conception of it,” but quickly refuted the idea “that anything that anybody considers beautiful is so . . . It simply means that the person who judges may or may not have a right mental standard of what beauty really is.”

Speaking to the possibility of teaching discretion, Parsons returned to the origin of taste:

“What a man selects in response to this demand of his nature and how he arranges what he has selected, determines his taste. A man’s taste improves as the aesthetic sense becomes refined or sensitized to the point of responding to the more subtle combinations of forms and colours. This matter of taste is not a fixed quality. One may have the gift or natural tendency to refined choice, but no man has by divine right a monopoly of good taste. Our standards are constantly changing during life as affected by study and by environment.”

Construing taste as an innate potential for discrimination, domestic professionals adopted the idiom of cultivation in a way that disavowed—both acknowledged and denied—the perceived necessity of regulating homemakers’ creativity and their aesthetic desires. As Bernard Jakway presumed to reassure even his most untutored readers, “A faculty developed by long processes of observation, analysis and comparison, [taste] is after all chiefly a matter of knowledge.”

Making appropriate selections encompassed most of what decorators needed to learn, and this skill could “be best and most quickly cultivated by the study of these underlying principles.”

For professional decorators, the idiom of cultivation implied the potential to draw out and nurture a capacity latently present, while it also framed taste education as a volitional endeavor motivated either by “duty to the cause of civilization” or by “the normal desires inspired by the aesthetic sense.”

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125 Richardson, 430.
126 Parsons, The Art of Decoration, 12.
127 Parsons, Interior Decoration, 226.
128 Jakway, 288.
129 Ibid., 5.
130 Parsons, Interior Decoration, 227.
resolve the dilemma that homemakers must comply with experts’ dictums without appearing to become either subservient to or subsumed by them. This resolution served to obscure the generally coercive tone and intent of the advice literature on home decoration. A reviewer for Parsons’s decorating manual explained this molding of appetite into willful conviction by commending the “most practical treatise” in which “Mr. Parsons does not merely tell what is good and what is not good, but gives the reasons for conviction and judgment so that the reader is able to arrive at conclusions himself.”

Taste thus connoted the willful control that American homemakers were enjoined to exercise over essential desires and appetites as a means of fulfilling them. This disciplined expression of liberty consequently functioned to transform interior decoration from a mode of discipline into an empowering performance of self-government. Equipped with a discernment analogous to informed consent, the tasteful, and thereby autonomous, homemaker could “be big enough and broad enough to take a stand against anything that is not good and right.” She possessed, according to the White House Conference’s committee on homemaking, the discretion and restraint “to buy a few pieces wisely and have them for years to come than to furnish with more pieces of too temporary a character.” Such a judicious woman resisted the impulse “to make today pay as much as possible regardless of what happens tomorrow.” Moreover, the tasteful homemaker identified with aims larger than her own preferences, and she came to embrace “mental and spiritual ideas” that Frank Parsons declared to be “the real things that not only determine what we actually are, but are the only things that are truly permanent.” As a result of these convictions, “right usage” triumphed over “personal whim,” causing the homemaker’s decorating decisions to be “governed by common sense and [consequently] the

132 Parsons, Interior Decoration, 231.
133 Report of the Committee on Home Furnishings and Decoration, 90, 111.
laws of choice and arrangement which are fundamental in any right design.” ¹³⁵ Finally, for the decorator well-versed in the strategic manipulation of sensuously appealing aesthetic elements, these choices appeared “not only essential, but natural.” ¹³⁶

The Public Cultivation of Private Tastes

That it was essential for American homemakers to regard as natural the principles defining good taste was reflected in Frank Alvah Parsons’s declaration that the home “can be . . . no better, and should be no worse, than the individual whose personal creation it is.” ¹³⁷ This accepted truism helps to explain why Better Homes of America’s interests extended well beyond the mere possession of single-family dwellings. Bolstering rates of home ownership and improving standards of the home’s appearance and maintenance required significant public reeducation, first, to provide a rationale for purchasing a home, and then, to instruct potential homeowners how to select, finance, furnish, decorate, and care for their new possessions. This information was generally represented as “authentic,” “unbiased,” and uncorrupted by ignorance or self-interest unlike the instructive information gleaned from women’s magazines, manufacturers, or even the Department of Agriculture. ¹³⁸ In 1935, the BHA published a compilation of the reports and materials that spanned the organization’s history. Many of the entries to be found in the encyclopedic Better Homes Manual had already appeared in local newspapers and monthly magazines or in the pamphlets such as those Jane Norton ordered. She was not alone in asking the public service agency for advice. Though the year of the Manual’s

¹³⁵ Parsons, Interior Decoration, 249.
¹³⁶ Ibid., vii-viii.
¹³⁷ Ibid., 274.
¹³⁸ Marie Meloney quoted in “Abstract of Discussion Following the Meeting of the Members of Better Homes in America,” December 15, 1934, James Spear Taylor Papers, Box 2 Minutes and Reports, 1932-1934, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library. Hereafter cited as HHPL.
appearance found Americans in the grip of economic depression, Americans sent the BHA 40,000 requests for its publications.  

To publicize its comprehensive agenda further, the BHA also deployed “the familiar, effective American method of ‘drives and ballyhoo.’” Experts at the national level particularly relied on local representatives to disseminate their prescribed standards and recommendations to both rural and urban communities through events such as the seminars, lectures, exhibits, workshops, and demonstrations conducted during the much anticipated Better Homes Week. Among the highlights of this annual festival was the opportunity to tour a model home. Home improvement experts regarded such performances as essential, particularly given the still limited availability of high-quality photographic depictions. As one BHA consultant explained, “One of the reasons why standards are so low is that there are few people who have ever been in contact with the best productions actually used in fine combinations, and the word pictures used fail to give these standards accurately.” Preparing a demonstration house required, however, a significant investment of personal and material resources. To encourage an expenditure that promised only intangible rewards, Herbert Hoover appealed to national idealism and social altruism. Claiming an inevitable merger of long-term self and social interests, he advised, “Every city and town that has an opportunity to demonstrate a model home, attractively furnished and better equipped, will be a stronger community, a better place for children to grow up in, and a healthier, happier part of America.” The BHA’s cadre of professional administrators similarly

139 James Spear Taylor Papers, Box 2, BHA, Inc., Correspondence, 1935, June-November, HHPL. In 1928, Will Irwin reported the circulation of 325,000 copies of the Division of Building and Housing’s “How to Own Your Own Home.” Will Irwin, Herbert Hoover: A Reminiscent Biography (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1928), 297.
140 Irwin, 297.
141 Report of the Committee on Home Furnishings and Decoration, 118.
142 Herbert Hoover form letter, 4 January 1923, Commerce Papers, Building and Housing, BHA, Previous to Incorporation, 1921-1923, HHPL.
framed Better Homes Week as a charitable initiative to help the less fortunate and less educated who might visit the demonstration houses.

The BHA’s leaders also ensured volunteers’ complicity with nationally conceived standards by recognizing those committees that best applied these prescriptions. With their competitive impulses appropriately channeled, the BHA’s predominately white, middle-class volunteers invested months of study, planning, and actual labor in the construction and decoration of demonstration houses designed to “embody” specific solutions to the typical family’s “homemaking problems” and that “aim[ed] to be as attractive, comfortable and sanitary as possible at a cost within reach of families of modest income.” For a small number of local participants, these careful preparations culminated in a coveted prize. The BHA committee of Kohler, Wisconsin, earned a spot among the winners of the 1929 campaign, earning $100 for the best demonstration organized in an “industrial village.” Partially explaining the committee’s success was its creative execution of the national organization’s general objectives and its annual theme, which “was to stress the educational, the cultural, the aesthetic, and the spiritual sides of the modern American home.” This victory built upon the previous year’s prizewinning effort “to show how to gain more leisure and how to direct spare time into worthwhile [sic] pursuits.” The topic of appropriateness was revisited in the 1930 campaign, and the town’s local leaders seemed determined to continue their winning streak by making the public demonstration a community affair. Using a recently constructed house donated by the Kohler Improvement Company, the committee drafted young women enrolled in the high school’s home economics program to manufacture curtains, draperies, and other handicrafts. Their counterparts in the Manual Arts Department exhibited prowess with a different set of gendered tools by producing furnishings for one of the model dwelling’s six rooms. The purpose of such improvements would have remained

143 “Better Homes and Decreased Costs Through Elimination of Waste in Construction,” 11 January 1928, 37-38, Commerce Papers, Box 64, Building and Housing, 1928, HHPL.
oblique without the presence of a hostess who guided visitors through the model home to ensure their proper understanding of its numerous features and efficiencies.144

Just as the BHA’s annual campaigns attempted to cultivate taste within Kohler’s working-class population, it similarly promoted a white, middle-class aesthetic to immigrant families in need of Americanization. In enumerating “why your community should participate,” BHA leaders suggested that communities might uplift “a large population of immigrants or Negroes, who because of limited education have not yet learned the ways of securing the best living conditions which are within their reach.”145 A promotional article appearing in The Delineator emphasized this purpose in recounting the experiences of one immigrant mother who, after touring a demonstration house, tearfully exclaimed to her children, “Here is the place where they learn you how to live! This is what American means!”146 The “efficient committee” of Atlanta, Georgia, more than met this assimilationist objective in the BHA’s 1925 campaign by combining a traditional emphasis on moral improvement and self-disciplined labor with newly devised scientific standards conceived to enhance health, productivity, and adaptability. A recurring national prizewinner, the Atlanta group designed and outfitted three demonstration houses “to arrange for educational work among the native population, among the large negro population, and among immigrants, whose knowledge of American standards of housing and

home life is slight, and who may experience difficulty in adjusting themselves to American
conditions.”

Unlike the Kohler committee’s newly constructed, six-room colonial revival, a
reconditioned five-room apartment helped to instruct Atlanta’s ethnic, working-class population
in the art of acculturation. According to Mrs. Newton C. Wing, who commanded Atlanta’s
successful initiative, pupils enrolled in the city’s citizenship schools learned through their
obligatory tour “that the living room should be used for the purpose and not as a bed room.” For one of Mrs. Wing’s co-workers, the BHA project also enriched Atlanta’s white natives by
providing a lesson in multiculturalism. Immigrants might have learned “what a little paint and
water can do,” reported Mrs. J. E. Newton, the American Citizenship Chairman of Atlanta’s
Parent Teacher Association, but contact with the “fine type of men and women among the
foreigners” similarly altered the opinions held by “the many fine citizenship workers.” “The
Better Homes,” Newton proclaimed, “made us know, understand, and like each other better.”
White, native-born women reportedly developed a new appreciation for their immigrant
neighbors’ “exquisite handwork” and “many lovely heirlooms.” Despite such moments of
sympathetic exchange, foremost among the declared accomplishments of the Atlanta committee’s
“Americanization demonstration” was cultivating a “desire for cleaner and more attractive
homes.” Hygienic and tidy with its coat of fresh paint and “harmoniz[ed] . . . furniture and wall-
hangings,” the small demonstration apartment “brought many minds back to the home which had

147 Better Homes in America, Guidebook of Better Homes in America: How to Organize the 1926
Campaign, no. 10 (Washington, DC: Better Homes in America, 1925), 41.
148 Mrs. Newton C. Wing’s report can be found in “Results of the Better Homes in America Campaign of
1925,” 5, Commerce Papers, Box 65, HHPL. On alternative uses of domestic space among ethnic,
working-class citizens, see Lizbeth A. Cohen, “Embellishing a Life of Labor: An Interpretation of the
Material Culture of Working-Class Homes, 1885-1915,” Journal of American Culture 3(Winter 1980): 756-
772.
wandered far afield. It suggested quiet and peace and rest—with music and love and laughter in the home.”

As this description of the harmoniously decorated model home helps to illustrate, exposure to appropriate décor played an essential role in the acculturation of ethnic citizens; however, cultivating taste within the native-born was an equally important objective. As explained in a report prepared for Hoover’s White House Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, incorporating the principles of art into the decoration of a home promised to elevate living itself to an art. Demonstration homes endeavored to accomplish this purpose by exuding an aesthetic and sensuous appeal that restored the affective attachment needed to transform mere houses into a domain of privacy or inviolable individual liberty and to sustain the private sphere’s function as fertile ground for cultivating self-governing citizenship:

“The house exists as a place for holding the family together. If the family is our most important social unit, the house should be a fit place in which it may live. . . The very nature of the house, its space arrangements and environment, may help to develop in children judgment, taste, courtesy, comradeship, fairness, and lasting memories. It is an important part of the whole situation of which the child is a part, and should be made to contribute to his education and cultural growth.”

The home’s continued ability to serve this civic purpose required the homemaker “to strip the house of nonessentials, worthless ornamentation, purposeless furnishings, wasteful space, [and] poor equipment.” Each of these aesthetic deficiencies and inconveniences revealed that many women “are drifting aimlessly” at a moment when expanding rates of home ownership rendered the services of professional decorators both necessary and unaffordable. With mortgage payments consuming already limited resources, women were forced to become their own

149 Better Homes in America, Guidebook of Better Homes in America: How to Organize the 1926 Campaign, 43-44.
151 Ibid., 41.
decorators, and this new form of creative independence left them in need of “an impartial adviser” to trust as they navigated retail outlets filled with suspect products and disreputable salesmen. Their only protection against duplicity and costly mistakes lay in internalizing “the unprejudiced decorating standards of the highly trained specialist.” The report’s authors consequently recommended educational initiatives that would “safeguard us against the ugly and the bizarre in housing.” Key among their proposals was the creation of a central school to develop a “taste-education program” as well as the institution of a federated structure of related agencies that would “cooperate toward the extension of better taste standards.”

The Uncanniness of Bric-a-Brac

When spreading the gospel of taste to less educated and less economically privileged Americans, nothing disturbed the BHA’s housing experts and middle-class volunteers quite as much as the undisciplined collection of bric-a-brac. These proponents of a more modern, minimalist aesthetic counseled homemakers to banish their dusty collectibles and uncomfortable furnishings to the attic and to start afresh with hygienic, labor saving wares and simple furnishings. Lacking both intrinsic value and purpose, copious ornamentation and elaborately carved furnishings created undue work for busy women and harbored potentially harmful germs. Bric-a-brac nevertheless retained an appeal that proved horrifyingly uncanny. A persistent preference for excessive adornment, particularly on mantels, not only violated Progressive standards of hygiene and taste, but also signaled an irrational connection to things of an unauthorized past. Unlike the popularity of colonial revivalism, the undisciplined attachment that homemakers refused to relinquish was the pleasure they continued to find in the artifacts of either Victorian or Old World sentimentality. Such inappropriate desires for objects better

152 Ibid., 104-105.
153 Ibid., 122, 41.
154 May, 107; Brooks, 29.
155 Parsons, Interior Decoration, 11.
forsaken rendered the homemaker a “slave to tradition.” As one interior decorator observed, the new covenant with science had failed to prevent “[c]luttering and junk collecting,” and these remained “common besetting sins, elusive, insinuating sins, that few have the stern, unwavering resolution to resist.” Experience had demonstrated to another professional that the native-born and the wealthy held no monopoly on self-restraint. For regardless of a family’s means, “[a] love for ostentatious display shows itself . . . in overdecorated furniture.” “To a person of refinement,” he assured, elaborate furnishings “seem to be in extremely poor taste, and merely show the character of the residents.”

Repressing desire for these gauche objects was made all the more difficult by the persistent importance of ornamentation or de’coration volante. Ironically using the French term for “the small, unimportant pieces and decorative accessories,” Jakway’s interpretation of a distinctively American aesthetic described these embellishments as the “fugitive pieces whose primary function is to contribute the personal touches necessary to individualize the room, to rob it of stiffness or heaviness, give it a note of gayety and animation, and establish among all its elements a sort of air de famille.” These moveable or “flying” objects supplied the points of contrast needed to produce not only the individualizing effects of personality and taste, but also the perceived harmony of the composition in which they were judiciously placed.

While much of the vitriol against ornamentation expressed fears about the destabilizing rise of working class wages and the increasing diversity of American society, it also pointed to a more troubling deficit of feminine restraint. As Bernard Jakway lamented, “most American houses do lack simplicity,” and he placed the blame for this unprincipled, unappealing, and inauthentic complexity on “[t]he American housewife [who] is inclined to accumulate much and to discard little.” As a result of this voraciousness, Jakway complained, “Her rooms are

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156 Eberlein, 7.
157 Wileman, 22.
likely to contain too many colors, too much pattern, too much furniture, too many pictures, particularly too many gew-gaws and gimcracks.” A homemaker’s lack of control in collecting “a multitude of little trivial things [that] destroys the unity of a room esthetically and clutters it physically” portended dire consequences such as “fatiguing the mind and disturbing the serenity of its occupants.” Yet, warding off the temptations of sentimentally hanging onto the old and profligately accumulating the new was no easy feat, Jakway acknowledged, for it would require “overcoming the primal instinct of possession which lies miles deep below our surface veneering of culture.” “To give up the things we own is to go against nature,” Jakway sympathized, but this loss was the price of true freedom: “[W]e can do it only as we learn to value what we gain by the process more highly than what we lose.”

Even more disturbing to professional decorators than irrational sentimentality was an overtly individualistic and rebellious dissent against decorative principles. Speaking directly to this problem, Frank Alvah Parsons lamented, “It is very rarely that we err on the side of simplicity, but it is not at all unlikely that we may become flagrantly sumptuous, with an uncomfortable, tawdry result.” Such displays of unrestrained egoism inevitably diminished the beauty of a domestic interior. The harmony existing among diverse pieces could be easily destroyed, for example, “if the ornament becomes the end instead of the means, or in other words, if it becomes apparent as an addition, with the purpose of showing itself.” Such an object “savours of ostentation,” Parsons warned, “and, of course, proportionately, of vulgarity.”

Favoring temperance, the respected professional similarly denounced as an exemplar of poor taste any piece that “makes a bid for attention quite out of proportion to its rights,” and he criticized such self-indulgences on the part of the decorator as being “too-aggressive” and “over-

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158 Jakway, 21-23.
160 Parsons, Interior Decoration, 10-11.
Writing for the BHA, Elsie Richardson concurred with the importance of avoiding the inclusion of objects and elements that appeared radically different from or irreconcilable with an interior design’s purpose or motif. Contrast served to clarify rather than contradict, she explained, for it ideally created within a collection of thematically unified and equivalently valued pieces an impression of originality, initiative, and self-expression that stimulated the interest of admirers.

Both explicit and implied within these enumerated threats to harmony was a critique of women’s unrestrained individuality. Concerns about homemakers’ unrepressed aesthetic desires abounded in the abhorrence to bric-a-brac, but of equal concern was the crass bid for illegitimate power. Such cries against either excessively extravagant, pretentious, or crass display conveyed anxieties about women’s public authority in their emergent economic and political roles. They similarly reveal decorators grappling with the impossibility of restoring the ideologically productive gender binaries that the nineteenth-century home had helped to create and enforce through a symbolic equation of feminine virtue with a definitively pre-political and morally didactic space that served to shape the characters of the men destined to leave it. An entree to exploring the impossibility of maintaining this fabricated dichotomy of a private maternal space and a public male identity, as well as the admissions and anxieties that gender ambiguity yielded, can be found in Bernard Jakway’s warning that beauty’s attainment required avoiding not just “inconsistencies,” but also “esthetic contradictions.” While the practice of principality—subordinating individual elements to a dominant theme—created the perception of harmony, equally important was the recognition that “[b]eauty and the expression of emotional ideas largely depend in all the arts upon the convergence of effects.”

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162 Richardson, 428.
163 Jakway, 76.
In explaining the decorative technique of convergence, Jakway referred specifically to the unavoidable combination of form and color within a decorative composition. The gendered meanings of each aesthetic element nevertheless made their merger both necessary and complicated. Illustrating this complexity, Jakway declared form to be “intellectual,” explaining that “[i]n its effect upon the mind, form is solid, hard, active and masculine.” Color was alternatively “emotional,”—“fluid, soft, passive and feminine.” Yet, even within this basic, gendered division between color and form, difference continued to proliferate. Form derived its meaning, for example, from observations of the human figure because “certain emotional states always find expression through definite positions.” In this association between emotion and posture, straight lines conveyed “the ideas of steadiness and force,” while curved edges evoked “the ideas of flexibility, buoyancy and grace.” Power inhered within the distinction between implicitly masculine and feminine silhouettes, but its manifestation ideally belied a traditional, dichotomized ordering. Declaring “there is not virtue in curves merely as curves,” Jakway counseled that “[a] straight line is always to be preferred, at whatever cost of rigidity and obviousness, to a weak and meaningless curve.” Though preferred in particular situations, linearity was hardly ideal, for “beauty in form . . . depends first of all upon the power of the curved lines,” which conveyed a natural rectitude and proved “graceful, subtle and yet vigorous” when they mirrored the shapes of naturally occurring figures. Propulsive and foundational blocks had no such precedent in nature, but were rather a product of invention and, consequently, “inevitably associated with what is thoughtful, serious, purposive and austere.”

Balancing the gravity straight lines and rectangular shapes conveyed and their implied artificiality required infusing these contrived edges with a softer, lighter emotion redolent within
one of the many colors that industrial innovation also supplied. The fabricated colors of the modern spectrum nevertheless similarly divided themselves into gendered subcategories depending upon the particular feelings and activities they evoked. Warm colors suggested “impetuous or instinctive action as opposed to calculative, or reflective action” associated with the cooler shades\textsuperscript{168} Light tones elicited a perception of “instinctive action” akin to the effect of curved lines, while darker hues accompanied straight lines in exuding “reflective action.”\textsuperscript{169} As explicated by Jakway, a convergence of these gendered elements supplied a means of effecting the sensate balance and unity essential both to beauty’s apprehension and principle’s seeming rectitude. This combination of masculine and feminine attributes within a tasteful domestic interior reflected more than the complementary function of opposites within an allegorical, marital union: It fashioned an androgynous form of representation that called into question the impermeability and inalterability of the gendered binary itself. Composed through inter-articulated gendered elements, the well-decorated home was neither connotatively masculine nor feminine; it was instead a manifestation of constitutive liberal ideals and principles that embodied a reconciliation of oppositional conditions through ambivalently gendered signifiers. The furnishings, elements, and principles that Jakway most admired were thus neither exclusively masculine nor wholly feminine, but rather both at once.

**Interior Decorator as American Individual**

Comprised of simultaneously masculine and feminine aesthetic elements and decorative objects, the tastefully decorated interior that visually reconciled discordance and opposition was, as Jakway and his colleagues repeatedly insisted, representative of the self-disciplined homemaker who composed it. Addressing an audience of female homemakers, commonly in the universal pronoun “he,” these professionals drew striking similarities between the interior

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 64.
\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 68.
decorator and Herbert Hoover’s American Individual. Explaining this analogy is the paradoxical logic of self-restrained freedom that originated in a metaphysical core of autonomy. Those who perused Bernard Jakway’s explanation of the decorative process learned, for example, that “creative work must start with an idea.”

What the homemaker hoped to effect through her interior—the room’s function, her family’s values and preferences, or her cognitions, sensations, and emotions—supplied the essential motive that determined how she planned any and all subsequent selections. “Rooms do not grow in repose or dignity. They must be invested with these attributes by studied creative processes.” Only through a “studied plan of procedure” could the homemaker achieve beauty, repose, and the “air de famille” that characterized a desirable home.

Jakway’s insistence on the importance of principle and planning in the creation of comfortable, beautiful interiors mirrors Walter Dexter’s discussion of the American Individual’s characteristic self-governing freedom of initiative. For Dexter, Herbert Hoover’s American Individual possessed a liberty of a uniquely productive and progressive nature:

“The individual who has accepted well established aims can form his plans so as to reach the imagined goal in the shortest possible time, with the most economical expenditure of energy, and in the most effective manner. An aim prevents deviation from a chosen course of action, or it acts as a stimulus in denying place to irrelevant activities that might tend to defeat the success of any mental undertaking. A characteristic life aim must be definite and at the same time flexible. It will help the individual to arrange what he has acquired in an order that will be intelligible, and because of this orderly arrangement will facilitate the choice of alternatives in times when decisions are necessary.”

Both American Individuals and interior decorators were thus born in the course of internalizing principles and espousing them as personal convictions. Ensuring this merger was, according to Dexter, an innate, undeniable impulse to seek out truth by pragmatically ascertaining “right

\[170\] Jakway, 16.
\[171\] Ibid., 16.
\[172\] Ibid., 19.
\[173\] Dexter, 97-98.
relationships” through the use of reason and the senses. This inexorable urge to decipher the reasonable inevitably regulated the primal drive to produce and create, but it also guaranteed that the necessary restraint of individual initiative in the orderly exercise of freedom would always be consensual.\textsuperscript{174}

Published in 1932, Dexter’s explication of Hoover’s American Individualism echoes much of what professional decorators and tastemakers professed in the previous decade about the significance of self-regulation to a beautiful home’s creation. The planning and application of principle required of tasteful décor manifested the decorator’s underlying vital energies, aesthetic desires, and an innate capacity for reason that compelled a deciphering of the “correct relationship” among objects.\textsuperscript{175} Constrained as a “conscious, constant right choice and right usage,” the cultivation of taste enabled the decorator to consent to the principles that, in guiding the simultaneously disciplined and creative pursuit of preference, most fully satisfied the homemaker’s longings both to admire and be admired.\textsuperscript{176}

The ramifications of the decorator’s ability to enact this ideal of self-governing autonomy extended far beyond the personal satisfaction of beautifying her home. As Frank Alvah Parsons explained:

“This we, the people of the United States of America are the most conglomerate of peoples. We have without having had time to amalgamate the characteristics of any people, received all peoples with open arms, until we are a nation one hundred million strong and represent nearly every form and grade of civilization. Naturally we are a people of many minds, many ideals, with distinctively individual and peculiar qualities, striving to be a nation. Our national colour expression can be nothing short of every colour available. We do not limit ourselves in any other field. We cannot limit ourselves in the range of colours used. Because this is true, it is of the greatest importance that we see to understand from every possible source what qualities may be expressed by different combinations, and learn to use those combinations to express individual ideas in moderation and with discretion.”\textsuperscript{177}

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 81, 95.  
\textsuperscript{175} Jakway, 118.  
\textsuperscript{176} Parsons, \textit{Interior Decoration}, 241.  
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., 54-55.
The beacon that had drawn so many from foreign lands, the constitutionally guaranteed possession of freedom—the opportunity to select from an abundant array of colors—also carried the obligation of enacting this cherished liberty reasonably and responsibly. This passage helps to illustrate that Parsons struggled as Hoover did to articulate a paradoxical ideal of ordered liberty and to assure that regulation could be an expression rather than a suppression of that freedom. For both men, a subordination to demonstrably sound principles served to reconcile liberalism’s potential antagonism between individual liberty and communal identity, enabling an increasingly heterogeneous America to remain a nation of equally free individuals unified through their collective consent to the rules that governed them.

If the practice of interior decoration was an allegory for American liberalism’s enactment, women were the professed founders of the nation in miniature, for acting in the role of freedom-seeking, self-governing individuals, they created the better homes that embodied desire’s rational pursuit. Laura Thornburgh’s account of Jane Norton’s adventures in homemaking particularly helps to illustrate how interior decoration as a conjoined act of self and national production enabled women to assume the role of protagonist in modern liberalism’s line of fiction. Born in 1885, Laura Thornburgh’s personal history differed significantly from the more conventional story she created for her homemaking heroine, Jane Norton. A native of Knoxville, Tennessee, Thornburgh graduated from the University of Tennessee in 1904 and pursued a career in journalism. Like Emily Post, she spent the 1920s dispensing advice on etiquette, home decoration, and household management for middle-class homemakers, publishing three manuals on these topics. While Post practiced her craft in the wealthy enclaves of Manhattan and the bucolic Tuxedo Park, New York, Thornburgh retreated to her beloved mountains of east Tennessee. There, she occupied a summer home in close proximity to several unmarried women working as authors and artists. Increasingly dedicated in the remainder of her career to
publicizing and preserving the natural beauty of this area, Thornburgh would become best known for her tribute, *The Great Smoky Mountains*, published in 1937.

Far removed from Thornburgh’s own Tennessee home, the life that Jane sought in the urban wilderness of New York City was hardly one of unmitigated freedom. As suggested by the décor of Jane’s apartment, numerous forces curbed the pleasures that a young woman living in the absence of parental influence might enjoy. Jane brought to her new life a cedar chest literally and metaphorically laden with impediments to an undisciplined pursuit of liberty: mementos of her southern heritage, a limited purse, her obligations to the family friend who was also her employer, a healthy dose of practicality and common sense, and of course, a detailed list of the principles that she planned to follow in designing the home she had already envisioned. Yet, not among these external restraints was Jane’s longing for “something more.” This animating desire fueled an individualistic quest that, carried out through the decoration of Jane’s successive homes, led to her attainment of personal gratification, social admiration, and an empowering sense of efficacy. Because she invested this yearning in her first apartment, Jane regarded “hav[ing] a place of your own with your own things about you” as an essential symbol of independence, and she urged other young women to “[p]icture your ideal room and then go forth to find it.” “If you are patient and persevering and know what you want,” she encouraged, “you will be surprised to find how quickly you will realize your dream, at least in part.”

Jane Norton’s longing to leave one home in order to make another creates a unique modus operandi for her coming of age story. As the introductory vignette of Jane’s first attempts at decoration illustrate, she arrived in an urban, consumer metropolis having already accepted the veracity of the decorative principles she had gleaned from studying tomes by professional decorators such as Bernard Jakway and Frank Alvah Parsons. Jane’s creator, Laura Thornburgh,

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178 Thornburgh, 11.
particularly incorporated these experts’ dictums into the advice she issued through the fictional young homemaker. Even more significant was the almost evangelical enthusiasm Jane felt for their rectitude, as she proselytized about their rationality and aesthetic merit to anyone who would listen. In addition to Jane’s small salary, this studied list of rules initially curtailed Jane’s purchasing opportunities, forcing her to practice interior decoration’s art of selection and arrangement with even more creativity and ingenuity. These memorized axioms gradually evolved, however, into habits and aims, a transition marked by Jane’s physical movement from her bachelorette quarters to the newlywed apartment she shared with her husband John. While marriage might have once represented an enactment of private consent that helped to qualify male subjects for public roles, it functioned quite differently in Thornburgh’s narrative of a modern young woman’s maturation. Jane evinced a feminine capacity for rational and consensual self-regulation not only through signing her marriage contract, but first through the acquisition and principled decoration of her first apartment. Marriage and movement into a shared dwelling simply furthered Jane’s quest to develop her skills as an interior decorator by broadening her knowledge, increasing her confidence in its application, and consequently, advancing the development of her taste.

Jane achieved the fullest expression of her innate autonomy when she and John moved from the city to the suburbs. A citadel of the New South, the aptly named community of Allville represented a beacon for “up and coming” white men such as John Norton, promising both the comforting, propertied security of southern, agrarian tradition and the expansive opportunities created by a rapidly commercializing economy. With their financial future seemingly secured by John’s promotion at the local bank, the Nortons triumphantly returned to the South to raise a family in a home they had long dreamed of owning. Their homecoming nevertheless left Jane acutely aware of her lost anonymity and the liberty to experiment that it had allowed, while the attainment of the couple’s most dearly held dream imposed additional, creative pressures that
exacerbated her anxiety. Familiarity with southern, social conventions caused Jane to lament, “I will be judged by the knowledge I have and the way I interpret it.” Thus beset by a “feeling of panic for fear her house would show the world at large how little she knew rather than how much and earnestly she had tried to build everything according to sound principles,” Jane redoubled her efforts “to get all of these principles and facts . . . into my head and then apply them wisely and well.”

To allay these fears of social rejection and isolation, Jane returned with renewed vigor to those principles she had attempted to apply and perfect in her New York apartments, and this vigilant study inspired an epiphany that brought her further comfort. As the breadth and depth of Jane’s knowledge increased, she realized “that many things are not open to personal whim,” but were rather based on “certain fundamental laws . . . that must be observed.” If confronted with indecision or uncertainty, Jane determined to heed one expert’s advice: “[I]f you observed certain well defined laws most of your problems would settle themselves—the individual really had very little choice after all except in the little trifles which were not to be considered of trifling importance.” Yet, even in selecting these minor embellishments, Jane continued to find it “a bit difficult to steer a course between the Scylla of ignorance and the Charybdis of too close an observance of ‘right principles.’” Jane’s Homeric allusion illuminates how the axiom of balance extended beyond maintaining a visual sense of proportional symmetry. Decorating manuals might have armed Jane against the specter of neighborly criticism and its threat to her family’s social status and material security, but this independent modern woman also feared “that in her eagerness to have things right, her own and John’s likes and individuality would be suppressed.”

179 Ibid., 185.
180 Ibid., 106.
181 Ibid., 119.
182 Ibid., 185.
183 Ibid., 185.
Relative to these opposing concerns, the rules that Jane cited so faithfully failed to offer the specific guidance she needed to balance the imperatives of social intelligibility and public ratification with her longings for self-expression and personal satisfaction. Jane understood that she must enact “right” principles to create an impression of rational equanimity and harmony that would render her home aesthetically appealing and herself socially valuable, and given this compulsion, she vigilantly strove to avoid any appearance of interior discord and asymmetry. Careful study had imparted the awareness, however, that too much conformity to the rule yielded environments that, deprived of individualizing and charming flourishes of color and character, appeared “insipid” and lack “zest.” Jane found a solution for striking just the right balance between the imperative of conformity and the impulses of individuality in her use of accessories. Vases, lamp shades, flowers, and other forms of ornamentation tastefully inserted into Jane’s interior designs rendered them all the more attractive to her husband, children, and their visitors. Inserted into her decorative compositions, such “little touches” in Jane’s interior composition were the flourishes that helped to “bring it out of type and stamp it with charm and individuality.”

Both Jane’s governing values and her initiating creativity were particularly on display in a unique feature that came to characterize her home. By chance, she developed a “passion” for assembling floor lamps, small tables, and mirrors throughout her home to make “a happy little family group living harmoniously together.” Useful, attractive, and unique, these arrangements embodied not only the decorative ideals of harmony, balance, and comfort, but also Jane’s own convictions about “beautility.” Similar to the tenets of equilibrium and unity in diversity, this precept evinced a merger of ostensible opposites that enabled decorative compositions such as Jane’s groupings to exude both principle and appeal or to manifest not only a sociality that

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184 Ibid., 222.
185 Ibid., 214.
186 Ibid., 214-215.
allowed for individuality, but also a restraint that was nevertheless intrinsically desirable and satisfying. Making a home that appeared to be “as nearly as possible the realization of an ideal” thus required Jane not only to conform her individual preferences to the principles of décor, but also to invest more intangible attributes such as “culture, refinement and comfort and charm” within its design.187 To accomplish this objective, Jane learned to make judicious decisions “with her head,” but also to “use her heart to give [her home] life and warmth and vitality.”188

This convergence of the implicitly temporalized opposition between heart and head, feeling and reason, was mediated by Jane’s developing taste. Founded in her innate appetites and preferences, Jane’s discernment evolved with her acquisition of knowledge and increasing judgement. It was a faculty that proved particularly important for Jane given her youthful preference for gay, energetic colors. The need to temper these natural proclivities induced Jane to “[keep] repeating to herself what had become a chant: ’Addition of details to a room after the fundamental objects are assembled is an exercise in self-restraint as well as artistic discrimination.’”189 Yet, a regulatory subscription to balance, harmony, and order hardly yielded sensations of deprivation and displeasure. “Jane was surprised to find,” her creator related, “that the more she exercised self-restraint the more she grew in artistic discrimination. Her judgment became surer, more accurate, more dependable. Where at first she experimented and changed from this to that, now she began to know when a thing was right. What a joy that was and what a sense of power it gave her!”190 Because of these sensate rewards, Jane learned the value and rectitude of sublimating her individual desires for beauty and vitality within the bounds of decorative ideals in a way that showcased both her initiating creativity and the principled sociality to which it presumably led. Metaphorically embodied in the interior of Jane’s home, this

187 Ibid., 91.
188 Ibid., 214.
189 Ibid., 225.
190 Ibid., 226.
synthesis of oppositions and the affective investment that presumably enabled their reconciliation caused the decorator’s numerous visitors to regard her home as charming and comfortable and the homemaker herself to find it personally satisfying and empowering.

Wisely investing her family’s financial resources also proved to be one of Jane’s most important responsibilities. Jane never entered a store without first making a list that enumerated and prioritized her needs and distinguished them from her desires. In furnishing her home, Jane first took stock of her possessions and assessed their value relative to their suitability and quality. She advised similarly thrifty women to “[l]ook about and see what things are useless, inexpressive of anything except yourself and capable only of collecting and harboring dust. If your old furniture is good use it where it fits; if bad throw it away, use it for kindling but don’t give it to the poor and corrupt their tastes, and don’t spoil an otherwise possible room with an accumulation of unnecessary articles neither decorative nor useful.”¹⁹¹ Jane’s living room illustrates her own application of this advice, particularly as she determined the fate of her grandmother’s Victorian furniture. While Jane might have delighted in her mother’s gift of numerous family heirlooms, she firmly declined the parlor furnishings. This refusal hardly expressed an intrinsic dislike for anything Victorian, and Jane had nothing but fond memories of visiting her grandmother’s house. Jane actually “loved” some of the old furniture, but to find a place in her own home, these pieces had to possess far more than sentimental value; they needed instead to harmonize with her possessions, be suitable for the smaller space, and more significantly, reflect her youthful spirit.

If age and sentimentality played an inconsequential role in deciding a decorative object’s value, an object’s monetary cost exercised even less importance. Money and principle functioned reciprocally in Jane’s narrative to delimit her consumer choices. Decorative axioms helped to

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 221.
maximize a young housewife’s limited resources, whereas budgetary limitations prevented impulsive, extravagant expenditures that might violate her convictions. “Many ignorant people are saved from making mistakes by being poor,” she consoled those who possibly felt thwarted by a small income, and she recounted numerous examples of houses transformed into “museums” and “junk shops” due to unchecked extravagance. Jane instead expressed nothing but relief that enforced thriftiness “will keep us from buying a lot of lovely but unsuitable things the stores put out to tempt the unwary and unbudgeted.” For Jane, appealing lines, quality materials, and fine workmanship distinguished the merely costly from the innately good, but acquiring a knack for discerning this innate beauty and authenticity required several years of applied study and practice. As a young woman Jane avoided antique markets, suspicious of dealers’ veracity and uncertain of the authenticity of the pieces they peddled; yet, as her knowledge expanded and her tastes matured, she developed an eye for detecting “good lines and good workmanship beneath the ugly excrescences that adorn so much of the Victorian furniture.” As Jane’s penchant for refurbishing used furniture helps to illustrate, budgetary constraints entwined with Jane’s longing for “her house, and everything in it, particularly her furniture, to be honest.” This quest for authenticity and sincerity also compelled Jane to patronize local artists and artisans, and by incorporating these evocative articles into her decorative compositions, she connected her home and thus herself to a uniquely American spirit of independence and history of progress.

Jane’s uniquely feminine *bildungsroman* reaches its conclusion with the accomplished decorator and her equally successful husband planning to build the home they had begun to imagine during their courtship. Yet, the architectural design they surveyed together could only partially translate the simultaneously modern innovations and timeless values that Jane wished to

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192 Ibid., 57.
193 Ibid., 157.
194 Ibid., 235.
195 Ibid., 188.
permeate every aspect of their family abode. The custom home that Jane and John had always longed to build consequently represented far more than the culmination of their diligent labor and their vigilant performance of the social conventions that defined southern decorum. It promised to embody, as the name Allville suggests, the Nortons’ attainment of “all” that a land of plenty offered to those who desired to enact its founding ideals. In the final pages of Thornburgh’s text, the usually loquacious Jane grappled for words to convey to her bemused, indulgent husband her wish to make a home that would be neither wholly a sentimental haven nor exclusively a model of Progressive-era managerial order and good hygiene. Though many of her desires remained inarticulable, Jane felt certain that her fully cultivated taste would ensure the creation of an interior domestic space thoroughly suffused with a “satisfying” aura expressive of everything the Nortons were and all that they hoped their children would become.

In Laura Thornburgh’s instructive guide to interior decoration, the fictional Jane Norton’s burgeoning sense of independence, autonomy, and power becomes visible through the succession of homes that she furnishes and decorates. While each of Jane’s designs testify to her evolving maturity, her increasing confidence, her expanding knowledge, and her developing taste, they also materialize the essential, inalterable foundation of Jane’s character that compels and guides her purposeful attainment of the home she has always idealized. As her progressively larger and better homes make evident, Jane’s growing expertise reflected only superficial rather than substantive change, for in keeping to her focused and principled pursuit of what she had always most dearly desired, Jane remained very much the same. The dreams of a home that compelled Jane also restrained her, and the interiors she decorated simultaneously signified both her longing and her volitional acquiescence to the representational forms and regulatory performances through which their attainment became possible. Jane even proclaimed that the rules of décor she so faithfully and ardently professed even enlarged her desires and incited her to strive always for something more satisfying. Armed with the confidence derived from her conviction, Jane
marched forth into her future, determined to “[e]liminate the ugly and unessential. Replace the medium with something better. Make [her] home better and better every day in every way.”

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Jane emerges through her adventures in decorating as a model of Herbert Hoover’s American Individualism. A metaphorical embodiment of this political philosophy, the harmonious and balanced interior of Jane’s home demonstrated more than the modern prescriptions for domesticity that were widely disseminated to homemakers during the 1920s. It also evinced a paradox inherent to liberalism, for it exhibited a state of ordered freedom in which personal liberty could be most pleasurably enacted by conforming to materially productive and socially collectivizing ideals and imperatives. Hoover struggled with this paradox throughout the text of his American Individualism, and like Laura Thornburgh, he articulated a resolution that located an ability to consent to socially and economically productive restraints in the vital metaphysical impulses and affections that established the individual’s autonomy. In Thornburgh’s allegory of liberal development, taste connotes both the animating presence of innate longing and its consensual regulation. While this synthesis of desire and discipline helps to explain why Jane’s belief in the rectitude of her decorating principles was so very impassioned, it also transformed Jane from a dependent emulator of experts’ dictums into a rational agent who independently and efficaciously wielded these axioms in the pursuit of her desire for a home that simultaneously ensured her security and expressed her liberty.

Calling upon her cultivated taste, Jane made her home into a symbol of liberal idealism and, in the process of focusing her husband’s and children’s desires on the principles it beautifully demonstrated, she put her own liberalism on full display. The rules of décor dictated that Jane select and arrange disparate objects into a unified, appealing composition, but through

196 Ibid., 28.
conscientiously chosen points of contrast, Jane’s home also exuded an individualizing personality that supposedly reflected its creator’s generative vitality. These decorative embellishments distinguished Jane’s principles from her real possessions, as touches of color, eclectic accessories, interesting arrangements, and quality furnishings attested to the essential attributes that enabled Jane to consent to the tenets she enacted. Aesthetic elements thus appeared to offer a charmingly tasteful revelation into the instincts and impulses constituting Jane’s authentic self—her desire for a home, her youthful enthusiasm, her vibrancy, her fortitude, her southern heritage, her idealism, her love of beautiful things, and her longing “for something more.” Manifested in the domestic interior, these prerequisites of Jane’s autonomy figured her own interiority not only as existing through the rules of recognition, but also as exceeding them. This metaphysical excess enabled Thornburgh to construe Jane’s acquisition of taste as a consensual submission to ideals that she came to view as synonymous with her desires. Jane’s tasteful home consequently sustained a belief that this independent woman’s actions emanated from longings that were never completely restrained, while it simultaneously acknowledged the desirability of this restraint in the pursuit of freedom and opportunity.

Jane’s consent to act like an American Individual thus preserved her home’s function to instantiate and nurture the liberal characteristics that presumably belonged to John Norton. In her tale of this married pair’s entwined accomplishments, Thornburgh specifically cites Frank Alvah Parsons’s *Interior Decoration: Its Principles and Practice*. This manual instructed Thornburgh that interior decoration derived its importance from the “power to use external material things to express ideas [and this] is the end and aim of material life.”

It was a universal truism, Parsons declared, “that principles are expressed in the language of colour and form as truly as they are in musical tones or through words or other symbols which express man’s ideas.” Through these representational elements, “his house expresses himself, his intelligence, his ideas of art, his best

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197 Parsons, *Interior Decoration*, 236.
conceptions of the aesthetic idea.”\textsuperscript{198} In these passages, interior decoration serves a reflective purpose for an abstract male; yet elsewhere Parsons confessed, “Let us again remember that man is exactly what he lives in, for environment is the strongest possible factor in man’s development. Let us not forget that what man really is, is what his mind is, and this he must express in all he does.”\textsuperscript{199} The well-decorated home that revealed what the mind contained thus also served to fill that container, and implicitly conceding this point, Parsons asserted, “This places the importance of the home where it deserves to be and makes its furnishing one of the most serious and at the same time one of the most delightful things in life.”\textsuperscript{200} Invoking both gravity and delight, Parsons intended to underscore the national importance of interior decoration, but also to incite an interest in the practice. Despite his preponderate use of masculine pronouns, he appealed primarily to homemakers, hoping “to arouse a desire to investigate the fundamental principles which govern form and decoration, and to use these principles daily in our selections and in our arrangements until, unconsciously, what we touch shall express a new state of personal consciousness in which good taste is not a thought-out act but an unconscious, irresistible impulse in all we do.”\textsuperscript{201}

Such passages help to demonstrate that, like Laura Thornburgh, Frank Alvah Parsons depicted interior decoration as an implicitly liberal practice potentially performed by either male or female bodies. Yet, these tastemakers also denied the equivalency they suggested, for women rather than men emerge as the true individuals in their accounts of the metaphorically liberal home’s creation. In the decorating advice literature, men are framed as symbolically dependent upon an embellished interior space that simultaneously signified their autonomy and consequent liberty, while also acknowledging the disciplined mode of self-expression required of liberal sociality. This dependency rendered male individuals thoroughly reliant not simply on women’s

\textsuperscript{198} Ibid., 273.  
\textsuperscript{199} Ibid., 24.  
\textsuperscript{200} Ibid., 25.  
\textsuperscript{201} Ibid., 237.
decorating labor, but also on the investment of feminine desire in a tacitly liberal performance. To focus women’s longing and their energies, on the beautiful home’s creation, professionals issued both veiled and explicit threats of criticism and derision, warning homemakers to conform their preferences to the fundamental principles and laws of interior decoration or else suffer the consequences of social unintelligibility and potential ostracism. Perhaps more effective were their assurances that decorating established an additional civic role for women, created new sources of personal power and fulfillment, and represented a public acknowledgment of men’s dependency on women’s self-governing autonomy. This admission seemingly opened a new frontier of representational opportunities within the home that exceeded the mere expression of personality and taste and the social intelligibility and admiration derived from each. As one home economist explained, the modern home symbolized an amalgam of “love and care and ambition.” For knowledgeable and determined modern women, she enthused, “talent and will” rather than outdated notions of virtue had become “the heart of homemaking.”\footnote{Martha Van Rensselaer, “The Effect of Housing on Family Life,” 41-42.}
Chapter Three: Autonomy, Privacy, and the Fetish of a Comfortable Chair

Even as Jane scoured New York City for affordable furnishings to outfit her bachelorette apartment, she had already begun to incorporate the presence of another into its decorative design. The person she sought to accommodate was not the young woman who rented an adjoining room, but rather “the big man for whom the big armchair near the fireplace found its way into Jane’s apartment.” This concern for and attention to John Norton’s comfort prompted him to pronounce Jane’s apartment “‘the coziest, most homelike place I have struck since I left my old home in Tennessee.’” This goldmine also compelled him to confide in Jane “his hope and dream of a home with her as its presiding genius.” Despite John’s quick introduction into the plot, Jane’s adventures in decorating neither began nor culminated in romance. Recounting the Nortons’s love story was simply Laura Thornburgh’s vehicle for telling “the story of how Jane and some of her friends solved some of their problems of homemaking.” The challenges and triumphs that Thornburgh’s protagonist experienced nevertheless unfolded through Jane’s efforts to create a home that John and their eventual children could regard as their own.

From the outset of the Nortons’s relationship, Jane’s developing taste and her homemaking skills mediated John’s attraction to her and earned his deepening respect over the course of their marriage. The tall, ambitious, but boyishly congenial suitor first declared his love by professing, “‘[W]here you are is home for me, Jane.’” Yet, it was not Jane’s companionship that evoked for John a sensation of being at home, but rather the comfortable domestic space that she produced for him. Jane’s awareness of John’s needs and preferences and his dependency upon her to fulfill them lent a gravity to her acceptance of his marriage proposal, for she rightly anticipated the difficulties entailed not only in merging their individual interests and their prior possessions, but also in creating a shared interior that would materialize this marital harmony. John’s “definite ideas” about what a home should be complicated Jane’s task, as his imaginings “were bigger and grander” than those conceived by his more practical, knowledgeable, and
principled bride.\(^1\) Although John appreciated the evidence of Jane’s increasing skill as a decorator, his favorite aspect of their shared quarters remained, of course, his “favorite chair . . . which had associations and was extremely comfortable.” This resting place evoked for this rangy, hardworking man fond memories of courtship, but more important, his knowledge that “Jane [had] bought it expressly for him when he first began calling on her regularly.” Because it evinced her attention to his needs and his comfort, “[h]e believed that the big leather chair had had something to do with his falling in love with Jane. It was tangible evidence of her thoughtfulness for others, her quick perception, her desire to make those about her comfortable, happy and contented.”\(^2\)

Concern for her husband’s needs and happiness remained at the forefront of Jane’s attention as she furnished their first house in Allville. Immersing herself in this project, Jane “resolved that the new house should reflect John’s tastes and personality to a greater degree.”\(^3\) “I want our home to be truly ours and a real home,” she explained when John questioned her assiduous preparations: “I want you to find in it all of your favorite things, the colors you like best, the kind of chairs you find most comfortable, rugs, lamps that appeal and your favorite possessions.” John reassured his anxious wife, “‘I think you know what I like better than I do myself,’” and he pointed to her success in “‘anticipat[ing] my wants in the past before I knew them myself.’”\(^4\) John indeed experienced his new house as “‘homey and comfortable,’” for “[e]verything that he wanted was within reach.” He particularly valued that his practical, industrious, and efficient wife “didn’t seem to let the house bother her and she wasn’t always getting after him or the children for getting things out of order as he knew they did—especially when he and the boys had their daily romp.”\(^5\) Such opportunities to play and to recapitulate his

\(^2\) Ibid., 44-45.
\(^3\) Ibid., 60.
\(^4\) Ibid., 158.
\(^5\) Ibid., 238-239.
youthful exuberance presumably facilitated John’s attainment of yet another promotion, and upon receiving this assurance of his family’s continued upward mobility, John surprised his wife with a gift of architectural plans for the custom home that the Nortons had long dreamed of building. While the successful banker expressed his enthusiasm for the comforts that a larger space would provide for his growing family and his pride in what a grander house would signify about his success, he beseeched Jane to recreate the present comforts he so thoroughly enjoyed. Jane’s earnest reassurances that their new home would “be better in every way than this one, more comfortable, more satisfying, responding to more needs of the mind as well as to bodily needs” prompted her husband to slip his arm around her waist as they surveyed the outline of their future. 6 “Oh, Jane, Jane,” he ardently murmured, “was there ever another like you.” 7

If John expressed a pleasure in his home and, consequently, a desire for his wife that seemingly originated in the comfort and enjoyment he experienced within a domestic interior created specifically for this purpose, Jane described her affective rewards quite differently. Thornburgh’s Jane repeatedly exclaimed over the “fun” to be had, but as a source of entertainment, the act of interior decorating appeared inextricably entwined with the sense of efficacy and pride that Jane derived from the public recognition of her labor’s value and her own knowledge of its larger social purpose. John’s expressions of gratitude for her attentions to his needs and preferences “made Jane feel that all of the time and thought and study and pains she was giving . . . was time and love and labor well spent, a safe investment promising sure returns in comfort, happiness and contentment.” 8 While ensuring John’s pleasure and satisfaction represented one motive for Jane’s inexhaustible labors, cultivating discernment and judgement within her children supplied another. Emphasizing the importance of exposure and absorption in the organic development of taste, Jane explained, “If the children are to grow up to be individuals

6 Ibid., 240.
7 Ibid., 242.
8 Ibid., 158.
of culture and refinement, with a fine feeling for art, a sense of discrimination and lovers of the beautiful they must find all of these qualities in their own home.”

Endowing these aesthetic, political precursors within the young Nortons and kindling a self-regulating desire for home “would be their contribution to the community and to the next generation.”

The community occupied Jane’s thoughts in more ways than one. Jane understood that, in addition to providing for John’s pleasure, her home would communicate to neighbors and passersby values and convictions that would qualify them as legitimate members of Allville’s economically progressive society. This imperative of intelligibility fueled Jane’s production of a home that was not only recognizable, but also regarded as desirable by John and by their many friends and acquaintances. While Jane intended for her children to feel complete satisfaction with and repletion in their home, she hoped to arouse similar sensations of longing within others. Any success at inciting this admiration consequently represented another source of delight for Jane. The numerous compliments she received on her home’s enticing charm and personality served to secure her social qualifications and status, and Jane derived a sense of individual efficacy from earning this external recognition and valuation through her principled conduct and disciplined labor.

As an expression of creativity, the labor of interior decorating was the only noteworthy form of recreation that Jane enjoyed. The industrious homemaker revealed to an inquisitive friend, for example, her economical practices of re-dying curtains and slipcovers to refurbish stale décor and of refinishing second-hand furniture to create the illusion of custom-made pieces. Exclaiming over Jane’s thrift, creativity, and resourceful ingenuity, the neighbor enviously observed, “I believe life is real fun to you.” Affirming this recognition of her experience, Jane replied, “It is fun to do things and to see results. It is wonderful to make ugly things less ugly.

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9 Ibid., 239.
10 Ibid., 91.
and beautiful things even more beautiful. It is a joy, for instance, to take an inexpensive scarf or centerpiece and by a little paint applied stencil fashion make it come alive.”\textsuperscript{11} Jane also tellingly confessed that she regarded rearranging furnishings as “her favorite indoor sport.”\textsuperscript{12} Such reported amusements demonstrate Jane’s identification with objects animated through the investment of her labor as well as the pleasurable and empowering sense of independence she found in the challenge of their production. Unlike the clear division between labor and leisure that John enjoyed, Jane’s supposed autonomy and volition consequently required that she continuously dream, plan, decorate, rearrange, and refurbish. Recounting a cautionary tale of a woman whose affluence allowed for immediate gratification, Jane counseled others to follow her practice of maintaining a list of items they hoped one day to acquire. Just as a beautiful, better home was by definition never wholly done, neither should the desire to create one be entirely satisfied.

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Residing in the progressive community of Allville, John and Jane Norton presumably typified the hopes and dreams of modern men and women. They were, their creator insisted, “just two normal, healthy Americans loving each other sanely and wholesomely, and with the normal desire of a happy married young couple for a home and family of their own.”\textsuperscript{13} The alleged typicality of the Nortons’s marriage and of the desires that ostensibly incited their union nevertheless reveals a bevy of conflicting concerns. Exposed to a more mobile, secular, socially diverse, and culturally homogenous society, Americans seemed everywhere to be questioning and redefining the conventions, roles, and institutions that had ordered their parents’ lives and liberties. For adults and adolescents alike, modernization had allowed an unprecedented amount of freedom while failing to supply countervailing sources of restraint to temper the excesses of

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 238.  
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 222.  
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 92.
this liberation. Even as Thornburgh’s manual celebrated this revolt from tradition, it reasserted the beautiful, comfortable home’s continued saliency in harnessing the needs and impulses that, if given free reign incited dissent, but catalyzed progress when appropriately invested.

While desire for a home both required and obfuscated the gendered forms of discipline respectively demanded of husband and wife, this mutual longing shared by John and Jane was also experienced in distinctive ways. As the vignette illustrates, owning a home of one’s own not only demanded differing obligations of Jane and John, but also signified alternative attributes about each, presented differing enticements, and yielded divergent sources of gratification. A gendering of self-disciplined liberty is particularly evident within Thornburgh’s descriptions of the dwellings that necessitated and progressively sustained the Nortons’s marriage. Rather than feel oppressed by professional and familial obligations, John found satisfaction in the more temperate pursuits of relaxing at home and fostering skills within his male children through play. John’s domestic happiness, which implicitly fueled his economic success, nevertheless required that Jane first experience sensations of fulfillment and gratification through supplying these pleasures for her husband. Exploring the ways modern men depended upon their wives’ performance of homemaking responsibilities contributes to a well-documented discussion among historians about the unacknowledged value of domestic labor. Scholars have identified the many ways that women continued to contribute to the family economy long after industrialization moved production out of the household, and in the twentieth-century, it particularly helped to perpetuate the fiction of a family wage by compensating for deficiencies in male incomes. A thoroughly modern couple, the Nortons applied Jane’s earnings to the costs of purchasing and furnishing their first home, and through this investment, the enterprising pair accrued the necessary equity to build the house of their newlywed dreams. However, Jane’s unpaid labor also significantly sustained the family’s economic and social security, for in addition to facilitating the
accumulation of further capital, Jane’s homemaking skills anchored the family’s perceived value and rank within a rapidly expanding city’s more fluid, socioeconomic hierarchy.\textsuperscript{14}

In addition to these socioeconomic functions, the labor of interior decoration also served an ideologically productive purpose. As the previous chapter began to explore, the interior décor of a tasteful home instantiated its inhabitants as consensually self-governing subjects who appeared at once personally interested and socially obligated. A home decorated to exhibit intrinsically beautiful principles rendered its residents identifiable as unique, generative individuals, while it also identified them as members of a singular, inviolable nation formed through a collectivizing, consensual submission to the characteristically Americans ideals and values manifested by aesthetic standards. An emblem of rationally self-disciplined liberty, beautifully principled decor embodied American liberalism’s paradox of regulated freedom; however, interior decoration also facilitated a resolution to this antinomy. Through substantiating liberal ideals in an array of visually and viscerally appealing colors, lines, and textures, décor attached an essential appetite for beauty to an axiomatic performance of a national character. This supposedly primordial attraction helped to recast the prescribed fulfillment of housing experts’ injunctions as a willful act originating in the home-owning citizen’s longings. The locus of political autonomy, personal desire thus established the home owner’s precedence to his house

\textsuperscript{14} Jeanne Boydston, \textit{Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 137-139. Boydston’s “pastoralization” of housework in the antebellum period supplies the historical and historiographical foundation for this reading of the ideologically productive labor of interior decoration. Boydston has illuminated how attributing women’s motives to a benevolent, self-sacrificing nature or defining housework as a leisure activity supported “the denial that it produced any economic value at all.” In distinguishing homemaking from paid work performed outside the home, this representation associated men with wage-earning and economic independence and deprived women the opportunity to claim political power as laborers and economic agents. Moreover, the pastoralization of women’s domestic work enabled the home to function as a place of psychological refuge, one untainted by the drudgery of labor and the inequality of industrialized relations. Boydston focuses on the economic advantages and perceived independence that men derived from claiming the surplus value of women’s labor, and she argues that this economic devaluation of women’s labor served to reinforce an existing gender and social order during a period of rapid economic transformation. Boydston, 141-159.
and a consequent capacity and willingness to consent to the regulated and delimited mode of
liberty it signified.

Yet, it was Jane’s taste—her consent—rather than John’s that transformed the Norton’s’s
house into a desirable home, and the dwelling that revealed so much about John’s character was
admittedly a product of his wife’s longing, which was figured in the decorating advice literature
as initiative, ingenuity, and skill. Beauty was thus implicitly construed as a feminine desire,
invoked by tastemakers and housing experts to induce women to create the aesthetically
appealing and viscerally stabilizing environments designed to cultivate national ideals and civic
behaviors within men and children. Fulfilling this mandate necessitated that homemakers
compose more than a visually pleasing perception of thematic unity among disparate furnishings
and accessories. In addition to effecting an aesthetically appealing representation of harmony,
homemakers were instructed to coordinate a room’s décor with the needs, desires, and
preferences of the men and children entitled to enjoy it. Ensuring this attraction to and identity
with the domestic interior consequently required women to attend to their husbands’ and
children’s desires for embodied pleasure. For modern men such as John Norton, the comfort
found in the arms of a substantial chair sustained the home’s purpose as an inviolable realm of
autonomy, privacy, and liberty that secured a capacity for self-government within liberalism’s
conjoined narrative of personal and national development.

