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PLEASURE AND THE NEW DOMESTICITY

One hundred and fifty years ago, Catherine Beecher, author of the canonical and much-reissued *American Woman's Home*, observed, "Few objects of labor are more remunerative than poultry, raised on a moderate scale." There follow some instructions on life cycles, feeding options, and greasing feathers with lard to prevent lice. She includes nothing about naming the birds, the superior nature of the eggs, or enjoying the process. But the work, and surely it is *work* in these pages, is useful: "if a woman chooses, she can find employment both interesting and profitable in studying the care of domestic animals."¹

This at-home "employment" of one's time certainly remains of interest: a plethora of magazines, online groups, and even webcams testify to a renewed interest in keeping poultry non-professionally. You can even, for \$1,500, buy a pressed-plastic high-design coop that comes in six "fantastic" colors from a company called Omlet.² There's an entire book devoted to attractive chicken-friendly garden designs. And why not? After all, chickens "offer a sense of humility and peace."³ While you "could go to the grocery store and buy eggs from happy chickens," as one owner notes, "this is so much more fun."⁴ Others echo her: it's "so much fun and so rewarding"; furthermore, the eggs your own chickens lay "make the ones in the grocery store taste like garbage."⁵ *New Yorker* staff writer Susan Orlean describes the terrible urgency of her own desire to raise chickens as joining a nation-wide "surging passion." Although Orlean had never liked housework, she enjoyed the chicken-care, and the pleasure she took came in the form of pride: "When one of my

1 Catharine Esther Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (Hartford, Conn. and New Brunswick, N.J.: Harriet Beecher Stowe Center with Rutgers University Press, 2002), 293-4.

2 https://www.omlet.us/shop/chicken_keeping/eglu_cube/

3 Jessi Bloom, *Free-Range Chicken Gardens* (Portland, Or.: Timber Press, 2013), 13.

4 Price, Catherine. "A Chicken on Every Plot, a Coop in Every Backyard." *The New York Times*, September 19, 2007.

5 Jenna Woginrich, *Made From Scratch: Discovering the Pleasures of a Handmade Life* (North Adams, Mass.: Storey Publishers, 2008), 19, 29.

hens laid my first homegrown egg, I was as proud as if I had been attending my daughter's bat mitzvah."⁶ It may not be "profitable" any more, but raising chickens at home makes people feel good. Frying up a home-grown egg for breakfast, then, once a simple procedure needing no elaboration, has become the stuff of longing, and a route to personal fulfillment and self-actualization. As an activity, it has made the transition from duty to pleasure.

Historically, domestic pleasure for American women has been closely bound to notions of duty (spiritual and marital), escaping only relatively recently to enjoin with notions of the sensual and individual. When you are performing a required task, you feel good about acquitting yourself of your duties thoroughly and efficiently: this was the way 19th-century prescriptive literature framed the work of making a home for one's family.⁷ When tasks are unnecessary, we require justifications. Pleasure—either of sensory, hedonistic enjoyment, or of self-knowledge and personal growth in a therapeutic sense—is a modern inducement. It is the means by which housework has been re-enchanted.

In the past two decades, domesticity—once figured by feminism as which was to be escaped or minimized—returned with a vengeance to the public eye. The phenomenon of domesticity as elaborate play arose in response to an anxiety about the *end* of domesticity, too often conflated with an anxiety about the end of the family—yet certain exaggerated (or, decorative) forms of domesticity

⁶ Susan Orlean, "The it Bird: The Return of the Back-Yard Chicken," *The New Yorker* (2009).

