

# Geography and gender: home, again?<sup>1</sup>

Mona Domosh

College of Liberal Arts, Florida Atlantic University, 2912 College Avenue, Davie,  
Florida 33314, USA

The spaces many of us hold close, because so meaningful and dear, are those of home – of the homes we were raised in, the ones we abandoned, the ones we live in. In Sandra Buckley's (1996: 441) guided tour of Japanese life, the protagonist of the novel *Kitchen* states 'I think the place I love the most in the world is the kitchen'. Perhaps it is because these spaces are so meaningful, so complex and so close that we tend to keep our distance from them in our research. But perhaps too it is that until recently geography and geographers did not move past the front stoop (but see Loyd, 1975; 1981; Seager, 1987). To do so would be to move out of the realm of social science research as defined, and into the world of humanities, of emotions and meanings. Yet integral to feminist analyses have been the unmasking of biases that have directed fields of study, a reshaping of the contours of acceptable objects and subjects of study, and new ways of interpreting traditional material. So, in recent years, feminist geographers have re-examined and reclaimed as an object of study that which has often been ignored: house and home, the household, and the domestic world. While the issues I focused on in the last report continued to elicit some of the most thought-provoking essays published recently (see, for example, Johnston, 1996; Nash, 1996a; Ó Tuathail, 1996; Tickell and Peck, 1996; Kay, 1997; Martin, 1997; Nagar, 1997; Pulsipher, 1997), I want to expand my scope here to encompass different stories – those about home, as a landscape form, as an economic entity and as a domestic space.

## I The house

I'm still fascinated by the material that was presented to me in my first geography class – vernacular housing as an indicator of cultural regions. As J. B. Jackson (1952) vividly reminded us, the house, as the most everyday of landscapes, is also the most profound. And walking through the door, past the living room and into the kitchen makes it more so, as Sandra Buckley's (1996) essay makes clear. In her wide-ranging and complex article, Buckley's cultural history of the kitchen provides an appropriate and important entry point to understanding contemporary Japanese gender roles, household

arrangements, and local and national politics. She argues that some of the most vexing issues confronting Japan, particularly shifting gender and national identities, are articulated in cultural stories about the kitchen – stories that take form as novels, pornography, advertising, political campaigns. For example, Buckley compares the television advertisements for Prime Minister Nakasone (this was in the 1980s), and for a new flavour of instant noodles. In the first ad, Nakasone is shown seated around a coal-fired hearth, surrounded by three generations of family in a traditional farmhouse. His message was to promote what in the USA we call ‘family values’ – in this case, having family (and, as Buckley states, ‘read mother/wife figure of the nuclear household’ for ‘family’ – p. 446) take over the welfare functions from the state. The site of the advertisement for the new flavour of noodles is also the kitchen, where a grandmother walks in to find her daughter stirring a pot of noodles for her children, and gets lost in memories of her own mother teaching her to cook noodles in a farmhouse kitchen. The kitchen is not an arbitrary choice in either case:

Both the political party and noodle manufacturer (and their respective advertising agencies) recognized the fantastic space of the kitchen as fertile ground for mobilizing the notion of family in the retro-structuring of memories and traditions – central components of marketing strategies for social reform and consumer goods alike (Buckley, 1996: 447).

And the significance of the kitchen as a site of confirming gender and sexual identities does not seem limited to the Japanese context, as Ellen Lupton’s (1992; 1993) and Penny Sparke’s (1995) work on the cultural history of the kitchen in the USA and Great Britain demonstrates. Sandra Buckley (1996: 446) states: ‘The hum of the kitchen reverberates across woman’s time-past, time-present, and time-future: the source of comfort and potential site of contestation.’

