

**Ladies' Home Erotica:  
Reading the Seams Between Home-making and *House Beautiful***

**By Kim Golombisky, doctoral candidate, Department of Communication,  
University of South Florida**

**Abstract**

Interior design and decorating magazines equate home with leisure, a fantasy for female readers with jobs and families. Women's magazines typically compel women toward neurotic ideals of housework and family. But decorating magazines represent an erotic vision of home wiped clean of the family who makes housework as well as the reader's own housekeeping labor. However, this resistant version of home still encourages domesticity by aligning the female reader's identity and influence with the house.

Sunlight streams through a wall of windows draped with cheerful blue and yellow fabric. A thick floral rug frames the quilt-covered loveseat. Delicate bone china lines a bead-board corner hutch. Weathered bric-a-brac and whimsy compose still-lives here and there among clouds of fresh flowers. Every pillow plumped, the rustic sunroom is pristine. There's no evidence of human occupation here except on the coffee table, next to a cup of tea, someone's reading glasses sit on an open book. Today the magazine is *Country Living*.

In today's home-interior design and decorating magazines, photographic logic becomes erotica. At a time when U.S. working wives still do 70 percent of the housework (Rix, 1990), these magazines allow women to turn a system that exhorts them to be neurotic about housekeeping into a sexy vision of the house wiped clean of the family who makes housework.

Second-wave feminism prompted scholarly interest in the gendered division of labor in this country. Socialist feminists, especially, exposed how women's domestic labor has supported the political economy since the industrial revolution. But the academy struggles to operationalize housework, while mainstream social institutions ignore it altogether (Ferree, 1990; Levin, 1993). Meanwhile, despite their growing numbers in the workforce, employed wives and mothers continue to work a "second shift" at home (Hochschild, 1990), while a husband contributing to housework is doing his wife "a favor" (DeVault, 1990; Ferree, 1990). As an unofficial service industry, home making remains women's invisible work.

At the same time, a number of highly visible discourses on the home target U.S. women. Historically, consumer culture and mass media have romanticized a white middle-class ideal of home as woman's world. Women's magazines, particularly, trace more than a hundred years of housekeeping advice increasing women's responsibility for the scientific efficiency, physical health, and psychological welfare of the family (Damon-Moore, 1994; Doner, 1993; Ehrenreich & English, 1978; Lears, 1983; Miller, 1991). At the turn-of-the-century, changes in technology led to a synergistic relationship between mass circulation women's magazines and national advertisers targeting the

purchasing power of middle-class women with mass-produced household products. This female-centered commerce offered women a new, although limited, kind of freedom outside the home through buying for the household. But it also institutionalized “a gendered commercial discourse and a commercial gender discourse” that today continues to define “women in terms of their place in the home and the products used therein” (Damon-Moore, 1994, pp. 3 & 197).

But over the same period, another less studied group of literature and periodicals feminized the interior design industry and handed women additional responsibilities for producing artfully furnished houses (Gordon & McArthur, 1988; Jones, 1997; McNeil, 1994). Like the marketing housewife, the decorating homemaker also was encouraged to leave home to make a better home (Jones, 1997). At the end of the 19th century, in addition to the routine of purchasing cereal and soap, the designing woman of the house was invited to experience the visual spectacle and vicarious adventure of window shopping for more creative projects and bigger ticket items with which to recreate at home the exotic—but in hindsight oddly unpeopled—fantasy spaces displayed in public places. She now was encouraged to visit department stores, exhibitions, museums, and, via decorating experts’ texts, the mansions and castles of her social betters. By 1900, the rise of the department store, credit, and cheaper reproduction goods allowed the “democratization of luxury” (Williams, 1982) for an upwardly mobile but rather insecure middle-class, anxious for a uniquely American style while nervously looking to Europe for definitions of good taste (Jones, 1997; Lears, 1981; Levine, 1988). However, as the home-maker’s desires began to exceed her needs and economic means, it became apparent that just looking at displays of beautiful rooms, even photographed ones in magazines, was a pleasurable pastime that both satisfied and fueled a vague desire for more. Interior design advice has consistently defined the perfect house as an ongoing project of yearning for something always just beyond the home-maker’s reach in time and space (Jones, 1997).