Laura Thornburgh was hardly alone in advising women about the chair’s significance, for
the reiteration of its importance was ubiquitous in the era’s decorating manuals. Constrained as an
essential element of a well-decorated living room, the large, comfortable chair preserved a male
occupant’s declared freedom both by signifying a requisite condition of autonomy and an
entitlement to privacy and by engendering the sensation of their possession. Tellingly, this
furnishing appeared much more fundamental than marriage or even home ownership in
simultaneously evincing and cultivating the qualifying attributes of liberal citizenship: It
manifested a resting subject’s innate liberty, while also equating relaxation with edifying reading and situating that precursor to rational, civic activity within a supposedly private, domesticated space that was ambivalently fulfilling and regulatory. Here was an equivocation that illuminates the comfortable chair’s status as a fetish, and functioning as this endowed object, a furnishing reserved specifically for relaxing men served to disavow—both to acknowledge and deny—the male subject’s inescapable constraints. With its sturdy textures, bold form, and straight lines, a man’s living room chair was thus figured in decorating texts as the symbol as well as the embodied experience of male independence. Necessarily located within the interiorized space of the home, however, this furnishing also testified not simply to a politically qualifying, volitional regulation of desire, but more important, to a representational dependency on an object whose own presence depended entirely upon a homemaker’s consent to include such an ungainly piece of furniture in her otherwise beautiful decorative scheme.

Obfuscating the autonomous male subject’s dependency on women’s decorating labor necessitated another denial that also conveyed an admission. Sinking into the depths of his comfortable chair, John Norton could both acknowledge his gratitude to Jane and continue to perceive the chair as an emblem of his entitled authority, for he construed the chair as a reflection of his wife’s regard for his needs. His favorite piece of furniture represented not the value of her labor, but rather an expression of her love, care, and selflessness. Jane joined her husband in perpetuating this disavowal. As her husband relaxed into an implicit maternal bosom that also emblematized its conquest, she construed both the motives and rewards of her homemaking labor in the ironically more masculine and public idioms of her “favorite indoor sport,” craftsmanship, and knowledgeable expertise. Such appeals to the enjoyment and authority that women might derive from their efficacy and expertise help to illuminate the paramount importance of homemakers’ complicity in supplying both the private experience and trappings of male power.
A Man’s “inborn yearning for a home”

As the introductory vignette illustrates, a young man’s fancy might be tempted either by a lithe young woman with large gray eyes or by a sturdy leather chair, and in the early twentieth-century, these objects of desire and delight became inseparable within home improvement literature. Just as decorators insisted on tempering a homemaker’s own appetites within the bounds of taste, they joined a chorus of voices that sang out about the importance of keeping the masculine drive for pleasure fixated on the temperate pursuit of home ownership.15 This portentous refrain often invoked marriage, family, and home interchangeably; however, each of these liberal institutions served a distinct role within a line of fiction that demarcated the citizen-subject’s movement from a postulated state of nature to a politically idealized one of volitional regulation required to preserve an economically expansive and democratically self-governing nation. Writing in 1928, the moralist Frederic J. Lawrence teased out these distinctions in his diatribe against unbridled sexual freedom and the dire consequences that licentiousness posed for a political philosophy founded upon an ethic of self-disciplined restraint to counter a burgeoning economy’s proliferating forms of freedom and interest. Most disturbing to Lawrence was modern matrimony’s transformation from a binding covenant or sacrament into a more ephemeral, “companionate” relationship, for this declension threatened a “structure of [American]

15 In the second chapter of Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century (New York: New York University Press, 2012), Kyla Tompkins argues that Sylvester Graham’s activism in dietary reform reflected a general fixation on corporeal discipline that occupied nineteenth-century middle-class, white Americans. Exploring Graham’s writings through the Foucaultian “biopolitics” of state-building, Tompkins situates the anti-Onanist campaigner’s focus on health and dietetics within a pervasive attempt to institute normative forms of sensuality that, in policing the expression of erotic desire, implicitly acknowledged desire’s significance in creating the metaphorical connection between the individual body and the body politic. Graham helps to illustrate Tompkins’ argument that orality—the sensuality of eating—and the mouth itself—the body’s most permeable, erotic site—have rendered both the production and consumption of food essential techniques in the articulation of a rationally homogeneous nation. Like his contemporaries, Graham believed that “social disorder [was] the inevitable result of indulging in the senses at the expense of virtuous behaviors oriented toward upholding orderly systems of feeling, being, and acting.” (69) His efforts to dictate appropriate alimentary desires nevertheless reveal an implicit recognition that sensual forms of consumption were essential to compelling socially desirable and nationally reproductive behaviors.
civilization” founded upon “purely monogamous marriage” and the institutions of home and family it engendered.\textsuperscript{16}

To support this claim, Lawrence cited an oft repeated, historical account of American development that began in an agrarian past. Unlike his European forebears, “[t]he American farmer is not a peasant and never has been a serf,” Lawrence asserted. This celebrated figure was rather “lord of the manor, overseer, worker, all in one; head of a small, self-sufficient sovereignty, his family.” From this prototypical householder’s economic independence “stemmed the American home and family, the backbone of the nation’s strength, the source of its individuality.” Economic change had eroded this patriarchal model and the home’s function as “a social industrial center,” enabling modern children to “early become emotionally as well as economically independent of the parents.” Allowed by industrialization, the impact of this premature autonomy was profound at every strata of society as modern Americans cast off the “austere morality” that had allowed colonists to profit on a harsh frontier. This “wholesale repudiation of Puritanism” had caused young and old alike to flaunt their disregard for traditional mores and abandon sexual propriety. Freed from these moral strictures, the nation’s youth had particularly fallen sway to “the lumber-room of its desire-nature,” and governed by these base drives, “proclaim[ed] the rights of Epicurus in the name of freedom.” Such a conception of liberty was dangerously false, Lawrence warned, for licentiousness “is no kin of the inalienable right to life and liberty which stirred our ancestors.”\textsuperscript{17}

In this misconception of liberty, Lawrence identified the constitutive link between the covenant of marital fidelity and the social contract of political order. “In a materialistic civilization when the ideals are to be found stalking among the idols in the market-place,” he explained, marriage had unfortunately become “a haven for selfish security, a refuge for

\textsuperscript{16} Frederic J. Lawrence, “Children of this World Marry,” \textit{The Century Magazine}, September 1928, 549, 552.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 550-554.
relaxation and lassitude, a means of gratifying material or social ambition.” A return to tradition was hardly warranted, however, for the Victorian home had inevitably failed to supply with its “ritual-serving . . . grace-before-meat and family prayers” the spiritual sustenance that modern Americans misguidedantly sought in libidinous pursuits. Lawrence instead proposed that Americans abandon the modern quest for “adolescent love” and recover an innate ability to recognize the natural rectitude of responsibility and discipline, which a mature marriage between individual adults embodied. “[I]t is not from the gay and pleasurable . . . we attain our growth,” Lawrence insisted. While the young might initially resist this lesson given their craving for sweets rather than sustenance, they would with maturity come to realize that “[n]ature cannot play on slackened strings, and she seems to have discovered that responsibility is the most direct energizer of the human spirit.”

Lawrence consequently enjoined his readers to understand that self-discipline rather than self-indulgence would supply the vitalizing fulfillment they craved, for the obligation and commitment demanded of monogamous marriage opened the door to “the treasure-house of [man’s] higher nature.” Accessing this Emersonian conception of an authentic, affective realm of consciousness allowed for the development of individual conscience and its elevation to the “potent, beneficent mainspring of right living,” which in turn, supplied the foundation for true autonomy and freedom.

If marriage ideally served to restrain rapacious, libidinal impulses associated with both personal and political immaturity, the modern home supported and sustained this function. “[T]o the degree that it acquires a self-conscious, social-ethical value,” Lawrence argued, the home played an invaluable role in transmitting both “the value of individual responsibility” and “the invisible principles of man.”

He prognosticated:

“If America should fail . . . the decay will come from within. The convictions, the motives, the knowledge which enable man to govern himself from within are not only the strength of the individual citizen, but they become the silent power of the nation of which

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18 Ibid., 551, 554, 549.
19 Ibid., 549, 553.
he is a part. And of this power the home is the bulwark, for in childhood the pattern is set, in the home the twig is bent. There is cultivated, if at all, the moral autonomy which is the beginning and the end of life. . . . For youth so inspired, institutions become but ways and means to better living, not compromises with nature. Unconfused by changing codes, legal or moral, able to act from inner convection and unselfish motivation, such a generation might be trusted to drink not only deeply but wisely of freedom from authoritarian dogma.”

Although Lawrence framed the home as the “ward” of marriage, these closing exhortations suggest otherwise. Children subjected to homes wherein “self-indulgence, waywardness, passion and instability” flourished would neither recognize the value of self-restraint nor develop the capacity to become self-governing citizens.

Lawrence’s harangue about the state of modern marriage thus expressed fears about the viability of a liberal state founded on the consent of its citizens. To be legitimate, this volition needed to emanate from a source essential and indelible to the individual, one that enabled the citizen-subject to perceive the rectitude of liberal principles, institutions, and relationships and to accept these external forms of regulation as personal conviction. The modern home continued to serve a traditional, didactic purpose in the rational suppression of destructive appetites; however, cultural pundits such as Lawrence increasingly argued that the home served to foster consent because it was the most reasonable and satisfying expression of those natural instincts. This presumption was similarly developed by the anthropologist Edward A. Vandeventer. Writing on “What It Means to Own a Home,” Vandeventer attested that “Home owning brings a feeling of contentment that can not otherwise be equaled.” From the moment that primordial man descended from his tree, Vandeventer recounted, this natural figure faced the immediate necessity of providing shelter and protection for his family. “Love of home,” he concluded, “then became a natural impulse,” “a craving,” that “developed into a fixed part of man’s nature.”

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21 Ibid., 548-554.
Hypothesizing about the primal scene of civilization’s origin, Vandeventer reiterated the narrative sequence that Frederic Lawrence imposed on a preindustrial America. Prior to the state’s contractual founding, providing for a family’s basic needs had compelled men living in a state of nature to seek homes that came to signify far more than mere necessity. The creation of a home respectively represented for these contemporaries the generative motive in a mythical chronology of American history and a pseudo-anthropological tale of human development; yet, longing for a domicile initially meant only to harbor a man’s wife and his children ultimately became the symbol of the liberties and comforts to be attained from a consensual compliance with the restraints required by liberal sociality. Though Lawrence and Vandeventer chose different temporal locations for the origin of this fictionalized sequence, each argued that a mythic ancestor’s presumably innate desire for a home enforced a reasonable, voluntary sublimation of his primitive drives that ultimately channeled these potentially destructive impulses into technological, intellectual, and artistic pursuits.

As an object of longing that elevated more primitive and destructive desires, the home served to perpetuate the fiction of consent by disavowing the liberal imperative of regulation. The consenting subject was equivocally restrained and free and presumably secure in the knowledge that self-regulation offered the most natural or empirically observable means of pursuing innate liberties. “The inborn yearning for a home,” proclaimed another ardent believer in the origins story, “is perhaps the strongest incentive to progress that functions in our individual and national development.” Also reiterating this fictionalized account of consent’s possibility

was Ray Lyman Wilbur in his introduction to a government sponsored report on the significance of homemaking and home furnishing. A member of Herbert Hoover’s inner circle, Wilbur stipulated that the “unconscious” and “natural” process through which housing had slowly evolved now required professional intervention and direction. Despite industrial advancements, automation, and culturally homogenizing technologies such as radio broadcasts and motion pictures, Americans had “clung persistently to the housing developed for a pastoral civilization.”

Most problematic about this incompatibility between housing and modern conditions was the consequent inability of homes to meet the changing needs of their inhabitants. Requiring more than mere shelter, modern Americans needed not resign themselves to houses that lacked “adequate privacy—aural and visual—for each individual,” nor relinquish a longing for personal comfort that also yielded both social and political rewards. “Order and good taste and beauty in the environment exert,” Wilbur argued, “a powerful influence of harmony within the individual.”

In this passage, harmony implied a viscerally pleasurable experience that the report’s authors also posited as a political ideal. Explicitly connecting the personal and the political, Wilbur explained, “A work of art is an experience in the ideal. The homes whose chairs and rugs and lamps and bureaus are constantly providing its inmates with such experiences will send better adapted, better-disciplined men and women into society than the home of ugliness and discord.”

Advertisers joined housing advocates in deploying mythic narratives of the independent, liberal subject’s quest for a home. Connecting modern men to a legendary tradition of pioneering individualism, one commentator celebrated the continued “existence of the pioneer spirit” that persisted despite the loss of a physical frontier. Fired by this ethos, prospective homeowners followed in the footsteps of “Pilgrim Fathers,” “Daniel Boone,” and the first “Forty-niners,” all of

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whom had braved the unknown in search of “new homes and new surroundings.” This courageous quest for opportunity enabled suburbanites to “enjoy the fullness of prosperity,” for it engendered within modern men a perpetual desire to improve their lot. Though the “settling of a new real estate subdivision” seemed “a far cry from the founding or development of a continent,” in the eyes of this housing booster, each proved that “the pioneer spirit manifests itself in many ways.” To “rest unsatisfied at home” violated a heritage defined by an impulse “to adventure for perfection even if the quest takes them no farther than from Main Street to Grand Avenue.” An advertisement for the Common Brick Manufacturers Association similarly began with the lament, “The sun shines no more on unknown wilderness of ours.” Juxtaposing a photograph of a graceful Italianate revival to an engraved miniature of an ox-drawn covered wagon crossing a verdant plain, the clever copywriter reminded the descendants of the wagon’s brave passengers, “Our empire lies domestic at our feet.” Though the nation’s “last frontier has vanished” and “[t]he time for permanence has come,” a new age of exploration, discovery, and conquest awaited modern men in a suburban hinterland. In the sequence of national development, pioneers of the present faced a “time for building lastingly,” and they tested their mettle through the challenge of “rearing . . . cities today, building the family homes.”

Such advertisements illustrate the multiple ways that claims of authenticity functioned to perpetuate an inter-articulated myth of the frontier and a fiction of consent. A yearning for homes of their own ideally compelled modern men to recapitulate their forefathers’ epic pursuit of liberty on a settled terrain. Just as this historicity served to delimit freedom’s meaning and the individual’s conception of his interests, which Walter Dexter touched upon in his explication of Herbert Hoover’s *American Individualism*, it also celebrated desire as an essential, catalyzing force authentic to the nation’s progenitors. Supposedly invested in and thus manifested by the

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26 “The house that grows with your pocketbook,” The American Home, June 1930, 303.
27 Common Brick Manufacturers Association, The American Home, April 1929, 73.
home, this vital essence enabled twentieth-century home owners to reenact American liberalism’s origins in the rejection of autocratic institutions and their embodied relations of political and economic authority, while also compelling them to serve a new political order. If the authentic was also frequently construed as beautiful when identified in interior furnishings, as the previous chapter explored, it also frequently accompanied assertions of comfort. Creating a metonymic association between authenticity and sensate appeal functioned to construct an identity between those who lounged in comfortable chairs and the willful pioneers who initiated a historical narrative of territorial exploration and conquest over an ostensibly virgin land whose plenitude enabled freedom-seeking men to start anew. While the quality craftsmanship, texture, straight lines, and square form of John Norton’s arm chair connoted his connection to this heritage, the paternal throne also paradoxically offered a somatic comfort that evoked more indeterminate, ambiguous, and even primal longings for repletion and maternal succor.

By embodying conflicting desires for conquest and care, the materiality of John Norton’s large, leather chair ultimately exposed the fragility of men’s desire for home. Adamant declarations of this natural craving consequently accompanied fears that, in the context of economic and cultural modernization, men might no longer want homes, preferring instead to read their newspapers before the hearth at a gentleman’s club or to seek illicit pleasures in a den of iniquity. Fanning the dying embers of modern men’s longing for a home required reassessing how the house might meet the needs and demands of increasingly enervated and errant Americans. No longer perceived as only a physical shelter or as protective haven, the modern home provided a place to rest, relax, and recover in order to accommodate the demands of modern life. This adaptive purpose evolved from nineteenth-century ideals of domesticity that had coalesced relative to the expansion of both political democracy and commercial capitalism. Within this historical context, an ideational, if not actual, division between gendered spheres of activity and value represented one of many efforts to control the symbolic fluidity and apparent
artifice that accompanied the escalation of market capitalism. Visual and literary renderings of
the home depicted domestic space as a womb-like refuge insulated from a corrupt and chimerical
public sphere. Representing a realm of stability and security, the pastoralized snug cottage
protected American families from the inconstancy and duplicity that accompanied commercial
relations of production and exchange. The nineteenth-century domestic sanctuary thus
presumably stood in opposition to a profane world, preserving a syncretic mixture of gendered
ideals, Protestant values, and republican virtues in a way that helped to stabilize and contain
market development. However, as historians have carefully documented, this idealization of a
sacred, impermeable, maternal sphere also functioned to support the political economy that it
ostensibly coalesced to combat.

The twentieth-century home might have lacked its predecessor’s overtly religious and
feminine connotations, but it nevertheless retained all of the nineteenth-century cottage’s
resonance. Using language evocative of a bygone era, decorators, tastemakers, and domestic
reformers continued to portray the detached, single-family dwelling as a mise-en-scène that
satisfied longings for sentimental connection and emotional repletion. More than “just a place
where one eats and sleeps,” modern dwellings still tugged at the heartstrings. In this allegorical
setting, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters “lived and loved,” painting a backdrop of “bright
pictures and pleasant memories . . . of music and cheerful conversation” that lingered in the
“mind . . . as a green oasis.” These were the evocative imaginings that supplied men with
something “tangible to fight for” in the event of another war.28 This pastoralized rendering of the
home illustrates that many critics of a modernizing culture longed to recapture an idealized family
domicile that had flourished in the previous century. As the 1920s unfolded, however, their dated
sentimentalities carried little currency with Americans mesmerized by the illusion of prosperity

28 Charles A. David, “No Man Ever Went to War in Defense of a Boarding House, The American
Magazine, February 1928, 51, 74.
and progress. Treasuring their shiny automobiles and porcelain bathroom fixtures, consumers proved unwilling to sacrifice an ever expanding array of material comforts, practical conveniences, and recreational excitement. An article appearing in the Washington Post admonished Victorian moralists to accept the inevitability that “the world moves remorselessly on;” yet, relinquishing outmoded beliefs presented “no reason why the home ideal should be allowed to disintegrate.” Truly helping humanity depended, rather, upon “comprehend[ing] the evolution that is taking place and readapt[ing] institutions and ideals to the new status of the individual.”29 Through such adaptions, several “points of emphasis [might] have changed,” as one home economist acknowledged, “but the value to the individual and to society of wholesome, satisfying home life is better appreciated than ever before.”30

**Big Chairs for Big Men**

Providing for the satisfaction and thus ensuring the adaptation of American men and children to a corporate, commercial society were among the new “points of emphasis” that restored the waning value of the modern home. Rather than shield men and their progeny from the rapid pace of change that characterized a public world of transaction, the purportedly private home evolved to help a new generation better adjust to the quickening pace of commerce and find meaning in the commodities they pandered. Fast-talking and plain-speaking, these professionals, managers, and technocrats raced about in their motor cars, cut deals by telephone and telegram, and smoked cigars with their fellow Rotarians. These hard-charging, hard-working men required a garage and an up-to-date bathroom as well as a host of other conveniences made possible by the merger of science and industry over which they presided. Even more important, they needed a restorative, private space to recover from the frenetic pace and the mental fatigue created by the imperative of incessant productivity. As one housing official explained, “Privacy is a need of

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29 Quoted in “Is the Old-Fashioned Home Gone Forever?” *The Literary Digest*, 2 August 1930, 18-19.
every human being. And one of the important functions of the modern house is to furnish privacy which cannot be had elsewhere in our crowded, bustling life.” Actively intruding into the individual citizen’s reflective, personal space, such recommendations help to illuminate that privacy remained a domain of inviolability that both spatially manifested and secured the autonomous subject’s innate condition of liberty. They also reveal, however, that this declared point of division between the citizen and the state was, though still mediated by the domestic sphere, increasingly located in the embodied experience of rest and comfort found within it.

Included in a government-sponsored report on home furnishings, this insistence on privacy’s importance reveals how the aesthetics of home presumably created sensations of vitality, autonomy, creativity, and self-governing individuality for the men who returned home after a day of increasingly rationalized labor in the corporate economy. To engender these sensate effects, homemakers were counseled to apply far more than the principles of harmony and beauty in a decorative composition, “but also—and primarily—to make it a sympathetic and pleasing background for the people who use it.”

“It will be obvious,” decorator Bernard Jakway further advised, “that in general the complexity and strain of modern life make emphasis of the

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32 Caroline Danielson has examined the historically malleable and gendered construct of privacy by comparing its articulation in Louis Brandeis’s seminal 1890 article to its first invocation in an 1881 court case regarding a woman’s expectation of privacy during childbirth. Danielson finds in this legal suit a feminine entitlement to privacy equated with modesty that differed significantly from an implicitly masculine right to a protected domain of self-development and self-expression. However, she also explores how privacy was articulated through a dialogical process wherein multiple actors participated, including a medical practitioner attempting to assert his professional expertise and legitimacy and a working-class immigrant family that invoked middle-class ideals of maternal virtue and feminine sexual propriety to mitigate its own precarity. References to privacy within the decorating manuals reveal a similar connotative flexibility as the spatialized location of privacy textually shifted between the interiority of ineffable desires and the domestic interiors that expressed and served them. The discursive imperative to equate these embodied sites enabled interior decorators and government housing experts to establish their own authority by codifying and thereby protecting a rightful sphere of autonomy requisite to liberalism. Danielson, “The Embodied Self: Examining the Origins of Privacy in U.S. Law,” Feminist Studies (Summer: 1999): 311-344.

quality of repose desirable in all rooms to be occupied continuously for any length of time. Tired nerves are rested, depleted vitality restored, and efficiency increased by it.” Inducing this reviving effect required only the manipulation of aesthetic elements within the bounds of principle, and an aura of leisure could be attained, Jakway promised, by “the emphasis of horizontal extension; by the use of cool colors, of low tones of any hues, and of closely related colors; by reducing the number of objects, shapes and colors in a room; by increasing the degree of likeness characterizing these objects, shapes and colors; and by emphasizing the importance of a dominant element.”34 While Jakway focused on the artful amalgamation of color, line, form, and texture, his contemporary, Frank Alvah Parsons, emphasized the significance of selection and arrangement in attaining “[t]he first requisite of a house,” which he defined as “physical comfort.” Enumerating the essential furnishings of a comfortable room as “a divan, a chair, a table, a lamp, some books and a footstool,” Parsons warned, “It is not enough that the chair, the divan and the stool should each be comfortable to the body.” Ensuring a husband’s complete comfort demanded, instead, “[t]he best possible arrangement,” which required of the homemaker “more skill than at first appears.” The aesthetic and sensate impact of each object would prove insufficient if the divan or chair were not grouped with the stool, and these must be placed within easy reach of the table, lamp, and books “so that one may lounge or sit and read without effort and without expending energy to assemble what is required.”35

Emily Burbank explained the rationale behind this arrangement in her manual, Be Your Own Decorator. In Burbank’s instructive guide for the novice, homemakers learned that the essential questions they must ask when planning the motive and scheme of a husband’s bedroom or sitting room: “[W]hat are the outstanding needs of man? What does he consider as being comfortable?” To these rhetorical questions, Burbank offered a reply, “A man likes to know

34 Ibid., 110.
exactly where his own belongings are.” Because “[n]o man likes to hunt for things,” she advised the homemaker “to provide a place for everything he calls personal.” In addition to convenience and accessibility, men also “[a]s a rule . . . like a simple room which not only has the comforts but looks comfortable.” Untrained in the finer arts of subtlety, men consequently associated comfort with sturdy, solid, boxy furnishings. These should, of course, include “a sofa of some sort on which he can throw himself down if he cares to rest, and of course have a big, comfortable reading-chair, with a table for a lamp and books near at hand.” Given that “the average man cares more for comfort and convenience than he does for effect,” Burbank advised that “[a] good, strong foot-rest is a necessity, not a fiddling little stool.” For the same reason, “little comforts” and adornments had to remain simple, and the window treatments, always of the type which might be drawn to create privacy and alter mood, needed to be “more serious in character than curtains you would choose for a woman’s room.”

Although Laura Thornburgh echoed Burbank’s guidelines, she reminded her readers that men might possess preferences that deviated from widely held assumptions about how best to create a comfortable habitat for these comfort-seekers. Through Jane Norton’s efforts to accommodate John’s tastes and needs, Thornburgh recounted the experience of a male acquaintance who “ despised” the den his wife created for him. He “ loathed” the animalistic, masculine connotations of the moniker itself and the “darkness” it implied, and he bristled at the belief it conveyed that “a man must have an untidily comfortable apartment into which he can retire and envelop himself in tobacco smoke and where he can have his own things around him and where he can wear an old shooting jacket and slippers.” Even if John Norton had wanted such a cavern, his own house proved too small and too filled with children to allow for this

36 Emily Burbank, Be Your Own Decorator (New York: Dodd, Meade, and Company, 1922), 42.
37 Ibid., 47.
38 Ibid., 43.
39 Ibid., 44, 48.
40 Thornburgh, 60.
exclusively masculine space, though he certainly enjoyed the comforts of his sleeping porch and his own cozy corner within the library just as he reveled in the perception of privacy these intimate areas designated solely for his relaxation served to effect. 41

Both Burbank’s recommendations and Thornburgh’s warnings reveal an effort to locate men comfortably and naturally within a domestic environment traditionally saturated with maternal connotations. The living room served this purpose well, for it was a way station between the street and the home’s more intimate rooms that was neither wholly private nor entirely public, masculine nor feminine, individual nor social. The sheer fabrics that graced its windows and the radio that brought family members into contact with far away events and personalities further signified the living room’s ambivalent compromise between public and private. Within the home’s largest room, guests were entertained, but family members also mingled together, companionably engaged in either their common or individual pursuits. At the end of an enervating, “nervously active” day, the modern man folded himself comfortably into an overstuffed chair and immersed himself in the “beautilitarian” comfort of such a room that, with its characteristically simple furnishings, décor, bookshelves, masculine paraphernalia, and radio appeared free from the threats to independent selfhood that a return home otherwise represented. Satisfying the “long[ing] for bodily comfort in our homes and colors which rest our eyes and nerves,” this natural and thus cheerful, restful setting enabled its ostensible ruler to enjoy a largeness of form and an abundance of sensory pleasure that, when enjoyed within the bounds of

41 In Visualizing American Empire: Orientalism & Imperialism in the Philippines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), David Brody describes the cozy corner as a space within the late nineteenth-century parlor that used international collectibles and their metaphorical exoticism to effect the illusion of a retreat from stultifying middle-class conventions. Within the cozy corner, he explains, “one can relax in an environment that signifies exotic difference . . . Like the enigmatic world hidden within a body, the cozy corner offers the mysteries of a dark, unknown place.” (49) Although John Norton’s living room lacked a designated space for enacting Western fantasies of desire and domination, his chair served the same purpose for twentieth-century men. It might have lacked the overt signifiers of Oriental exoticism, but it remained a space designated for male pleasure and relaxation; it was imagined as a “sanctuary of repose.” (46)
the home, reinforced willful and rational restraint, qualities undermined by managerial
capitalism’s tendency to routinize labor and standardize consumption.42

While Emily Post attended to the importance of lighting and color in creating the mood
of an interior designed to “live in, rest in, and think in,” she dwelled most on describing the living
room’s most important furnishings and specifying their use. For Post, a living room needed to
provide a sofa and chairs that were “low and deep and completely restful.” “If the sofa tempts
you to lie down on it,” she further explained, “then it is just the sort of sofa that the living-room
ought to have!” The nation’s paragon of decorum admitted the unseemliness of “receiv[ing] your
friends flat on your back,” nor would it be proper for guests to “throw themselves full length!”
Propriety prevented such license, but the living room’s centerpiece needed to accommodate
longings to be “support[ed] in a position of ease.” It was also perfectly appropriate for the chairs
to be “so low and deep that getting out of them again is difficult,” and to justify this implied
sensuality, Post declared, “Going away is the last thing a perfect living-room should make you
think of.” Writing these prescriptions when her children were grown and gone, Post could
imagine herself enjoying the sanctioned pleasures of a comfortable chair with “very soft springs”
and a seat tilted slightly backward, “a cushion on [her] knees and a book on the cushion.” Yet,
this citation of a feminine desire for comfort and pleasure was unusual in the decorating advice
literature that more often depicted men as seated comfortably at the center of the smaller, modern
home’s largest room. There, fatigued providers recaptured a pleasure lost, a satisfaction supplied
not by their return to a maternal haven, but by the reclaimed power of not simply proprietorship,
but personal autonomy.43

42 Burbank, 252.
(New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1935), 342-343. In his reading of the nineteenth-century cozy corner,
David Brody cites Anne McClintock’s reference to the ambiguity embedded within the verb domestication,
“‘which derives from dominus, lord of the domum, or home.’” (49) Like I attempted to illustrate with
Bernard Jakway’s reference to the etiological connection between decorate and decorum, the Lord’s ability
to dominate entailed a domestication of the master himself—the ability to civilize others was predicated
Although this archetypal modern man occupied a throne in the living room, he was hardly a regenerated patriarch; he was rather the nominal, governing authority of a family ideally modeled upon a liberal order. While the presence of children necessitated that the home maintain its traditional didactic and practical purposes, small bodies also compromised its newer function to satisfy inter-articulated, political and personal needs for privacy and comfort. Decorators sought a resolution to these often contradictory objectives, though each served to foster consent, in aesthetic rather than explicit moral instruction. Finding his echo in Jane Norton’s protestations of the home’s civic importance, Frank Alvah Parsons reminded homemakers that, due to its impressionable impact, interior decoration “should be of the quality one would have the young mind make permanent as standards for future judgment.”

For Parsons, the importance of aesthetics could not be emphasized enough:

“Every time a colour is seen, a sound heard, or an odour perceived, a new sensation is recorded in consciousness, or one previously recorded is made more permanent by repetition. This is true of all sensations received through the senses. These numberless sensation records accumulated since birth represent the part environment has played in the evolution of our consciousness. In other words, it is what one really is, for out of consciousness comes one’s acts, and his thoughts and acts affect his personality and his use of all material objects. Seeing this psychological truth clearly is the foundation for recognizing the importance of the interior of the house. . . . It is this that determines the standpoint of taste and becomes the stepping-stone to a higher plane of living both for the individual and the nation.”

A contemporary writing for Herbert Hoover’s federally sponsored housing conference inserted Parsons’s contemporary emphasis on taste into a list that also included Victorian and Progressive functions. “The house exists as a place for holding the family together,” and to this end, “the

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45 Ibid.
house should be a fit place in which it may live. It should do its part in contributing to the safety, health, security, normal relationships, and social and individual growth of family members.”

Facilitating this development was “[t]he very nature of the house, its space arrangements and environment,” for these beautifying attributes helped to instill within modern children “judgment, taste, courtesy, comradeship, fairness, and lasting memories.”

As illustrated by such exhortations to improve the home’s aesthetic standards, decorators and housing experts universally agreed that décor played a significant role in preserving the modern home’s influence on the nation’s youth by satisfying increasingly conjoined needs for independence and leisure. The same government sponsored report admonished, “[I]f the house does not provide opportunities for the family to live happily together, boys and girls will find substitutes for family love. They will go outside the family circle for amusement.” The author acknowledged, however, that entertainment had become increasingly difficult to provide within the confines of smaller, modern homes. Whereas Victorian Americans had once enjoyed cross-generational activities such as staging tableaux vivants, their modern counterparts clustered into peer groups engaged in developmentally appropriate forms of play. An emphasis on creativity and privacy also led to conflict among family members competing for the use of limited space. Arguing that the house “must be more than a center for group living,” the report’s author explained that, to fulfill the modern family’s needs, the house “must furnish each individual, within the group, opportunity to develop and express his own interests.”

Moreover, in safeguarding children from embarrassment, the appeal of well-decorated homes incited children of all ages to gather their friends under the safety of a parental roof, but for older adolescents

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46 Van Rensselaer, 40-41.
47 Ibid., 33-34.
49 Van Rensselaer, 37.
particularly, the charming house possessed an appeal that enabled it to “compete successfully with the theater, the movies, the automobile, the restaurant with dancing, and too often the road-house or speak-easy.”

Transforming the house into a modern center for entertainment was fine in theory, but a child’s impulse to romp with playmates or a teenager’s desire to carouse with friends often directly hindered more restrained activities such as rest, reading, study, or sleep. Resolving this conflict among individual needs within the family demanded a creative use of space and more than a modicum of decorative knowledge and skill. Parents torn between their own wishes for order and repose and their children’s demands for fun and frivolity were advised to invest in the gift of an additional room rather than in the extravagance of an automobile. Underscoring the rectitude of this choice, one expert rhetorically asked, “[W]ould not an equal investment in a room fitted with radio, pool-table and other games, perhaps a good dance floor, have a greater opportunity to turn thoughts and steps homeward than would a car that turns away on to the highroad?” If enlarging a house’s dimensions proved financially impossible, modernizing the home’s heating and electric systems offered another option as did creatively furnishing existing rooms to accommodate multiple uses and users. Bedrooms opened new spaces for imaginative, creative play wherein children, like their fathers, could store their most valuable possessions. When the exuberance of childhood play proved too much for even the most patient and tolerant mothers, enclosed backyards provided a safe space for young boys especially to release their naturally exuberant impulses. Evoking the expansive freedom of the frontier within the confines of an enlarged domestic space that encompassed a fenced yard, a publication for aspiring home builders connected the modern home to American liberalism’s origin by conjuring a safe playground where a son would be free to “romp around in,” to “run and play and shout in order to

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50 Ibid., 35.
51 Ibid., 37.
develop into the fine type of manhood his parents so greatly desire.” In this outdoor theater, a strapping son discovered new territory to conquer, one that enabled him to “play cowboy and chase Indians.” This atavistic experience, which an idyllic home surrounded by a sufficient amount of privatizing space made possible, reached backward to a particular past to sustain “a feeling of peace and security, a heritage in later years, a home he always will want to come back to.”

The young cowboy’s imaginative play enacted a developmental role profoundly different from the one that little Anna Norton played out in the solitary activity of decorating her dollhouse, but each proved equally important to the beautiful, comfortable home’s preservation as well as that of the autonomous, consensual subjects who matured within. While young boys roamed freely in the wilds of their manicured lawns, girls were encouraged to practice their homemaking skills. As the twentieth century progressed, however, this persistent, gendered distinction between male conquerors and female homemakers began to evolve in ways that both blurred and reinforced these disparate roles in the domestic allegory of liberal development. Alterations in the modern home’s interior aesthetics and recognition of this appeal’s civic function enabled women such as Jane Norton to imagine themselves as protagonists in a liberal line of fiction. These developments similarly created a new means of enacting male freedom, initiative, and self-reliance as men were encouraged to participate in the home’s material improvement. Although men’s labor in their homes admittedly compensated for insufficiencies in male incomes relative to the high costs of housing, it recapitulated their pioneering forebears’

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52 “What a Wonderful Inspiration for a Home,” Keith’s Magazine: Department of Information Upon Economy in Construction, October 1921, 177.
53 Carolyn Goldstein; Stephen M. Gelber, “Do-It-Yourself: Constructing, Repairing and Maintaining Domestic Masculinity,” American Quarterly (March 1997): 66-112. Gelber contrasts his understanding of domestic masculinity—distinct spheres of masculine activity within the household resembling the work once performed by professional craftsmen—to Margaret Marsh’s conception of masculine domesticity, “which had men doing jobs that had once belonged [exclusively] to women.” Gelber, 73-74. BHA activities support this distinction, particularly the celebration of “boy-built” houses, which created opportunities for young men in secondary manual arts programs to practice their skills.
endeavors to erect dwellings on the frontier. This reassertion of male freedom, opportunity, and authority nevertheless accompanied reminders that the founder fathers’ success had also required cooperative, democratic effort both among neighbors and within families. Industrialization had nevertheless inalterably affected the nature of those expedient, socially productive ties by rendering economic inter-dependency increasingly irrelevant, while the sentimental attachments that nineteenth-century Americans had valorized appeared equally incongruous with the currents of a progressive and more pragmatic modern age. A new source of identification and common interest was needed to work out the perennial conflict among individuals within their family groups, which established the foundation for this reconciliation within society more generally. To this end, one team of housing experts advised that the home itself might bring “the members of the family together through their common interest in its improvement and beautification” and through a negotiated “expression of creative ability and esthetic desires.”

The room in which families most needed to negotiate their individual interests and to cultivate a spirit of cooperation was the multipurpose living room that characterized the smaller houses of the early twentieth century. In contrast to the Victorian domicile’s demarcated and functionally specialized spaces, this proportionately large room ensured family members’ frequent contact and encouraged companionable sociability among family members and their guests. Imbuing the family’s living space with an appealing aura of effortless harmony and balance demanded a considerable exertion on the part of the homemaker. For assistance, women turned to publications such as the BHA’s “How to Furnish the Small House,” which issued recommendations for transforming the living room into a comfortable retreat for the entire family. This pamphlet’s author, Mrs. Charles Bradley Sanders, described the model living room as a “gathering place for family and friends.” Attaining this room’s essential “restful” quality, she

54 Van Rensselaer, 39-40.
55 Clark, 171-192;
advised, required the correct combination of colors, floor coverings, furnishings, and accessories. First, background colors helped to set the mood, and neutral tones ranging from ivory to gray made the best choices. “[S]everal shades darker than the walls,” floor coverings in either plain colors or of an “indefinite design” also earned Sanders’s praise. In the interest of harmony, Sanders suggested avoiding any furniture that appeared “elaborate or prominent” as well as any “unnecessary” pieces not reflective of the family’s “real needs.” To this end, Sanders reiterated a familiar list of the living room’s essential articles: An overstuffed sofa positioned before the fireplace; three armchairs, at least one selected for comfort and placed in a central grouping near the hearth; a desk adorned with objects of “silver, brass, bronze, leather, or wood” as well as ashtrays and “smoking appointments;” end tables; bookcases or shelves for the room that also functioned “as [a] library”; a “[t]all, wooden, or metal reading-lamp;” and finally, a phonograph or radio. Regarding these items as quite sufficient, Sanders commanded, “Do not indulge in any ornaments.” Though incorporating a “few bits” of bric-a-brac hardly amounted to a cardinal sin, failing to balance them was an unpardonable violation.56

Sanders’s description of the ideal living room illustrates the meticulous specificity with which decorators and domestic advisers articulated this simultaneously individual and collective space. While their attention to every detail seems to belie the living room’s declared individuality and privacy, it reveals an imperative to render this interior area sufficiently and appropriately fetishized for the purpose of sustaining these liberal precursors. Illuminating this intent, an article entitled “The Beauty of Well-Ordered Homes” endeavored to describe the utter gratification that a young woman derived from her family’s living room. In this tableau of domestic harmony, “the daughter of the home” leans against the banister, reluctantly ascending the staircase as she casts one last, longing look at the site of her evening’s pleasures. She laments, “I can scarcely bear to

leave this room, it is so beautiful.’” The article’s author, art educator Florence Fitch, asked her readers to imagine the colors and textures that sensually beckoned the adolescent and her family members into the modern family’s new, communal domain: The “bowl of orange-red blossoms,” the candles and tastefully framed pictures that subtly “echoed” the flowers’ “brilliant” hue, the “alluring” magazines and books so temptingly displayed, the plush comfort of the “easy chairs,” and the warmth of the brightly crackling fire that bathed the room in soft light. Ensconced within this domestic paradise, the young woman’s brother “loved to stretch on the rug in front of [the] fire as he joined in the conversation of the family group.” These expressions of youthful pleasure illustrate how the living room’s mise-en-scène satisfied cravings that might have otherwise tempted the adolescents to stray from the principles of harmony, balance, and ordered liberty that their home so appealingly embodied.57 Disavowing the compelling force of these regulatory tenets was the strength of the “aesthetic emotion” their application elicited individually within the room’s inhabitants. According to Frank Alvah Parsons, these acutely pleasurable sensations affirmed the rectitude of interior decoration’s fundamental principles. His assertions of principle’s intensely pleasurable effects suggests that beautiful décor merged the external and internal in such a way that cast self-discipline as the consensual apprehension of a desirable ideal. Parsons undoubtedly would have applauded the subtle and implicitly exotic touches of orange-red that infused Florence Fitch’s imagined living room with just the right amount of animation. These occultly balanced points of contrast moderated a dominant aura of tranquility without arousing “an orgy of emotion” as the incorrect application of color so often did.58

The Homelessness of Regular Guys

Fitch’s evocative description of the beautiful, well-ordered living room illustrated to her readers how a knowledgeable, attentive decorator had applied not only the fundamental principles

58 Parsons, The Art of Home Furnishing and Decoration, 14, 18.
of interior decoration, but also “the four C’s [of] comfort, convenience, cosiness [and] cheer.”

By evincing these decorative axioms, Fitch’s fictive living room detailed what Herbert Hoover called “the ideal setting for true home life,” which included not only a well-decorated interior that conformed to standards of hygiene, managerial rationality, comfort, and taste, but one located within a “detached house with at least some space around it.” Only within this type of domestic environment, Hoover declared, could “the finest flower of family life” grow and flourish.

Surrounded by a yard of standard dimensions, the colonial revivals and bungalows rapidly populating the nation’s suburban neighborhoods both individually and collectively exuded, in Hoover’s estimation, the ethos of ordered freedom he so lauded as the hallmark of American Individualism. Aesthetically, the interiors of these homes also showcased a disciplined liberty that served as a “stimulus” to its inhabitants, one that cultivated within a household’s disparate members the ability to comply with an ethical injunction of mutual respect that enabled them to “work out creative individuality.”

Seemingly undisturbed by the paradox that troubled his celebrations of regulated freedom, Hoover was equally adamant about the individually liberating effects of standardization. If industrial rationalization catalyzed economic growth, further democratized opportunity, and enhanced the quality of life, then surely, as Hoover reasoned, “‘[t]he man who has a standard electric light, a standard radio, and one and a half hours more daily leisure is more of a man and has . . . more individuality than he has without these tools for varying his life.’

Through the character of the progressive lawyer Seneca Doane, Sinclair Lewis paraphrased Hoover’s sentiments in the novel Babbitt, his satirical critique of an increasingly standardized and alienating white, suburban middle-class culture. “Standardization is excellent,

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59 Fitch, 7.
61 Ibid., “Statement for Liberty Magazine,” 11 May 1926, 1, Commerce Papers, Building and Housing, Home Ownership 1926, HHPL.
“per se,” Doane declared of the economy and dependability of name-brand products that consequently supplied “more time and energy to be individual in.” Of this passage, the literary scholar Catherine Jurca has suggested that Doane’s unexpected defense of standardization refused the more common argument that commodities supplied preserved a perception of individuality by providing a means of self-expression or identification. Rather, the pleasures and creative opportunities derived from consumerism precluded a totalizing identity between the commodity and the consumer, for the illusion of choice and experience of enjoyment maintained within the subject a sense of his or her own causal affectivity. This authentic locus of individual liberty and power is precisely what George F. Babbitt lacked, and in this prototypical character, Sinclair Lewis created a figure that Americans claimed to know, but not to be. “For though nobody will recognize himself in George F. Babbitt, everybody will recognize somebody else,” observed May Sinclair in her 1922 review of the novel. Due to this recognition and the novel’s resonance, Babbittry quickly entered the American lexicon as a moniker for the self-satisfied smugness and complacency of a middle class that the iconoclastic journalist and bombastic critic H. L. Mencken had already labeled the “booboisie.” Yet Lewis’s novel reveals more than a critique of the conceit and the banal preoccupations that obscured the despair of Zenith’s prosperous citizens. It also tacitly details the personal and social consequences that follow from George Babbitt’s awareness that the objects of desire, and thus his obligations, were externally imposed rather than voluntarily chosen. Reading the novel through an ideological rather than cultural lens illuminates that Babbitt’s perceived lack of volition led to a deficit of autonomy that prevented Babbitt from enacting his role in the progressive, developmental narrative of American liberalism.

Sinclair Lewis conceived Babbitt to capture the oxymoronic figure of the “Standardized American Citizen.” This iconic character in American literature ostensibly typified the era’s “Regular Guys” who, oblivious to the contradictions and insipid platitudes they spouted, comprised a “new generation of Americans: fellows with hair on their chests and smiles in their eyes and adding-machines in their offices.” Considering himself “a representative businessman,” an exemplar of a “Solid American Citizen,” Babbitt lauded “the Real He-man, the fellow with Zip and Bang.” These “salesmen of prosperity” concurred with the “Captains of Industry” that “American Democracy connoted not an equality of wealth, but rather a wholesome sameness of thought, dress, painting, morals, and vocabulary.” Given Lewis’s detailed descriptions of these homogenizing standards, contemporary reviewers touted not the novel’s stylistic innovations, but rather the striking sociological realism of its fictional representations and its reproduction of a distinctive American dialect. Lewis excelled, according to Mencken, at dissecting society and its institutions as no one else could, and of his novel, the “old professor of Babbittry” proclaimed, “I know of no American novel that more accurately presents the real America. It is a social document of a high order.” Lewis detailed not only the opinions, aspirations, and colloquialisms that rendered Babbitt so representative; equally important to his characterization were the quotidian routines and routes that he followed. Babbitt was thus rendered familiar as much by his avowed thoughts and desires as by the spaces that made them manifest and staged his ritualized behaviors.

66 Lewis, 139-140.
67 Ibid., 297.
68 H.L. Mencken, “Portrait of an American Citizen,” in George Babbitt, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2003), 7-10. In contrast to Mencken, Walter Lippmann disagreed with the laudatory reviews that more frequently praised Lewis for capturing and labeling an emergent prototypical American and this subject’s characteristic environment. He warned that Lewis had bitterly and even juvenileely caricaturized rather than accurately depicted Babbitt and his fraternity of “Chums” at the Zenith Athletic Club. Perhaps vexed that Mencken had described Babbitt as more illuminating and incisive than his own Public Opinion, Lippmann disparaged Lewis’s lack of intellectual complexity, and he complained that Lewis had contributed not a thoughtful or disinterested examination of reality, but rather new stereotypes and prejudices that were simply “useful devices for seeing the American scene quickly.” Walter Lippman in Mark Schorer, Sinclair Lewis: An American Life (New York: McGraw Hill, 1961), 85.
With its fixation on malaise and ennui, Babbitt was celebrated by Mencken and many of Lewis’s contemporaries as an indictment of a spiritually vacuous, materialistic middle-class culture that rose on the tide of the nation’s industrial progress. Even if Lewis satirically exaggerated his main character’s habits and foibles, Babbitt derived his apparent substance from the armature he ritualistically assembled every morning. Lewis’s protagonist emerged from his morning ablutions attired in his suit and spectacles, equipped with opinions gleaned from the local newspaper, and shielded behind the wheel of his car or the security of his office desk. Yet, from the chinks in this prosperous businessman’s defenses seeped an inchoate dissatisfaction that Babbitt endeavored to suppress with adamant assertions of satisfaction and the opiate of frenetic activity, or when those remedies failed, with the restoratives of cigarettes and illegal gin. In assessing this depiction, more recent scholarship has framed Lewis as ambivalently grappling with the dislocating effects of commercial capitalism and its simultaneously liberating possibilities and homogenizing impulses. Writing within this vein, Catherine Jurca argues that the standardization of consumption created a type of fraternity among white men that secured a perceived equality and shared privilege at the expense of their competing desires for privacy and individuality. An identification with the commodities they owned qualified men such as Babbitt to belong to a community of equals; however, founded in conformity rather than liberty, this identity led only to a debilitating alienation and a search for authenticity. Babbitt thus paradoxically suffered from the achievement of his professional aspirations and their translation into material satisfactions, for as Jurca and others have proposed, the commodities that surrounded him could provide only a fleeting and ultimately unsatisfying sense of pleasure because they proved incapable of signifying his essential, authenticating desires.  

A liberal critique also lies implicit within Jurca’s analysis of the socioeconomic and cultural assessment that Lewis articulated through Babbitt’s alienation and the misadventures to

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69 Jurca, Chapter Two.
which it leads. Ambivalently privileged and disempowered by his possessions, Babbitt enacts a
narrative logic antithetical to liberalism, for his socioeconomic discipline failed to enhance his
individual liberty or translate into real authority. Because Babbitt’s submission was neither
volitional nor an act of self-governance, it produced an over-powering affect of self-pity,
loneliness, and self-righteous martyrdom rather than one of empowered independence. By noting
that “Babbitt and his unread book indeed register Lewis’s resistance to the potential obliteration
of the free-thinking and –reading subject,” Jurca tacitly indicates that what ultimately concerned
Lewis was, similar to Herbert Hoover and the era’s more esteemed intellectuals, the demise of
judicious thought and informed consent.70 Testifying to this preoccupation was one
contemporary critic’s description of Babbitt as “[a] man of warm heart and weak resolve,” who
“might not have possessed an immutable core of reason and virtue to guide his conduct, but . . .
was hardly without a soul.”71

Lunch with Paul Reisling brought an opportunity for Babbitt to speak candidly about the
habits, social conventions, and Biblical injunctions that kept the two men from pursuits more
representative of their dreams. More bold than his best friend, Reisling—a moodily introspective,
repressed artist consigned to an inherited business and a shrill wife—cut through Babbitt’s flimsy
invocations of responsibility and duty, “[Y]ou’re so earnest about morality, old Georgie, that I
hate to think how essentially immoral you must be underneath.”72 It was this lack of conviction
that left Babbitt with neither a compass nor modus operandi on those occasions when he mustered
the courage to revolt against the institutions, relationships, and roles that guided his actions. A
planned escape from his family incited terror, for example, as Babbitt beseeched his wife to
understand his need rather than his entitlement to vacation alone. Having won her pity, he lay

70 Ibid., 55. Although this argument is beyond the scope of this dissertation, a concern for consent also
pervades the writings of Walter Lippman, John Dewey, and Lewis Mumford during the 1920s.
72 Lewis, 49.
awake “shivering, reduced to primitive terror, comprehending that he had won freedom, and wondering what he could do with anything so unknown and so embarrassing as freedom.”

This loss helps to explain why Babbitt mounted a rebellion akin to his son’s adolescent antics when he finally attempted to break free from the doldrums of his middle-class, middle-age constraints. His dissent—a descent into “a current of desire and very bad whisky and all the complications of new acquaintances”—was brief, for without sufficient support or approval from his peers, Babbitt suffered an anxious isolation that proved far worse than the enfeebling longing and loneliness that placed him at this ethical impasse. He consequently returned with “joy” to his former activities, and he reveled in his renewed popularity within Zenith’s fraternity of economically successful and ethically compromised businessmen. Marking Babbitt’s reinstatement within this society as well as his perceived ability to consent to its imperatives was an invitation to join the coercive Good Citizen’s League that allowed him to feel “coaxed instead of bullied.” A revelation secured this disavowal, for when Babbitt’s fellow Boosters learned the truth of his middle initial, they welcomed him back into the fold. Their “Folly” had returned, banishing forever the “wild crazy boy” and the “broad-minded and liberal” individualist who had resurfaced to defend the decency of Zenith’s striking workers as part of a vain attempt to “run [his] own life.”

With the renewal of their approval, a sobered Babbitt became once again the apparent master of his fate, even as an unscrupulous real estate deal mandated by his father-in-law left him “conscious that his line of progress seemed confused.”

Lewis’s narrative implicitly relates Babbitt’s aborted attempt at representative autonomy or principled individuality to the failure of his house to function as a domain of privacy. Unable to embody anything personal or authentic about its principal inhabitant, Babbitt’s residence was

73 Ibid., 99.
74 Ibid., 243-244, 282.
75 Ibid., 300-302.
76 Jurca, 53, 54.
solely a product of public articulation and, consequently, interchangeable with not only the other houses in his neighborhood, but also the hotel rooms that sheltered itinerate businessmen. The green and white Dutch colonial where Babbitt and his family resided was “one of three” on the block, and it stood in contrast to the “comfortable” home of a “Bohemian” neighbor that possessed “no architectural manners whatever.”

Decorated according to the latest fashions and standards, the interior of Babbitt’s residence appeared to be lifted from the pages of “Cheerful Modern Houses for Medium Incomes.” The product of a professional decorator, the Babbitts’s décor “was all as competent and glossy” and done in “the best of taste.” Similar to his yard, the interior of his house “was perfection, and made him perfect also.” One tragic flaw nevertheless marred the domicile’s otherwise pristine appearance: “[I]t had nothing to do with the Babbitts, nor with anyone else.”

Lacking any individuality or evidence of affective investment, Babbitt’s house was disenchanted, and in failing to effect a gratifying connection to his own metaphysical ontology, the Dutch colonial on Chatham Road left its owner feeling dispossessed. Excessively conventional and mimetic, the house failed to particularize Babbitt and consequently rendered his membership within a community of consuming equals compulsory rather than consensual.

Unable to manifest the autonomy that engendered consent, Babbitt proved similarly incapable of enacting a liberal developmental narrative that translated an otherwise ineffable affectivity into progressive productivity. Implicitly equating autonomy and domesticity through his critique of Babbitt’s home, Lewis thus suggested that his anti-liberal protagonist was a product of society rather than society’s producer because he was a man without a home. Babbitt’s alienation and disaffection thus stemmed neither from the “grind” of his occasionally boring work nor the commodities he purchased; the restlessness and dissatisfaction from which he suffered so

77 Lewis, 19.
78 Ibid., 11-12, 3.
palpably within his house ironically originated in a desire for a home that the interior of Babbitt’s own dwelling failed to satisfy.

By highlighting this discrepancy between house and home, Lewis implicitly explored the spiritual and implicitly ideological consequences of an insufficiently fetishized house. While this astute cultural observer focused on the banality of the Babbitts’s bedroom, he also described with sociological detail a living room that was similarly characterized by the color schemes, furnishings, and embellishments that graced “two out of every three houses” and “observed the best Floral Heights’ standards.” Though ideally conceived for the purpose of fostering community among diverse individuals, this gathering space was, like the rest of Babbitt’s house, “neither interesting nor offensive.” Though preferable to his mother’s old-fashioned parlor, Babbitt’s living room lacked life, and deficient of any original or personable qualities, “[i]t was as neat, and as negative, as a block of artificial ice.” Arm chairs upholstered in blue and gold-striped velvet felt “very deep and restful;” however, these failed to offset the unused and highly polished fireplace, the perfectly flat rug, the unopened books, and the obligatory jazz records. Similarly, the chairs’ rich textures and colors proved incapable of helping Babbitt to enjoy the magazines he felt compelled to read and of distracting him from the irritating presence of his children and his condescendingly maternal wife. A “gregarious and disorganizing dog” would have been unthinkable in such a pristinely clean and precisely ordered space.79

Lewis’s copious description of the studiously contrived living rooms conveyed an implicit, if not an intentional, critique of Myra Babbitt. Insufficiently beautiful and comfortable, the interior of Babbitt’s house failed to reflect back to Babbitt empowering knowledge about his own interiority, for unlike Jane Norton and her attentive concern for her husband’s comfort and tastes, Myra Babbitt had failed to produce a decorative composition that enabled Babbitt to better

79 Ibid., 71-72.
understand himself. Although this affluent homemaker had employed the assistance of a decorator to help her replicate the fashionable standards of décor commensurate with her husband’s status, her lack of understanding and care for Babbitt’s particular needs and desires had an imperiling effect on Babbitt’s own principles. This disregard for effecting a fitting environment for his protagonist helps to explain Lewis’s ambivalence about the domestic authority that Myra Babbitt exercised. When faced with his wife’s prolonged absence, Babbitt confessed, “He liked to have her there” because her ministrations and “her clucking made him feel secure;” yet, he also vehemently resented the infantilizing dictates that reduced him to a “kindergarten brat” and a “weak-stomached baby.” Conscious of the visibility of Babbitt’s reliance on the maternal Myra, Lewis endeavored to diffuse her dominance by depicting her “as sexless as an anemic nun” and as thoroughly unheeded by her family.

These obfuscations of his wife’s authority nevertheless failed to restore Babbitt as the singular master of his household, for the production of his independence required reframing Myra’s homemaking labor as affectively motivated and therefore willingly performed. Lewis revealed to his readers instead that Myra felt equally dissatisfied and bored by the unvarying domestic tasks that middle-class, feminine ideals compelled her to perform. Even the social obligation of visiting held little interest or appeal, and like her husband, Myra longed for fuller, more invigorating occupations and relationships.80 Despite this sympathetic characterization, the implication remained that Myra Babbitt’s lack of affective investment in her homemaking labor accounted for the absence of the “little touches” needed to transform the Babbitt’s sterile house into a charming, comfortable home that would embody its owner’s individuality, ensure his comfort, and guarantee his pleasure. Had his residence’s décor been more appealing, more comfortable, and more satisfying, Babbitt’s autonomy might have withstood the challenges of

80 Ibid., 255, 269-270.
modernization. Both George F. and Myra Babbitt instead felt only dispossession rather than the self-possession that one ideally derived from the gendered occupation of a home.

Yet, Lewis’s gloomy pessimism about the discontent, dispossession, and disaffection—the homelessness—of suburban masculinity failed to overshadow, the more pervasive assertion of the well-decorated home’s ameliorative powers. Appearing primarily in literature and advice manuals that addressed a predominantly feminine audience, this alternative line of fiction more explicitly echoed what Lewis implied in attributing modern men’s malaise and disenchantment to their wives’ failures as homemakers. A short story by F. Roney Weir entitled “The Saving House” seemed almost intentionally to refute not only Frederic Lawrence’s predications about the state of modern marriage, but also his conception of the home’s subordination as a “ward” of matrimony. The plot of Weir’s parable begins to unfold on the day that “plain, rugged” Walter Radnor purchased a lovely suburban lot. His chest swelling with the “pride of possession,” he eagerly awaited the opportunity to share his good fortune with his betrothed, a slender, raven-haired flapper with steel-blue eyes. Captivated by Alice Johnson’s beauty and the bare shoulders that attracted many admiring stares, Radnor dismissed her youthful penchant for cars, movies, and “vaudeville jokes,” “turquois dinner rings and chiffon velvet,” and “fox trots and blues.” He optimistically hoped that his anticipated house would distract Alice from these frivolous pastimes and transform her into mature and thoughtful companion.

A fortunate coincidence introduced the newly propertied Radnor to Philancy Rue. An aspiring architect who just happened to develop her skills by drafting numerous plans for Radnor’s corner lot, Philancy sketched out Radnor’s “house of dreams.” In contrast to the proprietor’s lack of vision, her “quick and capable” hands artistically captured Radnor’s inchoate longings in the form of a picturesque “colonial, small, dignified, facing a flagged, flower-bordered walk down a green hedge.” Each visit to this idyllic site left Radnor feeling “refreshed and invigorated” by the “sheer beauty of the thing.” Yet, increasingly unsure of his fiancée’s
response, Radnor concealed the love affair that dominated his every thought, despite Philancy’s assurances that “hardly any girl could withstand” the loveliness of his home. When Radnor finally unveiled one object of his affection to the other, his worst fears were realized. Alice proved inured to the home’s charms, for she had formed her understanding of a real home under the tutelage of a “trussed, high-heeled, superficial and narrow-minded” mother. Hardly a paragon of domesticity, Mrs. Johnson had taught Alice to feel at home in a “snug little apartment” that featured a “nice dressing-room and bath, compact kitchenette, [and] living-room large enough to entertain . . . friends in.” While such an environment perfectly suited the women of the Johnson family, it had wreaked consequences on its patriarch by reducing Mr. Johnson to “a ghost with no place to rest his bones.”