⁷ Beecher emphasized the "honor" and "dignity" that was reward for "the many difficult and sacred duties" involved in caring for a family. Again and again, prescriptive manuals and popular novels equated those "right" feelings and that "duty" with the source of female, and, what seemed a near-synonym, domestic satisfaction. Women's work in making a home was an enactment of a larger cultural prescription that female pleasure was to be located in the performance of duty—even for members of the privileged classes, and in this way served as a remnant of a persistent seam between domestic labors and social hierarchy. Beecher, *American Woman's Home*, 177.

came to publically thrive.⁸ By the same token of celebrating the conventionally feminine, the third wave of feminism also opened possibilities for a voluntary return to the domestic, albeit a domestic space newly conceptualized as contested and open to a range of meanings.⁹ Some critics understand the postfeminist housewife as making a deliberate choice to “go home,” thus rewriting what had been a script about oppression.¹⁰ This new version of the housewife has had her agency restored to her; her actions, her rituals, her choices construct both a space laden with meaning, and an actively-defined self.¹¹ But important as the abstraction ‘housewife’ is to feminism, there are ever-fewer permanent housewives in America, and even fewer who are not simultaneously mothers. For most women, however, housework and cooking are integral *parts* of their daily lives. What is new is framing their more complex manifestations in terms of volition and desire.

Much of this new discussion has focused on the putative ‘opt-out’ generation and their work-family conflicts. But another group—homesteaders, who demarcate the fringes of New Domesticity

⁸ As journalist Katha Pollitt puts it, housekeeping was, in the late 20th century, re-visioned as “the source of order, beauty, pleasure, and happiness.” It became a “holy task” for the well-off, and one to which a new discourse of joy and fulfillment has only recently been re-applied; of course, for mothers on workfare, motherhood and domesticity are out-of-reach class privileges, something that must be relinquished for a “job” if one wishes to hold onto one’s children. Katha Pollitt, “Home Discomforts,” *The Nation*, January 24, 2000. Former lawyer Cheryl Mendelson’s nine-hundred-page *Home Comforts: the Art and Science of Keeping House* was a publishing sensation in 1999. In a defensively framed prologue, Mendelson claims that “it is your housekeeping that makes your home alive, that turns it into a small society in its own right, a vital place with its own ways and rhythms, the place where you can be more yourself than you can be anywhere else.” Housekeeping, in her view “brings satisfaction,” and the good housekeeper has always “lived her life not only through her own body but through the house as an extension of her body.” Cheryl Mendelson, *Home Comforts: The Art and Science of Keeping House* (New York: Scribner, 1999), 6-10. Similar rhetoric is to be found in Martha Stewart, *Martha Stewart’s Homekeeping Handbook: The Essential Guide to Caring for Everything in Your Home* (New York: Clarkson Potter Publishers, 2006). It is simultaneously, as historian of domesticity Sarah Leavitt has noted, a “dirty pleasure, an interest for which one must apologize in public settings.” Sarah Abigail Leavitt, *From Catharine Beecher to Martha Stewart: A Cultural History of Domestic Advice* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 203.

⁹ As Gillis and Hollows point out, however, the scholarship on women’s genres (most of it about film and television), fails to address, let alone, resolve, the putative opposition between the feminist (presumably engaged in market work) and the housewife. This tension had been revived by the backlash thesis, and mirrors oversimple dichotomies between public and private, and between “an evil patriarchy and a sisterhood of female victims.” Stacy Gillis, and Joanne Hollows, *Feminism, Domesticity and Popular Culture*, 3, 2, 51.

¹⁰ Stéphanie Genz, “‘I Am Not a Housewife, But’: Postfeminism and the Revival of Domesticity,” in *Gender and Consumption: Domestic Cultures and the Commercialisation of Everyday Life*, ed. Emma Casey, and Lydia Martens (Aldershot, England and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2007), 50.

¹¹ At home, a homemaker is involved with what Michel de Certeau terms the “active practicing of place:” she is creating something. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 117.

