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Fraiman, Susan.

New Literary History, Volume 37, Number 2, Spring 2006, pp. 341-359
(Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: 10.1353/nlh.2006.0034



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Shelter Writing: Desperate Housekeeping from *Crusoe* to *Queer Eye*

Susan Fraiman

THE HISTORY OF THE NOVEL is full of women burdened by a stifling or terrifying domesticity. From the bored Emmas (Woodhouse and Bovary) to the incarcerated Bertha Mason, they are driven to various extremes by too much house, by interior spaces too cushioned or confining. In contrast to those made desperate by an excess of domesticity, the figures that concern me here embody an opposite logic: they are driven to domesticity—the refuge of four walls, the consolation of a table—by desperate circumstances. My topic is housekeeping across a range of texts (many of them novels) whose protagonists, rather than being trapped inside, are outcasts or castaways of some kind. For these characters, who are outsiders to polite society and at times literally out-of-doors, domestic spaces and domestic labor mean neither propriety and status nor captivity and drudgery but rather safety, sanity, and self-expression—survival in the most basic sense. I call the blow-by-blow accounts of their efforts to make and keep house “shelter writing.” It is a mode that may center on anyone whose smallest domestic endeavors have become urgent and precious in the wake of dislocation, whether as the result of migration, divorce, poverty, or a stigmatized sexuality. This essay theorizes forms of shelter writing and analyzes, by way of illustration, a text in which domestic shelter is lost, longed for, and finally recreated by a narrator who is transgendered.

My exemplary text is *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) by Leslie Feinberg, a writer known for her essays and activism on transgender issues as well as for this self-evidently autobiographical novel. The book is narrated in the first person by Jess Goldberg, a working-class woman from Buffalo, New York, who comes of age in the 1950s. Though not definitively transsexual, Jess is strongly male-identified; at one point she considers transitioning to male, and during this time she passes as a man. Throughout the novel, we see her working alongside men and other butches on the factory floor, riding her motorcycle, and drawn to feminine women. We also see her rejected and brutalized from an early age for so radically controverting gender norms. No wonder Judith Halberstam devotes a central chapter

of *Female Masculinity* to Feinberg's title character, stressing Jess's working-class masculinity and defending her "stone" sexuality. My own reading would supplement this emphasis by bringing out other, complicating aspects of Jess: what I elsewhere identify as her "butch maternity" and also, of particular interest here, her butch domesticity.¹

The relevant passage occurs toward the end of *Stone Butch Blues*, shortly after Jess has set out from Buffalo and washed up on the shores of Manhattan. For a month she's been crashing in makeshift, semipublic quarters and bathing in Grand Central Station, until at last she has the money for a real apartment. Handing over her cash to an indifferent super, she is free to take the measure of her new place.

I locked the door of my apartment and turned to look around. It needed paint: yellow for the kitchen, sky blue for the bedroom, creamy ivory for the living room. I needed rugs. And dishes, silverware, pots and pans. Cleanser for the sink.

I opened my duffel bag to look for a pad and pen to make a list. There was the china kitten that Milli had left me. I placed it gingerly on the mantle in the living room. . . .

I decided to buy some yellow calico curtains for the living room windows, like the kind Betty had made for my garage apartment. I glanced at the door once more to make sure it was locked.

A few pages later, the day-by-day account of intensive nesting continues:

Every time I got a paycheck I used part of it on my apartment. I spent one whole weekend spackling the cracks in my walls and ceilings. As I applied paint to each room with broad strokes my spirits lifted.

On my most ambitious weekend I sanded all the wood floors. Then I started from the furthest corner of the apartment and polyurethaned myself out of the door. That night I slept at a 42nd Street theater again—just for one more night!

The floors were dazzling. It added a new dimension underfoot, as though the ceilings were raised, or the apartment had grown in size.

I found a black Guatemalan rug at a flea market. It had tiny flecks of white in it. I unrolled it in my living room and stood back to look. It reminded me of the night sky filled with stars.

Gradually I bought furniture—a sturdy couch and reading chair, a mahogany kitchen table and chairs. At the Salvation Army I found a bed—the head and footboards were ovals carved out of cherry. I went crazy buying sheets at Macy's. . . .

I bought thick, soft towels and fragrances for my bath that pleased me.

And then one day I looked around at my apartment and realized I'd made a home.²

I offer these paragraphs by way of general introduction to the meanings, satisfactions, embarrassments, and divergent uses of shelter writing. Often, as here, it is embedded within a longer text: a few pages lingering over the shaping of a domestic space; part of a chapter detailing the pleasures of securing and supplying, ordering and adorning, taking a room from mess to thoughtful arrangement. Someone rigs up a shelter, hauls in scraps, refurbishing them for household use; next she polishes this object and that, placing each in considered relation to one another; now he ponders matching colors, contrasting textures; later she cleans from top to bottom, restoring order and brightness; and every day there are soothing, sometimes wearying rounds of neatening and freshening. Practical, aesthetic, and perhaps metaphysical desires coalesce in these passages. Memory comes into play (Milli, Betty, star-filled nights) along with desire. Ideological as well as emotional agendas are furthered. Small, specific, oft-repeated actions, meaningful in themselves, indicate larger, more general, and more profound ones—Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast, for example, scrubbing against death and decay at the heart of *To the Lighthouse*.

Of course the Ur-shelter text is *Robinson Crusoe*, in which Crusoe structures time as well as space, saves his skin while preserving his reason, by methodically devising a domesticity of his own. For while Crusoe has often been taken as a type of the explorer or entrepreneur, I would agree with Pat Rogers that Daniel Defoe's hero is above all a homemaker, busying himself with an array of domestic arts from building and furnishing a shelter to making pots and baking bread.³ What we are most fascinated and moved by, what we recall if we recall anything about this novel, are the almost technical descriptions, many of them in journal form, of the household tasks Crusoe undertakes not simply to survive but to create, as he puts it, "some order within doors."

