Working from Home: An Oral History of Activism, Gender and the Environment

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In contemporary scholarship, the prominent narrative surrounding what constitutes environmental activism in Australia from the 1960s onwards has been focused on the public domain and concerns with the protection of untouched wild spaces where humans don't live. Constituting a hybrid 'worked' landscape, the move of urbanites towards small-scale self-sufficiency on small rural and semi-rural properties has only recently come to scholarly attention as a way of proffering tangible solutions for economic, social and environmental insecurity, while tapping into rising concerns over the long-term sustainable character of industrial and post-industrial societies. This article draws on oral history testimonies to expand the common understanding of environmental activism to include the domestic sphere and explore how women have reconstructed their domesticity as an answer to the challenges of industrial modernity and to counter rising consumerism and detachment from the environment. In their quest for simplicity these women have constructed an intimate way to engage with nature through daily ritual and practice and formed a relationship to place that has involved re-creating and reframing the domestic as a form of environmental awareness, rejecting the ecofeminist logic that has sought separation from the home as a means of empowerment and social engagement.

INTRODUCTION

> I remember one of those defining moments was marching down the steps of King George Square, arms linked with a whole mob of people chanting 'the people united will never be defeated' and thinking, we're going to get hammered, we're not just going to get defeated here. Realising here that it was a silly chant … and thinking that you don't change it like this, you don't win this war like this, you win this battle by living a different lifestyle and showing that it works.[1]

Linda Woodrow was a wide-eyed working-class young woman from the suburbs of Brisbane. Like many coming of age in the 1970s, she participated in protests over the Vietnam War and nuclear power, while also objecting to the rapid diminishing of natural heritage and environmental assets in Australia and across the world. In her reflections on what led her to live at her current home at Black Horse Creek, a 400-hectare co-operative lifestyle property in the hinterland of northern New South Wales, she recalls that her 'Maleny vision'[2] grew out of a desire to 'make the politics work' while avoiding the hypocrisy of uranium mining for electricity – 'using electricity and then protesting about how it was produced'.[3]

Participation in the broadly identified 1970s counterculture for women such as Linda was not uncommon, but their stories and life histories have only recently emerged following the normalisation of discourses on gender equality across a range of hitherto masculine fields, together with a growing interest in sustainable behaviours and activities. As Lynn Abrams recently observed, these testimonies and narratives are common to women of the global north, and can translate the 'lived experience of being a woman into narrative – one that reclaims the female experience from patriarchal histories'.[4] Contributing to a range of factors and ideologies

1 Linda Woodrow, interviewed by author, Kyogle, NSW, 16 June 2016, tape and transcript held by author.

2 Maleny is a Sunshine Coast hinterland town 80 kilometres north of Brisbane with a strong countercultural history equitable with the more well-known town of Nimbin in Northern New South Wales.

3 Linda Woodrow, 16 June 2016.

4 Comparing interviews with British, North American and Australian women, Abrams asserts the propensity of the post-1940s generation to 'place themselves at the centre of their narratives as *(continued over page)*

that have shaped the broad move back to the land as both creative acts of personal and social transformation and as a rebellion against distressing aspects of industrial modernity, such testimonies will help explore a hitherto overlooked intersection of environmental activism, gender and relationship to place in late-twentieth-century Australia.[5]

This article is concerned with the intimate space of home-based activism as expressed through a largely overlooked tradition of back-to-the-land self-sufficiency across rural and semi-rural Australia. Using oral testimonies drawn from broader research concerned with the historical move 'off-grid' in Australia, this article considers the rise of post-1970s back-to-the-landers, particularly women, as a cohort of activists whose divergence from mainstream conservation practices was embodied by a simple, low-carbon life shaped by the tenets of post-materialism.[6] Contributing to research broadly concerned with the historical context for why urban people continue to embrace aspects of self-sufficiency, I argue that the move back to the land, often seen as escaping or avoiding the problems of modern society, has also inculcated concern for protecting the environment and, more recently, finding a better balance for living in a climate emergency.

This article considers the stories of three women from the 1970s, '80s and '90s drawn from a sample group of 35 people, both male and female, across generations, coupled and single in both heterosexual and same-sex relations who chose

heroes of their own life stories'. See Lynn Abrams, 'Heroes of Their Own Life Stories: Narrating the Female Self in the Feminist Age', *Cultural and Social History* 16, no. 2 (2019): 207.