Even though the discourses of home science and of home aesthetics both compel women to identify with private home making through public consumerism, their two messages essentially compete toward opposite ends. Women’s magazines suggest a home should be filled with happy, healthy family members. Interior design and decor magazines suggest that home is perfection when there are no people in the house.

In this essay I use Janice Radway’s (1986) concept of “ideological seams” to frame this contradiction. Taking a reflexive approach, I critically interpret the ideological contradictions of reading home design magazines. First, I discuss some assumptions regarding the women who purchase these periodicals. Then I analyze these publications’ photographic grammar. Finally, I scout for resistant uses and meanings. “My fieldwork has been on myself and on my friends and family” (Coward, 1985, pp. 14-15), all providing important insights for me, as a white, middle-class, married-with-children woman, with a mortgaged house, and something of a crush on Martha Stewart (<http://www.marthastewart.com>), the ’90s doyenne of domesticity. Here at the end of another fin de siecle, as I juggle hotly contested contemporary definitions of “women,” I marvel at both the persistence and permutations of the “cult of domesticity.”

### **Framework: Zigzagging Between Home-Making and Housekeeping**

Somewhere between *home-making* and *housekeeping* lie what Janice Radway (1986) would call “ideological seams,” where discourse and practice join imperfectly to persuade women toward contradictory desires: making a home for the family’s comfort and keeping a house scrubbed free of evidence of the family’s presence. For Radway, ideology is not a smooth, continuous fabric, but a dynamic “patchwork quilt” of “institutionalized but variable power relations, practices and activities” (p. 109). The significance of such a model calls our attention to junctions where pieces of the ideological worldview logically do not fit, but they become basted together anyway and naturalized through unexamined assumptions. Although we are bound up as objects of the ideological quilt, at the raggedy seams we create fancywork, zigzagging, and applique, in an attempt to blend mismatched ideals. Radway’s metaphor illustrates three important notions: 1) The seams make visible the fault-lines that construct our desires. 2) On the seams, we work out ingenious tactics for mending tears in the ideological reasoning our desires and their fulfillment depend on. 3) However ingenious, we can never make a perfect fit between either the seams or our desires.

Patriarchy is “riven by conflicts, slippages and imperfect joinings” (Radway, 1986, pp. 109-110). As an ideology, it binds women into a worldview where they can neither attain the self-determining power of male subjectivity nor become the ideal female object. Mass culture exacerbates this untenable situation for women by permeating everyday life with incomplete instructions on how to operate as independent feminine subjects. Encouraged to fill in the blanks, women never realize the whole enterprise is materially impossible within the very ideology, which tells them that it not only is possible but also should be their goal. Unraveling patriarchy then means locating the places where women and men struggle to reconcile what they’ve learned they should be with what they can be, given their circumstances.

Radway takes seriously her female romance novel readers’ “claim that they read simply to escape” from the constant demands of household life. For Radway, this desire to escape marks the tension of an ideological seam which romance novel reading addresses. “By placing the barrier of the book between themselves and their families, they secure a certain measure of privacy and personal space.” So romance novel reading is fancywork—creative resistance that temporarily transcends readers’ dissatisfaction with the contrast between the ideal of household life and its everyday realities. But romance novel reading is fraught with the very contradictions it is meant to address, according to Radway. Relief lasts only through the novel’s last page; the novels themselves fuel a desire for symmetrical gender relations unachievable in patriarchy; and readers seem to choose this tactic of reading over others because it simultaneously frees them from the constraints of the domestic routine while fitting perfectly within them.

At first glance, design and decor magazines operate very much like the barrier between themselves and household life that Radway’s romance novel readers describe. These periodicals provide fantasy space, which fits well within the household routine. Their content is full of the contradictions women want to escape. The relief they provide is temporary and their content always redirects readers back home again. As critics, we can read these images as full of advice on how to achieve the perfect house, which perpetuates women’s role as homemakers.

