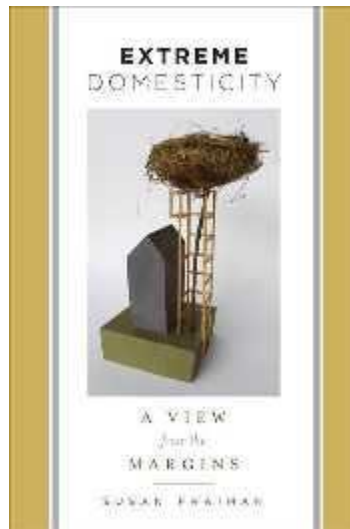


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*Special Issue:*

*Making Masculinity: Craft, Gender and Material Production in the Long Nineteenth Century*

*Guest Edited by Freya Gowrley, University of Edinburgh  
& Katie Faulkner, Courtauld Institute of Art*



**Refuge Fantasies**

[\*Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins\*](#). Susan Fraiman. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. 260 pp.

Reviewed by [Elizabeth Honor Wilder](#), Stanford University

<1>In 1926, the modernist architect and planner Le Corbusier completed work on a new public housing project — the Quartiers Modernes Frugès at Pessac, a village in southern France. Originally designed for the workers at a nearby factory which made packing-cases for sugar, the settlement’s fifty-one houses reminded many of the residents of sugar cubes: modular blocks of reinforced concrete featuring flat rooftop terraces, long ribbon windows, and open areas supported by slender, stilt-like columns. The standardized construction and relatively uniform appearance of what Le Corbusier called his “machine[s] for living in” (95) embodied the International Style he helped to pioneer.<sup>(1)</sup> Yet, almost as soon as they moved in, the new owners of these houses began altering and adapting them, covering their flat terraces with traditional pitched roofs, subdividing the long windows and adding shutters to them, and enclosing the open areas to make garages and additional rooms. Writing in the aftermath of

this experiment, Henri Lefèbvre concluded that “[i]nstead of installing themselves in their containers, instead of adapting to them and living in them ‘passively,’ they decided that as far as possible they were going to live ‘actively.’ In doing so they showed what living in a house really is: an activity.”(2)

<2>The story of the Quartiers Modernes Frugès serves as an apt parable of Susan Fraiman’s project in her newest book, *Extreme Domesticity: A View from the Margins*. Here Fraiman also sets out on a process of variegation, although the homogenized, modernist construct she seeks to diversify is not a particular building but the theoretical discourse around domesticity itself. She argues that criticism’s tendency to conflate domesticity with normative (white, middle-class) femininity has diminished our understanding of the range of possible domestic meanings. What would domesticity look like if we took as its avatar not the Victorian Angel in the House but rather a pantheon of figures more conventionally stationed on the outskirts of the domestic imaginary: working-class homemakers like those in Pessac, widowers, butch women, queer men, divorcées, immigrants, and those without a secure residence? Latter-day Robinson Crusoes, these figures cherish the ability to make a home precisely because they have known loss, precarity, and dislocation. Fraiman uses their stories to recalibrate the semantic field that “home” occupies in critical literature, shifting it from the domain of bourgeois sentimentality to an earthier, more elemental place: that of dwelling, shelter, and refuge.

<3>Through readings of a wide-ranging and suitably idiosyncratic array of Anglo-American texts from across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Fraiman redeems a vision of what, following Gaston Bachelard, she calls the “felicitous house.” She makes room for experiences of dysphoric domesticity in the expansive archive she uncovers—as Kathleen Stewart, a fellow commentator on the ordinary, notes, “There are times when it seems as if everything the heart drags home is peppered with a hint of addiction, aloneness, something rotten or worthless.”(3) But Fraiman’s real purpose with this book is fundamentally affirmative, an exploration of the terrain where attachments to houses and homes overlap with resistance to violent social and political orders.

<4>Fraiman publishes on British and American literature of the long nineteenth century and beyond, with a focus on gender and sexuality. Her first book, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (1993), is a study of the female bildungsroman that stretches from Frances Burney to George Eliot; it shares a feminist orientation with her subsequent two books.(4) Although only two chapters of *Extreme Domesticity* center exclusively on nineteenth-century texts, in many ways these two set the stage for the rest of the book, which refracts and recombines the ideas they introduce.