5 North America has a much larger demographic and established back-to-the-land culture and associated research that explores similar narratives and ideas of environmental care and concern. See Mark Leeming, *In Defence of Home Places: Environmental Activism in Nova Scotia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017); Rebecca Kneale Gould, *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 203–17. Australian research has largely overlooked this intersection. See Ruth Liepins, '"Women of Broad Vision": Nature and Gender in the Environmental Activism of Australia's "Women in Agriculture" Movement', *Environment and Planning A* 30, no. 7 (1998): 1179–96; Ruth Fincher and Ruth Panelli, 'Making Space: Women's Urban and Rural Activism and the Australian State', *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 8, no. 2 (2001): 129–48; Daniela Koleva,'Narrating Nature: Perceptions of the Environment and Attitudes towards It in Life Stories', in Stephen Hussey and Paul Richard Thompson (eds), *Environmental Consciousness: The Roots of a New Political Agenda* (London: Routledge, 2000), 63–75.

6 Ronald Inglehart, 'Post-Materialism in an Environment of Insecurity', *American Political Science Review* 75, no. 4 (1981): 880–900.

to be interviewed on their back-to-the-land experiences. These three stories help elucidate how ordinary domestic activities and identities can be reconstituted as divergent forms of environmental activism.[7] By no means unique, these testimonies are representative of the alternative frameworks brought to bear on rural self-sufficiency (united by the term 'off-grid living') and selected to demonstrate both spatial and social diversity, and a shared identity across the states and generations. In this way, these testimonies share a sustainability and environmental lifestyle focus and may not be representative of the broad category of counter-urban migrants who commonly demonstrate a desire for better amenity, employment opportunities, affordable land, and overall quality of life concerns.[8] The stories shared here are thus selective of experiences but demonstrative of how women's domestic activism can embody a broad-based and expansive environmental understanding that transcends the private domain, and is distinct to concern for specific habitats, landscapes or environs in the public domain.

Although ideas of the domestic are often confined to the home and family, Pam Nichols suggests it is time to expand the scope of environmental history to translate care and concern for one's home (and health) into broader spatial and social locations.[9] Beyond direct action campaigns, this article suggests simple acts of self-sufficiency parallel what researchers have coined 'everyday materialist practices', and can challenge established binaries that essentialise the relationship between women, nature and the domestic sphere.[10] By expanding the domestic sphere to

7 Rachel Goldlust, 'Going Off-Grid: A History of Power, Protest and the Environment in Australia, 1890–2016', (PhD thesis, La Trobe University, 2020).

8 Neil Argent et al., 'Amenity-Led Migration in Rural Australia: A New Driver of Local Demographic and Environmental Change?', in Gary Luck, Digby Race and Rosemary Black (eds), *Demographic Change in Australia's Rural Landscapes* (Dordrecht: New York: Springer, 2010), 23–44; Michaela Benson and Karen O'Reilly, 'Migration and the Search for a Better Way of Life: A Critical Exploration of Lifestyle Migration', *The Sociological Review* 57, no. 4 (2009): 608–25.

9 Pam Nichols, 'Expanding the Scope of Environmental history: Householders Campaigning for Safer Homes', in Andrea Gaynor, Mathew Trinca and Anna Haebich (eds), *Country: Visions of Land and People in Western Australia* (Perth: WA Museum, 2003), 241–55.

10 Niamh Moore, 'Ecofeminism as Third Wave Feminism? Essentialism, Activism and the Academy', in S. Gillis, G. Howie and R. Munford (eds), *Third Wave Feminism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 227–39; Aidan Davison, 'A Domestic Twist on the Eco-efficiency Turn: Environmentalism, Technology, Home', in Ruth Lane and Andrew Gorman-Murray (eds), *Material Geographies of Household Sustainability* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), 35–49.

incorporate small acreage which, as Valerie Padilla Carroll points out, extends the spatial and labour association to include the 'imagined self-reliance of smallholder independence offered by back-to-the-land, self-sufficiency, and urban homesteading movements' the home (or domestic space) is expanded spatially, while the self is re-appraised within a wider community of people and natural/biological elements.[11] Building on a growing interest in sustainable materialism that explicitly recognises human immersion in non-human natural systems, this article explores how some women of the post–World War II generation found they could 'work from home' as Linda claimed above, by 'living a different lifestyle and showing that it works'.[12]

HISTORIES OF ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

Over the past four decades, Australian environmental activism has largely been associated in both public imagination and in academic research as a function of public demonstrations, actions and boycotts.[13] According to scholarship, the contemporary green lobby constitutes an informal social protest movement whose roots are traced back to the urban Green Bans and conservation campaigns of the late 1960s and 1970s, later consolidated by the advocacy of grassroots groups such as Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and the Tasmanian Wilderness Society.[14] According to this

11 Valerie Padilla Carroll, 'The Radical Possibilities of New (Feminist, Environmentalist) Domesticity: Housewifery as an Altermodernity Project', *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 23, no. 1 (2016): 51–70. New Domesticity was coined by Emily Matchar, *Homeward Bound: Why Women Are Embracing the New Domesticity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 5.