—has, since the economic crash of 2008, helped to reconfigure the debate about public and private by insisting on the primacy of the latter. In so doing—and particularly via the way their choices have been diluted for easier consumption by bloggers and other popular authors—homesteaders have newly inflected the terms of the meaning of ‘home’ and the work that takes place there for the larger public. Homesteading today is nearly always a choice. Most homesteaders come from middle- to upper-middle class backgrounds; they have had educations, and abundant opportunities for self-fashioning.¹² They have every chance to understand the tradition in which they choose to participate. There was a 19th-century back-to-the-land movement, pleasureless and calculating, a survival strategy for the poor.¹³ The most famous 20th c. homesteaders were Helen and Scott Nearing, who unironically referred to the back-to-the-land life as “the good life.” Moral satisfaction was key; but hedonism had no place: “We eat our grain unground and unkneced” (that is, no bread), as it’s better for the teeth. “Not eating,” they claimed, “can be as enjoyable as eating.”¹⁴ The generations inspired by the Nearings celebrated the satisfactions of manual labor, and attacked consumer culture with a vengeance.¹⁵

Today’s homesteaders maintain that focus on authenticity and ethical clarity, but add to the mix the inducement of enlightenment. Prolific homesteading how-to author Abigail Gehring makes the common claim that the practice is “enriching;” even if you try only one project—say, can some peaches—“you’ll have... experienced a different way of being.”¹⁶ The movement’s ranking ethicist is

12 Rebecca Kneale Gould, *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 218.

13 Dona Brown, *Back to the Land: The Enduring Dream of Self-Sufficiency in Modern America* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 29.

14 Helen Nearing and Scott Nearing, *The Good Life: Helen and Scott Nearing’s Sixty Years of Self-Sufficient Living* (New York: Schocken Books, 1989), 14, 273.

15 Brown, *Back to the Land*, 210-11.

16 Abigail R. Gehring, *Homesteading: A Backyard Guide to Growing Your Own Food, Canning, Keeping Chickens, Generating Your Own Energy, Crafting, Herbal Medicine, and More* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2009), 1. Gehring’s books join a full field. See, for a small selection: Harriet Fasenfast, *A Householder’s Guide to the Universe* (2010), is committed to the idea of social change beginning with one’s own household, after the “significance” has been restored to the home arts and trades, 25; Amelia Barrows, *The Five-Year Guide to Self-Sufficiency: Simple Living Made Simpler* (2012); Deborah Niemann, *Homegrown and Handmade: A Practical Guide to More Self-Reliant Living*; Kelly Coyne and Erik Knutzen, *The Urban Homestead: Your Guide to Self-*

Shannon Hayes, a homesteader who also made an ethnographic study of fellow “radical homemakers.” To Hayes, homemaking and child-rearing need not encode submission to consumer culture, get-ahead-strategizing, or religious zealotry. Instead, it can be an ennobling activity with broader implications. She transforms what was once an individualized economic solution into a sharply political statement: “Radical Homemakers are men and women who have chosen to make family, community, social justice and the health of the planet the governing principles of their lives.” They live by their own production, and through barter. While society may be built on the idea that money is power, “he or she who doesn’t *need* the gold can *change* the rules”¹⁷—this is truly radical political potential.

What is less revolutionary about Hayes is that hers is a woman’s world. While she gives lip-service to men as homemakers, her rhetoric frequently slips into exhorting women, and she gives a history of homemaking that never examines its own gendered terms. Nor does she take into account the history of homesteading itself: Narratives from 20th-century homesteaders suggest that while both men and women worked hard, a great deal of the uncreative drudgery—carrying water, washing diapers by hand--fell to women.¹⁸ And while homesteaders have tended to see two-career marriages as “potentially destructive to family life,” it is more often female homesteaders who relinquish economic ties to the larger world, and then find themselves with the brunt of the daily work.¹⁹

Hayes has left the common culture behind. But her gold-free life marks the boundary of a much-broader phenomenon. ‘Urban homesteading’ is one manifestation.²⁰ Another is the popular

Sufficient Living in the Heart of the City (2008).

17 Shannon Hayes, *Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity From a Consumer Culture* Left to Write Press, 2010), 13.

