

“Is It a Good Thing?” Martha Stewart and Homemaking

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Article abstract

Martha Stewart Omnimedia is a tremendously successful enterprise disseminating homemaking advice through books, magazines, newspaper columns and television programmes. In the tradition of works like Janice Radway’s feminist analysis of women’s romance novels, a study that privileges audience voices, this article examines a popular culture form aimed at homemakers. Relying on interviews with five homemakers who watch Martha Stewart on television or read the Martha Stewart Living magazine, I explore Stewart’s influence on these individuals’ domestic skills acquisition and on their perceptions and practices of homemaking. Centrally, I consider homemakers’ interpretations of Martha Stewart’s depictions of domestic labour, depictions which they consider as escapism. I ask, as Janice Winship does in her discussion of a woman’s magazine and its interconnections to consumption and capitalism: “..why these fantasies, this escape...?” (1983: 45).

“IS IT A GOOD THING?”

Martha Stewart and Homemaking¹

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“I’ve never felt oppressed [*by the kind of things Martha Stewart does*] because basically I have always seen them as optional....I choose to buy in or not....What I like about Martha Stewart is that I find she affirms or confirms certain tendencies I have.... I have a very strong need for the aesthetic...I crave having a table set and those sorts of things. And the rest of society isn’t telling me these things are valuable” (Hickey 1997).

With these words, Gloria, a *Martha Stewart Living* subscriber, challenges certain frequently levelled criticisms of Stewart: that she is obsessive and promotes unrealistically high standards. The following article, in the tradition of works like Janice Radway’s feminist analysis of women’s romance novels, privileges audience voices like Gloria’s in examining another popular culture form: Martha Stewart’s homemaking programmes and publications. It draws on the notion that popular culture cannot be fully understood by studying cultural products alone. Rather, its complexities emerge only when audience responses, in this case when viewing or reading practices, are considered. Popular culture forms do not exert particular kinds of influence (a view advocated by Hall 1979) but instead as Janet Wolff argues, audience members negotiate culture from the point of view of their own situations, desires and contradictions (Wolff 1993). Relying on interviews with five homemakers who watch Martha Stewart on television or read the *Martha Stewart Living* magazine and the written comments of nineteen contributors to unofficial Martha Stewart web pages, I explore Stewart’s influence on these individuals’ domestic skills acquisition and on their perceptions and practices of homemaking. Centrally, I consider homemakers’ interpretations of Martha Stewart’s depictions of domestic labour as escapism, or as one woman I spoke with termed it, “playing for adults” (Hickey 1997). I ask, as Janice Winship does in her discussion of a woman’s magazine and its interconnections to consumption and capitalism: “..why *these* fantasies, *this* escape...?” (1983:45).

The five individuals I interviewed, roughly spanning in age from thirty to fifty years, represent a range of domestic experiences and relationships to homemaking. Cynthia and Kim are full-time homemakers and mothers of

1. An earlier version of this paper was delivered to the 1997 annual meeting of the Folklore Studies Association of Canada. I would like to thank Cynthia Boyd, Jane Burns, Joseph Clayton, Gloria Hickey, Norma McLean, Kim Nahachewsky, Cathy Rickey and Lori Treneman for sharing their experiences and opinions with me; Diane Goldstein, Peter Latta and Paul Smith for their suggestions and references; and Debbie Ryan and Sarah Steele for their help. I also benefited from the useful comments of two anonymous readers.

young children. Cathy who works part-time in the labour market is the mother of adult offspring. Gloria works full-time in the labour market from her home-based office and has no children. Joe, the only man I interviewed, is a full-time homemaker on leave from his job as a flight attendant. He is in a long-term gay relationship.² Joe has no children but his partner has an adult son. Everyone I interviewed has a life partner with full-time employment and a family income that securely anchors them in the middle class. At the time of our interviews, they were living in Atlantic Canada (Cynthia, Kim, Cathy and Gloria in St. John's, Newfoundland and Joe in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia). The backgrounds of the nineteen internet contributors encompass a broader spectrum but most are American women who appear to be in the same age range as the people I interviewed.

I. The Creation of Martha Stewart

Many of my friends think my chicken coop is a lot nicer than their apartments, and it is, actually (Habib 1997).

Martha Stewart heads an incredibly successful and rapidly growing empire that penetrates every cranny of the media market place (see Kasindorf 1995). Since the publication of her first book, *Entertaining*, in 1982, she has produced at least a book a year; her magazine, *Martha Stewart Living* reaches 8 million readers; her television show by the same name is among the Life network's top three programmes and now airs daily instead of weekly (Habib 1997), reaching 578,000 viewers in Canada alone (Delap 1996). The television programme and her line of mail-order products, "Martha by Mail", which includes a \$50. cake decorating set reportedly earned \$275 million (US) last year (Delap 1996). She has a nationally syndicated newspaper column called "Ask Martha," makes regular Wednesday appearances on the Today Show, produces popular seasonal television specials like the December 1996 "Home for the Holidays," and has launched several product lines including signature sheets, towels, and \$110 a gallon paints in colours inspired by the eggs laid by her Araucana hens. In February 1997 she bought her company back from Time Warner Inc., thus ensuring Martha Stewart Omnimedia's control over both future direction and profits.

Stewart is integral to every aspect of her enterprise's success. She is featured heavily in the television programmes and publications — for example she appears on most of the magazine covers — and she reportedly micromanages her estates and business affairs (see Kasindorf 1995). A self-described "brand" (Green 1995), Martha Stewart makes much of her middle-class roots. Born in

2. Stewart's marketing efforts directed towards and responses from the gay community fall outside the parameters of this discussion. For a humorous treatment of the subject, see Surasky.