12 David Schlosberg and Romand Coles, 'The New Environmentalism of Everyday Life: Sustainability, Material Flows and Movements', *Contemporary Political Theory* 15, no. 2 (2016): 160–81. See also Thomas S.J. Smith, 'Ecological Ethics of Care and the Multiple Self: Revisiting the Roots of Environmentalism', in *Sustainability, Wellbeing and the Posthuman Turn* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 63–90.

13 Stephen Cotgrove and Andrew Duff, 'Environmentalism, Middle-Class Radicalism and Politics', *Sociological Review* 28, no. 2 (1980): 333–51; Stephen Crook and Jan Pakulski, 'Shades of Green: Public Opinion on Environmental Issues in Australia', *Australian Journal of Political Science* 30, no. 1 (1995): 39–55; Bruce Tranter, 'Environmentalism in Australia: Elites and the Public', *Journal of Sociology* 35, no. 3 (1999): 331–50; Joanne Dono, Janine Webb and Ben Richardson, 'The Relationship Between Environmental Activism, Pro-environmental Behaviour and Social Identity', *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 30, no. 2 (2010): 178–86.

14 Verity Burgmann, *Power, Profit and Protest: Australian Social Movements and Globalisation* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2003); Rowan J. Cahill and Beverley Symons, *A Turbulent Decade: Social Protest Movements and the Labour Movement, 1965–1975* (Newtown, NSW: Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, 2005); Jon Piccini, *Transnational Protest, Australia and the 1960s* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

narrative, across the environmental, social and political justice movements from the 1960s onwards, care and concern over issues, both big and small, were enacted across particular natural settings such as the Great Barrier Reef (1967–1975), Little Desert (1969), Myall Lakes (1969–1970) and Lake Pedder (1967–1973), sometimes buoyed by dedicated letter-writing campaigns and political petitions.[15] In this way, much of the recording of this movement has been concerned with prominent figureheads, tracing grassroots collective action campaigns, and navigating the intersection of politics and conservation as it has reflected a concern for the plight of untouched 'wild' places.[16] While much of the historiography has focused on wilderness campaigns, there has been a move towards recognising activism on a private and community level, particularly across the changing demographic and land-use concerns of rural and semi-rural areas that has attracted fleeting interest.[17] Within a broader shift in environmental politics from large-scale public advocacy to consumer choices and a more individualised move to a low-carbon footprint, the emergence of a particular feminised discourse through this convergence has only nominally and tangentially been investigated in the Australian context.[18]

Taking Linda's testimony above as an entry point into a new narrative of environmental concern involves generating a different archive and asking a different set of questions. Oral history can help illuminate the human immersion in non-human natural systems, in this case, the motivation behind moving onto a piece of land and

15 Drew Hutton and Libby Connors, *A History of the Australian Environment Movement* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Timothy Doyle and Tsarina Doyle, *Green Power: The Environment Movement in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000).

16 Libby Robin, *Defending the Little Desert: The Rise of Ecological Consciousness in Australia* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1998); Iain McIntyre, 'Tree-Sits, Barricades and Lock-Ons: Obstructive Direct Action and the History of the Environmental Movement, 1979–1990' (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2018); Vanessa Bible, *Terania Creek and the Forging of Modern Environmental Activism*, Palgrave Studies in World Environmental History (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot, 2018).

17 John Holmes, 'Impulses Towards a Multifunctional Transition in Rural Australia: Gaps in the Research Agenda', *Journal of Rural Studies* 22, no. 2 (2006): 142–60; Nicholas Gill, Peter Klepeis and Laurie Chisholm, 'Stewardship Among Lifestyle Oriented Rural Landowners', *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 53, no. 3 (2010): 317–334; Benjamin Cooke and Ruth Lane, 'How Do Amenity Migrants Learn to Be Environmental Stewards of Rural Landscapes?', *Landscape and Urban Planning* 134 (2015): 43–52.

18 Ruth Liepins, 'Fields of Action: Australian Women's Agricultural Activism in the 1990s', *Rural Sociology* 63, no. 1 (1998): 128–56; Kyra Clarke, 'Wilful knitting? Contemporary Australian Craftivism and Feminist Histories', *Continuum* 30, no. 3 (2016): 298–306.

rejuvenating the immediate environment, learning to live with the seasons, build from locally sourced materials and trade within local networks.[19] As Holmes and Goodall remind us, while oral historians often write about place, attachment and meaning, they are less adept at approaching the 'human/nature inter-relationship and the way these change'.[20] And while interdisciplinary scholarship on environmental change and our relationship to it often draws on oral resources, they tend to inform and complement scientific approaches to land management or ecological systems, with a repeated focus on weather phenomena, dramatic landscapes or popular spaces such as national parks, mountain ranges and watercourses.[21] In his treatise on living and working in nature, Richard White argues smallholdings and rural lifestyle properties can help create knowledge, familiarity, and in some cases, offer a solution to our problematic relationship with the nonhuman world, but these efforts are often discounted in environmental literature.[22]

In existing historiography, much like their American counterparts, the first generation of Australian environmental historians and geographers often located the

19 Often conflated with homesteading in North America, and smallholding traditions in England and Europe, the phenomenon is characterised by subsistence agriculture, home preservation of food and small-scale production of textiles, clothing and craftwork for household use or sale. Pursued in different ways around the world – and in different historical eras – it is generally differentiated from rural village or commune living by isolation into family units (either socially or physically). See David Ernest Robinson, *The Complete Homesteading Book: Proven Methods for Self-Sufficient Living* (Charlotte, Vermont: Garden Way Publishing, 1974), 2–3.

