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Nature in the Home

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Glossary

Domestication The historical, biological, and cultural process through which wildness is brought into the sphere of human influence, such as within the home and through agriculture.

More-than-human homemaking A term capturing the idea that home is made through relations between human and nonhuman actors.

Culture–nature binary The separation of nature and culture in Western thought; a way of thinking that constructs nature as separate, passive, and distant from human activity.

Uncanny A feeling of discomfort, unfamiliarity, or alienation within a familiar space or space of belonging, such as the home; related to the Freudian concepts of *heimlich/unheimlich*.

Nature in the Home

The idea that home is a human place that excludes nature is foundational to Western conceptualisations of home and underpins a sense of home as a safe, comfortable, and secure space. This separation has been subject to research attention across diverse disciplines including archaeology (Hodder, 1990), anthropology (Ingold, 2000), and geography (Kaika, 2004). This literature examines the historical, practical, and symbolic processes through which home is created as a place that excludes nature; highlights ruptures to home as a bounded and exclusionary space; and demonstrates that home is a hybrid space of cohabitation with nature. Home as a place that excludes nature is also implicit in a much wider range of research that focuses exclusively on the role of the human agent in homemaking. In absencing nature and nonhumans this literature reinforces the assumed dominance of humans in understandings of home. The culture–nature binary that informs Western relations with nature is a critical framework for comprehending home–nature relations.

Understandings of nature in the home begin with the premise that home is a process and practice that has material and imaginative dimensions. Homemaking is an ongoing, relational process that takes place through relations with and around the material world. The denial and exclusion of nature and natural processes is a key way that home is

imagined and made. Through the exclusion of nature, the material dwelling place is transformed into a home, a site that is shaped by feelings of belonging and security. This article focuses predominately on home–nature relations in the Western home, although constructions of home and nature in non-Western cultures are also considered.

The article is organised in three sections. The first section discusses the historical, practical, and ideological construction of home as a place that is separate from nature. This separation has been central to Western conceptions of home as a safe, comfortable, and secure space, and it underpins a sense of home as an autonomous space independent of nature and natural processes. Notions of home as a domesticated space have been influential in shaping this view. The second section examines the materiality and spatiality of home–nature relations. Despite home’s appearance as a place that is separate from nature, it is materially dependent on nature. The third section extends the focus on nature in the home to discuss the place of natural agency in homemaking. Nature is not a passive object that is simply enrolled into human designs and conceptions of home, rather it brings particular affordances that shape, make, and disrupt home.

Home and Nature: Separate Spheres

Views of home as a place that is separate from nature have long been central to Western cultural understandings of

home as a safe, secure, and comfortable space. Separations between home and nature do not simply exist but are made through conceptual, symbolic, and practical relations around nature and the material world. Historically they can be traced to the Neolithic period when home was first constituted as a place of culture in opposition to nature and wildness. These separate spheres are captured in the oppositional concepts *domus* and *agrius* (Hodder, 1990). *Domus* means literally the house-as-home, but also references the symbolic and material processes through which the wild was brought within the sphere of human influence through practices around pottery, plants, and animals. As a space and set of activities, *domus* was a strongly gendered concept that included “mothering (women and children), nurturing (providing food), and caring (storage)” (Hodder, 1990: 84). In contrast, *agrius* lay outside home and was associated with masculinity and practices around hunting, weapons, and death. Processes of domestication are central to *domus* and *agrius*, addressing the culturing of ‘wildness’ within and around the home. This includes the gradual domestication of plant and animal species through agriculture, as well as the domestication of Neolithic society through the establishment of more permanent and elaborate housing and of planned and bounded villages. Since the Neolithic, the production of home as a domesticated space has thus been bound up with the domestication of human society.