1941 of Polish heritage, Stewart grew up in Nutley, New Jersey (a suburb near New York City) as the second eldest in a family of six brothers and sisters. After graduating from Barnard College and before launching her empire, she worked as a model, a stockbroker, a caterer, and the editor of *House Beautiful*. She was married to lawyer Andy Stewart from about 1961-1990, with whom she had a daughter Alexis. She often refers to her daughter, sisters, nieces and nephews, as well as to her mother, two chows and six cats, and some of them make occasional appearances on her TV show and in her magazine.

Her homes are also featured in her programmes and publications. She owns two houses in East Hampton, New York: a \$3.2 million home built by the famous designer Bunshaft and a \$1.7 million home on Lily Pond Lane. As well Stewart has a condo on 5th Avenue in Manhattan. Reportedly she has never spent a night there in the seven years she has owned it, but after changing clothes there recently the owner nonetheless described her apartment as "excellent" (Martha Stewart: The High Priestess...) However, it is her six-acre estate with 19th-century farmhouse (ca. 1805) and 2 barns on "Turkey Hill" in Westport, Connecticut that is most familiar to her readers and viewers for this is the location of many of her featured projects and gardens (see Martha Stewart Biographical Information).

The reasons behind the phenomenal success of Martha Stewart Omnimedia have been the subject of lengthy speculation and analysis. Stewart has excelled at tapping into the huge home-based market which has developed over the past few years. Hers is a "comforting, almost nostalgic aesthetic" (Green 1985) emphasizing what she describes as a simplified approach to homemaking, an approach which is, in fact, often expensive and elitist.

II. Skills Acquisition

[*When shovelling*] always leave an inch of snow so it looks nice and white. Aesthetics are very important in snow removal. (January 1996 *New York Magazine* quoted in Martha Stewart: Selected Quotes).

A common explanation for Stewart's popularity is that she teaches "hands-on householding," that is something one writer described as information that we have lost in the last hundred years while we've been allowing machines to do things for us (Talbot 1996). Stewart instructs on making soap, planting a rosebush, putting up preserves, and snow shovelling. But, how exactly does her success relate to a gap in people's knowledge? Are skills that individuals need to run a household no longer being taught or does Stewart create and then fill needs, taking something away and selling it back? Is this an area where popular culture in general, and Stewart in particular, is supplanting a form of family folklore (Furst 1996) that was once solely passed informally from homemaker to homemaker?

A sizable body of literature attests to the fact that determining what constitutes domestic labour is a thorny issue. What can be seen as falling under the category varies from one individual to the next (see Wilson 1986: 57-61 for definitions of housework).³ Domestic labour evades a clear-cut enumerative definition because in addition to physical tasks such as washing dishes, it includes nebulous on-going management responsibilities and preparations such as meal planning (see Luxton 1986: 27). Stewart's presentation of homemaking that includes cooking, gardening, decorating and "good things", and which encompasses instructions on vacuuming, sewing projects, and organizing, represents the scope of concrete and conceptual tasks that constitutes domestic labour. Not surprisingly the wide range is part of Stewart's success. Individuals rely on some segments more heavily than others. Kim's reflection is important in this regard: "The cooking sections are attractive to me because I do a lot and like to do it. It's a love of my life but the other stuff I find intriguing. Geez, that's what it's supposed to do [*laughs*]...I'm not much of a housekeeper so seldom [*have I used the housekeeping tips*]. Cooking I've used a number of times" (Nahachewsky 1997). On the other hand, Cynthia usually skips over the cooking sections to the information on gardening and decorating (Boyd 1996). Joe reported benefiting from all segments: gardening, good things, cooking, and decorating (Clayton 1996). All five homemakers I interviewed keep back issues of Stewart's magazine for future consultation.

Martha Stewart is belongs to a long line of prescriptive literature that homemakers have relied on as a resource (see Barker 1988 and Rose 1995). For example, her writing falls within the tradition of women's magazines that Cathy remembered her mother buying in the 1950s (Rickey 1996). As well, everyone I spoke with talked of other magazines or other programmes they consulted as well as Stewart's for homemaking information. Through her contribution, Stewart represents part of a complex, and despite her usefulness, she is a supplementary rather than a primary conduit for the learning of domestic skills for the people I spoke with. Mothers remain the number-one source for such knowledge although often the learning process takes place gradually and occurs on an unconscious level so that individuals may have difficulty remembering exactly how and when learning took place. Kim did not recall exactly when her mother showed her how to do most things around the house but concluded that she must have: "I did lots. My parents split up when I was twelve so I was cooking and cleaning and making meals and all that sort of thing at the age of twelve because there was only one parent in the house and we were very busy. So I did a lot of those things a lot earlier than any of my friends did" (Nahachewsky 1997). Women in their twenties might be less likely to know techniques for how to vacuum a rug or make a bed if their mothers, who often held down full-time jobs in the labour market, did

3. Levin 1993: 285 argues that this ambiguity is part of the reason folklorists have avoided the study of household labour.

not make a point of showing them.⁴ For example, Cathy was unsure whether she had passed on a full range of domestic skills to her daughters whom she described as being uninterested in such things when they were teenagers (Rickey 1996).