20 Katie Holmes and Heather Goodall (eds), *Telling Environmental Histories: Intersections of Memory, Narrative and Environment*, Palgrave Studies in World Environmental History (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 4.

21 Ruth Lane, 'Oral Histories and Scientific Knowledge in Understanding Environmental Change: A Case Study in the Tumut Region, NSW', *Australian Geographical Studies* 35, no. 2 (1997): 195–205; Leena Rossi, 'Oral History and Individual Environmental Experience', in Timo Myllyntaus (ed.), *Thinking Through the Environment: Green Approaches to Global History* (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 2011), 135–55; Heather Goodall, 'Rivers, Memory and Migrancy: Everyday Place-Making in Changing Environments', in Katie Holmes and Heather Goodall (eds), *Telling Environmental Histories: Intersections of Memory, Narrative and Environment* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 31–50. For recent work that relates to less wild agricultural landscapes see Andrea Gaynor and Joy McCann. '"I've Had Dolphins … Looking for Abalone for Me": Oral History and the Subjectivities of Marine Engagement', *The Oral History Review* 44, no. 2 (2017): 260–77; Karen Twigg, '"Another Weed Will Come Along": Attitudes to Weeds, Land and Community in the Victorian Mallee', *Telling Environmental Histories* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 213–40.

22 Richard White, '"Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?:" Work and Nature', in William Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 181.

aesthetic, ethical and spiritual dimensions of environmentalism through the relation of the individual to an uncharted wilderness.[23] Early investigations into colonial and post-colonial engagements with nature were reluctant to locate a spiritual dimension in farming or agriculture as such activities, Libby Robin and Tom Griffiths confirm, lay at the heart of the colonialist settlement project – one characterised by overwhelming 'environmental destruction and cultural loss'.[24] Tapping into the cultural turn from the 1990s that embraced hybrid landscapes, newer narratives have begun to incorporate holistic agricultural approaches – thus small-scale farming lifestyles that had previously been associated with destructive agricultural systems have begun to be re-appraised as potent forms of environmental thinking and activism.[25]

My research has mapped the move to small acreage self-sufficient farming in Australia (sometimes called the 'quiet revolution') since the late nineteenth century – where ordinary urban people learn how to grow, conserve and fix things themselves and, through these simple acts, find meaning, purpose and belonging.[26] American historian Rebecca Gould has highlighted in her work on homesteading that such a study begs investigation into what people do, why they do it, how what they do functions as an expression of their most deeply held values and beliefs about what the world should be like, and how they want to live in it.[27] Largely inexperienced, and making

23 Roderick Nash, 'The American Wilderness in Historical Perspective', *Forest History* 6, no. 4 (1963): 2–13; Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Joseph M. Powell, *Mirrors of the New World: Images and Image-Makers in the Settlement Processes* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1978); William J. Lines, *Taming the Great South Land: A History of the Conquest of Nature in Australia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Thomas R. Dunlap, 'Australian Nature, European Culture: Anglo Settlers in Australia', *Environmental History Review* 17, no. 1 (1993): 25–48.

24 Libby Robin and Tom Griffiths, 'Environmental History in Australasia', *Environment and History* 10, no. 4 (2004): 440–3.

25 Richard White, 'From Wilderness to Hybrid Landscapes: The Cultural Turn in Environmental History', *The Historian* 66, no. 3 (2004): 557–64; Charles Massy, *Call of the Reed Warbler: A New Agriculture, A New Earth* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2017).

26 Some foundation texts are Helen Nearing and Scott Nearing, *Living the Good Life: How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World* (Harborside, Maine: Social Science Institute, 1954); Maurice Grenville Kains, *Five Acres and Independence: A Practical Guide to the Selection and Management of the Small Farm* (United States: Courier Corporation, 1973); John Seymour, *Farming for Self-Sufficiency: Independence on a 5-Acre Farm* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973); Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* (New York: Morrow, 1981).