But such an analysis doesn't account for the reader. Radway predicts a "womanly subtext," where readers address their own interests; women may read these magazines "against the grain" by resisting "dominant practices of patriarchal signification" (1986, p. 98). Perhaps for female readers the allure of gazing at beautiful rooms is that these photographed places freeze moments in time when the home environment is completely controlled. As such, they offer a fantasy power trip. Once made perfect, an unoccupied room does what it's told, stays put, does not require constant keeping. Designed magazine rooms are void of the family's everyday living that disrupts the ideal of a perfect house, and so these pictures appear to be submissive to the homemaker's will. In magazine rooms, readers take symbolic control of the home.

Because these kinds of zigzagging practices point to innate flaws in patriarchy's ideology as well as a kind of nascent feminist subversiveness, they are places ripe for intervention, Radway says. For feminist scholarship, the project then becomes prying open the ideological seams, challenging them, and looking for opportunities for change. Persistent intervention at the practical level of the mundane and interpersonal is a crucial move toward the political. Everyday, easily overlooked, unglamorous practices have the most significance for gender. "We must wonder what power a politics of excluding the everyday and 'the personal' would have in accounting for women's oppression," Kathleen Kirby (1996) asks in her analysis of women's spatial subjectivity. Radway herself is forced to argue for the significance of so-called women's media and media habits because they so often are denigrated as trivial or irrelevant. But the subtle, hardly noticed ways women and men are offered and take up their own genders ought to be the first seams we unravel.

While Radway's ethnographic work seeks to understand others, I struggle to understand the implications of my own zigzagging work when I stare longingly at beautiful photographs of tasteful rooms. And while Radway explicates romance novel readers' talk about reading, I explicate the photographic texts of the home design and decor magazines I find so appealing.

### **The Reader: Buying into Home-Making**

For female readers, the act of purchasing home interior design and decoration magazines means they've already bought their roles as home-makers, the people most responsible for the house's interior. These magazines do not convince a woman to take charge of home making; they only reinforce what she already believes: The house is her sphere of influence.

At the grocery store, I randomly picked 14 fall 1996 issues of these magazines to compare their content: *American Homestyle & Gardening* (<http://www.dreamremodeling.com/index2.htm>), *Architectural Digest*, *Colonial Homes* (<http://www.hearstcorp.com/mag1>), *Country Home*, *Country Living* (<http://www.countryliving.com>), *House Beautiful* (<http://www.housebeautiful.com>), *House & Garden*, *Southern Accents*, *Today's Homeowner* (<http://www.todayshomeowner.com>), *Traditional Home* (<http://www.designerfinder.com>), *Veranda*, *Victoria* (<http://www.homearts.com:80/victoria/index>), *Victorian Home*, and *Better Homes & Gardens* (<http://www.betterhomesandgardens.com>).

These titles represent 17 million paid copies for their combined September 1996 issues, according to Standard Rate and Data Service (1996), or a rough net reach of 9 million readers. That is a significant market for publishers and advertisers selling everything from the idea of what a furnished house should look like to the products with which to achieve that look. Particular publishers position themselves in terms of class, taste, historical period, geography, and decorating skill. But their content is always the same: lots of 4-color pictures of beautiful, unoccupied rooms. For all their apparent niche markets, these magazines are really more alike than different. They address women in their private domiciles with examples of how to create beautiful rooms.

Simmons Market Research (1990a, 1990b) and Mediamark Research (1989a, 1989b) were helpful for constructing a loose composite of this home interior design magazine reader. She is a white, married, 30- to 40-something woman. She is likely to have some children and some college education. She tends to be employed outside the home, although she earns less than half of her household's annual income of roughly \$50,000. In fact, she tends to earn less than half of what her husband earns. She is a single-family-unit homeowner and the female head-of-household. Predictably, her consumption of these magazines increases somewhat the first year she lives in a new house that needs to be made into a home.

Perhaps here I should clarify some terms. To my thinking, a household includes the family and its belongings. The homemaker is the female head-of-household who has assumed full-time responsibility for making the private material structure called a house into the physically and emotionally comforting affective environment called a home. Even though she has a public career, the homemaker is still responsible for home making, as well as housekeeping, although she may insist on help with the housework.

This contemporary homemaker has the idea she works for herself (and thus the rewards of her labor are her own) in her own home. She believes that in the house there is no authority higher than hers. The idea of home-making, assuming responsibility for the house, in her mind means taking charge, which is a different proposition altogether than being assigned responsibility for a chore (as she well knows because she is the person who usually assigns household chores). Having power over the poetic abstract noun home implies oh-so-much more than the concrete noun house. Home making points to creating something of value that lasts and offers rewards. Housework is tantamount to slavery, but home making "provides the opportunity for endless creative and leisure pursuits" (Oakley, 1974, p. 41).