Dec. 11. This day I went to work . . . and got two shores or posts pitched upright to the top, with two pieces of boards a-cross over each post; this I finished the next day; and setting more posts up with boards, in about a week more I had the roof secured, and the posts, standing in rows, served me for partitions to part of my house.

Dec. 17. From this day to the twentieth I placed shelves, and knocked up nails on the posts to hang every thing up that could be hung up, and now I began to be in some order within doors.

Dec. 20. Now I carry'd every thing into the cave, and began to furnish my house, and set up some pieces of boards, like a dresser, to order my victuals upon, but boards began to be very scarce with me; also I made me another table.⁴

In the discourse I am looking at, characters use broom and hammer, muscle and imagination to stay death, cling to life, or simply keep house.

Sentences like those above devoted to homemaking and housekeeping occur, though largely unremarked, throughout the novel from Defoe to writers like Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, Virginia Woolf, Radclyffe Hall, and on up through Feinberg. It should not surprise us, then, to be told that Woolf's Mrs. McNab and Mrs. Bast salvage a basin, a teaset, and . . . the works of Sir Walter Scott.⁵ A central project of the realist novel—its production of interiority—is effected in part through the concrete, systematically detailed domestic gestures of a Robinson Crusoe or Jess Goldberg. Descriptions like Defoe's and Feinberg's are intrinsic to the meaning and inextricable from the grain of the genre.⁶ They are not, however, confined to it. In contemporary culture we find instances of shelter writing, broadly speaking, in media such as house magazines and reality TV. *House Beautiful* and *Martha Stewart Living*, *Trading Spaces* and *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* all offer versions of the microdrama outlined above: the step-by-step creation, restoration, or transformation of one's living space. Nor is it surprising that we find this drama more often on the small than the large screen. Television's cheerful traffic in the seemingly insignificant, its penchant for the domestic, and its commitment to repetition—these conduce quite naturally to scenes of self-discovery in a newly Windexed mirror. Before returning finally to the passage from *Stone Butch Blues*, I want to consider at some length the theoretical parameters and political implications of this discourse about dwelling.

Of interest here are both content and form: that is, not only shelter and shelter-making as things and actions referenced, but also the generic attributes of shelter *writing*. Since most of my examples are literary, they might seem to fall under the rubric of description—*ekphrasis* in classical terms—and, more specifically, *topography*, or description of landscapes and places. Translating the visual into the verbal, concerned with space rather than time, representing objects that exist simultaneously rather than events that occur sequentially, description is often posed against narration.⁷ Yet theorists of this mode such as Michel Beaujour note that descriptions of what appear to be static, ornamental scenes shade easily into those of movement and function. Descriptions of gardens, for example—captured as if on canvas—dissolve into descriptions of flowers swaying and gardeners watering, a different kind of description, if not a different register altogether.⁸ Certainly this is true of my homemaking examples, in which interior description functions not apart from but *as* narrative, not eschewing action but intimately involving, as I have said, the acts of envisioning and producing a renewed or at least tidied-up space. More important, such descriptive passages qualify as shelter writing only within a particular narrative context—one that involves a history of deprivation or difficulty regarding shelter.

Descriptions are also suspected of fetishizing the detail—thereby not only losing the narrative thread but also causing characters to recede, eclipsed by unimportant particulars, in effect reversing the proper relation between figure and ground.⁹ But the kind of description I am specifying here, however in love with itemizing particulars, does not actually stray from so much as stage the protagonist in her or his relationship to domesticity. Passages devoted to walls and ceilings, pots and pans—seemingly digressive and even “skippable”¹⁰—contribute crucially to the establishment and development of characters. Indeed, as I began by saying, the mode I am defining turns on a protagonist whose abjection gives peculiar significance to her or his interaction with domestic objects and occupation of domestic spaces.¹¹ There is one last point to make about shelter writing as descriptive writing, in the impurest sense. According to Beaujour, description is best understood, despite its seeming empiricism, as a register of *fantasy*, the rendering of a dreamscape. “As the multifaceted mirror of Desire, description bears only an oblique and tangential relationship to real things, bodies and spaces. This is the reason why description is so intrinsically bound up with Utopia, and with pornography.”¹² My subset of shelter writing does, it is true, involve both dreaming and desire, and these may have an erotic as well as political cast. At the same time, I want to insist equally on its status as a materialism or, more accurately, a realism—a mode very much invested in highly specified, physical depictions of things/bodies/spaces and their function within a given text on a literal as well as figurative level. This is especially true insofar as the descriptions show daily, repetitive, and, in the case of housekeeping, ostensibly non-productive physical labor as valuable in and of itself.

One of the most helpful intertexts for a theory of shelter writing is *The Poetics of Space* (1958), a meditation on the emotional meanings of interiors by Gaston Bachelard. I share with Bachelard an attention to the house imagined primarily as a “felicitous space,” a space that protects and consoles. “Hostile space is hardly mentioned in these pages,” he tells us in his introduction.¹³ His is a poetics, rather, of the safe, snug interior; the house evoking a nest, cradle, or shell; the house whose predominant affect is maternal. According to Bachelard, this sense of the house as refuge is only heightened when tested by the elements—by snow, for example, or by storm. When the house is besieged, it becomes, in our imaginations, more intimate, more fiercely protective (38–47). His work encourages us, moreover, to see the domestic space as “the topography of our intimate being.” Engaging in “topo-analysis,” he takes us on an affectionate tour of its most hidden recesses: its cellars and garrets, its nooks and crannies, and the smaller containers contained therein—drawers, chests, and wardrobes, or what he charmingly calls “the houses of

things" (xxxvi, xxxvii). The house for Bachelard is therefore at once what encloses us and what we enclose, a figure for the womb and a figure for the psyche, the place in which we dream and a set of images for that which is dreamt. And in either case, the house in *The Poetics of Space* is never an impersonal monument or sterile showcase but always inhabited—touching us and responsive to our touch.