Colonial relations, too, are enacted inside the house, as Anne McClintock shows us so persuasively in *Imperial Leather* (1995). Beatrice Colomina (1996) suggests that at times the house itself is the bounty that some colonizers fight for. Her analysis of LeCorbusier’s defacement and ‘colonizing’ of Eileen Gray’s house in Cap Martin, France, opens the possibility of interpreting the architectural authorship of houses as another site of establishing colonial and gender hierarchies. Sara Mills (1996) argues that in British India, landscape shaped and reflected the division between the ruler and ruled in terms of laying out new towns and settlements for the British that were separated both spatially and architecturally from Indian cities and housing. Yet within and behind these façades, the separation fades: ‘But this notion of the complete separation of the “native” area from the British area is one which only holds at an ideal level, since the separated civil lines contained within them large numbers of indigenous people’ (Mills, 1996: 137). Servants, for example, lived in the same compounds as the British, thus making the house itself an important site of enacting power relationships (Mills, 1997). Even in British hill stations, established specifically to segregate British women and designed to replicate Britain (Kenny, 1995), servants lived close by, and the open plan of the bungalow house turned private space into a public stage where domestic colonial politics were played out on a daily basis (King, 1984).

## II The household

Stepping into the house not only opens new ways of interpreting landscape but it also recasts economic analyses, as J. K. Gibson-Graham’s (1996) important and timely book,

*The end of capitalism (as we knew it): a feminist critique of political economy* demonstrates. Gibson-Graham (1996: 260) sets for herself the most imposing of questions: 'If categories like subjectivity and society can undergo a radical rethinking, producing a crisis of individual and social identity where a presumed fixity previously existed, can't we give Capitalism an identity crisis as well?' Informed by postmodern Marxism and post-structuralist feminism, she carefully and cleverly reveals the ways that Capitalism has been represented as a singular and fixed entity in a variety of discourses (her use of the capital 'C' indicates this singularity), from 'organicist social conceptions, heroic historical narratives, evolutionary scenarios of social development, and essentialist, phallogentric, or binary patterns of thinking' (1996: 4). These powerful images obscure the various forms of capitalism and noncapitalism that exist within and throughout our lives. The household economy, she argues, is one of the most important, although certainly not the only, site of economic production that is not foreclosed in the world of Capitalism, and as such, challenges us to recast our ways of thinking about the market, about production and about capitalism. The household economy provides an important starting point for imagining different forms of economic exchange. And imagining different economic futures is a vital first step in organizing and producing those futures, as Laura Chernaik (1996) shows us. Chernaik analyses the work of science fiction writer C. J. Cherryh, whose stories about a future form of transnational capitalism defined by race, gender, sexuality as well as class, help us to imagine how such neo-Marxist concepts as transnationalism 'must be transformed' (1996: 271).

Kirsten Simonsen and Dina Vaiou (1996) provide interesting case studies of how the use of such abstract categories as transnational capitalism precludes any attempts to understand everyday life, and particularly women's daily lives in which the household economy plays a significant role. Through extensive interviews, they ascertained the life-histories of select women in Athens and Copenhagen, focusing on women's everyday practices and experiences as agents of urban change. One of their more significant findings is that women's work strategies, including those of the household and outside it, both formal and informal, need to be understood as social practices, and that it is these practices that influence, both in Athens and Copenhagen, the societal organization of services and their own families' residential locational decisions. So, focusing on the household economy can inform not only critiques of how Capitalism has been represented but also how, on a daily basis, it is confronted and at times challenged.

In addition, the integration of paid work and unpaid 'house' work within the household raises serious challenges to how labour and production have usually been conceptualized. Ann Oberhauser's comprehensive study of women home workers in rural Appalachia (1996; 1997) challenges 'masculinist notions of the home as a private space where primarily reproductive activities take place' (1997: 165) by demonstrating how many women engage in income-generating activities, such as sewing and quilting, within their home. These activities demand that we rethink our traditional notions of home as the site of reproduction only, and that we allow for more flexible and creative uses of the home by women. Sherry Ahrentzen (1997) takes this argument one step further, to question the architectural design of housing, given that it is often the site of a range of productive and reproductive activities. Drawing on the work of Dolores Hayden (1984), among others, she argues for more creative housing arrangements that 'challenge the conventional, singular ideal of home by rethinking and redesigning the physical form and layout of the home and community to better fit the daily life patterns and meanings of a diversity of families and households' (Ahrentzen, 1997: 88). An interesting case