Homemaking is a very personal, fluid set of skills, however, and individuals develop their own ways of doing things and their own approaches. Often such labor calls for adaptation to particular circumstances and the people I interviewed described drawing on both traditional and popular culture in developing their own solutions to house-keeping problems. For example, Joe struggled when trying to articulate how he has learned what he considers to be the correct way to do things around his home. He credited his mother with being most influential, but concluded that his has been a learning process that has evolved over his adult life and history as a homeowner (Clayton 1996; Furst 1996 makes this point as well).

Homemakers face difficulties when aspirations or perceived or actual expectations of family and guests exceed their traditional knowledge base. Joe reflected a commonly held experience: "My Mom was more basic than I am; she still is in her housekeeping..." (Clayton 1996). He turns to Stewart for information his mother could not have taught him. In preserving or gardening, he draws on a solid base of traditional knowledge. But, for example, when he purchased expensive handmade knives and hand-forged pans, he sought information on their care not from his mother who had neither in her kitchen, but from Martha Stewart: "She has actually taught me a lot about the care of tools...for the kitchen or the garden."

His comments indicate that Martha Stewart is about class as well as gender.⁵ Stewart may be criticized for setting a stage for life rather than living it herself (Allemang 1996) but when one wants help in creating his or her own Goffmanesque front stage (Goffman 1959), she can be a resource. Reflecting the 1990s middle-class person's desire to be an expert on everything, she teaches the proper name for things, expands one's knowledge of ingredients, points out the right colours and the right way and, most of all, assures viewers and readers that they conform to the larger social ideal; they are tasteful in ways their parents never were. They have made it.

The price for learning new information and skills can be annoyance. Cathy finds that Stewart is often too pedantic, especially when the TV personality

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4. The rise of home-centred publications and programmes also accompanies the decline of home economics courses in schools and of full-blown finishing schools (see *Girls say ta-ta...*).
 5. Talbot 1996 also makes this point. She points out that Stewart rescues the family with bloodlines and no money and buys their house (34) — she is marrying the house and not the son but she also has taste. It is taste far more than money that gives one the right to these houses. Stewart deserves such houses. She understands them. Here Talbot draws on Boardie (1984) who connects aesthetics and social class.

suggests that there is only one way to do something properly (Rickey 1996), and Cynthia is sometimes frustrated by advice she considers too basic: “One of the other things I don’t really like is...her useful tips for the home. Sometimes it’s on how to clean...I mean really...she is one of the few people who doesn’t have a central vacuum system. If she doesn’t, she should because I do” (Boyd 1996). Stewart strikes a delicate balance in advocating an (unrealistic) aesthetic that reaches back to a time without machines at the same time as she relies on appliances, like the food processor, to create her magic.⁶

But fans claim not to feel pressured by her suggestion that one can do it all, including puff pastry (it only takes forty-eight hours). When asked if Stewart has raised his expectations for homemaking, Joe answered: “Sure a bit but in a positive way I feel. I feel she’s been a good influence. I mean sometimes I watch a show and think, ‘Oh Martha get over yourself. That’s way too much work; I don’t have a 100 hours’...What I usually do with Martha Stewart’s ideas is I turn them around and make them work for me because I mean I can’t afford to go to Provence and buy the ingredients for this concoction she’s coming up with. So I adapt” (Clayton 1996).⁷ Gloria echoed this view: “You take what you can use, what you want, what will give you pleasure and you say no thank you to the rest” (Hickey 1997). Fans adopt some ideas, adapt many others and overlook still other monumental undertakings — which have been dubbed “Martha-mental” projects (McIntyre 1995) — as impractical.

The ideal Stewart presents is unattainable and not always desirable. For example, she took criticism for her suggestion that dish detergent be decanted into a glass container because she finds the plastic bottle unsightly (see, for example, Rosenfeld 1995); but she does offer us the possibility of being a little more like her. One viewer wrote: “Her vision is not of some impossible paradise where rich people sport among themselves, but a life that might be lived in any American suburb, right now, with the help of a few good recipes and decorating tips” (*Washington Post* quoted by Green 1995: 102).⁸ Levin observed

6. For a critique of Stewart that includes this criticism, see Fiorito 1987.

7. Experiences of other viewers confirm Joe’s approach: “Ivo Jamrosz, a municipal bond salesman who lives in Baltimore, bought the ingredients to make a gingerbread house last December but he ran out of time to bake and build it, so he opted for a more plebian non-Martha sugar-cube castle instead. ‘It’s a Greek ideal you aspire to but never quite attain.’ he said of Martha. And like childbirth ‘you forget how much work it is’” (Brown 1995).

8. One writer to the internet felt: “She is the epitome of who we all wish we could be. She is sharp, smart, clever, wealthy and you know she must have a quick wit. Martha entertains, and obviously never sits at home on the weekends watching movies on her VCR — she is too busy. She has enough ‘stuff’ to fill at least four homes, has never paid actual cost because she picked it all up at ‘tag’ sales. All the food she makes is ‘tasty’ and nothing ever burns. She grows beautiful plants and never forgets to water. Martha is without a doubt — a good thing. I love you MARTHA! You are my idol!” (Butler)

that "Housework is indeed connected to "the idea of what a house is supposed to look like" (1993: 293) and as was the case for earlier generations, our ideals have changed. Martha Stewart shows contemporary homemakers the "good things" and the "right" ways of the middle/upper middle-class in the nineties: a convincing combination of all natural ingredients that amounts to an environmentalist emphasis offering a (sometimes false) sense of economy arising from the fact that we are doing it ourselves. Her simplicity of design connotes a rootedness but also an elegance and sophistication missing in much of the homemaking information mothers of the last generation passed on. And she offers advice on what Janice Winship (1983: 50) has identified as an important subject for women's magazines: "the transformation of commodities from their mass-produced forms into expressions of individuality and originality." Gloria told the story of how her husband jokingly calls her "Martha" when she fusses over details but "on the other hand he asks me to make something 'Martha-ish' occasionally...which means making things nice, making things pleasing. But it means investing yourself. It's obviously not something you go out and buy" (Hickey 1997). Cleverly, Stewart appears to eschew the mass market at the same time as she creates it.⁹

