



Reflections on, and from, Feminist Practice: Introduction to the 'Home' Special Issue

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ABSTRACT

Home is a vital site and subject for feminist research. This introduction to the special issue of *Australian Feminist Studies* on 'Home' begins by reflecting on domestic spaces and routines as they unfold through contemporary art and performance. This reflection maps home as both a material space and an imaginary: a complex realm of constraints and possibilities. The discussion on this complexity of home is then situated within the contemporary context of the gendered experience of housing, from its precarity to its porous boundaries, ideas which are engaged with throughout the special issue. Taken together, the articles in this special issue show how questions of creativity, care, labour and technology, all pivot around home as a significant and (still) politicised site for feminist thought. Research into gender, housing and homelessness, and human-centric ideas about home also provide key insights into home as an unfixed, relational and political space.

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Home has a complex, contradictory and continuing presence for feminist thought. It is a realm of both possibilities and constraints (Fraiman 2017; Vider 2021). Sometimes positioned as a site of subjugation, sometimes as a site of community formation and political activity, home remains a significant theme and site for contemporary feminist research. Home can be tangible and material but can also be an idea or feeling. Home is both an emotional geography as well as a material one, and the experience of home is not necessarily common, shared or always locatable (Blunt and Dowling 2006; Lloyd and Vasta 2017). Importantly, for our focus in this special issue of *Australian Feminist Studies*, home continues to be both a material space and an idea tangled up with questions and issues about belonging, economics and global mobilities, as well as with political frameworks that impact upon everyday life in both routine and profound ways. The questions of what home means, who has the privilege of having a home, how home is experienced in the context of climate-change induced natural disasters, and how technology intersects with the affective and lived experience of home are all feminist issues. They underpin the collection of articles included in our special issue, and the global context in

which it was developed. Home is also a politicised and intersectional space where issues of gender, class, race and ethnicity coalesce. Increasingly too, with paid labour moving into this realm on top of affective care work, the conception of home as a space of pure reproduction and leisure is no longer tenable.

During the period of compiling this special issue, several events occurred that showed us the continuing relevance of home for feminist thinking and practice. In early 2023, for example, Joanna Walsh – a British writer – organised an online Zoom performance called *#theoryplushouseworktheory* in conjunction with the PHI Foundation in Montreal, Quebec (2023). The 12-hour online performance involved two women performers each in their own zoom frame, one reading theory out loud and the other doing household tasks: both in the setting of their own homes. Words are spoken aloud from sources such as bell hooks', 'Love as the Practice of Freedom' (2006), while a fellow performer scrubs a frying pan and loads the washing machine. Another performer reads the introduction to Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* ([1985] 1987) while the other frame shows a performer trimming her garden lawn slowly with a pair of scissors.

This relay of theory and housework invoked in the aforementioned performance – enabled by online technologies – unfolded slowly over the 12-hour period, connecting domestic labour and intellectual labour, while making home visible as the interface for both types of works. This reflects, in a very practical sense, the intensification of multiple modes of labour colliding in the home during periods of lockdown amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Home, and the caring and domestic duties needed to maintain it, became increasingly present across that period, as boundaries between work life and home life became ever more permeable, and unsurprisingly, emerged as the focus of many artistic and feminist endeavours.

Interest in home as a politicised space has spurred on several contemporary groups who work together across disciplines and national boundaries. *Insurgent Domesticities*, a multidisciplinary and multi-institutional working group funded by Columbia University's Center for the Study of Social Difference, take the unit of the home and the processes of domesticity as its critical focus (*"Insurgent Domesticities,"* n.d.). The collective's aim is to cultivate the scholarship of home and its practices as 'a politicised field of many interdependencies, from the sociospatial to the material and aesthetic, which demand regular negotiation and theorisation'. The collective is committed not just to further research and knowledge exchange in this field of study but also towards creating an infrastructure of care for its scholars. Indeed, the ethics of care has become intrinsic to the study of homes. Championing care in domestic environments, the London-based feminist design collective EDIT (Edit Collective, n.d.) focus on the biases and hierarchies of our everyday environments. Through a series of installations, exhibitions, design propositions and design publications, EDIT has reinvigorated important questions about home, its interiors, and its domestic routines at a juncture where conversely architectural interventions have moved a distance away from radically rethinking this space even as the pandemic and its aftermath have perceptually altered the sacrosanct boundaries of home and the city.

From September 2023 to May 2024, Madelon Vriesendorp, the London-based Dutch artist, painter and sculptor who co-founded the architecture practice OMA in the 1970s, is exhibiting her playful transformation of domestic artefacts and household dis-cards at Cosmic House, the London home of the late postmodernist architect Charles

Jencks. In *Madelon Vriesendorp: Cosmic Housework*, the visitor is confronted with plastic milk bottles fashioned into curious and fragile figurines, a family game with a psychoanalytic bent, and cardboard models fashioned after puns and jokes wedged into surprising but site-specific spaces in the house. The inventive use of found domestic materials elevated into art subverts domestic banality. It also raises questions about the crossovers between non-disruptive, productive work and housework in the domestic sphere, or as Vriesendorp reiterates, 'Housework is the work we do so that we can do our proper work. It is often done by women, and it's often overlooked' (Wainwright 2023). Because it is made and often kept in the home (her own), Vriesendorp's art literally finds its adaptive use(s), and over time, accrues its symbolic, metaphorical and anecdotal references. While playful, these artefacts reconfigure the site of home as a space of sexual difference in that they challenge the notion of a traditionally gendered realm, with their provocation to otherness in terms of gender roles and labour (Butler 2004; Holliss 2015).