But the distinction between home making and housekeeping is merely rhetorical. Twenty years ago, Ann Oakley's (1974) stay-at-home housewives said they disliked the monotony of housework, but they liked the autonomy of being their own bosses. On the one hand, to be a homemaker implies mastery of a private world. On the other hand, this mastery depends on the homemaker's labor, not leisure, and the source of her labor is the household. Reframing housekeeping as home making does not change its material circumstances. Women continue to have the most responsibility for the interior of the house, which by virtue of always being open for business, is a full-time job, whether or not these homemakers moonlight at careers.

Similarly, defining married female heads-of-households as homeowners is a misnomer. Rarely will a house belong to a woman based on her individual earning power. Most women cannot afford to buy a house independently because women's wages across the board are substantially less than men's (Blum et al, 1993; Rix, 1990). For women, home ownership usually depends on marriage, or at least a committed partner.

So defining home interior design and decor magazine readers, who are working wives earning less than half of their household incomes, as home-owning home-makers constitutes an ideological seam. The questionable difference between being a home-maker and a housekeeper, and the unquestioned difference between being a home owner and the wife of one, makes for a raggedy tear in logic that home interior design and decor magazines, and their readers, zigzag across.

Unlike the decorating magazines, the Seven Sisters (Better Homes & Gardens, <http://www.betterhomesandgardens.com>; *Family Circle*; *Good Housekeeping*, <http://www.goodhousekeeping.com>; *Ladies' Home Journal*, <http://www.lhj.com>; *Woman's Day*, no web site; *McCall's*; and *Redbook*, <http://www.homearts.com/rb/toc/00rbhpc1.htm>) offer women a 150-plus-year literary tradition of experts' housekeeping advice on wifery, mothering, cooking, dirt-and-germ warfare, and social etiquette. Their helpful hints explicitly remind readers that they serve the family. But the equally long U.S. literary tradition of home interior design and decor advice focuses specifically on the material house, its aesthetic atmosphere, and its artful furnishing, to the exclusion of everything else distinguishing a house from a home. People, relationships, housework, and labor itself all literally disappear from the picture in these magazines. They wipe out everything the Seven Sisters harp at homemakers about. Instead, the creative work of home making—making a beautiful, inviting place of their houses—magically appears, even though they don't live there by themselves and couldn't afford to anyway. The seam, of course, is that the house always leads back to housekeeping. The reader buys the ideal of making empty, perfect rooms, but forgets the work, let alone the budget, it takes to create and maintain them, especially when she is sharing those rooms with the family. Home interior design and decor magazines obfuscate home and house and women's relationships to both.

The September 1996 issue of *Today's Homeowner* was its premier. In "Welcome Home," Editor in Chief Paul Spring wrote: "As all of you regular readers of *Home Mechanix* know, we spent the summer remodeling—*Today's Homeowner* is the result." The new *Today's Homeowner* was now clearly trying to capture the female reader its formerly male title *Home Mechanix* did not. Spring admitted the redesigned magazine wanted to attract the more feminine "home-owning" and "homeowners," which meant dumping the masculine "hobbyist." "We've even hung those useless little towels in the guest bath," Spring wrote.

### **The Photographs: Fantasizing Perfect Rooms**

The rooms in home interior design and decor magazines invite the female reader to stand in photographic doorways to chart her longings onto four-color landscapes. These magazines "hail" (Althusser, 1971) her with absences. Here, yes, is a territory that remains in submission to the homemaker's will. Ah, how well all rude signs of budget limitations and housework have been erased. At last, there are no bodies disturbing the

peace. The camera has captured the perfectly made home.

For the homemaker, this is an irresistible fantasy because the object of desire, perfect rooms, mirrors an illusion of her more powerful self. How silently drives the engine of its contradictions. She can never achieve this standard she measures herself against. She visualizes making the perfect home for herself and her family. But perfect rooms, standing in for the perfect home, do not accommodate the household's people. Here I want to explain the photographic grammar of home magazines, suggest why women find this grammar so appealing, and unravel the ideological seams both magazine and reader must manage in this relationship.