18 Brown, *Back to the Land*, 212.

19 Gould, *At Home in Nature*, 204. Jeffrey Jacob’s ethnography of homesteaders: division of labor -- roughly equitable on gardening and animal care; husbands do the overwhelming majority of repair work. And wives the overwhelming majority of cooking, dishwashing, and housecleaning. Only one in ten male smallholders regularly prepares the meals or washes the dishes and a mere 6 percent are primarily in charge of housekeeping. Twice as many women as men are dissatisfied with the division of labor on their farms. To them fall the relentless Sisyphean tasks. Jeffrey Jacob, *New Pioneers: The Back-to-the-land Movement and the Search for a Sustainable Future* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 137-39.

20 Carpenter, Novella. *Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer* (New York: Penguin Press, 2009).

format of the ‘weekend homesteader’ who works nine-to-five, but learns the skills that allow “a more independent way of living” and employs them sporadically. As Jenna Woginrich (who works an office job and doesn’t have a farm, but does “the same things homesteaders do”) puts it, the “Point is, *it feels good* to get dirty, work hard, and slow down.”²¹ There is, not just in homesteading, but in New Domesticity writ large, a correctly thoughtful way to do things, which carries with it satisfaction. Michael Pollan, author of the bestseller *The Omnivore’s Dilemma*, argues that, “To eat with a fuller consciousness of all that is at stake” is not a burden, but the kind of “pleasure” that is only “deepened by knowing.”²² Knowledge and labor alike are invested with pleasure-giving qualities by the pundits of New Domesticity. Grinding your own bread flour, claims one, “is more difficult [but] infinitely more satisfying.”²³ Another assures that, “Even the smallest backyard garden offers emotional rewards in the domain of the little miracle.”²⁴ And, for those who give over their lives to the project, “As much as you transform the land by farming, farming transforms you.” You realize over time that in your life before farming “you were *deprived*. Deprived of the pleasure of desire, of effort and difficulty and meaningful accomplishment.” Ultimately it overfills “not only your root cellar but also that parched and weedy little patch we call the soul.”²⁵

21 Woginrich, *Made From Scratch*, 2-3. Emphasis added. There’s a cottage industry of books about turning your own cottage into a home-industry. Carleen Madigan’s *The Backyard Homestead: Produce All the Food You Need on Just a Quarter Acre!* (2009) and *Little House in the Suburbs: Backyard Farming and Home Skills for Self-Sufficient Living* (2012) and, for those short on time, not space, Anna Hess’s *The Weekend Homesteader* (2012).

22 Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 11. There are, of course, other factors at play: the longing for authenticity, distrust of the government and the food system; environmentalism; economics; disillusionment with corporate work culture; the satisfactions of hands-on work in a technologically-driven world. See discussion in Emily Matchar, *Homeward Bound: Why Women Are Embracing the New Domesticity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013), 5. This idea shows up even in seemingly apolitical single-subject books, for example: “Eating home-canned goods is a modest but meaningful way to assert our self-reliance as citizens and declare our resistance to the oligarchical union of big business with government. Home canning sticks a finger in the eye of agribusiness and flips the bird at the corporate food industry.” West, Kevin. *Saving the Season: A Cook’s Guide to Home Canning, Pickling, and Preserving* (New York: Knopf, 2013), 43.

23 Ken Albala and Rosanna Nafziger Henderson. *The Lost Arts of Hearth & Home: the Happy Luddite’s Guide to Domestic Self-sufficiency*. New York: Perigee Trade, 2012, 1.

24 Barbara Kingsolver, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle: A Year of Food Life* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 177.