Distressed by Alice’s dismay and “signs of tears,” Radnor resigned himself to selling the house he had grown to love. In a fortunate twist of fate, he received a brief reprieve when just months before the scheduled wedding, his not-so-beloved Alice embarked on a final youthful adventure. For six blissful weeks, Radnor furnished the new home and tended to its fledgling garden with the help of his trusted adviser Philancy Rue. Though Mrs. Rue had suggested that Radnor “[a]ssert [his] right as head of the family” and insist that Alice accept his home, in more reflective moments, the ever-honorable Radnor pondered his future with his young bride and the impending “eternal struggle to obtain things for which he did not care.” He repressed the “reckless pleasure” he had begun to feel in Philancy Rue’s company, particularly after realizing the breadth of interests that he shared with the “full-bosomed, unfashionably plump” widow who had a soft spot for stray dogs, her landlord’s children, and the tidy colonial she had designed for Radnor. “[W]holesome and natural,” Philancy Rue shared Radnor’s joy in the house they had created together and in the authentic, “rustic Colonial” furnishings they had selected. Unlike Alice and her mother, Mrs. Rue appreciated the value of “a big couch for the man of the house to snooze on while his wife does the family mending or reads aloud.” Just as Radnor began to sense
that his idyllic summer must come to an end, Mrs. Johnson arrived with startling news: Alice had eloped! Wagging her finger, the unpleasant Mrs. Johnson chastised an immensely relieved Radnor. “You have nothing in the world to blame but this house,” she scolded. Alice was simply not the type of “girl to be happy in a suburban cottage with chickens in the back yard.” As Weir’s readers undoubtedly predicted, Radnor married the woman who had helped to build his home, and by a “narrow squeak,” it was he rather than Alice whom the “saving house” had rescued.81

**Mrs. Livewell’s Splendid Personality**

Similar to John Norton’s love for Jane, Walter Radnor’s desire for the matronly Philancey Rue was mediated by the home she created for him, and as significantly, his ability to enter a marital union with this archetypal, modern homemaker was predicated on his identification with the product of her labor. The house’s evocative beauty and its promises of repletion, which the large, colonial-style sofa embodied, saved Walter from the “lumber-room of [his] lower desire-nature,” to borrow Frederick Lawrence’s phrase. With his desire appropriately invested, Walter felt not only personally revitalized, but also ready to play his part in a larger public drama as the consensual subject that an inter-articulated perception of title and entitlement enabled him to become. As the conclusion to Weir’s short story makes evident, Walter Radnor’s home retained the private domicile’s traditional functions of engendering personal responsibility, social stability, and political rationality. It also evinced, however, a very modern insistence that comfort and pleasure supplied the means of accomplishing these regulatory objectives.

Frank Alvah Parsons’s reflection on the well-decorated home’s purpose offers a commentary on the assumptions undergirding Weir’s fictional tale of Walter Radnor’s maturation. Parsons began with a familiar refrain: “Man is exactly what he lives in, for

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environment is the strongest possible factor in man’s development.” Yet, the environment to which he referred was a more progressive one filled with “concordant sounds, agreeable odors, harmonious colors and pleasing arrangements.” Similar to their Victorian antecedents, these more modern aesthetic attributes nurtured a “tendency toward refinement, culture and artistic appreciation instead of toward brutality, ignorance and indifference.” As a result of this cultivation, Parsons concluded, “[W]hatever he does will be as nearly like his environment as he himself is.” Here was a clear reiteration of interior decoration’s purpose in constituting liberal subjectivity. The consequent necessity of effecting a metaphorical identity between the home and the principles that characterized the liberal polity was, Parsons explained, a “viewpoint . . . somewhat new to us [that] accounts for the upheaval in our ideas of what a home really is.”

What Parsons described as “new” actually reflected a reassertion of the private sphere’s public function, albeit one packaged in a more modern aesthetic. As illustrated by Parsons, this renewed emphasis on interior décor’s ideologically constructive purpose shaped contemporary prescriptions for women’s domestic responsibilities and labors. Speaking to the alteration of women’s traditional role, one prominent home economist explained that modern homemakers “contribut[ed] much to the sum total of human comfort and efficiency by creating a home atmosphere which modifies the complexities of the business world.” Cora Winchell’s statement nevertheless conveyed more than an adaptive response to the enervating effects of standardization and managerialism from which George F. Babbitt suffered. Housing professionals, decorating experts, and domestic reformers urged women to comprehend the obligation to create beautiful, enjoyable interior spaces, and they insisted that tasteful décor elicited sensations of gratification and fulfillment because it embodied the principles that rightly governed both individual conduct and sociopolitical relations. The experts’ adamant attempts to effect a seemingly natural,

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82 Parsons, The Art of Home Furnishing and Decoration, 5.
spontaneous connection between pleasure and principle served to link the possession of subjectivizing desires to the performance of liberal subjectivity. When aroused by the home, impulses and instincts hardly threatened the rationality required of civic participation and political reproduction. Rather, affectively revitalized and reanimated male citizens acquired a renewed sense of their individuality, autonomy, and efficacy that caused the manifold sources of their regulation within an increasingly corporatized political economy to appear volitional and ultimately liberating.

Because of their homemaking labor, women were depicted as playing a vital role in recreating the requisite domain of privacy that sustained liberalism’s legitimacy and reproduction. In the flagship edition of *The American Home*, Edward Bok proclaimed, “No being on earth is inwardly fonder of a home than a man.” “Making a home is . . . a joint affair,” the highly regarded editor of the *Ladies Home Journal* declared, and he enjoined husbands and wives to play their respective parts in contributing to “the atmosphere in the house that . . . exhalts the home feeling.” Modern men, in Bok’s experience, were all too eager to take on this obligation for “[t]o make a home out of a house means . . . to find rest and quiet and comfort there in the evenings before the fire or under the lamp light.” Although Bok appeared to acknowledge the home as an equivocally gendered site by depicting the responsibility of homemaking as a marital endeavor, he nevertheless charged women with primary responsibility for creating the comfortable environments that would entice men and children to stay home. Potentially wayward husbands, Bok cautioned, “will gladly remain in it evenings if the atmosphere is provided for him.”

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admonitions repeated an increasingly common refrain in the popular press that charged wives with luring their husbands away from the temptation of illicit recreations. Captivated themselves by the call to make their homes “the most winning spot on earth,” women learned from the interior decorator Emily Burbank that “[e]very man has it in him to love a home, and if this instinct is not developed it is the fault of some woman.” To avoid such condemnation, Burbank advised, “Fan any spark in your man-child that indicates interest in home. If he feels that it is his home he will have a pride in it and like to be in it.” Burbank’s readers hardly needed youth or beauty; recapturing a man’s wayward attention required only the proper placement of a very special chair.

Mary McDuffie Hampton’s contributions to *Sunset Magazine* similarly exemplify the widespread and often portentous appeal to women to become more conscientious, skillful, and tasteful interior decorators. In “The House a Man Calls Home,” Hampton recounted the sad tale of Mr. Richard whose wife had banished his favorite chair to the basement. Subjected to overly accessorized, dark rooms crowded with uncomfortable and impractical furniture, Mr. Richards was suffused with “a feeling of uprooted strangeness and discomfort.” Thus deprived of an “immeasurable . . . source of comfort,” Mr. Richards had little incentive to stay home. His wife might have prevented the inevitable denouement of this “domestic tragedy” if only she had supplied the essential props for her husband’s comfort. This regular guy simply needed a cushioned chair, a stool on which to prop his feet, an adequate reading lamp, and a sturdy table for the convenient access to his cigarettes, spectacles, and anything else a man “wished handy.” In her efforts to be efficient and fashionable, Mrs. Richards had instead imbued her living room “with a chilly atmosphere of mercenary reverence . . . for handsome . . . furniture” that had rendered her husband, like George Babbitt, figuratively homeless. Wanting to avoid a similarly tragic conclusion, Hampton “corner[ed]” several men “to discover exactly what men themselves

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85 Burbank, 2, 41.
want in their homes.” A doctor whom she surveyed “took up his pencil and prescription pad . . . to draw a rough sketch” of the room where he spent his evenings reading and listening to music, surrounded by his wife and children. The “big doctor” first sketched a fireplace before drawing another “very generous square” that represented his “own comfortable chair,” then another proportionally smaller shape denoting “his special foot stool” complete with a cover that had taken his wife many months to petit point. After a moment’s hesitation, he penciled in a davenport situated “at a corresponding angle to the fire” upon which his wife perched in the evening, perhaps with needle and thread, providing silent companionship to a husband who disliked being distracted from his books.86

Hampton similarly blamed women’s deficiencies as decorators for the absence of “genuine happiness of a deep but simple sort” among their children. Though they sought enjoyment in pursuits less solitary than reading and resting, wide awake adolescents longed for comfortable, inviting rooms in which to entertain their friends and to engage in creative play.87 Hampton further emphasized this causality between pleasurable domesticity and liberal sociality in the parable of the Staid and Livewell children. Akin to Mrs. Richard, Mrs. Staid exemplified the “last-century women,” who to Hampton’s dismay, “destroys every joy of home before the importance of silent, stiff orderliness.” By creating an “alienating” environment wherein her two daughters “[did] not feel at home,” Mrs. Staid gave the adolescents little choice but to seek out recreation elsewhere. Once, the young women seized the opportunity of their mother’s prolonged absence and “begged” Mrs. Hampton to help them “rejuvenate their depressing and antiquated house.” With her assistance, fires burned brightly on previously spotless grates and piano keys, formerly hidden from view, tinkled with the melodious sounds of jazz. Upon Mrs. Staid’s return,

87 Ibid.
however, the inviting “room was thrust back into its old, punctilious gloom.” The Staid sisters, needless to say, “ha[d] scarcely been home since.”

Keeping her children and husband close to home was an art that Mrs. Livewell had perfected through her home’s more appealing décor. To emphasize the Staid sisters’ tragic plight, Hampton contrasted their mother’s implacability to Mrs. Livewell’s insistence that “home is a place where my husband and children . . . find rest and comfort and satisfaction.” Unlike the Staid daughters, her children considered “no place . . . more fun than home.” The resolution to Hampton’s story made its moral abundantly clear. Women such as Mrs. Staid “rant[ed] most loudly about the degeneracy of the modern generation,” but their outmoded methods of housekeeping and decorating actually incited the behavior they so vehemently deplored.88 Real homes, in contrast, accommodated family members’ desires for exciting novelties and entertainments, which neither “a series of nights in cafes” nor “any of the other possible diversions found outside the home” could ultimately satisfy. Meeting modern husbands’ and children’s needs for comfort and enjoyment was, arbiters such as Hampton explained, as simple as rearranging furniture or experimenting with new fabrics and colors. Not only did these decorative activities create an “interesting adventure” for family members to embark on together, they also yielded “a change in home surroundings to keep them restful and pleasing and yielding of genuine pleasure.”89

Decorated in the more casual, contemporary style recommended by progressive tastemakers such as Hampton, Mrs. Livewell’s home reflected more than the needs and desires of its individual inhabitants; this aesthetically appealing, comfortable interior space also manifested its creator’s “splendid personality.”90 In charging modern women with responsibility for halting the home’s demise, Hampton reiterated a familiar trope, one that conferred upon mothers a civic

duty to curb and channel male licentiousness and youthful irrationality.\textsuperscript{91} This maternal inculcation of restraint supposedly enabled those who enjoyed domestic delights to perceive their unique individuality, while also becoming obligated to a familial collective. Yet, also illuminated by Hamptons’s reframing of a traditional, feminine role is the significance of not simply focusing husband’s and children’s longings on the principles and ideals manifested through the domestic interior, but also investing women’s desires in this material process of ideological reproduction. By admonishing women to adopt a dutiful regard for the happiness of others and to decorate their homes in a more rationally tasteful fashion, Hamptons’s fictionalized morality tale reveals that the comfortable chair—the symbol that instantiated Mr. Livewell as an autonomous, consenting subject—actually depended upon his decorating wife’s consent to its presence. Preserving this emblem and experience of independence for Mr. Livewell (and presumably his submission to the values and virtues upon which the nation was founded) thus depended upon Mrs. Livewell’s complicity in transforming her family’s house into an appealing place either to relax or play.

As Hamptons’s domestic allegories also illuminate, danger accompanied this dependency for men such as Mr. Richard. This male citizen’s ability to identify with what the tasteful, comfortable home ideally evinced and to be identified as such was compromised by his wife’s disregard for the needs of her family’s individual members as well her refusal to subordinate her own preferences to interior decoration’s fundamental axioms. Mr. Richard consequently fled not solely because he preferred public forms of amusement, but also because his home was insufficiently fetishized due to the presence of a feminine autocrat who was not herself adequately subjugated. Ironically, the villain in Hamptons’s domestic tragedy, Mrs. Richard, violated the ideal of disinterested, maternal sacrifice by remaining wedded to an anachronistic

interior aesthetic that had once signified this virtue. In contrast, Hampton’s praise for Mrs. Livewell’s “splendid personality” indicated that this modern heroine was motivated by the pleasure she derived from enacting the role of a creative, consensual subject who enabled her husband and children to become the same. For just as the décor of Mrs. Livewell’s home aroused strong feelings of emotional and physical gratification within its occupants that engendered more virtuous behaviors, it also evinced the initiating power of its maker’s expertise at facilitating this discipline and the sense of independence she derived from a performance of self-possession.

As illustrated by Hampton’s critique of women’s homemaking failures, admissions of male dependency upon women’s decorating prowess incited an ambivalent public discussion regarding not only the misuse of that constructive power, but also the refusal to exercise it. Many of Hampton’s contemporaries consequently expressed dismay about women’s eagerness to act upon newfound liberties by following their husbands out the domestic door. Addressing the readers of Collier’s in 1924, for example, William Johnston rhetorically asked, “What Has Happened to Home?” Unapologetic for his conservative views, Johnston offered a definitive diagnosis: American families refused to stay home. “Modern life,” filled with temptations for spending finite supplies of money on infinite opportunities for leisure, had created “a hundred lures” to entice parents and their children away from the family hearth. A national craze for motoring and movies had eroded interest in pulling taffy, reading, and lounging comfortably in front of a crackling fire. Impaired by too little discipline and too great an enthusiasm for gin, American homes, Johnston lamented, no longer cultivated sincere relationships, molded sterling characters, and instilled an appreciation for culture and a respect for authority. The home simply could not fulfill its restorative and regulatory purposes in the face of so much “gadding about.”

Although Johnston criticized both parents and children for pursuing modern adventures in consumerism, he reserved his harshest reproach for women. On them, he principally blamed the American home’s “lack of permanency.” “For countless generations” and “in all countries at
all times,” Johnston argued in a vein similar to Frederic Lawrence, “inherited migratory instincts” had engendered within young men an undeniable urge to “see what the world had to offer them.” Johnston framed modern women’s similar, peripatetic interests as abnormal, selfish, and culturally destructive. If women felt equally free to roam, he asked, who would temper men’s nomadic impulses? In response to this rhetorical question, Johnston urged modern Americans to recreate the “old-fashioned” home of yesteryears. Perhaps referring specifically to William Johnston’s harangue, however, a contributor to The House Beautiful criticized the “somber moralist” who had proposed returning the “American home . . . [to] what it was by putting an end to ‘gadding.’” Unlike his more conservative contemporary, this commentator advised his readers to “leave the routine of home for brief periods.”

Whether they lamented or welcomed women’s apparent escape from the private sphere’s confines, contemporaries of William Johnston and Mary McDuffie Hampton largely agreed that women had become dangerously liberated. When examined more closely, however, their anxieties were incited not only by women’s newfound freedoms, but as significantly, by the effects that women’s liberation presumably had on husbands and children who seemed both excessively constrained and destructively intemperate within a corporatized consumer culture. While William Johnston castigated women for “gadding” about, his was a minority view. More commonly found in the popular literature was Hampton’s complaint that modern women performed their traditional responsibilities incorrectly or insufficiently. Speaking directly to this indictment, Miriam Van Waters more directly charged women with the task of creating pleasurably comfortable domestic environments. An esteemed expert in juvenile delinquency, Van Waters argued that restoring the modern home’s vitality demanded reform rather than a “backward journey to those simpler forms of life that sufficed our ancestors.” While modern

dwellings might satisfy children’s perennial needs for “comfort and security,” they expressly lacked “sound, joyous health and behavior codes of sufficient virility,” which had animated even the Puritan home and represented the source of its strength. Restoring this “virility and joy” required mothers specifically to reinvest in their maternal responsibilities and to rehabilitate their homes, and consequently their wayward children, by applying “the fresh definitions of science” and by acquiring a “more biologically sound view of family formation.” Reanimating the domestic environment through the infusion of a new regulatory structure promised to curb children’s delinquency—their irrational expression of dissent—by “sustain[ing] them in conflict with demands of modern business, adventure, ambition, and monotony.” 

Although women’s lack of decorating knowledge and skill was not the subject of Van Waters’s prescriptions, this deficiency exercised, as her contemporaries argued, very much the same effect on children’s unruly behavior. How after all could delinquency be prevented in children when “the colors, the patterns, the combinations of different periods with different meanings, all of which unite to make an unthinkable, inharmonious jumble . . . produces a reaction on an impressionable person little short of criminal?”

Professional decorators consequently reminded women repeatedly that the very purpose of principled décor was to arouse “states, which have bases at once physical, intellectual and emotional,” and as significantly, that these effects were “in a very considerable measure under the control of the decorator.”

This recognition of women’s “control” and the power it exerted over both children and their fathers helps to explain women’s elision from the pseudo-anthropological theories and historical accounts that posited men’s natural instincts to acquire homes. Fundamental to the developmental narratives circulating within the early American republic of letters, man’s sexual desire for a wife and the obligations of support that family life entailed were tellingly absent in

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94 Miriam Van Waters, “What’s Wrong with the Home?” New Republic, 4 February 1925, 279.
95 Parsons, The Art of Home Furnishing and Decoration, 6.
96 Jakway, 109.
these modern liberal fictions. This omission perhaps illustrates a persistent trope of orphanage commonly deployed in nineteenth-century coming of age stories, such as Herbert Hoover’s, in which the male protagonist’s independence required the radical severance of his dependency upon a maternal progenitor. As Thornburgh’s vignette of John and Jane Norton illuminates, however, fantasies of male auto-generativity and autonomy also functioned both to acknowledge and deny the modern man’s dependency upon his wife’s unremunerated contributions to the household economy as well as her labor in making a home that he viewed as his own. Tales of a men’s catalyzing desire for a home thus disavowed women’s role in producing a domicile, which portrayed as a primordial object of male desire, yielded an affective experience of privacy and independence, and consequently, both facilitated and testified to men’s consensually regulated freedom. This emphasis on the comfortable home demonstrates how, by the early twentieth century, admissions of men’s economic and symbolic dependency on women’s homemaking labors became increasingly problematic given the modernization of gendered economic roles and women’s acquisition of political rights and legal protections. The insistence that women act rationally as voters and consumers called into question the biological essentialism that had perpetuated a fiction of women’s economic dependency and virtuous confinement within a domestic sphere, creating a symbolic fissure between the sentimentalized home and an idealized, wholly private maternal figure. With women legitimately occupying public spaces once deemed inappropriate for the weaker, fairer sex, men were no longer alone in leaving and reentering their homes at will. Conveyed through prescriptions for creating a more comfortable, desirable home, admissions of men’s reliance upon informed consumers and decorators thus enabled the Jane Nortons of America to embark upon their own liberal quests. Yet, an explicit confession of

98 Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004),
male dependency upon politically entitled and economically productive women remained unthinkable.

Explaining away modern men’s continued reliance on women’s homemaking labor required devising new ways of obfuscating the meaning and motives of household work. Helping to illustrate these equivocations is an advertisement for the Dubois Fence and Garden Company that promised to remedy the violations of privacy suffered by modern Americans crowded into subdivided suburban developments. Providing “seclusion immediately [and] artistically,” a Dubois woven wooden fence was guaranteed to “safeguard . . . children at play, exclude picnickers and other trespassers, protect . . . flowers and shrubs, and shut out the blinding glare of motor headlights.” As significantly, the “quaint, rustic beauty” of Dubois fences hid “unsightly views” such as clotheslines filled with drying laundry, blocking from passersby a reality of women’s reproductive work that might have marred the admirable personality and enticing charm that her home ideally signified.99

This advertisement for fencing was hardly unique in either concealing or misrepresenting women’s homemaking labor. Although it appealed specifically to women, an advertisement for brick also obscured modern women’s authoritative roles in the design and construction of their homes by hearkening back to Victorian sentimentality. “I cannot remember,” an essayist confided in her prize-winning submission to the American Face Brick Association, “the time when I did not go to sleep at night planning the home I was going to have some day.” Though her dreams followed the uneven path of a young woman’s fancies, they stoked the author’s unwavering desire to possess “‘a little house of joy, founded on contentment, and all securely walled about with cheer and merriment’” wherein “love and peace were to abide always within its portals.” Knowledge acquired through experience had nevertheless taught a once romantic youth

to appreciate the practical and aesthetic value of brick, particularly its ability to reproduce the principles of “quality and simplicity” and attain a “permanent and enduring beauty.” Unlike poets and suffragists, simple homemakers, the author confessed, left few material legacies of their art. With her castle of brick, however, she aspired to “create something beautiful to stir men’s imaginations when I am long gone and even my name forgotten.” Immortalizing “the soul of a home-loving woman,” this domestic beacon would continue to provide a “haven of rest to tired men who will climb its little hill at evening time.”

These advertisements help to illuminate that, while tastemakers and home improvement experts urged men to perceive the home both as a desirable emblem of possession and self-possession, they alternatively encouraged women to invest their longings for pleasure and independence into labors that were not represented as such. Hidden behind fences or misrepresented by a brick façade, women’s domestic labor was also disguised through its portrayal as an adventurous form of recreation or, in the words of design historian Penny Sparke, “a journey of self-discovery.” While a longing for excitement and amusement led some women to the nearest department store, Alice Van Leer Carrick urged women to travel even further afield. In The Next-to-Nothing House, a decorating manual that instructed women in the art of collecting, Carrick regaled her readers with glowing descriptions of her own romps throughout the New England countryside. This antiquarian’s regular junkets reaped the profits of her discriminating taste, knack for haggling, and wealth of historical knowledge. Guiding her readers on an intimate tour of her “picture post-card house,” Carrick lovingly described the gems she had excavated in the most unlikely places. Found memories of her various journeys enhanced

100 “The House of Brick: One Home-maker’s Ideal,” The House Beautiful, December 1921, 469-470, 493. Of Elsie de Wolfe, Penny Spark has written that interiors played “the role of fantasy-fulfillment.” As de Wolfe explained in her 1913 manual, “When other women would be dreaming of love affairs I dream of the delightful houses I have lived in.” Stimulating this desire was, of course, the beautiful interiors de Wolfe herself created rather than the materials supplied by male industry. Sparke, “Interior Decoration and Haute Couture: Links between the Developments of the Two Professions in France and the USA in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” Journal of Design History 21 (Spring 2008): 71.

101 Sparke, 73.
the pleasure she derived from transforming each room into a harmonious and beautiful collage. As she bid adieu to her “dear Friends in Collecting,” Van Leer Carrick wished them “incomparable adventures along the broad road that stretches.”\(^\text{102}\) For along this path, she assured her readers, lay the objects that would brighten women’s solitary days and alleviate the monotony of their work. Yet, like Jane Norton, Van Leer Carrick urged homemakers to remember that the quest to beautify the home should remain incomplete. True contentment, she confided, rested in diverting thoughts of treasures waiting to be found.\(^\text{103}\)

If the labor of interior decorating offered women occasional opportunities for adventures outside the home, it supplied an inexhaustible wealth of fun within. “Almost every woman hides a longing to really venture a bit when she decorates,” Hazel Dell Brown confessed in an advertisement for Armstrong linoleum floors. In her role as the company’s decorating consultant, Brown assured the more timid homemaker that she need not be uncomfortably “daring” to enjoy the pleasure of experimentation. Rather, the uncertain novice might simply begin with a “bold arrangement of beds” and a bright new floor covering to create a “delightfully different” result. Using as her example a young girl’s bedroom, Brown exclaimed that such minor changes “certainly upset . . . some old-fashioned ideas!”\(^\text{104}\) When she learned of her impending move to the South, Jane Norton similarly tackled the project of rearranging the furnishings in her apartment with cost-conscious gusto. While Jane’s activities left John feeling disgruntled and inconvenienced, she reveled in the amusing practice of critiquing and improving the apartment by comparing her amateur efforts to the principles she so revered. She understood that her continued pride, pleasure, and happiness depended upon the continuous improvement of her interior

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\(^\text{103}\) In her astute analysis of Van Leer Carrick’s text, Janna Jones argues, “Interior design manuals . . . are a literature of the experience of modernity for women within the private sphere.” They both encouraged and circumscribed women’s participation in a mobile, urban consumer society. Janna Jones, “The Distance from Home: The Domestication of Desire in Interior Design,” *Journal of Social History* (Winter 1997), 318-319, 321-322.

decoration, for it allayed the “divine discontent” inevitably felt “if something better is possible.”

Budgetary deficiencies also forced Jane’s first roommate, Alice, to employ her creativity when furnishing her home’s living room. This comfortable place pleased her husband to such an extent that he claimed credit for its arrangement when his friends “remark[ed] that they have at last discovered a living room designed for a man’s comfort and convenience.”

Although Alice claimed to find her pleasure in theirs, she basked in Jane’s compliments to her taste, skill, and ingenuity, for she knew that what her husband claimed as his was truly hers.

Further excavation reveals, however, that the comfortable room signified a feminine authority that precluded its unequivocal recognition. Though intended to function in Thornburgh’s text as a foil for the more affluent Jane, Alice’s character illustrated not only the domestic comforts that could be attained on a limited income, but also the various disavowals that focused the admiring gaze on the effect of women’s homemaking labor rather than its actual performance. As their examples make evident, both Jane and Alice enacted the initiating role that Emily Post labeled the “beauty-loving woman.” Presumably compelled by this appetite rather than the threats of reproach or even of ostracism that appeared everywhere in Post’s text, these enterprising homemakers exemplified the consummate, resourceful decorator who endeavored to “contrive somehow to achieve an effect of inviting personality in her surroundings, even though she accomplish it with saw and chisel, a few cans of paint and some cotton print.”

Post’s references to tools and materials in this valorized script demonstrate how the early twentieth-century imperatives of home improvement and interior decorating required women to develop artisanal skills that nevertheless remained obscured by the gendered attributes they served to manifest. While interior decoration enabled men to feel a fitting sense of identity with and

105 Thornburgh, 60.
106 Ibid., 74.
107 Post, 10.
attachment to their houses, it also ideally conveyed not the labor, but rather the inviting aura of care and comfort that supposedly engendered this perception of being at-home. Comparing the rudeness of people generally to that experienced in the domestic interior, Emily Post’s counsel further shows how décor and decorum together produced the illusion of a welcoming suitability in a way that rendered decoration an expression of virtue rather than work: “Rooms that are skilfully [sic] and invitingly arranged have ease, poise and welcoming grace of manner. Others that are inexpertly assembled are often as ill-mannered as the unknowing provincial hostess who has the dishes at table presented to herself first, and her broken-into leavings passed on to her guests.”

Post’s manual helps to make evident how the work of interior decoration was minutely described, then obfuscated by its ambivalently gendered effects. Selecting, purchasing, arranging, and often producing the articles that comprised a decorative composition were activities acknowledged as labor; however, they were presumably undertaken to satisfy familial obligations and civic responsibilities that included gratifying another’s bodily desires for comfort and emotional longings for enjoyment. The appropriately decorated home consequently testified not only to the rational turn these traditionally virtuous, feminine motives had taken, but also to the affective rewards the work of homemaking continued to yield for men. The surfeit of meaning that the home embodied for both husbands and wives and the pleasurable and empowering sense of independence each derived from the manifestation of this initiating essence were thus fundamentally gendered, as a beautifully tasteful and fitting domicile ideally fulfilled his compelling needs for a sensate experience of privacy and sensual gratification and hers for a socially valued form of self-expression.

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109 Post, 323.
Although similarly framed as gratifying, the sensation of privacy and the expression of personality attained through women’s homemaking labor were hardly commensurate. While each was construed as an affective dimension of autonomy, privacy and personality were portrayed as fundamentally inequivalent within the decorating advice literature. Home improvement experts deemed privacy to be an essential need and entitlement that emanated from an inviolable, metaphysical essence within the male subject, whereas personality implied a socially regulated representation of this substance within women that hinted of charm, manipulation and, therefore, of inauthenticity and deception. Consequently, the gendered possessions of privacy and personality also occupied disparate temporal positions and served entirely different functions within the domestic allegories that narrated the regulation of male desire. Relative to the home’s catalyzing role in the liberal citizen’s development, a man’s elemental need and longing for a sensation of privacy supposedly preceded a woman’s representative performance of personality. Along with personality’s role in concealing the real value of women’s labor, this reversal of cause and effect further mitigated admissions that the signifier of male autonomy, entitlement, and capacity for self-governance was produced through homemaking as did the refusal to grant women symbolic title to the home’s they produced. Yet, if misconstruing the motives and worth of modern women’s domestic labor served to cover over the disciplining of male desire, it did so by executing a second disavowal: In making their homes comfortably appealing to their husbands and children, women sought to be regarded not simply as personally attractive, but also as empowered in their own right.

**The Public Peril of the Home-Maker’s Misery**

Despite claims to the contrary that filled the pages of domestic advice literature, independence was hardly the feeling that homemakers reported in a government sponsored survey. Their responses reveal that women understood all too well the inescapable mandate to decorate their homes and to provide for family members’ comfort. More significantly, they
expose how an inability to meet prevailing standards of taste and to accommodate children’s and husbands’ individual needs engendered perceptions of failure and inadequacy. Acknowledging this demoralization, the synopsis related, “Women often think that their houses look ‘run down’ and that they do not provide a cheerful atmosphere for family life.” The report’s author consequently found herself in a difficult position. While duty obligated her to enumerate the numerous deficiencies that the survey had exposed, she advised caution, for “in calling attention to the shortcomings of houses we must beware of encouraging any false shame among homemakers. Instead, one should attempt to stir in them a pride in what they have and ambition to make the best out of their possessions.” The committee’s proposed solutions to the reported deficits mentioned nothing of systemic reform or state assistance, though the survey was conducted in the early 1930s. Rather, the onus was placed on individual women in their roles as homemakers, not simply to recreate a domestic illusion of socioeconomic opportunity and equality, but also to sustain an ideologically productive illusion of male self-possession. Accomplishing these objectives prompted the recognition that women also bore affective possessions such as “pride” and “ambition” that motivated not their longing for a home, but rather their willingness to make one for those who essentially needed this individualizing and privatizing space. It was the imperative to sustain male, liberal subjectivity that thus enabled women to claim this characterization for themselves.

Along with a persistent idiom of maternal sacrifice, these affective and, therefore, volitional motives ideally produced a domestic space that, in signifying a divergent set of gendered pleasures, obscured the male householder’s economic and representational dependency on his wife’s labor as well the compulsory nature of women’s household work. As the survey reveals, however, this disavowal yielded critical self-assessments and self-recriminations rather

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110 Van Rensselaer, 15.  
111 Ibid., 24.
than the desired, sensate effect of perceived autonomy. Housing professionals exacerbated this response by chastising women for their lack of creativity, exhorting them to overcome their resignation, and ironically, instructing them to worry less about being judged for their homes’ and consequently their own comparative deficiencies. These liberal subjects needed only to acquire knowledge in order to act rationally upon their innate impulses and to fulfill their aspirations; yet, the survey also revealed the flaw in this narrative of self-reliance. If good homemaking fabricated for husbands and children sufficient time, space, and solitude for individual study, relaxation, and creative pursuits, women needed these conditions themselves to develop into good homemakers. Cultivating their own tastes proved impossible for women who reported an absolute absence of privacy, surrounded as they were by noisy, playful children in the cramped quarters of their single-family dwellings.¹¹²

This report was hardly the only contemporary admission of the disaffection that women experienced in their homes. In the opening scene of her popular, middlebrow novel, *The Home-Maker*, Dorothy Canfield Fisher painted a palpably vivid picture of Evangelina Knapp’s unhappiness.¹¹³ Eva Knapp is bent over the grease stains that mar her otherwise pristine kitchen floor, “scrubbing furiously . . . her whole body tense with determination.” Anxious, irritable, and frustrated, she is a woman with too many cares and too few comforts. When a friend attempts to entice Mrs. Knapp from her scrubbing, she responds, “I never can take the time for outings!”

¹¹² Ibid., 16-19.
“I’m way behind in every thing. I always am,” she laments. When the friend attempts to object, Eva asks, “How can I go out more and rest? You know what there is to do. Somebody’s got to do it.” Mrs. Knapp’s final defense of her compulsive, joyless labor is particularly telling: “People talk as though I worked the way I do just to amuse myself. What else can I do? It’s all got to be done, hasn’t it?” In the silence that follows, Evangeline hears the ticking clock that, on the rare occasions she is still enough to listen, issues the constant reminder: “So much to do! So much to do! So much to do!”

Through the disciplinary presence of an incessantly ticking clock, Fisher explored how the sacrificial labors of Evangeline Knapp created not a home, but rather a domestic dystopia. For Eva Knapp, homemaking offered little opportunity for amusement, creativity, or independence. Fisher’s protagonist experienced, rather, a felt sense of imprisonment created by compulsory obligations whose fulfillment required unremitting, inescapable work. The clock signified the source of this compulsion through a ticking that echoed the admonishingly clicking tongue of the Knapps’ elderly neighbor, Mrs. Anderson, and the sympathetic clucking of the Ladies Guild. These forms of traditional, localized surveillance ensured Eva’s adherence to modern, gendered standards of productivity, cleanliness, taste, and decorum. By making a home that conformed to these dictums, Eva protected herself and her family from the social disapprobation and ostracism the Knapps might have otherwise suffered from their house’s geographic placement on the wrong side of the tracks. Laboring compulsively and unceasingly to meet prescribed standards of conduct and appearance, Eva consequently produced a sterile, disenchanted home that her tastefully refurbished sofa or her daughter’s stylishly remade hand-me-down coat aesthetically failed to mitigate.

114 Canfield, 7-11.
Because these articles were the products of alienated domestic labor, they garnered admiration, but in expressing non-maternal motives, they failed to provide pleasure for her family. The living room’s refurbished sofa was, however, a particular source of joy for Eva if not for her family, and at the end of a grueling day, she enjoyed pausing to “feast her eyes on” it. Eva with her unerring sense of style had salvaged the piece from a junk store and reupholstered it in an appealing striped velour. Associated with the friend who had given it to her, the fabric’s quality and texture beckoned to Eva, and when gazing at it, “[h]er face softened to dreaminess as she passed her hand gently over the smoothly drawn material.” In the sofa’s production, Eva’s love of beauty, her innate sense of style, and her drive to produce had merged, generating a vital energy that had enabled the temperamentally impatient, irritable Eva to stay awake all night completing her project. Yet, because she had not labored for the comfort of another, Eva derived a selfish, individualistic pride from the knowledge that “[e]very inch of it had been recreated by her hand and brain and purpose.” Given Eva’s usual demeanor when performing her homemaking responsibilities, “her children would not have recognized her face as she sat there loving the sofa and the rich fabric on it.”

Eva took pleasure only in gazing at rather than sitting upon the sofa, however, and the furnishing’s inability to be a source of bodily comfort for anyone in the Knapp family originated in the failure of this furnishing to disavow the compulsory nature of Eva’s domestic labor. Instead, Eva was all too aware of her work’s lack of affectivity, its consequent absence of choice, and its inability to confer gratification and power. This recognition caused Eva both to create a home akin to a prison and, paradoxically, to become an excessively and destructively powerful warden. These consequences beg for further exploration into a novel that has appeared simply to critique the rationalization of household labor and the excessive self-discipline that conforming to scientific standards required. Delving more deeply into Fisher’s text reveals that she neither

\[115\] Ibid., 44.
indicted the private sphere nor a division of remunerated and affective labors, for she perceived each as necessary to the reproduction of a liberal state. While Fisher’s novel certainly decried the increasingly managerial conception of homemaking and the outdated insistence that maintaining a home constituted women’s work, it also illuminated the insufficiently fetishized home’s inability to serve as a formative, liberal institution. Because Eva’s domestic labor failed to originate within a metaphysical source authentic to her, she was unable to conceive of herself as a liberal subject. Her consequent inability to effect an aesthetic and sensate balance between order and freedom within her household ultimately prevented Lester Knapp and his children from become consenting, self-governing individuals.

The compulsive productivity required of Eva was primarily necessitated by her husband’s failure at economic accumulation. Though innately drawn to the creative ardor and angst of poetry, a much younger and idealistic Lester Knapp imprudently allowed his attraction to the compelling allure of Evangeline’s natural vitality and capability to entice him away from his intellectual and spiritual home at the university. Rather than initiate his developmental narrative of self-disciplined economic acquisition and political rationality, a premature marriage rendered Lester equally imprisoned by the juridical presence of the clock that hovered above his stooped shoulders as he labored over the accounting books he despised. Just as Lester and his family teetered tragically on the precipice of unfulfilled hopes and stifled desires, however, a potentially horrific accident saved the Knapps from collapsing entirely into bitter despair and poor health. Disguising suicidal desperation as an act of heroism, Lester valiantly threw himself from the burning roof of a neighbor’s house; yet, true to Lester’s incompetence and poor luck, his long-suffering wife became saddled with the additional burden of caring for a bedridden cripple rather than redeem the lucrative insurance policy for which Lester attempted to sacrifice his life so that his wife and children might have a better one.
Lester’s accident nevertheless precipitated a figurative metamorphosis, as his partial paralysis enabled every member of the family to escape the constraints of social convention and to act upon their innate talents and attributes. Forced to become the family’s breadwinner, Eva sought employment at Willing’s Emporium. While the department store’s ambitious, enterprising new owner felt nothing but animosity for Lester’s high-minded principles and constant distraction, he intuitively recognized the value of Eva’s innate acumen and determination. What had proven so destructive to her children’s emotional and physical health thus found its appropriate outlet in the ladies’ cloaks and suits department, and Fisher seemingly reveled in Eva’s rise to corporate success. Recovering sufficiently to accomplish small tasks, Lester alternatively embraced the occupation of homemaking with equal interest and vigor. Fisher detailed his capacity to view menial, repetitive tasks as contemplative opportunities, and she implicitly praised his intuitive ability to devise creative solutions to housekeeping dilemmas, to nurture his children’s unique potential and their deepest aspirations, to dispense with oppressive standards of cleanliness and order, and to ward off neighborly social criticism of his unconventional, albeit pedagogically progressive and scientifically proven methods. Freed from the tyranny of custom, Lester eventually came to realize not only the immense value of homemaking, but also his own affinity for the role. A man once oppressed by his “collaboration with materialism fatly triumphant” now flourished, enabled by his inert legs to discover “his real work, vital, living, creative work, work he could do as no one else could, work that meant the salvation of his children.”

Following this epiphany, Lester experienced a spiritual rebirth, and fully reconciled to his failings as a successful man in traditional terms, “knew a moment of pride himself, of satisfaction with something he had done.”

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116 Ibid., 303.
117 Canfield, 307.
Comprehending the misdirection of his own initiative led Lester to a sympathetic revelation about the source of his wife’s unhappiness. Fully aware that the children had blossomed under his observant, thoughtful care, Lester objectively understood that, while Eva might have possessed “passionate love and devotion” for her children, lacking real “patience nor understanding,” she had “no bread to give them,” no “real food for what was deepest in them.” Despite this harsh realization, Lester and his creator hardly construed Eva as a villain, as Fisher forcefully demonstrated that this husband and wife had been equally victimized by the repressively judgmental forces of unenlightened traditionalism and provincial localism. When forced nobly to conform to a socially prescribed role of motherhood, vigorous, vibrant Eva devolved into a “somber, taciturn, self-contained woman,” and similarly repressed by custom and convention, the more intellectual Lester had become a gloomy, dyspeptic object of contempt. Yet, when ironically liberated by Lester’s physical confinement to act upon their innate inclinations and talents, Lester and Eva developed a renewed appreciation and affection for each other, and each found new sources of delight in parenting that created for their children similar opportunities for familial harmony and individual self-expression within the privacy of their home. Even the sofa became the setting for the family’s nightly game of whist, an entertainment that Lester devised to distract Eva from the untidy house and to “make a civilized contact between two generations and the widely differing temperaments” of the Knapp family’s individual members. The Knapps’s salvation was complete when Eva failed to notice the clumps of dried mud that marred the sofa’s beautiful fabric, absorbed as she was in pondering how to better perform her professional responsibilities.

The return of movement in Lester’s legs briefly threatened to undo the Knapp family’s unconventional division of labor that his physical incapacity made tolerable if not entirely

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118 Ibid., 307, 306.
119 Ibid., 221-222.
120 Ibid., 161-162.
acceptable. Though it remained unspoken between the couple, knowledge of Lester’s possible recovery drew both Lester and Evangeline into a vortex of anxiety and despair. While Lester abhorred his reentry into a corporate world of crass, insipid commercialism, he also feared for his children’s continued ability to flourish under Eva’s care. His concern was justified, as Eva recoiled violently at her family’s inevitable descent into poverty if left dependent upon Lester, and she privately railed against her return to the “isolation, monotony, stagnation, [and] killing depression over never-ending servile tasks.” Fortunately, a family friend’s more limited aptitude for worldly affairs enabled her also to intuit the source of the Knapp family’s newfound happiness, and she inarticulately implored the family doctor to abort Lester’s treatment. Officially declared an invalid, Lester was freed to continue making the home that, protected by his affective investment in domestic labors, was at once safe from and secured by the force of Eva’s ambition.

Both Eva’s drive and Lester’s compassion played essential roles in a novel that is essentially a domestic allegory of liberal development. In detaching gendered characteristics and their associated labors from the masculine and feminine bodies that needed presumably to perform them, Fisher exposed the economic and civic consequences that a strictly delineated and socially enforced division of labor and love created for modern families. This feminist critique was nevertheless embedded within a more comprehensive objective: Fisher’s novel illuminated not simply the personal and familial harm, but also the national consequences that followed when oppressive societal norms stifled the authenticity and creativity ideally expressed through the inter-dependent labors of care and accumulation. Bound by irrational, outmoded axioms and excessively conscious of the various wardens who enforced them, neither Lester, Eva, nor their children were capable of expressing their intrinsic values and desires and thus of acting as economically self-determining and politically self-governing citizens. Replicating the moral of

121 Ibid., 289.
her more popular novel *The Brimming Cup*, Fisher illustrated her ideological conviction that the self-possession characteristic of liberal subjectivity could only follow from adopting more voluntary forms of restraint grounded in innate aptitude, authentic self-expression, and pragmatic rationality. While Lester and Eva dissented against convention, their revolutionary “variation” hardly led to license, but rather to the adoption of more progressive and empowering forms of self-control that conferred upon each a sense of true independence.

Fisher delineated the Knapps’ transformation into a harmonious unit comprised of independent individuals by demonstrating that voluntary forms of disciplined labor served to liberate each family member. When endeavoring to learn domestic skills, Lester eagerly consulted advice manuals and, intuitively implementing the pedagogical theories of John Dewey and Maria Montessori, transformed cooking and housekeeping into a family enterprise that bred confidence and initiative within his children. His efforts failed to replicate the standards of health and hygiene that Eva had attained, but that was Fisher’s point. Neither motivated by desires for self-expression nor a sense of rectitude, Eva’s alienated homemaking labors were hardly consensual. Enabled by his gender and his disability to scoff at Mrs. Anderson and the Ladies Guild, Lester did not so much break rules as he tested their legitimacy, and finding the traditional ways wanting, he instrumentally devised a more rational and rewarding approach to the tasks that had so oppressed his wife. Cleanliness never stifled creativity, for example, as corners collected dust, a sandbox moved from the yard to the porch, and Eva’s once pristine and stylishly refurbished couch became sullied by dirty feet and dog hair. Lester also realized in the course of his reflections, however, that reason, observation, and expert instruction were insufficient tools. His proclivity to parent reasonably and observantly arose instead from his sensitivity, patience, and sympathy, qualities that he rather than she uniquely possessed. Lester’s musings led to the conclusion that homemaking was a valorous occupation, for when performed with the correct
balance of love, aptitude, and information, it unlocked the potential of the individual while also "creating harmony out of human relationships."

The home’s essential function to engender an ideological balance between liberty for the self and harmony within the community incited Lester to reject commercialism and its corrupting effects on the home’s sanctity. Embittered by his corporate experience, Lester romanticized a Victorian distinction between the virtuous home and the morally bankrupt corporation, and he railed against vapid materialism and the business leaders who profited from “induc[ing] individual Americans first to want and then to acquire more of the finer things of life.” Material acquisition carried no ethical merit for Lester, nor did he concur with Herbert Hoover’s contention that consumer-based economic growth yielded political stability and social equality. Lester instead reiterated a sanctified conception of a private sphere that, in the vein of its predecessor, continued to “show young human beings how to create rich, deep, happy lives without material possessions.” This was a mandate “subversive of the whole-hearted worship due to possessions,” and one that ostensibly required homemakers such as Lester to possess righteous, anti-market convictions. His belief in the private sphere’s ameliorative function echoed the arguments of nineteenth-century municipal housekeepers who portrayed women’s domain as the guardian of sympathy and moral conduct among public men. Invested with Lester’s quintessentially feminine, extra-market attributes, the Knapp home appeared to retain this traditional, didactic function, although through more modern forms of leisure and self-expression.

Though Fisher seemed to reiterate an obsolete ideal of a separate, domestic domain by giving voice to Lester’s soliloquys, she allowed her male protagonist to expound only to challenge his anachronistic misconceptions. His creator’s more nuanced perception of the relationship between the corporation and the home—and the inter-articulation between capitalism

122 Ibid., 311-313.
and liberalism—surfaced in Lester’s ambivalence about Eva’s professional success and his gratitude for her newfound happiness. Lester justified the ambivalent tension between his ideological professions and the positive economic and psychological effects of his wife’s gratification by assuming dismissively that she “loved the work he hated, [and] took it all simple-heartedly at the solemnly preposterous value that the world put on it.” Yet, offering her readers omniscient insight into Eva’s thoughts and motives, Fisher disputed Lester’s patronizing dismissal of Eva’s naivety. For in justifying his own need to break with convention, Lester failed to realize that embracing “his real work, vital, living, creative work, work he could do as no one else could, work that meant the salvation of his children” required the financial security supplied by the remunerated, commercial occupation in which Eva alternatively thrived.\(^1\)

Fisher’s novel consequently challenged the oppositional construction of private and public spheres of value and activity by portraying the Knapp home and Willing’s Emporium as both mutually dependent and co-articulated. The department store provided an essential foundation of economic security that enabled the Knapp home to become a liberal microcosm wherein the aptitudes and impulses of Willings’s potential employees and customers were affectively liberated and consensually self-regulated in ways that enabled the commercial institution to function not only more profitably, but also more ethically and democratically. Fisher’s argument nevertheless exceeded what appeared to be only a modernization of a previous century’s separate spheres ideology, which by locating privacy and consent within the home, attributed a temporal priority and causality to the domestic sphere within a progressive, developmental narrative of liberal capitalism.

By identifying a circular rather than linear relationship between the home and the market, Fisher posited both domestic and corporate labor as manifestations of personal autonomy and the

\(^{123}\) Ibid., 304, 303.
consequent capacity for consent that engendered the resolution of individual rights and communal harmony. Lester’s alienation as a clerk arose not from the conditions of his employment, but rather from his unsuitability for an occupation that required a form of “pep” that he simply did not possess. In condemning the department store and the stimulation of irrational desires from which it profited, Lester patronizingly ignored how the methods and motives of the work Eva performed at the store were analogous to those engaging him at home. Eva devoured trade publications and instructional manuals with the same appetite that compelled his consumption of cookbooks. Despite this deference to professional expertise, both husband and wife possessed a sensitivity, intuition, and capacity for empirical observation that ultimately determined the conduct of each in their spatially delineated employments. For example, Eva both empathetically and judiciously refused to press a customer into purchasing a sweater she might later regret, even though her reticence could have compromised her opportunity for advancement. Hoping to unlock the potential of other saleswomen to improve both their satisfaction and the store’s profits, Eva observed her charges with the same interest that Lester watched the children. Such examples demonstrated that Eva’s pecuniary interests and ambitions were secondary, for Eva’s success was principally motivated, like Lester’s, by her compassionate ability to identify with her customers’ needs and interests so that she might better serve her community.

In addition to Eva’s business acumen, this disinterested commitment to service attracted the admiration of Eva’s employer who quickly advanced Eva to a position that would secure her children’s future educational and social opportunities. Before Jerome Willing and his wife promoted Eva to a supervisory role in acknowledgment of her “importan[ce] to them and their splendid work,” they needed to confirm that Eva understood their “wonderful conception of what the business really was.” A charitable visit to the Knapps’s home following Lester’s fateful accident revealed that Eva would possess this intuitive knowledge, for of the living room she had contrived, Jerome Willing declared, “The only [one] I’ve seen in this town that had any style to it.
Did you see that sofa?” Perceiving the sofa as a representation of Eva’s affectively motivated labor rather than Lester’s authority, the Willings felt confident that Eva would similarly construe profitability as a necessary evil in achieving their more worthy objectives of inspiring, educating, and uplifting their town’s provincial citizens. While sound business practices and a commitment to service promised to promote the long-term, inter-dependent economic interests of the Willings, their employees, their customers, and the community to which they collectively belonged, the entrepreneurs struggled to articulate a more intangible goal whose attainment began with the opportunity to purchase “good merchandise” that provided “a liberal education in taste.” “Give us ten years’ time,” Jerome Willing promised Eva, “and see if there is a single golden-oak, Morris-chaired ‘best room’ left in town!”

Lester Knapp was more cynical than his enchanted wife about the Willings’s motives. When confronted with the enticing evidence of Nell Willing’s skill as an advertiser, Lester vilified her work as the “unscrupulous exploitation of the home-making necessity, the adroit perversion of the home-making instinct.” Such clever, duplicitous copywriting merely propagated the belief “that home-making had its beginning and end in good furniture.” Lester consequently perceived the Willings’s corporate co-optation of women’s innate desires for beauty and interests in familial care as antithetical to “keeping alive some intellectual or spiritual passion in the home.”

Although Fisher allowed Lester to pontificate prolifically and poetically about

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124 Ibid., 256-257. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fashion and interior decoration were viewed as similar art forms. Women ostensibly found each attractive due to their avowed, innate love of beauty and a natural interest in decoration. Both fashion and decoration also supplied an acceptable form of feminine self-expression that accommodated women’s modern roles as consumers. The large department stores upon which Fisher modeled Willing’s consequently included both clothing and furnishings. See Leach, Land of Desire; Bridget May, “Nancy Vincent McClelland (1877-1959): Professionalizing Interior Decoration in the Early Twentieth Century,” Journal of Design History 21 (Spring 2008): 59-74; Penny Sparke, “Interior Decoration and Haute Couture: Links between the Developments of the Two Professions in France and the USA in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” Journal of Design History 21 (Spring 2008): 101-107. Penny Sparke has also found that the development of professional, entrepreneurial, and marketing practices in the respective industries mirrored each other and were often intertwined.

125 Canfield, 77.
the home’s many immaterial virtues, she gave equal voice to the earnestness with which Jerome Willing and his wife described the department store’s function to cultivate taste. Together, they revealed an intent to provide their customers not only with an education in aesthetics that served to regulate desire, but also with goods that promised to yield greater satisfaction and pleasure. Explaining the Emporium’s broader significance, Jerome Willing shared his belief that “the alarming American exodus to the cities comes from a nagging sensation of inferiority that would disappear with the possession of really satisfactory merchandise.” As Eva listened with mounting excitement to her employers’ implicit vision of a more enlightened localism, she anticipated the larger salary that would enable her to purchase a new Ford and to educate her children. Yet, Fisher also attributed Eva’s elation to the opportunity “to be really useful in a big thing,” for “[e]very word found an echo in her heart, although she had not had the education to express it brilliantly as they did.”

In Fisher’s novel about both the joys and miseries of homemaking, authentically motivated labor yielded ethical consequences that rendered the socializing functions of home and corporation potentially synonymous in the production of liberal subjectivity. Simply enabling the discontented Lester and Eva to exchange their gendered forms of work appears at first glance to undermine Fisher’s feminist objectives. While Fisher questioned the assignment of homemaking and money-making to feminine and masculine bodies, she ambivalently reproduced this spatially located division even as she attempted to illuminate the essential identity of affectively motivated labors and the institutions where these were performed. Central to Fisher’s domestic allegory of political autonomy is, then, an intent to free both Lester and Eva from the subjugating imperative of rationalized productivity and the sense of constant surveillance that enforced it. Reiterating liberalism’s narrative structure—its line of fiction, the author of this middlebrow novel identified an internal, metaphysical locus of subjection that was, paradoxically, the source of her characters’

126 Ibid., 256-258.
liberation. When pleasurably freed from convention, Lester and Eva approached their respective labors with creativity, sympathy, and rationality. This autonomous foundation for ethical conduct catalyzed the husband’s and wife’s mutual transformation into consensually self-governing subjects, and their expressed independence engendered the balance between order and freedom, communal harmony and personal liberty, that prevailed both within the Knapps’s home and at Willing’s Emporium. Identically subjected by consensual restraints and possessing an opportunity to invest themselves freely within their chosen occupations, Fisher’s unconventional husband and wife were each archetypal liberal subjects. As a consequence of this androgyny, the Knapps’s daughter could poetically view the ticking clock as a source of comfort rather than as a metaphorical indictment of her failures within the march of linear time, and her house could become a home-like source of comfort, relaxation, enjoyment, individuality, and privacy for every member of the Knapp family, including Evangeline.

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For Dorothy Fisher, privacy comprised an inviolable realm of metaphysical autonomy that gendered subjects expressed through labors performed in co-articulated and inter-dependent, liberal institutions that included the home, the school, the civic organization, and even the corporation. Although Fisher reproduced a division between the home and the workplace, she detached these sites and their associated labors from the gendered bodies traditionally associated with them. Her critique of suburban domesticity refused the division between affective and productive work as well as the traditional opposition between the public and private spheres of its performance. This rejection similarly led Fisher to refute the developmental sequence implicit within these distinctions and consequently to follow her pragmatist contemporaries in recapitulating a neo-Kantian argument that self-regulation must originate wholly within the
autonomous subject and its deliberative pursuit of self-representation. The solution that Fisher conceived for preserving liberal citizens’ capacity for consensual self-government necessitated a failure of the multiple disavowals that functioned to construct illusions of both male and female independence. Unable to deny her absence of choice, Eva Knapp was consumed with misery and she crackled with a suppressed fury that inevitably oppressed her husband and children. Though ameliorating Eva’s disaffection required Lester to remain a perpetual invalid, the contrived plot device of his physical crippling ironically saved Lester from an even more personally and ideologically debilitating incapacity, his representational dependency upon Eva’s labor.

Sinclair Lewis’s critique of white, middle-class men’s alienation and malaise similarly focused on the restoration of privacy and consent, but a resignation suffused the conclusion of Babbitt as Lewis seemed unable to identify a volitional means of self-expression. Reminiscent of Fisher, Lewis perceived the living room’s décor as fundamental to this liberal project, and he deployed the trope of illness and incapacity to restore a male protagonist’s independence after the failure of a maternal investment. Unlike Lester’s paralysis, however, Myra Babbitt’s appendicitis served as a substitute for Myra’s interest in making her home more appealing rather than a means of transcending the necessary obfuscation of investing a homemaker’s affections in her labor. Lewis consequently failed to transform his protagonist into a self-determining liberal subject, and he deferred a resolution by pinning his hopes on the next generation. The novel thus concludes

127 In “The Strange Career of the ‘Social Self,’” Radical History Review 76 (Winter 2000): 53-79, James Livingston has argued that the advent of corporate capitalism and its attendant consumerism and proletarianization of the labor force precipitated a metaphysical crisis by eroding classical liberalism’s constitutive delineation between public and private domains and the implicitly masculine, proprietary form of political subjectivity that this dichotomy engendered. In his reading of this period, economic revolution created opportunities for both men and women to define themselves apart from the traditional parameters of familialism and the gendered economic and political roles it dictated, while the decline of producer ideology created an identity or equivalency between consumer and commodity that rendered subjective experience fluid, radically discontinuous, and performative. Within this context, pragmatists and feminists articulated “social self” that refused a reassertion of spatialized gender binaries. Fisher’s representation of Evangeline and Lester Knapp seemingly supports Livingston’s description of a more androgynous mode of subjectivity. However, husband and wife remain in Fisher’s text more akin to individuals within a classical liberal tradition of autonomy, rationality, and consent that, then, creates the possibility of a political identity that encompasses both men and women.
with a fraternal bond solidified between “the Babbitt men,” forged through a father’s vow in the face of fierce opposition to support both Ted’s marriage to his own “fairy child” and his ambition to invent. Ted’s desire to become an inventor foreshadows the resolution Lewis managed to achieve in the character of Sam Dodsworth, who introduced to American readers in 1929, was most definitely “not a Babbitt.” Rather, this pioneering creator and industrial manufacturer reconciled modernity’s antagonisms and liberalism’s antinomies by conceiving the representative symbol of his own spiritual independence—an automated “motor caravan” that enabled modern men to traverse the open road in a mobile home of their own making.\(^{128}\)

Leading from a recovered authenticity to the attainment of true independence, the paths explored by Fisher and Lewis were not among those generally chosen. The developmental narrative that became hegemonic within the era’s domestic advice literature was, instead, Laura Thornburgh’s illustrative rendering of John and Jane Nortons’s homemaking partnership and the numerous disavowals that operated within it. For John Norton, the home remained a signifying object produced through Jane’s skilled labor, but this investment of value yielded affective returns that differed for each. The home Jane created for John symbolized his affluence and purportedly manifested the character responsible for its steady increase. While Allville’s other citizens recognized his tastefully decorated home as the emblem of his disciplined work, John alternatively experienced this interior space as a respite from labor as he thoroughly enjoyed the comforts of relaxing in his favorite chair and the pleasures of boisterously and playfully romping with his male children. In contrast, Jane exclaimed over the joy, power, and even fun to be had in the invigorating acquisition of decorative skills, in the expert planning and execution her compositions, and in her increasing expertise. She felt justified and emboldened by the openly acknowledged, socioeconomic and ideologically productive purpose of her decorative labor; yet, framing the work of interior decoration either as a traditional manifestation of maternal sacrifice

for family and nation or as a pursuit of personal pleasure disavowed not only John’s reliance on this labor, but also Jane’s recognition that her husband’s symbolic and material dependency left even liberated, modern women such as herself no choice but to perform it. Illustrating this multi-layered disavowal was Jane’s perception that “she ran the house and never allowed the house to run her or her family. It was to be lived in and enjoyed.” Jane consequently derived satisfaction from producing the presumed effect of her husband’s liberal subjectivity, for it was the compulsory performance through which she enacted her own self-governing independence.

In order to maintain her perceived autonomy and independence, however, Jane also recognized that her domestic labor could never end, for either working or planning to work at homemaking activities not labeled as such supplied her only ratified form of happiness. If male individualism required a clear delineation between the productivity of disciplined labor and the privacy of pleasurable leisure, the same failed to hold true for homemaking women. In reward for their remunerative employment, white, suburban men returned home each evening to lounge in their stuffed chairs and to revel securely and comfortably in the apparent fact of their self-possession. The characterizing chair thus served to substantiate the generative, affective value of the male subject who rationally and responsibly chose to relax there. Mitigating the effect of the chair’s implicitly masculine, solid form and its straight lines was the recommendation to avoid placing furniture at right angles, for “[a]n easy chair . . . looks more inviting, if it is a little off the straight line.” This prescription conveyed an equivocation within the representation of male authority, for in advising a convergence of gendered, aesthetic attributes, it also appealed to the homemaker upon whom the chair’s inclusion and placement within the living room’s décor depended.

129 Thornburgh, 234.
Both large and angular, but also artfully selected and placed, the chair that signified male autonomy also testified to the productive power of a homemaker’s consensual labor. This lack of complete identity between a man and his chair called into question the avowed catalyst within the narrative structure of liberalism’s development—man’s desire for a comfortable home of his own that, by embodying his autonomy and securing a sensual experience of entitled privacy, engendered this protagonist’s ability to enact a consensual submission in the name of freedom. As both contemporary fiction and the advice literature on home décor illustrates, the paradoxically satisfying regulation of men’s desires instead followed from their wives’ pleasure and fulfillment. Jane Norton’s quest to create a comfortable home for her husband helps to show that this sense of authority and gratification enabled women to play the part of liberalism’s enacting subjects so that their husbands might also do so.