27 Gould, *At Home in Nature,* 3.

the exodus as a choice rather than a necessity, the move has generally engaged those with no agrarian background, migrating in search of an autonomous (free from wage labour and market), but most importantly, a desire for a close-to-nature and ecological way of life.[28]

WOMEN GO BACK TO THE LAND TOO

Across a broad field concerned with gender and agricultural activities, scholars such as Dee Garceau, Sarah Carter and Valerie Padilla Carroll have recently focused on the prominence of women, single and divorced, within the North American practice of homesteading.[29] Throughout the twentieth century, Carroll argues that the home provided a 'liberatory, even feminist space' for the homemaker who supplied vital domestic labour to the self-sufficiency project.[30] Challenging a second prominent narrative in Australian historiography that has long viewed yeomanry as a distinctly masculine or family-oriented activity, there have been few studies that consider female-only or female-centric farming practices and institutions.[31] With the cities long seen as sites of human degradation and a symbol of corruption and exploitation, the 'bush' has long offered a place of revitalisation and fulfilment.

Nostalgia for the rural idyll has been a critical aspect of the modern condition throughout the twentieth century, providing a space for new relationships to the land to emerge, and where individuals could ensure the progress of civil society.[32]

28 'Back-to-the-Landers', in Giacomo D'Alisa, Federico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis (eds), *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (London: Routledge, 2014), 143–144.

29 Dee Garceau, 'Single Women Homesteaders and the Meanings of Independence: Places on the Map, Places in the Mind', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 15, no. 3 (1995): 1–26; Sarah Carter, *Imperial Plots: Women, Land, and the Spadework of British Colonialism on the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2016). See also Vivien Ellen Rose, 'Homesteading as Social Protest: Gender and Continuity in the Back-to-the-Land Movement in the United States, 1890–1980' (PhD thesis, State University of New York, 1997).

30 Valerie Padilla Carroll, 'Fables of Empowerment: Myrtle Mae Borsodi and Back-to-the-Land Housewifery in the Early Twentieth Century', *The Journal of American Culture* 40, no. 2 (2017): 119–33.

31 Richard Waterhouse and Kate Darian-Smith, 'The Yeoman Ideal and Australian Experience, 1860–1960', in *Exploring the British World: Identity, Cultural Production, Institutions* (Melbourne: RMIT Publishing, 2004), 440–59. A notable exception is Kate Hunter, 'The Drover's Wife and the Drover's Daughter: Histories of Single Farming Women and Debates in Australian Historiography', *Rural History* 12, no. 2 (2001): 179–94.

32 Michael Roe and Russel Ward, 'The Australian Legend', *Meanjin Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (1962): 363–8.

Kate Murphy has convincingly argued that far from being exclusionary to women, such nostalgia for the rural lifestyle contains a vital relationship between gender, modernity, and both rural and urban spaces.[33] While Murphy has documented the move of urban women onto the land during the interwar period as predicated on a certain 'naturalising' of manhood and womanhood and upholding 'natural' gender qualities, there has been little work on women undertaking the same move half a century later as a continuation or a challenge to these qualities.[34]

The 1970s saw a reconfiguration of colonial yeoman traditions when it came to embracing the turn back to the land as an emergent interest in 'quality of life' overtook the narrower material-security concerns of previous generations. For those seeking alternatives, highly influential books with a global message and broad reach such as Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb (1968),* Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle* (1971), the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* (1972) and Ernst Schumacher's *Small Is Beautiful* (1973) proved vital to their thinking. These authors looked to spread the message of humankind's increasingly detrimental impact on nature under the guise of progress, and their popularity ushered in a new environmental ethic based upon individual responsibility and consumer choices.[35] The movement's new hero, Rachel Carson, saw humans as ecological creatures, and challenged the basis of the established conservation ethic. Carson was the first and most influential figure

33 Kate Murphy, 'Rural Womanhood and the "Embellishment" of Rural Life In Urban Australia', in Graeme Davison and Marc Brodie (eds), *Struggle Country: The Rural Ideal in Twentieth Century Australia* (Monash University ePress, 2005), 02.1–02.15.

34 Kate Murphy, 'The "Unnatural" Woman: Urban Reformers, Modernity, and the Ideal of Rurality after Federation', *Australian Feminist Studies* 21, no. 51 (2006): 369–78. Much of the writing on countercultural and organic lifestyles in Australia is nominally concerned with women's issues and voices. See Chapter 4 of Rebecca Jones, *Green Harvest: A History of Organic Farming and Gardening in Australia* (Collingwood, Vic.: CSIRO Publishing, 2010), 87–102. An exception is recent work by Carroll Pursell, '"Back-to-Earth" Movements in the Australian 1970s', in *How the Personal Became Political: Re-Assessing Australia's Revolutions in Gender and Sexuality in the 1970s* (ANU, 2017). Available at http://www.auswhn.org.au/blog/personal-became-political/. Accessed 22 April 2021.