Conceptually, separations between home and nature are founded on a culture–nature binary that constructs nature, understood as the nonhuman world, as a passive ‘other’ to human culture and activity. These separations are founded in an Enlightenment logic that emphasises the triumph of (human) culture over (nonhuman) nature. This binary has been historically important in constructing nature as a passive object and resource that is available for human use. By contrast, humans, viewed as having crossed an evolutionary threshold through the development of sentience, sapience, and linguistic ability, appear as active agents and the “authors of their own designs” (Ingold, 2000: 175). From a culture–nature framework, human interactions with nature are thus characterised as a one-way relationship, a monologue, where humans design without input from the natural world. A second definition of nature as human nature has also been influential in understandings of home and nature. In this definition, the development of culture also signifies the domination and domestication of the internal, human nature. The improvement and domestication of external, nonhuman nature, such as through agriculture and as evidenced in the making of home, is an essential pathway that indicates the humanity and superiority of humans over nature. This definition has significantly defined Western perceptions of non-Western cultures, as discussed later.

Culture–nature binaries have three key implications for understandings of home and nature. First, culture–nature binaries support the idea of separate spheres: of home as a space of culture that lies in opposition to nature. **Table 1** shows how the culture–nature binary maps onto other key dualisms, constructing home as a domesticated and human space that lies in opposition to nonhumans and wildness. The exclusion of nature, nonhumans, and wildness creates home as a familiar and secure space; by contrast, nature in the home is viewed as matter out of place, a contaminating and anxiety-provoking presence that challenges the safety, comfort, and security of home. However, designations of nature and culture, dirt and cleanliness are not fixed, but rather are situated culturally and historically. These distinctions are clearly illustrated in Pink’s (2004) comparison of home-making cultures in Spain and England. For Spanish homemakers dust was encountered as dirt and out of place because it was associated with nature and spaces outside home, whereas English homemakers saw dust as a product of the home and therefore as less troubling. Individuals further manipulated these designations to construct particular identities, for instance tolerating the presence of dust/dirt to establish a resistance to dominant versions of housewifely practice.

Separations between nature and culture are most strongly articulated within the modern home. Reflecting the modernist goal of separating spheres and functions, the idea of home as a place that is separate from nature has been progressively written into the city through planning processes such as land zoning, restrictions around the presence of livestock, and webs of infrastructure that regulate the flow and supply of natural resources such as energy and water. These networks and practices construct the house-as-home as a place that appears to operate autonomously of nature and natural processes. Electric lights, for example, allow the home to operate independently of diurnal rhythms of daylight and darkness; networks of taps, pipes, and pumps supply seemingly limitless volumes of water; and technologies such as air conditioning materially and imaginatively disembed home from its immediate climatic setting. Abstract systems of exchange, such as the exchange of money for energy and water, consolidate these separations by distancing use values from the environmental source and

Table 1 Culture–nature binaries

<i>House-as-home</i>	<i>Nature/nonhumans/outside</i>
Culture	Nature
Human	Nonhuman
Subject	Object
Active/agent/homemaker	Passive/object
Domesticated	Wild

implications surrounding the use of these resources. These symbolic and institutional practices around nature are supported by everyday practices such as cleaning that further strengthen home–nature separations through the localised exclusion of undesirables such as dirt, pests, and germs. In effecting this exclusion, the modern home is made to appear as a secure space separate from nature and the outside world.

A second implication of the culture–nature binary is the reification of human agency in homemaking. From a culture–nature perspective, homemaking is a process of domestication: an intentional activity undertaken by knowledgeable human agents who exert biological and social control over the nonhuman world, domesticating it and producing it in the image of human culture. These processes commenced with the domestication of plants and later animals during the Neolithic period. The emphasis on human agency transforming passive natures facilitates a view of domesticated spaces (e.g., home) and domesticated bodies (e.g., companion animals) as simple reflections of human culture and agency. This is the default way that home has been viewed and represented in the social sciences and is most clearly apparent in the absence of discussions of nature and natural agency in research about homemaking. As suggested in the introduction to this article, the absence of nature and nonhumans in literature about home implicitly reinforces the assumed dominance of humans and human agency in homemaking.