Photos of perfect, unoccupied rooms do welcome readers with a particular protocol. These pictures point to their own "hollow for the missing person," defined by "crowds of signifiers," where the reader's body is meant to be (Williamson, 1978, p. 79). Judith Williamson (1978) describes the reader's identification with the "absent person" in this kind of print media image: "The perspective of the picture places us in a spatial relationship to it that suggests a common spatiality (as in all 'classical' art); everything is proportioned to the gaze of the observer—us, the absent person 'meant' by the picture" (p. 78). Home design and decor magazine photos hail readers with an enhanced estimation of their missing but clearly indicated selves marked on the picture. A draped afghan and an open book on the couch say, "You, come sit by this roaring fire. You deserve to relax here." They say, "This is you." For a minute or two, this is home.

"Surely this is the room where I would stay," wrote Janna Jones (1997), looking at an *Architectural Digest*. "The white mosquito netting flutters slightly as a cool breeze drifts through the French door. Exhausted from the Caribbean sun, I crawl under crisp cool sheets and take a nap until I am summoned for dinner.... I have gained passage to ... fantasy island ... by means of these images."

The *I* who gains passage into leisure time and space is the reader who inserts herself to become the "leading actor" in a narrative (Williamson, 1978). And by becoming subjects of this photographic narrative, women readers become its ideological objects, target-marketed character actors directed to re-enact a symbolic-symbiotic relationship to the home's house and its rooms. This is a fantasy of controlling the home environment for the homemaker's pleasure. But imagining power to control the house perpetuates her relationship to the housework, hidden from these pictures, that she'll need to do to fulfill her fantasy. In the throes of this magazine fantasy, she forgets to ask who will cook and summon her to dinner as she naps on those freshly laundered sheets in that cleaned and tastefully appointed Caribbean room. While the homemaker's implied absence is the necessary formula in the story, her own labor-intensive attachment to the house, as well as her family, must be written completely out of the script. This fantasy is a "regime of imagery" that "represses any idea of *domestic* labor" (Coward, 1985, p. 66).

The absence of reality in these magazine rooms is precisely the grammar that makes them work as possible fantasies. Their purported seriousness as actual locations makes them all the more plausible. If in addition to the cutout hollow for the reader's absent self, these rooms also implied cutout hollows for reality as she knows it, we would have one of Williamson's jokes (1978); an overt contradiction between the ordinary and

the extraordinary becomes a preposterous lampoon. Imagine there also on the photograph is the dotted coupon line marking the spot where the rug really lies out of alignment after the galloping dog rides it across the floor, and there is the cutout of the children beating each other with juice-stained sofa cushions, and there is the partner, feet propped on the coffee table, surfing with the remote. And finally, there is the real cutout for the reader, in her scruffy sweatpants, not reading peacefully by the fire, but folding the family's laundry in front of the TV. A picture of that would make her laugh. The absurdity of banal reality overlaid on the poetic imagination crushes the fantasy of perfect rooms.

Erasing the budget, clock, household, and chores from the picture makes a much more satisfying home-making fantasy, reflecting the reader's real underlying desire for some control over her responsibility for the house as well as a space in it where she, too, can relax. Magazine photos of beautiful rooms hail readers as women of leisure. But maintaining standards of tidy and stylish, that look effortless but still welcome and comfort human occupants, leaves little time for home-makers themselves to "put up their feet," according to Ruth Madigan and Moira Munro's (1996) contemporary home-making respondents. Madigan and Munro uncover a cycle of competing tensions between the women's work of home fashion and housework. Home furnishings should produce a stage set that visually welcomes human occupation; housekeeping should ensure that the set is not disturbed by human occupation. The beautiful-room fantasy exists in reality only in the transitional period after the stage has been set and before anyone walks on.