For me, too, as I have said, descriptions of interior spaces do not, as early critics of description feared, overshadow the people who live there. In my account they serve, on the contrary, to produce and determine character as well as to enact and reveal it. Shelter writing is further compatible with Bachelard's paradigm of the house as cherished and cherishing. My view of Charlotte Brontë, in particular, resonates with his discussion of smallness and snugness, the cozy rather than palatial. At the same time, taking off from his brief remarks about the house under storm, my own readings develop and insist more strongly on the house as *refuge*, on renderings of enclosure in continual tension with exposure, a sense of safety coinciding with intimations of danger. And while my emphasis is on a similarly positive domesticity, one can hardly approach someone like Brontë without, at the same time, taking full account of a domesticity that can kill. Reading Brontë means reckoning with dwellings that sicken and rooms that madden—interiors that are haunted, claustrophobic, and predatory. A major challenge of this project is to claim shelter writing without reinstating a romance of the house oblivious to its gothic aspects, especially where women, both middle- and working-class, are concerned. As Ben Highmore has stressed in a piece appreciative of domestic routines from chopping vegetables to bathing children, work in the home is always profoundly ambiguous: involving frustration as well as reverie, oppression as well as artistry, resentment as well as love.¹⁴ So while my subject is not the gothic interior (Charlotte Brontë's attic, Harriet Jacobs's garret, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's yellow room), which has by now been vividly if not definitively elucidated by feminist scholars, I take for granted and would keep continually in mind the coexistence of this evil twin, this flip side of the felicitous house.¹⁵

My good house image is thus significantly more qualified and contingent than Bachelard's. I differ, too, from Bachelard by emphasizing domestic *labor*—in pursuing not a poetics of houses so much as a poetics of housework. The French philosopher's house for the most part is a serenely dustless place, in which we have little to do but give ourselves over to dreaming and repose. And when housekeeping does make a fleeting appearance in *The Poetics of Space*, it is valued as a mental rather than merely physical exercise. "But how can housework be made into a creative activity?" Bachelard asks. The answer is *consciousness*, "for consciousness rejuvenates everything, giving a quality of beginning to the

most everyday actions.” In Bachelard’s rather rapturous description, wiping a table is no longer a routine act of maintenance but a singular act of creation, quite akin to God breathing life into Adam. “When a poet rubs a piece of furniture—even vicariously—when he puts a little fragrant wax on his table with the woolen cloth that lends warmth to everything it touches, he creates a new object; he increases the object’s human dignity; he registers this object officially as a member of the human household” (67). These are lovely lines to be sure, and it is part of my project as well to recognize consciousness and creativity as elements of the everyday world of waxing. I share, too, Bachelard’s admiration for those who *write* about this world. “There is also,” as he puts it, “the courage of the writer who braves the kind of censorship that forbids ‘insignificant’ confidences” (71). One of my goals is to celebrate, precisely, the courage of writing that declines more obviously heroic and dramatic subjects for sentences given over to the most minor gestures, the lowest forms of work, and those who perform them. I would call attention, however, to a phrase set off between dashes in the passage above: “even vicariously.” When a poet waxes—even vicariously—he creates a new object. What does this mean? How exactly does one make an effort of fingers and forearm, squint at the scarred wood, smell the fragrant wax, and confess the weariness in one’s shoulder “vicariously”? Can you really agitate a can of Lemon Pledge, give it a brain-rattling shake, depress the nozzle, and avert your face “vicariously”?

What this phrase serves to indicate is the actual remoteness of the laboring body from Bachelard’s vision. A few pages later, he cites Rilke on the pleasures of dusting, which the poet discovers one day “in the absence of his cleaning woman.” Apparently Rilke was required as a child to help his mother with this chore, so that he speaks of it with touching lyricism from the standpoint of a man (unlike his mother, his cleaning woman, or himself as a child) for whom dusting once was *but is no longer* a daily obligation. As Bachelard correctly observes, Rilke’s rhapsody is animated by “*the nostalgia for work*” (70, 71). In other words, both men celebrate domestic chores only by locating them elsewhere, whether in space or time—projecting them onto another person or tying them to an earlier moment. The effect of doing so is not only to remove from housekeeping the taint of repetition and banality, not to mention obligation and exploitation, but also to elide the body whose relation to this work is neither vicarious nor nostalgic but intimate and immediate: the body of the child, the body of the mother, the body of the cleaning woman.¹⁶ All of these absented bodies are, of course, strongly marked as feminine. Bachelard himself recognizes that “the ‘wax’ civilization” (68), as he calls it, is gendered, and to his great credit he documents and celebrates it anyway. But despite his wax envy, I would argue that

Bachelard is finally unable fully to enter this culture. And perhaps the difficulty lies in his imaging of the house in, as we have seen, largely maternal terms. Defining the house *as* mother, caring for him and sheltering his dreams, Bachelard cannot sustain a sense of the house, rather, as the mother herself might inhabit it. Largely missing from his poetics is that less dreamy, less restful, and more demanding space—the house which cares for you only insofar as you perform the feminizing tasks of dutifully, tediously, and tenderly caring for it.

In sketching out a feminist poetics of interiors I therefore draw on Bachelard but privilege the strongly gendered, frankly physical responsibilities of housekeeping as he does not. My house-space, as I say, is material as well as metaphorical, and I not only pay more attention to the storm raging outside, but also construe the storm as a confluence of social pressures and dangers. In my renderings of domesticity, interior is always pushing back against a threatening exterior; the “private sphere” is never sealed off from but is always produced and interpenetrated by the public. Indeed, as I have explained, shelter writing documents the painstaking creation of a private space by those who have been battered by the outside world. For figures like Jess Goldberg, a room of one’s own is hard to come by and impossible to count on.