35 Maril Hazlett, 'Voices from the Spring: Silent Spring and the Ecological Turn in American Health', in Virginia Scharff (ed.), *Seeing Nature Through Gender* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 120.

to talk about environmental loss and importantly, used ecology to define people's 'homes, gardens, and health as part of the natural world'.[36]

Providing a unifying image for a politically charged countercultural generation, rural self-sufficiency, and by association, an authentic life engaged in agriculture featured prominently as part of the emergent aspirations, and agitations, for social, political and environmental change in Australia. Women were vitally and equally engaged in this vision.[37] Prominent cultural critic Dennis Altman observed that although the return to 'traditional rural values' was a less-than-revolutionary position, its re-deployment had emerged within a progressive mindset intent on challenging aspects of the system through reduced consumption and dependence on manufactured goods.[38] But the return to what Valerie Padilla Carroll has termed the 'heteropatriarchal refugium' of previous generations with 'the heterocouple complete with attached gendered roles and expectations' was primed for a challenge as women realised, with support from the growing liberation movement, they too had a yearning for authenticity, self-realisation and to not be restrained by traditional modes of authority.[39]

From the early 1970s, the self-sufficiency movement's ideology emerged through alternative lifestyle magazines such as *Grass Roots and Earth Garden*, both of which painted an idyllic picture of farm life that was autonomous and liberating, encouraging ordinary Australians to 'kick the 9–5 habit by getting a shift worker's job. Laze on the beach during the day, travel to work without traffic jams and save money by doing it yourself'.[40] The duty and responsibility of ordinary people to liberate themselves from the constraints of the 'system' was presented as a challenge facing both men and women equally, while activities such as gardening, building, mending, cooking

36 Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Cambridge, Mass: Houghton Mifflin; Riverside Press, 1962); Maril Hazlett, 'Woman vs. Man vs. Bugs: Gender and Popular Ecology in Early Reactions to *Silent Spring*', *Environmental History* 9, no. 4 (2004): 701.

37 Richard Fairfield and Timothy Miller, *The Modern Utopian: Alternative Communities of the '60s and '70s* (London: Process, 2010); Vanessa Bible, 'Australian Counterculture', in *Terania Creek and the Forging of Modern Environmental Activism* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot, 2018), 9–34.

38 Dennis Altman, 'The Counter Culture: Nostalgia or Prophecy?' in A. Davis, S. Encel and A.M. Berry (eds), *Australian Society: A Sociological Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1977), 457.

39 Valerie Padilla Carroll, 'Ralph and Myrtle Mae Borsodi's Vision of Back-to-the-Land as a White Heteropatriarchal Refugium during the Great Depression', *Environment and History* 27, no. 2 (2021): 303–21.

40 'Making the Most of It: Down on the Farm', *Earth Garden* (October 1972): 4.

and crafting were reconfigured as shared activities that transcended proscribed ideas of men's and women's work. By the mid-1970s, 'living better for less' was the corollary to a new 'ethic of frugality' that may not directly address the issue of gender, but which was being applied to 'every individual in [his] private life'.[41]

FEMINIST DOMESTICITY AS HOME-BASED ACTIVISM

In their work on countercultural femininities, Rosanna Hunt and Michelle Phillipov have argued that progressive politics around consumption have long been expressed through images and aesthetics 'culturally coded as conservative'.[42] Notions of ethical consumption, they argue, are often paralleled by resurgences in practices associated with domesticity and traditional femininities. For Jaki Lockyer, who purchased a rural property in 1971 on the mid-north coast of New South Wales, it was such a paradox that enabled her to pursue her dream of rural simplicity. Jaki had attended university and begun working for the national broadcaster, the ABC, in Sydney while her boyfriend Jon completed his draftsmanship training. With a professional career in sight, it was a romantic turn that led them towards their future property, found by accident on a road trip north, fuelled by a growing 'dissatisfaction with city living which seemed to be becoming increasingly materialistic'.[43] To emphasise her independence and that it was a personal, as much a shared dream, she recounted the story of her transgressions as a young, single woman fighting 'the system':

> So, I went to the bank and said, 'I want to borrow two and a half grand'. I was then 18. And they said 'No, we're not going to give you the money because you're only 18 and in 6 weeks' time you'll be spending the money on shoes'. I took all my money out of the bank, and I went to my credit union, and I said, 'are you going to lend me the money?' and they said 'yeah, sure we will, but we can't lend it to a woman without a male guarantor'. This is

41 Bill Metcalf, 'The Ethic of Frugality', *Eco Info, the Newsletter of the Queensland Conservation Council* 1, no. 3 (1973): 31.

42 Rosanna Hunt and Michelle Phillipov, '"Nanna Style": The Countercultural Politics of Retro Femininities', *M/C Journal* 17, no. 6 (2014). Available at http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/901/. Accessed 9 August 2018.