Continuing to follow the allegory of Jane and John Norton, the next chapter examines how many modern women, particularly home economists, seized upon the representational opportunities allowed by the equivocating denial and admission of male dependency. The chapter also demonstrates, however, that the effort to recast women as rational, consensual subjects through the performance of homemaking labor both facilitated and precluded women’s assertions of political individualism. As the absence of a comparable, comfortable chair for women attested, home economists, in their desire for homemakers to be regarded as liberal subjects, relinquished a clear division between leisure and labor—a state of nature and a public state—that the home established for men. Symptomatic of liberal discourse, this attempt to signify feminine autonomy entrapped homemakers in the rationalized reproduction of an idealized private, domestic space that was increasingly imagined in public terms.
Chapter Four: Happy Homemakers and the Hub of the Better Home

When Jane Norton turned her discerning eye to the kitchen that anchored her new home, she had a very clear vision of the space she hoped to create. Distinct from all others, this room “was to be spick-and-span and shiny and cool and inviting and cheerful, as well as convenient and sanitary.” Fulfilling these multiple and potentially contradictory standards was a tall order, and for guidance, the ever practical Jane returned to her list of decorating axioms. Given the kitchen’s smaller dimensions, “Jane realized acutely that the correct arrangement of furniture was . . . nowhere of more importance than in the kitchen.” Yet, Jane’s commandments also advised that the purpose of any given space govern the application of these aesthetic principles, and due to this imperative of suitability, “the laws of proportion and balance, though important, gave way to convenience.” To determine how best to equip and furnish her “laboratory and workroom,” Jane turned not only to the advice supplied by professional designers, but also to bulletins published by the Bureau of Home Economics. In these, she found lists of essential articles and ideas for their arrangement and storage that would facilitate the efficient performance of her household work. Jane had already developed many rational opinions based on the lessons in frugality and efficiency she had learned during her years as a New York apartment dweller. The BHE’s informational bulletins nevertheless filled an essential gap between Jane’s acquired experience and her compiled principles, for they expertly helped to address “the personal problem of arranging equipment in her own kitchen to save her time, energy, strength and incidentally wear and tear on her disposition.”

Despite the overriding importance of convenience, Jane remained committed to her guiding standard of “beautility.” She consequently wanted the gendered space of the kitchen to function practically while also possessing “as dainty and feminine a look as a woman’s boudoir.”

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Continuing her practice of mentally designing each room, Jane envisioned an attractive kitchen with cool, pale blue walls to complement the modern and hygienic white and black tile linoleum. The kitchen needed also to reflect Jane’s youthful creativity, and through the splashes of yellow paint that she imagined covering a chair, the icebox, and the refrigerator, Jane “could harmlessly indulge her love of color.” Accessories offered even more insight into Jane’s personality. In her preliminary design, seasonal flowers graced the window boxes, and Jane vowed to defy the rigid dictates of hygiene by displaying “odd pieces” of china that “she liked but would not wish to show in the dining room.”

Jane placed these items of “decorative value” on the tripartite list that she always assembled before making additional purchases. To the articles she already possessed, she added essential utensils, furnishings, and equipment that she needed to acquire more quickly. The final section of the list included items that Jane desired, but would collect only gradually. Unlike many “unwary young housewives,” Jane felt “determined to guard against” wasting her limited resources by falling sway to impulsive or unnecessary purchases. She instead anticipated the pleasure of finding “fun” in the challenge of stretching her one hundred dollar budget to its limits. Of course, every kitchen required a “good clock,” and Jane hastened to pen this essential item on her list before closing her notebook.²

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Other than the splashes of color that brightened its otherwise sterile, utilitarian appearance, the kitchen that Jane Norton designed for her own comfort and convenience stood in marked contrast to her home’s living room. As the previous chapter explored, Jane’s meticulous, conscientious efforts to devise an enjoyable, domesticating space ensured that her husband regarded his home as a place of pleasure and repletion. Ensconced within a comfortable chair,

²Ibid., 209-212.
situated just so in the living room over which he spatially reigned, John Norton remained secure in his relative autonomy, privacy, and authority because of the common sense and tasteful discretion exercised by his wife. While Jane took pleasure in fabricating the trappings that enticed and enabled her husband to assume his throne within their house, she regarded her “own special realm” as the kitchen. When juxtaposed with the living room metonymically associated with John Norton and the children who relaxed within it, Jane Norton’s kitchen and her identification with the domestic labor that it served to facilitate beg for further exploration.

Illustrated by Jane’s understanding of her domestic responsibilities, the modern revolution in housekeeping has attracted significant scholarly attention; however, largely unexamined is its relationship to homemaking’s historically constitutive role in the reproduction of American liberal idealism and its presupposed autonomous subject. To improve the quality of women’s labor and consequently that of their homes, educators and proto-bureaucrats advised a new generation of homemakers to embrace scientific and industrial innovations and their attendant techniques of empirical investigation and rationalized production. Examining more closely the principles of scientific homemaking and their relationship to the modern kitchen’s design helps to illuminate the dimensions that bodily containment would take for the otherwise politically and spatially liberated women who were incited to be rational rather than virtuous. For home economists, however, restoring the presumptively masculine occupations of invention and production to the household reasserted the economic value of women’s household labor, which had suffered a precipitous decline when manufacturing moved from the household to the factory.

Yet, an initiative to establish an identity between connotatively male and female work—one that

3 Ibid., 205.
4 Glenna Matthews has argued that nineteenth-century women derived more cultural power from their domestic labor than their more rationalized twentieth-century counterparts. Her argument differs from Jeanne Boydston’s assessment of the “pastoralization” of women’s labor that occurred in that century. Home economists writing in the 1920s seemingly agreed with Boydston, for they sought to claim the economic value of women’s labor, which had suffered a devaluation, they argued, following the movement of production out of the household. Jeanne Boydston, Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
also justified real improvements in the material conditions of women’s household labor—can also be interpreted as an essentially feminist attempt to render women’s domestic roles commensurate with their newly acquired political rights and public identities. By promulgating the tenets of scientific housekeeping, home economists attempted to demonstrate that, whether managing their households or casting their ballots, women bore the politically qualifying possessions identified with their husbands.

Establishing women’s identity with an implicitly male, archetypal citizen required more than a demonstration that household work mirrored the tasks performed by wage-earning men. Internally separated into managerial and managed activities, modern homemaking incorporated into the feminine body a gendered division between rationality and servility that wage-earning producers had struggled to surmount throughout the nineteenth-century and that the modern corporation’s employees resolved by claiming the entitled reward of embodied pleasure, particularly leisure. Just as lounging male providers manifested a paradoxical condition of regulated freedom, so too did modern homemakers when they listed, like Jane Norton, professionalism and individual achievement among the motives and compensations that made their labor consensual. Although feminists of the nineteenth-century had also emphasized women’s capacity for ethical and judicious self-government, what truly distinguished managerial homemaking from its antecedents was an avowed ability to satisfy women’s longings for self-expression. Stimulated by a modernizing culture, this prescribed shift away from a sentimental ideal of maternal virtue and self-sacrifice functioned to compel a renewed interest in traditional household obligations. The advocates of scientific homemaking consequently reasserted the economic value of women’s labor not simply to raise awareness of its worth, but also to figure housework as a source of pride and esteem, a signifier of independence, and an inter-articulated expression of feminine desire and consent.
The depiction of domestic labor as a personally gratifying pursuit of self-interest nevertheless yielded paradoxical effects because it arose from the foundational contradictions and reconciliatory fictions and fantasies of liberalism itself. Although the proponents of scientific housekeeping maintained the traditional connection between maternal instruction and the nation’s ideological reproduction, they revised the developmental narrative that had enabled nineteenth-century women to claim the characterizing attributes of liberal citizenship, but only through their idealized sequestration in the protective privacy of a maternal sanctuary. This line of fiction had established a fundamental, didactic role for women within the liberal polity, albeit one predicated upon their exclusion from it. The modernization of household work attempted to circumvent the paradox faced by the nineteenth-century’s virtuous mothers who found themselves forever barred from the public roles they served to protect. If these women provided a haven of emotional and spiritual succor that sheltered their families from a morally corrosive public world, homemakers of the 1920s were urged instead to create comfortable, rejuvenating retreats that would enable men and children to adapt more easily and creatively to the enervating demands of contemporary life. This emphasis on adaptation accompanied a symbolic disassociation between home and

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5 This analysis explores in an American context Joan Scott’s argument in *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

6 Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 4-5. Brown argues, “What the feminist movement for women’s political and economic autonomy highlights, therefore, is the sexual division of individualism within domesticity. This domain is at once the separate sphere of women and the correlative to, as well as the basis of, men’s individuality. It is thus the case that the nineteenth century advanced and delimited individualism by identifying selfhood with the feminine but denying it to women. What women wanted was, quite literally, themselves.” Brown’s conceptualization of individualism as a gendered equivocation created through the home’s affective meaning differs from that of scholars who, following Carol Pateman, have viewed individualism as an inherently male construct. See for example, Linda Kerber, “Can a Woman Be an Individual? The Discourse of Self-Reliance,” chapter in *Toward an Intellectual History of Women* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

7 As this statement implies, the analysis articulated above focuses on the domestic ideals that created through the home’s affective meaning differs from that of scholars who, following Carol Pateman, have viewed individualism as an inherently male construct. See for example, Linda Kerber, “Can a Woman Be an Individual? The Discourse of Self-Reliance,” chapter in *Toward an Intellectual History of Women* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997).
mother. With the family’s domicile equated more with somatic and visceral comfort rather than maternal love, homemakers continued to produce the site of a liberal society’s origin; yet, these judiciously self-disciplined individuals were also free to participate in, even to lead, its progressive development.

Representative of the modern homemaker, Jane Norton felt empowered by the disciplinary principles of household management and décor that her well organized and tastefully furnished kitchen staged. Because a sense of importance and independence renewed Jane’s belief in the voluntary nature of her labor, these perceptions enabled Jane to transform her house into a home—to endow it with an affective, extra-market worth through the investment of her animating vitality and initiative. This supplemental value was consumed by her home-owning husband, then claimed as his own characterizing possession. Aware of this transfer, home economists found political capital in women’s ideological role to facilitate and obscure the liberal imperative of male regulation. Seizing upon the admissions of male dependency circulating in popular and prescriptive texts, they emphasized how men relied upon their wives to create the domain of autonomy and privacy over which modern proprietors could claim ownership and perceive as an

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8 This analysis of the way that women’s rationalized domestic labor figures into the reproduction of political subjectivity is informed by Judith Butler’s explication of the inter-articulated positions of bondsman and lord that are the subjects of Hegel’s The Phenomenology of Spirit. Butler focuses on a “double disavowal” in which both bondsman and lord appear as the effect of the other’s subjugated, embodied condition. Serving to disavow that the bondsman is a projection of his master’s own compulsory self-enslavement is the lord’s prerogative to consume and, thereby, own the products of the bondsman’s labor. This claim to own disavows not only the signatory or affective value of that labor and any autonomy that the bondsman might derive from recognizing his imprimatur, but also any awareness that the lord himself is the effect of consuming the value that intrinsically belongs to the bondsman. A subsequent disavowal enables the bondsmen both to recognize and deny that he is constituted through the loss of what he produces rather than the value of the possessions that serve to constitute the Lord. Desire and loss thus function together inextricably in the inter-articulation of lord and bondsman to create a radical identity rooted in absence and to conceal the “unhappy” realization that neither acts of consumption nor production can establish the subject’s ontological value or liberate the body from the external forces of domination that subjugate it either through another’s commands or through self-imposed ethical imperatives. Judith Butler, The Psychic Life of Power, Chapter One.
extension of themselves. This illusion of male initiative and freedom balanced the recognition that the beautiful and comfortable products of women labor connected male desire to unifying national ideals and cultivated the discipline required of democratic self-government. Home economists’ insistence on women’s import to American liberalism’s preservation consequently reframes the modern kitchen as a political site and the tenets of scientific housekeeping as a strategy for signifying the modern woman’s autonomy, volition, and equality.

Emphasizing the liberalism of homemakers, whose capacity for self-government enabled their husbands and children to develop the same, nevertheless founndered on the persistent problem of difference that took an even more insidious form: The modern homemaker manifested her consensual discipline through a performance of unceasing work, and her incessant activity contrasted starkly with the reposing form of a resting homeowner who reveled in a natural state of relaxation that signified his own innate liberty. Within their kitchen factories, scientific housekeepers worked continuously to enact what the living room made apparent about those who rested and played there. This disparity between men’s and women’s occupations within the modern home—hers to work and his to relax—helps to illuminate that a modernized, maternal ideal continued to offer only paradoxical effects for women. In contrast to her multi-purpose living room, Jane Norton’s kitchen allowed no space for the truly comfortable, big chair to which her husband was entitled, nor little opportunity for creative, personable expression other than a cheerful tea towel, a brightly painted appliance, or an unusual piece of china. These subtle forms of self-representation and the brief moments of leisure in a “small, straight kitchen chair” were the only symbols of personal autonomy within a room that otherwise signified the prescriptions for efficiency and productivity that Jane Norton felt compelled to follow and eventually internalized as her own.
Home Economists and the Advantages of Applied Science

As the nineteenth century evolved into the third decade of the twentieth, many New Era reformers began to interpret changes in the modern home and family as the inevitable effect of progress and, more positively, as the hallmark of a vital civilization. Yet, the modernization that had allowed Americans an unprecedented amount of freedom had failed to supply countervailing sources of restraint to temper the excesses of this liberation. In diagnosing the eroding balance between liberty and order, the sociologist Ernest Groves argued that “[t]he sweep of modern life,” particularly scientific advancements and the “intellectual freedom” they inspired, had fueled a dynamic tension between “what is and what is to be.” To illustrate this distinctively modern antagonism between the past and the future, Groves, like Frederic Lawrence, cited the conflicting expectations that had weakened modern marriages. In pointing men “backward,” Groves observed, “[s]entiment and desire” for an “old-fashioned type of wife” stood in opposition to the progressive ambitions that education and suffrage had aroused within women. It was the abundance of “material satisfactions” that had, however, “given the family its most staggering blow.” While a modern cornucopia of consumer products reflected “social evolution and social progress,” it also overwhelmed an inadequate capacity for self-control and rendered a familiar system of values obsolete. In the absence of appropriate guidance, these evolutionary changes had engendered a “high degree of restlessness” within the family as well as “its unmistakably transient character.”9

Though he lauded modern women’s newly acquired economic opportunities and political rights, Groves tapped modern women with the very traditional responsibility of ameliorating the stress that modernization had placed on liberal citizens’ characters. Fulfilling this civic function nevertheless required women to become far more than voters and shoppers, for if conservatives

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criticized women for behaving less than virtuously, Groves found them guilty of acting irrationally. While women had embraced their newfound roles and abilities to pursue more individualistic aspirations, they inexplicably continued to cling to the antiquated child rearing practices followed by their Victorian mothers and grandmothers. These outdated habits were simply incompatible, Groves argued, with the changes wrought when scientific discovery and innovation shifted the locus of economic production out of the household. Just as “applied science” had liberated women from the domestic sphere, it also held the key to eliminating the servile labors that continued not only to enslave homemakers, but also to prevent the home from functioning as a stabilizing institution in a modern society.10

Groves’s call to reform women’s domestic responsibilities reveals an underlying impetus to revive the role that homemaking women had traditionally played in liberal fictions of male self-governance. Though he expressed concern for the home’s fate, Groves refused republican idioms and repudiated nineteenth-century ideals of femininity that conflated a sheltering domicile with a maternal caregiver whose self-sacrificing love and disinterested labor bound pleasure-seeking individuals into a collective familial and national entity. Charged with creating the sense of domestic contentment that engendered male rationality, the virtuous mothers of yore had played an essential, albeit apolitical and sequestered role in the public sphere’s preservation, for by guarding the hearth, they had protected the nation’s citizens from the forces of moral corruption and the nation itself from inevitable decline. Modernization nevertheless demanded a more scientifically informed means of keeping the home fires burning, and for this purpose, the white, middle-class mother wore numerous hats both within and without her tidy bungalow or neat colonial revival. She was, at once, a nutritionist, hygienic housekeeper, time management expert, nurse, psychologist, educator, accountant, informed consumer, and tasteful interior decorator. When not devoted to her family’s physical well-being and her children’s emotional

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10 Ibid.
adjustment, the resourceful homemaker found her leisure in attending a stimulating civic meeting. Such afternoon outings often entailed a stop at the supermarket or department store where she might purchase necessities for her family before tooling home in her Liberty Six. Even after preparing a nutritious meal on her gas range and storing the dishes in her Hoosier cabinet, this ever-efficient manager of the domestic factory was never too tired to play the “pleasant, jolly companion to her husband and children.”

These multiplying roles and the non-traditional spaces they enabled women to occupy constituted a recognizably modern understanding of homemaking that began to emerge in the late nineteenth century. Groves’s critique of women’s resistance to acting this part reveals not only the contours of this new performance of middle-class maternity, but as tellingly, its relationship to the rise of corporate capitalism and consumer culture. Scientific homemaking’s emergence is consequently most often explained by an historical narrative that begins with the acceleration of market capitalism and the attendant rise of an emergent middle-class that simultaneously enjoyed the benefits and feared the consequences of commercialization. To combat these market forces and their destabilizing impact on local religious and political institutions, nineteenth-century reformers asserted the domestic sphere’s inviolability and charged the virtuous women that the home ostensibly sheltered with responsibility for guarding against capitalism’s encroachment. For white, antebellum women, the virtues cultivated within and protected by the private sphere equipped these zealous reformers for waging a public war against the public problems of male licentiousness and drunkenness. The purview of women’s domestic guardianship subsequently expanded to include more explicitly political forms of municipal housekeeping, and this

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distinctively feminine obligation became the justification cited by the progressive granddaughters of the abolitionists, prohibitionists, and suffragists of the mid-nineteenth century. Though often armed with college degrees, these young women confronted similarly limited opportunities for meaningful employment. With fewer obligations to their natal families to engage their energies, they either pursued advanced training in the nascent fields of social science or founded organizations devoted to social, municipal, and industrial reform. Legitimating these very untraditional activities nevertheless required this vanguard to continue citing women’s intrinsic interest in the home, their innate domestic prowess, and the altruistic attributes honed by women’s traditional removal from the spheres of government and business.

This acquisition of intellectual credentials and organizational expertise enabled well-educated and well-connected women of the Progressive Era to create rewarding, remunerative work within the traditional domain of social reform. By focusing their energies and talents on issues such as health, hygiene, and décor, civically minded and professionally ambitious women reiterated their predecessors’ emphasis on the national significance of biologically determined empathy, expertise, and interests. For turn-of-the-century activists, however, science rather than spiritual uplift supplied the idioms and techniques through which these reformers responded to urban squalor, corporate greed, and consumer excess. This generation of Progressive reformers consequently forged productive partnerships with a vanguard of university-trained, male social scientists. Just as this scientific turn transformed many academic disciplines such as sociology and economics into applied professions, it created remunerative and more respected positions for women that altered both the performance and perception of traditionally feminine pursuits. Just as friendly visiting and the household arts acquired utility, credibility, and a veneer of rationality,
the development of fields such as social work and home economics supported the perception that “New Women” enjoyed opportunities for personal and economic freedom.  

Standardizing the work of domestic reform both paralleled and facilitated the rise of other home-related professions through which women found meaningful careers. A more cohesive and credentialed group of architects, for example, rendered in material form social scientists’ prescriptions for appropriate domestic environments. Realtors similarly forged professional associations that helped uneducated consumers purchase homes. Although interior decorators’ persistent association with the artistic, the domestic, and the feminine often mitigated the claims of “Lady Decorators” to professional status, this nascent group increasingly sought to establish their own authority by codifying how untutored homemakers transformed their houses into homes.  

During the 1920s, white women made inroads into each of these emergent and implicitly domestic occupations. Working as civic volunteers, trained professionals, and government technocrats, white women participated on a similar, if not entirely equal, footing with their male counterparts and thus contributed in unprecedented ways to public initiatives to improve the nation’s homes and the privacy they ideally provided.

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14 Linda Gordon, Pitied But Not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Robyn Muncy, Creating a Female Dominion in
Home economics mirrored the rise of these professions and supplied women with even greater access to institutional legitimacy and social authority. Intent upon developing and disseminating the scientific principles that should guide the performance and assessment of modern women’s domestic labor in the early twentieth century, home economists pursued a strategy for elevating the perceived value of housework that can be traced to the domestic advice literature that began circulating within the print culture of the mid-nineteenth century. Manuals such as Catharine Beecher’s *Treatise on Domestic Economy* (1842) and *The American Woman’s Home* (1869), which Beecher authored with her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe, anticipated a later generation’s emphasis on organization, management, decoration, consumerism, and education as well as its audience of middle-class, white women. Though they underscored the religious import and moral superiority of women’s domestic labor, the Beechers’s prescriptions were institutionalized and more widely publicized in the early 1870s following the introduction of domestic science courses into the curriculum of land-grant universities. Intended for the expanding number of young women seeking a post-secondary education, these offerings opened new paths of professional advancement for women who failed to earn teaching positions as economists and chemists. Following the formal recognition of home economics as a discipline in 1899, the formation of the American Home Economics Association in 1909 and the publication of the *Journal of Home Economics* in the same year helped to complete the process of professionalization.

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17 Stage also suggests that the home economics profession moved from a model of professionalization characteristic of what Robyn Muncy has described as the “female dominion” evinced by the Children’s Bureau to a more male model that emphasized scientific expertise at the expense of social reform and that focused its suggestions on housewives. Stage, 10-11; See also Stage, “Ellen Richards and the Social
By the twentieth-century’s second decade, the discipline had become widely taught in universities and public schools throughout the country. This proliferation of home economics courses reflects not only the era’s emphasis on domestic reform and manual training, but also a congressional mandate for colleges and universities to promote the education of home economics teachers. Passed in 1917, the Smith-Hughes Act offered legislative recognition to the burgeoning discipline’s importance. By emphasizing teacher training rather than research, however, this act undermined the profession’s legitimacy as a scientific field of study and implicitly reinforced a conservative agenda by highlighting a traditional division of professional labor.\(^\text{18}\) Equally delimiting was the imperative proponents felt to justify the pursuit of non-domestic aspirations by invoking the significance of domestic reform. While codifying the tenets of good housekeeping and the professional qualifications of those equipped to explain them might have opened public doors for women, home economics also helped to maintain a hierarchical, gendered binary not within the realms of secondary and higher education as well as within the domains of governmental and civic activity. Trained home economists nevertheless created opportunities for fulfilling careers in vocations other than teaching, as the escalating demand for advice literature prompted many home economists to become authors and editors, while others found employment either in an expanding federal bureaucracy or in helping corporations to develop, test, and market their wares.\(^\text{19}\)

Celebrity offered another avenue of public recognition, and Christine Frederick’s successful efforts to publicize the benefits of efficiency established this popular author as a well-
known expert on household management. To demonstrate her empathy for her audience, Frederick narrated a tale of her interest in household efficiency that began with daunting maternal responsibilities, endless chores, and an increasingly high standard of success. When depression threatened to overtake the harried, college-educated housewife, she found salvation in her husband’s enthusiasm for the management theories of Frederick Winslow Taylor. As the myth goes, their conversations on this subject led to the epiphany that transformed Frederick’s personal life and initiated a career based on proselytizing this revelation: Business-like efficiency offered a panacea for the modern housewife’s malaise. Frederick consequently set about producing a series of magazine articles, pamphlets, and books that applied the principles of scientific management to common household duties, and through this savvy use of publicity, Frederick widely promulgated the principles of the “New Housekeeping” and became the public face of an initiative to “Taylorize” women’s labor. Determining these “standardized operations” prompted Frederick to establish Applecroft Experiment Station on Long Island. In this domestic laboratory, a team of efficiency experts conducted time-and motion studies of household activities in order to adapt techniques initially designed for routinizing industrial labor, and they further used the experimental kitchen to test household commodities and to instruct students in “the one best way” of completing household tasks.²⁰

²⁰ For a discussion of Christine Frederick and standardization of household management and activity, see Leavitt, 53-56; Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, “The Bathroom, the Kitchen, and the Aesthetics of Waste,” introduction to The Kitchen, the Bathroom, and the Aesthetics of Waste: A Process of Elimination (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 13-15, 43-48; Matthews, 168-170; Martha Banta, Taylored Lives: Narrative Productions in the Age of Veblen, Taylor, and Ford (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); Susan Strasser, Never Done: A History of American Housework (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 214-219. In Selling Mrs. Consumer: Christine Frederick and the Rise of Household Efficiency (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2003), Janice Williams Rutherford unpacks the mythology that Frederick told to account for her transformation from a Phi Beta Kappa graduate, to a disgruntled and isolated mother, to an established expert in the field of home economics. In a biography somewhat similar to Emily Post, Frederick married the author and advertiser J. George Frederick who would leave his post at the advertising agency J. Walter Thompson to become an innovator in advertising and marketing through his research firm and publishing house, the Business Bourse. By creating a career in the burgeoning field of household management, Frederick found a means of acting upon stymied professional aspirations, but her renown in articulating a more modern domestic ideal was shadowed by her husband’s numerous extra-marital affairs.
Mrs. Consumer

Unlike the detractors of women’s gadding about, home economists joined Christine Frederick in celebrating the freedom and achievement that “Mrs. Consumer” derived from the fact that housewives now purchased more than they produced.\(^{21}\) Frederick, who coined this moniker, asserted that women exercised “buying power . . . on a tremendously broad scale,” and she underlined this authority by estimating that women controlled eighty to ninety percent of household expenditures.\(^{22}\) To emphasize the social benefits of this arrangement, Frederick shared a presumably true anecdote illustrative of “the great differences between men and women as buyers” that originated in the “very special faculty and ability for spending” women had acquired through their traditional control over the family purse. Frederick’s tale began with a wayward husband’s susceptibility to a wily salesman’s praise for a film projector. Entranced by the gadget’s features and functions, the family provider seemed more akin to “a boy fascinated with a new mechanical toy.” The clerk had almost clinched the sale when Mrs. Consumer “began to ask questions, practical to-the-point questions that snapped out like fire-crackers.” She obviously “had other fish to fry with the family dollars,” Frederick surmised, for “she and she alone . . . knew the dividing line between what was sound expenditure and unwise expense.” Weighing the projector’s actual and hidden costs against the necessity of saving for appliances and college tuitions, the astute wife declared such a purchase an “[a]bsurd” waste of her family’s limited

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\(^{21}\) While contemporaries variably welcomed and feared women’s purchasing power, scholars have viewed consumerism’s political impact and potential more ambivalently. Certainly, it conferred the power of self-expression and even the display of socio-economic mobility. See Lizbeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Chapter Three; Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, eds. *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996). Jennifer Scanlon is among those scholars who first argued that advertisements and the women’s magazines that printed them delimited women’s choices and channeled their “inarticulate” longings for greater independence and social equality into demands for ameliorative and ostensibly liberating consumer products. This redirection of desire functioned to mitigate modernization’s impact on traditional gender roles and family relations. Scanlon, *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies’ Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 61-76.

resources. Frederick’s tale concluded with the promise of order restored as a chastened husband followed his wife out of the store, the projector left behind with the “clerk [who] looked daggers after the wife.”23

As Frederick’s tale illustrates, the consumerism that appeared to threaten male rationality and self-governing independence created an opportunity for women to showcase their possession of these attributes. Home economists consequently deployed this strategy in their efforts to recast the value of household labor by asserting that, if modern goods and services were truly to enhance the home’s traditional appeal and function, their quality and utility must first be ascertained by a judicious homemaker. A federally sponsored report emphasized the importance of this more modern form of guardianship, citing the lack of formal protections against the unethical manufacturing and marketing practices of large corporations. Further acting as David to the corporate Goliath, homemakers also stretched male providers’ insufficient wages, enabling their families “to finance the building of a house or provide adequate funds for housing.” Because the costs of purchasing and maintaining a home generally exceeded incomes, “[i]he buying policies of the household are often the determining factor” in the capacity for homeownership.24 This conclusion led the report’s authors to emphasize, “‘Making money and spending money are strictly correlative arts.’”25

Not only were these gendered activities inter-dependent arts, they were equally self-disciplined forms of productive labor. “A wise and orderly use of money,” the home economist Lita Bane informed readers of The Ladies’ Home Journal, “is one of the fundamental

23 Ibid., 12.
requirements for successful homemaking today.”

As one of Bane’s colleagues warned, only through learning “to make purchases that represent her most fundamental wants” could a homemaker resist being “stampeded into the purchase . . . with an alluring picture and the implication that she will forfeit either her children’s heath, her own social status, or her husband’s affection unless she buys the pictured product.” Cultivating this essential capacity for self-regulation affected so much more than “the family’s material welfare . . . its entire tone depends upon the homemaker’s purchases.”

Even professional decorators such as Frank Alvah Parsons emphasized the affective consequences derived from the homemaker’s rational enactment of consumer restraint: “Intelligent selection—the art of buying the most appropriate furnishings and decorations for the home—leads logically to intelligent decoration, the art of arranging the furnishings and decorations so as to make possible a thoroughly attractive home and keenly enjoyable living for the family.”

Writing in this vein, Emily Burbank’s decorating manual advised women, “If one gets the habit of carefully thought out lists and sticking to them when shopping, it is not long before the mind works this way. It is then that you can claim to have mastered the art of shopping!” She counseled her readers to “wear imaginary ‘blinders’ and keep walking past the counters” that displayed enticing, though unnecessary items, particularly the kitchen utensils that came “in such alluring forms and finishes that no matter whether one knows what they are for or not, one is impelled to buy them.” Burbank proclaimed these articles to be “a veritable pitfall for weak womanhood.”

Although she advised women to remain focused on a list of necessities, Burbank hardly conceived this disciplinary device as antithetical to imagination. Like Laura Thornburgh, this

29 Emily Burbank, Be Your Own Decorator (New York: Dodd, Meade, and Company, 1922), 249, 247, 140.
tastemaker advised homemakers to “sit down in the room you are furnishing or refurnishing, and try to visualize it with new furniture and hangings you plan to have.” Out of this imaginative exercise “a plan for action” would coalesce that served “to hold you steady when shopping.” Burbank’s shopping list thus provided a regulatory mechanism that conveyed an amalgam of desires and needs, while also constraining their pursuit. By framing the conception of this list, a budget supplied another means of disciplined attainment that facilitated a developmental sequence progressing from a homemaker’s desire, to rationally defined objectives, to judicious selection, to personal and familial gratification, to national stability. In addition to the generative force of a homemaker’s vision, the perceived “function of decision and choice [that] looms large in budgeting and in purchasing” belied the regulatory purpose of prescriptive, cost-conscious list-making. Home economists further emphasized the importance of rationality and volition in controlling women’s consumer behavior by asserting the “relatively high degree of intelligence” required to tailor a sample budget to suit particular needs. Just as adapting decorative principles to a family’s condition and its members’ preferences evinced a creative individuality, discretion in budgeting and purchasing enabled women to enact an ordered pursuit of liberty.

Not only did this work render homemakers equivalent to corporate managers who were similarly responsible for a company’s bottom line, it also served a greater national purpose. “‘[P]erhaps the most important result of all budget-making will prove,’” quoted one report, “‘to be the harmonizing of our individual plans with a program of social welfare.’” Consumerism thus offered women a means of self-expression, as scholars have so often argued; yet, founded in rational choice or consent, it also supplied a mode of political self-representation that made a generative, feminine autonomy and initiative visible for all to see and value. Quoting Emerson, the reporting committee of home economists concluded, “‘My expenditure is me,’” and these

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30 Ibid., 250.
professionals without question imagined this consuming self as the individual subject that this
nineteenth-century articulator of liberal subjectivity so valorized.\textsuperscript{31}

In addition to the guidance of a household budget, knowledge of consumer standards represented another technique for asserting women’s liberal autonomy by informing their consent. Here, home economists again played an important role, acting as mediators not only between the home and the corporation, but similarly between female homemakers and male manufacturers. Lita Bane, a former president of the American Home Economics Association turned assistant editor of the \textit{Ladies Home Journal}, might have advocated budgeting to guard women from their own irrational impulses and longings; however, she realized that the judicious ascertainment and acquisition of needs often proved difficult because homemakers had very few protections against unscrupulous corporate entities bent on profit. “If it is true that all economic activity is for the purpose of keeping up a constant and adequate flow of goods and services to our homes,” Bane reasoned, “it is of the utmost importance that these goods and services be selected and used according to standards.” Understanding that homemakers lacked the resources to create these measures independently, Bane suggested that they rely upon “persons of the finest training and experience.”\textsuperscript{32} Established in 1923, the Bureau of Home Economics (BHE) contributed significantly to developing and publicizing the measures of industrial quality that Bane promoted. Its creation and purpose appear strikingly similar to Hoover’s Bureau of Standards, for it served as a clearinghouse of unbiased information about common household products that both consumers and producers might utilize to function more efficiently and productively. In fulfilling this purpose, the BHE emphasized its objective stance relative to industry. Eschewing monetary offers to endorse products distinguished the true professional, and those who claimed this status criticized domestic advisors such as Christine Frederick who


\textsuperscript{32} Bane, 124.
appeared to undermine the profession’s credibility by entering into these pecuniary arrangements. Home economists could help women with their “purchasing problems” only if “scientifically trained women” remained “very meticulous in public pronouncements of all sorts and kinds.”

Consumerism that conformed to standards of unimpeachable conduct and quality thus seemed to home economists an effective means of manifesting women’s capacity for rational consent, self-disciplined labor, and ethical leadership. Chase Going Woodhouse of Smith College issued, for example, a “call for ethical consumption” in a 1925 article entitled “The Economic Problems of the Home.” The “director of family consumption” could also readily serve as “the potential director of production,” Woodhouse argued, and “as the ultimate buyer,” homemakers stood poised to lead “another industrial revolution.” Woodhouse’s uprising called for consumers and laborers to realize their common interests, as capitalists’ unbridled pursuit of profit endangered equally those who produced and those who purchased factory-made goods. Reminding her audience of the basic macroeconomic principle that demand inevitably affected supply, Woodhouse urged women to act intentionally so that their consumer choices might exercise an ameliorative impact on methods of industrial production. Not only would ethical consumption protect families from tainted products, it would also “have as its goal . . . production under conditions most favorable to all parties concerned.”

In pointing out the impact of capitalism’s profit motive on women’s households, Woodhouse echoed her professional peers in

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33 On the conflict between Frederick and home economists, see Stage, 11, 29; and Goldstein, “Part of the Package,” 274-275.
34 Faith Williams, “Purchasing Problems,” 729.
advising women to regard their labor as intrinsically embedded within the operation of a larger political economy. Faith Williams, who would become the BHE’s chief economist during the 1930s, emphasized, for example, that many “purchasing problems” originated not in inadequate budgeting or frivolous expenditures, but rather in “factors which seem remote from the individual home.” The home’s unavoidable connection to larger national and global issues necessitated, Williams argued, that women take an active interest in public affairs such as international price fluctuations, protective tariffs, and legislation aimed at improving the plight of agricultural and industrial laborers.\(^{36}\)

As this insistence on the public importance of women’s private responsibilities makes evident, home economists argued that women potentially exercised the ability to resolve the antagonisms and inequalities that inevitably arose from the complex inter-articulation of capitalism and liberal idealism. In examining such efforts both to promote a model of “rational consumption” and to “identify citizenship with wise purchasing,” Carolyn Goldstein has argued that home economists “shaped what might be called a ‘public policy of consumption’ by linking patterns of rational buying to civic duty and democratic citizenship and by promoting themselves as professional mediators.”\(^{37}\) Her conclusions suggest that home economists hoped to achieve far more than revising traditional conceptions of homemaking women’s national and political significance, for while they made historical references to the disinterested, civically obligated nature of maternity, these domestic professionals also transcended didactic or sacrificial models of feminized virtue. Savvy about her family’s needs and resources, educated about the quality of available products, and informed about the national and global issues affecting what and how she purchased, the self-governing Mrs. Consumer was a public figure who stood prepared to play a new part in the nation’s continued economic and political development. Housewives’ skilled

\(^{36}\) Williams, 729.

\(^{37}\) Goldstein, “Mediating Consumption,” 66.
labor as consumers helped to translate male wages into the “good life” that the home ideally embodied. What they rationally produced through their judicious, self-regulated planning and purchasing served to attach men’s and children’s desires for a vital freedom to a disciplinary imperative of economic productivity, while spending tied to home ownership and improvement simultaneously fueled and delimited a consumer-based model of economic growth. Yet, as defined by home economists, the work of consumerism also signified that women too possessed the liberal citizen’s characterizing capacity for self-governing independence. It was this autonomy, enacted through rational consumer practices, which secured the continued viability of a democratic republic founded upon an ordered, ethical pursuit of freedom and the consequent reconciliation of individual and communal interests.

**Better Homes for Modern Women**

The Better Homes in America campaign created an unprecedented opportunity for the proponents of rational consumerism and scientific housekeeping to assert their equality within governmental and civic domains. Calling for greater cooperation between the Bureau’s home economists and the male housing reformers who worked through the Department of Commerce’s various agencies and affiliated organizations, the BHA’s executive director, James Ford, observed, “[T]oo little thought has been given to housing by home economists and too little thought to household management and work areas by housing specialists.” The principle of suitability both to individual and social conditions shaped Ford’s recommendation that home economists work with architects and manufacturers to create a “new synthesis,” one that promised to realize housework’s “potentialities for [personal] interest and business efficiency.”

Concurring with Ford’s conclusion was the organization’s secretary. James Taylor’s role as head of the Commerce Department’s Division of Building and Housing might have created a bias for

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the contributions of male architects and engineers, but he understood that “[i]t takes a student of housekeeping and the art of living to arrange a satisfactory modern house.”

The BHA’s leaders also understood that, in addition to improving the “better” home’s design, women also contributed to the organization through their tireless work at planning and publicizing the BHA’s annual campaigns. Because “[h]ome economics training, in schools, and articles in women’s magazines cannot do the whole job,” John Taylor explained to Lillian Gilbreth, “[t]here is an imperative need for practical demonstrations and contests, and all that goes with them.” Executing this educational initiative on such a broad scale consequently prompted BHA officials to enlist the help of home economics teachers, extension agents, and local clubwomen. Legislative acts passed in the years prior to the BHA’s inception created both an institutional infrastructure and a labor force that prepared both professionals and civic volunteers to assume leadership positions at every level of the BHA’s federated structure. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 created positions for home demonstration agents within the Department of Agriculture’s rural extension program, and three years later, the Smith-Hughes Act helped to provide a steady supply of trained teachers for household arts and domestic science programs in elementary and secondary schools. In the national organization, Blanche Halbert served as the BHA’s research director and authored several of the agency’s publications. Home Economics Bureau Chief, Dr. Louise Stanley, initially held a position on the BHA’s advisory council and later became a member of the organization’s board of directors. Stanley also assisted the BHA’s James Ford and other luminaries by helping to select the prizewinning demonstration homes. When Hoover convened the President’s Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership in 1931, home economists, including Louise Stanley, solidified their membership in

39 James S. Taylor, “Architecture and Housing,” undated, James S. Taylor Papers, Box 2, BHA, Inc., Correspondence 1934, HHPL.
40 John S. Taylor to Lillian M. Gilbreth, 19 December 1934, James S. Taylor Papers, Box 2, BHA, Inc., Correspondence 1934, HHPL.
41 Stanley would go on to chair the Committee on Family and Parent Education for Hoover’s White House Conference on Child Health and Protection.
his associational state by either participating on or chairing many of the conference’s investigative committees.

It was at the local level, however, that home economists made their most significant contributions to Hoover’s model of associationalism. In coordinating the annual demonstration weeks, extension agents and home economics teachers served as volunteers, passing along the government’s findings to eager homemakers and instructing them how to attain the better home’s defining standards. Summarizing the achievements of the 1926 BHA campaign, James Ford attributed the improvement in local committees’ abilities to meet the national organization’s goals to “the cooperation of home economics teachers, home demonstration agents, and other trained specialists.” “Under experienced leadership,” he said, “complete cooperation is forthcoming and outstanding achievement is the outcome.”

Four years later, he repeated this commendation of “leading home economists,” calling their participation “more responsible than any other one single factor” for the program’s success.

To cultivate the support of domestic professionals, Ford and the BHA’s national representatives arranged meetings with home demonstration agents and their superiors, spoke at their professional meetings, and prepared articles for their publications and newsletters. In her institutional history of the BHA, Janet Hutchison notes the obstacle that women’s local influence created for the organization’s executive director. For the better part of a decade, Ford endeavored to shift the campaign’s emphasis from interior décor and home economics training to the facets of home improvement traditionally associated with male expertise.

44 Memorandum to Herbert Hoover from James Ford, 7 January 1926, Commerce Papers, Box 65, HHPL.
falter repeatedly due to the organization’s dependency on women’s leadership, which perhaps helps to explain Ford’s entreaty for greater cooperation between these gendered camps.

Professional home economists and educators were not the only women with whom Ford battled to define and execute the BHA’s objectives. In planning the annual demonstration weeks, professional home economists used the relationships they had previously cultivated with white, local clubwomen, many of whom belonged to civic organizations affiliated with the General Federation of Women’s Clubs. Founded in 1890, the GFWC served to support and coordinate the extension of clubwomen’s interests and ambitions as they expanded beyond the original social objectives of their literary societies and sewing circles. In the absence of bureaucratic and regulatory support, Progressive Era professionals turned to the GFWC for assistance in carrying out their efforts to clean up dirty streets, working-class bodies, and political officials, all of which allegedly polluted the urban environment and compromised the sanctity of white, middle-class homes.

Marie Meloney’s enlistment of GFWC members built upon this cooperative foundation. Although the BHA’s founder conceded in a planning letter to Hoover that the organization’s director “ought to be a man,” Meloney continued, “[i]t is my personal belief that the field workers should be women.” Helping to explain this suggestion was Meloney’s awareness that the effectiveness of potential field workers depended upon knowledge of “the club woman problem and psychology.” For this intermediary role, Meloney particularly recommended a candidate whom she knew to be “very anxious to leave the Federation and cast her lot in with ‘Better Homes.’”

Meloney’s first booklet instructing local committees how to organize a demonstration week further emphasized the importance of clubwomen to the BHA’s objectives in its assurance that “energetic and capable women . . . can effectively put into practice the ideas and

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46 Marie Meloney to Herbert Hoover, 15 December 1923, Commerce Papers, Box 65, Building and Housing, BHA, Inc., 1923, HHPL.
plans with which they will be supplied.” Penned in 1921, this assumption of women’s involvement reflected not only historical tradition, but also recent memory of women’s mobilization during the war. Meloney consequently deployed republican idioms in her appeal to a “disinterested group of prominent women, working from motives of public service” who, she envisioned, would mobilize an army of volunteers to help prepare and maintain demonstration houses and elucidate their many attributes for less knowledgeable and affluent visitors.47

The General Federation’s leaders also actively cultivated this partnership with Meloney’s initiative. Testifying both to the volition and the extent of clubwomen’s involvement, the GFCW solidified its ties to the BHA and its yearly campaigns by establishing a Department of the American Home in 1926. In creating a committee exclusively devoted to the “improvement of the American home,” clubwomen had tackled, in the estimation of their national president, Mrs. John D. Sherman, “the greatest challenge to the women of America today.”48 According to Sherman, this committee served “to enlist and direct the activities of the 2,800,000 club women of America in every possible way for the improvement of the home,” and appealing to this constituency through the BHA’s promotional materials, she urged, “[A]ll of the club women of America should cooperate to the limit, and with all the power at their command.” 49 Sherman further enumerated the contributions made by the clubwomen’s American Homes Department to the BHA’s board of directors at their annual meeting in 1927. Emphasizing the “complementary” nature of the committee’s work, she informed board members that “from 40 to 50 per cent of the Better Homes demonstrations during the past three years have been conducted by chairmen drawn from the Federation.” Sherman presumably felt gratified following this presentation, for her appreciative audience was “unanimous in recognizing the mutually helpful character of the

49 Ibid.
two lines of work.” This politic sense of gratitude was reiterated during BHA officials’ national
tours, as the GFWC’s state presidents and the chairwomen of its American Home Department
never failed to receive the recognition merited by the scope of clubwomen’s participation.
However, the praise for “the two lines of work” embedded within the minutes of the 1927 board
meeting was telling. As suggested by Marie Meloney’s initial recommendations to Hoover, the
relationship between the BHA’s national leaders and the local volunteers who interpreted and
executed their objectives was often fraught, and the parent initiative’s reliance on these voluntary
workers precluded any real victory in this struggle. A 1926 memorandum sent by James Ford
reveals the extent of this dependency by estimating the cost of local leaders’ voluntary labor at
$186,000, a figure the BHA’s director further translated into the “low,” individual wage of fifty
cents per day. 

Despite this friction within the BHA’s federated structure, the organization’s president
joined its other leaders in praising clubwomen’s contributions. Two years after the BHA’s
inception, Herbert Hoover commended clubwomen for doing “more than any other single agency
to make the demonstrations a success.” His congratulatory letter to GFWC President Sherman,
bestowed glowing complements “for the real public service” performed “[w]henever the
Federation encourages research on household problems, training of girls in modern housekeeping
methods, and cooperation with housekeepers who wish to make the best use of modern
methods.” In addition to the expediency of garnering newly enfranchised women’s electoral
support, Hoover’s commendations reflected a real commitment to women’s political equality.
Not one to waste resources, Hoover perceived women as essential participants in the civic

50 “Minutes of the Fifth (Fourth Annual) Meeting of the Board of Directors of Better Homes in America,”
12 February 1927, Commerce Papers, Box 65, Better Homes in America, Inc., 1927, HHPL. See also
Hutchison, 60.
51 Memorandum, James Ford to Marie Meloney, 14 January 1926, Commerce Papers, Box 65, HHPL.
52 Hoover to Mrs. John D. Sherman, 28 May 1924, Commerce Papers, Box 65, HHPL.
53 Kendrick A. Clements, “The New Era and the New Woman: Lou Henry Hoover and ‘Feminism’s
organizations and cooperative, local initiatives that sustained an American heritage of democratic self-government. This practicality reflected not only an engineer’s approach to resource management, but also the influence of his devout, Quaker mother. Widowed when Hoover was only six, Huldah Minthorn Hoover refused to let the care of three young children impede her calling to spread her faith across the Midwestern frontier. Her zealous devotion forced Hoover and his siblings to lead an equally itinerant life until Huldah Hoover’s untimely death left Hoover an orphan at the age of ten. Hoover would choose another intelligent, determined, and adventuresome woman as his spouse, and in Lou Henry Hoover, he found a valuable intellectual, humanitarian, and political partner.

Citing the influence of these spirited, capable women, Hoover’s friend and campaign biographer portrayed his subject as the epitome of republican disinterestedness and liberal rationality. While Jesse Hoover might have passed to his son an “interest in mechanics” as well his “sense of humor” and a “love of human contacts,” it was Huldah Hoover who endowed her son with his characterizing “idealism,” “unswerving integrity,” and “spiritual quality.”

Possessing these maternal inheritances, Hoover became in Irwin’s words “a quietly spoken, pleasantly mannered man with no ‘side’ about him,” a depiction that differed markedly from less sympathetic, anecdotal accounts of Hoover’s obstinacy and social deficiencies. Though Will Irwin’s text explicitly accounts here for Hoover’s decision to renounce his financial interests, it contrasts this altruistic commitment to the common good with the irrational greed and competitive aggression exhibited by many of his male contemporaries. Theirs were the short-sighted and selfish impulses that differed so greatly from Hoover’s discernment, “ingenuity and insight,” and “[t]he benevolent strength and common sense and modesty of him.” Inherited from

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his mother, these fundamentally liberal virtues constituted the foundation of Hoover’s perceived lack of pecuniary motives and his bipartisan independence. In Irwin’s *Reminiscent Biography*, men might have admired and resolved to emulate a tale of courage, determination, fortitude that evolved developmentally from independence into altruism. Yet, as Irwin suggested, women recognized a peer and because of this identity felt “a state of quiet enthusiasm for their leader.”

How could women feel anything but enthusiasm for a political leader who endeavored “to give greater dignity to the management of the home”? Scholars who have assessed the BHA’s activities during the 1920s and early 1930s have nevertheless argued that the organization contributed to a general retrenchment of traditional gender ideals and reinscribed a division of paid and domestic labor even as women increasingly occupied public roles as voters, consumers, professionals, and remunerated employees. The BHA’s rhetoric also frequently addressed men as homeowners and women as homemakers, as Karen Altman has argued. Yet, Hoover’s statements on the home’s creation suggest a more equivalent conception of this gendered distinction that hardly limited women to the sequestered ideological role their grandmothers had played in the Victorian home’s guardianship. Instead, Hoover praised “the average American home,” which heretofore had been “overlooked” as “the largest single industry in the world.” Within this “vast composite factory,” he acknowledged, “twenty million women toil[ed] every day of every year” without receiving any remuneration or real recognition for the incomparable “value of effort” and “importance of production” that they contributed to the national economy, which Hoover estimated at “ten billion dollars a year.”

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55 Irwin, 201-202.
56 Memorandum on Better Homes, circa 1924, marked unused in Commerce Papers, Box 65, HHPL.
57 Karen Altman has argued that the “BHA, as well as many other conservative organizations during the 1920s, worked against women’s political gains and economic advances.” Altman, “Consuming Ideology: The Better Homes in America Campaign.” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3, no. 7 (September 1990): 294.
58 Memorandum on Better Homes, circa 1924, marked unused, Commerce Papers, Box 65, HHPL.
If Hoover used his penchant for facts and figures to quantify women’s domestic labor, the value of their product remained essentially and necessarily intangible. “Can it [the home] not be called the spiritual treasury of the world?” Hoover asked. “What matter it,” he reiterated, “if a nation be great in industry, in commerce, in politics if it be not also great in its homes?” These rhetorical questions underscored the significance of the better home’s extra-market value, and posed in an effort to enlist women’s support for the BHA’s initiatives, they led Hoover to identify homemaking women as the source of this ineffable worth. “[T]he real contribution these women make to life,” Hoover proclaimed, “is above computation.”59 Women’s labor enabled families to acquire homes, but even more important, it yielded the “large distinction” between house and home that both expressed and secured men’s attachment to American ideals and their consensual submission to the state that secured them.60

This valorization of women’s domestic activities appears at first glance to deny Hoover’s initial recognition of women’s labor value, for it seemed to summon a nineteenth-century trope of feminine virtue and its accompanying paternalistic ghost. Yet, Hoover’s meaning was not quite so anachronistic. Safeguarding the liberal virtues of self-restraint, propriety, temperance, and empathy hardly required equating women with the home and construing their political and economic activities as illegitimate.61 Such antiquated logic rang hollow in the emergent socioeconomic and cultural context that reciprocally required modernizing the home to accommodate evolving gender roles and revising the representations of feminine labor needed to

59 Ibid.
60 Hoover, “The Home as an Investment,” in Better Homes in America, Plan Book for Demonstration Week, October 9 to 14, 1922, 10.
61 This claim refutes James Kloppenberg’s lament that the virtues associated with liberalism became privatized in the mid-nineteenth century and equated with women’s sexual virtue. As literary historians Gillian Brown and Elizabeth Dillon have argued, this privatization facilitated the preservation of liberal selfhood within an expanding market economy by enabling male citizens paradoxically to claim the attributes required of both economic and political behavior. This rendering of subjectivity served to facilitate the articulation of a liberal-capital episteme, reconciling the potential inconsistencies and points of contradiction that emerged in the inter-articulation of liberal and capitalist discourse. James Kloppenberg, 35; Gillian Brown, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon, The Gender of Freedom: Fictions of Liberalism and the Literary Public Sphere (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).
create a new domestic ideal. Within the liberal narrative that Hoover recounted, he implicitly refused to draw upon a burgeoning cultural myth that elided women’s essential presence in unsettled lands. Hoover was, after all, the son of a resolute Iowa frontierswoman, and his wife had not only created homes for him around the globe, but also defended one of them during China’s Boxer Rebellion. Throughout the nation’s past, a longing for home had compelled both men and women to delimit their absolute liberty through gendered labors that allowed for “purposeful saving” so that together they might acquire the architectural embodiment of the restrained liberty that founded a nation of ordered freedom.62 “A husband and wife who own their home,” Hoover emphasized elsewhere, were “more apt to save.” Out of the reciprocal, ethical responsibilities of owning and making a home, this self-disciplined couple developed “an interest in the advancement of a social system that permits the individual to store up the fruits of his labor,” and “[a]s direct taxpayers, they take a more active part in local government.”63 This logic suggests that, for Hoover, homemaking women enacted liberal values and virtues as authentically as homeowning men in the liberal subject’s sequential movement from private property to public participation. These passages also help to illustrate that never did he perceive the better home as identical to a maternal creator. Instead, Hoover and the home economists who echoed his rhetoric identified the site of liberalism’s origin and preservation as the product of women’s initiative and their acknowledged labor.

The Domestic Factory

Because Hoover’s conception of the better home characterized women as protagonists in a developmental narrative of American liberalism, it helps to explain the vigor with which home economists and clubwomen embraced the BHA’s agenda to promote the ownership of modernized houses. This argument acknowledges that Hoover’s political and humanitarian

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63 John M. Gries and James S. Taylor, How to Own Your Own Home (Washington, DC: Better Homes in America, 1924), v-vi.
objectives as well as the bureaucratic expansion these entailed created opportunities for professional women to promote their own policy initiatives and occupy new institutional roles.\textsuperscript{64} It expands upon this analysis, however, by focusing on the representational opportunities that, accompanying the home’s early twentieth-century rehabilitation, seemingly enabled women to cast themselves as not simply politically equal, but as identical political subjects. Herbert Hoover’s musings on the partnership that home ownership required of husbands and wives once again illustrates why home economists endeavored to signify this identity by asserting the equivalency of men’s and women’s labor. Attempting to reconcile modern expressions of liberty with traditional forms of restraint, Hoover averred that homeownership supplied the modern man with “a more constructive aim in life,” a reason to work harder, and to spend “his leisure more profitably.” If possessing a better home promised men the principled pleasure of a comfortable chair in exchange for economic productivity, it supplied a very different form of gratification for the women charged with constructing this retreat. According to Hoover, women’s responsibility in the domestic enterprise of home ownership entailed the obligation to spend “[h]ours . . . making improvements that beautify [the home] or lighten the burden of housekeeping” and to acquire the “wider knowledge” essential for making wise selections from an unprecedented “range of alternatives.”\textsuperscript{65}

This touted ability to spend “leisure more profitably” and thus pleasurably nevertheless depended entirely upon the “hours” that women invested in making their homes more appealing and comfortable. Because the appearance of male self-discipline originated in a homemaker’s own principled labor, many home economists and domestic advisers were compelled to represent women’s autonomy through the performance of scientific housekeeping. Seizing upon Hoover’s insistence that Americans must no longer overlook the economic and political significance of “the

\textsuperscript{64} This is Robyn Muncy’s argument in \textit{Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935}.
\textsuperscript{65} Gries and Taylor, \textit{How to Own Your Own Home}, v-vi.
laundry and the kitchen,” these experts turned their attention to these household sites to capitalize on Hoover’s admission that women’s disciplined labor bore both quantifiable value and rational motives that homemakers might claim as their own.\textsuperscript{66} The kitchen seemed particularly deserving of reformers’ attention, and they sought to transform a work area where bad habits and germs had once proliferated into an exemplar of productivity, efficiency, and cleanliness.

The changes home economists advocated in the kitchen’s size and organization were intertwined with the modernization of the home’s function. The watchwords of efficiency and convenience had entered into common usage for housewives, architects, and social reformers prior to the 1920s; however, these values became a material reality only after the public and private initiatives to expand rates of homeownership catalyzed that decade’s revolution in domestic architecture. No longer a “big, ungainly room,” the “small, efficient” modern kitchen illustrates how shrinking square footage helped to make the middle-class home more affordable.\textsuperscript{67} Wasted space was a luxury the family of modest means could little afford, and only through its rational organization and configuration could the modern kitchen accommodate the people and things packed into it. In addition to reducing the kitchen’s dimensions, modern house plans eliminated pantries and dining rooms, offering broom closets and breakfast nooks in their stead. Walk-in pantries were also replaced either by built-in or modular Hoosier cabinets that lined the

\textsuperscript{66} Herbert Hoover, “The Home as an Investment,” 10.

\textsuperscript{67} Architects’ Small House Service Bureau. \textit{Better Homes in America: Plan Book of Small Homes (Three, Four, Five and Six Rooms)} (Washington, DC: Better Homes in America, 1924). Prepared for the BHA, this guidebook presented several plans for houses containing between three and six rooms. The kitchens ranged from approximately 105 to 130 square feet. The larger kitchens included eating areas and generally appeared in homes lacking a dining room. For a description of the larger, inefficient kitchens of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Olive Blair Graffam, “’They Are Very Handy:’ Kitchen Furnishings, 1875-1920,” in \textit{The American Home: Material Culture, Domestic Space, and Family Life}, ed. Eleanor McD. Thompson (Hanover, New Hampshire: The University Press of New England, ?), 217-240. Graham argues that, although efficiency and convenience had entered the lexicon used by housewives, architects, and social reformers prior to the 1920s, these values did not become a material reality until that decade.
kitchen walls, and the butler’s pantry similarly proved unnecessary in a house that lacked servants and in a kitchen that had gradually become “public domestic space.”

The modern kitchen incorporated many typical features that reflected the decade’s general emphasis on enhancing productivity by eliminating the waste of time, energy, and materials. Meeting the demand for factory-like efficiency, the “continuous kitchen” organized its artifacts—cabinets, appliances, sinks, and stoves—into a series of logically arranged, linear workstations. The sink commonly stood beneath a window to ensure adequate light and ventilation, and as the twentieth-century’s third decade progressed, it was increasingly linked by a countertop to base cabinets that flanked the sink on both sides. These storage units, which were increasingly viewed as two independent planes horizontally dividing the kitchen, served as both the kitchen’s furnishings and its distinctive architectural features. For their countertops’ standardized height, housewives of average size had efficiency experts such as Christine Frederick and Lillian Gilbreth to thank. Gilbreth modeled this innovation and others in the demonstration kitchen that she planned for the Herald Tribune Institute. In the words of journalist Elizabeth Russell, Gilbreth’s design was “as near perfection as possible.” Although many features evoked Russell’s enthusiasm, one deserved especial emphasis. The demonstration’s kitchen’s “circular work space” enabled the Tribune’s food expert to “stand on one particular spot and prepare any given dish with about half the motions generally used in an unrouted kitchen.” Russell advised her readers that perusing “plans and photographs of carefully

68 Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, 44; For a contrast between the modern kitchen imagined as “public” space and the nineteenth-century kitchen, see Kyla Wazana Tompkins, Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century (New York: New York University Press, 2012), Chapter One. Tompkins demonstrates through textual and architectural analysis how the nineteenth-century kitchen became increasingly associated with the racially minoritized, feminine bodies who labored there. As a consequence, it assumed a “hyperviscerality” and lack of economic value, while also freeing white women to engage in middle-class and nationalistic performances of polite respectability that were staged in rooms designed for public and social use. The kitchen was, she concludes, crucial to the construction of whiteness. This ideological function remained true in the early twentieth century, as did Tompkins’s claim that the kitchen was “the space within the house where the politics of both the public sphere and the home are most contentious and visible.” (10)
thought out kitchens” would supply much needed “inspiration” and enable them to avoid the kitchen’s “usual haphazard arrangement” that, in wasting excessive amounts of time and energy, compromised women’s productivity and overall happiness.69

The modern kitchen’s efficient arrangement also evinced the discoveries made in Frederick’s and Gilbreth’s time-and-motion studies. Countertops, steps, minutes—every element of a housewife’s daily routine was subject to measurement. The Bureau of Home Economics conducted one such analysis in which investigators used a “photo-electric eye” to determine the amount of time spent at and the number of trips made to the kitchen sink. Records for eight suburban homes participating in the study indicated that women worked between 38 and 152 minutes at the kitchen sink and that family members traveled between 32 and 217 times to that location. A careful examination of these findings revealed ways of minimizing the time women spent washing dishes without compromising the quality of their labor.70 Despite its standardizing and rationalizing consequences for women’s household activities, this impetus for recording dimensions related to time and space reflected a recognition that truly efficient kitchens were ideally adapted both to the homemaker’s individual frame and to her family’s size and unique needs. For this reason, the process of rationalizing both domestic labor and the “one woman-power kitchen” in which it principally occurred needed to begin with a tape measure and a notebook.71

Following the lead of efficiency experts such as Lillian Gilbreth and Christine Frederick, the BHA’s national organization and its local affiliates published many recommendations on efficiently designed and hygienically managed kitchens. Reporting to its parent organization in 1925, a committee operating in Hartwell, Georgia, announced, “184 homes, emphasizing

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71 Leavitt, 55, 56.
kitchens, [were] made more convenient.” For the “[t]housands of people” who toured the Atlanta demonstration house in the same year, “the kitchen of Home No. 1 attracted more attention than any other room.” Exclaiming over the kitchen’s popularity, the report’s author expressed her confidence that the kitchen’s convenient design promised to become a feature in “[m]any an Atlanta home.” The report continued by conveying one admirer’s urgency to know “where she could buy the (built-in) kitchen cabinets” and her intention to build “a house like this one in every detail.” This convert apparently had much competition as “people with tape measures actually got in each other’s way” in their efforts to record the demonstration kitchen’s precise dimensions. A decade later, the BHA touted its success at encouraging 72,876 families to “improve” their kitchens.