Homemakers appreciate the value of "investing" themselves because they recognize the social or communicative aspects of their work. Joe talked about how messages are communicated in the most minor details; the wrapping as well as the gift itself is a vehicle: "I do want to project [*through my homemaking*] this is what I'm all about to my friends and family and they pick up on it immediately....When I buy a gift for somebody it's usually something they're desperately looking for, just really want, so it makes it more special to give it away. And secondly it's in the wrapping itself. Like [*my partner*] Stephen always says, 'you're spending as much on the gift wrapping and the ribbon as you did on the gift'...I sit back after they're all wrapped and think gee you did a pretty good job" (Clayton 1996). The same complex motivations — self-satisfaction and self-expression — come together in his choice and maintenance of bed linens: "I always steam and starch all my cotton sheets. I just love the way it feels...I change my bed linens probably every five days and I just love going to bed that night. It's wonderful. I do a lot of it for my own enjoyment and a lot of it for my friends and family...I get great enjoyment out of their enjoyment. And I know when I do certain things like put certain sheets on the guest bed for certain people they always appreciate it" (Clayton 1996). Gloria sometimes regards such domestic tasks as gifts: "They are gifts. They are gifts to yourself or they are gifts to others but they are an offering. They are not strictly functional" (Hickey 1997).

9. See Margaret Wentle for a discussion of Stewart's successful marketing of what she terms "Marthavision": the rejection of conspicuous consumption and the embrace of conspicuous creation.

For some, domesticity offers opportunities to master form (see Jones 1987). Levin (1993: 291) observed of housework: "It is, on the whole, a less product-oriented aesthetic, one that values not only the thing created but the worker's sense of creation, of transcendence, of mastery. It is a performance-oriented study of occupation." Joe reflected: "If it's something to do with me personally or with my home, there's a correct way to do it...I mow in the exact same pattern every single time. I like the way it looks...I discovered after I put the gardens in that there were certain lines in the garden that I really liked and I wanted to enhance them and stick with them...when I'm finished I can stand on the deck and look at these actual lines that last about a day but even Stephen has commented that really does look beautiful..it just doesn't look as nice unless it's mowed in that particular way" (Clayton 1996).

He finds pleasure in every household task: "It's total enjoyment for me. I could stand back after scrubbing my kitchen floor and just enjoy the shine and the smell" (Clayton 1996). Unlike Levin's emphasis on process, however, Joe is motivated by result: "There's basically nothing that I don't really enjoy doing inside or outside...I even get into cleaning the toilets...I just think, that's great. It's clean, it smells good, it's fresh....there's not really anything I don't enjoy doing or enjoy the results of...I guess usually it's the results that I enjoy rather than the actual task itself" (Clayton 1996).

This concentration on results is a luxury afforded homemakers without children. One of the most commonly voiced complaints about domestic labour by parents is its lack of results. As a mother of three commented: "There's no sense of completion. That's what I find most frustrating" (Treneman 1997). Before one task is finished another is undone. At the same time as the performing of domestic tasks offers some homemakers one of their only areas of control, the results are sometimes out of their control. The kitchen floor may need to be redone as soon as it is finished.

III. Martha Stewart as escapism

A lot of times it's like looking into a fairytale, especially when she's doing something like a Christmas dinner or a wedding. It's magical...She's like comfort food to me sometimes (Clayton 1996).

Stewart offers two kinds of escapism for homemakers: a figurative identification with a homemaker (Stewart) whose life does not resemble their own and a literal escape offered by the act of getting away from realities of everyday life through the process of reading or watching television (Radway 1984:90 identified these two forms of escapism among romance readers as well). Part of the reason Stewart is a fairytale for adults may be linked to some of her subject matter and her nostalgic approach to it. Cynthia reflected on the issue this way: "When Martha talks about things like chickens she captures

an image, a fantasy of something we want but can't have because technology is so advanced" (Boyd 1996). Gloria described reading the magazine as "stepping into an alternate world" (Hickey 1997). In some ways Stewart recreates a life as far removed from that of most contemporary homemakers as the lords and ladies of *märchen*.

An important part of her appeal is the opportunity she creates for middle-class dreaming. An internet fan of Stewart's explained:

I happen to love Martha Stewart and all that her 'Living' empire created. Of course I may never acquire all of the 'good things' that she has during my lifetime, but just look at all that I can aspire to! I want to live just like her!

Ok, so maybe there's a little money that needs to be had before I can go gallivanting around my house in the Hamptons, but it doesn't take a lot of money to spark my imagination (Reddy).

Joe echoed this view: "I think a lot of people if they had the budget would aspire to be Martha Stewart. She doesn't work for a living so to speak and she has a huge staff to do all the menial tasks" (Clayton 1996).

For others the dreaming can take on less grandiose proportions. Stewart's advice allows Kim to think about things she might do around her home: "I think largely it's escapism. I think so. The things that you would like, you think you might like to do but you know you will never do. I think that's a large part of it...escapism and dreaming with a much more practical sense" (Nahachewsky 1997). Joe expanded on this notion: "I always think of Martha Stewart as someone who is very very magical. She's got a magic wand and whatever she touches turns not necessarily to gold but I think, 'Doesn't that look nice? How could I achieve that without spending maybe that much money?'" (Clayton 1996).