A third implication that culture–nature binaries have for understandings of home speaks to the second definition of nature as internal, human nature. This definition of nature has been instrumental in constructing difference along the lines of gender and race, with women and people from non-Western cultures viewed as closer to nature. The naturalised association between women and mothering/nurturing sees women relegated to the space of the home. These ideas are apparent in the gendering of Neolithic conceptualisations of *domus* and are bound up with more recent articulations of the domestic space as a feminine space. At the same time, female sexuality, or feminine nature, has been constructed as a threat to home that requires regulation, control, and domestication (Berner, 1998). Non-Western cultures are differently placed in this hierarchy, with ideas about home, nature, and domestication providing a foundation for racial hierarchies on the basis of culturally specific (Western) understandings of property, ownership, and possession. Indigenous Australians, for example, have been construed as inferior ‘savages’ because of their nomadic culture and lack of fixed housing and agriculture (as perceived from a Western colonial perspective), factors that suggest that they are part of nature (Anderson, 1997).

Nature as Part of Home

The previous section established the historical and contemporary significance of home–nature separations in constituting the Western home as a safe, secure, and comfortable space. These separations are produced conceptually and practically through symbolic and practical relations with and around the nonhuman world. They are consolidated through a focus on human agency in homemaking that downplays the presence and significance of nonhuman natures in home. However, despite the dominance of this view, home is a space that is materially connected to, and dependent on, nature and natural processes. It does not simply exclude nature, but is made through complex relations with the nonhuman world. Understandings of homemaking as an ongoing process where the material space of a house is transformed into home are important in conceptualising this connection.

The ideological and conceptual construction of home as a space that is separate from nature and the nonhuman world contrasts with its material dependence on nature and natural processes. Maria Kaika’s (2004) work has been particularly influential in foregrounding these connections through the case study example of water, an element that is essential to the construction of home as a comfortable and clean space, but which is contrastingly also imagined as separate and part of nature. Water is enabled as part of home through its social and material production as a purified, domesticated commodity. It is “abstracted, dammed, channelled, stored, distilled and chlorinated” (Kaika, 2004: 274), shifting geographically and conceptually from the country (nature) to the city and ultimately the home. By contrast ‘dirty’ water is removed from home. These connections reveal that rather than simply excluding nature, home is characterised by a selective porosity where desired elements are “selectively allowed to enter after having undergone significant material and social transformations” (Kaika, 2004: 274). Water “(along with other forms of produced nature) becomes part and parcel of the *material* construction of the modern home” (Kaika, 2004: 267). The invisibility of infrastructures that supply home is essential to the maintenance of the illusion of home’s separation from nature. Hidden within the walls and below the floors of the modern home these infrastructures facilitate and consolidate a sense of home as an autonomous space that functions independently of nature, despite its essential connectivity.

This simultaneous need and denial of nature is the paradox of the modern home. While fostering feelings of comfort and security, this paradox at the same time alienates human occupants from home because, “In a deceitful way, remaining unfamiliar with [these] socio-natural networks is a prerequisite for feeling familiar [and

at home] within one's own home" (Kaika, 2004: 275). Home's paradoxical dependence and denial of nature thus constitutes nature as the domestic 'uncanny'. Drawing on Freudian notions of *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, this term refers to a process where "things that ought to have remained hidden come to light" (Kaika, 2004: 277). For example, at times of crisis such as water shortages these networks malfunction and 'come to light', highlighting the essential role of nature in home and giving rise to uncanny and unhomey feelings. As Kaika explains,

These occurrences put the normalized character of the control and commodification of nature into question, and threaten the smooth functioning of the domestic sphere. Such an exposure of the limits of domestic bliss, and a revelation of its dependency on social relations of production generates a feeling of "not being at home in one's own home".