As for other adjacent theoretical discourses, my interest in tables and chairs sent me off initially in the direction of Bill Brown’s appealing new book on “things.” Particularly suggestive are the comments on objects, people, and houses in paintings by John Singer Sargent as well as novels by Henry James—Brown’s observation, for example, that human figures in both James and Sargent have a tendency to be deanimated. Turned into objects, they can then be acquired as collectibles or grouped into still lifes, like so many vases. He describes this phenomenon in memorable terms as the “ontological democratization of person and thing,” and it strikes me that this alchemy, stiffening children into urns, reverses the ritual celebrated by Bachelard, in which furniture is enlivened through touch.¹⁷ Brown also addresses the way in which household objects—golden bowls and whatnot—function in James as placeholders for ideas and, in addition, as go-betweens, formulating and mediating relations between characters.¹⁸ I am interested in the latter as well—objects as they serve to gauge the distance and code the intimacy between people (about which more later). But generally speaking I am closer to Bachelard in pursuing descriptions not of people objectified but instead of houses that breathe. Indeed, there are several other ways in which my interest in “things” might be distinguished from Brown’s. First, whereas for him the primary register is visual, I am equally concerned with the tactile—not only with objects seen but also with objects handled. Second, the discourse of shelter writing is one in which verbs take precedence over nouns, whereas I suspect

that for Brown the opposite is true. Another way of saying this is that I focus on what Michel de Certeau calls “spaces,” defined by operations and itineraries, whereas Brown is arguably more about “places,” defined less by actions than by objects.¹⁹ For Brown, James’s well-appointed country houses and villas are understandably pivotal. For my purposes, however, the long-standing residential edifices in James are too much taken for granted. They serve in his novels typically as static backdrop, or else as starting premise, as in his famous metaphor, in which their windows are the lenses through which all else is seen. Paintings and pianos, curtains and crucifixes in James are always already in their places—as they are also, say, in Jane Austen—and we hardly expect Isabel Archer or Elizabeth Bennet to lift a finger in their care.

Houses in James and Austen are apt to be trophy houses, their owners smug and proprietary. Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice* is a preeminent example, and we needn’t look far in this novel for another. When Mr. Collins leads Elizabeth on a quantifying tour of his house and land, he might as well be counting out coins. Comfortable residences cared for by invisible hands, homes in Austen are also generally secure; though Mr. Woodhouse worries about drafts and someone does rob his turkey coop, their aura in *Emma* and elsewhere is one of inviolability. And even should daughters fail to inherit, aristocrats be forced to downsize, or the moral foundations of a Northanger Abbey or Mansfield Park prove shaky, the prospect in Austen is of a contracted space—a parsonage perhaps, or even a boat. What we do not find in Austen is someone sleeping in a tree like Crusoe or wandering the moors like Jane Eyre—someone bereft of shelter altogether.²⁰ By contrast, there is something dire about the house passages I am highlighting. Think Brontë instead of Austen, *The Well of Loneliness* rather than *The Golden Bowl*. The dwellings involved, if old, are neglected or war-torn; often they are small, rickety, rigged up. What my instances of shelter writing stage is not a complacent sense of class pride and entitlement, so much as gratitude, relief, pride in ingenuity, and other feelings born of a sense of physical and social precariousness. They are, as we have seen, apt to occur in the context of shipwreck or some other traumatic exile; their descriptions of towels and tea sets are frequently just pages away from homelessness, social unrest, personal and political violence; and the comfort they represent is usually all too temporary. Likewise, the characters therein are marginal in one way or another. They are all, in a manner of speaking, *survivors*, and their relationship to beautiful, functional, and safe interiors is underwritten by terror and longing. I term this mode “shelter writing,” then, in part to stress its concern with our most primitive fears and desires, with our Crusoe-like need, first of all, for shelter. At the same time, this mode dramatizes as well an attraction to order and ornament, and may, we

should acknowledge, merge in some cases with the desire for goods, respectability, and status.

There is still one more theoretical intertext to consider before going on to the political stakes of this project, and that is work by Henri Lefebvre, de Certeau, and others on the “everyday.”²¹ Clearly my discussion of homes and women, dishes and dusting involves a wish to examine and validate the texture of everyday life, and the thinking of feminist critics on this topic has proved particularly congenial. Rita Felski and Mary McLeod, for example, argue that many theories of the everyday require the category to be somehow aesthetically or politically ennobled (shades of Bachelard here).²² As Felski explains, in the discourse descended from Lefebvre, habitual and ostensibly harmless activities such as cooking, walking, or cleaning are championed only by recasting them as actually disordering, defiant, and disruptive. Noting the irony of claiming the everyday in terms that negate its everydayness, Felski remarks, “There is scant recognition that everyday life might include desire ‘from below’ for order, stability and the security of ritual.”²³ Like Felski, I would question the fetishizing of rupture and offer in its place an appreciative exploration of domestic order, stability, and ritual—especially from the perspective of those whose exilic status has deprived them of these very things. A central goal of this essay is to counter the assumption of many left critics that houses—people inside houses, practices sponsored by houses—are somehow inherently bourgeois and suspect.