Martha Stewart's dream is the American dream rewritten for homemakers (who of course are mostly women): All things are possible with a little hard work. If one fails either to attain the level of elegance of Stewart's life and surroundings or to create the perfect home then it is a personal failing.¹⁰ One need only to work harder or to develop a better attitude. Yet, clearly most North Americans will never have the resources of Martha Stewart. However, dreaming is an important coping mechanism. The escapism that Stewart provides helps Cynthia parent a small child, Cathy to live away from her family, Kim save to buy a home, and Joe to manage an illness.¹¹ Most importantly,

10. Loudon (1997: 23) refers to the "Martha mantra: that dedication and self-discipline make anything possible."

11. An internet fan makes this point as well: "Ms. Stewart offers me a well received coping mechanism as my husband and I save for a house. She helps me plan and dream, as I do as much as I can to make the most out of apartment living. For that she keeps me coming back. And I would guess there are others who feel the same.

I believe critics are jealous and do not fully grasp the point of life enhancement. Martha

individuals rely on reading or viewing *Martha Stewart Living* to help maintain their centre of identity. Cynthia reflected on this problem: “[*My son*], you know, he’s a great little boy but it was like I lost this sense of who I was because all I did was think [*about*] this kid” (Boyd 1996). She finds an important release in magazines like *Martha Stewart Living*.

For various individual reasons some people find Stewart inspiring. Often they, like this fan, appreciate her ability to find the beautiful and the creative in everyday life: “In our hurly-burly world, we sometimes lose sight of the marvels of ordinary life, such as the intensity of colour of a piece of fruit, or the delicateness of a flower. Martha reminds us of these things...”¹²

For others, like this writer on the internet, locating creative space is important: “Of course she lives like others only dream but my reality is okay too and I enjoy making my place just a little more loved. Watching her shows inspires the creativity I sometimes lose sight of” (Strube). An American Martha-wannabe reflected: “As a young wife and mother in the ‘60s, with no car (in those days ‘stay at home mom’ meant no car), I found that I was able to maintain my sanity by experimenting with crafts, cooking, sewing, and gardening” (Contest winners).

Part of the inspiration comes from the serene manner in which Stewart presents her information. To watch the programme or read the magazine is to be cocooned by soft, hazy pictures of wonderful gardens and tranquil country life. The pictures affirm central values some homemakers hold about themselves

Stewart suggests intelligent projects to pick and choose from if interested...not orders to swallow them whole. If people are having trouble because they cannot emulate themselves enough after Martha, then that is solely the fault of the consumer”. Living a little Westport in Wisconsin” (Brehm).

12. Christine M. Hansen/Open letters to Martha (Hansen).

Another internet fan writes: “Thank you for the very nice autographed picture. It is placed in my office where everyone who enters can see it. Frequently men say to me, ‘Who is this person?’ I have many answers that I can give, but I simply say, this is a woman who inspires me. That’s it, that’s all. We all work hard at our jobs but Martha reminds me that the drudgery in the job is just our inner selves yelling out that our creative side needs expression. Martha does this everyday and yes she has a large staff who provides her with an abundance of ideas. But we should not forget that you, Martha, decided one day to control your life and to do something that interests you and has sparked the imaginations of others.

Can I be like you? Perhaps, but my method of expression is different. I may not have your drive but I have your enthusiasm and a bucketful of ideas that keep my life exciting. I have a family that gets my full attention and that rewards me more than the lure of the paper presidents.

And when my batteries run down, I open a little notebook and write down my dreams and hopes and plot how to achieve them. The title of my dog-eared notebook...Simply Living” (Stafford).

and their place in the family. An American physician wrote: "I believe that Martha Stewart is not necessarily about accomplishing projects. She is all about having the attitude to do things pleasing for yourself and those for whom you care deeply" (AOL reader).

For some, reassurance comes with the message that quality and perfection should always be a primary goal. For others, it lies in her emphasis on homemaking; they find in her message an affirmation of the high priority they, themselves, put on creating a home for their families: "I am a Mom, yet I still think that building a home that is an oasis from the world is worthwhile. Martha helps me to realize this goal" (Wooddard).¹³

Ironically, for some homemakers Martha Stewart is not about the work they do but about not working — having time to yourself to read or view and to do the creative things she suggests. Its format — several segments on a half-hour television programme or a magazine with many articles — fits the homemaker's lifestyle. Kim commented: "You can fit it in at your convenience and it's not like a novel or a serious piece of work where you have to, you don't want to put it down now because you're just getting to a certain point....because they are long enough to provide a certain amount of detail for someone who really wants to pursue it but not so long that you can't manage with a cup of coffee. And it fits with a cup of coffee...My reading is around a cup of coffee often" (Nahachewsky 1997). Cynthia described the magazine and the time she spends by herself reading it as nurturing (Boyd 1996). An American fan agreed: "When you're out working, taking care of other people all day...it's satisfying to feel as though you've done something just for you" (Brown 1995). For Gloria, the arrival of a new issue of *Martha Stewart Living* sparks a ritual event for her and her partner: "We look at it together. It's like a kid with a new book. Do you know what I mean? Like, 'Read me the story.' So when it comes we both sit on the couch, we have our cups of tea and we go through the pictures and we'll target things we both want to read on our own later on" (Hickey 1997).