study of how one house was designed by a woman (as a client, not architect) to fit her particular, and not 'traditional' needs, is provided by Alice Friedman's (1996) analysis of the Rietveld Schröder House built in the early 1920s in Utrecht, The Netherlands. The house challenged traditional ideas of privacy and of 'rooms' by using thin, moveable partitions to divide space, and incorporated aspects of productive labour within its design. The result, according to Friedman (1996: 226), was a house that 'broke down boundaries between generations and redefined social relations through unconventional design; it contested the structure of the traditional family as well'.

### III The domestic

The relatively recent deconstruction of the binary public/private, informed by post-structuralist feminism, has opened up the world traditionally assigned to women – not only the house, as discussed above, but family and children – to academic scrutiny. In Stuart Aitken and Thomas Herman's (1997) work, the play of children is taken seriously, and those 'play' spaces are analysed as spaces where children learn about themselves and their relationship to others. As such, these are 'transitional spaces' where identities are being formulated and reformulated, and where selves are open to engagement with the environment, instead of controlling it. Aitken and Herman (1997: 84) suggest the possibility that children's play, where they are 'engaged in a dialogue with people and places', can teach us, adults, about a less controlling and more reciprocal way of dealing with each other, and our environment.

Studying children also confirms that parenting and schooling are highly gendered activities, from the types of informal learning that goes on in, for example, farm families (Leekie, 1996) to the more formal classroom. According to Gill Valentine (1997), parents tend to assess their child's ability to negotiate through public space and deal with strangers on the basis of the child's sex – girls are thought to be more socially mature, and therefore are able to deal with the outside world better than boys, who were considered less mature and less rational (as Valentine (1997: 42) points out, this is a rather ironic reversal of 'the historical construction of women as hysterical and man as rational and logical beings'). In addition, mothers are still considered the primary caregivers, and therefore bear most of the responsibility for supervising their children and taking care of their safety, despite some recent changes in the 'culture of fatherhood' and the 'conduct of motherhood' (Valentine, 1997: 58). But, while some girls may be considered more mature by their parents and able to negotiate public space better than boys, Karen Nairn (1997) shows that in the geography classroom, the potential for being publicly humiliated by 'getting it wrong' keeps many girls silent, and therefore out of the 'public' space of the classroom. She argues that the classroom is a paradoxical space for girls – they are both insiders there, within their own groups of friends, and outsiders in terms of the public verbal space. Their fear of that public space was due particularly to their sensitivity to being watched and judged, 'one of the most objectifying processes to which the body is submitted' (Nairn, 1997: 104), and one that historically has affected women more than men. Nairn presents a useful example of a 'woman-focused' lesson she devised that allowed more girls to participate actively. The lesson focused on a video documenting the life history of a woman from Bangladesh, and her decision not to marry, and Nairn structured the exercise around two strategies she thought would allow for a more participatory experience – students needed to use prior knowledge of their

own lives, and each student was asked to speak in turn on a topic for which 'there was no right or wrong answer' (Nairn, 1997: 109). Although the results were not uniformly positive, and Nairn acknowledges the difficulties of developing woman-focused curricula and tactics, her study should instigate important questioning of how we present geography 'lessons' not only to children but in our universities as well.

The less formal and more everyday tactics used by children to survive racism and sexism in the classroom are explored in Julie Mariko Matthews' (1997) case study of 'Asian' girls at a South Australian high school. Her extensive interviews and observations confirmed what many of us feel in our lives – that personal interactions are incredibly complex, and that the binaries formed when we invoke such terms as racism and sexism are far too 'clean' and simple, and rarely provide adequate descriptions of everyday life. In the daily lives of 'Asian' girls in high school, their imposed marginalization was lived in ways that it became a powerful identity: "'Asian' girls draw on discourses of racism and sexism to formulate tactical responses to oppression' (Matthews, 1997: 16).