This permeability of work and home, public and private is, of course, not new. Writers from a range of disciplines – often informed by a rich history of feminist and postcolonial thought – have contributed much to the idea of the home as porous, as neither neatly private nor public, but rather as rippling outwards (see, e.g., Bennett 2011; Chee 2013, 2017, 2018, and 2023; Cheng 2022; Harper and Price 2017; Lloyd and Vasta 2017; McCarthy 2018; Riley 1999; Steiner 2010). Home as a site and idea has never had a straightforward relationship between the inside and outside or between the private and public. Indeed, why the category of home has a lingering presence in feminist work is precisely its potency for challenging these distinctions altogether. Home, as Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling point out in their influential book of the same name, is 'a porous, open, intersection of social relations and emotions ... not separated from public, political worlds but is constituted through them' (2006, 27). And, as Cathy Smith, Ainslie Murray, Demet Dincer and Eva Lloyd (2023) highlight in their contribution to this special issue, the act of challenging these distinctions is itself a feminist one.

Notably, Blunt and Dowling's *Home*, first published in 2006, appeared in its second edition in 2022 as we were in the process of gathering submissions for this issue. Their book highlights home as unfixed and multiscalar. In their critical geography, home is positioned as a site, an idea and an imaginary inflected with the lived experiences of bodies with their own mobilities and limits. In the same year that *Home* appeared in its second edition, Sophie Dyring and Samantha Donnelly published *A Design Guide for Older Women's Housing* (2022). It appeared just as debates on affordable housing supply, renting and the changing profile of home ownership were increasingly present in the media both in Australia and elsewhere. Sophia Maalsen and Cathy Smith (2023) interviewed Dyring and Donnelly about their timely publication and its implications for this issue.

Indeed, the increasing awareness of womens' housing precarity due to changing home ownership pathways, emphasises the point that home is not just a housing market issue, but a feminist issue as well. The 2021 census showed that women across all age groups accounted for 81.7% of the 6067 increase of people experiencing homelessness since 2016 (ABS 2021). Older women are particularly vulnerable, with the impacts of structural disadvantage such as lower wages, time out of the workforce for caring responsibilities, and subsequent lower superannuation, all increasing housing precarity for them in older age (Darab, Hartman, and Holdsworth 2018; Petersen 2015; Petersen and Parsell

2015). But this is not necessarily new, as Anne O'Brien's (2023) article for this special issue demonstrates. Drawing upon historical interviews from the 1970s, O'Brien shows how feminists both challenged and reinforced conceptualisations of homelessness as a white adult male problem, which ended up producing divergent outcomes for women, either shaming them as flawed individuals, or obscuring the multitude of ways in which women experience homelessness differently to men. Housing as an infrastructure of care, therefore, is failing many older and lower-income women (Power and Gillon 2021).

Care has long been at the centre of feminist ethics, and unsurprisingly is an underlying thread of this special issue. Care, as the oft-quoted Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto show us, is 'a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, contain, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, ourselves, and our environment' (1990, 40). Care, then, is relational, and we see this relational activity emerging through many of the articles in this issue. Yet care work, when analysed within the time frame, and productive demands, of the standard workday, becomes complicated. In the home, it is difficult to decouple unpaid care work and paid labour (Foundations for Home-based Work 2022). Certainly, the fuzziness of work-live boundaries reflects and magnifies the struggle faced by many women, including those who work away from their homes.

For Gretchen Coombs, Larissa Hjorth, Kelly Hussey-Smith and Julianne van Loon (2023), care is front and centre in the heightened relational intensities of home involved in the caring practices of creative workers at home in the COVID-19 pandemic. Continuing a focus on creative work and home, Susie Elliott (2023) problematises the separation of care work and professional practice in her article on creative workers. For the participants in her research, there was opportunity to blur the boundaries between the individualised nature of work, often thought of as external, and the care and relational work often associated with home. It created the possibility for an identity of motherhood that inhabited both caring and working, the blurring of which remains an ongoing focus of this special issue.

Bringing in our wider environmental relations, Scott Webster and Fiona Allon (2023) look at how home (and its limits) are entangled in climate crisis. In their analysis, home is a site of multispecies connection and brings attention to the ways in which we are responsible for not only ourselves, but the many non-human others left homeless due to anthropogenic climate change. Returning our focus to human and cultural relations, Anoma Pieris and Kelum Palipane (2023) highlight the importance of home spaces for care and ontological security, focusing on the role of the migrant kitchen as a space of adaptation and persistence in the process of assimilation. In their article, Sarah Pink et al. (2023) also turn their attention to the spaces in which caregiving practices often occur, problematising gender-neutral 'smart home' narratives.

Home then, continues to be a site of relations that exist beyond our individual home lives, and extends to broader social, cultural and economic systems. In this special issue, particular attention has been paid to the location of home at the intersection of care, creativity, labour, technology and more-than-human worlds, revealing the complexity and porosity of home. Practices and performances of home therefore provide important insight into its politics and reconfigurations as it continues to be remade in the contexts of changing climates – socio-economic, political and ecological. As the diverse articles in

this special issue reveal, home remains a potent site, theme and imaginary for feminist studies.

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