(Vidler, 1992: 4, in Kaika, 2004: 276)

Home is also connected to nonhuman nature in ways that exceed human agency, control, and design. Pest animals frequently cohabit the house-as-home, rupturing and disturbing views of home as simply a human place. Insects like cockroaches and flies enter through gaps around drains and cracks in brickwork, actively challenging home's selective porosity. They also flourish in spaces viewed as empty, dirty, and uninhabitable by humans, foregrounding a view of home as a place that supports the life opportunities of diverse bodies that are not always human. Germs, and insects such as dust mites, further destabilise home-nature separations through their assertive presence in home. These entities represent danger and disorder within the home, rupturing and emerging from ruptures in human homemaking activity and flourishing in spaces such as the kitchen and bedroom that are central to imaginaries of home and that are the locus of feelings of comfort and homeyness (Power, 2007). The presence of insects and germs highlights the limits of human control over home, challenging home's selective porosity and highlighting a much greater permeability and openness to the outside. At a much larger scale, the pervasive impact of climate change and the current emphasis on local and household scale sustainability measures points to a broader shift in which nature and connections to nature are not only recognised, but also practiced as part of everyday homemaking.

More than simply disrupting home and senses of home as a safe, secure space, challenges to home as a place of culture can also emancipate occupants by confronting them with their alienation and therefore offering the opportunity for reflection "on alternative ways of engaging with the world" (Kaika, 2004: 23). Analysis of Australian homes shows that in some cultural contexts a blurring of inside and outside is an important way that home is made. This is evidenced in the growing

popularity of 'outdoor rooms' associated with outdoor eating and entertaining, as well as in the trend to informal living areas that are "physically (e.g., large sliding door) and visually (extensive use of glass)" opened to the outside (Head and Muir, 2006: 512). In this context, openness offers new possibilities for living that involve encounters with spaces and bodies outside home. These are not spaces of anxiety, but are conceived as facilitating a productive engagement between inside and outside. Unanticipated ruptures to home, such as by pest animals, also offer new ways of living home as a space that is connected to nature and home at other scales. For example, relations with native animals in the home can shape feelings of belonging at a national scale.

More-Than-Human Homemaking

Home is not only connected to nature, but also made through complex relations with and around active, creative natures. Understanding home as a process that is made and re-made through everyday practices that transform the material space of the house into a home is a critical first step in comprehending the significant ways that home reflects the presence of diverse, active nonhuman natures. Acknowledging the active presence of nature in the home means allocating agency away from the central figure of the human, towards a distributed and more-than-human understanding of agency that recognises and engages with the active and sometimes creative presence of nonhuman entities in home including, but not restricted to, animals.

Historic narratives that challenge the central notion of a knowledgeable, disembodied, and intentional human agent in homemaking provide an important foundation for a broadened more-than-human understanding of home. Most notably, anthropologist Helen Leach (2007) foregrounds the unintended consequences of domestication to demonstrate the limitations of human control over these processes. As Neolithic society moved into increasingly sedentary dwelling spaces, the human species underwent observable biological and physiological changes that are comparable to those experienced by nonhuman animals undergoing domestication, such as the development of an increasingly gracile skeletal form. This perspective unsettles the assumed dominance of human agency and intentionality in processes of domestication and hence homemaking. It also suggests the capacity of the material space of home to 'speak back' and influence the development of the human form.

Relational views of homemaking have expanded understandings of home in two key directions. First, through the notion of accommodation as articulated by Daniel Miller (2002), homemaking is highlighted as a

multidirectional relation where the materiality of the house can challenge and disrupt residents' feelings of being-at-home in the house-as-home. Accommodation expands human-centred notions of home by explicitly speaking to the materiality of homemaking through three definitions: First, accommodation means the physical dwelling place where people live and make home. Second, it describes homemaking as a multidirectional relation where (1) people appropriate and change this dwelling place so that it suits their living patterns and (2) people change themselves and/or their living patterns to suit the house. A final definition "expresses a sense of willing, or benign agreement to compromise on behalf of the other" (Miller, 2002: 115). In processes of accommodation agency lies in current and previous human residents as well as in the materiality of the house-as-home.