Of course homemakers find home design and decor magazines' photographic grammar seductive. "Everything shown is at an ideal moment" (Coward, 1985, p. 65). Such photos prolong the all-too-fleeting time after housework when she has asserted some control over her house's rooms. Theoretically, gazing longingly at magazine pictures of the house that erase housework positions the looking reader in exactly the fantasy she desires: as a landlord surveying her property. According to Gillian Rose (1993), the Western aesthetic "landscape" projects a patrician visual ideology that conflates having the power to look at a place with mastering it. A manicured landscape, as that which lies within a viewer's field of vision, symbolizes environmental control. The gaze itself, the ability visually to organize and dominate the landscape, corresponds to a class-conscious assumption of superiority. Vistas swept into the landscape gaze imply the viewer has a privileged power over the scene. "The landscape gaze" is a "sophisticated ideological device that enacts systematic erasures," Rose writes (1993, p. 87). In human-engineered environments, the grammar of the aesthetic landscape tends to erase the work and worker who labor to make the place so pleasant to look at.

But Rose argues we overlook the gendering of this visual domination. "The active look is constituted as masculine, and to be looked at is the feminine position" (p. 104). Western culture feminizes both nature and landscape by conceptualizing them as bodies to be explored and subdued. Rose's landscape gaze (grandfather of the cinematic gaze) is powerful and active. This masculine survey subordinates the feminine landscape, which is constructed as passive and submissive while nurturing and sustaining.

Building on feminist psychoanalytic theory and Laura Mulvey's (1989) "scopophilia" (visual pleasure), Rose sees the contradictory pleasures of the landscape gaze, which she calls an "erotics of knowledge." The gaze, a white heterosexual male

visual perspective, unstably oscillates between voyeurism and narcissism, and so it erases itself. “The gaze is then always torn between two conflicting impulses: on the one hand, a narcissistic identification with what it sees and through which it constitutes its identity; and on the other a voyeuristic distance from what is seen as Other to it” (Rose, 1993, p. 103). The landlord holds title over his landscaped property only as long as he continues to be connected to it. But as long as his identity depends on his property, he can never be autonomous from it. The landscape gaze both “interpellates” (Althusser, 1971) itself through the feminine landscape and distances itself from it (Rose, 1993).

Turning a site such as the house into a landscape for the female homemaker to gaze upon constitutes an ideological seam and further complicates the possibilities for her subjecthood. The home as privatized domestic space already has been feminized once as woman’s domain. But as a landscape it is feminized a second time as a body whose interior contours are subdued and controlled for physical as well as visual pleasure. Appropriating the male landscape gaze with which to turn the house into an aesthetic object of desire makes invisible both the homemaker as the house’s laborer and the family as her source of labor. This is knowledge she needs to confront in order to understand her dissatisfaction with her relationship to both. The homemaker’s gaze upon landscaped rooms, both corporeal and photographic, seems to position her as both active master and passive servant to them. Such a gaze seems to give her the voyeur’s power of separation from and control over the house while at the same time giving her identity a narcissistic connection to it. Here the voyeur’s power is an illusion supported only by the absence of her own labor, and the narcissist’s pleasure of identification undermines her efforts toward an identity other than housekeeper. She is locked into the self-annihilating oscillations of this narrative cycle between master and laborer.

What’s more, the homemaker herself represents the feminine projecting her longing onto the feminized house. Kathleen Kirby (1996, p. 100) makes clear why women’s relationships with feminized space are problematic: “‘Man’ becomes self by extricating himself from both woman and space, metaphysically and metapsychologically.” But women can’t objectify space because, in the phallogocentric symbolic order, women “blend” into space. Women and space occupy the same subordinate position. “Between the alienation we (women) confront in material and metaphysical space and our intimacy with it, a wavering, a distortion, or an inversion occurs” (Kirby, 1996, p. 100).

The homemaker’s symbolic absence in home interior design and decor magazine pictures erases her laboring relationship to the house. But if an open book and a cup of tea signify her presence, her narrative role is not scripted as master. Her gender, by definition, requires her to pose as adornment, another pleasant bit of furniture. Where her gender and respectability intersect, she and her agency elide into background and disappear from the picture. Like a domestic version of Wolff’s (1990) urban boulevard-strolling “invisible flaneuse,” she becomes an impossible creature, unrepresentable. The turn-of-the-century male flaneur “is the modern hero”; he has “a freedom to move about in the city, observing and being observed” (Wolff, 1990, p. 39), but the independent female flaneuse, as a respectable woman, does not exist in literature or art. Rose (1993) also finds this gender formula in 19th century pastoral art: Unlike the master’s robust portrait, self-consciously conveying his “potential for activity, his free movement over