<5>In a chapter on Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (1848), Fraiman develops her conception of domesticity as a form of ongoing activity, arguing that Gaskell’s representation of the home as a site of unwaged labor and production makes it impossible to cleanly separate the novel’s sentimental plot, which is focused on Mary, from the labor-activism plot centered on her father. Gaskell’s emphasis on “the *doing* of domesticity” (47)

helps make visible the ways the novel's working-class households model an alternative domesticity, one premised on the precarity of both shelter and relationships and conceived as a practice of care and solidarity. The following chapter counterposes Edith Wharton's interior design guide, *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), against her novels of conjugal failure (and her own unhappy marriage) to show how an investment in domesticity can stem as much from the desire to escape family life as to burrow into it. In a particularly striking analysis, Fraiman draws a comparison "between messy fictions and neat rooms: between *narratives* exploring the often-entropic trajectories of married life and, as if in compensation, *visual images* in which drawing rooms and dining rooms, ballrooms and bedrooms are arrested in time, ordered, and aestheticized" (76). Upending the vision of domestic life given in *Mary Barton*, the grand, immaculate interior tableaux Wharton celebrates in her decorating handbook represent a fantasy of domesticity scrubbed of both housework and kin. Yet these rooms also suggest their availability for another kind of labor: the intellectual work of a professional writer.

<6>Although arranged in loosely chronological order, the book avoids imposing a developmental narrative on its material, instead presenting the chapters on Gaskell and Wharton as prefigurations of a set of themes that will run throughout. Mary Barton's experiences of domestic insecurity and poverty, for instance, link her to the protagonists of immigrant fiction by Sandra Cisneros, Jamaica Kincaid, and Lois-Ann Yamanaka that Fraiman turns to later in her book. Similarly, the chapter on Wharton pairs with the chapter on Dominique Browning and Martha Stewart, two contemporary shelter magazine mavens. More provocatively, a brief discussion of Wharton's *The Book of the Homeless* (1916)—a charity anthology with contributions from celebrity authors whose proceeds benefited World War I refugees—anticipates the book's final chapter on the domestic routines and aspirations of those without stable shelter. In addition to these thematic interconnections, the chapters are also linked to one another through a shared formal feature that Fraiman terms "shelter writing." Shelter writing refers to a mode of slow, detailed description of domestic process. It mediates between domesticity as a lived activity and domesticity as a theoretical discourse, bringing to light the ways the embodied reality of domestic experience exceeds the narrow parameters by which it is theorized.

<7>It often seems that critical approaches to domesticity come in only two flavors: denial or critique. In the first, the critic reveals that what looks like a representation of domesticity is in fact something else, something stranger or sexier. In the second, the critic acknowledges a domestic ideal but condemns it as ideologically suspect. *Extreme Domesticity*, which is both an act of disaffiliation and of recuperation, offers us a way out of this bind. By spurning domesticity's usual suspects (the middle-class wife and mother, the suburban family) and recentering on subjects disenfranchised to varying degrees, it stakes a claim for the importance of reparative domestic experience in repertoires of survival. "For the poor or transgendered person, the placeless immigrant or the woman on her own," Fraiman writes, "aspiring to a safe, stable, affirming home doesn't reinforce hierarchical social relations but is pitched, precisely,

against them” (20). This line of thinking challenges leftist critiques of the domestic by pointing out the role that an attachment to home can play in creating and sustaining radical worlds.

<8>But *Extreme Domesticity* is also an act of recuperation. Although Fraiman elaborates a novel connection between domesticity and marginalized homemakers, the constellation of values she associates with the felicitous house — beauty, comfort, privacy, intimacy, belonging — will not startle anyone. What the book finally offers therefore is not so much a reevaluation of domesticity itself as a reevaluation of domestic values. Building on the main argument of her previous monograph, *Cool Men and the Second Sex* (2003), which examined the denigration of the feminine and the maternal in the work of a number of masculine cultural practitioners, Fraiman in her new book refuses the gendered logic that belittles domesticity and its cognates.<sup>(5)</sup> Instead, she mounts a defense of “the mental and the manual agility required by [domestic] practices; the opportunities they offer for improvisation, artistry, and dissent; the grounding, ritualistic aspect of their daily occurrence; their ability to enact a complex range of feelings; and their organization of social relations” (17). In other words, through her careful attention to home as a potential site of creativity and consolation, and to the activities that sustain it, Fraiman herself emerges as a shelter writer. Scholars will find in this book not only a lucid reappraisal of one of the nineteenth century’s signature ideological formations but also a novel approach to reading gender in the period. Balancing descriptive and reparative modes, *Extreme Domesticity* shows that it is possible to sanction historically feminine values and practices without tethering them a constricted set of political meanings.

#### Endnotes

(1)Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture* (New York: Dover Publications, 1986), p. 95.<sup>(^)</sup>

(2)Henri Lefèbvre, *Lived-In Architecture: Le Corbusier’s Pessac Revisited* by Philippe Boudon (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1972) preface n.p.<sup>(^)</sup>

(3)Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007): p. 52.<sup>(^)</sup>

(4)Susan Fraiman, *Unbecoming Women: British Women Writers and the Novel of Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).<sup>(^)</sup>

(5)Susan Fraiman, *Cool Men and the Second Sex* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).<sup>(^)</sup>