Like the romance novels analyzed by Janice Radway, Martha Stewart's programmes and publications offer women a kind of affective support (1984:96). This confirms psychologist Nancy Chodorow's findings that "What is ...often hidden, in generalizations about the family as an emotional refuge, is that in the family as it is currently constituted no one supports and reconstitutes women affectively and emotionally — either women working in

13. Others echo this: a winner in an American Martha Stewart Wanna be contest, enjoys creating "a spot the soul craves — home — a haven where schedules are consistent, good meals are served at meal times and someone is available to welcome, listen and help" (Laura Colombo/Contest winners 327). An internet writer concluded with unshakable American confidence: "I think Martha's a good role model in many ways — she's a strong woman who's in charge, and she has indeed changed the way our country, if not the world, views what used to be called 'women's work.' And for that all of us who enjoy it (or at least some aspects of it!) owe her a debt of gratitude" (White, Heather).

the home or women working in the paid labour force" (1978: 36). No one in the family is primarily responsible for providing emotional support for the wife and mother. Some homemakers can find support outside the family, in part in Martha Stewart and in the quiet time they take to watch her programme or to read her magazine.

Not everyone would describe Stewart's message as nurturing. In fact, partners of some of the homemakers I interviewed hold negative opinions about *Martha Stewart Living*. Homemaking is frequently an isolating activity, and often the tasks, the degree of organization involved, and the priority placed on it are shouldered most heavily by one individual. Three of the five people I interviewed considered themselves primary homemakers whose investment in domestic labour is not equally shared by their partners.

For several of the interviewees, to view Stewart's programmes or to buy her publications is an act of resistance. All the homemakers, with the exception of Gloria, described partners who at times express a distinct lack of interest in talking or thinking about elements of domestic labour. Cynthia commented: "[My partner] isn't interested in issues discussed in the magazine..." (Boyd 1996). Kim reflected: "[My husband]'s very cynical about these sorts of things ...he would look at it as...just another way of corporate America trying to convince us that we need to want these things. And it's pretty much a non-issue with him. He doesn't pay any attention to it" (Nahachewsky 1997). Some face outright opposition. Cynthia believes that her partner resents the time she spends reading the magazine because it takes away from their time together and that he considers it "a waste of money" (Boyd 1996).¹⁴

Like the readers of romance novels in Radway's study, some of the homemakers feel guilty about the subject of their pleasure. For the romance readers, critics' dismissal of the genre as soft porn made them feel uncomfortable (1984: 103). At least two of the homemakers I spoke with often feel badly about showing an interest in something as seemingly banal as housework. Cynthia commented: "Sometimes I am afraid to admit that I really like her magazine" (Boyd 1996). Kim noted the embarrassment and guilt she feels about reading a magazine that promotes unrealistic standards: "People really don't live like this" (Nahachewsky 1997). Her hesitation to talk to others about her enjoyment of Stewart also stems from her need to be recognized as more than a homemaker, as someone other than a wife and mother. She wants to be considered as a person in her own right. Too close an association with Stewart and her ideal might jeopardize that identification and so Kim has removed the magazine from sight when women employed in the labour market come to her home. She admitted that "because I've chosen to be a mom at home...I have insecurities that sometimes jump with that." She has never hidden the

14. Radway's informants described similar reactions from their husbands and, as she notes, whether or not partners do resent the time women claim for themselves, what is significant is that the women feel that they do (1984: 101).

magazine from male company: "men tend not to notice because it's not part of their world" (Nahachewsky 1997).

Guilt is also linked to the cultural belief that women do not deserve any time to themselves (see, for example, Mitchell 1971). Kim commented: "Perhaps part of [*the guilt*] is something as simple as if you're not going to do any of this stuff, why do you bother getting it? ...That's just, you've got real things to do. More important things to do...[*My mother-in-law*] would say, 'why don't you make cookies for your kids?' or something like that...she would find it so self indulgent and self indulgence doesn't fit in her vocabulary or in her matter of living" (Nahachewsky 1997). For some, then, making the time to read or watch Martha Stewart is an oppositional act or what anthropologist James C. Scott (1985) termed an "everyday act of resistance."

Resistance takes place against criticisms that extend beyond those offered by partners, family, or friends. Over the last year there has been a clear backlash against Stewart in the media.¹⁵ The media has shown that the woman who appears to do and have it all does not. The backlash has become its own industry, producing countless articles as well as two full-length parodies, *Is Martha Stuart Living?* and *Martha Stuart's Better at Entertaining than You*, and a paper doll book, *Mad about Martha*. The most violent parody is the internet site "Ways to Kill Martha".¹⁶

Admittedly Stewart is an easy target. In fact, sometimes it is difficult to distinguish what *is* Martha Stewart and what is parody. For example, Stewart's monthly calendar is a regular feature of her magazine. The calendar for April 1996 included the usual impressive slate of household projects and media appearances as well as "April 26 — Leave for Mount Everest." While it is admittedly difficult to outdo the real thing in this case, parodists have tried. For instance, a contest was held to create Stewart's December-January calendar and contestants played with her obsessive-compulsive image. The end result included an entry for December 25: "bear son and wrap in swaddling clothes" (Barr 1997). Journalists and humorists remind readers that Stewart has a large staff working for her and that she is not all that she seems. The most personal attacks are levelled at her less than perfect family life. For example, one magazine quoted her ex-husband whose reflections (one suspects purposefully) undermine the very image Stewart projects: "[I] think we did a poor job as parents...we were too involved in our professional lives and fixing up our house. We were always making the home into a mythical place. But it wasn't a home — we didn't spend enough time with Lexi" (Green 1995). Legends about her

15. For example see: White, Diane 1996; *Mansion...*; Rosenfeld 1995; Sabulis 1995; Kloer 1995; Lakas 1995; Aleman 1996; Anon. *Stencilling...*; McIntyre 1995; and *Martha Stewart Exposed*).