Domesticity, particularly from the eighteenth century on, has been tainted by several associations. For one thing, modern households are identified with consumerism. No longer sites of production, the argument goes, houses may be seen primarily as showcases for portable property, signs of genteel taste and wealth, consolidating middle-class status and shoring up class hierarchies. Then, too, domesticity is often taken to be coextensive with propriety. The good nineteenth-century homemaker enforces familial and racial as well as class codes, not only buying the right stuff but controlling children, disciplining servants, and stamping out dirt. Her purifying regime may do the additional symbolic work of preserving the “domestic” from contamination by “foreignness,” thereby furthering nationalist agendas. Finally, despite recent work challenging the actual separateness of public and private spheres, domesticity is still tied to notions of privacy and individualism at odds with oppositional politics.²⁴ To be sure, I share the political concerns and agree with the gist of all these critiques. I am troubled, however, by the slip that sometimes occurs from recognizing the conservative effects of “domesticity” as an ideological construct to a repudiation of domesticity per se—a repudiation that serves to devalue real homemakers (usually women) and to discount real domestic labor (considered “feminine”). It is important to

remember not only that these workers and this work are themselves more constrained than empowered by the domestic ideal, but also that (as Luce Giard's study of the "Kitchen Women Nation" so powerfully shows) their lived, material reality goes far beyond it.²⁵ Above all, I would argue that the desire for shelter, the impulse to make and maintain this, the finding of security and pleasure in domesticity, is not necessarily conservative and conventionalizing, although it may be. As the example from *Stone Butch Blues* will suggest, it may also be quite the opposite.

This brings me to why I care about domestic description as a feminist, bearing in mind the problems it poses for progressive scholars generally as well as what Dana Heller has described more specifically as "Feminism's Troubled Romance with the Domestic Sphere." For one thing, I see the theorizing of shelter writing as an effort of feminist recuperation in the tradition of Tania Modleski on the romance, Jane Tompkins on the sentimental, Naomi Schor on the detail, Bonnie Zimmerman on the lesbian novel, among a great many others.²⁶ To take seriously and positively a cluster of categories generally coded as "feminine" and denigrated as such is to continue the ongoing work of flipping the switch on normative hierarchies. These categories include the domestic, the private, the trivial, the manual, the habitual, and the everyday, as well as the mode of descriptive writing. Am I, then, simply returning to the methods and agendas of so-called difference feminism, that celebration of women's culture emergent in the 1980s? Well, not exactly. My hope is to claim the continuing power of an approach focused on women and the feminine, even while departing from earlier difference models in at least three respects. To begin with, although domesticity is undoubtedly gendered—more likely to be the domain of women, the purview of women writers, and strongly marked in any case as "feminine"—it is nevertheless available to men as well, a point evident in the fact that this essay is bookended by references to *Crusoe* and *Queer Eye*. Note, too, that while gender remains an important axis of analysis, an examination of labor, things, and taste means that class is at every turn an equally indispensable category. Sexuality, as the example of Feinberg illustrates, is another central term, possibly even the primary term, in my thinking about shelter. Finally, while my subject is a discrete and largely appreciative discourse of homemaking, its version of domesticity is heavily embattled—so that home and homelessness, interior and exterior, feminine and masculine, manual and mental labor, queer and straight do not oppose so much as encounter and inform one another. Committed, then, to antiessentialist and intersectional readings, attuned to the instability as well as utility of its binary terms, this project retains a certain affective and ideological affinity with '80s feminism, yet also obviously benefits from the post-separate-spheres work of feminists and

from the postidentitarian work of queer theorists.²⁷ In a recent book, I take cool masculinity to task for anxiously and sometimes quite violently repudiating the domestic and maternal. Denying that the domestic is a separate, inherently female sphere, I would vindicate domesticity as an ethic, an aesthetic, and a public. Perhaps this essay can begin that work of denaturalization and vindication.

And now, in conclusion, let us return to Jess Goldberg—that emotionally guarded, motorcycle-riding, union-organizing, granite-hard stone butch who tells us, brimming with girlish enthusiasm, that she went crazy buying linens and bath products at Macy's. This passage is, first of all, a love letter to domesticity—to kitchenware and coordinated colors, to cleaning a sink, sanding a floor, unrolling a rug, and standing back to look. It is, of course, striking in this context not only for entering a narrative register easily scorned as trivial and sentimental—pages lifted from a women's magazine—but also for doing so in relation to a character so thoroughly at odds with the normative gender of this register. Like mannish lesbian writer Radclyffe Hall and her character Stephen Gordon, both of whom are fussy housekeepers; like Crusoe with his earthenware pots; like Brontë's Monsieur Paul, who displays a flair for decorating at the end of *Villette*; and like the straight and gay men who bond over end tables week after week in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*; Jess, in this burst of butch domesticity, mixes and matches traditional gender traits.²⁸ Domesticity affirmed, then, but also uncoupled from any simple, natural relation to womanhood.

"It needed paint," Jess says of her neglected interior. And then, in the next sentence, "I needed rugs." From "its" needs to mine: what this subtle evolution maps for me is the way decorating imperatives coincide with psychological ones, so that homemaking, as Defoe apparently knew, can be a form of self-fashioning. "I made me another table," Crusoe recounts, and the effect of his vernacular is to embed a second claim: "I made me." Jess is more explicit, declaring that with each stroke of paint, her spirits lifted. The repetition of "need" further clarifies the urgency—really, the lifesaving necessity—of this practical as well as spiritual endeavor for Jess. For hers is no idle act of redecorating by a wealthy woman with too much time on her hands. It is, rather, an audacious effort to produce a basic sense of physical and psychic security on the part of someone who has been repeatedly violated, who has never in her life felt truly safe. We see what is at stake for her in the passage's other repetition: Jess's locking of the door, and then, moments later, checking again, "to make sure it was locked." Home, then, as safety from the storm without, enclosure in whisperingly close dialogue with exposure. Interior is also more positively linked to exterior as Jess makes forays out into the world—like Crusoe swimming out to the wreck, returning with recycled riches. Notice as well

the sky blue paint Jess uses for her bedroom, the rug like a night sky, the ceiling raised up by dazzling floors. For isn't the vertiginous effect of these to produce an outdoors within an indoors, constellations under foot? And here again I am reminded of *Villette's* penultimate chapter, when Monsieur Paul unlocks a door and we discover along with Lucy that her charming little house opens on to the school where she will teach, so that for her, too, private and public spaces intermingle.²⁹