43 Jaki Lockyer, personal communication with author, 18 March 2016. Transcript held by author.

> 1971. And I thought, well I don't want my dad to be guarantor, and I said, 'I've got a boyfriend' and they said 'fine', and I said, 'but he's studying, he doesn't have a job, he's living off me at the moment' and they said 'it doesn't matter'. So that was the first time I met, quite so blatantly, the qualifying criteria of having a penis.[44]

In this well-trodden personal narrative, Jaki establishes herself as a rebellious agent that was completely in control of how she and her soon-to-be husband Jon moved onto the land, though it is likely she was not aware of the gender implications at the time. Both Jaki and Jon were active in anti-war protests, environmental and moratorium marches, and Jaki reflects that it was because of the progressive politics of the women's movement that she could enact her dream, and the couple could engage with self-provision on equal footing. In Jaki's re-telling, dealing with the bank manager is a poignant symbol of her deviation from conventional gender expectations and highlighted the ongoing struggle of women to assert control over their finances and choices. Within what feminist scholar Susan Magarey has called the 1970s utopian dream in which sexual difference would not mean major differences of power, Jaki saw living off the land as empowering rather than limiting.[45]

The women's liberation movement had certainly facilitated Jaki's ability to walk away from a professional career to start a family and build on a rural property. Unlike previous generations where freedom for women meant the ability to earn an independent income and turn their back on the restrictions of conventional (read suburban) domesticity, for Jaki it meant the ability to choose. Choosing domesticity in this context, functioning within Valerie Padilla Carroll's definition of a 'radical, eco, and feminist housewifery', was Jaki's way of challenging the ubiquity of modern conveniences and conventions associated with the excesses of materialism and mindless consumption.[46] When asked why she would return to a life of domestic

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44 Jaki and Jon Lockyer, interviewed by author, Bellingen, New South Wales, 9 June 2016, tape and transcript held by author.

45 Susan Magarey, 'Dreams and Desires', *Australian Feminist Studies* 22, no. 53 (2007): 338.

46 Feminist scholars have argued that the home was not always opposed to or a place to retreat from the modern world but could represent a different vision of modernity. Although second-wave feminists positioned the home as a retreat from progressivism, the home was not anti-modern, *(continued over page)*

drudgery when women had fought for generations to remove themselves from the kitchen sink, Jaki's answer was simple: 'there was no sink, we lived in a tent'.[47]

Figure 1 Jaki and Jon Lockyer in front of their temporary home in Grace's Gully, 1975. Photograph courtesy of Jaki Lockyer.

Though she would have undertaken much of the household labour, Jaki's response highlights two competing frameworks affecting the way women understood their decision to escape the system: a desire to escape the structures of patriarchy, symbolised by the structures of capitalism, and the disassociation caused by industrial

but in fact central to the very project of modernity in the post-war era. See Lesley Johnson, '"As Housewives We Are Worm": Women, Modernity and the Home Question', *Cultural Studies* 10, no. 3 (1996): 449; Carroll, 'The Radical Possibilities of New (Feminist, Environmentalist) Domesticity', 51.

47 Jaki and Jon Lockyer, 9 June 2016.

modernity that affected both genders as a common enemy. Homemaking in this context, a home-centred lifestyle that favoured a purer, simpler and more authentic way of life based on a DIY approach to meeting one's own needs, had become an empowering act that challenged both gendered perceptions of domesticity, alongside capitalist assumptions regarding the domestic sphere and excessive consumption. As Abrams has observed, these women's life stories were enabled by the confluence of the post-war cultural context, 'whereby the ethic of authenticity bred feminism with its practices of self-care, alongside other critical political and social movements and the critique of patriarchal structures and mindsets'.[48]

In examining the Lockyers' narrative, it is necessary to acknowledge a common critique of oral history testimonies. In this case, that their recollections may transcend accurate reflections of the past to become a representation of a present reality that is susceptible to a nostalgic romanticism.[49] Moreover, these are political narratives that have been pressed onto distant events in order to ratify and justify the decisions made at a time of youthful enthusiasm. Lynn Abrams has argued that in her experience of a similar demographic of women, when encouraged in an interview to tell a story about the self, 'these women unshackle their memory stories from conventional expectations of what a woman's life story should look like'.[50] In this case, Jaki's bank encounter has become a symbol of her deviation from conventions, and a marker of how she had begun to think differently from a young age.

Alistair Thomson views the so-called un-reliability of memory as its strength. Its very subjectivity, he claims, elucidates not only the meaning of historical experiences, but the relationships between past and present, between memory and personal identity.[51] Although these interviews are peppered with both nostalgia and romanticism, testimonies like Jaki's reveal some nuance of the post-war generations post-materialist view on the meaning of home, family and lifestyle as they began to identify with a

48 Abrams, 'Heroes of Their Own Life Stories', 207.

49 Nathan Wachtel, 'Introduction', in Marie-Noëlle Bourguet, Lucette Valensi and Nathan Wachtel (eds), *Between Memory and History* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1990), 5.