For further guidance, BHA manuals directed local organizers and participants to consult official pamphlets such as “How to Furnish the Small House.” First printed in 1924, this pamphlet reproduced the guidelines for a “model kitchen” that the Bureau of Home Economics had prepared for the previous year’s guidebook. An imperative of efficiency dictated this ideal kitchen’s conceptualization, and no detail was too small to escape the attention of women who needed every second that a properly organized kitchen might spare. To this end, the booklet recommended, “The first consideration in arranging kitchen equipment is to save steps and labor.” Readers were left with few doubts about what the efficiently outfitted kitchen should contain, even down to the smallest utensils and their proper arrangement and storage. In addition to being rationally organized, a better home’s “kitchen should be clean, odorless, and attractive,” the pamphlet counseled. An illustrative photograph suggested that dishes and serving pieces—

72 Results of the Better Homes in America Campaign of 1925, 4, Commerce Papers, Box 65, HHPL.
73 Better Homes in America, Guidebook of Better Homes in America: How to Organize the 1926 Campaign, 43.
74 Better Homes in America Annual Report, 1 July 1936, 2, JST Papers, Box 3, “Minutes & Reports, 1936 & undated, HHPL.
75 Mrs. Charles Bradley Sanders, How to Furnish the Small House, no. 3 (Washington, DC: Better Homes in America, 1924), 26.
though not enough to create the impression of clutter—be displayed in a cupboard situated “left of [the] sink.” These utilitarian items possibly added touches of color and finery to a standardized space that derived its remaining character from linoleum, dish towels, and curtains. These elements helped enliven light or white walls and cabinets, though not at the expense of sanitation. Rounding out the room’s essential accessories was a clock featuring “simple . . . clear figures” and hung “within sight of [the] stove” so that a busy “worker” might assess her progress without the wasted movement of “turning around.”

Because of prescriptive pamphlets such as these, the BHA’s Blanche Halbert advised local committees that “[t]he requirements for a convenient, comfortable and attractive kitchen are now common knowledge.” The BHA’s reports nevertheless suggest that “common knowledge” did not always translate into popular support, for on the issue of the kitchen’s appropriate square footage, BHA organizers and the local women they sought to help apparently parted company. The BHA’s informational pamphlet advised, for example, that the kitchen should be a compact working space, one that measured “[n]o more than 120 square feet of working space for preparing food and washing dishes.” In significantly reducing the Victorian kitchen’s cumbersome size and superfluous space, this recommendation echoed those widely found in other publications. One housing design approved by the Architects’ Small House Service allowed only 11’ X 10’ for the kitchen. Despite the intention to ease homemaker’s burdens and improve their working conditions, women protested the shrinking square footage of the space where they spent the greater balance of their days. If some experts entered women’s work spaces to measure and improve their performance of domestic tasks, others used their notebooks and pencils to gauge

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76 Ibid., 27.
77 “Home Improvement Contests,” BHA, Leaflet no. 1, February 1930, Presidential Papers, Box 73, HHPL.
78 Sanders, 26.
79 Maurice I. Flagg, “When You Build—Build Right,” Good Housekeeping, March 1923, 37. The ASHA design measured 13’ X 23’
beneficiaries’ satisfaction with these efforts. In one such survey, respondents overwhelmingly agreed that they longed for a larger kitchen.\(^{80}\)

The BHA’s guidebooks and reports similarly conceded that, due to the multiplicity of productive tasks they were obliged to perform, farmers’ wives were justifiably attached to larger kitchens. Despite this apparent acceptance of large kitchens as the rule for rural households, BHA officials joined many home economists in urging farmwomen to adopt suburban standards.\(^{81}\) As suggested by one BHA tract for organizing rural campaigns, a “dingy, inconvenient farm kitchen” threatened to “wear out the housewife who used it.”\(^{82}\) A study prepared for a White House housing conference echoed this warning: “If these people who remember only the glories of the large farm kitchen should have to work in it day after day, they would find that extra steps and fatigue do not compensate for the enjoyment one secures from using the kitchen as the family gathering place. Living rooms today are used for this purpose.”\(^{83}\)

Issuing an admonishment akin to those directed toward recent immigrants, this critic of traditional, rural life expressed her conviction that more convivial activities simply did not belong in a space designated only for women’s increasingly unassisted labor. While modern designs occasionally incorporated an adjoining breakfast nook, most featured a compact kitchen that forced families to gather in the more generously sized living room while mother finished her dishes alone. Acknowledging this isolation, one group of home economists proposed that, in addition to meeting demands for safety, hygiene, storage, and efficiency in the performance of

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81 Mary S. Hoffschwelle, *Rebuilding the Rural Southern Community: Reformers, Schools, and Homes in Tennessee, 1900-1930* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 137-140. In her brief discussion of the BHA’s operation in rural Tennessee, Mary Hoffschwelle argues that the BHA’s annual campaigns were vigorously supported by federal and state extension services. The proposed reforms nevertheless remained financially out of reach for most rural women.
concurrent tasks, the kitchen might be located adjacent to a multi-purpose room so that “music, conversation, or play may enliven the routine, and where supervision of young children seems incidental to the work being done.”

What home economists also acknowledged was that homemaking and moneymaking were hardly commensurate forms of labor despite their efforts to depict them as comparable. The homemaker might possess skills equivalent to those of both a skilled industrial worker and an experienced corporate manager; nevertheless, her domestic enterprise bore little resemblance to her husband’s workplace. Where a predictable schedule and discrete separation of tasks prevailed in his domain, hers was defined by its fluidity and a multiplicity of variable tasks that necessitated constant adaptation and flexibility. Even though she spent the majority of her hours at home, the modern homemaker was most definitely not “a lady of leisure.” In fact, one BHE survey revealed that the vast majority of its respondents devoted over fifty hours per week to household duties. While women living in large urban areas clocked less time than their rural counterparts, the access to assistance they enjoyed actually increased the amount of time that homemaking tasks consumed within their households. Similar to labor-saving devices, then, receiving help from family members, servants, or commercial services enabled women to work more methodically and comfortably, elevated the standards they expected to attain, and allowed them to invest more time in childcare and service activities. Women with young infants endured the most consuming responsibilities, however, as these charges generally added ten or more hours to a mother’s work week. Small children wreaked havoc on more than a mother’s opportunities for rest and

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85 Journal of Home Economics (October 1929): 745-746; Fisher, 8-9; Jean Muir Dorsey, “Time Spent in Homemaking Tasks,” in Household Management and Kitchens, 29-31. Unlike the other professional home economists who worked either for the Bureau of Home Economics or as educators, Dorsey was identified as a homemaker from Urbana, Illinois.
recreation; they also created constant interruptions, which made it all the more important to “have the various work centers within easy reach.”

Embedded within home economists’ recommendations for enhancing the efficiency of women’s labor is the recognition that, short of revolutionizing the economy and the household, they could do little to alter the breadth of women’s domestic responsibilities. The obstacles making the alteration of women’s tasks an unfeasible goal were relatively easy to identify, namely a lack of employment opportunities for women and inadequate wages for men that prevented the use of commercial services. Together, these conditions of insufficiency—one of opportunity and another of support—left the homemaker “withheld from gainful employment by the necessity for caring for children,” and in such circumstances, she “tend[ed] to fill up her day with productive household labor,” particularly “those activities which are most interesting or pleasant or whose products are most expensive to buy.” Even when pleasantly engaged in their domestic work, women faced the very real danger that “[t]he proportion of time and labor claimed by housekeeping may become excessive.” Portraying this threat as an inevitability, one group of home economists concluded that an undue amount of work diminished any satisfaction homemakers might find in their daily routines, for “[c]ontentment is possible only when standards can be reasonably well attained without undue strain.”

Seemingly unable to change either the types of labor delegated to women or their quantity, home economists pursued a tripartite approach that sought to quantify the value of homemaking, improve the conditions under which it was performed, and eliminate the

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87 “Work Center Trends and Progress, 155.
88 Fisher, 12.
psychological and physical stress it created. This strategy helps to show that home economists viewed their efforts to reform and regulate the kitchen’s design as a labor issue. As one government sponsored report argued, given that “at least one-fifth of the population doubtless spend a large portion of the working day in kitchens and other work centers, the actual condition under which the work is carried on is of vital importance.”\footnote{“Existing Conditions and Problems in Work-Area Planning,” in \textit{Household Management and Kitchens}, 150.} The report’s authors disclaimed any intent to speed up the production process within the domestic factory; instead, they sought to improve women’s working environment so that more satisfied and well-rested mothers might better maintain not only the family’s standard of living, but also “standards in health, happiness and character development.”\footnote{Ibid.} Fatigue and discontent carried numerous costs for women, for their families, and for the nation, and tackling these consequences of women’s labor rather than their systemic causes, home economists promoted an “economy of effort” that required “comfortable clothing, adequate tools, rest pauses in work, and frequent changes of work.”\footnote{“Meeting the Fundamental Needs of the Modern Family,” in \textit{Household Management and Kitchens}, 2.}

In promulgating this “economy of effort,” home economists and their allies also promoted the scientifically informed standards of household management that enabled them to use their re-designed work space and its equipment most effectively. A report issued by Atlanta’s Better Homes in America committee lamented, for example, the harmful effects that homemakers’ “inadequate knowledge of household management, budgeting, and household operations” created for women and their families. To help ameliorate the deficits of information and skill, the committee constructed and furnished a six-room colonial. Upon arriving at the demonstration house, “[v]isitors were led through the house by hostesses who explained its advantages and distributed booklets containing lists of furnishings for each room, with their costs, and a budget for the family for which the house was intended.”\footnote{Better Homes in America, \textit{How to Organize the 1926 Campaign}, 43.} A subsequent guidebook

\[\text{\footnotesize 89} \text{ “Existing Conditions and Problems in Work-Area Planning,” in} \text{ \textit{Household Management and Kitchens}, 150.} \]
\[\text{\footnotesize 90} \text{ Ibid.} \]
\[\text{\footnotesize 91} \text{ “Meeting the Fundamental Needs of the Modern Family,” in} \text{ \textit{Household Management and Kitchens}, 2.} \]
\[\text{\footnotesize 92} \text{ Better Homes in America, \textit{How to Organize the 1926 Campaign}, 43.} \]
indicated that sample expense plans such as the one created by Atlanta’s committee offered “[a]n excellent way of educating the public in scientific management.”93 This educational initiative was essential, for it targeted those women who “suffer[ed] from needless drudgery due to lack of knowledge of labor-saving devices or of the best ways of arranging furniture and utensils to facilitate housework.”94

When viewed through the context of labor reform, such oft-repeated concerns for women’s suffering, drudgery, and fatigue signal an effort to create a division of labor and leisure for women that their husbands enjoyed when they returned home each evening to lounge in their comfortable chairs. Women who reported laboring up to seventy-five hours each week—a number that home economists suspected was underestimated—hardly had time to throw themselves down on the living room davenport. Scientific housekeeping functioned to codify and improve women’s performance of prescriptive domestic obligations; however, it was also intended to conserve their time, their energy, and thus their interest in and enjoyment of their household work. Compiled by the home economists participating in Hoover’s Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, the report cited above wasted few of its pages on enumerating women’s faults and suggesting methods for their remediation. Its authors alternatively focused on the apparently more pressing problem of restoring an affective investment in domestic labor that women reportedly regarded as increasingly isolating, onerous, and even unfair.

Following a standardized schedule thus disciplined women to the regimen of a judgmental expert for the purpose of liberating them. Adapted to women’s particular needs, the rationalization of domestic labor supplied, home economists argued, a rational means of

94 Those frequently cited reasons are quoted from Better Homes in America, Guidebook for Better Homes Campaigns, no. 8 (Washington, DC: Better Homes in America, 1924), 10.
assuaging a reported “uncertainty and nervous strain in housework” by arousing the more independent and efficacious “feeling of mastery and confidence.” The adoption of efficient routines lessened “psychological fatigue,” the committee argued, “through replacing confusion by order, aimless worry by purposeful activity, and weariness by interest and increased pleasure in performing the task.” Just as scientific methods ostensibly helped to make homemaking itself more enjoyable, they also responded to overworked women’s need for “[a] definite time for rest and recreation, and the balancing of work and rest periods so as to eliminate unnecessary fatigue.” These moments of leisure not only included numerous breaks in the housewife’s workday, but also opportunities to participate in social, civic, and consumer activities that occurred outside the home.95 Without even a rudimentary reorganization of domestic tasks, satisfaction and enjoyment would continue to elude the feminine workers charged with performing household duties, and in the absence of a homemaker’s pleasure and fulfillment, the intangible rewards of home would remain equally elusive for the family members who depended upon all that she invested in “the creation of a home.” Quoting from a manual by this title, one of the report’s authors reiterated her colleagues’ insistence that scientific housekeeping served to achieve this goal by maintaining women’s affective motives for performing domestic labor and thus her ability to create a true home:

“‘[T]he [successful] house must be run in work hours. It must, at some certain period in the day, cease to be a workshop and become a product. And this it can only do if the homemaker herself cease at the same period to be workman and become detached from her job. The homemaker who does this will not make a cult of homemaking . . . She will see it as it is, useful, important, but not an end in itself.’”96

Although greater efficiency was meant to engender a sense of control, happiness, and autonomy that reanimated homemaking labor and the homes it produced, it also prevented women from detaching themselves from an incessant process of production. Rather than reduce the fatigue and stress wrought by long hours and an endless list of chores, the standards of

efficiency and hygiene served only to heighten the demands on women’s time, to raise they standards they felt compelled to meet, and to reinforce the increasingly isolated conditions of women’s household work. One advocate of “[s]aving steps in the kitchen” recommended, for example, filling unused space with a “planning desk” where a modern homemaker might “sit at her ease” while paying bills, conducting business via telephone, or copying recipes and household hints gleaned from the nearby radio.97 The BHA’s kitchen expert similarly encouraged women to express their individuality by selecting a “comfortable chair, footrest and small table for books and sewing” to adorn a “little-used” alcove where they might enjoy a brief moment of “rest and recreation while waiting for food to cook.”98 Efficiency thus functioned to carve out a few moments of rest in a workday that was never done; yet, as one efficiency expert counseled, such routine breaks were ultimately “of prime importance in increasing the output of work.”99 Intended either to conserve energy or to improve skills, these brief respites occurred in a small corner of the kitchen in view of a clock that further helped to discipline a homemaker’s embodied labor and longings.

Due to the disempowering and enervating consequences of home economists’ attempts to standardize and improve the performance of women’s domestic labor, scholars have reached ambivalent conclusions about their zealous pursuit of efficiency in the name of reform. While home economists held out the carrot of leisure, pleasure, and thereby privacy to justify their objectives, they just as often wielded the stick of judgment and disapprobation to compel women’s compliance with the juridical standards for domestic tasks—measures of a performance that reconstituted a compulsory division of gendered labor. Scholars of women’s professionalization have also argued that those seeking institutional and professional authority

98 Sanders, 27.
ultimately demeaned the workers these reformers intended to empower and dignify by insisting upon the superiority of scientific knowledge and method over intuition and instinct. Relative to the principles of modern homemaking, white, middle-class, suburban women particularly felt the weight of home economists’ higher expectations, which circulating within secondary classrooms and the popular press, proved increasingly difficult for them to achieve despite their privileged access to labor saving devices and other consumer conveniences. Their less advantaged working-class, immigrant, and rural counterparts were, however, more often the specific targets of didactic programs designed to inculcate the culturally homogenizing, regulatory techniques of modern housekeeping that were shaped by white reformers’ personal ambitions, but also as by their ethnic, class, and educational biases.

While professional home economists and often the volunteers who assisted them might have sought to empower themselves by asserting their expertise and their worldview at the expense of their female clients and students, their actions must also be read as symptomatic of liberal discourse, particularly its deployment of feminine ideals that were enacted through homemaking labor. Of the nineteenth-century, literary historian Gillian Brown has argued that, inscribed in a perceived binary of public and private space, gendered oppositions actually created a type of subjective androgyne that enabled nineteenth-century men to claim the attributes of virtuous restraint symbolically equated with a feminized domestic haven as a means of sustaining rather than diminishing their claims to male autonomy, rationality, and authority within the public worlds of work and politics. Brown attributes the political strategies of the nineteenth-century’s domestic reformers to this gendered equivocation embedded within liberal subjectivity. These activists attempted to legitimate their demands for political entitlement and equality by underscoring the imperative of restraint fundamental to liberal individualism and by emphasizing that this capacity for self-governing independence was itself a feminine attribute. Brown’s

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100 Brown, 4-5.
colleague, Elizabeth Dillon, has further explained how this justification for women’s equality was ultimately stymied by women’s relegation within liberalism’s developmental narrative to a supposedly pre-political domain. The dichotomization of gender and space functioned within liberal discourse to focus male desire on a domestic sphere created by women’s labor, and this regulating sublimation paradoxically freed white men to engage in rational relations of exchange among disembodied equals.

The home’s historical purpose within the discourse of American liberalism was thus to discipline the desire that it also served to evoke. This ambivalent and fetishistic function rendered the home a reprisal of an atavistically maternal and sexualized state of nature that incited men’s desire and catalyzed their initiative by preserving a hypothesized, pre-political condition of liberty. Quelling derivative fears about both male debauchery and debility in an uncivilized, natural condition prompted the repackaging of maternity’s evocative power in the subjugated, but equally productive, archetype of the virtuous mother. Conflated with the sentimental haven built out of her loving devotion, this figure continued to wield power over men; however, her idealized spatial confinement and the evacuation of her labor’s monetary value also signified the symbolic remnants of patriarchal possession. When examined relative to this paradigm of the home’s role in the legitimizing narrative of liberal discourse, home economists’ efforts to rationalize women’s domestic labor rejected both this mode of signifying gender opposition as well as the dichotomous conception of difference itself. Yet, in issuing this challenge, they reasserted women’s ideological responsibility for cultivating the restraint within male subjects that enabled them to progress sequentially from self-possession to consensual self-governance. Rationalizing women’s domestic labor and subjecting it to the purview of expert authority thus attempted to empower women, but due to the imperative of restraint within liberal subjectivity, it also not only helped to assuage concerns about New Era women’s freedom, but also renewed the function of women’s discipline to cultivate male political virtue. This
ideological service required disavowing—both sustaining and mitigating—the evocative power of a feminized material plenitude by restoring homemaking as the catalyst of male discipline.\(^{101}\)

The ambivalent connotations of power and repression embedded within women’s ideological role and the feminine ideals through which it operated enabled home economists to emphasize the rewards that women would derive from fulfilling a traditional responsibility to cultivate discipline within men. As the case of Evangeline Knapp helps to illustrate, transforming a house into a home and its desiring inhabitants into liberal subjects required women to perceive their labor as affectively motivated and, therefore, voluntary. Home economists reminded women that each of their domestic tasks acted out “a more basic motive, that of the optimum development of each individual member of the family.” Because of this goal, the measure of a woman’s work and her worth would be taken “in the end by the type of human beings that emerge from the home.” Achieving this nationally paramount objective required that the home serve “its primary purpose—that of giving comfort, peace, and beauty, sufficiently in proportion to giving of its inmates what is to them ‘the good life.’”\(^{102}\) The home’s capacity to realize this function depended, of course, upon “‘the best homemaking’ comprised of ‘‘an intelligent, affectionate effort to help others to attain as nearly as possible to completeness of life by securing for them those essentials of good living which they cannot obtain in others ways as well or better.’”\(^{103}\)

Though these words sounded a familiar ring, they offered a very different explanation of the affective motives of women’s labor and the extra-market value it produced. Having absorbed the implicit lessons of Catharine Beecher’s advice manuals and the sentimental novels written by

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102 Fisher, 9, 4.
103 Ibid., 9. In articulating the purpose of home economics, Fisher quoted Caroline L. Hunt, whom she called one of the “great pioneers and interpreters in the field of home economics.”
her sister Harriet Beecher Stowe, a generation of nineteenth-century activists had asserted that the home derived its essential value from the investment of women’s selfless caretaking. Though biology presumably continued to inspire modern women to work for the health and welfare of their families, it drew additional force from a less essentially feminine intent. For modern women, homemaking remained “an outlet for the spirit of service that is the basis of a happy home;” however, in establishing the significance of household management for the White House conference on homeownership, the legitimizing voice of Secretary of the Interior Ray Lyman Wilbur also acknowledged that this “[w]ork becomes a joy when facilitated by intelligent planning.”

Wilbur’s introduction set the tone for the reports that followed not only by suggesting that the pleasure of homemaking originated in the rationality of its performance, but also by implying that the home’s essential value and purpose was predicated on a very individualized sense of volition and gratification. Further explicating this shift, one committee member argued, “[T]he rich heritage of the past should serve as the basis upon which scientific procedures of the modern age may be established.” Still, the tradition to which the home economist Elizabeth Russell referred was a less explicitly maternal and sacrificial “pride in achievement, the attitude that in work there is opportunity for self-expression and enduring satisfactions.” Incorporating the principles of home economics into the household’s management thus promised to fulfill Ellen Richards’s intent to “free the spirit for the most important and permanent interests of the home and of society.”

Here, the spirit to whom Russell referred appears initially oblique, but in her explanation of the linked personal and national significance of scientific housekeeping, it becomes clear that a family’s fate was inextricably entwined with both how and why a homemaker performed her ascribed labor. Only by eliminating the debilitating toil, fatigue, and

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105 Richards is quoted in Fisher, 8.
psychological strain of their domestic work could women aim to achieve the high standards that, in transforming the business of making homes into a personally rewarding venture, served this liberal institution’s ultimate purpose to cultivate “right attitudes on the part of members of the family.”

These “right attitudes” in family members thus seemingly depended upon freeing the homemaker’s spirit by making her domestic tasks a mode of expressing desires for independence and authority. To enhance the personal rewards and preserve the social effects of domestic labor, home economists asserted a division between labor and leisure for women within the home itself. Addressing inefficiencies and discomforts within the kitchen’s design and the labors performed there theoretically enabled women to experience privacy within their homes by sinking into their own attractive, comfortable chairs even if only for a brief moment. Given the unceasing nature of homemaking and the multiplicity of its responsibilities, however, dividing labor itself into habitual and rational components seemed a more effective strategy for manifesting women’s autonomy through labor that home economists implicitly recognized as compulsory, inescapable, and often servile. Establishing the monetary value of housekeeping, these professionals emphasized that a homemaker’s tasks were potentially as rationalized as those executed by the most productive industrial workers. Yet, in contrast to unskilled laborers, homemakers were also highly knowledgeable, and the degree of discipline they demonstrated in the execution of routine activities reflected not the oversight of a supervisor’s gaze, but rather the managerial responsibilities they voluntarily assumed.

Home economists’ emphasis on the reason and volition that homemaking required and the individualizing rewards it offered illuminates their efforts to represent this form of feminine labor as a mode of liberal subjectivity. While they acknowledged that “[h]omemaking is made up

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of routine household tasks” requiring “manipulative skill,” one report outlining the homemaker’s responsibilities also argued that women’s traditional occupation now demanded “skillful, judicious, imaginative management.” This higher order facility, its author explained, “is based on the ability to make wise decisions and choices when confronted with optional situations. In other words, the homemaker is both the worker and the manager, the skilled craftsman and the pattern maker.”

Due to homemaking’s characteristic variability, the director of the Good Housekeeping Institute similarly counseled women that, to order a “housekeeping routine . . . made up of a comparatively large number of somewhat loosely-related activities,” women must assume the roles of “both the executive or manager, and the worker. She must plan the work and work the plan.” Self-management required “executive ability,” and if applied to the arrangement and execution of routine domestic tasks, this penchant for rationality created further “‘management moments’” wherein “the worker is left free while performing these tasks to plan ahead.”

Bringing order and focus to an occupation that had traditionally wrought worry, fatigue, discomfort, and unhappiness thus freed women to direct their energies and interests toward “those things which are apt to be considered secondary to the demand for food, clothing, and shelter.” Related to achieving the home’s affective purpose to promote individual privacy and familial harmony, these more elevated concerns rendered “[t]he business of managing a household” an occupation that entailed “the constant weighing of values.” This judicious process was made all the more important and fraught by the manifold decisions and choices that attended modern life. Home economists consequently declared, “The determination of real values is a managerial responsibility of homemaking.”

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108 Fisher, 5-6.
109 Ibid., 5; “Dorsey,” 29.
111 Fisher, 4.
labor was hardly a subjugated condition, but rather an expression of autonomy, reason, and volition that enabled women to perform the liberal subject’s quintessential task of deciphering and manifesting the “sound relative values” that served to harmonize their individual needs and aims with those of the various collectives to which they belonged.

By dividing household work into the roles of manager and laborer, home economists depicted homemaking women as identical to their home-owning husbands. Not only did men and women perform equivalent tasks, but homemakers were fundamentally self-governing liberal individuals. They, too, were private figures whose liberty and capacity for consent existed prior to the regulatory principles and compulsory labors governing freedom’s public pursuit. This politically strategic argument nevertheless foundered on the narrative structure that compelled it, for if liberalism’s line of fiction figured women as acting like the nation’s progenitors, it also denied their ability to embody this role fully. A husband’s and wife’s respective chairs—his located in the living room and hers in the kitchen—hold the key to understanding both the possibility of envisioning and the impossibility of attaining a marital partnership of ideological equals. As John Norton’s attachment to his large, comfortable chair helps to illustrate, male repose was admittedly an effect of women’s labor, but with adolescent self-absorption, John perceived Jane’s motives for creating a pleasurable home as a self-subordinating act of care. In contrast to John’s interpretation of the chair’s presence in his living room, Jane echoed the assertion that a man’s comfortable chair symbolized women’s rational comprehension of and commitment to the larger national aim of sustaining their husbands’ and children’s privacy—an embodied domain of generative creativity, individuality, initiative, and fulfillment wherein a liberal capacity for volition was cultivated. To Jane, the comfortable chair demonstrated that her husband’s proprietorship—John’s ability to command the chair and the home as an extension of his liberty—depended upon her recognition of its importance. These equivocations about the meaning and motives of the chair’s presence enabled John to claim ownership, while also
allowing Jane to see her own imprimatur in the chair—to conceive this furnishing’s presence and placement as signs of John’s reliance on her initiating agency and of her rational adherence to the liberal ideals and individual interests that the chair ultimately signified.

Due to these dueling interpretations, the living room chair possessed an affective, surplus value whose origin remained indeterminate. For both John and Jane—and for the men and women they represented—the chair’s supplementary meaning belied the subjugated condition of their labor and the imperative of their embodied discipline, enabling each to perceive their labor as a volitional investment yielding sensate rewards that included pleasure, but also authority, efficacy, and achievement. The big chair for a big man nevertheless remained an object to be occupied only by its intended user; it was a signifier that women could choose to make but never claim to own. John’s rest and Jane’s labor consequently remained fundamentally inequivalent, even though these embodied states of being admittedly manifested the same animating desires and politically qualifying capacities.

The types of pleasure deemed appropriate for women to experience at home further shows how modern women remained locked in an unequal, gendered relation of exchange that functioned to produce the ostensible autonomy and consent of another. Home economists’ awareness that women must also enjoy being at home found its echo in decorating texts that emphasized the appearance rather than the management of the kitchen. While the advice literature depicted men as finding satisfaction in the comfort of their chairs, their wives were alternatively portrayed as delighting in the amalgam of colors, textures, and lines that made even the utilitarian kitchen attractive. As decorator Emily Burbank explained, “A cheerful looking kitchen is very apt to make a cheerful feeling cook.” Because of décor’s effect on a woman’s mood, cultivating aesthetic appeal was essential, and to support this contention, Burbank asked, “Is there anything which so quickly demoralizes a home as an unhappy cook who takes no interest in the preparation of meals and ruins good materials?” In order to create homes for
others, women required more than “a spotlessly white-enameled kitchen,” for they too needed to feel at-home. Creating this sensate illusion in a working kitchen was nevertheless a more difficult feat, for as Burbank confessed, “Almost any one knows how to create an attractive living-room, but to work out a kitchen which is equally a ‘winner’ is a far more unique achievement.” The fundamental decorative principles continued to apply, and Burbank thus advised that the kitchen’s sterile environment could “be made more home-like and attractive with some color and a bit of real relaxing comfort such as a chair large enough for your cook to rest in.”

These recommendations reveal Burbank reiterating a possible division between labor and leisure as she cited the presence not only of “your cook,” but also of the quintessential symbol of autonomy and privacy, the comfortable chair. Yet, located within a small workspace, the chair Burbank suggested was merely “large enough” rather than “big” in proportion to those vessels where men such as John Norton lounged, and surely an audience with resources insufficient to hire a decorator could never afford a cook. These inconsistencies in Burbank’s text illuminate how descriptions of the kitchen’s décor endeavored to cast homemaking as voluntary rather than compulsory labor. Making evident the significance of this perception, Burbank emphasized that even in the kitchen a “cheerful winning appearance comes first, for the impression on entering any room is of great importance.” With the work that occurred within the kitchen obscured by its beauty, Burbank exclaimed of the woman who labored there, “How she can be induced to take even an afternoon off is what puzzles some of us!”¹¹³

This ability to escape for an afternoon depended not solely on women’s managerial efficiency, but as many advertisements implied, on the commodities produced by men. As an advertisement for Sealex Linoleums touted, “Every tiny pore of the material is sealed against dirt and spilled things.” “Awake with style,” these modern, impenetrable floor coverings required

¹¹³ Burbank, 137-139.
only “[a] whisk of a damp mop” to keep them “spotlessly clean.”

Unlike Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s description of a weary and resentful Evangeline Knapp, the modern homemaker depicted in this advertisement was as fashionable and carefree as the kitchen floor whose convenience enabled her to be so. Sketched by the pen of a creative illustrator, this metonymic juxtaposition of stylish floor and attractive woman nevertheless created a relationship of mutual dependency rather than one of identity between the industrial commodity and the female consumer. Through this depiction of a homemaker admiring an already clean floor rather than laboring to make it so, women could imagine the independence to be gained from the clear division of labor and leisure that the more easily maintained floor covering allowed. Having knowledgably selected and purchased a factory-made product that, in reducing the affective costs of her labor, enhanced its value and rationality, “the woman of the newer freedom and the greater achievement” anticipated the liberties to be rightfully enjoyed outside the walls of her domestic factory.

Yet, the homemaker’s freedom and achievement implicitly depended upon this industrial product, which she desired and maintained, but did not actually produce.

An advertisement for General Electric’s Monitor Top refrigerator similarly illustrates a tendency to represent consumer goods, particularly labor-saving devices, as indeterminately originating in both male initiative and female desire. While the creators of the first hermetically sealed refrigerator had seemed to develop the refrigerator’s innovations “[o]vernight,” they had actually worked steadily for “more than fifteen years” in “the vast laboratories of General Electric” to craft the appliance that, according to its advertisers, had come to occupy a “prominent place in the thoughts of homemakers.” The evolution of “this truly revolutionary refrigerator” reflected a “long and expensive process—but nowhere in the field of electric refrigeration,” its

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promoters exulted, “have engineers and scientists done their work so well.”

By the appearance of L. Ray Balderston’s promotional article in 1930, mechanical refrigeration had become affordable for many middle-class Americans. Touting its advantages to female consumers, Balderston celebrated “[t]he trinity of science, manufacture, and publicity” that had advanced the revolution underway in the nation’s households by generating a “neat,” “efficient,” and less worrisome appliance. This liberating transformation referred not simply to the technological innovations that had become available to American consumers, but more specifically to the alterations in women’s household labor that followed in their wake. In promoting the refrigerator, Balderston reiterated the emergent trope of women’s alleged release from the “drudgery of household tasks” due to their unique and enjoyable access to commodities that were “luxuries . . .in almost every other part of the world except America.” Through “the "gifts of science,” he proclaimed, women “have been made free” and consequently possessed the “leisure to think of affairs beyond their own four walls.” Despite the implication that men in white coats had rescued imprisoned women in the course of a scientific quest to innovate, Balderston also traced the origin of refrigeration’s development to “emancipated womanhood—which demands, and gets.”

Aimed at female consumers, these publicity materials reiterated home economists’ insistence that modernization promised to revolutionize household labor and thus the opportunities of American women. While home economists sought to empower women to lead this revolution through reforming the performance of household tasks and the conditions under which they were performed, manufacturers and their representatives claimed that men’s initiative and the labor into which it was channeled had chivalrously created women’s new state of

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freedom. It was their invention that, by liberating homemakers from excessively burdensome labor, enabled women to pursue entwined individual liberties and national aims through their newly rewarding, self-disciplined work within the home. Yet, within these testaments to male ingenuity and initiative, the source of the generative desire animating these labor-saving, woman-saving, and therefore home-saving and nation-saving commodities remained unclear. This indeterminacy rendered promotional materials such as Balderston’s a tacit reiteration of women’s dependency on men’s productive ingenuity; however, they also necessarily conveyed an appeal to the feminine consumers upon whom further progress and profit depended. To attract this interest, advertisements often depicted modern homemaking as home economists envisioned it, as an internally divided performance identical to that of liberal subjectivity. It was tellingly this incarnation of the ideal homemaker that, home economists argued, produced the private homes needed to sustain men’s own supposed drive to produce.

Home economists and advertisers were thus engaged in an implicit battle to determine the gendered origins of the nation’s political independence and economic productivity. Winning this struggle to define the source of what catalyzed and animated liberal development led educators to focus on shaping their students’ longings as much as they did on imparting modern techniques. They endeavored to incite, in the words of a Nebraska instructor, “a changing attitude among our homemakers” who might have otherwise remained faithful to their grandmothers’ and mothers’ burdensome methods of housekeeping. Ironically taking advantage of a younger generation’s “sense of the value of expert instruction,” they attempted to foster independence within this “eager group of housewives” who flocked to their classrooms “needing to know certain facts about housekeeping and knowing that they need to know it.”

Applying industrial techniques of production to household work as a means of showcasing women’s capacity for rational self-

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governance nevertheless prompted a handful of astute dissenters to question this performative means of manifesting a condition of consensually restrained freedom.

A small group of naysayers argued that the home and the factory and the work that occurred respectively in each were not exactly analogous. In an address to the Fourth International Congress of Home Economics Instruction, Hildegarde Kneeland, the esteemed home economist and political activist, expressed doubts that “the application of scientific management principles to homemaking . . . will bring the tasks of the household up to twentieth century standards” by creating a “marked or wide-spread increase in household efficiency.”

Emphasizing the findings that her colleagues acknowledged, but dismissed in their report to Hoover’s conference on home ownership, Kneeland asserted that home and industry were not at all comparable enterprises. Not only did the tasks and the environments fundamentally differ, but more significantly, the “skill and interest demanded of the housewife” precluded greater efficiency. The majority of housewives were simply not “‘born’ efficiency engineers,” Kneeland argued. She quickly clarified her statement that initially appeared to criticize women’s innate abilities. Instead, Kneeland called into question her colleagues’ insistence that such an artificial means of regulating women’s domestic labor could ever truly lead to rational action or yield greater individual rewards. Self-management was hardly tantamount to the consensual restraint of autonomy nor did the freedom from housework that efficiency promised to supply provide a sufficient inducement for women’s labor discipline. “[N]o substitutes have yet been found,” Kneeland argued, “for the incentive and stimulus which workers in other occupations receive from competition and from the pay envelope.” With so few housewives authentically desiring to become unremunerated “experts,” Kneeland concluded, “[t]here is no cure, in fact for the inefficiency of household production.”

Debate among graduating home economists at the University of Wisconsin echoed Kneeland’s skepticism about women’s desire to adopt modern standards of housekeeping. The class of 1928 concluded by a close margin that “home economists should not attempt to introduce efficiency engineering methods into the home.” In this debate, the losing proponents of scientific housekeeping reiterated their instructors’ insistence that efficiency enabled the modern woman to become “a better wife, a better mother, and a better citizen.” Not only did the practice of saving time and energy provide “relief to her nervous system,” but it also enabled rejuvenated homemakers to “bring to her husband, her children, and her social and civic contacts a spirit that is still fresh and eager and patient and cheerful.” Moreover, these advocates resolved, “The saving of time . . . would allow greater leisure and a chance to express her own individuality, which in turn, would make her a more interesting companion to her husband.” For these college seniors, “having a small share of the world’s work brought into her home” and consequently becoming “more nearly in tune with the things that are going on in the world about her” thoroughly justified embracing the principle of efficiency.¹²⁰

Despite these presumed benefits, a majority of the graduates still rejected the feminine version of managerial discipline. Those opposed to standardizing household duties pointed to the impracticality of applying management and production techniques at a site where tasks were more “variable” and “affected by so many and such constantly changing factors.” This unpredictability supported their contention that the household would prove “difficult if not practically impossible to standardize.” A lack of return on invested effort was not the only objection offered by the graduates whom the article’s author accused of being “old-fashioned” and “more phlegmatic.” The rhetorical questions these dissenters posed articulated Kneeland’s implicit concerns about women’s autonomy, even though they eschewed her more radical

proposals for transferring more onerous and repetitive tasks from the household to commercial facilities. “Is it not enough” they demanded, “that children must go out into a machine world without having them growing up in a machine home?” Should not women be responsible for protecting the home’s “extremely interesting and ever-varied humanistic element?” If allowed to dictate women’s work, they concluded, the “[e]fficiency engineer” threatened to make housework “dreadfully monotonous” by eliminating “the fun in keeping house,” an enjoyment rooted in “its unexpectedness.” This element of variability, they insisted, transformed routine household tasks into “fascinating and . . . stimulating” activities that demanded of housekeepers “originality and versatility.”121 For these young homemakers, internalizing home economists’ dictates for dividing domestic labor into managerial and industrialized components or a sequentially rational and rationalized process was hardly the path to experiencing the autonomy and authority that women had traditionally enjoyed by working creatively within a private sphere ostensibly free from public oversight.

**Everyman’s Home**

For the Better Homes in American campaign of 1924, the citizens of Kalamazoo, Michigan, conducted an innovative experiment in housing design and management. With donated materials, land, and labor, the city’s BHA committee constructed a five-room cottage conceived to meet the specific needs of a family “in which the mother does all her own work and the father finds it hard to make both ends meet.”122 Planned for a large family with a small income, the compact, one-and-a-half story house was limited neither in useable space nor in innovative ideas, and for this reason, the demonstration house attracted over 20,000 visitors and earned the highest honors in the BHA’s national competition. The “Everyman’s House” brought to life the vision of Caroline Bartlett Crane who explained in a book of the same title that

121 Ibid.
“Everyman” represented “the man who cannot have the ‘grand house,’ but should be able to have the decent, attractive convenient, ‘little house.’”\textsuperscript{123} Despite the house’s moniker, Crane’s “prim,” snug colonial was “built around a mother and her baby,” and her text explained in minute detail how the house’s design uniquely accommodated the needs of mothers consumed by the rearing of young children.\textsuperscript{124} Acknowledging this essential purpose, Herbert Hoover sent his congratulations to Crane for demonstrating that “relief is available to overburdened mothers.”\textsuperscript{125}

In detailing how the members of a prototypical family might avail themselves of the house’s features, Crane’s explanatory text suggests numerous interpretations. Tenets drawn from the discipline of home economics influenced the efficient design of Everyman’s house, which even received the approval of Michigan’s leading home demonstration agent; yet, Crane also invoked her own experiences, preferences, and opinions to justify many of the features she regarded as the dwelling’s most noteworthy innovations. These imbued Crane’s book with a didactic, patronizing tone that intimated a moralistic intent on the part of this Progressive reformer, suffragist, and former Unitarian minister to elevate the aspirations and uplift the habits of a working-class audience. Crane also frequently defended her project against the criticisms of those who viewed her ideas as too radical a departure from the colonial revivals and bungalows that populated suburban neighborhoods during the 1920s. In contrast to the floor plans of these dwellings, Crane’s novel design served her intention to reconcile the demands of childcare with the standards of scientific housekeeping, particularly in the absence of paid or familial assistance, in order to prevent the excessive physical or mental strain that inhibited women from making a home. Unlike many contemporary texts, Crane explicitly attended to the potential conflict between mothering and housekeeping, anticipating the BHE survey that detailed the impact of childcare both on women’s work load and on their quantifiable productivity. Efficiency and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 44.
  \item \textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 18, 1.
  \item \textsuperscript{125} Ibid., Hoover to Crane,
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regimentation alone were an insufficient means, she argued, of restoring women’s ability not simply to control the pace and the duration of their labor, but also to enjoy their work and to feel empowered by their contributions to society.

This expressed intent reflects how liberalism’s developmental narrative helped to structure Crane’s account of Everyman and his family. Crane followed home economists and the BHA’s organizers in reasserting a gendered division of labor that separated a married couple’s obligations into discretely defined financial and affective labors. Yet, Crane hardly perceived her design as a reiteration of either tradition or convention. By enabling homemakers to perform their domestic tasks—including childcare—more pleasurably and more effectively, Everyman’s house was conceived to renew women’s self-regard for both the economic and social value of their labor. While the floor plan served to enhance homemakers’ productivity, it also endeavored to revive the happiness and vitality with which they tackled their work, for as Crane explained, the edifices of the family and the nation were built upon this generative maternal foundation. Crane’s design thus enabled Everyman’s wife, a character called “Mother,” to work incessantly at nursing her infant as well as her husband’s phantasmatic belief in his own independence.126

Establishing an initiating role for women in the fiction of liberal development prompted Crane to recount a tale of society’s origin and evolution that differed markedly from the more widely circulated version that began by sublimating male sexual desire in a longing for home. In Crane’s anthropologically inspired account, liberal civilization began with a cave woman’s compulsion to find shelter for her infant, and she commanded the labor of a man as a means of helping her to carry out this maternal drive. At this primordial mother’s insistence, the competitive urges to hunt and to seize that occupied men in a state of nature were channeled into

a nascent family’s support and defense. Citing the suffragist and peace activist Anna Garlin Spencer, Crane argued that the functional necessity of feeding young children uniquely cultivated within women an “incentive to labour, which cannot be ignored, an obvious suggestion of things to be done, a time schedule . . . and a satisfying reward for duty well done!”\textsuperscript{127} Impulses that originated in a primal need to shelter infants thus evolved into an industry that encompassed entwined imperatives to invent and to work. Crane consequently proclaimed, “The wheels of industry were started by the hand of woman in the home,” for in responding to the exigencies of caring for children, the woman of yore “was the primitive and supreme Jack-of-all trades” who created the workshop of a kitchen, the first factory, as another means of fulfilling her maternal responsibilities. Acting on the necessity of caring for her children rendered this mother “the first creature to be appropriated as a beast of burden in the transportation systems of the world,” but hers was a role more akin to Atlas in that she alone carried the weight of civilization’s subsequent development on her shoulders.\textsuperscript{128}

Lamenting that the initiating role of maternity in civilization’s evolution had been forgotten, Crane sought to restore the primordial mother to historical memory. Explaining women’s absence were the natural impulses of competition and seizure exhibited by men, for in the course of waging battle against each other, men had moved their struggle for domination into the more rational domain of the market where they commandeered “these lines of business . . . that women created, and long carried on, in the home.” Crane decried this appropriation by a masculine figure who was initially only a “shadowy outline” in the home’s creation and in the practical inventions and productive techniques that women had expediently devised.\textsuperscript{129} “The work thus taken away from women has been specialized, capitalized, systematized, performed with all the resources of invention,” and moreover, she underscored, with “no babies

\textsuperscript{127} Crane, 134-135.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 74-75.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 135.
As a consequence, an industrialized mode of production seemed alien to rather than rooted within and arising from women’s efforts to solve the problems that attended motherhood. Scientific housekeeping hardly mimicked the principles and techniques of the corporate workplace; rather, it reclaimed from men what they had taken to facilitate an atavistic drive for domination and the acquisitive and pecuniary interests this urge engendered. Further demonstrating women’s essential role in society’s evolution, Crane emphasized the persistent function of domestic labor in fulfilling industry’s purpose to nurture human beings. While male-dominated corporations simply provided the basic needs of food, shelter, and clothing, homemaking remained the archetypal “productive business.”

By recovering women’s original part in the evolution of mankind’s progress, Crane endeavored to revive women’s regard for their own worth. Both the social and economic value attached to homemaking had suffered a precipitous decline, she argued, through the devaluation of women’s domestic labor and the consequent development of sacrificial motives that had led to a further degradation of the conditions under which women worked in their households. Absent a sense of historical purpose and personal reward, women’s “lives had become confused and inarticulate,” and devoid of this perceived importance, their domestic tasks had become servile, leaving women demeaned and embittered by “longer hours and more exhausting toil.” To redirect an evolutionary path gone astray, Crane urged her audience to remember, “All homemaking is an elaboration—when it is not a perversion—of this primitive home idea.” Crane’s reference to a distortion of women’s caretaking tasks admonished the providers who recapitulated their ancestors’ habit of dumping the day’s kill at the maternal doorstep. In a modern world, wages rather than soiled work clothes were the raw products that women needed to process, and

130 Ibid., 75.
131 Ibid., 125.
132 Ibid., 132.
the persistence of primitive habits rendered “[t]he woman who is eternally picking up after her family . . . a slave to their carelessness.”

For women’s labor to escape the taint of servility and return to its origins in a nurturing productivity, the inter-articulated spaces and methods of women’s domestic labor needed to become more reflective of homemaking’s purpose and value. While Crane conceived her innovative design to enhance the felt liberties and pleasures of a family’s individual members, she was more particularly concerned with preserving the individuality and esteem of Mother. If labor rooted in an ostensibly biological imperative to nurture was essentially inalterable and inescapable, then effecting an illusion of control over the tasks related to this caretaking allowed Mother to perceive her domestic labor as a mode of enacting the rationality and consent that, emanating from her autonomy, transformed a subordinating self-sacrifice into a liberal subject’s volitional self-discipline. Such was the intent of Everyman’s house. This objective led Crane to issue detailed instructions for maximizing the utility, convenience, and efficiency of her design, and the script that accompanied the architectural plans directed how family members should move about and interact within its furnished dimensions. These guidelines were enacted in Crane’s text by Mother and communicated in the demonstration house itself by her hostess surrogates. Most notable about Crane’s design was a unique floor plan that included a combined living room and dining area, a Mother’s suite that featured an adjacent bathroom, and a copious amount of storage. These features accommodated the distinctive characteristics of women’s household labor, which required women to work “in isolation and yet in the midst of constant interruptions.” Further complicating women’s productivity and satisfaction was the unabated nature of repetitive domestic tasks that left women without “the time, the energy, and the

133 Ibid., 120.
initiative to analyze and reconstruct their methods; to invent, or go out of their way to hunt up, new helps in their old tasks."\(^{134}\)

This justification of her design’s more controversial and revolutionary features reveals Crane echoing home economists’ attempts to divide household labor into managerial and managed components. Unlike her contemporaries’ emphasis on reforming the methods of household labor and the safety, hygiene, and convenience of the domestic workplace, Crane perceived that the reconfiguration of domestic space served a more constitutive function in structuring how, why, and with what effects certain activities were performed.\(^{135}\) The outcome she ultimately intended was a renewed perception that women’s household labor originated within their autonomy and thus served as an expression of their independence in the absence of a grander revolution.\(^{136}\) “[If] the individual family kitchen is to stay with us,” she explained, “we need—oh! How we need!—a Better Kitchen as the drive-wheel hub of our Better Home!”\(^{137}\) This room, which measured 10’ by 9’6, satisfied a worker’s needs for safety, adequate ventilation, and convenience. While the tilted stool for dishwashing served these purposes, it also provided tired laborers an opportunity to rest and to appreciate that “[d]ishwashing is warm and pleasantly sudsy and has this advantage, that you can think of something else meanwhile.”\(^{138}\) Due to these features, this “well-considered kitchen” recaptured its ineffable “something” that, in speaking to women “in a different language from that of any other room,” allowed them to feel “useful and rested and happy again.”\(^{139}\) Certainly those happy, rested feelings could also be attributed to the

\(^{134}\) Ibid., 76.
\(^{136}\) Delores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981). Many of Crane’s more novel ideals were incorporated into the recommendations made by those home economists who worked on the *Household Management and Kitchens* report for Hoover’s 1931 White House conference. They advised, for example, “to provide elsewhere, near the kitchen, the centers for other activities which the homemaker must do or oversee while she is engaged” in food preparation.
\(^{137}\) Crane, 76.
\(^{138}\) Ibid., 104.
\(^{139}\) Ibid., 73.
reassurance that young children were safely harbored within the mother’s adjoining bedroom. Although husbands presumably slumbered in the “Mother’s Suite,” they remained, once again, a “shadowy” presence in a space conceived for the convenience of a mother and the safety of her child. Even the crib suspended over the bed testified to the house’s undergirding principle of easing a mother’s labors, especially those that occurred in the dead of night.

A kitchen stool and a suspended crib were hardly the only furnishings that accommodated a homemaker’s need for rest in a house designed to facilitate and empower a woman’s work. Crane also advised situating an upholstered settee “at the strategic point for reaching the greatest number of conveniences and making the greatest number of short cuts.” Its centralized spot in the combined living room and dining area adjacent to the kitchen enabled her relaxing husband and children to “roar at Mother, ‘Sit down!’ which is, metaphorically speaking, the central ideal of Everyman’s House.” This commandment to act on a pleasurable liberty to relax, even if momentarily, contradicted Crane’s almost simultaneous admission that Mother “hasn’t time to sit down.”

This disavowal led Crane to acknowledge that women needed more help than a strategically positioned settee to create an illusion of feminine autonomy. For a mother with numerous children and no servant to call upon for assistance, inducing those young charges to help was essential. Crane consequently emphasized that a homemaker’s managerial responsibilities included training children to tidy their possessions and to perform gender appropriate tasks as a means of alleviating a busy mother’s numerous responsibilities. The contributions of small hands nevertheless served mother’s needs and those of the family in a way that exceeded the value of either tinkering with the plumbing or preparing a pudding: “The children who willingly help Mother release her from something like bond service into a condition

140 Ibid., 133-134.
where she can be, not only a happier woman, but a real leader and a maker of happiness in the home.” A child’s ready assistance thus not only evinced “respect for the individuality” of a hard-working mother, it also served to produce the possibility of individualism for every member of the family by sustaining Mother’s affective investment in her caretaking labor. While children’s chores compensated for a deficit of household assistance and created opportunities for applied practice in vocational skills, they also served an ideological function as Crane’s references to willingness and individuality made evident. Children’s role in effecting a mother’s ability to consent to the conditions of her domestic labor depended upon the young assistants’ perception of their help as similarly voluntary.

As Crane’s expressed effort to free women from a perceived “bond service” illustrates, she raised a concern of far greater import than women’s diminished self-regard, though one inextricably linked to it. It was women’s ability to derive pride and pleasure from fulfilling their domestic obligations that determined the home’s inestimable worth and, consequently, the family domicile’s ability to fulfill its social and civic purposes. Although Crane took into account “the comfort and happiness of the husband and father,” the affective rewards that Everyman found in his home depended not as much on the home’s architectural features as on the innovations designed “to help a working mother to make a real home for the family.” It was not simply the quality of a woman’s labor that facilitated the house’s transformation into a home; it was the intent with which she performed it. A homemaker’s perception of her worth consequently determined, Crane argued, the comfort, enjoyment, and security that the home provided to its inhabitants. For this reason, a man’s longing to own a home was predicated upon women’s desire to make one. Fueled by these gendered desires, male provision and female production sustained the home’s metaphorical ability to serve as “Mother Earth”—a body that men purchased, but

141 Ibid., 184.
142 Ibid., 184.
women essentially created by “animat[ing] it with a spirit worthy of something ‘born great’ in
that other ‘miracle’ of wedded love.”

In comparing the home’s animating spirit to that feeling born in marriage, Crane
implicitly recast the protagonist of liberalism’s developmental narrative from male suitor to
feminine creator. As significantly, she illustrates the early twentieth-century shift from romantic
love to the comfortable home as the supposedly pre-political locus of desire’s consensual
regulation. Yet, in stipulating that the home “was first created because mothers must have a place
to produce and care for their product,” Crane identified a precursor to the phantasmatic stories
that located a liberal society’s origin in male desires for material conquest and sexual
gratification, which marriage and home ownership served. Due to “the necessity of providing and
guarding” the shelters that women had supposedly sought out for their children from the
beginning of time, she claimed, “ruthless savages have been turned into tender, self-sacrificing
fathers and husbands.” Crane’s use of the passive tense thus supplanted the initiating role of male
desire, rescuing women from their status as objects and restoring them to their presumably
rightful place within an entwined narrative of familial development and male sublimation.
Instigated by women’s compulsion to care for their children, this story posited the inter-
dependent, gendered activities of homemaking and home ownership as the template for all other
achievements. For arising from the primal, generative roles of male provision and female
production, “The desire for a home of their own is the great discipline which can transform the
impossible into an accomplished fact.”143

With Everyman’s desires appropriately regulated by his economic and emotional
investment in his home, he was free to enjoy the gratifying rewards that it supplied. Among these
were the self-regard and social status that, according to Crane, men derived from a communal

143 Ibid., 130, 148-149.
recognition of all that owning a home signified. Public acknowledgment nevertheless paled in comparison to the contentment of relaxing at home and as importantly, to the satisfaction of being esteemed by an appreciative family. Enjoying a clear distinction between his remunerated work and the leisure he enjoyed at home, Everyman rested on the davenport before dinner, romped with his children after a satisfying meal, and sneaked away to go fishing on his half-day away from work. These pleasures were among the “little liberties” that prevented a man from falling victim to the “homeless state” that incited him to seek refuge at his club where he could drop apple cores and scatter newspapers at will, free from a wife’s nagging admonishments of “what shall and shall not be.” Denying a provider the absolute freedom he longed to feel in his home deprived the homeowner of his “founder’s rights,” which Crane essentially defined as an entitlement to privacy or the fulfillment of a wish “to be let alone” and to act without amendment or explanation.144

As Crane’s rendering of male freedom suggests, included among these founding privileges was the liberty to make a mess. Although Crane suggested numerous strategies for cultivating conscience, reason, and interest within the home’s youngest inmates, engendering the same spirit of helpfulness within their fathers proved more problematic. As she lamented, “[W]e caught Father too late to teach him many new tricks.”145 Through the politic suggestions of a shrewd wife, however, a man might come to understand the advantage of showering in the basement and leaving his soiled work clothes in the laundry, or the prudence of keeping his possessions safely locked away under the window seat or in his basement workroom. A diplomatic hint of the dry cleaning bill might even give him pause before placing his dirty feet on the davenport. Yet, these concessions had to appear voluntary, for what a man needed most after a day of arduous labor was “a glad welcome and a good dinner.”146

144 Ibid., 163, 173.
145 Ibid., 163.
146 Ibid., 156.
These sources of happiness nevertheless functioned, as Crane’s origins fantasy implied, to obscure the extent to which women—not society—directed men to work and dictated the expression of their freedom. At several points in her text, Crane evoked fears of an emasculating, dictatorial maternal figure bent upon eroding the home’s privacy and its inmates’ autonomy by exercising excessive control over their choices and behaviors. Yet, this specter of feminine dominance further justified Crane’s efforts to reassert women’s independence and restore their felt worth. The failure to do so threatened to reduce the male provider to the status of a mere “meal ticket” in the eyes of a tired, resentful mother who had become either compelled by a “needless or senseless sacrifice” or treated as an “underling.” With her husband subordinated in her heart to the natural objects of her affection, a discontented wife inevitably failed to appreciate that marriage “gives her a home and the exclusive services of one man for the support of herself and her children.” This disregard inevitably precluded the father from wielding authority within his domain and his offspring from acquiring a duty to honor and revere him. When considering the design of the home, Everyman needed thus to remember that “the thing which suits [Father] best is the way Mother is suited.” Learning this lesson supplied the incomparable moment of pleasure when, “[s]eated by her side, under their own roof tree, the day done and the children all in bed, he reaches over and takes Mother’s hand and declares that this is a good little old world!” It was this sense of repletion that constituted what Caroline Bartlett Crane described as the “training of husbands.”

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In staging a developmental narrative in which a wage-earning man supplied the material support for Mother’s creative initiative, Crane’s housing design for the prototypical Everyman helped to manifest homeownership as a mutual, albeit intrinsically gendered experience. Each of

147 Ibid., 184.
148 Ibid., 154-155.
149 Ibid., 161.
its distinguishing features served to acknowledge the significance of women’s domestic labor and to facilitate its performance, and in this regard, Everyman’s House provided architectural support for the home economist Cora Winchell’s conception of homemaking as an essential “phase of citizenship.” Like Crane, Winchell located the home’s origin in the maternal responsibility to care for an infant, and this instinctual labor preceded the more recent sociological discovery “of man’s tendency to create a family group and to dwell within a personal home.” Although the product of this gendered merger between necessity and longing, the home propagated social and political stability due to the vision and skill that women brought to its creation and management. As Winchell explained, “man brings into the world both strength and weakness, of body, of mind, of heart,” and the home was foremost among those institutions that “serve[d] to encourage and develop the better, and to inhibit the less valuable tendencies,” enabling “civilization” to reach a “higher plane.” To cultivate these “tendencies,” Winchell encouraged women to become more engaged in civic causes, but she primarily emphasized the “silent influence of a good housekeeper.” By exemplifying ideals and attributes for others to emulate, this role model “contribut[ed] to the creation and maintenance within her own family group of a clear and well-defined body of principles of right living and right thinking.”

Given the acknowledged civic and national importance of women’s household labor, the traditional obligations of care had lost their more derogatory associations, prompting Winchell to assert that “the business of homemaking assumes a share in the world’s work.” Yet, building a successful domestic enterprise required negotiating a “fair partnership” among “all members of the family group.” Revising the gendered and generational responsibilities of homemaking was unavoidable, for the exigencies of modern life had irrevocably altered “the principle of division of labor” and led to the “present tendency to equalize man’s and woman’s share in the life within and without the home.” Winchell praised contemporary men for applying their “broad vision and business sense” to improving the domestic corporation’s “business methods.” Although
homemakers’ had adopted these techniques to enhance their productive efficiency and managerial skills, they continued to “head up the effect of the home,” primarily through the investment of their unique interests and talents. Theirs was an unrivaled influence that imparted the home’s defining affective value and didactic purpose. Despite the significance of an education that should be “liberal in every sense of the word,” women needed above all else to cultivate “health of body and mind, nerve poise, and constantly widening vision.” It was “[t]he realization of her opportunity for wider service through the exercise of her utmost powers as a homemaker,” Winchell concluded, that engendered within modern women “a desire for adequate preparation for that service.”  

Winchell was not alone in framing modern marriage as a partnership between the equally visionary if not exactly identical bodies of the homeowner and homemaker. Her description of homemaking as a collaborative investment helps to explain why she and her colleagues perceived the modernization of women’s domestic labor as a means of casting husband and wife as married proprietors who possessed an essential, animating sameness. Efficiency, organization, cleanliness, and judicious consumption—these tenets of scientific housekeeping might have coalesced relative to a managerial ethos; however, the modernization of domestic work also attempted to establish an equivalency between male and female labor. Even more significantly, the proponents of rationalized housekeeping argued that, by displaying women’s capacity for reasonable and ethical self-discipline, it was a performance that reflexively figured the autonomy and independence of feminine subjects. Scientific homemaking might consequently be read as a political strategy—symptomatic of liberalism’s paradoxical logic—that showed women enacting a presupposed freedom through the regulatory labor of making a home symbolic of each. Home economists thus sought to reconcile women’s traditional domestic obligations with their newly

acquired public roles. In pursuing this objective, they articulated a modern ideal of femininity both to illuminate the value of women’s household labor within a corporatized political economy and to revive the home’s constitutive function within liberal discourse.