16. It must be noted that Stewart herself participates in this process of poking fun. For example, her television special, "Home for the Holidays", featured Miss Piggy and her appearance on the sitcom *Ellen* played with her image as a model of domestic perfection.

personality circulate, stories that serve to reinforce the perception that Stewart is less than she seems: she is difficult to work for, the neighbours are tired of her, she uses ideas and recipes without crediting sources, and she's a manic depressive who had a "dreadful" marriage (Burns 1996).¹⁷

Critics raise fundamental points about Martha Stewart's success, women's roles and the nature of North American culture. An internet contributor struck out at the unrealistic and classist nature of homemaking: "Believing in Martha Stewart and the Yankee perfectionism she stands for may seem comforting or inspiring; but it's truly only diversionary. It prevents us from recalling how real women on real budgets with really complicated lifestyles and real limits on their time have managed to make any manner of house, tenement, and even slave quarters feel like home" (Style Council).

Some worry about the whiteness of Stewart's ideal world: "...I am an African American woman (attorney) living with my husband and baby daughter in the San Francisco Bay area and I have lamented to the magazine directly at the dearth of minorities in the magazine. Since my letters to the editors, MS Living has featured an (sic) brunch in Harlem, an interracial couple in the second Weddings issue, a Chinese dinner and a Vietnamese dinner. (What prompted my letter was the first appearance of an African American woman in the magazine being a maid). WAY TO GO!!!"

This same viewer also highlighted Stewart's excessiveness as being characteristic of American society:

Martha is excessive. She does not need four homes — she is just one woman. She still goes antiquing although her homes are crammed full. How much Depression glass, yellow ware, McCoy pottery, Bauer bowls, etc. does one woman need? She never talks about shedding anything, simplifying, paring down (Her articles on having a garage sale featured other people).

This excess is a disservice to Americans. Material things don't bring happiness and this message is not enforced enough...people work and spend their precious time striving to get more things. It's too much. Life is too short (Alesia Martin/Opinions).

These criticisms do not surprise the people I spoke with who enjoy Stewart's programmes and publications. Cynthia commented: "People like her ideas but in real life women do not really have this unlimited amount of time. One thing that's a little alarming, and it's sort of in contrast to the images that she tries to present in her magazine, is that we have to have time for all this but we

17. Work remains to be done on the creation and use of humour that focuses on Martha Stewart. For example, all the people I spoke with described being referred to as Martha Stewart from time to time. This could be meant as a complement or a joke. As well, women may use Stewart to make poignant comments on their roles. For example, Tanya, a young woman at her bachelorette party, opened bawdy and obscene gifts, most of them representations of male genitalia, with the response: "It's a good thing". (For a full description of the bachelorette party, see Ann Marie Powers and Diane Tye, forthcoming.)

really don't...it takes a lot to get organized" (Boyd 1996). Gloria confirmed this observation: "I do think she is a genuinely driven person and I don't see that as a desirable option" (Hickey 1997).

Joe approaches Stewart like other forms of popular entertainment, with willing suspension of disbelief: "I think even to be exposed to Martha Stewart to begin with, there has to be an interest there. I watch Martha Stewart, I read Martha Stewart. Stephen doesn't. So I guess the pressures would be self-inflicted if you want to sort of keep up with Martha. I don't put pressure on myself. What I get out of Martha Stewart is usually pure enjoyment. I think a certain type of people watch Martha Stewart. It's not for everybody obviously...I've never ever been disappointed with Martha Stewart...I think taste is exactly what it's all about. She has exquisite taste and I've never ever been disappointed with what she does" (Clayton 1996).

For others, some of the enjoyment comes from spotting cracks in the veneer:

Okay, I'll admit it: I'm jealous of Martha Stewart! I mean she has this effortless life! Me, I work fifty plus hours a week, mother (however ineffectively) my two children, defrost frozen food items occasionally, keep up with the OJ Trial and try to remember to have a meaningful conversations (sic) with my husband once a week. I don't have time to re-do my bathroom commode in tasteful Laura Ashley designs or implement any of the other design schemes that Martha sets such store by! And I'm tired of Martha making me feel inadequate! Imagine my delight then when I picked up one of those magazines you only read when trapped in a seemingly endless line at the supermarket checkout stand and discovered this shocking news: Martha has her parties catered. Martha, Martha, Martha...Have you no shame? (DiLucchio).

Her imperfections can even be part of the appeal, for they are reassuring:

She helps me know I'm ok — everyone's ok. There is no perfection, not even Martha. She seems perfect, but she's not. She's obsessed. She's fanatic. She's a control freak beyond my wildest dreams. And that shows me two things: A) no one is perfect and 2) there's a price for everything. If you want a house and a life that looks perfect and lovely as Martha's — you'll never get to sit back and enjoy it.

So I love her because she teaches me new things all the time — things even better than how to plant the perfect raspberry bush. She motivates me — when I watch her I feel invigorated and encouraged and I want to hurry and make my life better. She has this charisma that says, 'Go ahead. Try it. You'll do fine. Of course yours won't be as good as mine, but that's ok.'

So I love her. Would I change lives with her? No way. I sure wouldn't mind if a bit of her rubbed off on me though (Anon. My Martha Stewart page).