These ideas are comprehensively explored in Nicky Gregson's (2007) publication *Living with Things*, which examines the ways that home-nature separations are located in and (re)produced through homemaking activities around plants and domestic pets in the house and garden. Cohabitation with pets, for example, is characterised by three dilemmas, "specifically: how to manage their cohabitation in the dwelling space, how to manage cohabitation in things and how to manage animal bodies" (Gregson, 2007: 152). Recognition of these processes challenges traditional views of domestication as a one-off event located in the historical biological domestication of plants and animals and instead situates domestication as an ongoing and essential part of everyday homemaking practice that is essential to the cultural accommodation of nature in home. The home-nature separation is thus not a natural or inevitable part of home, but is a dynamic and contingent achievement that is predicated on the ongoing, vigilant activity of the homemaker. Views of domestic animals and plants as simple reflections of human culture are also destabilised by this view, which foregrounds their capacity for independent and at times disruptive action. Thus homemaking becomes a story of containment and holding nature within the bounds of human culture and respectability.

Understandings of home and nature have also been expanded in a second direction that emphasises the essential embodiment of the human actor and that focuses on the specific relations between human and nonhuman actors in home. Much of this research examines the place of animals in homemaking. Home is a site of cohabitation between human and nonhuman animals, including companion species and pests. Companion animals affect a range of homemaking practices including "housing choice and design, furnishing and the internal configuration of space" (Franklin, 2006: 154). They actively co-define the nature of the companionate relation and the form of the house itself, not only disrupting

home as intimated in Gregson's analysis but also opening up new ways of living home. Smith's (2003) reflection on her own experiences of cohabiting with rabbits is particularly illuminating. Smith seeks to reconceptualise the power dynamics that shape human-companion animal relations in the house-as-home. Challenging accounts that suggest people always dominate these relations (particularly Tuan, 1984), she describes her efforts to recognise and engage with the free agency of the rabbits that she cohabits with, focusing on the ways that they open up new ways of living home. Her experience of 'becoming animal' recounts a process of learning to cohabit with rabbit ways of living. It is equally a process that shapes the house itself, as rabbits participate in their own forms of spatial management. Through this process of intimate cohabitation, Smith and the house itself are recognised as 'becoming animal'.

Nonliving elements, objects, and materials are also active in homemaking. Human homemaking activity does not take place independently of these entities but is entwined with them and takes place through them. Home is thus a more-than-human achievement that reflects the qualities, capacities, and properties of diverse nonhuman entities. For example,

Water flows. It reacts with certain chemicals and dissolves others. Often these dissolved chemicals are invisible, and diffuse rapidly and uncontrollably. Water evaporates when warmed, condenses when cooled, and, as any homeowner in Minneapolis knows, expands when it freezes. It obstructs movement and enables movement. It serves as a pathway for viruses and bacteria, but is also used to cleanse. It seeps into porous materials, but flows across those that are nonporous.

(Braun, 2005: 645–646)

These properties are configured into the home. Views of home as a place that is separate from nature are therefore challenged, not simply because 'nature' is connected to and physically part of the home (as suggested in the section 'Nature as Part of Home' of this article) but because these elements shape and co-constitute the possibilities for what home can be.

Conclusion

The idea that home is a human place that is separate from nature is central to Western understandings of home and practices of homemaking. This separation is based in a culture-nature binary that constructs nature as passive and distant from human activity. However, as this article has explored, this is a limited view of home that fails to account for the multiple connections and continuities between home and nature. Feelings of safety, comfort, and security are enabled through these connections, rather than simply challenged by them. Finally the article has

shown that nature is also active in home, making a distinct contribution to people's sense of home, and the ways that they make home. Home is not simply a human achievement, but rather is necessarily more-than-human.

See also: Domestic Pets; Material Cultures of Home.

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