By reforming women’s household labor to illuminate that men and women shared a consensual subjection that also implied an equalizing possession of autonomy, home economists seized upon the liberal subject’s potential androgyne. While these professionals carved out occupations and pursued reform initiatives within Herbert Hoover’s associational state, they also attempted to capitalize on his political agenda to renovate a requisite, private domain that effected the gendered subjects theoretically needed to initiate the liberal state’s existence. The home economists engaged in Hoover’s suburban housing policies consequently endeavored to demonstrate that the liberal state’s foundation was created not simply through women’s labor, but rather through the voluntarily self-regulated, rational procedures and judicious decisions that also characterized the public sphere. Yet, modern homemakers and modern homeowners played very different roles within liberalism’s developmental narrative, despite any analogies between their laboring performances of autonomy. The modern home continued to derive its ideologically reproductive function from the excess value that women’s labor imprinted upon it—this refuted declarations of an identity or absolute equality between homeowners and homemakers.

This intangible worth, which exceeded any monetary investment men might contribute, was identified by advocates of the better home as the real object that modern men must continue to desire and endeavor to own. As Caroline Bartlett Crane’s concern for Mother’s perception of her own importance helps to illuminate, her pleasure and pride preceded the possibility of Everyman’s. She consequently echoed home economists’ attempts to divide housework into rational and rote components, for this distinction attempted to renew modern women’s interest in their household responsibilities by construing domesticity as a source of personal efficacy and social admiration. A perception of themselves as workers and managers supposedly incited
women to continue producing the private site where liberalism’s line of fiction originated, and at the same time, it also enabled them to participate as main characters in its public unfolding. This renewed sense of purpose and enjoyment served to rekindle husbands’ affection for their homemaking wives, but more important, for the affectively endowed home women’s inspired labor created. Nurturing and preserving this vital, maternal wellspring through the institution of scientific and industrial practices was thus intended to encourage men to save and also to save men both from themselves and from a corporate manager’s emasculating dictates.

If the scientific homemaker enjoyed the work of creating a home, her husband found his reward for labor in the pleasure of relaxing there. Providing for a home earned a hard-working man the freedom to lounge profitably rather than profligately in a comfortable chair. Apparently liberated from servitude to another, home-owning men appeared self-determining and self-governing both despite and because of the recognition that their perceived independence depended upon a homemaker who viewed the attractive, big chair and its occupant’s consequent happiness as an equivocal sign of what she both did and did not possess. Women might have received universal acknowledgement and praise for judiciously selecting chairs and rationally laboring to make homes, but they owned neither of these symbols that enabled men to identify with and to be identified as the proprietor of what women’s labor produced. In contrast to the large, comfortable chair that graced the living room and the leisure enjoyed there, the small, uncomfortable kitchen chair consequently signified not a feminine occupant’s independence, but rather an excessive discipline obscured by the ostensible pleasure she derived from exercising control over her valuable work. Here, the gendered, domesticated pleasures of labor and comfort executed an inter-articulated disavowal that for men and women equivocally acknowledged and denied the “unhappy” imperative of self-regulation that representation as an autonomous, liberal subject paradoxically required. The idealized better continued to transform these injunctions into
presumed choices that putatively led to the fullest expression of freedom, and for the home to remain a signifier of liberty, those who produced it needed also to imagine themselves as free.

This equivocation failed, however, to mystify completely the costs of unremitting domestic labor. Writing in the year between Cora Winchell and Caroline Crane, W. L. George posed the question, “What Is Home?” George was one of many feminists who disputed home economists’ strategy for representing feminine equality, and her article lambasted the new housing styles that complemented the rationalization of women’s household responsibilities. Smaller houses actually created friction in the family, George observed, and for this reason, she concluded, “The new woman acquires an outside habit, finds this attractive, and turns more and more away from the focus of domesticity.” To justify women’s pursuit of public pleasures, George challenged the labor of homemaking as the expression of women’s autonomy by disputing the assertion that this politically qualifying possession originated in a natural propensity for caretaking. A system of compulsory sanctions and rewards had, rather, forced women to appear so. Constrained by joyless, inauthentic labor, the homemaker had become a “home-endurer.”

W. L. George’s disenchanted homemakers joined Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s Evangeline Knapp and the antiquarian Alice Van Leer Carrick in pursuing desires for self-expression and independence either outside the home or in activities other than the work of homemaking.

The incommensurate signifiers of a homeowner’s living room lounge chair and a homemaker’s workplace kitchen chair suggests why the modernized labor of homemaking yielded for these critics only an “unhappy consciousness” rather than gratifying rewards. In these gendered sites, the problem of difference persisted. Its unintended revival catalyzed expressions of discontent, dissatisfaction, and even misery that, in articulating a dissent against

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the revival of archaic constraints that reproduced liberal idealism, nevertheless expressed a longing for autonomy at its heart that the idealized home was conceived both to discipline and fulfill. Arising from this equivocation, the initiative to revolutionize the labor that produced this domestic site served as an attempt to articulate feminine autonomy in an embodied form other than proprietorship or remuneration. It ultimately proved to be an insufficient revolution. Not only did a gendered division between moneymaking and caretaking persist, despite women’s increasing ability to occupy both roles, but modern homemaking’s distinction between managing and working failed to alleviate the alienation that women reported, induced as they were to derive their perceived socioeconomic and political value from laboring continuously for others. This discontent threatened to diminish the feminine investment that enabled the home to masquerade as a symbol of male fulfillment. Acknowledging the inadequacy of the efficiency and convenience they offered as antidotes for domestic labor’s subjugating effects, many home economists suggested that even a one-woman domestic factory required additional workers. While children served this function, so too did many African-American women such as the young servant who, by helping Jane Norton to manage her house so efficiently and effectively, enabled the principled Jane to conceive her household work as an empowering expression of her liberation.

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153 Diana Fuss has argued that Western metaphysics has denied women’s possession of an ontologizing autonomy by conceiving the category of Woman as matter to be overcome rather than a potential to be realized. Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989). See also Patricia DiQuinzio, *The Impossibility of Motherhood: feminism, individualism, and the problem of mothering* (New York: Routledge, 1999).
Chapter Five: The National Association of Colored Women and the Beautiful Home

Unlike most of her collegiate peers who studied home economics, Jane pursued an impractical degree in the classics. Although the self-taught homemaker often longed for a more solid foundation in the principles about which she felt such passion, she was grateful for the domestic training she had received from her mother and an “old fashioned Southern cook.” “Colored Sally” had tutored a young Jane in her “spotless kitchen,” and by the time her charge reached “the age of the present-day flapper,” Jane could bake cakes that “were regarded with respect by the housekeepers in a neighborhood where Southern ladies of social position prided themselves on their culinary achievements.” Of Jane’s prowess as a baker, Sally explained, “‘[S]he took it natural-like and allus cleaned up her mess.’”¹ When Jane and John returned to the South to create a home of their own, Jane’s memories of Sally’s role in her mother’s household undoubtedly shaped her intent “to secure a young colored maid to prepare the vegetables, wash the dishes and help about the house and serve dinner.”² This brief reference is the only indication that Jane benefited from assistance in managing her household. Implicit acknowledgements are nevertheless everywhere, as John praised Jane’s ability to keep their house “spotless” even as she shifted her attentions from housekeeping to “her growing duties as a mother.” The help she received also enabled Jane to regard herself as a manager who “ran the house and never allowed the house to run her or her family.”³ Even Jane’s ability to enjoy hunting through second-hand furniture stores and refurbishing her discoveries implies the presence of another who liberated Jane to engage in these pursuits by providing care for the four little Nortons.

² Ibid., 211; In Racial Indigestion: Eating Bodies in the 19th Century (New York: New York University Press, 2012), Kyla Wazana Tompkins has argued, “From the kitchen [the mammy] seems to speak from power, but a power that is undercut by the broad vernacular of her speech and her ‘natural’ embrace of manual labor.” (107)
³ Thornburgh, 238-239, 234.
The labor of a racialized other in her southern home both practically and metaphorically enhanced Jane’s sense of liberation. In alleviating Jane’s housekeeping and caretaking responsibilities, the assistance of a black maid enabled Jane to create the distinction that home economists touted between managerial activities and repetitive, unskilled tasks. This sense of autonomy was further bolstered, however, by the idiosyncratic elements that Jane carefully incorporated into her decorative compositions, all of which imbued these principled creations with a spirit of youthful individuality. In pondering how best to achieve a balance between social approbation and personal expression, Jane found inspiration in a visit that she and John made to the Freer Art Gallery in Washington, DC. There, the Peacock Room that housed James McNeill Whister’s “Princess of the Land of Porcelain” captivated Jane. Noting that Whistler had conceived the room’s décor to showcase his painting, Jane enthused over the blue and gold scheme that, inspired by the peacock’s color and plumage, provided “a wonderful study in color and design.” The Asian porcelain that framed the mantel also enticed Jane with its “appealing color and shape.” Jane’s visit to the Freer Museum imparted two lessons: She left not only understanding the rectitude of “the Japanese principle of showing only a few beautiful things at a time,” but also feeling determined “to have a room built around the same general idea of the Whistler room, that is, to use a picture as a theme and to key the whole color scheme of the room to it.”

After her visit to the museum, Jane carefully articulated the principles modeled by the Whistler exhibit; however, her memories more fondly returned to its exotic, aesthetic elements.

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4 Ibid., 110-1 11; The design historian David Brody has demonstrated that this admiration for a Japanese aesthetic was conveyed as early as the mid-1880s by Edward Morse who praised the austere simplicity of Japanese décor. Brody argues that this perception served to critique the visual clutter characteristic of late nineteenth-century interior design. He also suggests that Morse’s preference for the “Quaker-like simplicity” of Japanese design represented another form of appropriation, collection and exhibition that, citing the work of James Clifford, transforms a compulsion to possess what racially exotic peoples are believed to have into an axiomatically regulated desire and mode of imperial domination. Brody, Visualizing American Empire: Orientalism & Imperialism in the Philippines (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 35-37.
This passionate decorator arrived at the Freer already possessing a taste for the exhibit’s Asian references. When decorating her first apartment, Jane had passed a window display almost daily simply to admire “two old blue Chinese vases” whose cost exceeded her limited budget. Her visit to the Freer’s Asian exhibit also brought an opportunity to tour the White House where she particularly admired the Blue Room’s white and gold accents. Although Jane cited this appeal in explaining her desire to paint one room of her new home in the blue-green shades, the imaginings conjured by names such as “peacock, turquoise, jade, bottle green, robin’s-egg blue and sea green” hardly evoked her visit to the home of the nation’s First Lady. These “fascinating” monikers instead “set her fancy traveling the seven seas and back again bringing from orient and occident hangings and tapestries and rare silks and exquisite furniture with which to furnish the blue-green room.” Although Jane eventually deferred to principle and relinquished her desire for a room of blue, she confessed to the “fun” she experienced when “thinking things out and letting one’s mind and imagination fare forth free and unrestrained.” Facilitated through the colors of blue and gold, these metonymic associations between her home and exotic, foreign places rendered Jane’s decorating labor akin to the implicitly erotic freedom she had experienced as a youth, clinging to the neck of a wildly galloping horse. While some might seek excitement by traversing the globe, Jane alternatively found her “great adventure” in “a whole world of color from which to select and a whole house to endow with personality and charm.”

Similar to unique objects, bright hues enabled Jane to attain an aesthetic equilibrium between principled respectability and personable individuality. Cognizant of the atavistic and implicitly libidinal sensations colors evoked, Jane emphasized that they, particularly the more brilliant shades, must be chosen with the greatest of care. She worried that selecting and applying color incorrectly might lead their new acquaintances to “call them barbarians.” Jane nevertheless

5 Thornburgh, 18.
6 Ibid., 117-119, 98.
determined that “she would much prefer to be called a young barbarian than to be taken for a prematurely old and sober and dignified dowager.” To create a balance between the poles of youthful savagery and stuffy civility, Jane reiterated that tasteful décor must not only articulate a theme, but also appear appropriate for the space. She consequently eschewed the Victorian preference for a pastiche of explicitly exotic, imperial artifacts, emphasizing instead that either authentic or reproduction pieces must have an observable rationale within a decorative scheme. “‘Indian things’” ideally belonged, for example, in “‘simple houses in the country,’” for these more evocatively “primitive” dwellings were the only suitable repository for objects that reflected “the art instinct of a primitive people.” Similarly, Jane expressed her wish that “people who traveled widely and collected numerous objects in their travels would sort their possessions and have a Chinese room or a Japanese room furnished throughout in the Chinese or Japanese spirit, if not with strictly native objects.” This sentiment conveyed Jane’s concern for thematic unity more than an objection to the artifacts themselves. Although it lacked a designated area for such foreign collectibles, Jane’s prototypical American home borrowed aesthetic elements of color, line, and texture from peoples who were, by the late 1920s, either excluded from citizenship completely or denied its entitlements and protections due to their racial designations. Yet, for Jane, incorporating aesthetic ideals and beautiful commodities that she associated with racially different people and places functioned to signify her own political qualifications. Her consumption of a racialized essentialism testified to American domination on an increasingly global stage, but more essentially, this appropriation signified both the desire and the discipline of self-governing individuals that rendered this conquest possible.

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7 Ibid., 98.
8 Ibid., 220.
Evocative of racially exotic people and places, the colors that unified Jane’s tasteful home belied her expressed intent to fill her home with homemade artifacts created by local architects, artisans, and artists. Her efforts to imbue her home with authenticity and individuality rivaled the simultaneous recognition and denial that the labor of a black maid facilitated Jane’s ability to make a beautiful home worthy of admiration. Whether in the form of embodied work or as the aesthetic embodiment of Jane’s initiative and creativity, racial otherness helped to symbolize white autonomy through its role in fabricating an idealized home for the Nortons. Yet, even as the fictional account of a progressive home’s creation reveals the importance of racialized signifiers and labor, African-American women were expressing an equally ardent desire to realize this ideal for themselves and their families. A leader in this endeavor, Sallie W. Stewart formally launched the National Association of Colored Women’s “crusade for better homes” in 1929.

Stewart’s initiative reasserted a traditional perception of black women’s unique responsibility for racial progress, while it also introduced the NACW president’s vision of a more prominent role for the Association among national reform organizations. At a moment of declining political fortunes, Stewart attempted to enhance the Association’s visibility by establishing an alliance with Better Homes in America. To this end, she repeatedly exhorted clubwomen throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s to join a campaign to promote the improvement of housing conditions and home life in African-American communities throughout the nation.⁹

The sections that follow locate the NACW’s interest in housing reform within a history of African-American protest associated with the postbellum and early twentieth-century

development of a black middle class. While clubwomen’s campaign to improve black homes recapitulated a familiar mandate of self-help and communal responsibility, it also addressed the economic and legal precarity that black women uniquely endured. With black men largely prevented from supplying the protective privilege of economic dependency and entitled privacy for their wives, the spatial and material signifiers of idealized domesticity and maternity remained foreclosed to women forced to labor in largely servile, underpaid, and frequently dangerous positions. To combat both the deprivations and the indignities that accompanied racial and gender discrimination, African-American women sought to exalt African-American motherhood, to improve black women’s material conditions, and to facilitate their abilities to care for their children. Creating a domestic space recognizable as a home played a crucial role in attaining these objectives, for as one historian has written, “Black clubwomen believed they could solve the race’s problems through intensive social service focused on improving home life and educating mothers.”

10 Judith Butler has defined “precarity” as a “politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death.” Those relegated to this excessively vulnerable, artificially created state of existence are also subjected to arbitrary state violence and to other forms of aggression that are not enacted by states and against which states do not offer adequate protection.” Butler, “Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics,” AIBR: Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana 4 (Septiembre-Diciembre 2009) : ii, http://www.aibr.org/antropologia/04v03/criticos/040301b.pdf.


12 White, 27.
conferences that constituted the nascent federal bureaucracy developing around Herbert Hoover’s Department of Commerce. An account of the NACW’s collaboration with Better Homes in America highlights the pragmatic purposes and the material benefits that clubwomen derived from cooperating with this organization’s initiative to improve American homes. Moreover, the BHA campaigns seemed to provide more affluent African-American clubwomen with a unique opportunity to acquire federal protection of their rights as citizens, validation of their socioeconomic status and leadership roles, and white policymakers’ support for their efforts to improve the living conditions of African Americans residing in rural and suburban areas.¹³

Illustrating how NACW leaders pursued the BHA’s goals links African-American women’s activism not only to a history of state development, but also to an examination of domesticity’s role in reconciling cultural transformation with ideological reproduction.¹⁴ Not only did clubwomen reiterate the BHA’s rhetoric, they also sought political advantage in the logic of home improvement and an undergirding liberal narrative that posited the ideological significance of the better home and the women responsible for making them. Like white home economists, the NACW’s leaders emphasized that consent—the willful transformation of an absolute state of freedom into one of individual restraint and social order—originated in a woman’s ability to create a tasteful, well-managed home that focused male desire on the values

¹³ Glenda Gilmore has consequently interpreted clubwomen’s attention to home improvement as a “canny political strategy” that reflected both national political and social trends as well as black women’s traditional objectives. Gilmore, Gender & Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920 (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 152-153. Susan Smith has also demonstrated how African-American women couched demands for political rights to equal protection in a more innocuous idiom of material need. Black women, she argues, “exploited the identification of health needs with the domestic realm in order to take on very public roles and engage in a little-recognized form of civil rights work.” Smith, Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: Black Women’s Health Activism in America, 1890-1950 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 169. Deborah Gray White alternatively frames clubwomen’s participation in the BHA as an accommodation to male criticism of clubwomen’s feminist ideology. Through this movement, she has suggested, clubwomen “defined race work within the context of femininity.” White, 131.

¹⁴ Glenda Gilmore’s study of New Bern, North Carolina, provides a model for situating the development of black women’s social reform networks within the sociopolitical context of the Progressive Era, the limited opportunities for interaction with organized white women, and the reactionary response of white men to African-American political and economic success.
the home signified and the productive labor its possession demanded. Enabling black men to play a part in this developmental narrative required educating black women in the Progressive standards of domesticity as a means of molding them into rational, judicious subjects themselves.

Given the symbolic identity between an ambiguously gendered citizen and the better home, conformity to federally endorsed housing standards seemed to provide a means of establishing black Americans’ equality within the body politic. The possession of better homes made visible the liberal attributes and virtues that black citizens shared with white homeowners, proving that African Americans, too, possessed the paradoxical mixture of catalyzing initiative and restraining ideals that characterized Herbert Hoover’s American Individual. Sallie Stewart’s determination to “revolutionize the standard of living of the Negro race” thus represented more than an attempt to uplift her less fortunate and less educated brethren; it was also a publicly sanctioned act of self-determination. In signifying a convergence of modern standards and traditional values, the better home and by association the model citizens who resided there bore an implicit racial ambiguity. For Hoover, American Individualism was a creed antithetical to caste. He construed this political philosophy (rather than the bodies who enacted it so imperfectly) as synonymous with the nation, and he viewed the better home as the embodiment of an essential “spirit” that unified individual citizens into a singular “race.” It was this reproductive dwelling, he believed, that would engender American Individualism’s merger of instincts and ideals within old and new citizens alike.

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15 Minutes from the 1933 NACW Convention, NACW Records, Reel 2, Frame 00018. This argument has received its inspiration from Claudia Tate’s, Domestic Allegories of Political Desire: The Black Heroine’s Text at the Turn of the Century (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). In explicating the post-Reconstruction, domestic novels written by black authors, Tate argued that “the political desire in these black female texts is the acquisition of authority for the self both in the home and in the world.” (8) Attempting to illuminate the inseparability of personal longing and political aspiration, Tate sought to demonstrate that the black authors’ mimetic reproduction of Victorian cultural symbols such as marriage, courtship, and familial harmony allegorically expressed political aspirations for civil entitlement and economic opportunity.
The Jewish immigrant and acclaimed author, Anzia Yezierska captured the home’s nationally reproductive function and inclusive potential in her poignant description of a working-class adolescent’s first glimpse of a life removed from the urban tenements of her childhood. Sara Smolinsky gazed with rapt wonder at the “real Americans” who enjoyed the “leisured quietness [that] whispered in the air” of the small town where she attended college. Securely resting in the quietude of “eternal time,” every house that Sara enviously desired “had its own green grass in front [and] its own free space all around.”

Virtually the same yet distinct, the suburban homes that Sara Smolinsky longingly admired epitomized through their standardization a fealty to unifying ideals and aspirations, while they also embodied the possession of something “real,” entitling, and essentially American. Although creating a standardized better home enabled African Americans to enact the characteristics of liberal citizenship, this domestic performance ultimately benefitted only those, like Yezierska’s Eastern European heroine, who could be phenotypically incorporated into an increasingly monolithic conception of whiteness.

The modernized home thus sustained what Amy Kaplan has described as domesticity’s “double meaning that no only links the familial household to the nation but also imagines both in opposition to everything outside the geographic and conceptual border of the home.”

Cognizant of the better home’s role in demarcating racialized national boundaries, NACW leaders advocated greater access to this site of a liberal civilization’s origin; yet, they also

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17 As Matthew Frye Jacobson has also argued this whitening of the population served as a vehicle for assimilating non-Protestant, European immigrants. See Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998). Amanda M. Page has read the 1927 film “Old San Francisco” as further evidence that Asians were perceived as incapable of cultural assimilation. Within the context of a racial binary, Asian immigrants constituted a “yellow peril” that threatened the integrity of a white citizenry. The film engaged, she argues, in “demonizing the Chinese passing subject as a means of consolidating European ethnic groups into one unified white race.” Amanda M. Page, “Consolidated Colors: Racial Passing and Figurations of the Chinese in Walter White’s ‘Flight’ and Darryl Zanuck’s ‘Old San Francisco,’” MELUS: Media(s) and the Mediation of Ethnicity 37 No. 4 (Winter 2012): 96.
invoked maternalist values to critique the terms of recognition they sought. \(^{19}\) As scholars have explained, clubwomen’s celebration of the inviolable bond between a black mother and her child reflected the history of slavery’s assault on this relationship, while it also challenged the hardships that black women uniquely faced in a legally segregated and racially discriminatory society. For these purposes, the NACW’s advocates of home ownership and improvement deployed maternal and Biblical idioms to locate the source of racial and gender inequality within individualism, and through glorifying a mother-child dyad, they articulated an interdependent mode of political subjectivity. As Sallie Stewart acknowledged to her constituents, the better home identified with Hoover’s American Individual would never be sufficiently beautiful enough to create a racially harmonious and just society, for as an emblem of white, imperial power, it served to perpetuate the nation’s racial incivility.

By suggesting that the continued alienation of racialized bodies prevented the American home from exuding an authentic beauty, Stewart’s critique demands a closer examination of the elements and objects through which homemakers such as Jane Norton displayed their autonomy and individuality. This chapter’s final section will explore how the colors, textures, and artifacts evocative of racialized others served both to gratify and regulate white desires, and in rendering the better home so captivating, these aesthetic metaphors sustained the fiction of a white citizen’s consensual self-government. \(^{20}\) Whether non-white bodies were imagined as noble savages, exotic

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\(^{19}\) Seth Koven and Sonya Michel define maternalism as a collection of “ideologies and discourses that exalted women’s capacity to mother and applied to society as a whole the values they attached to that role: care, nurturance, and morality.” See Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of the Welfare States (New York: Routledge, 1993), 4; Deborah Gray White has argued that, during this period, the NACW adopted a rhetoric of femininity that starkly contrasted with their previous, more feminist conception of racework. White, 124-128, 130-131.

\(^{20}\) As Robert Reid-Pharr has argued, “[B]lackness as a conceptual category has its origins in Enlightenment ideals of the sublime and the transcendent, in which the black represented not simply that which was base and ugly but, more to the point, that which was the very antithesis of subjectivity... [B]lack does not reference the African per se, but instead a sort of conceptual void around which the ideological structures of white supremacy have been moored.” Reid-Pharr’s project is to demonstrate the attempt by antebellum African Americans to locate, through domesticity, a non-subjected ontology within the black body that refuted inter-articulated representations of black corporeality and primitivity. Robert Reid-Pharr, Conjugal
Asians, or tribal Africans, their ambivalent presence—outside the nation and within the home—recapitulated an imperial domination that was also an appropriation. In this way, Jane Norton’s barbaric love for exotic colors led to a theft or what Eric Lott has also described as a “simultaneous construction and transgression of racial boundaries.” Relative to the aesthetically appealing home’s role in the liberal individual’s origin and development, Lott’s observation helps to explain how racial othering enabled white bodies to consume what liberal citizens were told to renounce voluntarily, but then advised to reincorporate into their homes through the purchase of decorative objects that evoked sensuous gratification and expressive freedom. This disavowal illuminates the paradox that black women uniquely confronted: The better home and the American Individual were indeed compelling, racially ambiguous ideals, but revitalized by the metaphorical presence of racialized bodies, they stymied clubwomen’s efforts to be what their objectification served to make.

**African Americans and Hoover’s Associational State**

In the spring of 1929, over 2,000 black residents of Lexington, Kentucky, reportedly participated in a week-long Better Homes in America program. Led by clubwoman Hattie I. Snowden, Lexington’s African-American BHA committee opened two model homes that included a reconditioned duplex and a “new, modern bungalow.” Under the direction of a well-respected black educator, the Civic League cooperated with the women’s clubs to organize a “Yard and Garden” contest. Additional competitions also encouraged students of all ages to submit posters, essays, and miniature houses. Choosing an essay that reflected its objectives, the committee granted an award to the adolescent author who composed an essay entitled “Wealth

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21 Eric Lott, Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 25. Amy Kaplan has also written, “Through the process of domestication, the home contains within itself those wild or foreign elements that must be tamed; domesticity no only monitors the borders between the civilized and the savage but also regulates traces of the savage within itself.” Kaplan, 582.
As hostesses for the demonstration houses, high school girls also vied for honors by competing to attract the largest number of visitors. These enthusiastic youth received a small share of the prizes, which the committee valued at one-thousand dollars.

The following year, NACW President Sallie Stewart received a letter from a colleague who bragged, “Better Homes Week went big here in Lex.” While an even greater number of participants toured model houses and entered contests, they also enjoyed many new events. Handicrafts and reconditioned furniture were displayed at the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, and children received free examinations at the local day nursery. Though barred from the activities promoting better homes among Lexington’s white citizens, the black clubwomen received support from the several white merchants who loaned furniture and donated supplies. Their appreciation extended to the city commissioners, the Board of Commerce, white newspapers, and instructors from the University of Kentucky, all of whom “cooperated in a most excellent way in making this work most successful.”

Whether the residents of this upper-South community responded to Sallie Stewart’s call to join the campaign for better homes or to the promptings of local black educators and extension agents, they joined the hundreds of African-American citizens who participated in the Better Homes in America initiative. Articles published by Blanche Halbert, a member of the BHA’s executive staff, highlight the scope of African-American involvement in Herbert Hoover’s efforts to increase the quantity and improve the quality of single-family dwellings. According to Halbert’s articles in The Southern Workman, thousands of black Americans enthusiastically contributed to the annual projects and embraced the BHA’s avowed ideals. In addition to NACW

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22 Lexington Herald, 1 May 1929; Ibid., 2 May 1929.
23 Lizzie Fouse to Sallie Stewart, 5 May 1930, NACW Records, Reel 8, Frame 00330.
reports and Halbert’s testimonials, BHA guidebooks further reveal the scope of African-American efforts and the diversity of the local campaigns that black committees organized.\textsuperscript{25} In 1928, African-Americans formed 229 of the BHA’s 5,055 local committees.\textsuperscript{26} These numbers had increased dramatically by 1931 when, even in the throes of a devastating economic depression, black chairpersons led 925 committees, including fourteen segregated state committees and several countywide programs. Representing 770 communities, African-American committees also conducted 133 model home demonstrations during the 1931 campaign.\textsuperscript{27} One of those exemplary dwellings, which was furnished by the Arkansas Colored Federation of Women’s Clubs, reportedly attracted 7,450 curious visitors.\textsuperscript{28}

The NACW’s attempt to promote and to coordinate local clubwomen’s involvement in the BHA’s yearly programs reveal numerous practical and political objectives. Fleeting


\textsuperscript{26} Halbert, “Why America Will Have Better Homes,” The Southern Workman, May 1929, 216.


references to clubwomen within the national guidebooks indicate that the organization supported efforts to facilitate the suburban resettlement of black migrants in the aftermath of World War I.  

In the 1926 campaign, for example, members of the Ladies’ Library Association of Port Huron, Michigan, opened a demonstration house within a newly developed residential area designated for African Americans.  In contrast, the Urban League of Louisville, Kentucky, acted in cooperation with local clubwomen and the YWCA to conduct two nationally recognized BHA projects that supported the expansion of black homeowners into formerly segregated neighborhoods. Praised in The Southern Workman, these programs not only increased rates of home ownership, but the BHA’s emphasis on civic engagement and community improvement enabled black Americans also to protest the deficit of municipal services in their neighborhoods.  

Paraphrasing the BHA’s objectives, clubwoman Elizabeth B. Fouse advised that “Better Homes Week is a good time to put your town . . . in order,” a project that included “paving and lighting streets,” and for this purpose, she instructed local organizers to “[f]orm committees to see officials for improving special sections.”  In Middleboro, Kentucky, these advocates “secured the cooperation of city officials to haul away rubbish,” while a Better Homes committee in

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29 The Great Migration of the twentieth century’s second and third decades refers to a fundamental shift in the country’s demography of race. The movement of black Americans out of southern rural communities has become narratively linked to an historical trope of urban decay and ghettoization. The debate that surrounds this dominant paradigm has overshadowed an accompanying story of the 1.5 million African Americans who had settled in suburban areas by 1940. Andrew Wiese, “The Other Suburbanites: African American Suburbanization in the North before 1950,” The Journal of American History (March 1999):1496-1498.  
31 J.M. Ragland, “Negro Housing in Louisville,” The Southern Workman, January 1929, 22-28. As Glenda Gilmore has argued, black women could “use this discourse [good homes rhetoric] for their own purposes, and they grasped the opportunity it gave them to bargain for the state services that were beginning to improve whites’ lives but were denied to African Americans.” Gilmore, 152, 168-175. See also Tera Hunter, To ‘Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women’s Lives and Labors after the Civil War (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 104, 138-141.  
Pulaski County, Arkansas, reported that “owners and managers cooperated in helping tenants to improve their homes.”

While the BHA’s annual contests enabled black middle-class leaders to solicit much needed assistance and material support for their impoverished constituents, they also created opportunities for interracial cooperation. As expressed in one NACW resolution, participating on BHA committees enabled clubwomen to exert their “influence in formulating and fostering any plan whereby the two races in which we are so vitally interested may have the opportunity to know and understand each other.” Though Better Homes in America segregated the annual campaigns in 1924, national officials repeatedly emphasized that improving the nation’s homes and, consequently, the strength of its communities was an integrated endeavor. Committee reports acknowledged this mutuality when they described demonstration weeks as collective enterprises during which “[e]very citizen . . . black and white, did something in care or repair of

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34 According to a national survey of clubwomen conducted by Estelle Davis, chair of the American Home Department between 1926 and 1928, 75% of the responding clubwomen described themselves as property owners, while eight-tenths of the Oregon federation’s members owned their own homes. Davis, “American Home Department.” For a discussion of class-based interracial alliances, see Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent, 188, 197–199; Gilmore, 49, 172-174.

35 This quotation appeared in resolutions approved by the Central Regional Association of Colored Women at their Third Biennial Meeting. These resolutions were reprinted in the January, 1930, edition of National Notes.

their premises.” The BHA’s appeal to black citizens inspired a heightened sense of importance among African-American leaders who presumably shared one clubwomen’s perception that her “group’s” activities “brought along with the other group put us in the front ranks of demonstrations throughout the country.” Reinforcing her perceived significance was the BHA’s acknowledgement that four of the prizewinning communities in 1926 had received assistance from African-American subcommittees.

The citizens of Santa Barbara, California, ranked highest among the recipients of these honors. Of the nine demonstration houses opened by the local committee, one represented the enterprise of an African-American minister who hoped “to inspire others to improve their homes and their living conditions.” Though personally responsible for the house’s construction—a six-room dwelling that, by using salvaged materials, tallied only $2,011.50—the pastor received decorating and gardening assistance from presumably white representatives of the Woman’s Club Better Homes Committee and the Community Arts Association. Dubbed the “Good-Will House,” this model home attracted hundreds of visitors who sought practical advice from the demonstration’s black supervisors.

The BHA’s publicity materials nevertheless reveal, often subtly, how racial difference remained embedded in the organization’s policies, practices, and purposes. Though the BHA acknowledged and encouraged black participation, the organization endorsed segregation within the local campaigns, and it portrayed African Americans either as the grateful recipients of white benevolence or as a source of danger that necessitated white citizens’ involvement. One annual guidebook appealed to white readers, for example, by warning of “a large population of immigrants or of negroes, who because of limited education have not yet learned the ways of

37 Better Homes in America, Guidebook for Better Homes Campaigns in Cities and Towns, no. 23, 44.
40 Better Homes in America, Better Homes in America Guidebook for Better Homes Campaigns in Cities and Towns, no. 12, 42. See also Halbert, “Leadership for Better Homes.”
securing the best living conditions which are within their reach.”

Guidebooks also tacitly suggested that educational institutions rather than parents imparted to black children the values that attended home ownership. Based on a survey of home economics programs in secondary schools and colleges, a bulletin authored by the BHA’s executive director James Ford and Blanche Halbert proposed that “practice houses” offered “examples of what a home can be” and cultivated “an appreciation and a fine regard for home life.”

Though devoid of explicit racial connotations, this statement was illustrated with numerous photographs that primarily depicted African-American children engaged in industrial or domestic education projects.

These laudatory descriptions of vocational and home economics programs in black high schools and colleges exemplified the BHA’s commitment to preparing future citizens for home ownership and homemaking. They also implicitly conveyed, however, that schools rather than homes were the source of black children’s cultural and civic education. Representative photographs depicted the young women of Hampton Institute either gardening or sipping tea at a home economics “practice house” built by their male counterparts. Similarly, the industrious students of Douglass High School in San Antonio, Texas, received national recognition for their accomplishment in architectural drawing and carpentry.

A consistent winner in national competitions, the Penn Normal School of St. Helena Island, South Carolina, also modeled for struggling educational institutions the financial benefits of organizing a prize-winning demonstration. Under the direction of Grace Bigelow House, the school’s white assistant principle, the Penn Normal students acquired skills that enabled them to “show the rural colored

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41 Better Homes in America, Better Homes in America Guidebook for Better Homes Campaigns in Cities and Towns, no. 12, 11.
44 Halbert, Boy-Built Houses, 26-27, 35.
population of the island practical ways to raise their standard of housing and living.” On St. Helena Island and elsewhere, the school functioned in the BHA’s publications as a surrogate institution that, acting in the family’s stead, steeped young bodies in a gendered performance of domesticity. The symbolic effects of this recognition proved ambivalent. Depicted in classrooms designed to resemble homes, black children such as those at the Penn Normal School received training in the tastes and tools they would need to become homeowners themselves. Yet, this instruction occurred in institutional settings rather than in the homes made by parents whose racial difference was reiterated through expressions of gratitude uttered in paraphrased dialect. The desires of black children consequently appeared imposed rather than cultivated, and the missionary connotations of these projects undermined the illusion of liberal agency and initiating autonomy that home ownership was declared to manifest.

In their reports to BHA officials, white organizers similarly claimed to have played the part of benevolent instructor in ways that allowed black Americans access to the regulating influence of homes, but not to the characterizing attributes associated with them. From a strategic perspective, efforts to assist and incorporate black residents reflected positively on the intensely competitive local communities, and many of the prizewinning projects involved African American leaders. A third place finisher in 1924, Ft. Lauderdale’s local committee opened “a remarkable cottage designed for negroes [and] demonstrated by a subcommittee of negroes.”


46 References to African-American initiatives appearing in the BHA guidebooks escalated after the 1929 campaign as a larger number of local committees received honorable mention for their activities during Better Homes Week. For examples, see Better Homes in America, Guidebook for Better Homes Campaigns in Cities and Towns, no. 21, 42-47; Ibid., Guidebook for Better Homes Campaigns in Rural Communities and Small Towns, no. 22 (Washington, DC: Better Homes in America, 1930), 22-23; Ibid., Guidebook for Better Homes Campaigns in Cities and Towns, no. 23 (Washington, DC: Better Homes in America, 1931), 44-45; Ibid., Guidebook for Better Homes Campaigns in Rural Communities and Small Towns, no. 24, 15, 24, 27.
These acknowledgements of black independence and ability were nevertheless contradicted by assurances that these men and women had acted with “the advice and help of a member of the general Better Homes Committee.” A report prepared by Atlanta’s BHA representative similarly suggested that its black subcommittee had received courteous assistance from its white counterpart. With numerous years of experience in organizing community initiatives, however, the black members of the city’s Neighborhood Union undoubtedly needed little guidance or support.\textsuperscript{47} In examples such as these, the BHA’s promotional guidebooks contrasted sharply with the NACW’s publicity materials that noted the involvement of white patrons, but cast their participation as ancillary to the activities of black leaders.

The BHA’s ambivalent reassertion and denial of racial difference also characterized the conferences that Herbert Hoover convened during his presidency. Historians have noted the failure of early health and social welfare agencies to incorporate African Americans as either recipients of their assistance or as colleagues in the development of these nascent governmental services.\textsuperscript{48} Just as Better Homes in America opened opportunities for black women’s participation in a sphere of civic association, the White House conferences on housing and child health similarly enabled African-American professionals and clubwomen to gain entry into the policymaking circles that coalesced through Hoover’s state-building model of associationalism. The investigative intent and collaborative structure that defined Hoover’s conferences created

\textsuperscript{47} Better Homes in America, Guidebook of Better Homes Campaigns, no. 8, 49; Ibid., Guidebook of Better Homes in America: How to Organize the 1926 Campaign, no. 10, 45; Sarah Mercer Judson discusses the participation of Atlanta clubwomen in the Better Homes campaign in her dissertation, “Building the New South City: African American and White Clubwomen in Atlanta, 1895-1930” (Ph.D. diss., New York University, September 1997), 264-282. For discussions of the Neighborhood Union, see Jacqueline Anne Rouse, Lugenia Burns Hope: Black Southern Reformer (Atlanta, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), and Tera Hunter, 130-144.

\textsuperscript{48} In addition to Susan Smith, Linda Gordon has written extensively on this topic in Pitied But Not Entitled: single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). See also, Robyn Muncy, Creating a Female Dominion in American Reform, 1890-1935 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Ira Katznelson, When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005). An exception to this general exclusion were the black extension agents who were employed by the Department of Agriculture to assist rural, southern families.
opportunities for political participation and recognition; however, in taking advantage of these, black leaders also understood the imperative of defining the nature and scope of the housing and health problems that African Americans uniquely faced in the early twentieth century. No longer primarily cordoned within the segregated, rural South, the black families that were expanding urban populations across the country had become an object of concern for white social scientists and government administrators.

Forced to address the impact of this demographic dispersion, white officials turned to black educators and civic leaders for help in collecting data and devising solutions to mitigate the economic and social effects of black Americans’ determination to join the currents of modernization and to seek the economic opportunities that Herbert Hoover had proclaimed to be the entitlement of all Americans. In 1930, for example, the sociologist Ernest Groves approached the Bureau of Home Economics’s Louise Stanley with a request for funding to conduct a survey that, in supplementing a review of the secondary literature, would “draw out objective material that will permit evaluating the family.”

Groves’s letter explained that a previous attempt at gathering data had failed due to the lack of a black social worker to facilitate the “Negro study.” Stanley’s interest in Groves’s research project originated in her duties as chair of the Family and Parent Education committee for Hoover’s White House Conference on Child Health. It was in this capacity that Stanley invited Robert Moton of the Tuskegee Institute to “discuss some studies under way on the Negro family in the United States, and outline additional studies needed and work out, as far as possible, plans for conducting the same.”

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49 Ernest Groves to Louise Stanley, 17 April 1930, White House Conference on Child Health, Files of Louise Stanley, Better Homes in America, Box 1, HHPL.
50 Louise Stanley to Robert Moton, 22 January 1930, White House Conference on Child Health and Protection, Files of Louise Stanley, Box 9, HHPL. Donald J. Listo has examined Hoover’s complex relationship with Robert Moton during the months after the catastrophic flooding of the Mississippi River in 1927. Moton helped to educated Hoover on the plight of African Americans in the South and the virulent racism of white, southern officials. Moton found himself caught between a strategic effort to maintain Hoover’s patronage and his frustration with Hoover’s naïve failure to comprehend how white
Although Robert Moton’s obligations prevented his attendance, his wife, Jennie B. Moton, agreed to act as her husband’s surrogate. This prominent clubwoman and NACW member assumed responsibility for ensuring the distribution of Stanley’s survey among “a number of workers in various sections of Alabama.”

In neighboring Mississippi, clubwoman Lucy C. Jefferson sent Stanley’s assistant a report detailing the social service activities carried out in her state. Her submission was, perhaps, a response to clubwoman Anna Murray’s appeal to enumerate “any work that was being done for the children of the race in infancy and the preschool period.” Not only did Murray also serve on Stanley’s committee, but she headed the NACW’s department on legislation, and she used the organization’s monthly newsletter to assure clubwomen of “the great good that will come to our race if we take the proper interest in the survey.” Fellow NACW leader Elizabeth Fouse framed this investigative effort as an opportunity to “take stock of ourselves in every community; to find out the truth about ourselves, and to compare our findings with American standards.” Though also a member of Stanley’s committee, Fouse nevertheless prepared her own “objective test” for “drawing reasonable conclusions as to the home life and its relation to child development.”

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52 Anna Murray, *National Notes*, January 1930. Murray sent this copy of *National Notes* to Judith Clark who served as Stanley’s assistant at the Bureau of Home Economics. The correspondence between Murray and Clark suggests that Clark frequently consulted this NACW leader in coordinating subcommittee meetings addressing the health and housing of African-American families. Clark wrote, for example, “I do not like to invite any one without consulting you.” Files of Louise Stanley, Negro Women Study and Parental and Pre-parental Education Among Negroes, Box 6, HHPL.


54 Ibid., Frame 00988. Fouse’s questionnaire guided clubwomen in assessing their communities’ demographic characteristics; percentages of church attendance, home ownership, and school attendance; the prevalence of club activities; hygienic and disciplinary practices; and recreational and educational opportunities.
Having taken an active role in the survey’s execution, Anna Murray and Lizzie Fouse were among the NACW members “called to Washington” in October, 1930, to discuss the obstacles faced by African-American families, particularly the limited formal education of black parents. Their facilitator, Louise Stanley, concurred with the clubwomen’s recommendation that achieving the committee’s objectives would require both “trained leadership and the opportunities for such training.”\(^{55}\) While Stanley’s enthusiasm for this advice reflected a post-Progressive, technocratic commitment to education as a panacea for systemic inequalities, it tacitly supported clubwomen’s agenda to improve both African-American schools and the health of black children, while also securing their leadership roles in these initiatives. Despite this indirect victory, the clubwomen undoubtedly remained frustrated with Stanley’s solipsism. In framing the problem as primarily a deficit of trained educators, Stanley seemingly disregarded what her survey revealed such as one pastor’s report that economic discrimination made operating a day nursery for working mothers “too heavy a burden to carry.”\(^{56}\) She similarly dismissed Anna Murray’s complaint “about the behavior of certain members of the committee” at the October meeting. To the clubwoman’s polite rebuke, Stanley’s assistant replied, “Neither Dr. Stanley nor I noticed any conspicuous lack of courtesy. In fact, we thought it a rather successful meeting.”\(^{57}\)

**Lizzie Fouse Builds a Better Home**

Among those African Americans attending Hoover’s White House conferences on children’s health and home ownership was the clubwoman Elizabeth B. Fouse. Born in Lancaster, Kentucky, in 1875, Lizzie Fouse shared with Herbert Hoover a modest upbringing, the

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\(^{55}\) Louise Stanley to the presidents of African-American educational institutions, 17 November 1930, White House Conference on Child Health and Protection, Box 6, Files of Louise Stanley, Parental and Pre-parental Education Among Negroes, HHPL. This quotation can be found in a cover letter that accompanied the minutes of a meeting held in Washington on October 24-25, 1930. Prominent NACW members included Grace Lowndes, Janie Porter Barrett, Mary McCleod Bethune, and Jennie B. Moton.

\(^{56}\) Richard H. Bowling to Judith Clark, 4 June 1930, White House Conference on Child Health and Protection, Box 6, files of Louise Stanley, Parental and Pre-Parental Education Among Negroes, HHPL.

\(^{57}\) Judith Clark to Anna E. Murray, White House Conference on Child Health and Protection, Box 2, Files of Louise Stanley, HHPL.
absence of a parent, a hard-won education, a loving marital partnership, commitments to self-improvement and upward mobility, and a sense of social obligation. Differentiated by race and gender, however, these two contemporaries had few common experiences. While Herbert Hoover’s degree in mining sent him packing for the mines of southeastern Asia, Lizzie Fouse’s education at State University in Louisville, Kentucky, and later at Eckstein Norton University prepared her to teach in segregated public schools. Fouse eventually retired from teaching in 1904, as her husband, William H. Fouse, became an increasingly successful and well-respected educator. William Fouse’s career path eventually brought the civic leaders to Lexington, Kentucky, when he was appointed both the principal of the high school designated for the city’s black students and the supervisor of Lexington’s African-American schools.

Due to William Fouse’s professional position, the husband and wife enjoyed an elevated status and relative affluence within their new community that brought accompanying obligations. After retiring from paid employment, Lizzie Fouse was hardly idle, and in the nine intervening years before she and her husband settled in Lexington, she became increasingly involved in clubwork. Upon moving to Lexington, Fouse quickly established herself as a formidable force in the community. She assumed leadership roles in the City Federation of Colored Women’s Clubs, the Women’s Improvement Club and Day Nursery, and the women’s auxiliary of the First Baptist Church. The nation’s entry into World War I led Fouse to become a Red Cross volunteer and a demonstration agent, and following the war, she spearheaded the initiative to establish a local branch of the Phyllis Wheatley YWCA. Coinciding with these activities was Fouse’s increasing stature within the National Association of Colored Women. Having joined Kentucky’s state federation six years after its 1903 founding, Fouse was elected to lead the KFCW in 1912. Most
notable among her accomplishments in this position was the creation of a Scholarship Loan Fund that she continued to direct for over forty years.58

Upon the foundation of such achievements at the state and regional levels, Lizzie Fouse gained entry to the NACW’s elite circle of national leaders. An appointment to the NACW’s Department on Railroad Conditions in 1916 engaged the energies of this frequent traveler who, during a summer vacation to Niagara Falls, documented the purchase of two “Col[ored] tickets” and an expenditure of $.35 on the “Col. Street car.”59 Whether encountered when vacationing with her husband or traveling to promote the NACW’s objectives, the injustices of segregated transportation continued to inspire Lizzie Fouse who threatened suit in 1931 against the Consolidated Bus Company for “the public embarrassment and painful humiliation” she endured “without cause.” From that incident, Lizzie Fouse demanded monetary compensation for the unjust and unequal treatment she suffered when a “big, rough policeman came stalking into the bus and shoved me out of my seat and forced me into another seat in he [sic] rear of the bus.” Responding to this complaint, the company agreed to a $75 settlement.60 It was a sum that acknowledged the breach of justice suffered by a middle-class woman whose decorum and self-discipline evinced not simply her socioeconomic status, but also her political liberty and equality. This commitment to protecting and preserving these inherent entitlements similarly led Fouse to work actively for black women’s voting rights and to condemn lynching.

Seemingly at odds with this explicit support for black women’s political rights were the bourgeois values and gendered division of labor that Lizzie Fouse reiterated in her support for maternal education and home improvement. Fouse began to establish her reputation within the

59 Ledger, Fouse Family Papers, Folder 1, 2, Special Collections, M.I. King Library, University of Kentucky, Lexington (hereafter cited as FFP).
60 Lizzie B. Fouse to Walter Muir, Lexington, KY, 31 October 1931, FFP, Folder 6.
NACW as an expert on issues of maternal and child welfare when she was tapped to chair a committee that encouraged the formation of mothers’ clubs. Fouse followed this position with concurrent appointments to the NACW’s Child Welfare and Maternity Department and to the American Homes Department. She attained her most significant national role in the NACW when President Sallie Stewart consolidated these minor committees into the Mother, Home, and Child Department. Fouse’s communications with NACW President Sallie Stewart show Fouse as “tickled pink over the proposition of Mother Home & Child,” and she urged Stewart to “count on me any time any where.” This assurance illustrates Fouse’s enthusiasm as well as an ambition for her “department to go big,” and for this purpose, Fouse explained, “Everyday I am working out my yearly program.”

This leadership position within the NACW also connected Fouse to the circle of white bureaucrats and reformers affiliated with Herbert Hoover by enabling her to assume an active, even ardent, role in promoting home ownership and home improvement to other African Americans. In addition to participating in the White House conferences, Fouse worked directly with its white organizers such as when she invited Julia D. Connor, the assistant director of Better Homes in America, to speak at the NACW’s 1930 convention. After engineering this coup, Lizzie Fouse confided to Stewart, “I felt that I am really a somebody to secure a speaker from Better Homes office of America.” Connor’s address to the clubwomen surely heightened Fouse’s sense of accomplishment, for the BHA’s assistant director urged her audience of black women to join a nationwide, federally sanctioned project “whose purpose is so exactly in accord with the principles and purposes of your Association” and whose suggested program “is intended for the benefit of all American citizens.” Although Connor acknowledged that black men and women had already become active participants in the local drives for better homes, she stressed

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61 Lizzie Fouse to Sallie Stewart, 11 January 1932, NACW Records, Reel 8, Frame 00354.
62 Lizzie Fouse to Sallie Stewart, 1 August 1930, NACW Records, Reel 8 Frame 00339; Lizzie Fouse to Sallie Stewart, 24 September 1932, NACW Records, Reel 8, Frame 00386.
63 Lizzie B. Fouse to Minnie L. Scott, undated, NACW Records, Reel 8, Frame 00417.
that the BHA “need[ed] Colored Leaders, women such as you who have the ability to lead.” By involving themselves in the BHA initiative, she concluded, the NACW’s members would find “an unusual opportunity . . . to make an outstanding and lasting contribution to the civic development of your communities.” By encouraging clubwomen’s involvement in the BHA’s annual campaigns, Lizzie Fouse attempted to act upon this “unusual opportunity” to assert the leadership of black women, and in a letter to Sallie Stewart, Fouse conveyed her intent to contact James Ford, the BHA’s executive director, to ask “him as far as possible to use the women in each state that is a member [sic] of my committee.”

These committee members followed Fouse’s guidance rather than Ford’s in adapting his organization’s general recommendations to meet the specific needs of black Americans. Outlining how to organize a Better Homes in America campaign, Fouse advised that ministers could best publicize and sanction the BHA initiative by delivering from their pulpits sermons on the “Spiritual Significance of the Home” and “Character Building in the Home.” This ministerial endorsement set the stage for lectures promoting the merits of home ownership and helping potential homeowners negotiate the financial and legal intricacies of purchasing a house. Further facilitating the ability to finance a house was a “Family Budget Day” that stressed the importance of planning and recording expenditures, making a will, and acquiring insurance. If these events incorporated representatives from religious, banking, and educational institutions, a number of contests were also planned to involve benevolent associations, businesses, schools, civic organizations, and individual families. Fouse’s sample program also instructed participants to survey housing conditions, appeal to government officials for better services and facilities,

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64 A transcript of Connor’s address appears in the Minutes from the NACW 1930 Convention, Frames 00911-00913.
65 Lizzie B. Fouse to Sallie Stewart, 11 January 1932, Reel 8, Frame 00354.
establish recreational centers and playgrounds, improve the safety and passability of neighborhood streets and alleys, and carry out community projects.

In addition to these communal initiatives, Fouse’s recommendations encompassed guidelines for preparing new and refurbished demonstration houses. Acknowledging the financial limitations of many African Americans, Fouse advised that exhibited furniture “[s]hould be simple, economical, modest [and] durable,” as a “few pieces of furniture with little debt is better than a house of furniture with unpaid debts.” Local organizers consequently demonstrated how even the poorest families might recondition old furniture and make new pieces from boxes. Such projects were intended to reassure less affluent African Americans that better homes hardly required worldly riches, but were instead characterized as “well planned, soundly constructed, attractively furnished, artistically decorated . . . [and] efficiently and easily run.”67 These attributes reflected the belief Fouse held in common with the BHA’s national organizers, for as she explained to the NACW’s socioeconomically diverse membership, “I am impressed that a good home like character is made, not by impulsive sporadic efforts, but rather by constant, thoughtful, systematic work every day.”68

Lizzie Fouse hardly relied upon the BHA’s national leaders to tell her that hard work translated character into the pleasure of owning a better home reflective of this innate fiber. Rather, the ledger that Fouse and her husband kept between 1898 and 1918 literally accounts for the value that the couple placed on home ownership. Although the record of their income and expenditures ends prior to Lizzie Fouse’s involvement in the NACW’s Better Homes in America campaign, this chronicle of her economic activity in the first twenty years of her marriage suggests that she modeled her recommendations for improving the appearance of the homes inhabited by African Americans on her own personal practices. As indicated by the ledger, Fouse

67 Ibid., “The Better Homes Department of the N.A.C.W.”
drew upon experience when she advised clubwomen that thrift was essential in purchasing a home, and it was this financial discipline that enabled the Fouses to become both homeowners and landlords. To the rental properties they owned, the Fouses contracted numerous repairs, and they improved their own residence by erecting a cedar fence, building an addition, renovating the front steps, and pouring a concrete sidewalk. The ledger also reflects the Fouse’s concern for the decoration of their home, documenting that the Fouses paid to have wallpaper hung, the banister repaired, and linoleum installed. Approximately every fourth year, the couple also invested in more expensive furnishings that included a bedroom set, rug, a dining table, a china closet, and a dresser.

Focusing on educated professionals and activists such as Lizzie Fouse, historians have grappled to understand their promotion of the middle-class ideals associated with home ownership and improvement. Unable to challenge racism’s systemic causes effectively, a well-educated professional class of African-American men and women, whom W. E. B. Du Bois labeled the Talented Tenth, practiced and promoted the quintessentially American tenets of self-help and self-sufficiency. Attendant to this ethos was a bourgeois emphasis on manners, morals, educational achievement, and cultural enlightenment that coalesced into what historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has termed a politics of respectability.69 Just as the white home economists of the previous chapter compared the educated homemaker’s rationality and skill to that required of male corporate managers, elite and middle-class black Americans asserted the values and aspirations they shared with their white Progressive counterparts. These race men and women similarly created programs and institutions that distinguished themselves from and asserted their authority over the less affluent, rural and working-class beneficiaries of their

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professional labors and benevolent services. Middle-class men and women were hardly the only proponents of respectability, however, and the socioeconomic diversity of this doctrine’s adherents speaks to the fluidity and relative immateriality of class distinctions within black communities. Laborers and sharecroppers joined teachers and landowners in perceiving self-improvement and self-scrutiny as a more viable means of countering the logic of racial oppression than dismantling its state sanctioned and often violent modes of operation.

While the educational and social welfare agenda that black leaders pursued highlighted class differences within their communities as a means of emphasizing inter-racial similarities, these programs also acknowledged the entwined fate of all African Americans due to the polarizing effects of the nation’s racial binary. The struggle for economic and political rights required countering justifications for the denial of civil entitlements—the demeaning, homogenizing stereotypes and denigrating cultural narratives that rendered all African Americans similarly marginalized regardless of their socioeconomic status. From the onset of chattel slavery in America, a complex of racial theory, legislation, and iconography had coalesced for the purpose of managing a colonial labor force. In this way, the conceptualization of blacks as a homogeneous race created a “collective identit[y] by demoting or effacing the lived integrity of individual families [and] clans.” This geographic and familial extraction relegated enslaved laborers to a legal state of “kinlessness” that rendered them literally and perceptually unable to create the publicly sanctioned, intimate relations of familial care upon which liberal discourse predicated the possibility of self-government and thus entry into a body politic comprised of

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70 The periodization of this binary’s development remains a topic of historical debate. In The Color of Race in America, 1900-1940 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), the cultural historian Matthew Guterel traces racial polarization to the aftermath of World War I as a more self-consciously imperialist country faced the challenges of immigration, Bolshevism, and black migration out of the South. As racialized attributions coalesced into the more monolithic categories of black and Caucasian, the latter designation expanded to encompass the numerous ethnological categories of the late nineteenth-century. However, both historians and literary scholars have also located the construction of race in the imperialism that has always characterized American history, arguing that racial discourse has historically served to establish the inter-articulated borders of the body and the nation. For a recent example of this argument, see Tompkins, 77.
presumptively autonomous, consensual, and equal individuals. While the productivity of an agrarian black labor force fueled the young republic’s economic growth, the racialist discourse that accompanied its institution and regulation served to establish the boundaries between who could govern and what must be governed.71 White bodies could be conceived as self-governing through their possession of and domination over black bodies that were objectified by way of their oppressed labor and their imagined eroticism. Racial theory and imagery thus served to mark the boundary between inclusion and exclusion, the national and the alien, the self-ruling and the subjugated; yet, as significantly, fantasies about race functioned within the paradox of liberalism to facilitate the fiction that a white liberal subject might transcend his own embodied constraints, channel his own baser impulses, and deny the unavoidability of his own domination.

These representations of black identity had become especially pernicious by the early twentieth century relative both to consumerism and to the pervasive, social application of Darwinian theories that helped to legitimize the country’s imperial aspirations.72 Circulating with increasing force within Jim Crow America, fantasies of black primitivity and servility depicted black identity as an inescapably primordial and libidinously unbridled state that both threatened and established the temporal and spatial boundaries of a progressively evolving, white civilization.73 In this context, moral and behavioral decorum served to refute what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham has termed a “metalanguage of race.” This totalizing, racial ascription not only conflated blackness with poverty, intellectual inferiority, and sexual licentiousness, but reflexively figured the effects of racism as the consequences of an indelible black pathology.74

“Uplifting” the manners and morals of African Americans refuted this degrading attribution by demonstrating a capacity for evolutionary development. As an expression of carefully cultivated and restrained appetites, then, respectability refuted the sexualized and servile images of African Americans as a means of enabling black citizens to join a political collective of disembodied individuals rendered theoretically identical through their consensually disciplined enactment of governing ideals. Higginbotham’s interpretation of respectability as a political strategy underscores its origin in the assumptions, logics, and narratives of a liberal capital episteme that produced the linear connections and symbolic associations between the desiring body, the gratifying home, and a progressive, economically abundant nation.

Lizzie Fouse was representative of the well-educated, middle-class adherents of respectability who viewed home improvement as an interrelated strategy for achieving political demands. A 1929 article appearing in *The Crisis* illustrated her perception of the conjoined powers of decorum and decoration when it rhetorically asked, “Do you see the home pictured on this page?” Leaving no doubt as to how the photograph should be interpreted, the author answered, “It is a beautiful home within and without, tasteful, well-furnished and housing a physician who . . . is on the staff of the leading white hospital.” Due to the doctor’s presence—though perhaps not to that of his house, which was described as “the most tasteful if not the most costly on the street,” “the neighbors were in arms, [and] the house was dynamited twice.” The doctor’s wife nevertheless “stuck to her home” and to her convictions about what this aesthetically appealing dwelling should convey to her hostile neighbors.75 Echoing her conviction, the *Southern Workman* optimistically reported that the construction of model homes in Louisville, Kentucky, “completely changed the impression formerly entertained concerning

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75 *The Crisis*, February 1929. This story along with many similar accounts were also reported in Johnson’s *Negro Housing*, 46-47.
Negroes by the white people in the community,” and many white residents consequently chose to remain in the newly integrated neighborhood.76

Through both the propriety and property that domesticity encompassed, material and performative representations of black discipline countered racialist discourse by effecting black men and women as protagonists within the narrative of American liberalism. Because the home directed desire into economically productive and politically rational activity; it was deemed the natural precursor of the public sphere wherein citizens cultivated the values and skills necessary to fulfill the ethical demands of contractual obligation. Relative to this logic, securing adequate housing for black Americans prompted many African-American reformers of the early twentieth century to reiterate an historical argument that posited home ownership as both a practical and symbolic means of attaining racial equality. As early as 1845, Frederick Douglass wrote in his narrative, “[A]n orderly, enlightened, domestic environment makes the African American worthy, not only of freedom, but of acceptance into American social circles, churches, and politics.”