In addition to scrambling girl and boy, inside and out, what else is happening here? This passage assembles and itemizes stuff (rugs, dishes, curtains, and couch) but is perhaps more significantly about actions: cleaning and placing; spackling and painting; sanding and polyurethaning. It is, in other words, about work—the degraded labor of cleaning and the strenuous labor of building that here fits with Jess's working-class status but that, in other contexts, may contradict and complicate the status of a monied character. Take the slave-owning Robinson Crusoe, for example, who spends entire days driving posts into the ground. One cannot deny the commodity fetishism of much homemaking, and certainly shelter writing often helps to clinch middleclassness by narrating property accumulated, refined tastes implemented. Even for Martha Stewart, however, merchandising and consumerism go hand in hand with an oddly anachronistic craft ethic. Why *buy* a concrete planter if you can mix up and pour one yourself? Suffice it to say that shelter writing describes a kind of unpaid domestic labor, productive as well as consumptive, physical as well as managerial, repetitious but wrongly disparaged as unskilled, which has always confounded the neat class categories derived from masculine wage-work outside the home.

Passages like this one thematize and valorize manual labor, but not to the exclusion of mental labor. I have already indicated my agreement with Bachelard that sweeping and polishing should not be dismissed as lacking in creativity and consciousness. Indeed, in the case of Jess Goldberg and especially Robinson Crusoe, physical tasks are accompanied not only by imagining and planning but also, surprisingly enough, by *writing*. In Defoe's novel, the blow-by-blow account of building and furnishing a shelter is interrupted by interpolated material from Crusoe's journal giving us—bizarrely enough—a second, blow-by-blow account of building and furnishing his shelter, much of it repeating what has just come before. Once again, we hear how he enlarges his cave, secures it with a semicircle of posts, makes a table, and so on.³⁰ There are several points to be made about this. First, it resembles Jess's relocking her door, suggesting the vulnerability and fear underwriting these narratives. In fact, both homes will subsequently be damaged—Jess's by fire and Crusoe's by earthquake—requiring them to be relocated and rebuilt. In this sense homemaking, which appears teleological compared to housekeeping, may

also actually be work that is never done, work that is cyclical, a kind of ritual necessarily repeated many times throughout a lifetime (especially for someone like Jess). Second, notice that Crusoe's interpolated journal constitutes an inside story, a narrative inside the narrative. The result is that Defoe, at the level of form, appears to replicate and trope his character's construction of an interior. More broadly speaking, Crusoe's journalizing references Defoe's own act of narration, suggesting that shelter writing may generally go hand in hand with self-referentiality. By launching *Stone Butch Blues* with Jess's letter to a long-lost love, Feinberg also stages Jess in the act of writing. Here in her New York apartment, she does no more than grope around for pad and pen; it is tempting nonetheless to take the paint as well as pen in this scene as figures for Feinberg's own artistry. I want to propose, in short, that descriptions of characters making and keeping house may offer writers a store of images for their own barely waged work of conjuring and furnishing the spaces in which people dwell.

There remains the matter of the china kitten, which would surely be verboten in Martha Stewart's book. For Eleanor Kaufman, however—who has written about Jewishness, class, and clutter—such a kitten would be cause for delight.³¹ For me this breakable baby animal on the mantle just goes to reinforce the point that home decoration discourse may range widely among class idioms and serve diverse purposes when it comes to constructing class identities. Gaskell's industrial novel *Mary Barton*, for example, describes a room resonant with the desire we have seen elsewhere for order, comfort, and beauty—but here the scene also functions quite pointedly to specify the Bartons as members of the working class in the context of mid-nineteenth-century class struggle.³² No less significant than the kitten as a class marker is the fact that it was a gift from Jess's old love Milli, just as the yellow calico curtains are reminders of Betty.

It is revealing to juxtapose Jess's kitten with household objects lovingly detailed by an earlier lesbian novel in a different class key: the heavy, handsome furniture; old blue brocade bedspread; ivory hairbrushes; and other fine things in the Paris house belonging to Stephen Gordon in *The Well of Loneliness*. When Mary moves into this refurbished space on the Rue Jacob, she immediately feels that "the bed could only have been Stephen's bed; it was heavy and rather austere in pattern. . . . The chairs could only have been Stephen's chairs. . . . The dressing table could only have been hers. . . . All these things had drawn into themselves a species of life derived from their owner." And just as Jess realizes she has "made a home," Hall's narrator tells us that "now for the first time the old house was home. Mary went quickly from room to room humming a little tune as she did so, feeling that she saw with a new understanding the inanimate objects which filled those rooms—were they not Stephen's?"

Every now and again she must pause to touch them because they were Stephen's."³³ Touch, as I say, is a conspicuous sense in shelter writing, and this may be not only because floors require sanding and sideboards waxing but also because the things we brush up against in our homes may mediate—as they obviously do for Mary—our intimate, tactile relation to those we love. Apparently Hall herself took a rather erotic pleasure in domestic objects and spaces: caressing the worn wood of her antique furniture, sharing in what Una Lady Troubridge described as an “orgy” of selecting the most beautiful items for their first home.³⁴ And of course in a queer context there is especially good reason for beds and dressing tables to function as the sites of displaced erotic feelings—both claiming and coding illicit desires.