his property,” the manor-house mistress “is painted almost as a part of that still and exquisite landscape” (Rose, 1993, p. 93). In either version, city or country, the laborers, especially the women as factory and field workers or domestic servants, are systematically erased. Nevertheless, whether or not the contemporary design and decor magazine browser reads herself as landlord or lady of leisure, her fantasy perpetuates her need for fantasy because the reality she faces in her day-to-day relationship to the house becomes highly dissatisfactory (Radway, 1986) against either ideal.

Hoping to reconstruct the human relationship with landscape, Rose hints that women, already having learned to do domestic spaces, might also already have a solution: remap spaces as mutually nurturing human and environmental networks instead of domineering lines of objectifying sight. Such a perspective seems reasonable, especially in the context of the family home. But Rose falls prey to the same romanticism she condemns by assuming that nurturing, naturally, is what home-makers facilitate—a conclusion that once again makes women responsible for home-making. Furthermore, for women, the home environment is a field of labor not sustenance. Refocusing on seeing the household as a series of intimate human relationships rather than as a house to be controlled in a battle of agency over environment offers an optimistic alternative. However, until women take a domestic role other than homemaker, changing their visual orientation to the house’s landscape will not change their material relationship to its work. Theoretically or psychologically changing a woman’s relationship with feminized space, especially in the home, does not “magically represent an intervention in social constructions of the real” (Kirby, 1996, p. 117).

### **Resistance: Home-Making to Erase the Household**

U.S. consumer marketing asks women to become neurotic about controlling housework and the home’s aesthetic landscape. But women can turn this ideology into a nearly erotic attraction to houses emptied of the people who make housework. Interior home design and decor magazines provide readers with a kind of home erotica. The obvious fancywork is a perpetual cycle of housekeeping for women who struggle to erase evidence of the home’s people in the house’s rooms. But Janice Radway (1986) suggests there may be a more subtle kind of applique, at work here—a therapeutic “womanly subtext” reading “against the grain.” Resistant practices that symbolically erase the ideological irritant represent feminist opportunity, even if women haven’t fully articulated or understood their own resistance, and even if the resistance serves to perpetuate their own conflicting positions.

If a homemaker is always on duty when she is in the house, then stealing some household time to get pleasure from looking at magazine pictures is itself a subversive activity. Magazine reading when the family isn’t home makes for even better pleasure. Using the precious little time when the house is empty for personal leisure is a subversive act because the most efficient housework gets done when the house is empty of children and husbands. Because the house is rarely empty of other family members when the homemaker herself is home, empty-house time for leisure or work is rare. The growing number of women who base their career offices at home find leisure time in the house becomes even more scarce because household housework and career homework compete for the home-maker/home-worker’s time. So reading magazines of any sort for homemakers is a sinful pleasure that wastes empty-house. Like all sinful pleasures, there

is a certain amount of guilt involved. Even when she's not alone in the house, her magazine reading is a selfish treat. For a brief time she simply refuses to share herself with others or the work others make (Radway, 1986).

Choosing to read home interior design and decor magazines instead of *The Seven Sisters Good Housekeeping* genre represents another form of resistance. Interior design magazines further erase the household by providing a fantasy of empty beautiful rooms instead of good housekeeping advice on removing stains, preparing holiday Jell-O molds, or dealing with teenage mood swings. The decorating fantasy of creating a personalized environment for yourself is a more satisfying project than getting advice on cleaning, cooking, or playing household referee. The *Seven Sisters* magazines always explicitly remind readers that they are at the mercy of others living in the house. But home-making design and decor magazines fantasize complete control of the house emptied of other people.

Similarly, there is an element of self-validation in home design magazine reading. If her house is fashionable, at least at its ideal moments, then by default, so is she. What's more, by dressing the house for herself, she can enjoy looking at—actually see—a symbolic version of herself. This self-validation has nothing to do with her household people or cleaning skills; they are erased in favor of her personal identity expressed through decoration. She may be no good at housekeeping, mothering, or wifing, but darn it, she has style. Decorating the house does offer tremendous opportunity for creative expression, even if only picking up second-hand pieces at yard sales.