Clearly personal identification with Martha Stewart, something Stewart promotes through having her picture on nearly every magazine cover and her domination of televised segments, is important. It facilitates the audience

member's own identity voyage (see Klapp 1962). Cathy identified parallels between herself and Stewart: "...obviously her roots are not from upper middle class, it might be middle class. So here's the person, a person that seems to combine a whole lot of things that I find appealing, she likes to do the things I do" (Rickey 1996). Stewart assures homemakers that what they do and value is worthwhile, even if their priorities are not shared by partners or close friends. Maybe she even persuades some — at least momentarily — that they are not among the isolated, but among the elite. Joe noted: "I just find that my taste and Martha Stewart's taste for a lot of stuff is very similar" (Clayton 1996) and Gloria claimed: "I don't feel like I'm following Martha. I always joke...that Martha Stewart has my home bugged because I do things for years and then they turn up in the magazine" (Hickey 1997). Kim commented on Stewart's ability to make people feel like they belong to the "right" club: "She's got snob appeal. She allows me to feel snobby. I don't think that's intended perhaps but I think there's a sense of an exclusivity or something...she's a perfectionist and I think there's a snob appeal for those who would look at it as a positive thing" (Nahachewsky 1997). The appeal to fine taste and elegant living is a strong one that offers protection against the criticism audience members feel. When Cynthia's sister makes fun of her interest in Stewart's homemaking, she can be dismissive: "she doesn't even know who Martha Stewart or Peter Gzowski is" (Boyd 1996).

IV. Conclusions

"I watched her and it was a half hour show and I was just fascinated...and I thought this chick has got it all" (Clayton 1996).

Drawing on a small sampling, my observations must be taken as being more suggestive than conclusive. However, after talking to these Martha Stewart viewers and readers, I am left with a strengthened conviction that folklorists who privilege the individual voice have much to contribute to a postmodern cultural understanding of the complicated interconnections between elements of popular and traditional cultures. Audience-centred analyses challenge interpretations of popular culture as the imposition of alien ideologies on unsuspecting individuals (Radway 1984:8). As this exploratory consideration of Martha's Stewart's representations of domestic labour shows, viewers and readers at least sometimes draw on popular culture to supplement rather than replace traditional knowledge.¹⁸ Unlike those who have contributed to the

18. Bielay and Herold (1995: 248) make a similar observation about popular magazines as a source of sexual information for university women, indicating that they rely on a combination of popular and traditional sources. The authors refer to a 1991 study by Andre et al that concludes: "The mass media and peers usually provide information about sexual relations, behaviours, techniques and problems; whereas, parents and educational institutions provide information on physiology and anatomy."

growing literature of criticism and satire that focuses on Stewart's creation of domestic perfection, audience members I interviewed approach popular culture with a kind of dual consciousness that allows them to recognize the shortcomings of Stewart's presentations yet sometimes to willingly overlook them or to creatively adapt her ideas. The individuals included here show themselves to be anything but passive dupes of popular culture.

This is not to deny the ideologically conservative nature of Stewart's homemaking message. Stewart speaks loudly for both capitalism and patriarchy. I am not confident, as another writer is, that Martha Stewart has "made an enormous contribution to feminism by enabling the once-vilified homemaker to feel gratified" (Martha Stewart: The High Priestess) or that "She's about assuaging guilt and dignifying domestic chores...." (Stencilling). While the individuals I interviewed do not feel they have to duplicate Stewart's ideal and ambitious efforts since they see them as unattainable, I personally continue to feel discomfort concerning the results Stewart suggests are available to everyone who works hard and long enough. It is a message that suits patriarchy's goals awfully well.¹⁹

Martha Stewart's homemaking is presented as detached from family concerns (Talbot 1996) in a childless, affluent world, and precisely for those reasons, she is particularly successful in inviting individuals to embark with her on an "identity voyage" (Klapp 1962). In soothing tones, with warm, hazy pictures, she leads her audience into a faraway world that Joe compared to that of folk tales (Clayton 1996), Gloria paralleled to children's books (Hickey 1997) and a writer likened to children's television programmes (Talbot 1996). The people I interviewed find comfort here. As Gloria reflected, "it's like taking a bubble bath" (Hickey 1997). And to discover that most of these individuals not only shoulder the lion's share of the domestic labour in their households but are also made to feel badly if they show an interest in it is disquieting. Perhaps John Fiske's observation regarding the disciplinary power of patriarchy to devalue anything that resists, threatens, or evades its power (1990: 134) applies here as well. Taking my cue from Radway, who concluded that the "act of romance reading is oppositional because it allows the women to refuse momentarily their self-abnegating social role" (1984: 210), I recognize some homemakers' enjoyment of Martha Stewart as contestative. As Tania Modleski concluded in her examination of soap opera and romance novels, if one cannot regard these genres as progressive, they perhaps can be understood as transgressive (Modleski 41 in Shiach 1991: 43).

Like Fiske's examination of quiz shows and Radway's exploration of romance novels, this introductory look at Martha Stewart emphasizes the necessity of considering meanings of the act as well as the text when trying to understand the power and role of popular culture in the lives of individuals.

19. See Rogers (1991) for a discussion of soap opera's connections to patriarchal goals and values.

Only then do the ways subordinated groups respond to the cultural commodities of the dominant reveal themselves (Fiske 1990: 140-141). As well as the emerging ideological voices of the dominant, one sometimes finds, in the most unlikely places, opportunities to resist, evade and negotiate with these voices (Fiske 1990: 142).

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