I want to conclude by briefly observing the way this works on the reality TV show, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*.³⁵ In this upbeat makeover drama, five gay men storm and swish into the most intimate spaces of the life of a hapless straight man. They look and poke into not only his house but also, as Bachelard might say, the houses of his things: his medicine cabinet, freezer, and sock drawer. Mocking the absence of skincare products, holding their noses at moldy food, tossing mismatched clothing to the floor, they leave nothing untouched—including the man himself. For despite the relentless dropping of brand names, what is genuinely moving about this show is the way straight men who begin insecure and out of synch are renovated at a spiritual as well as cosmetic level. Somehow, over the bodies of textured sofas and vintage martini glasses men are enabled to confess their profound sense of vulnerability. Schooled in the performance of mundane domestic tasks, they discover rituals expressive of their yearning for safety, order, beauty, and connection to other people, men as well as women. Outed as islanded Crusoes, survivors of the shipwreck that is conventional masculinity, they learn to redefine themselves not through daring exploits in the public sphere but through the smallest, most banal gestures in the private. And if this happens under queer auspices, is that because, as everyone knows, gay men are the divas of good taste? Or does the expertise of the Fab Five lie elsewhere—in their heightened understanding of the need we all share for shelter, in their privileged relation to shelter writing as a discursive effect of the unsheltered life?

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NOTES

1 Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 111–39. Other discussions of *Stone Butch Blues* include Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 171–205; Cat Moses,

"Queering Class: Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues*," *Studies in the Novel* 31, no. 1 (1999): 74–97; and Kathryn Bond Stockton, "Cloth Wounds: Queer Aesthetics of Debasement," in *Aesthetic Subjects*, ed. David McWhirter and Pamela R. Matthews (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 268–84. For my own remarks on Jess's butch maternity, see *Cool Men and the Second Sex* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 148–55.

2 Leslie Feinberg, *Stone Butch Blues* (New York: Firebrand, 1993), 234; 236–37.

3 Pat Rogers, "Crusoe's Home," *Essays in Criticism* 24, no. 4 (1974): 375–90. Also relevant here is Cynthia Wall, "Details of Space: Narrative Description in Early Eighteenth-Century Novels," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 10, no. 4 (1998): 387–405. Overall, Wall's extensive work on novelistic interiors argues that these were rendered rather sketchily—as needed for plot purposes—in the early eighteenth century, with furniture accumulating and descriptions thickening only as the century progressed. In this essay, however, Wall singles out Daniel Defoe for his precocious attention to "topographical" details, whether of rooms or streets. See also her helpful remarks on description as forwarding rather than countering narrative. Lydia Liu, in "Robinson Crusoe's Earthenware Pot," *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 4 (1999): 728–57, takes a less benign view of Crusoe's domestic production: in the context of economic rivalries, his homemade "English" earthenware implies a slap at imported Chinese porcelain.

4 Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (New York: Penguin, 1965), 91.

5 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Harcourt, Brace, 1927), 209.

6 Lorri Nandrea and Michal Ginsberg share my interest in what they call the "home maintenance" language of novels such as *Robinson Crusoe*. Like me, they tie prose describing such everyday tasks as finding food and making pots to Crusoe's dire situation, in which immediate survival is paramount. Their emphasis, however, is on the limitations of such language within plots pulling toward the long-range goals of an increasingly comfortable middle class. As Nandrea and Ginsburg explain, despite the novel's specialization in prosaic matters, the physical routines of keeping house quickly become too "low" (in their banality and class connotations) to remain within the purview of novelistic realism. See Nandrea and Ginsberg, "The Prose of the World," in *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, forthcoming); also Nandrea, "Home Maintenance: Narrating the Quotidian in *Robinson Crusoe* and *Mary Barton*," unpublished paper (Narrative Conference, Louisville, KY, April 7, 2005). My own work, by contrast, identifies the persistence over time of home maintenance/shelter writing precisely because some novels continue to focus on "shipwrecked" figures (for whom survival cannot be assumed) and to narrate the series of small, hands-on actions by which they make a place for themselves. Other critics who consider the role of domestic detail in the novel's development include Wall (see notes 3 and 6) and David Trotter, *Cooking with Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). Trotter and I both link the fine textures of domesticity in novels to broader anxieties/agendas regarding issues of class and gender. That said, our projects could be seen as the inverse of each other: I explore the meanings of domestic order, while his "mess theory" takes up scenes of disorder (spills, clutter, fumes) as tropes for accident or meaninglessness.

7 For a collection of essays theorizing descriptive writing, see the special issue "Towards a Theory of Description," *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981); for discussions of description in the early British novel see Wall, "Details" and "The Rhetoric of Description and the Spaces of Things," in *Eighteenth-Century Genre and Culture: Serious Reflections on Occasional Forms*, ed. Dennis Todd and Wall (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2001), 261–79.

8 Michel Beaujour, "Some Paradoxes of Description," *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981): 28–31.

9 Philippe Hamon, "Rhetorical Status of the Descriptive," trans. Patricia Baudoin, *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981): 11–14.

10 Jeffrey Kittay, "Introduction," *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981): i.

11 For this reason—because my primary concern is with accounts of homemaking centered on certain kinds of protagonists within particular plots—I do not, for the most part, consider the genre of the conduct book. Exceptions involve conduct materials featuring a dramatized narrator such as Martha Stewart or an elaborated narrative—the improvement of a straight guy by queer mentors, for example.

12 Beaujour, "Paradoxes," 58–59.

13 Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon, 1969), xxxv; xxxvi (hereafter cited in text).

14 Ben Highmore, "Homework: Routine, Social Aesthetics and the Ambiguity of Everyday Life," *Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (2004): 311.

15 Notable examples of work in this vein include Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979); Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989); Valerie Smith, "'Loopholes of Retreat': Architecture and Ideology in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Penguin, 1990), 212–26; *The Captive Imagination: A Casebook on "The Yellow Wallpaper"*, ed. Catherine Golden (New York: Feminist, 1991).

16 Needless to say, obligatory unpaid or low-wage domestic labor, often in someone else's home—housework as a servitude shaped by inequities of gender/race/class—belongs to the "gothic" rather than "felicitous" house; as I have stressed, such oppressive aspects of domesticity are not central to but do necessarily haunt my own more consolatory space. Novels that come to mind thematizing the dark side of housework include Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*, and Barbara Neely's "Blanche" mysteries (whose detective is a housekeeper). For a recent nonfictional account, see Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2001).