#### IV The private in the public

I wonder if the tactics the 'Asian' girls learnt in high school to respond to oppression will be successful after they graduate. Successful tactics in one context do not always translate to another. Several authors have raised a related issue – what happens when activities and people thought appropriate within the house, 'get out'? Heath Schenker (1996) raises the question for nineteenth-century women moving into the public sphere. She interprets (1996: 305) the construction and design of the Children's Quarter within Golden Gate Park in San Francisco as an attempt to invoke a 'mythic domesticity' in order to assuage the anxieties caused by women's new public roles in the city: 'It managed to represent a mythical middle ground between two conflicting desires: the desire to accommodate middle class women in public and the desire to reaffirm their essential association with the private, domestic sphere' (Schenker, 1996: 305–6). These anxieties continued into the early twentieth century, when women found in public places that did not accord with notions of domesticity could find their public reputation ruined. Kate Boyer's (1996) analysis of rape trials in Vancouver from 1915 to 1925 demonstrates the role that associations with certain gendered forms of public space played in determining a woman's reputation, a reputation that was often used to determine the outcome of her rape trial. This complex relationship between the spatial and the social, and of the violent potential of transgressing the norms of sociospatial behaviour (that is, for being 'out of place') is explored in Ki Namaste's (1996) study of 'genderbashing' on the streets of Montreal. The analysis points to the pervasiveness of gender norms in establishing who and what is considered 'out of place', but also the complexity of analysing gender, sexual and transgender identities, and the 'slipperiness' of these categories. Similarly, but adding more of an emphasis on class and 'race', Susan Ruddick (1996) convincingly argues that how violence in public spaces is popularly portrayed depends on commonly held assumptions about public space and social identities, and that representations of public space are 'deeply implicated in the process of othering' (1996: 146).

So, when we move out of the house and on to the streets, our identities are constantly being monitored, judged, constituted, negotiated and represented. This is not to suggest that inside the house our identities are fixed or are unimportant. As we have learnt from

these recent studies in feminist geography, and will continue to learn, the home is rich territory indeed for understanding the social and the spatial. It's just that we've barely begun to open the door and look inside.

## Note

1. I am borrowing this type of phrasing from Catherine Nash (1996b).

## References

- Ahrentzen, S.** 1997: The meaning of home work-places for women. In Jones, J. P. III, Nast, H. J. and Roberts, S. M., editors, *Thresholds in feminist geography*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 77–92.
- Aitken, S. and Herman, T.** 1997: Gender, power and crib geography: transitional spaces and potential places. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 4, 63–88.
- Boyer, K.** 1996: What's a girl like you doing in a place like this? A geography of sexual violence in early 20th-century Vancouver. *Urban Geography* 17, 286–93.
- Buckley, S.** 1996: A guided tour of the kitchen: seven Japanese domestic tales. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 14, 441–62.
- Chernaik, L.** 1996: Spatial displacements: transnationalism and the new social movements. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 3, 251–76.
- Colomina, B.** 1996: Battle lines: E.1027. In Agrest, D., Conway, P. and Weisman, L. K., editors, *The sex of architecture*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 167–82.
- Friedman, A. T.** 1996: Not a muse: the client's role at the Rietveld Schröder House. In Agrest, D., Conway, P. and Weisman, L. K., editors, *The sex of architecture*, New York: Harry N. Abrams, 217–32.
- Gibson-Graham, J. K.** 1996: *The end of capitalism (as we knew it): a feminist critique of political economy*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Hayden, D.** 1984: *Redesigning the American dream: the future of housing, work and family life*. New York: Norton.
- Jackson, J. B.** 1952: Human, all too human, geography. *Landscape* 2, 2–7.
- Johnston, L.** 1996: 'Flexing femininity': female body-builders refiguring 'the body'. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 3, 309–26.
- Kay, J.** 1997: Sweet surrender, but what's the gender? Nature and the body in the writings of nineteenth-century Mormon women. In Jones, J. P. III., Nast, H. J. and Roberts, S. M., editors, *Thresholds in feminist geography*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 361–82.
- Kenny, J.** 1995: Climate, race, and imperial authority: the symbolic landscape of the British hill station in India. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 85, 694–714.
- King, A.** 1984: *The bungalow: the production of a global culture*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Leekie, G.** 1996: 'They never trusted me to drive': farm girls and the gender relations of agricultural information transfer. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 3, 309–26.
- Loyd, B.** 1975: Woman's place – man's place. *Landscape* 30, 10–13.
- 1981: Women, home, and status. In Duncan, J., editor, *Housing and identity*, London: Croom Helm, 181–97.
- Lupton, E.** 1992: *The bathroom, the kitchen and the aesthetics of waste: a process of elimination*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- 1993: *Mechanical brides: women and machines from home to office*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Martin, A.** 1997: The practice of identity and an Irish sense of place. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 4, 89–114.
- Matthews, J. M.** 1997: A Vietnamese flag and a bowl of Australian flowers: recomposing racism and sexism. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 4, 5–18.
- McClintock, A.** 1995: *Imperial Leather: race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest*. New York: Routledge.