25 Kristin Kimball, *The Dirty Life: On Farming, Food, and Love* (New York: Scribner, 2010), 5.

So: old, once-necessary technologies that have been reinvented as hobbies or choices can give us a venue for skill-development; they can nurture our nostalgia for an imagined, better past; they may provide the chance for an immersive, meditative experience, and ultimately for spiritual growth.²⁶ And they can produce, as a side effect, the pleasure of one-upmanship. When you've fed your friends the honey you've harvested, one urban homesteader suggests you'll be met with "awe and gratitude."²⁷ Another blogger suggests "You may feel like you have superpowers the first time you prepare a meal using only ingredients you grew in your garden."²⁸ Or, why grow sprouts at home, you might ask? It's not just that they "taste better," one cookbook author writes, it's that, "You can boast about your sprouting accomplishments." You can say to your friends, "I am eating my homegrown sprouts for lunch today." "Would you like to eat some of my sprouts, the ones I grew at home, *myself*."²⁹ The sprout-afficionado isn't alone in her lack of grace: "If you think making yourself a meal from your backyard sounds satisfying, try feeding friends a meal you grew *from seed*."³⁰ The response of others to this caretaking *in extremis* is always implicit, if not explicit: "Recipients who *don't* bake get to eat amazing pie that knocks store-bought out of the park; recipients who *do* bake know exactly how much work went into that pretty pie and are doubly grateful."³¹

And how much work *did* go in? Rather more, one suspects, now that the pie baker has access to not just *The Joy of Cooking* but 30,000 food blogs. Buying a crust is less acceptable in the face of hundreds of recipe options, and studied opinions about flour provenance. But who's baking those pies? Overwhelmingly, women. New Domesticity *has* opened its pleasures to men, and at first blush

26 Rachel Maines, *Hedonizing Technologies: Paths to Pleasure in Hobbies and Leisure* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 122-23.

27 Woginrich, *Made From Scratch*, 68, 58.

28 Deanna Caswell, *Little House in the Suburbs: Backyard Farming and Home Skills for Self-Sufficient Living* (F&W Media, 2012)

29 Rita Galchus, *Homegrown Sprouts* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Quarry Books, 2013), 11.

30 Gehring, *Homesteading*, 101.

31 <http://hipgirlshome.com/blog/2013/7/22/say-it-with-pie-piebox-mighty-nest-giveaway.html>

it may seem that domesticity has blossomed into a set of more capacious meanings. But it isn't an equal flowering. We find men where there is danger; digging wells, butchering animals, foraging for mushrooms, or, even, canning. Food has been steadily acquiring cultural cachet, so making it is doable without cultural injury for most men, especially if it involves special equipment (home brewing or fermenting) or science (cheese). The physical power demanded by any version of homesteading is an easy fit. But many aspects of routine domesticity remain stubbornly female. As long as they do, ascribing pleasure to them is an act with multi-layered meaning.

Pleasure, insofar as it attaches to our private home lives, is complex because it purports to exist independent of politics and social binaries, but in fact is constructed by them and, in turn, participates in them: pleasure appears to be democratic and universally accessible, and there is no obvious "pain" associated with our own private, daily household tasks. Yet, different household pleasures (providing, consuming, enjoying particular substances) are both discursively and pragmatically available to different groups of people. Pleasure is also complex, because it appears to be bound, first and foremost, with choice and with taste—that is, with instinct and the body—while in fact being partially scripted and limited by cultural norms. Pleasure in our home-work, with its visceral content and ties to personal memory, can smoothly mask attendant cultural scripts.

Literary critic Susan Fraiman asserts that when we take seriously any aspect of the home—the "domestic, the private, the trivial, the manual, the habitual, and the everyday"—we continue the ongoing work of "flipping the switch on normative hierarchies."³² That is, to think carefully about what we do at home, and what we enjoy, and *why*—whether we're making jam or mucking out coops because we enjoy the process more than any other use of our Saturday afternoon, or because we feel we must because we can—is to clear space for a more genuine set of allegiances, perhaps ones that don't entail the rejection of society as we know it, or the elaborated reproduction of old forms in the

32 Susan Fraiman, "Shelter Writing: Desperate Housekeeping From "Crusoe" to "Queer Eye"," *New Literary History* 37 (2006), 351.

guise of new “choices.” The long tail of cultural assumptions about female meaning-making imbue New Domesticity with a coercive power that, even as bloggers and pundits resist it, marries old assumptions about gendered duty to new ones about pleasure and self-actualization. Pleasure, incompletely redefined, and bound to its own history, can be both liberatory, and a vehicle for retrenchment.