Explicating this quotation, Barbara Burlison Mooney has written, “For Douglass, it is not merely the removal of the condition of servitude but the ability of a black man to construct a middle-class domestic setting characterized by order, health, literacy, and morality that establishes a sufficient claim to his participation in the public sphere.”77 Because the home purportedly reflected the character of its owner, it served to “undermine a system of judgment based on skin color and replace it with a system based on the ability of a person to create a humble but clean and orderly architectural environment.”78 Further illustrating the sentimentalized home’s function in structuring desire and symbolizing entitled liberty within a capitalist economy, Clinton Fisk advised freedman in the Civil War’s aftermath, “You must learn to love home better than any

78 Ibid., 50.
other place on earth.” Booker T. Washington continued to reiterate the belief that a home manifested the productively disciplined desire of its maker even after the promises of Reconstruction had given way to the perils of Jim Crow. Demonstrating the influence of evolutionary logic, he held up the “comfortable, tasty, framed cottage” as an emblem of black Americans’ rapid advancement in the aftermath of slavery as well as an admission that a “white man knows the Negro that lives in a two-story brick house whether he wants to or not.”

The federally endorsed Better Homes in America campaign coalesced from this belief in in this fundamental identity between citizens who inhabited homes that conformed to “American standards.” The federally supported BHA’s promotion of affordability, frugality, and simplicity breathed new life into the ethos of self-help that African Americans had adopted in response to a governmental failure to protect their rights and serve their needs. While this stratagem had attempted to insert black Americans into a national mythology of success for the self-disciplined, it sidestepped a more direct confrontation with the systemic operation of racism and white privilege, an avoidance that frustrated a younger generation of African Americans. Yet, with its racially neutral proclamations and its promises of opportunity, the BHA’s activities revived liberal individualism’s seductive appeal. If white American Individuals were inspired by visions of home rather than those of riches or fame, so too were black men. If homes evinced the consensually restrained initiative of the white men who owned them, those belonging to black Americans did the same. In these ways, the liberal fiction that led Herbert Hoover to construe the better home as the embodiment of an archetypal American identity also structured the arguments for granting African Americans the civil protections and economic opportunities that would enable them to fulfill stymied desires to become homeowners and, consequently, to take their places in a national body constituted of home owning individuals.

79 Ibid., 52.
80 Ibid., 54.
Enjoining clubwomen either to initiate or join a BHA project, clubwoman Elizabeth Fouse assured her audience that Herbert Hoover’s housing project recognized “neither race, creed or caste.” Rather, the BHA promoted an inclusive objective by acknowledging that “every citizen should have a chance to live in a simple, well built, modern home that is attractive and beautiful, at the smallest possible cost.” Because the opportunity to own a home secured a capacity to demonstrate one’s qualifying character, what ominously sounded a warning also took on an air of optimistic possibility. “Tell me where you live and how you live and I will tell you who you are,” Lizzie Fouse both advised and assured her constituents. Yet, in conceiving the home as “an agency for progress and culture” that “should stand for mental life, spiritual growth and social achievement as well as for household conveniences,” Fouse agitated for the rights of African Americans not simply to own homes, but more significantly, to be identified with the economic independence, moral idealism, political autonomy, and developmental potential these domiciles had come to symbolize.

Such statements also illustrate that, in paraphrasing Herbert Hoover’s pronouncements on the better home’s national importance, Fouse seized upon the circular construction of citizen, home, and nation that vexed his developmental account of American Individualism. As a participant in Hoover’s White House conference on housing, Fouse reported a universal agreement that the home represented “that one element out of which American civilization is to be constructed.” It was “the foundation stone of the Republic,” and no other institution or

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82 Ibid.
85 Mrs. Lizzie B. Fouse, “Department of Mother, Home and Child.”
influence trumped its significance as “the most important factor in American life.” While Fouse acknowledged that “the beautiful, well appointed home is very desirable,” she reminded clubwomen that an attractive house “should not, however, be an end in itself.” Focusing instead on the attributes that an aesthetically appealing abode should both manifest and cultivate, she reiterated Herbert Hoover’s emphasis on the “vast difference between living in a house and living in a home, since certain mental and spiritual values belong to a real home that make for happiness and are fundamental in establishing a worthwhile civilization.”

Although these values allegedly originated in the American Individual’s pursuit of liberty and opportunity, or so the BHA’s leaders claimed, national ideals—and consequently the nation itself—remained undeveloped and unrealized in the absence of appealing homes. Repeatedly articulated in the BHA’s publications, the liberal citizen’s formative and symbolic dependency upon an aesthetically tasteful dwelling created for Fouse and the African-Americans on whose behalf she tirelessly labored a form of equity that was both economic and political. It was the President himself, Fouse argued, who “has said that ‘The First essential for wholesome home life is a good house, inwhich [sic] the family may live in privacy and comfort and justly take pride. The [sic] detached [sic] single family dwelling makes home ownership possible, promotes thriftand [sic] foresight, and by giving the family a stake in the community, insures responsible citizenship.’” The home consequently assumed, as she echoed elsewhere, “a strategic place in developing character, setting a higher standard of culture, and lifting higher the level of living.”

Such statements reiterated Hoover’s conception of the better home’s meaning and purpose: It signified an entitled individual liberty as well as collectivizing national ideals and obligations. This symbolic association between a home and the nation served to effect a creator of each whose

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86 Ibid., National Notes, December 1934, Reel 24, Frame 00802.
87 Fouse, “Better Homes Department of the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs,” July 1930.
89 Ibid., “Mother, Home, and Child Department of the N.A.C.C. W [sic],” NACW Records, Reel 7, Frame 00374-375.
capacity for self-government originated in the home’s aesthetic ability to channel innate and potentially destructive desires into ideological reproduction and economic expansion.

Structuring Hoover’s rhetoric on both the American Individual and the better home, this template for liberal subjectivity and nationhood created the possibility that African Americans might also become recognizable as racially ambiguous liberal subjects. Fouse and her contemporaries consequently sought to demonstrate the initiative and self-governance of black citizens by emphasizing their efforts to acquire adequate housing. In their *Report of the Committee on Negro Housing*, the contributors to Hoover’s White House Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership’s drew heavily upon T. J. Woofter’s 1928 study *Negro Problems in Cities* and his conclusion that the “tendency toward home ownership, so pronounced during the past ten years, is one of the remarkably encouraging signs of genuine advancement.” “No one can observe,” Woofter asserted, “the persistent struggles of some Negro families dependent upon humble occupations for a livelihood and yet steadfast in their purpose to build and own real homes, without feeling that here are people who are determined to progress.” Though they battled insufficient wages and a deficit of opportunity, “ambitious migrants” had progressively climbed a “home-making ladder” by sequentially moving in less than a decade from “country cabins,” to tenements, to rental properties, to “comfortable and homelike houses.”

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90 This argument questions if what Robert Reid-Pharr and Nancy Bentley have argued of the nineteenth century remained true relative to the consumerism of the twentieth century and the significance of commodities in creating an aesthetically recognizable home. Taking her cue from Reid-Pharr’s *Conjugal Union*, Bentley states: “While recognition within the private sphere of the family was necessary for any individual to become an agent in the public sphere, the effort to represent black subjects as family members threatened to reclaim kinship at the cost of attaching a damaging modifier—black subjectivity.” In this way, the “transmission of blackness would always exclude such families from national belonging.” *Bentley*, 281. This argument seems to create an insurmountable paradox for black Americans—the assertion of an embodied identity that will always be a difference—that contradicts the possibility of racial ambiguity and malleability that NACW leaders found in the conceptualization of the better home. See also Reid-Pharr’s later monograph, *Once You Go Black: Choice, Desire, and the Black American Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

further evidence of Woofter’s findings, a study of Knoxville, Tennessee’s, black residents showed that “where the family income is sufficient to warrant better living, we found that homes had been purchased in good neighborhoods, where the comforts and conveniences of life may be had, and in fairly clean and wholesome surroundings.” In these enclaves, African American homeowners “ordinarily redecorate once a year, take proper care of their garbage, keep the lawns cut and the premises clean, plant flowers, and otherwise reveal a natural and normal pride of ownership.”\footnote{Quotation excerpted from J. H. Dave's, “Social Study of the Colored Population of Knoxville, Tennessee,” 1926.}

Any failure to embark on this upwardly mobile path could be attributable only to a deficit of economic opportunity and the numerous impediments uniquely encountered by African-American citizens.\footnote{For an enumeration of the specific impediments to home ownership, see Johnson, vii-viii, 1-2, 5, 46, 50-51, 73-78, 119-142, 199-230.} Echoing the era’s general claims about the home’s regulatory effect on men’s pursuit of illicit pleasures, the housing report contended that a black man who lacked both means and ways proved unable to “see the advantage in postponing the satisfaction of his desires. His chances for advancement do not encourage thrift, and no vision of the ascent from poor boy to third vice-president or of a junior partnership inspire him to wait.”\footnote{Johnson, 59.} As this critique illustrates, the report on the state of African-American housing conditions enabled its principal author, African-American sociologist Charles S. Johnson, to make the argument that racism rather than any innate deficit of character, discipline, or ability thwarted the longings of African Americans to own their own homes. Johnson detailed for white officials the hardships faced by black migrants—the “inhibitions and handicaps imposed upon the Negro as a Negro”—in securing adequate, affordable shelter.\footnote{Ibid., 73.} “The literature of Negro housing is virtually a literature of the slums,” Johnson lamented, and he decried how the spatial effects of racism were accounted for “in terms of a fixed destiny, a propensity to depreciation, and uniform emotional adjustment to
the setting, [and] an ability to subsist on less than others require." To counter such prejudicial assumptions, Johnson’s committee meticulously documented how low wages and high rents made saving for home ownership a virtual impossibility for black tenants who consequently became unable to move beyond the dilapidated dwellings where most immigrants first resided before beginning their progressive journey to the city’s periphery. According to Johnson’s committee, inescapable poverty and segregation determined not only the location of African American homes, but as significantly, their perceived instability and deficiencies, particularly the presence of borders, the necessity of working mothers, the perception of delinquency among black children, and a general disrepair and lack of cleanliness.

Evident in Johnson’s report is the fact that racial discrimination forced African Americans to forge a very different path to the suburbs than the one paved by the BHA’s rhetoric. Given their limited financial resources, but also the institution of restrictive deeds, racial covenants, and discriminatory lending practices, black suburbanites more frequently moved to outlying and less desirable areas where they constructed their own houses and often eschewed the modern conveniences associated in the popular press with a consumer-based standard of home ownership. These comparatively rural neighborhoods reflected a longing to recreate an agrarian heritage; yet, black homeowners also extended their meager incomes by planting gardens and keeping livestock, and they kept their tax assessments low by declining public utilities, municipal services, and improvements such as paved roads and sidewalks. The distinctive character of black suburbanization thus illustrates the persistence of desires for land ownership and the opportunities for self-sufficiency that it continued to provide for those marginalized within an industrializing economy.

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96 Ibid., 2.
97 Weise, “The Other Suburbanites,” 1495-1519. See also Johnson, 79-102, particularly 89-91.
Despite Johnson’s evidence to the contrary, the settlement of black families in comparatively marginal environments was widely proclaimed to be yet another example of cultural, if not biological, degeneracy. Explaining this perception, political theorist Clarissa Hayward has recently examined how space has functioned since the early twentieth century to objectify narratives about the causality of racial identity. Her work documents that the segregated location and the relatively inferior condition of African-American housing can be traced to a host of discriminatory practices perpetrated by employers, realtors, lenders, landlords, government policies, and white homeowners. While the racialization of space originated in these systemic and discriminatory factors, it functioned to conceal and perpetuate these inequalities, for the conflation of black identity with substandard forms of housing coincided with the insistence that recognizably better homes materialized a quintessentially American character. As Hayward argues, explanations of segregated housing patterns “racialized the failure to maintain one’s residence, telling stories of race as the cause of incapacity for home ownership and unfitness for admission to high-status (white) neighborhoods.”99 The types of homes that black and white Americans disparately began to occupy in the early twentieth century thus acquired the power to reify explanations of racial causality as well as entwined justifications for African Americans’ inability to enact liberal narratives of national identity and entitlement. Hayward further argues that this exclusion from a progressive American body politic—metaphorically embodied by the rows of standardized, single-family houses lining suburban streets—also cast the deficiencies in African-American housing as a “black problem” rather than a collective one.

In his introduction to Charles Johnson’s report, Secretary of Commerce Robert Lamont promised to ameliorate the “individualistic theory of housing” that had created the “Negro’s housing problem.” Yet, in advocating the national community’s responsibility for improving the

domestic environments of black citizens, Lamont focused on increasing the supply of affordable options for the black laborer who was already hampered by “[r]acial factors and the primitive housing conditions to which he has been accustomed.” While the Secretary acknowledged that “racial segregation makes it exceedingly difficult for any Negro family” to find adequate housing, he also averred that “[t]hese conditions . . . are not the result of any wilful [sic] inhumanity on the part of our society.” Attributed by Lamont to an unfortunate combination of black ignorance and white inefficiency, the deficits in the quality and quantity of African-American homes could be remediated, he assured, through the institution of standards and through the passage of zoning ordinances that would eliminate the blight of slums altogether. Teaching African migrants to desire better homes played an equally significant role, and the exposure to cleaner, more wholesome environments would serve, Lamont concluded, to “consolidate such education.”

The various studies that constituted the bulk of *Negro Housing* refuted Lamont’s assessment by demonstrating how African Americans’ access to better housing lay largely beyond their control. As the report illustrates, Charles Johnson and his colleagues were acutely aware of the conditions that would underlie Clarissa Hayward’s contemporary claim that housing has helped to produce racialist ideology and to sustain white privilege. Insufficient wages and a discriminatory lack of economic opportunity were significant impediments, but these were ultimately symptoms of an intransigent prejudice that had become more virulent with the migration of African Americans out of the rural South. Black citizens’ efforts to seek economic opportunity and to act upon their political rights had created a “discomforting consciousness of change,” and this perception of racial fluidity provoked white Americans into seeking an

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100 Robert P. Lamont, Foreword, in *Negro Housing*, vii-viii.
“artificial means of crystallizing relations” with the black men and women moving into their communities.\textsuperscript{101}

Housing segregation was the “artificial means” to which Johnson’s committee referred, and it functioned as a technique for reinforcing the relations of power that the geographic and economic mobility of African Americans threatened to destabilize. Playing upon the metonymic connection between family and home, one contributor to Johnson’s report explained that, like the prohibition of miscegenation, “[t]he dominant and controlling element in the case is the determined attitude of the white race to forbid residential promiscuity which, in turn, it is felt, would lead to social equality.”\textsuperscript{102} This vehement policing of racial difference describes the experience of Lizzie Fouse and her husband, when in 1920, the couple visited a house they owned in Covington, Kentucky. A disturbing encounter with white neighbors prompted the Fouses to confide in their ledger, “White people in vicinity very ugly.”\textsuperscript{103} These “insolent” neighbors were anything but welcoming, and they were representative of the suburbanites cited in Johnson’s report who mounted an often violent resistance to the encroachment of black bodies into white spaces.

More than any other factor, then, segregation obstructed the efforts of black Americans to demonstrate their submission to the collectivizing national ideals that regulated the pursuit of freedom. As Johnson’s report also argued, it fundamentally violated the right of consent that ensured liberty’s voluntary limitation and the possibility of self-government.\textsuperscript{104} Executed through legally sanctioned and violently coercive means, the confinement and containment of African-American bodies within spatialized racial categories consequently distinguished the black citizen

\textsuperscript{101} This quotation was taken from an editorial in \textit{Opportunity}, October 1926, 302. “Segregation, General, Appendix III.,” White House Conference on Home Building and Home Ownership, Negro Housing Committee, Reports, Segregation, Box 42, Record Group 167, Series 78. HHPL.

\textsuperscript{102} Johnson, 207. Quote taken from the mathematician and sociologist Kelly Miller in a segment entitled “The Causes and Results of Segregation.”

\textsuperscript{103} Fouse, Ledger, FFP, Folders 1, 2.

\textsuperscript{104} Johnson., 209.
from the immigrant “who has shuffled off the coil of his Continental condition,” for it prevented black citizens from acquiring the better homes that were the authorized signifiers of national identity and civil entitlement.\footnote{Ibid., 200. This quotation was taken from an excerpt of George E. Haynes’s “Conditions Among Negroes in the Cities.”}

Even black Americans with incomes sufficient to purchase a better standard of living were often confined to residential areas “out of harmony with [their] tastes and ability to acquire a modern home with up-to-date appointments and facilities.”\footnote{Ibid., 209.}

Both explained and contested through liberalism’s developmental narrative, this racialization of space led the Committee on Negro Housing to pose an ambivalent challenge to the role of home ownership and improvement in perpetrating racial discrimination. Johnson and his colleagues refuted but also reiterated the traditional claim that systemic inequality could be surmounted by “[c]reating among Negroes themselves a desire for the maintenance of pleasant, attractive neighborhoods or blocks.” Yet, because it catalyzed a citizen’s disciplined initiative and the nation’s progressive trek, this orientation of longing was essential for “[e]mphasizing to white house owners and agents that there are different kinds of Negroes just as there are different kinds of whites.” “An attractive Negro block or neighborhood is the best argument possible,” as one housing official contended, “in convincing [the white public] that all Negroes are not shiftless or irresponsible.”\footnote{John Ihlder, Executive Director of the Pittsburgh Housing Association,” quoted in Johnson, \textit{Negro Housing}, 74.}

This performative, individualizing strategy for combatting the material and political effects of racism illustrates how the “metalanguage of race”—“the fact that [black] individuals and families are all lumped by popular opinion into one class”—simultaneously shaped and stymied efforts to help African Americans gain access to homes that symbolized both individual rights and national belonging. By exposing their continued difficulty in acquiring this signifying American standard, Johnson and his report’s numerous contributors called attention to the irrationality of white racism, but they stopped short of questioning if a racial binary might be
embedded within liberal ideals, the logic of liberal development, and the ideal of home. Instead, these male reformers joined the NACW’s leaders in viewing their inter-articulation within Hoover’s housing campaign as a symbolic opportunity for African Americans to represent themselves as abstractly identical to white homeowners. Through creating an association between black people and better homes, “a white person [could] come to know that ‘there are Negroes and Negroes just as there are white folks and white folks,’” or in other words, white Americans could come to view black Americans as self-governing individuals just like themselves.108

“A Better Childhood; A Better Womanhood; A Better Race”109

Articulated in American Individualism, Herbert Hoover’s charge that Americans must temper desires for individual opportunity with an obligation to serve the community perfectly articulated the balance that necessarily structured Lizzie Fouse’s long career as an educator, civic leader, and officer within the NACW. The “practical idealism” and the voluntarism to which Hoover urged his audience were phrases describing the all-encompassing commitment that many well-educated black women such as Fouse felt to assist their communities in either paid or voluntary positions. Rather than retreat themselves to a domestic domain and immerse themselves in its insular, individualistic concerns, these activists used their educational and financial resources to assist their communities. Balancing personal ambition with communal obligation, theirs was an ethos of both individual accomplishment and public service that the historian Stephanie Shaw has labeled “socially responsible individualism.”110

108 Johnson, 201.
110 Stephanie Shaw argues that a model of individual achievement that created a sense of class privilege and social distance equally reinforced African-American women’s obligations and connections to their racial communities. Shaw, 2.
It was in the National Association of Colored Women that many women such as Lizzie Fouse found an opportunity to fulfill their call to serve while also pursuing their individual ambitions. Founded in 1896, this organization responded to the exclusionary membership policies of the social and charitable organizations operated by white women, and through its federated structure, black clubwomen sought to counter all forms of discrimination, but particularly the inability of African American women to access nascent health, education, and welfare programs as either providers or clients. Although black women enjoyed few opportunities to work directly with white reformers in these realms of civic activism, they similarly deployed a maternalist ideology to explain and legitimate their specific interests.¹¹¹ According to this worldview, women possessed experiential knowledge and innate characteristics that qualified them to address the needs of impoverished women and children, to counter the corrupting effects of industrial capitalism on the home, and to correct a political system beset with greed and self-interest. Unlike white home economists, maternalists who advocated both public roles and legal protections for women emphasized the ameliorative effect of feminine difference. It was women’s contrast to men rather than their similarity, they argued, that enabled women to correct the deficiencies in the home identified by social scientists and to provide children with a proper, formative environment. Historians have argued that this celebration of maternity reflected a pragmatic approach to establishing workplace protections and social welfare programs within a political economy that eschewed the state’s involvement in democratizing economic and political relations.¹¹² At the same time, reiterating a traditionally feminine concern for charity and domesticity served to establish political roles and legitimize a public presence for

women, and through their voluntarism, they found opportunities to develop administrative and leadership skills and to work in para-professional capacities.\textsuperscript{113}

Invoking women’s relation to the home and the sanctity of the mother-child bond may have echoed white maternalists, but the rhetoric and activities of black clubwomen originated in the particular history of black mothers. Although slave codes precluded legal recognition of familial bonds, they failed to destroy the symbolic value of motherhood and the social importance of mothers to enslaved communities. Motherhood provided a measure of communal stability that reinforced its traditional centrality and importance as well as the value of consanguineous bonds and female networks.\textsuperscript{114} Within the context of Jim Crow, African-American women continued to rely upon the relationships of mutual assistance that had enabled them to withstand the personal and civil abjection of slavery. These evolved into an ethos of “othermothering” through which black women enacted their customary responsibilities to preserve, sustain, and perpetuate the corporate values arising from their African heritage and necessitated by the exigencies of racism.\textsuperscript{115} Theirs was a racially specific variant of maternalism that illustrates how turn-of-the-century black Americans refused to construe family and society as either distinct or temporally

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\textsuperscript{113} These arguments reflect what Amy Kaplan has argued of Sarah Josepha Hale in her examination of the inter-articulated constructs of home and nation and the shared logic of empire and domesticity: “Hale charts and evolutionary narrative that places American women at the apex of development” and also at its origins. Kaplan, 598.

\textsuperscript{114} Brenda E. Stevenson, Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 209, 222-223; Leslie Schwalm, A Hard Fight for We: Women’s Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 67-68; Deborah Gray White, Ar’ n’t I a Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1985), Chapter 3; White, 108. This legal elision of kinship produced, Nancy Bentley has argued, a “kinless” state that “regimes of power have imposed in order to isolate and extract the sheer materiality of a human population—their bodies, labor, and reproductive capacities—from the sphere of the familial.” Bentley, 270.

\textsuperscript{115} Stanlie James, “Mothering: A possible feminist link to social transformation?” in Theorizing Black Feminisms: the visionary pragmatism of black women, Stanlie M. James and Abena P. A. Busia, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1994).
\end{footnotesize}
sequential sites; rather, they conceived the home and the family as non-privatized constructs that encompassed the larger community in both material and symbolic ways.\textsuperscript{116}

What explained this refusal to demarcate the public from the private was, in part, the inability of black men to supply the economic foundation for enacting contemporary gender conventions. When racial violence, debt peonage, and electoral disfranchisement left the wages of black men insufficient to support their families, black women were forced into equally low-paying jobs and vulnerable positions relative to their white employers. This precariousness exacerbated depictions of black femininity that, in portraying African-American women as either sexually licentious Jezebels or submissively servile Mammies, relegated them to roles of catering to white appetites.\textsuperscript{117} The sentimentalization of maternal virtue that elevated the cultural significance of white women and created the illusion of white male independence consequently afforded black women few protections. Prevented from devoting themselves to their own families’ care in the sanctuary of a single-family dwelling, black women remained unequivocally embodied and thereby commodified as laborers, servants, and metaphorically as sensuous objects to be consumed.\textsuperscript{118} This inability to claim a generative role in the making of a private sphere rendered African-American men unable to signify their entitled privacy and left them deficient in economic and political capital.

Clubwomen responded to black women’s vulnerability by taking a broad view: They addressed the difficulties black women encountered in their public employments while also reiterating a traditional division of gendered labor and space. Clubwomen living in urban areas


\textsuperscript{117} As Hazel Carby has argued, “Ideologies of black female domesticity and motherhood have been constructed, through their employment (or chattel position) as domestics and surrogate mothers to white families rather than in relation to their own families.” Carby, “White woman listen! Black feminism and the boundaries of sisterhood,” in \textit{Black British Feminism: A Reader}, ed., Heidi Safia Mirza (New York: Routledge, 1997), 47.

\textsuperscript{118} Tompkins.
supplied an alternative private sphere in the form of settlement houses and community centers that offered housing and educational services to laboring women and their children who lacked the protections of a traditional home. African-American women also sought refuge by adopting a protective “culture of dissemblance” that shrouded their sexuality through the exaggerated performance of Victorian mores. During her tenure as NACW president, Sallie Stewart argued that improving the quality of African American homes required reforming black women’s working conditions, for as Stewart told her constituents, limited employment opportunities, exploitative and dangerous work environments, inadequate childcare services, and low wages undermined black women’s abilities to fulfill their obligations as mothers. In addressing these abuses, the Women in Industry Department complemented the work of the Mother, Home, and Child committee by addressing the obstacles that impeded employed women’s ability to provide nurturing environments for their children.119 Clubwomen also registered African Americans to vote, and they criticized white officials for discriminatory public policies and for sanctioning racial violence.

While these reforms exceeded the traditional scope of maternalist politics, they collectively served to protect the integrity of both black homes and the women who created them, and in this endeavor, the NACW’s leaders used maternalist rhetoric to justify the organization’s determination to lead this campaign. In Sallie Stewart’s 1930 presidential address, she heralded the unique duty of the “mothers and daughters of the race” to “raise the moral plane and home life to the highest standard.”120 Her reminder to clubwomen accompanied an acknowledgement that other organizations had been recently formed for the same purpose. In providing welfare and educational services to black communities, these groups threatened the clubwomen’s leadership,

119 “Sallie W. Stewart, President of the National Association of Colored Women Announces Fundamental Changes in the Organization Program and Plan of Work for the Years, 1930-1932,” National Notes, November 1930; Ibid., December 1930, Reel 24, Frame 00566; Davis, Lifting As We Climb (1932), in NACW Records, Reel 19, Frame 00983; Wesley, The History of the National Association of colored Women’s Clubs, NACW Records, Reel 20, Frame 00058.
120 Minutes from the 1930 NACW Convention.
and the NACW struggled to retain its relevancy as demographic and cultural shifts gave rise to a more militant and male-dominated mode of racial activism. While newer organizations exposed class and gender tensions within the African American population, the NACW seemingly continued to espouse an ethos of reform dating to the antebellum period. This tradition of African-American dissent emphasized an ethic of self-improvement, the performance of moral discipline, a communal obligation to assist the economically impoverished members of the racial community, and a spiritual egalitarianism articulated by the black church.

Disillusioned by strategies pejoratively viewed as accommodationist, younger black men and women sought an authentic representation of their experience and value in the voices of the Harlem Renaissance and in the raspy melodies of the blues. These aesthetic forms fueled increasingly vocal and explicitly political efforts to hold the federal government accountable for guaranteeing social, legal, and economic justice to its black citizens. In contrast to organizations such as the NAACP, the Urban League, and Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association, the NACW appeared increasingly anachronistic given its continued insistence on Victorian standards of personal conduct and the persistence of its maternalist agenda. In even starker contrast to the masculine rhetoric of African nationalism, Sallie Stewart responded to the NACW’s critics by arguing that black women were uniquely equipped by disposition, experience, and necessity to lead the struggle against racism. The health, welfare, and education of black mothers, she insisted, were fundamental to the attainment of racial equality.

Maternalism further served to maintain the NACW’s relevancy and its leadership by aligning black clubwomen with the activities of Hoover’s associational state. In Hoover’s objectives to protect the health and welfare of American children, for example, African American

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121 In Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), Melinda Chateauvert offers a periodization of women’s activities and the gendered politics of civic activism among black men that supports Deborah Gray White’s assessment of the New Negro Movement’s impact. Chateauvert, 2-18, Chapter 3; White, 124-129, Chapter Four.
clubwomen found a promising entrée into the policymaking circles affiliating with the expanding federal bureaucracy. Yet, invoking the primordial bonds and acquired skills of motherhood represented more than an expedient strategy to justify the participation of black women in political activities that had once been the exclusive domain of white men (and increasingly of white women). In addition to carving out these public roles for themselves by citing their private responsibilities and virtues as mothers, black clubwomen seized upon an argument that invoked children’s innocence to justify the expansion of federal protections and assistance to society’s most blameless and therefore most deserving members.122

This conception of children’s entitlement reflected not only the influence of modern psychological theories professing the malleability of the young, but also a Lockean notion of childhood as a natural state of liberty that established the possibility of consent.123 These liberal suppositions informed “The Children’s Charter,” which was issued by Herbert Hoover’s White House Conference on Child Health, and its tenets enabled Lizzie Fouse to construe African-American health as both a public concern and a personal right. This federally sanctioned document defined “the rights of the child as the first rights of citizenship” and guaranteed protection “FOR EVERY child . . . regardless of race, or color, or situation.” Invoking the constitutional weight of this declaration, Fouse implicitly assured NACW members of the government’s obligation to support black mothers’ efforts to supply the “prerequisites” of citizenship for their children. The “CHILD’S MAGNA CHARTA [sic] of rights” had, after all,

guaranteed to children “the right . . . to be well born” and the “rights of a wholesome environment [sic].”

Fouse’s emphasis on a child’s constitutional entitlement to a “wholesome” environment further illustrates a tacit understanding that a private space called home operated within liberal discourse to produce a simultaneously free and constrained public subject. Issued in her role as the director of the NACW’s Mother, Home, and Child Department, entreaties to clubwomen on the importance of improving the home repeatedly emphasized the linear connections between the creation of a proper domestic environment, the cultivation of self-regulation, and the appropriate expression of political entitlements. “[T]here is nothing so far-reaching as ‘making men.’ They are to be our future citizens; they are to receive this social heritage we call civilization,” Fouse wrote in her monthly report for the NACW’s National Notes. She asked her readers to examine their conscience: “Have their hands and minds been so trained that they can accept this and hold it as well as members of other racial groups?” If black mothers failed to fulfill this obligation to their sons and to the nation, Fouse warned that “the law of the survival of the fittest will meet them.”

Though expressed in a Darwinian idiom, Fouse’s charge reveals the underlying structure of American liberalism’s developmental narrative. The nation’s survival depended upon the home’s function to nurture citizens who would choose to submit, by virtue of what the home so beautifully and pleasurably manifested, to the ideals that constituted and preserved the republic. This logic prompted Fouse to charge black women with “making stronger and more enduring that one element out of which American civilization is to be constructed, viz., the home.”

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125 Ibid., National Notes, November 1929, Reel 24, Frame 00472-473.
126 Ibid., “Department of Mother, Home and Child.”
appreciations,” she contended, “while living in the slums and ashes.” To avoid this fate, black women must “make the best and most beautiful environment for the Negro child during the formative years of his life;” and in performing this essential responsibility, African-American women would “shar[e] our privilege with the builders of a nation in making successful citizens out of the Negro youth of this country.”  

By emphasizing the home’s significance to a liberal citizenry’s cultivation, Fouse established an essential role for black women within a progressively evolving nation comprised of vital, self-governing citizens. Sallie Stewart joined Fouse in arguing that “an informed and careful motherhood” supplied the “foundation which the race, as a whole is not receiving at the proper time during childhood; something of beauty and culture that poor environment is robbing our children of; something . . . that will be able to produce a virile race; something of the love of law and order and propriety that helps our general prosperity; something of cleanliness, self-control, and respect for the rights of others that would cause us to give the evidence of leadership, initiative and the regard of leadership when it is established.”

Reiterating Hoover’s liberal narrative, these NACW leaders reached a similar conclusion. They, too, emphasized the productive power of desire’s investment in an aesthetically pleasing and hygienic domestic environment, and it was this cultivated discipline that transformed appetite into personal initiative and public leadership. Yet, as evidence of desire’s appropriate expression, recognizable homes also transfigured black bodies, enabling those allegedly unable to temper the virility attributed to them to enter into self-regulated, rational relations of exchange among disembodied equals.

“[W]hat the home is to the community will be reflected in what the home has been to the child,”

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128 Ibid., “Child, Welfare and Maturity [sic].”
Fouse further expounded. Here, the essential connection between the better home and the liberal nation supplied the logic for improving the material and political fortunes of African Americans through the innocence and malleability of the child. For this reason, Fouse warned her constituents that “the stream of youth will never be better than the fountain of mothers.”

Given the generative role that women played in the conjoined development of youthful Americans and the nation they would one day lead, the NACW intensified its emphasis on inciting and enabling African-American mothers to improve their homes. Although clubwomen identified the many discriminations that impeded black women’s abilities as homemakers, reforming the domestic environment proved a more expedient means of ameliorating their effects. For Fouse, teaching hygienic practices to black mothers proved her only weapon in the struggle to improve children’s health, which she ascribed to “sociological, psychological and economic . . . causes [that] are a combination of ignorance, carelessness, indifference, neglect, filth, vice and poverty.” In the absence of short-term solutions to racism, Sallie Stewart similarly urged her NACW constituents to “consider our deficiencies (the source of all our ills) as entirely within the home circle.” With these diagnoses, Stewart and Fouse echoed the predominately white, middle-class reformers who rebuked impoverished ethnic and rural women and held them accountable for the poverty they battled. Under Stewart’s leadership, clubwomen continued to adopt regulatory and supervisory tactics designed to improve the housekeeping practices and consequently the dwellings of rural and working-class black women despite an acknowledgment that racial inequality accounted for their plight.

130 Fouse, “Mother, Home, and Child Department of the N.A.C.C.W. [sic]”
131 Ibid., “Child, Welfare and Maternity [sic].”
133 In addition to sources already cited, a discussion of class conflict between middle-class reformers and their working-class clients appears in Robin D. G. Kelley, Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class (New York: The Free Press, 1994).
While blaming racism’s victims not only conceded the improbability of social and political reform, this criticism also originated in the liberal individual’s formative dependency upon the homemaker. This liberal presupposition led Estelle R. Davis, Lizzie Fouse’s predecessor in the NACW’s American Home Department, to attribute the home’s problems to the “[u]nwillingness of mothers to assume parental responsibility,” making maternal shortcomings one of the “most effective enemies of this sacred institution.” Yet, qualifying this criticism, the NACW leaders also asserted that the deficiencies exhibited by black mothers were neither innate nor irremediable. Insisting on the inherent potential of African American women, Fouse advised clubwomen to “have an abiding faith in the new belief in the capacity of the adult to continue to learn throughout his maturity.” In true Progressive fashion, she averred, “We are coming to see that youth and the nation are to be saved not by magic nor by sanctified ignorance, but by knowledge, understanding, by common sense approach and by scientific procedure.” Black adolescents were hardly different from their white counterparts, she implied; and to support her contention that these youth could also be saved by a scientifically managed home, she and other black mothers “must rest our case on the testimony of mental hygiene; [sic] on the suggestions of the psychiatrist; on the fundamental principles of psychology.”

Just as scientific housekeeping helped to facilitate its proponents’ agenda to assert women’s political equality, it seemed to create a similar opportunity for African American women. Disciplining feminine bodies and longings remained imperative within liberal discourse, but due to the modernization of homemaking, a protective, maternal haven was no longer regarded as the prerequisite to male self-governance. In allowing white home economists to declare a political identity with men, the symbolic disassociation between chaste mothers and the home facilitated Lizzie Fouse’s efforts to connect African-American women to traditional liberal

135 Fouse, “Mother, Home, and Child Department of N.A.CC.W. [sic]”
virtues and institutions. As a regulatory technique, scientific housekeeping enabled Fouse to declare, “THE IMPROVEMENT OF MOTHERS WILL BE BASED ON SCIENTIFIC PRINCIPLES WHOSE ROOTS GO DOWN INTO THE SOIL OF EDUCATION, RESPONSIBILITY, AND SACRIFICE.” Because of this organic link between science and ideology, those black mothers who voluntarily sought to learn the science and art of homemaking demonstrated, Fouse argued, a quintessentially liberal “spirit of sacrifice and the willingness to assume responsibility.”

The Queen of the Fireside

Using liberalism’s narrative as a scaffolding for her own political arguments, Fouse urged her constituents to cultivate within themselves, and consequently their homes, the liberal virtues required of their husbands and sons. Like her white counterparts, Fouse sought political currency in emphasizing the male liberal subject’s constitutive dependency on the aesthetically appealing better home and consequently on women’s labor in making it. Viewing her promotion of scientific homemaking as derivative of liberal discourse expands upon previous explanations of black clubwomen’s interest in domestic reform, and it helps to explain the onus these activists placed on black women to create a politically representative environment. In pursuing this strategy, Fouse confronted the paradox posed by women’s generative role within liberalism’s developmental narrative: Homemakers were acknowledged as bearing liberal attributes only for the purpose of creating the possibility of another’s autonomy, liberty, and consensual restraint. Fouse’s need to circumvent this impasse helps to explain why she continued to invoke maternalist ideals that seemed inconsistent with her efforts to modernize women’s domestic roles and responsibilities.

137 Ibid., “Mother, Home and Child Department of N.A.C.C.W. [sic]”
Like Caroline Bartlett Crane, maternalism enabled Fouse to spin a somewhat heterodox version of civilization’s origin in the consent to its regulatory imperatives, one that similarly emphasized women’s initiating act of making homes for their children rather than men’s catalyzing desire to possess a site of emotional succor and physical shelter. Fouse began, for example, at least two published statements by proclaiming, “Around Mother, Home and Child is woven the web of civilization.”\(^{138}\) A racialized experience of motherhood and of the gender inequality originating within its function nevertheless distinguished Fouse’s narratives from that of her contemporary. Whereas Crane celebrated the capitalist industry and relations that originated in mothers’ quest to care for their children and in the initiative that homemakers demonstrated in discharging this responsibility, Lizzie Fouse articulated women’s authority by employing archaic, corporeal metaphors that were ambiguously rooted in European, African, and Biblical political cultures. “Woman is the queen of the home,” she explained, and “in setting up its program of ‘Lifting as we climb,’ [the NACW] is doing the most reasonable thing by fixing standards for making home a better place in which to live—better in the sense of being more commodious, more convenient, more sanitary, more beautiful.”\(^{139}\) This passage frames the NACW not as the well-intentioned keeper of servile or self-sacrificing women, but as an attendant enabling black mothers to create enlightened dwellings befitting of their monarchical authority. “As far back as historical records give any account,” Fouse narrated, “we find that the mother was the center of that stage we call HOME . . . due to the fact that she possessed a finer set of such personality traits.” Among these were “endurance, love, patience, and other fruits of the heart,” which mothers possessed in greater measure than “bodily power and physical strength.” Such attributes “gave her sovereign power and has made her indeed the queen of the fireside.”\(^{140}\)

\(^{138}\) Ibid., “Mother, Home, and Child Department, N.A.C.W.,” National Notes, May 1931.
\(^{139}\) Ibid., “The Better Homes Department of the N.A.C.W.”, March 1929.
\(^{140}\) Ibid., “Mother, Home, and Child Department of the N.A.C.C.W. [sic].”
Fouse’s rhetoric initially appears to reiterate a sentimental trope of motherhood that had become increasingly antiquated by the late 1920s. When serving as chair of the Child Welfare Department in 1928, for example, Fouse based her committee’s policies on the premise, “A little child and its mother is the finest symbol of social progress . . . they are the central figures of home . . . So it follows that whatever conserves the welfare, the life, the happiness[,] the destiny of these two central figures must take second place to not one of the major interests of life.”¹⁴¹ Not only were the fates of these enmeshed subjects inseparable, but mother and child ideally co-existed within “a wonderful, a beautiful, and a heavenly circle” of the home.¹⁴² If the home was indeed the foundation of American civilization, supporting the essential dyad of a mother and her child represented “the modern, unabridged formula for working out a worthwhile civilization, since they are the central figures of home.” Here, Fouse merged archaic metaphors with liberal ideals and logic to establish the authority and significance of black mothers, and to underscore this objective, she turned to religious prophecy, paraphrasing Isiah’s divination that “‘[a] little child (and its mother) shall lead them.’”¹⁴³ Yet, Fouse’s Biblical allusion to a peaceful world wherein the least might rule suggests a critique of liberal individualism rather than a symptomatic engagement with its line of fiction. When read in this light, her invocations of maternal authority served a purpose more significant than claiming a culturally sanctified and thereby spatially and temporally delimited role for black mothers within the liberal state. The timeless and inviolable nature of the mother-child bond served to refute the sequentialized relationship between the self-sacrificing mother and the naturally entitled child—the qualifying home and the liberal state’s founding citizen—that

¹⁴¹ Ibid., “Child Welfare and Maturnity [sic].” ¹⁴² Ibid., “Mother, Home, and Child Department, N.A.C.W.,” National Notes, May 1931; Stewart, “With the President,” National Notes, May 1931. ¹⁴³ Ibid., “Child Welfare and Maturnity. [sic]” Fouse’s article that appeared in the January 1930 edition of National Notes urged clubwomen to remember the childlike qualities that had captured the love of God. She referenced for example Hosea 11:1: “When Israel was a child, then I loved him, and called my son out of Egypt.” However, her intention seemingly shifts in this report, for in paraphrasing Isaiah 11:6, Fouse referred to the state of peace and harmony that would make it possible for even a child to lead.
structured liberalism’s developmental narrative. Fouse reiterated the significance attributed to women’s self-discipline in the better home’s creation, in the orientation of men’s and children’s desires, and thus in a liberal citizenry’s cultivation. She nevertheless refused to disavow the generative power of black women’s corporeality, locating black women’s autonomy and authority within the maternal body, which Fouse depicted as a divinely endowed monarch rather than a fetishized object placed in the service of liberal capitalism’s reproduction. Consequently, the mother-child relationship Fouse celebrated was located within the home, but not equated with it. Lacking nothing, this conception of an essential, primal mode of being—not the atavism stereotypically associated with African Americans—suggests a refusal of individualism itself if not the liberal ideals associated with it.\footnote{In these passages, Lizzie Fouse seems to be articulating an alterity that resists the political positions deployed by black men. As Robert Reid-Pharr has argued in Once You Go Black: Choice Desire, and the Black American Intellectual, these masculine conceptions of black identity have countered white heteropatriarchy either through assuming the resistant, oppositional role in a master-slave narrative or claiming a corporealized African essentialism that is imagined as temporally prior to this subjugating, Hegelian antagonism and as antithetical to capitalist constructions of Western masculinity. These illuminate African Americans as contributing to a seemingly inalterable racial binary wherein blacks are always inescapably subjugated within or exterior to a white nation and its sociopolitical relations. Identity politics has consequently obscured the ambiguity and malleability of blackness particularly and race generally in a way that belies the choice and consequent agency that many African Americans have shown in conceptualizing the relationship between the individual and the community. Gwen Bergner has also argued that African-American acts of self-representation have helped to expose how “the symbolic order is linked to the phallus and to whiteness.” See “Myths of Masculinity: The Oedipus Complex and Douglass’s 1845 Narrative,” in The Psychoanalysis of Race, ed. Christopher Lane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 257.} Reading her intent in this way shows that clubwomen’s calls to improve African American homes originated neither wholly in class and educational biases nor as a simulacrum of white policymakers’ self-serving political agenda. Clubwomen might have urged their constituents to renovate African-American homes based on standards that rendered them more recognizably American. However, they also understood how American racism operated through and within an idealized architectural structure that was, by the 1920s, regarded as the embodiment of an American Individual’s freedoms, opportunities, and ideals. Realizing these for black Americans would require transforming standardized houses into truly
beautiful homes—those that would cultivate a more just and enlightened citizenry by uplifting white Americans from the irrationality of racism.

**Sally Stewart’s Beautiful Home**

As clubwomen tried to temper the sticky heat of a July afternoon in Little Rock, Arkansas, tempers threatened to flare as President Sallie Stewart introduced her plan to reinvigorate the National Association of Colored Women. Elected amidst the acrimonious disputes of the 1928 biennial convention, Stewart had required two years to “clear the atmosphere” and “to discredit the persons who are trying to rise on the ruins of our organization.”

Stewart approached the podium with a determination to guarantee the organization’s financial viability and to bolster its declining significance. In her address to the NACW’s 1930 national meeting, Stewart endeavored to cultivate support for her agenda by crafting an argument that would both persuade and inspire her listeners. Linking her proposals to a rich tradition of activism, Stewart invoked the NACW’s founding objectives “to raise the standard of the home work for social welfare; to protect the rights of women and children, [and] to obtain for colored women the opportunity of reaching the highest standards in all fields of human endeavor.”

While Stewart praised this broad vision, she cautioned that the success of competing organizations and the NACW’s limited financial resources required clubwomen to clarify their goals and return to the organization’s founding objectives. Calling upon the specific responsibilities that black women had traditionally assumed, Stewart urged her listeners to “be alert to the duty of the community mother as so often plans are made without regard for the children of our group.” She asked, “Why will not the National Association of Colored Women whose object is mainly to show proof of mental, moral and cultural development in the race,

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146 Minutes from the 1930 NACW Convention. Unless noted otherwise, the following quotations are extracted from Stewart’s 1930 presidential address.
strike at the cause of the retardation of our children?” Neglect of the home was the primary
culprit that Stewart identified, and to remediate this deficiency, she advised clubwomen to
“arouse the consciousness of Negro mothers of this country, every mother in every village, until
she constantly thinks better environment for her little ones—clean clothes, clean kitchen, orderly
and beautiful surroundings.”

Stewart’s charge to the “community mothers” in attendance at the NACW’s 1930
biennial convention further underscores the question of why clubwomen’s concern for improving
African-American homes and educating their makers intensified in the late 1920s. Although
Stewart’s predecessors had created an American Homes Department in 1925 and African-
American clubwomen had participated on local BHA committees before receiving the NACW’s
official endorsement, Stewart expanded these initiatives by making home improvement, and
consequently maternal education, key elements of her administrative agenda. In introducing
these objectives to her constituents, a newly elected Stewart issued a bold proclamation “TO THE
WOMEN OF THE UNITED STATES” in the September 1929, edition of the NACW’s National
Notes. In this proclamation, Stewart averred, “Our children live and have their beings in homes,
and here it is that impressions are made on their young lives that can never be erased.” “The
home,” Stewart continued elsewhere, “should furnish a beautiful setting for the children to be
born and reared in.” If provided with “the best environment in his formative years,” the child
“may grow to love the beautiful; may grow to love law, regularity and order.”

With this challenge to clubwomen, Stewart reiterated the line of fiction embedded within
both Herbert Hoover’s explication of American Individualism and his support for the home
improvement initiative that he believed sustained the nation’s philosophical foundation. In
echoing Hoover’s assertions that desire for an aesthetically beautiful home produced an

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147 Sallie Stewart, “With the President,” National Notes, September 1929, NACW Records, Reel 24, Frame 00461.
archetypal American citizen who paradoxically both enjoyed liberty and revered the law, she also seized upon the potential, racial ambiguity of this developmental narrative. For implicit within Hoover’s exclamations over the ideological significance of a single-family dwelling was the suggestion that the home’s aesthetically seductive and liberally subjectifying powers worked upon any child fortunate enough to spend his or her tender years in such a dwelling. Stewart’s 1930 presidential address thus initially appears intent on enabling African Americans to insert themselves into a myth of national origin that began with a volitional act of self-regulation. Racial equality required, Stewart argued, that the NACW promote the self-discipline that a well-furnished and well-managed home symbolized of its inhabitants. “For years and years, I have been possessed with the idea of better home life for my people, better environment for colored children,” she confided to her audience. Compelled by the force of this vision, Stewart had “often wondered about and prayed for the day when this group so separate . . . would formulate itself into something engaging rather than remain repulsive.” The source of this revulsion was nevertheless possible to ameliorate, for she had “long believed that the greatest difference between our group and the group alongside of which we live was a difference of physical appearance, personal habits, and home life; a difference in the culture that comes from within; a difference in the fine points of propriety.”

Yet, these perceived deficiencies in propriety could be corrected, Steward believed, through the proprietorship of (the identity with) a better home. As Stewart explained, she had reached her conclusions about the origins and manifestations of racial difference from “observations and comparisons centered around people themselves and their home life.” Here, Stewart emphasized not simply upon the symbolic association between a home and its inhabitants, but also the constructive circularity between setting and subject. The indeterminacy of their causal relationship led Stewart to insist that clubwomen must rectify the unappealing appearance and insufficient instructional function of African-American homes. “Our children
live and have their beings in homes, and here it is that impressions are made on their young lives that can never be erased,” she explained, and for this reason, clubwomen must “help mothers to arrange a beautiful setting for children to be born and reared in.” By cultivating children’s tastes, the better home prepared African-American youth for the responsibilities of citizenship; yet, an identification with dwellings that conformed to federally sanctioned standards also promised to transcend the persistent constraints of racial embodiment. It shielded black women from the “criticizing eyes [that] have no trouble pointing out our faults.” This was a judgmental gaze that attributed every shortcoming to racial identity, “laying them at the door of the Negro.”

Although Stewart urged her constituents to improve housing standards in their communities, the NACW’s leader also acknowledged that African Americans would remain unsheltered within the veritable wilderness of an immature nation lacking in true civility. Fulfilling their obligation to preserve the sanctity and quality of African-American residences consequently required clubwomen to embark on a civilizing mission that would eliminate racism’s degenerative effects from all American homes. Using her presidential address to establish a more comprehensive scope for the NACW’s home improvement campaigns, Stewart asserted, “Our race is at that place in the world’s history where the human race must penetrate the forests of ignorance and make waste lands habitable.” To serve as a force of enlightenment, clubwomen “must pierce the jungles of filth, ignorance, and carelessness, cut away forests of indifference and ugliness, and win the wild hillsides of semicivilization and cultivation.” While Stewart’s charge initially appears to reiterate the NACW’s self-proclaimed mandate to uplift the race by supplying the trappings of civility to the impoverished, it also implied that achieving this mission would require far more than white washed walls and clean floors. Extending liberalism’s universal ideals to black Americans demanded, rather, that the nation must mature beyond the barbarism of its own racist and imperial history. Liberty, equality, and justice would only be

secured through fundamentally re-imagining the beautiful home and, consequently, the citizens and the nation it symbolized.

Acknowledging the inevitable limitations of her proposed housing campaign, Stewart drew a sharp distinction between a civilized, European egalitarianism and the barbarity of American racism. Her awareness of this contrast dated to a divine revelation Stewart had experienced while attending a European meeting of the International Council of Women. It was an experience that had provided Stewart with “especially ground spectacles through which to . . . make her comparisons,” for she had experienced a heretofore unknown acceptance that could only be explained by a more highly evolved and therefore civilized apprehension of beauty and order. Seemingly devoid of racial connotations, these ideals enabled the Europeans whom she had met to reject the significance of racial difference and to base their impressions solely upon an unbiased evaluation of her “personal habits, cleanliness, intelligence, and propriety.” Stewart attributed this courteous acceptance to the influence of European homes and to the admiration for a specific type of order and beauty that they engendered within European citizens. Reflecting “thousands of years of artistic and cultural training,” Europeans understood that better homes ideally created “time to reflect and appreciate the beautiful.”

Europe’s beautiful homes instilled not simply a regard for dignified behavior, but also a deep respect for the body. Stewart traced this reverent attitude to the “temples of art” that, scattered throughout European towns, exercised a profound impact on “the beings who live among them.” Through the aesthetic influence of their museums and cathedrals, Europeans had learned to “adore the human body and realize that it is a temple in which dwells the soul and the care of which has direct effect upon the life that is within.” European homes consequently embodied the more altruistic ideals of a less acquisitive, aggressive society, and as a result, they instilled within their inhabitants “the orderliness, the method of living, the cleanliness, the idea of form and beauty expressed in every action.” Unlike America’s better home, these domiciles
cultivated within the more civilized Europeans whom Stewart claimed to encounter a “beauty of soul” denied full expression within her country’s social order of discriminatory laws, restrictive customs, and economic relations that denigrated black bodies and impeded their fully entitled inclusion in the nation. Through an appreciation for actual art rather than its commodified substitutes, Europeans had retained, Stewart alleged, a more archaic conception of sociality that acknowledged both the inter-dependency and the essential identity of bodies rendered whole and replete through a divine investment. As a repository for the soul, the body was to be nurtured and revered rather than disciplined and transcended, and this perception led to a conception of harmony that fundamentally differed from an American state of accord among equally opportunistic individuals induced to moderate their declared liberties.

Although the words that Stewart deployed to describe her vision of the beautiful home mirrored those appearing within BHA guidebooks and popular magazines, they had a vastly different meaning that she revealed and legitimated through the narration of her European journey. It was because of this experience, rather than her embrace of Herbert Hoover’s injunctions, that Stewart had decided to dedicate herself to the home’s “reconsecrat[ion]” and to commit her presidency “to the task of raising the standard of home life.” Following Stewart’s return “home,” the memory of what she had witnessed “haunt[ed] her soul.” Subjected once again to the visual economy of race, Stewart expressed a renewed determination to support clubwomen in fulfilling their “first duty, above all things . . . to create surroundings, beautifully sweet and clean, that shall teach the youth the love [of] order, to appreciate beauty and to adore the temple in which his soul is housed.” By recreating the more civilized ethos of European homes, clubwomen could “do a wonderful piece of social service” that would bring “the virgin riches of latent power and unknown potentialities into verdant fruition.” Stewart consequently urged the “women of my race, mothers, sisters, and daughters” to set out “with hope and faith and a great deal of direct application” with the intent of “creating beauty of soul by arranging a setting
in home life in which beautiful souls can develop.” Only through this means could clubwomen “take our places in the sun so that in our country [sic] as well as in foreign lands, our group shall not be repulsive, shall not be despised and evaded.”

If, for Herbert Hoover, the better home symbolized a revolt against Old World civilization with its inherited privileges and intractable class divisions, this comfortable and convenient dwelling lacked, in Sallie Stewart’s estimation, the aesthetic authenticity necessary for cultivating an enlightened civility. With missionary zeal, the NACW President reiterated an imperial logic that conflated the moral authority of an insular home and an expansive, liberal nation; yet, she challenged imperialism itself. Her interrogation of the better home’s beauty suggests a recognition of the historian Amy Kaplan’s observation that “[d]omesticity makes manifest the destiny of the Anglo-Saxon race, while Manifest Destiny becomes in turn the condition for Anglo-Saxon domesticity.”149 While Stewart implicitly contrasted the brute domination of imperialism with liberalism’s egalitarian ideals, she also seemed to understand that abundance supplied the means of equality’s achievement. For this reason, she envisioned a future of spiritual fulfillment rather than material plenitude. Her strategic deviation in the source of this Eden’s origin—its shift from the better homes built on an American frontier to the beautiful dwellings inspired by European cathedrals—renders her 1930 presidential address a critique rather than a reiteration of the liberal developmental narratives appropriated by white home economists and clubwomen. While these proponents of homemaking endeavored to create through the rationalization of housework a dichotomy between the subjugated, laboring body and the rational, orchestrating mind, Stewart used Christian idioms to refuse this opposition. Locating autonomy’s source in the soul and its bodily container, she urged clubwomen “to look up to God, knowing that we are made in his image.” Because the European beautiful home served to manifest for Stewart an identity between the divine and the corporeal, which established an

149 Kaplan, 591.
essential sameness between citizens themselves, this ideal functioned in her text as far more than a fetishized substitute covering over the insufficiency, dependency, and potential license of the bodies that resided within. Through its authentic beauty, the beautiful home instead substantiated a non-contractarian conception of sociality that, like the bond between a mother and her child, preceded the American state and its polity comprised of fictively autonomous and abstractly disembodied individuals. 150

**Herbert Hoover’s Pueblo Walls**

In retelling a civilization narrative that tied the creation of beautiful homes to racial equality, Stewart suggested that the causes of racism were related to the aesthetic elements that transformed the tasteful, modern home into an object of desire. This implication becomes clear relative to how the American house beautiful came to embody an abstraction—to substantiate a disembodied individual unconstrained by any hereditary or bodily impediments and animated by an idealism that engendered the liberal citizen’s presumed autonomy. Using scriptural references and Biblical metaphors, Stewart questioned the beauty of the better home in order to raise, like Lizzie Fouse, additional questions about the entitled citizens identified with this dwelling. An imagined contrast between old and new conceptions of beauty—sectarian and feudal as opposed to secular and capitalistic—supported Stewart’s tacit claim that what supposedly filled freedom-bearing white Americans was neither intrinsic nor divine, but rather barbarically appropriated from another. The tasteful, comfortable home consequently proved incapable of yielding a just society, for it sheltered the imperialists whose rapacious impulses had historically subjugated non-white peoples.

Stewart’s address thus conveyed a confusing disavowal. It urged NACW members to recognize the strategic implications of Hoover’s better homes campaign by underscoring the home’s essential role in cultivating liberal ideals; yet, it also admitted the futility of this project

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150 Minutes from the 1930 NACW Convention.
by arguing that improved houses were not necessarily just homes. To resolve this contradiction, Stewart implied that the aesthetics of the home—the décor that transformed a utilitarian structure into a desirable abode—perpetrated racial inequality. Her critique consequently begs for an exploration of the many ways that imperial relations remained embedded within the decorated interior even after American homemakers were told to relinquish their cozy corners, for bodies classified as irrevocably different remained very much within the better home both literally as servants and figuratively in the form of enchanting accessories and features. What the literary historian Kyla Tompkins has argued of the home’s front door (which even Emily Post construed as a metaphor for the mouth) was true of the domestic interior more generally: Like eating, interior decoration was a form of consumption—a satiation of appetite—through which “the porous and eroticized boundaries between the races [were] both traced and erased.” In examining dietetics, orality, and alimentary desire in the nineteenth century, Tompkins explores how “the white desire to devour black subjectivity also indicates the desire to annihilate it, to recognize the black subject only in terms of her capacity to regenerate whiteness.” Not only did homemakers such as Jane Norton rely upon black and immigrant labor in transforming their houses into homes, they also consumed racialized objects and elements in a way that visually figured the homemaker as an initiating, self-disciplined subject. Interior decoration was thus an act of “love and theft” in which the affectivity and sensuality believed to make a racialized other incapable of rationality or consensual discipline supplied the metaphysical foundation for the white subject’s ability to exercise these political qualifications.

Located in desire and its symbolic manifestations, this dependency rendered the home a site of racial ambiguity; yet, fear and denial accompanied longing and recognition, and this ambivalence led to pervasive fears about the home’s permeability. In the advertisements of the

151 Tompkins, 100.
152 Ibid., 112.
153 For a discussion of this phenomenon in the nineteenth century, see Tompkins, 75-76.
1920s, white homeowners imbibed repeated warnings that they needed wooden fences and other physical barriers to protect their houses and their families against insidious invaders. If the articles appearing in popular magazines were to be believed, a truly snug home required both screens and insulation. While screens kept out the flies and mosquitoes that carried “virulent disease germs and disease parasites,” insulation further protected the family’s health by moderating the seasonal onslaught of sharp winter winds or scorching summer sun. A well-insulated house also secured a sense of privacy, security, and comfort by stifling the bothersome noises that “penetrat[ed] thin walls.”

The advertisers and home economists who touted these barriers also enlisted women in the battle against the unseen menaces and microscopic dangers that penetrated the home. Armed with dishwashers and cleaning supplies, homemakers waged war upon the “invisible army of germs” that “lurk[ed] in the dish-rag” and other innocuous hiding places. Although black and immigrant employees often assisted white, suburban women in protecting the home’s insularity, these maids were frequently regarded as an endangering source of infection.

Articulated through the idioms of invasion and infection, racial alterity marked the domestic sphere’s boundaries. Yet, the metaphorical presence of bodies construed as external and prior to liberal-capital relations also revitalized the modern home, transforming it into an object to be consumed and, paradoxically, into an emblem of the consumer’s own identity. Forged through the making of a sensuously and emotionally gratifying domestic interior, this conflation of home and subject was a “cannibal union”—a marriage that supplanted the conjugal union as the initiating moment of the American Individual’s development.