17 Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 139. See also his edited collection (based on a special issue of *Critical Inquiry*) *Things*, ed. Brown (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

18 Brown, *Sense*, 141.

19 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendell (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 117–18.

20 For this reason among others, the roving gypsies in *Emma* represent the ultimate Other for Jane Austen, their exclusion key to delimiting the world of her characters. On the racial/national work accomplished by the gypsies' abjection, see Michael Kramp, "The Woman, the Gypsies, and England: Harriet Smith's National Role," *College Literature* 31, no. 1 (2004): 147–68.

21 For recent work on the everyday, see the special issues of *New Literary History* 3, no. 4 (2002) and *Cultural Studies* 18, nos. 2–3 (2004).

22 Rita Felski, "Introduction," *New Literary History* 33, no. 4 (2002): 607–22; Mary McCleod, "Everyday and 'Other' Spaces," in *Architecture and Feminism*, ed. Debra Colman, Elizabeth Danze, and Carol Henderson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996), 1–37. For an earlier feminist critique of Henri Lefebvre, see Laurie Langbauer, "Cultural Studies and the Politics of the Everyday," *diacritics* 22, no. 1 (1992): 47–65. I would also echo Felski in looking to de Certeau's collaborator Luce Giard for work on the everyday celebrating women's domestic culture, in all its repetitiousness and creativity. See de Certeau, Giard, and Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, in vol. 2, *Living and Cooking*, ed. Giard, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 149–247. Whereas de Certeau parses our navigation of public spaces, Giard analyzes the "nourishing arts" emanating from kitchens: from selecting a cheese and putting up pickles to improvising

meals from leftovers and adapting old recipes to new technologies. Reading Giard's wonderfully rich microstudy of the "Kitchen Women Nation," I can't help noting (and regretting) the relative neglect of this text as a model for American cultural studies in favor of those celebrating the subcultures of rebellious male youth.

23 Felski, *Introduction*, 612.

24 See, for example, Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Knopf, 1977), which blames Victorian women and their sentimental, domestic values for ushering in the consumerism of modern mass culture. As Lori Merish notes, critics since Douglas *describing* the binary valuing productive, public-sphere men over consuming, house-bound women have tended to *replicate* it (arguably a risk even within her own highly self-conscious, historicizing work). See Lori Merish, *Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), 7–9. For a critique implicating the "domestic" in antebellum American expansion, see Amy Kaplan, "Manifest Domesticity," *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998): 581–606. Also of interest here is James Procter, *Dwelling Places: Postwar Black British Writing* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2003). Procter's revisionary study of diasporic writing focuses on images not of wandering but of dwelling. Like mine, his topic is "the emotional and cultural preoccupation in home and housing, an investment that was heightened rather than displaced by the fear of homelessness" (31). Nevertheless, Procter resembles his novelists in favoring the male solidarity of basements and barber shops over the privacy of homes, seen as sites of gender and generational conflict (62). Once again, domestic culture, women, and "bad" politics are implicitly conjoined.

25 For more on Giard's ethnography, see note 27.

26 Dana Heller, "Housebreaking History: Feminism's Troubled Romance with the Domestic Sphere," in *Feminism Beside Itself*, ed. Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman (New York: Routledge, 1995), 217–33. For examples of 1980s recuperative scholarship, see Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women* (New York: Methuen, 1982); Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, 1987); and Bonnie Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction 1969–1989* (Boston: Beacon, 1990).

27 As an obvious stand-in for the latter, see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); for an example of the former, see the "No More Separate Spheres!" issue of *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998): 443–668.

28 On Radclyffe Hall's housekeeping, see Laura Doan, "'Woman's Place Is the Home': Conservative Sapphic Modernity," in *Sapphic Modernities: Sexuality, Women and English Culture*, ed. Laura Doan and Jane Garrity (New York: Palgrave, forthcoming). Doan comments on two fascinating "good housekeeping" interviews with Hall that appeared in the *Daily Mail* (May 11, 1927, and July 16, 1928). For Doan, Hall's praise of polishing "with beeswax and turpentine," her "housewife's" eye for dust, and her love of roses are invoked strategically if not disingenuously. Doan disparages Hall's self-described mania for cleanliness as retrograde in gender terms, complacent in class terms, and hypocritical in sexual terms—an effort to "sanitize" her lesbianism. I, of course, am far more willing to be seduced by Hall's housekeeping language. Especially relevant is what Doan herself describes as Hall's erotic pleasure in domesticity, about which more below.

29 Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (New York: Penguin, 1979), 585.

30 Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*, 76–93.

31 Eleanor Kaufman, "Living Virtually in a Cluttered House," *Angelaki: Journal of Theoretical Humanities* 7, no. 3 (2002): 159–69.

32 Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (New York: Penguin, 1970), 49–50.

33 Radclyffe Hall, *The Well of Loneliness* (New York: Avon, 1981), 323, 321. For a discussion of queer spaces in *The Well*, especially that of the war front, see Victoria Rosner, "Once More Into the Breach: *The Well of Loneliness* and the Spaces of Inversion," in *Palatable Poison: Critical Perspectives on "The Well of Loneliness,"* ed. Laura Doan and Jay Prosser (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 316–35.

34 Cited by Doan in "Woman's Place."

35 For recent comments on *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, see the short essays in "Queer TV Style," ed. Chris Straayer and Tom Waugh, *GLQ* 11, no. 1 (2005): 95–117. In general, these pieces accuse the show of commodifying a desexualized white queerness—the better to moisturize the metrosexual market. Jaap Kooijman, however, notes its reliance on *real* gay men—as opposed to gay characters played by panicked actors anxious to clarify their off-screen straightness. And Sasha Torres agrees with me that the show usefully suggests a crisis in heterosexual masculinity.