- Mills, S.** 1996: Gender and colonial space. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 3, 125–48.
- 1997: Colonial domestic space. Paper presented at the Imperial Cities Conference, Royal Holloway, University of London, May.
- Nagar, R.** 1997: Exploring methodological borderlands through oral narratives. In Jones, J. P. III, Nast, H. J. and Roberts, S. M., editors, *Thresholds in feminist geography*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 203–24.
- Nairn, K.** 1996: Hearing from quiet students: the politics of silence and voice in geography classrooms. In Jones, J. P. III, Nast, H. J. and Roberts, S. M., editors, *Thresholds in feminist geography*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 93–115.
- Namaste, K.** 1996: Genderbashing: sexuality, gender, and the regulation of public space. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 14, 221–40.
- Nash, C.** 1996a: Reclaiming vision: looking at landscape and body. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 3, 149–70.
- 1996b: Men again: masculinity, nature, and nationhood in the early twentieth century. *Ecumene: A Journal of Environment, Culture, Meaning* 3, 427–53.
- Oberhauser, A.** 1995: Gender and household economic strategies in rural Appalachia. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 2, 51–70.
- 1997: The home as ‘field’: households and homework in rural Appalachia. In Jones, J. P. III, Nast, H. J. and Roberts, S. M., editors, *Thresholds in feminist geography*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 165–82.
- Ó Tuathail, G.** 1996: An anti-geopolitical eye: Maggie O’Kane in Bosnia, 1992–93. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 3, 171–86.
- Pulsipher, L. M.** 1997: For whom shall we write? What voice shall we use? Which story shall we tell? In Jones, J. P. III, Nast, H. J. and Roberts, S. M., editors, *Thresholds in feminist geography*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 285–318.
- Ruddick, S.** 1996: Constructing difference in public spaces: race, class and gender as interlocking systems. *Urban Geography* 17, 132–51.
- Schenker, H.** 1996: Women’s and children’s quarters in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 3, 293–308.
- Seager, J.** 1987: The home as landscape: shaping an ideal. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the AAG, Portland, OR.
- Simonsen, K. and Vaiou, D.** 1996: Women’s lives and the making of the city: experiences from ‘north’ and ‘south’ of Europe. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 20, 446–65.
- Sparke, P.** 1995: *As long as it’s pink: the sexual politics of taste*. London: Pandora.
- Tickell, A. and Peck, J.** 1996: The return of the Manchester men: men’s words and men’s deeds in the remaking of the local state. *Transactions, Institute of British Geographers* 21, 595–616.
- Valentine, G.** 1997: ‘My son’s a bit dizzy.’ ‘My wife’s a bit soft’: gender, children and cultures of parenting. *Gender, Place and Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 4, 37–62.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.