Finally, even though the house may be cramped with too much furniture and decorated to near gaudy, or even though her economic situation may waver on the brink of financial disaster, home design and decor magazines can still offer the home-maker ideas to own as a commodity. If she can't consume material house-furnishing artifacts, then she can consume house-furnishing ideas. She can buy them and own them through these magazines, and she can hoard them up like collectibles or trade them with her friends.

The tension between home making and housekeeping hinges on the family. Sinful pleasure in stealing time or empty house; the fantasy of perfect, empty rooms that make housework invisible; validation of self as designer rather than house-worker; and buying decorating ideas as commodities all erase the home's other people from the material house. These interpretations of reading home design and decor magazines subvert and resist the home-maker's other housekeeping responsibilities and offer therapeutic escape from the reality of home-making as unending servitude to the household. At the same time, by virtue of their relationship to the house itself as well as to the home-maker, these magazines and the home-maker's zigzagging practices perpetuate the house as woman's world, the place she is best suited to explore and invent her identity.

Having located this subversive reading, the next step is to replace the home-maker's worldview of her household responsibilities with a more conscious and empowered set of practices and discourses that disrupt her identification with the home, relieve her of her primary responsibility to the house, and extend her influence beyond the private sphere.

If reading these magazines symbolically erases the family's presence as an irritant to the fantasy of perfect, empty rooms, then how women deal with their families' presence inside their corporeal homes becomes another ideological seam to explore. If perfect, empty rooms do not accommodate the family, if the two concepts themselves, family and beautiful house, are mutually exclusive as women's culture currently constructs them, then which one wins the home-maker's attention becomes the important next question.

### **Intervention: Prying the Housework out of Home-Making**

The group of practices associated with interior design and decor magazines seems to be about erasures. Publishers systematically erase their female readers' labor intensive relationship with the home. Readers who buy into these magazines' ideal versions of home erase the difference between a beautiful house as museum of personal identity and a home where families impinge on the material world with their bodies. Publishers and readers seem to ignore the difference between a house and a home while perpetuating both as woman's sphere.

Still, Radway's (1986) prediction holds that subordinate groups may cultivate resistant, even subversive, practices that undermine dominant ideologies. At least the theory holds in the case of my community of women. While I make no claims beyond my own experience, I find an astonishing consistency in my friends' and neighbors' awareness that the ideal house is a practical impossibility but still a delightful fantasy. However, this erotica has less to do with serving the family by crafting a better home than with carving out a controlled metaphysical sphere of influence in which to retreat for some personal leisure and privacy. This, too, is an erasure—of the family.

All these erasures zigzag across ideological seams. As homemakers, we have bought an ideal of home as both sight of pleasure and site of leisure, a fiction for working moms. Trying to materialize this fantasy by asserting our authority as head housekeepers only makes more work that further removes us from leisure. It also aligns the sight of the family in opposition to pleasure. Now I begin to persuade my friends, who most of the time resist my feminism, that the situation depriving them of down time "is not naturally occurring" or "inevitable" (Radway, 1986). In fact, it may be as much a result of our own practice of appointing ourselves household boss as it is the result of ideologies that "hail" us (Althusser, 1971) as homemakers. At the same time I have opened a discussion about household control as well as personal time and space—for everyone—in my own household. While I may not be ready to relinquish my symbolic custody of the house, at least I understand my desire for it. And I consciously am trying to invite my family to share that space with me.

To be sure, I find reflexive and interpersonal intervention difficult. But this kind of border-crossing communication inspires and informs my feminism. Becoming adept at locating "ideological seams" and reading for resistant "womanly subtexts" offers academic feminists a useful tool for connecting their scholarship to political action off campus, at home, in the community.

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of California Press.

This is Kim Golombisky's debut article. A Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Communication at the University of South Florida, she is writing her dissertation on gender equity debates in education. She teaches in USF's School of Mass Communications, where she has won the Provost's Commendation for Graduate Teaching Excellence in 1998 and 1999. Before returning to graduate school, she worked 11 years in advertising. Forward comments to [kgolombi@luna.cas.usf.edu](mailto:kgolombi@luna.cas.usf.edu)