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155 The quoted text appeared in an advertisement for a Walker dishwasher found in The American Home, August 1930, 474.
157 Tompkins, 100.
and the property required to support dependents, interior décor evocative of a primal freedom painted over the paradox that the civil protection of the liberal subject’s declared entitlements required a limitation of those liberties. Just as the comfortable chair—a fetishized symbol of both maternal care and patriarchal authority—domesticated the modern man while also leaving him rest assured of his ability to dominate, the racialized aesthetic elements that beautified a home similarly functioned to signify a vital, initiating individuality within the dictated parameters of taste. Décor regarded as principled, seemly, suitable, and fitting thus connoted a disciplining of the self; the sensual pleasures derived from its comfort and charm nevertheless covered over this submission by framing it as a consensual expression of desire.

The “cannibal union” embedded within the domestic interior created a conundrum for the African-American women charged with applying the decorative principles that purportedly turned a house into a home. While the source of Lizzie Fouse’s inspiration for decorating her various homes remains unclear, the family ledger contains clues. The Fouses subscribed to numerous periodicals that included *Ladies Home Journal* and the *Delineator*, and recommendations that clubwomen “[r]ead for your improvement and suggestions *Better Homes and Gardens, Good Housekeeping, [and] Parent Magazine*” also implies a familiarity with the decorating advice dispensed in these publications.158 These public statements and private recordings collectively suggest that what Tara Dudley has argued of Madame C. J. Walker is also true of Lizzie Fouse: She regarded her home as a model for the less educated and less affluent to emulate, and like her appearance and decorum, her domicile “express[ed] values representative of mainstream white society for all blacks to appropriate, but in a way that underscored her personal financial and social status.” In acknowledging this replication of white, middle-class conventions and tastes, Dudley refuses to criticize Walker and, implicitly, the affluent black women who followed suit, for as she explains, “there was then no source in the United States for a black aesthetic of

158 Ibid., *National Notes*, December 1934.
architecture or décor” until the 1960s.\textsuperscript{159} The leader of the NACW’s Mother, Home, and Child Department consequently made recommendations that echoed those issued by the BHA and by the popular periodicals that advised homemakers how to emulate Progressive standards of taste. These sources of information even conveyed democratizing implications as their emphasis on minimalism, simplicity, and rationality made acquired knowledge and native ingenuity the key materials of fabricating a beautiful interior, both of which were free to those lacking in economic resources, but not in a desire to learn or in an abundance of natural initiative. As Sallie Stewart concurred, joining BHA projects “will not cost money . . . only cooperation and activity.”\textsuperscript{160}

Had Stewart issued her implicit accusation about the aesthetic deficiencies of American homes just a few years earlier, her complaints would have been well-founded.\textsuperscript{161} By the 1930s, however, Progressive principles of design rejected the exotic artifacts and overt symbols of American imperialism as abominations of taste. A stalwart adherent of a more austere, modern standard, Jane Norton scorned the inclusion of a Turkish cozy corner in her home’s décor. Racialized signifiers nevertheless found a significant place in her decorative compositions. Unlike her Victorian grandmother, Jane called upon her cultivated knowledge to summon the self-restraint she would need to keep her mantels uncluttered and her walls relatively unadorned. This minimalism supported Jane’s intent to imbue her first house with an aura of harmony, and for this purpose, Jane decided to draw her color scheme from an “old fashioned southern flower garden” that she had purchased while living in New York.\textsuperscript{162} Although reminiscent of the South, the picture was neither produced by one of the local artists whom Jane self-consciously patronized nor was it wholly evocative of her southern heritage. Rather, Jane conceived the idea of building thematic unity upon the foundation of a striking, colorful picture after her visit to the

\textsuperscript{162} Thornburgh, 111.
Freer Museum’s installation of the dining room that James Whistler had created for shipping magnate Frederick R. Leyland in 1877 to display his painting “La Princesse du pays de la porcelaine.” That visit inspired Jane by demonstrating the use of non-representative aesthetic elements in effecting an illusion of harmony. Attracting Jane’s attention and piquing her desire to replicate the technique was not so much the rectitude of the artistic principles that the exhibit evinced, but rather the captivating colors and geometric lines incorporated into Whistler’s scheme. In both his painting and the interior that displayed it, Whistler had found his muse in the peacock’s brilliant plumage and in the Asian artifacts he collected. Yet, because Whistler’s intent was non-mimetic, Jane gleaned how she might similarly use the sensuously evocative hues and abstract shapes derived from Asian art—not the images themselves—as a motif for enacting the decorative conventions of unity and harmony that rendered her home recognizably tasteful.

Although Jane eschewed incorporating the explicit symbols of nineteenth-century imperialism into her design schemes, she relied upon aesthetic elements that metaphorically implied the presence of a racial other imagined as either indigenously primitive, racially atavistic, or sensuously exotic. Jane’s expressed attraction to a more austere Japanese aesthetic paradoxically served to reinforce the Western decorative conventions prescribed in the numerous manuals she studied. Yet, the appeal of this minimalism and Jane’s understanding of its racial origin was due to the colors, lines, and shapes that Jane also regarded as characteristically Asian. As significantly, by fusing Jane’s rationality with her desiring appetites, these aesthetic elements enabled the principled homemaker to perceive her conventionally decorated home as expressive of her individuality. The living room’s restrained harmony connoted, for example, an essential freedom and the initiative that it catalyzed, particularly after the addition of an Oriental rug Jane had long desired for its “soft and lovely colors.” As Jane explained, “she had always wanted one of the modern Chinese rugs with plain center and large conventional corner design and felt now was the psychological moment in which to indulge in this desire.” Jane’s longing was nevertheless tempered by her knowledge that the reproduction rug must harmonize with her
home’s Western furnishings, its rooms’ various function, and the other textiles that covered its floors, windows, and pillows. Her inclusion of an Oriental rug she found sensuously evocative, despite its American origins, thus functioned to transfigure a space conceived to discipline desire into an emblem of its pursuit and gratification, allowing Jane to view her submission to experts’ injunctions as a personal indulgence.

A closer examination of Whistler’s inspirational painting helps to explain how these Asian signifiers enabled Jane to perceive a submission to Western artistic conventions as expressive of her independence. In her explication of “The Princess from the Land of Porcelain,” the art historian Eileen Tsui has argued that Whistler “drew upon the mysteriously evocative power of East Asian objects” largely to challenge the imperative of representation that governed artistic production in mid-nineteenth-century Europe. In this analysis, Tsui looks beyond the paradigm that most often explains artists’ fascination with Oriental exoticism as a projection of Western fantasies and anxieties. She alternatively examines how Whistler innovatively blended Western and Asian referents “to convey the idea that subject matter in a picture should not signify.” While the artist used metaphorically Asian colors to effect the convention of harmony, he attired his European model in Asian garb and placed her in a stylized pose characteristic of Asian design. Through this syncretism, Tsui argues, Whistler explored “the relationship between visual form and aesthetic experience” and challenged the perceived oppositions between the material and the fantastical, the familiar and the strange, and most importantly, the sensual and the rational. Facilitating this exploration into uncharted artistic and psychological territory were the “[v]isual signs of ‘Japan’ and ‘China’” that Whistler used to experiment with “the doubleness of the effect of the aesthetic, its extra-ordinary and non-linguistic meaningfulness as well as its sensuous appeal,” and in doing so, “to demonstrate that visual form could affect the sensitive viewer with a force and complexity to rival or surpass the effects of the traditional narratives and

\[^{63}\text{Thornburgh, 131.}\]
humanist subjects of painting.” Reflective of the pleasure Whistler derived from his collection of Chinese porcelain, the artist’s painting taught Jane how to create harmony in a room through color rather than subject matter—feelings rather than ideas—because rich blues appealed to her. Jane’s belief in the capacity of color to satisfy simultaneously conflicting desires for social recognition and self-expression consequently helps to illustrate Whistler’s efforts to show, as Tsui explains, how “the force of brightly colored pigment takes on an expressive autonomy of its own.”

The use of racialized aesthetic elements to convey a home owner’s “expressive autonomy” is further illustrated by Herbert and Lou Henry Hoover’s Palo Alto home, which Lou Henry began to design in 1919 following the family’s return to the United States. With her husband’s attentions focused on his diplomatic responsibilities, Lou Henry Hoover worked closely with a trusted architect and professional draftsman, pouring her energies into designing a home that would reflect her desire for practicality, her love of the outdoors, her responsibilities for supporting Hoover’s political aspirations, and her cosmopolitan worldview cultivated by her years of international travel. Herbert Hoover’s interest in the house was limited to his instructions that the house be fireproof and afford a view, and ironically (albeit in characteristic fashion), this proponent of home ownership demonstrated very little attachment to or interest in the construction of the home that consumed his wife. According to Hoover, “The house was all [Lou Henry Hoover’s] own making,” and he lauded how it “reflected well her excellent sense of taste and form in arrangement and workmanship.” Even the cost failed to elicit his concern, and the generally modest couple spent upwards of $150,000 in the early 1920s on a dwelling that proved considerably larger than the seven room “palace” that Irwin Will Irwin cited in his

biography of its owner. Large enough to house the Hoover family, their numerous servants, and frequent guests, the house that Lou Henry Hoover built realized all of her objectives, while also remaining in harmony with the surrounding architecture of Stanford’s campus and with the northern California topography.

The Hoover House (as the dwelling where Stanford’s presidents reside is now called) has defied categorization from the moment of its inception in Lou Henry Hoover’s sketchbook. While Hoover promoted houses that conformed to a distinctive architectural genre, his own home stood in stark contrast to the colonial revivals and bungalows that increasingly populated American suburbs during the 1920s. Rejecting styles rooted in Greco-Roman tradition, Lou Henry Hoover conceived a dwelling constructed of unadorned, cubic forms stacked in a manner reminiscent of a child’s block tower. Their asymmetrical arrangement allowed for flat roofs, outdoor terraces, and connecting exterior staircases that enabled the Hoovers to extend their living space to the patios and verandas where they relaxed, entertained, and even slept. The iconoclastic dwelling incited numerous questions about the source of Lou Henry Hoover’s inspiration, and the multiple answers supplied by all those involved in the house’s construction illustrate not only her intent to avoid stylistic categorization, but also the innovations occurring within domestic architecture in the early twentieth century. Despite its designer’s insistence on her home’s stylistic ambiguity, the compulsion to categorize led others to describe the remarkable structure as Italian, Mediterranean, Algerian, Oriental, Mission Revival, and “Puebloesque.” This latter designation was reinforced by Herbert Hoover’s reference to his residence as a “Hopi house” and by Lou Henry Hoover’s fond description of her “pueblo walls.”166 Their more frequent protests of this Native-American attribution perhaps reflected either the disdainful opinion of Pueblo architecture as more cheaply and poorly constructed or the Hoovers’s desire to assert their individuality by explicitly rejecting the revivalism that they helped to popularize.

166 Hoover, 5; Paul V. Turner, Mrs. Hoover’s Pueblo Walls: The Primitive and the Modern in the Lou Henry Hoover House (Standford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 65.
Although the Hoovers sought to retain the values of the past, they also imagined themselves as pioneers recreating these ideals on a modern, industrial terrain. Drawing Lou Henry Hoover to the stark, cubic forms that distinguished her home was her perception that these geometric shapes conveyed the principles of simplicity, functionality, practicality, and rationality, all of which the trained geologist and Girl Scout leader valued. This design supplied the form that most adequately realized her practical desire for a “collection of rooms . . . for living purposes, enclosed by plain wall surfaces,” where she claimed despite evidence to the contrary, “you will find no feature of it for purely ornamental purposes.”\(^{167}\) As the architect who helped to bring Hoover’s wish to fruition concurred, “The individuality of the owner [is] evidenced everywhere by the lack of conventionality and disregard of tradition or the accepted way of doing things.”\(^{168}\) Significantly, Lou Henry Hoover borrowed from “primitive” rather than European architectural forms to effect these modern values as well as her desire to appear unique. During her extensive travels around the globe, Lou Henry Hoover became a student of the diverse cultures she encountered, filling numerous scrapbooks with photographs and mementos that chronicled her observations. This appreciation led her to become one of the first members of the National Geographic Society when it was founded in 1902, and it has prompted architectural historian Paul Turner to conclude, “[T]he elements of non-Western architecture found in the Hoover House were motivated not by exoticism or whimsy . . . but by genuine admiration for the principles and virtues found in much ‘primitive’ architecture.”\(^{169}\) It was because she valued what she perceived indigenous houses to represent that Lou Henry Hoover declared, “I have liked the primitive houses in many lands especially for their simplicity.”\(^{170}\)

Lou Henry Hoover was not alone in admiring aesthetic forms classified as “primitive” for the values they seemingly conveyed, and the Hoover House has consequently been identified as a

\(^{167}\) Quoted in Turner, 84.

\(^{168}\) Ibid., 4.

\(^{169}\) Ibid., 16.

\(^{170}\) Ibid., 66.
precursor to an international style of modern architecture that coalesced in the 1930s. In the stark geometric designs associated with indigenous peoples, its proponents apprehended a mode of expressing the principles of functionalism, minimalism, and naturalism that also characterized modern innovations in interior décor. Although numerous features distinguish the Hoover House from structures characteristic of architectural modernism, they reveal as Turner has also argued, that “the concepts of the primitive and the modern are both relevant to the house, and their combination gave the building much of its distinctive character.” It thus represents “one example of the interplay of primitive traditions and modern ideals in early twentieth century architecture.”

Just as Tsui concludes of Whistler’s Japonism, Turner similarly contends that architectural modernism reflects “an interest in primitive forms and building types, not for their exotic or eclectic appeal, but for inherent traits that the pioneers of modernism found useful in their formulation of a new style for the twentieth century.”

Like Whistler, then, Lou Henry Hoover could be framed as a proto-modernist who used aesthetic elements that she associated with presumably less civilized, non-Western cultures to express her individuality, physical vitality, and authenticity. Expressing an admiration that justified her appropriation of another’s vital resources, she incorporated innovative forms of artistic expression that embodied a visceral and sensual realm of aesthetic experience; yet, the unembellished, stark lines also manifested a more austere aesthetic that functioned to harness feeling, placing Hoover’s desire for what another possessed in the service of a modernizing society’s progressive development. Visually embedded within the architectural structure of Lou Henry Hoover’s home was, then, a familiar narrative structure, one in which desire initiated the creation of a home. Her design choices raise numerous questions, however, both about what Hoover desired and how she endeavored to satisfy these longings. Significantly, Hoover looked outside of Western culture, to people and places she regarded as marking the beginning of

\[171\] Ibid., 84.

\[172\] Ibid., 87.
historical time, to create a home that was “an expression of her.” Ambivalently primitive and modern, Hoover’s home similarly figured its maker as both a consumer and a creator. This equivocation enabled a dwelling—identified as designed by Lou Henry and belonging to Herbert—to display the affective impulses and motives that compelled the self-governing initiative from which the Hoovers’s development and that of American society could proceed.

Related to her expressed intention to convey an innate vitality and vigor, Lou Henry Hoover also used racialized aesthetic elements to sustain her family’s health. In addition to the rationality evoked through their minimalism, the architectural cubes constituting the Hoover House supplied roof-top terraces where the Hoovers, their children, and their guests could retain a primal connection to nature. The national president of the Girl Scouts was an ardent proponent of vigorous exercise and outdoor living, and her insistence on using the roof of her house reflects both an engineer’s insistence on functionalism as well as a widespread concern among white middle-class Americans for conserving vitality. Many of Hoover’s contemporaries viewed Native Americans as exemplars of a vigorous, natural lifestyle, and this conception rekindled a childhood fascination with Native-American culture born during her formative years on the American frontier. Although both she and Herbert Hoover had spent several years working and traveling in Asia and northern Africa, they remained drawn to the western landscapes of their youth and the indigenous peoples who inhabited them. The décor of her Palo Alto home reflected this admiration as photographs reveal her inclusion of Native-American textiles and artifacts, and although these rugs and jars appeared only in designated locations within an interior more reflective of European décor, they appeared liberally in the stone and log cabins that Lou Henry Hoover also designed for the presidential retreat in the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Lou Henry Hoover might have declined the services of a decorator, but her judicious use of Native American embellishments suggests a familiarity with the contemporary rules governing interior decoration. In using Native-American accessories in the more rustic setting of a vacation home or within the boundaries of a single, designated room, she apparently concurred with Jane
Norton’s dictum that the indiscriminate use of primitive and Asian artifacts produced disharmony rather than interest or charm. Although the public lady scrupulously guarded her family’s privacy, she allowed glimpses into her home that reveal how a distinctive theme governed the décor of each room. Native-American rugs graced the brick floors of the main terrace, while the Flemish memorabilia located in an alcove commemorated Hoover’s humanitarian service.

Furniture from the Hoover’s London residence imbued the living and dining rooms with a more traditional, formal aura that complemented the rooms’ paneled walls and their leaded glass windows. Reflecting a cognizance of color’s harmonizing power, numerous experiments were conducted for the purpose of finding just the right hue of an antiqued, pale gold. While Herbert Hoover likened the result to a Flemish basement, to his wife, this particular shade reconciled the aesthetic antagonisms between her home’s iconoclastic, functional architecture, the exotically primitive ornamentation in its exterior spaces, and an interior more evocative of cosmopolitan gentility. With discord thus averted, the Hoovers’s California home not only effected a visual perception of the couple’s progressive movement through time and space, but it also conveyed the story of an imperialistic nation’s evolution, one that Hoover himself described as catalyzed by an American Individual to which he was likened. Giving substance to her husband’s words in the form of her home, Lou Henry Hoover attained her most fundamental objective: “The whole theme is that it is a very simple house, made to be lived in and on by the family that built it,” and in this fundamental way Lou Henry Hoover’s house epitomized the better home that her husband perceived as representative of the opportunities to which all Americans were entitled.173

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Within the “pueblo walls” of her home, Lou Henry Hoover confronted a challenge faced by homemakers across the country: the necessity of combining disparate elements and objects within a decorative composition to create a thematically unified effect. A defining attribute of the

173 Turner, 56.
beautiful home, this principle of harmony carried allegorical weight for the NACW leaders who
joined both Herbert and Lou Henry Hoover in supporting the Better Homes in America initiative.
The aesthetic idealization of a “unity of diversity” metaphorically suggested that black men and
women might also transcend the specificity of their racial identities by enacting a commitment to
the liberal principles and ideals that characterized the nation. Staged through homemaking, such
a performance promised to render black citizens characteristically American, for replicating the
standards that defined a better home would obscure the differences attributed to the black bodies
who occupied such dwellings. Shifting the gaze from differentially racialized bodies to
standardized architectural ones thus presented clubwomen with a means of pursuing equality,
opportunity, and liberty for their constituents in a publicly sanctioned symbolic form.

Yet, creating a beautiful environment also required the homemaker to imbue her
domestic interior with eclectic touches that signified her identity as the home’s designer. For Lou
Henry Hoover, cubic forms and Native-American rugs served this purpose. Evocative of the less
civilized peoples and places she admired for their simplicity, the lines and artifacts that she
regarded as primitive enabled Hoover to execute the more disciplined tenets of functionality,
thermic unity, and harmony in a way that expressed rather than diminished her autonomy. The
aesthetics of Hoover’s home thus signified a philosophical contradiction: Her décor embodied
the possibility of social harmony within a liberal body politic constituted through a submission to
shared ideals; however, her domestic interior also materialized the existence of an initiating,
creative individual through a judicious eclecticism. Within liberal discourse, a fiction of consent
served to reconcile this opposition between social order and personal liberty, between the political
community and the private individual. The plausibility of that fiction depended upon a declared
possession of autonomy, a postulated metaphysical condition that, manifested through color and
accessory within the domestic interior, saved the liberal subject from subjugation and the home
itself from a repetitive, insipid banality. Incorporated in only the smallest of amounts, the
aesthetic elements and unique embellishments that beautified a home thus signified a desiring subject’s presence as well as her ability to join voluntarily a rationally principled collective.

As both Lou Henry Hoover and the fictional Jane Norton illustrate, metaphorically racialized colors and artifacts helped to effect liberalism’s presumption of individual autonomy and the fiction of consent because these decorative elements materialized a sensuous, affective dimension of experience. Explaining this excess of meaning were the pseudo-scientific theories of civilization’s development. These evolutionary narratives conveyed racial fantasies that imagined more primitive others—politically disqualified by their unrestrained desires and instincts—as existing outside both the home’s and the nation’s boundaries. Unregulated by civilized society’s imperatives, this state of externality preserved the possibility of absolute freedom; however, the metaphorical incorporation of this implicitly libidinal energy in the better home’s décor represented an admission that white liberal subjects needed to appropriate what they were presumed to have. As Kyla Tomplins has illustrated of food production and consumption in nineteenth-century America, racialized bodies were allowed “to enjoy what whiteness is meant to disavow.” Yet, the gender of the consumer complicated how the twentieth-century domestic interior effected a white individual’s freedom to consent. It was the homemaker who felt the tug of desire for objects animated by the latent presence of racialized bodies; it was her consumption—her enactment of autonomy’s consensual regulation—that enabled her husband, in turn, to appropriate the affectively and politically valuable product of his wife’s self-disciplined labor.

The role that black Americans played both literally and metaphorically in fabricating Herbert Hoover’s potentially androgynous better home and its principal inhabitant, the American

174 Tompkins, 150.
175 As Kyla Tompkins argues, “white appetite signifies unthinking privilege and aggression, but it also represents the desire on which both white female citizenship and the future of the postemancipation republic rests.” Tompkins, 113.
Individual, led Sallie Stewart to question the beauty of that domicile and to confront the limitations of home improvement as a strategy for attaining political equality. In her 1930 presidential address, she tried to understand how a space that enabled white subjects to imagine themselves as simultaneously free and restrained, individual and social, different and identical also led to the revulsion and degradation of black bodies. Although it ironically ignored a history of racism within European politics and aesthetics, Stewart’s celebration of the civilizing artistry housed sequentially in European churches, museums, and cottages represented a refusal to accept black women’s service in the production of white Americans’ pleasure and power.

Stewart’s recognition of the better home’s limitations also helps to explain Lizzie Fouse’s celebration of the inviolable bond between mother and child. Through this idiom, Fouse extolled an essential feminine attachment to and responsibility for the home that seemed inconsistent with the more overtly political demands that she and other black clubwomen also pursued. Her maternalism nevertheless followed a familiar, seductive logic: It reiterated the function of femininity and maternity within American liberalism’s developmental narrative in which women created a private domain of both freedom and discipline that compelled and enabled their husbands and sons to assume civil obligations and identities. Though reminiscent of the maternalist and often imperialist arguments articulated by her white contemporaries, Fouse’s rhetoric nevertheless evinced important deviations rooted in her racial experiences and political purposes. In this way, her invocation of maternal ideals represented, in the words of Judith Butler, a type of “[critical] appropriation that seeks to make over the terms of domination, a making over which is itself a kind of agency . . . which repeats in order to remake—and sometimes succeeds.”  

176 In this remaking of the home and the relations it harbored, Fouse invoked feudal archaism and Biblical allusion to suggest that the interdependency characterizing the relationship between a mother and her child modeled an alternative mode of subjectivity, one

that she conceived as embodied and corporate rather than abstracted and individuated. The beautiful home that she urged clubwomen to desire and to make ideally symbolized this new American citizen, for it refused to disavow how embodied relations of dependency and mutuality constrained all Americans in addition to the binding liberal ideals that were rationally and voluntarily chosen.
Epilogue: The Recess of Home

This dissertation has attempted to demonstrate that the developmental narrative that structures liberal discourse—a “line of fiction”—caused Herbert Hoover to link the preservation of American political philosophy to the improvement of the nation’s homes. Because of the connection that Hoover helped to restore between the private sphere and liberal subjectivity, white and black women played upon the assumption that everything men were declared to own depended upon homemakers’ own enactment of liberalism’s self-regulated mode of agency. In supplying the evocative, domestic emblems that ensured the appropriate and productive investment of male desire, however, the economic value and affective motives of women’s labor were disavowed and appropriated. This appropriation enabled Hoover and his predecessors to imagine that, by consuming the delights of an aesthetically beautiful, comfortable, and well-managed home, American citizens of a new century might continue their developmental progression toward a subjective ideal of expressive freedom and ethical discipline that served to attain liberalism’s theoretical symmetry of individual liberty and social equality. Hoover thus renewed for generations to come a means of reconciling liberalism’s constitutive paradox in which the empowering recognition of entitled liberty can arise only from a consensual subjection to an authority external to the self. Excessively endowed with an emotional and sensuous value, Hoover’s idealized better home fetishistically transposed this paradox into an equivocal condition that rendered the home’s white male inhabitants anxiously aware of their contingent form of independence, while also pleasurably content and secure within a creative domestic recess that symbolized their liberties and entitlements.

Almost one hundred years after Hoover assumed the helm of Better Homes in America, the iconic dwelling he helped to promulgate remains fundamental to an American standard of living and to the American dream first described by James Truslow Adams. The better home continues to serve as the symbol of desire’s fulfillment and its restraint, ambivalently signifying
both its inhabitants’ intrinsic liberty and their inescapable regulation. In other words, the affectively endowed home effects the belongings and the capacities that qualify its residents to belong to a liberal body politic. More specifically, it figures the limitations imposed upon the citizen as a consensual expression of the presumed autonomy and freedom that a home is believed to manifest and that the liberal state is founded to protect. This insight into the aesthetically appealing home’s function within liberal discourse both to create subjects and to substantiate them furthers an understanding of the private sphere’s persistent importance within the American political economy and the emotional power that the home still wields. As the following epilogue suggests, gendered labor and racial othering continue to make the home an animated and evocative space, rendering it representative of the initiating desire—the interior—of the inhabitants who reside within the beautiful home’s interior. Because of this constructive purpose, the work of homemaking remains evacuated of economic value despite its acknowledged significance, and the racialized signifiers that are deployed metaphorically in the desirable home’s composition compromise the ability of categorically raced bodies to enter the teleological narrative of American progress as entitled contributors.

Through the many years that I have needed to complete this dissertation, one facet of my work and my identity has remained constant: I have been a homemaker. Following the logic of a neoliberal political economy, I set aside my dissertation and my professional aspirations for several years, devoting myself to ameliorating the state’s contracting responsibility for its citizens and to concealing through labor characterized as affective a more highly paid spouse’s declining opportunities in a recessed economy.¹ When this precariousness eventually prompted a return to academic work, I became unavoidably aware of the ironic connection between my chosen topic

¹ Wendy Brown, “Neo-liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy,” Theory & Event (Vol. 7, No. 1): 2003, paragraphs 15-30. The current fixation on improving the home seems to support Brown’s argument that neo-liberalism serves to discipline subjects by equating the rationalized management of their lives with a type of moral autonomy. Brown observes that this equation has eroded the “ethical gap” once allowed by classical liberalism’s formulation of the subject.
and my personal experience. Reading Dorothy Canfield Fisher’s *The Homemaker* for a second time yielded not simply new intellectual discoveries, but a deeply disturbing identification with the novel’s main character. I viscerally recognized Evangeline Knapp’s neurotically compulsive and joyless attempt to perform a prescribed maternal ideal, the misery of her felt subjugation, and the consuming guilt that, frequently bent on productivity more than affection, her non-consensual labor psychologically compromised her husband and children. Yet, I knew that my experience was hardly unique, having logged hundreds of hours chasing children around playgrounds in the company of other, predominately white, formerly professional women who felt similarly ambivalent about a decision to empower ourselves and to nurture our families through homemaking.

Shortly before making the “choice” to call homemaking my principal occupation, I read Joan C. Williams’s “Domesticity as the Dangerous Supplement of Liberalism.” In this article, Williams explores the tension well-educated, middle-class women feel between professional achievement and the performance of more traditional feminine ideals that privilege a maternal ethos of care. Shaped by notions of femininity, the priority that domesticity as an ideology accords to affiliation, responsibility, and self-sacrifice stands in opposition to liberalism’s privileging of achievement, status, and self-interest. In many respects, Williams’s argument is a precursor to the work of Elizabeth Dillon whose analysis of liberalism’s developmental narrative supplies the paradigm for this historical interpretation. Anticipating Dillon’s “line of fiction,” Williams argues that domesticity’s constructive supplementarity precludes women’s attainment of a political and economic maturity that is construed as masculine, individualistic, and liberal. Their analyses diverge, however, with Williams’s assessment of the relationship between

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2 I would not have thought it possible to resume my professional work after a seven-year leave of absence and the potential failure at being sufficiently professional if not for Judith Halberstam’s wisdom. She writes, “[S]ome of the most important intellectual leaps take place independently of university training or in its aftermath or as a detour around and away from the lessons that disciplined thinking metes out.” Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 24.
domesticity and liberalism as “complementary and mutually exclusive.” Domesticity stands not simply in opposition to liberalism, Williams argues, but always external or supplemental to the domain of self-interest. (Rather than constitutively embedded within it, as Dillon argues.) As liberalism’s supplement, domesticity serves to challenge the driving force of egoistic self-interest and consequently to supply a potentially destabilizing point of critique.

If sustaining an alternative to liberalism renders domesticity dangerous, it also creates a more pernicious danger for the women who invoke it to explain their self-conscious rejection of the implicitly liberal values that govern the workplace. Citing a preference for more socially virtuous and communal principles, the late twentieth-century women referenced in Williams’s article largely chose to leave their occupations rather than refute the gendered assumptions informing the standards of productivity and professionalism that continue to discriminate against care-givers twenty-five years after the publication of Williams’s critique. Through this chosen departure from activities associated with economic and political maturity, women have ultimately disempowered themselves, Williams concludes. Not only have they limited their access to economic and political capital, but they have also performed the reproductive labor that has enabled others to accumulate tangibly valuable resources. As significantly, their complicity in perpetuating an ideal of domesticity has allowed the celebration of self-interest to proceed unchecked in non-domestic sites.

Because academic work is to some extent always autobiographical, this dissertation represents my response to Williams’s analysis of the private sphere’s Derridean supplementarity within liberalism and the consequent impact on those who literally and metaphorically transform houses into homes. Her argument was very much on my mind as I wrestled with my choice, or

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3 Joan C. Williams, “Domesticity as the Dangerous Supplement of Liberalism,” *Journal of Women’s History* 2 (Winter 1991): 72. Williams further argues that “domesticity helped to create the version of liberalism it critiqued, by siphoning off the ‘virtues of liberalism’ and gendering them as inherently feminine.” (78)
perhaps my perceived lack of choice, to leave professional work and to devote myself to the unremunerated care of others. As Williams suggests, I construed motherhood and professionalism as incompatible, and living in a predominately white, suburban community, I felt somewhat compelled to enact an intelligible and socially rewarded role of maternal devotion and to explain that choice by invoking remnants of the nineteenth-century’s sentimental idiom or “voice” of maternal sacrifice and care. Yet, in the early twenty-first century, my decision—and the choices of my peers—was ultimately determined by the belief that success at both a professional occupation and at motherhood was simply impossible. I have realized in the aftermath of my professional hiatus that, for women of my generation, the ethos of care that Williams describes has served to disavow the neoliberal-capital episteme that undergirds the contemporary idealization and performance of domesticity. Although we responded in part to the discriminatory labor policies that both led us to lower-paying occupations and often precluded the possibility of two caregivers, women of my generation, the daughters of second wave feminists, also desired (in a compulsory way) to become sufficiently productive and professional at the work of homemaking. We inherited this understanding of homemaking’s demands not from the sentimentalized mothers of the nineteenth-century, but from the rationalizing home economists of the early twentieth. As a consequence, our sense of autonomy and perceived worth required us to restore for ourselves the boundary between work at home and work at work by choosing between these sites of professionalized gendered labor.

The dissertation’s various chapters have traced the historical origins of my alternative reading of the dichotomous relationship between liberalism and domesticity that Williams explores. They collectively illuminate how various actors contributed for political purposes to the domestic sphere’s ideological reconstitution in the early twentieth century. For this reason, a private domicile for which Americans yearned and that symbolized their consent to necessary forms of self-regulation was, I argue, a publicly conceived fiction articulated by educational
institutions, federal agencies, popular publications, advertisements, and the BHA’s staged performances. This promulgation of a normative conception of home served to channel potentially disruptive and dissenting longings for self-expression, authenticity, and even community into a declared symbol of the economic opportunity, personal security, and political independence that the state was conceived to protect. Engendered by desire, the identification with a personally gratifying and socially admired home thus conferred a nationally stabilizing political identity that those seeking an empowering recognition as rightful Americans had little choice but to replicate.

The circular construction of the American liberal subject and the aesthetically appealing home appears less relevant today due to declining rates of home ownership that recently reached a fifty-one-year low.\(^4\) Belying this fact are the glossy magazines and television programs that continue to proclaim the joys and transformative possibilities of homemaking. Although home ownership has failed to rebound, home improvement remains a thriving, multi-billion dollar industry because Americans persist in regarding an iconic home—even when that dwelling is a rented apartment—as the embodiment of autonomy and the bastion of freedom.\(^5\) We continue to hold this view even as the market and its logic are encroaching into the most intimate and presumably affective domains of our lives.\(^6\) To support this neoliberal critique, I will conclude by showing how homemaking continues to disavow—to both deny and facilitate—the political

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\(^4\) According to the U.S. Census Bureau, home ownership rates in the second quarter of 2016 continued to drop, reaching a record low of 62.9%, a percentage last (and first) reported in 1965. This marks a decline from a peak of 69.2% at the end of 2004. More disturbing is the racial discrepancy in rates of home ownership with non-Hispanic whites recording a rate of 71.5% and African Americans only 41.7%.

\(^5\) The value of the home improvement products market in 2016 is an estimated $345.5 billion. At the end of 2015, the HGTV network reported $1 billion in annual earnings. See www.statistica.com/topics/1732/home-improvement/.

economy’s operation by continuing to create a fictively separate sphere of personal autonomy, privacy, and liberty.

If contemporary housing experts are to be believed, nothing enacts liberalism’s presumed foundation of consent like the fun of decorating a home and the pleasure derived from arranging evocative furnishings into an appealing and principled composition. Interior decoration thus continues to effect an ambivalence between the individuality and the conformity, the desire and the discipline, of an independent creator. As interior designer Danielle Colding advises, “Ground a space in classic, timeless pieces and then go wild with fun accents that reflect who you are.”

Colding’s directive illustrates that the paradox of liberal subjectivity remains manifest in the aesthetics of the tastefully beautiful domestic interior, but through the promise of enjoyment and authenticity, adhering to principle leads to a fuller, more satisfying expression of an innate freedom.

In the print media targeted at middle-class home-improvers, having fun and manifesting that experience aesthetically have become primary objectives of interior design. Décor conceived as playful and cheerful is both obfuscating and compensatory in a political economy characterized by stagnating incomes and declining mobility for middle-class Americans. “[W]hat makes you smile in your kitchen?” asks Sara Peterson, the editor of the HGTV network’s promotional magazine. Confessing some dissatisfaction with her current kitchen, Peterson admits to fantasizing about a “dream kitchen” that is “picture-perfect in my head.” Although readers must know this professional woman can afford it, they nevertheless appreciate her efforts to identify with their budgetary constraints by pluckily accepting that their happiness should never depend on realizing a consumer fantasy of “gleaming white cabinets, marble countertops, a blue tile backsplash, and a fridge that cleans itself.” Rather, Peterson encourages her readers to adopt

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7 Danielle Colding, quoted in “40 Style Secrets,” Better Homes and Gardens, September 2013, 62.
her resilient determination and commitment “to love the one I’m with.” Her pragmatic, yet fun-filled secret to sustaining that affection is to “buy bright new accessories and constantly swap things around.” She even displays a charmingly idiosyncratic “kitchen witch” made by her grandmother.8

Although she does not say specifically, Sara Peterson’s affordably decorated kitchen is most likely attached to a multi-purpose space. Investing in a house with an open floor plan has become an increasingly popular and aesthetically desirable strategy for creating an enjoyable, pleasurable home. Spacious, connected rooms invite groups to gather and have fun, and as significantly, their larger dimensions and functional flexibility maintain an illusion of freedom and opportunity. While the spaciousness of an open kitchen and connected multi-purpose area allows for familial and social conviviality, Peterson’s description of her home’s designated work and gathering space underscores how aesthetic elements help to create a mood and visual interest that disavow the kitchen’s utilitarian purpose and the labor that occurs within it. Bright colors mark this interior space as fun or playful, while synthetic and metallic materials are perfect mediums for colorful palettes that evoke spontaneity and cheerfulness. Curved lines and geometric patterns further attract the gaze by providing an eclectic contrast to the boxy shape of functional, foundational pieces.

While the strategic use of aesthetic elements imbues interior spaces such as Peterson’s kitchen with cheer and charm, juxtaposing oppositions within a single design scheme advisedly achieves a similar effect. Blending the masculine and the feminine, the traditional and the modern, the natural and the industrial, or the permanence of a splurge and the ephemerality of a steal has become a standard technique among designers for creating visual interest and appeal. Yet, simply mixing-and-matching hardly distinguishes the playful from the traditional; that feat

8 Sara Peterson, “what makes you smile in your kitchen,” hgtv magazine, September 2013, 8.
requires inserting the surprising or unexpected. An eye-catching splash of color or a unique combination of form and texture supposedly infuses a room with a sense of fun and frivolity, but so too does incorporating unusual accessories such as the handmade owl that adorns Sarah Peterson’s kitchen. As one “lifestyle expert” recently advised the readers of a do-it-yourself decorating magazine, “One weird piece makes a room pop with personality.” To find his “really unusual stuff,” he has joined the legions of pickers who comb through grandparents’ attics, thrift stores, flea markets, and junk emporiums. The value added by the discovery of such quirky, vintage treasures more than compensates for the time and labor that picking requires. The local thrift store is no longer only a poor man’s paradise, however. It yields artifacts that even professional designers seek for their affluent clients, for having “fun with accessories” has become an almost axiomatic technique for evincing authenticity by “adding interest and a dose of whimsy” to any room.

Interesting accessories and furnishings stimulate visual appeal and set a particular mood, but these components of beautiful décor also evoke “love” for a domestic interior by revealing something essential and previously ineffable about the interiority of those who inhabit it. To be recognized and experienced as truly playful, a decorative scheme must also deploy color, texture, line, and pattern to effect a daring proclivity for creativity and experimentation. “Texture is more than just a tactile sensation,” as one celebrity designers explains; “It gives a place soul.” Advice manuals suggest that eye-catching colors and patterns function similarly, although excessively valued objects are deemed to have a revelatory and often talismanic significance that can elevate these furnishings or accessories to a motif. Seemingly dismissive of decorative rules and conventions, another designer liberates her readers from worries about “[p]eriods and styles,”

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11 I’ve borrowed this insight on the revelatory impulse of self-improvement from Brenda R. Weber’s reading of reality television programs in Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity (Duke University Press, Durham, NC 2009).
12 Lili Diallo, quoted in “40 Style Secrets,” Better Homes and Gardens, September 2013, 64.
claiming that these “don’t matter nearly as much as what you love.” “[B]uy what you’re passionate about,” she instructs, and “[t]he rest falls into place.”¹³

The “rest” that magically follows from passion’s pursuit is style whose meaning conveys a perfect synthesis between personal preference and decorative principle. For the LA-based blogger, designer, and entrepreneur Joy Cho, this aesthetic ideal amounts to a “visual statement of what intrigues me and makes me happy.”¹⁴ Cho’s definition of style asserts that affective motives guide her design schemes, and this avowed autonomy qualifies Cho for admission into a pantheon of celebrity designers or style-makers whose homes depict interpretative variations on common design themes and techniques. Selecting only the elements that she finds appealing saves Cho from a mimetic uniformity that her adherence to social and decorative conventions might otherwise lead. Her pretensions to individuality and originality, which her playful, eclectic interiors support, nevertheless belie her admission that she has employed a professional designer who “tones me down” and orders her “random” preferences into a coherent “vision.”¹⁵

Cho’s admission suggests that, although this style-maker claims to appropriate and alter decorating principles, these tenets remain the province of authorities external to herself. Yet, the evocative elements incorporated into her recognizably tasteful interiors reframe Cho’s submission as a choice. This insistence on aesthetic discretion is pervasive within the textual descriptions that accompany the photographic images of model interiors, and it serves to acknowledge the imperative of regulation while also casting self-discipline as the logical consequence of autonomy due to its foundation in desiring appetite. One homeowner selected, for example, a classic blue and white palette because it “gave her more freedom to play with other colors in the space.”¹⁶

Another designer also deployed this aesthetic technique to help a client create a very different

¹³ Homeowner and jewelry designer Julie Wolfe, featured in “retro chic,” 100 ideas fleamarket style, Better Homes and Gardens Special Interest Publications, 2011, 51.
¹⁵ Ibid., 32.
¹⁶ Betsy Goldberg, “kitchen chronicles,” hgtv magazine, July/August 2013, 146.
mood in her new home. While the “old house was sleek and modern,” the homeowner desired her “new space to be stylish, too, but brighter and more fun.” To achieve this objective, the designer paired a “splashy print” with subtle shades, natural textures, and classic furnishings. While these traditional elements maintained the décor’s balance and harmony, the bright print supplied an appealing motif that visually attracted the attention away from the restrained, conventional backdrop and created the perception of playful independence.

While play functions to disavow subjection by preserving the possibilities of autonomy and consent, it also appears in decorating advice literature as an injunction. The designer Nathan Turner’s “smart and practical” advice illustrates how the command to play both disguises and conveys an imperative. “Don’t rush out the door and start buying things,” he recommends to his cost-conscious audience. “Begin with moving things around. See what works. Play! Experiment. Have fun. You’ll start to develop an eye.” His exclamation begs the question of whether this gaze belongs authentically to the subject or to an internalized expert. Originating in a directive to play, however, the sequence of his instructions obscures the source of the scopic drive. Visual pleasure ambiguously belongs to the decorating subject, but also to the expert who orders her to decorate and whose admiration and recognition the decorator seeks. As an authority on interior décor, Turner’s imperative thus functions as a type of Althusserian hail, calling a subject into being through a subjugating interpellation. Yet, because the command to play and experiment bids a pursuit of creativity, playfulness, authenticity, and inventiveness, the imperative reflexively bestows an ontological priority upon the subject. This ordering consequently suggests that the interpellated subject might precede, consensually legitimate, and even alter the axioms she must follow, but only through the rules of representation.18

Functioning as a disavowal, the aesthetics of playful décor serve not only to sustain and potentially resist the imperative of regulation, but also to acknowledge and deny the authoritative experts issuing these commands. A rendering of Nashville-based designer Gen Sohr illustrates the equivocations that accompany the admission of a designer’s power to make homes for others, particularly when that creativity is depicted as playful and manifested as fun. “Our aesthetic, our home, is very, very personal,” Sohr professes. Her unique style begins with a blank canvas of white walls and trim that enables her to “play with” the embellishments she adds. “I’m not scared of color and pattern,” she declares, and Sohr asserts this bold self-confidence and independence by placing traditional pieces in unexpected places; accessorizing flexibly to accommodate changes in the season, the occasion, or her mood; strategically incorporating carefully selected vintage pieces that feel special rather than “costumey;” and eclectically combining materials to make a room appear more “personal” or interesting.

Enumerated in an article entitled, “making her own rules,” these are the principles Sohr “put[s] . . . into play” whether she’s decorating for herself or for a client. So frequently reiterated within advice publications, such rules hardly originate with Sohr. Rather than concede her own lack of authorship, however, Sohr cites the inspirational role of her mother who encouraged her to search for a “muse.” Deferring to this maternal figure, Sohr is thus inspired rather than instructed herself. Illustrating Sohr’s declarations of her creativity and preferences for pink, the photographic glimpses of her home support an equivocation between expressive liberty and principled restraint. Yet, the playful décor that represents Sohr’s autonomy and capacity for consent also qualifies her claims to these precursors of political independence. The layout’s caption identifies Sohr as first a “mother” and “wife,” and only then as an “entrepreneur with style to spare.” Each picture enforces this textual claim, as we see Sohr standing with her husband and children, washing dishes, playing the hostess, and interrupting either her leisure or her work to attend to a child. Performed against the backdrop of her playfully animated décor,
Sohr’s affectively motivated homemaking labors allow for multiple disavowals: Always at play rather than work, Sohr is and isn’t subordinate to the axioms of interior décor; this style-maker is and isn’t directing the amateur decorators in the representation of their own individuality; this business owner is and isn’t a professional herself; the home is and isn’t a private space; interior decorating is and isn’t a quantifiably valuable occupation.¹⁹

This ambivalent representation of Gen Sohr helps to illustrate how labor that is construed and experienced as recreational rather than compulsory or economic creates a felt sense of independence for both expert and amateur decorators. When motivated by play and pleasure, both professional designers and the legions of amateur and semi-professional decorators they advise can expressively and creatively design rather than inescapably labor.²⁰ Yet, the insistence that interior decorating expresses desires for fun and play yields ambivalent effects for Sohr and women like her. The play that appears to empower this female designer and her presumably female clients to act autonomously also problematically qualifies not only Sohr’s professional status and expertise, but also the perceived economic value of women’s homemaking labor.

In the twenty-first century men also spend their leisure time wielding hammers and paintbrushes to increase the value of their homes, but this labor that is not labor yields somewhat different consequences for these weekend contractors. The designer Eddie Ross’s explanation of his personal style and design strategies suggests how interior decorating creates an opportunity for fun that allows a more masculine mode of working at play and playing at work. Pointing to the affective origin of his quest for affordable sophistication, the style editor for Better Homes and Gardens reveals that as a young caterer, “I craved the look of those great homes in Greenwich.” Not one to be defeated by unattainable desire, he ingeniously “figured out how to

²⁰ Butler, 35-38.
get it without spending a lot of money.” In designs that blend “vintage plus modern, with a dash of DIY,” Ross incorporates many of the aesthetic elements that signify fun. These markers of playful authenticity enable the interior of Ross’s Manhattan apartment to appear ironic rather than mimetic, for they convey a vitality that makes his home uniquely equivalent rather than repetitively identical to the affluent homes he once admired. Delving further into Ross’s text reveals a desire for something animated that is embedded within, but not fully commensurate with socioeconomic status. This longing is for power, and it suffuses the explication of Ross’s style, which hooks readers with the perennially effective pick-up line, “Looking for a little fun on the cheap?”

In this caption, a double entendre is at play with “fun” referring not only to objects perceived as fun, but also to the experience of decorating itself. For Ross, decorating potentially enacts a more virile craving for challenge and adventure. He advises his readers to approach decorating as “always being on the hunt.” To adopt this hyper-aware perspective, one must “[k]eep an open mind. See the possibilities that might be opened with a little elbow grease or a simple change-out.” Juxtaposing the gendered tropes of hunting and hard work, Ross cites supplementary impulses of thrill-seeking, competitiveness, and aggression that catalyze familiar narratives of male dominion, acquisition, and pick-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps self-determination. Such quests have traditionally culminated in an equation between material security and political entitlement wherein what is achieved or earned reveals what one has always been. The collectibles that Ross hunts and displays in the process of making his home thus help to effect an implicitly masculine, adventuring subject that exists prior to the modes of acquisition and labor that produced these belongings.

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22 Ibid., 86.
23 Ibid., 84.
Ross’s ploy for attracting readers’ libidinal investment is hardly unique, for it pervades the home improvement genre. An episode of the DIY network’s *10 Grand in Your Hand* illustrates how the narrative structure of such programs encourages viewers to equate the meaning of homemaking labor with the symbols it produces rather than the reality of the work itself. Similar to the male protagonists of so many do-it-yourself programs, this particular home improver is repeatedly berated by the program’s critical host, his mocking wife, and his silently disapproving father-in-law. Relative to these foils, viewers witness an incompetent amateur exercise little authority, expertise, or even common sense. Upon surveying the imperfect fruits of his often inept labor, however, this disciplined homemaker becomes an elated home owner who raises his arms in victory and proclaims, “I came, I saw, I conquered!”

In this particular episode, an African-American man experiences the labor of homemaking as a masculine form of fun and a vehicle for self-determination; yet, white women more commonly step into the role of imperialist. Very few people are ambivalent about one of my favorite television personalities, Nicole Curtis, the host of *Rehab Addict*. In one particular episode, Curtis’s addiction to rehabilitating old houses leads to the seemingly irrational purchase of a condemned home in a dilapidated area of north Minneapolis. Inspecting the house for the first time, Curtis creeps down the basement stairs with her flashlight. “I feel like I’m in, like, a twisted house, like a fun house,” she ruefully remarks, one “that’s not so fun when I find out I own it.” Despite Curtis’s apparent trepidation, her fans sense that this challenge fuels the thrill she derives from pursuing her addiction. As the title of her program suggests, Curtis rarely identifies fun as the motive for her unceasing labor. Though she occasionally uses play to motivate her male employees and to diffuse any resistance to her authority, this designer, investor, real estate agent, and single mother admittedly works on and profits from the houses she

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24 John DeSilvia, *10 Grand in Your Hand: Ghosts of Homeowners Past* (Season 5, Episode 11; the DIY network), Television.
renovates. Curtis alternatively disavows these motives by seeking gratification in her desire to beautify a blighted neighborhood’s landscape and to improve its residents’ attitudes. With this particular purchase, she intends to “prove a point . . . that a house set for demolition can be renovated on a budget and sold again to an owner occupant.” “There is a chance for this area of the city to turn around,” Curtis explains. “We just have to start thinking a little more positive,” and that positivity begins, Curtis believes, with a house that embodies it and acts as a beacon to those who choose to experience their freedom by submitting to the ideals that the gentrified house beautifully signifies at a more affordable price.25

I watched this particular episode while folding laundry with one of my young daughters. At the culmination of the program, we viewed Curtis, now attractively attired and coiffed in the aftermath of her implicitly male labor, offer a visual tour of the rehabilitated house. My daughter exclaimed, “Mommy, those rooms are so pretty and clean! You would never let us play in them.” I must admit that she was right because my children’s play almost always increases my housekeeping labor, which I refuse to disavow through the idiom of maternal sacrifice. In contrast to my daughter, I longingly gazed at Curtis’s uncluttered, eclectically traditional, and naturalistic designs because they aesthetically represent for me a freedom from work and the enjoyment of leisure. Yet, as Curtis frequently reminds her viewers, her schemes, so evocative of pleasure, security, and independence, could be mine to enjoy if only I would adopt the right attitude, give myself the freedom to perceive my environment more creatively, flexibly, and ingeniously, and consequently, be ready to do a lot of hard work. This familiar line of fiction helps to make Curtis’s program so compelling. I and her millions of viewers need only to replicate its paradoxical logic, then labor to restore a space whose authenticity and beauty will prove I have invested so much more than my toil.

25 Nicole Curtis, Rehab Addict: Boarded-Up Beauty (Season 4, Episode 1; the diy network), Television.
Yet, disavowing homemaking labor as fun creates more than an equal opportunity for racial and ethnic minorities and white women to perform a script that has historically explained and preserved the privileges of white men. For some home improvers, recreation literally opens up possibilities for re-creation. Like designer Eddie Ross, a female counterpart relates the pursuit of unique, affordable accessories to the gendered activity of hunting. Her exclamatory “Happy Hunting!” reads, however, as a well-wishing salutation rather than an authoritative command. In contrast to Ross’s directive to capture, her encouraging and less connotatively masculine suggestion to uncover and repurpose hidden gems promises a sensory stimulation far different from the thrill of search and seizure or the libidinal pleasure of conquest following implicitly masochistic work. Discovery requires, for this enthusiast, neither acquisitive impulses nor brute strength; it needs only “a little creativity and imagination.” By adopting a more playful, inventive perspective, the decorator advises, “these treasures can almost always be transformed,” for looking beyond familiar assumptions and superficial details reveals an inherent potential that enables worn objects to “serve entirely new purposes.”

The desire to embark on a transformative adventure certainly spurred my recent attempt to build a desk out of salvaged materials. I gleefully snagged a pair of old bathroom cabinets at the local Habitat for Humanity’s Re-Store, and I found a flat-panel door at a picker’s paradise. My elation at finding these treasures so cheaply completely eclipsed my recognition of the amount of work required to transform these artifacts into a desk that would symbolize so much more than a location for the family’s desktop computer. For this thrifty idea, I have John and Sherry Petersik to thank. When I recognized the Petersiks’s smiling faces while flipping through old editions of HGTV’s promotional magazine, “researching” this academic project, I felt as if I had bumped into a pair of old friends. I first stumbled upon their blog, YoungHouseLove, a

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27 Jessica Dodell-Feder, “100,000 people visit our house every day,” hgtv magazine, July/August 2013, 135.
few years ago when searching for instructions to repaint dilapidated kitchen cabinets. My pleasure in the rehabilitated cabinets (not in the act of rehabilitation itself) helps to explain the affection I feel for the Petersiks. Yet, my interest in this young couple also originates in my intrigue with their professed desire to blur the distinctions between gendered sites and types of labor.

For seven years, John and Sherry Petersik expressed an overriding passion for their work as do-it-yourself home improvers that compelled and justified the intangible expenditures required to build a successful web-based business. The readers of their blog flocked to the Petersiks’ youthful enthusiasm, avowed lack of professional expertise, affordably creative ideas, and propensity to “over-share.” Because the Petersiks supposedly opened the doors to their successive homes and to their hearts so completely and authentically, a loyal internet following regarded John and Sherry as friends. Their disclosure of yearly business reports further bolstered these affective bonds, for this transparency revealed that, in yielding no revenue, the blog was truly a labor inspired by love that justified the good old-fashioned hard work needed to transform the Petersiks’s blog into a brand. The same joie de vivre that attracted thousands of fans enabled the Petersiks to expand their business “accidentally” far beyond the initial endeavor of blogging about their own home improvement projects into more lucrative ventures—two bestselling books, a limited line of home décor products at Target, promotional spots in print and televised media, and a stint as consultants with Benjamin Moore paints.

Although the Petersiks admittedly worked almost around the clock since leaving their corporate positions in advertising and copyediting, they adamantly reiterated the enjoyment they derived from improving their home and the gratitude they felt for the creative independence this work afforded—until it began to feel like work. In early September, 2014, the Petersiks posed a question: “What are your opinions about smaller posts when we can’t write something juicy?” If you regard the work of closely reading cultural texts as fun, readers’ responses were simply
riveting. More importantly, they arose from the Petersiks’s equivocal representation of their work as both fun and labor. John and Sherry received, of course, many expressions of support from their “friends.” Though disappointed, these readers admired the Petersiks all the more for wanting to prioritize their emotional well-being and the needs of their preschooler and infant.

Much of this outpouring was, however, a reaction to comments that supporters perceived as excessively personal and mean-spirited. For example, after criticizing the Petersiks’s juvenile style and their unnecessary thriftiness, one respondent scolded them for “using 2 small kids as your excuse” for a lack of productivity. “You make big bucks from your blog . . . and IT’S YOUR JOB,” she continued. Even when more loyal readers reminded her that the blog generated no revenue for the Petersiks, she defensively persisted, “5 posts a week isn’t that much for readers to expect when they are two fully functioning adults who are supposedly working on this 80 hours a week. . . . They get paid to decorate their house and fix it up (which almost every other couple does on the evenings or weekends).”

One member of such a couple poured her frustration into a scathing critique. Her post merits a close reading because it illuminates how a cultural disavowal of homemaking labor as a necessary, but fun form of leisure left her feeling not only physically exhausted and emotionally frustrated, but also betrayed by the Petersiks:

“My husband and I have two children as well, an almost 3 year old and a baby of nine months. My husband is a lawyer and works fulltime. We moved into our new place four weeks ago and my husband took three weeks off. In these three weeks, we built a giant Ikea kitchen by ourselves, including picking it all up with a rented truck and bringing it in, with no help by anybody else. We moved in two days with the help of some family members. My husband started work again and in the evenings, as soon as the kids are in bed, we hang pictures, install new furniture or unpack boxes et cetera. I really do not want to complain, but this blog is THEIR FULLTIME JOB. Even though I personally do not pay them, their sponsors pay them because I and everyone else of their readers comes here regularly. I can completely understand if after the birth of a child you take some time off, but the content of this blog has been going downhill since long before Teddy’s birth and Clara is already 4 – my son is over a year younger and he’s been in daycare

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since he was 10 months old (since I had to go back to teaching). What I want to say with this overly lengthy comment (sorry, I’m rambling): it makes me cringe when they complain about all the work and how little time they have and blabla. This is their job, get some daycare or a nanny and do your job. Readers do not see how much time you spend on side projects, and when you give them the feeling that they come third behind family (of course) and side projects (not understandable), then this is off-putting.”

A more astute reader helped to explain why this respondent angrily entreated John and Sherry to work harder at having fun so that they could elevate the labor of maintaining her friendship above their actual, remunerated work. Though he admitted to being a little drunk, the mediator attributed the critical responses to a general frustration with the propensity among popular blogs to become excessively commercialized and, consequently, less authentic. Were the Petersiks cultivating friendships or followers? When the quality, the “juiciness,” of their highly detailed and personally anecdotal posts declined, this apparent lack of affective investment in the blog left readers uncertain about the answer to the equivocations embedded within the entwined disavowals embedded within their blog: work as enjoyable, labor as leisure, workplace as home, public as private, economic motives as altruistic beneficence, discipline as liberating, and conformity as individuality. The blog-savvy reader advised the Petersiks to “find a balance in your writing between being the next door neighbor and a magazine editor.” This tactic would require “keeping to [their] roots” by exploring new techniques for communicating their enthusiasm, originality, and realism, but also by acknowledging the blog as work and thus containing it within appropriate boundaries.\textsuperscript{30}

I waited anxiously for the Petersik’s response. A few days later in a post entitled “Feeeeelings,” Sherry revealed the couple’s decision to take an indefinite leave of absence. “If we have any respect for this blog and our love of it, and for you guys and what you’d like to see,” she explained, “we need to take break if we ever want any hope of getting back to that fun/real/spontaneous place it used to be when this was something we did for the love instead of

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
the high stakes game of supporting a family.” Referring to the blog, Sherry confessed that she and John had felt increasingly frustrated “to do a job that you love poorly” and equally perplexed about why they were no longer “so inspired and joyful to wake up and do [it] each day.” They agreed with critics that they had become synonymous with their brand. To disavow this equation—to be YoungHouseLove, but not—she and John realized that they needed to recapture the passion that had once animated the blog and earned the affection of thousands. More interestingly, Sherry confessed that reigniting that “fiery blog-spark” might even require resuming their “day jobs” and returning to their origins of blogging about homemaking only as a “hobby.”

As the Petersiks illustrate, the work of homemaking and what it produces are more than ever construed as fun in the mainstream media. The frequency of this reiteration reflects a perceived loss of independence among men and women in the context of a neoliberal political economy that makes self-care and self-help unavoidable strategies for preserving personal and economic security. Yet, this emphasis on safety and stability obscures the symbolic purpose that homemaking has historically served in American liberalism’s preservation. This dissertation has sought to locate the historical moment at which inhabiting an aesthetically appealing and comfortable home became the means of sustaining Americans’ capacity for self-governing, democratic citizenship. Ubiquitously framed as fun in contemporary domestic advice literature, the aesthetics of interior décor and the homemaking activities that transform houses into homes persist in fabricating the possibility of a desiring, initiating subject that not only follows the rules, but also idealistically founds. In this way, the home as a perceived domain of privacy and embodied interiority persists in distinguishing our labor from our love, our laws from our leisure,

31 Sherry Petersik, “Feeeelings,” 9 September 2014, Young House Love, youghouselove.com. As promised, the Petersiks revealed their decision in their latest and last post (9 October 2014) that they have decided “to move on” and embark on a “new adventure” that will help to restore their “life balance.” Authoring the post together as YoungHouseLove, the Petersiks confess that they “do not know what the future holds.” They have nevertheless decided to embrace this uncertainty because experience has proven that “the most amazing things have happened to us when we’ve stretched waaay out of our comfort zone.”
and our discipline from our desires. This dissertation has explored the reinscriptive purpose that attends the home’s ideological function and consequently suggests why American liberalism has failed to extend to all citizens the ideals whose very possibility it declares. Yet, in the American spirit that the home maintains, I want to conclude with an optimistic question rather than an indictment: Can the appealing, pleasurable home—a dwelling which focuses and intensifies our personal desires to become liberal—potentially enable Americans to re-imagine and re-create liberal subjectivity by signifying through the act of homemaking something inchoate and not yet articulated, but nevertheless potential within our longings for home?
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