50 Abrams, 'Heroes of Their Own Life Stories', 208.

51 Alistair Thomson, 'Memory and Remembering in Oral History', in Donald A. Ritchie (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 91.

subculture, and unite in their separation from urban and conventional expectations of their parents' generation. As both a form of self-realisation, and establishing a political and social identity, Jaki and Jon's testimony speaks to a wider counter-cultural viewpoint emergent in the early 1970s that saw a new generation shape their lives not around economic livelihood, growth and material gains, but to living itself.

Figure 2 Jaki and Jon Lockyer taking down a convict-built timber church in Narrabeen, 1972, for their home-to-be. Photograph courtesy of Jaki Lockyer.

LIVING SIMPLY AS ENVIRONMENTAL CARE AND STEWARDSHIP

According to historian Rebecca Jones, the 1970s countercultural move onto the land drew heavily on a romantic tradition in which wilderness was revered as

untrammelled by human destruction, akin to the Garden of Eden before the fall.[52] The longing to create a garden in the wilderness also found resonance within enduring settler mythologies and metaphors for human achievement and ethical endeavour. Following the convergence of ideas at the Nimbin Aquarius Festival, land settlement came to signify more than a collection of autonomous rights, but rights imbued with a corresponding duty to protect its ecological wellbeing. According to John Page who participated in the festival in 1973, property began to embody self-meaning within a communitarian context, 'premised on obligation, ownership had become more than a bundle of autonomous rights, but rights imbricated with a corresponding duty to land health'. [53] Another interviewee, Adrienne Weber, shared her reflections on how their property, and dreams of rehabilitation, were likewise tied to a bigger ecosystem vision built into the progressive politics of the time.

After travelling through the Pacific Islands where she observed that each village was able to meet their own needs for food, shelter and community, Adrienne and her husband Erwin moved to the Tweed Valley on the New South Wales and Queensland border in the late 1970s. There they established a successful solar design architecture business and cultivated a holistic approach to living by building an ecologically sensitive home from local natural materials and working on others in their community. Adrienne talked of how their block, previously a denuded banana plantation, symbolised the broader issue of land left degraded by generations of extractive agriculture practices and a legacy of poor soil health. More than simply building and living, they saw value in regenerating a native landscape while learning about the region's biota. Acknowledging the slow but consistent deforestation of Australia's wet sclerophyll forests, and their often discounted or undervalued ecological status, Adrienne reflects that their decision was not uncommon:

> Around here there are so many people who are like-minded and … none of them have really been trained but they've come and lived in a place where

52 Jones, *Green Harvest,* 93.

53 See John Page, 'Counterculture, Property, Place, and Time: Nimbin, 1973', *M/C Journal* 17, no. 6 (1 October 2014). Available at http://www.journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/900. Accessed 8 October 2019.

> you could spend your whole life trying to get on top of the lantana and it would keep coming back unless you work with the natural systems. So, you go to the part of your little creek where you've got the best canopy and the most natural/native plants, and you work from there out to the other bits. We know hundreds of people who have all found out that this is what you need to do: bushland regeneration, trying to restore habitat. That to me underpins many of the other things we do for the people, and it also underpins people's survival on earth.[54]

In this passage we see how Adrienne saw her efforts in the context of her wider community, with a shared desire to restore local habitats a tangible response to broader social, economic and environmental concerns and a destructive societal vision of progress and development. The ability to be active and engaged with big-picture and systemic environmental issues such as deforestation, invasive species, waterway destruction and habitat loss is centred upon and focused through the rehabilitation of a single piece of land, which then ripples through their communities. As David Holmgren, one of the founders of permaculture, argues for the work ordinary landholders do by naturalising plants:

> Compared with other active campaigns of the environmental movement against nuclear power, genetic engineering, coal mining or even native forest logging, the demonizing of naturalized species was not up against established powerful interests and found a psycho-social resonance in the general population that could relate to the idea of pest plants and animals. A war against 'environmental weeds' or simply invasive species was a natural extension of the war against agricultural weeds that had its origins with the beginnings of agriculture and civilisation.[55]

54 Adrienne Weber, interviewed by author, Chillingham, NSW, 23 June 2016, tape and transcript held by author.

55 David Holmgren, 'Weeds or Wild Nature: A Permaculture Perspective', *Plant Protection Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2011): 92.

Whether consciously practised or not, back-to-the-landers such as Adrienne and Erwin are part of a growing cohort of small landowners who saw their work as part of a dispersed but growing grassroots movement, motivated and shaped by the principles of permaculture.[56] Most who volunteered to share their stories with the broader oral history project on back-to-the-land experiences were still living on their original property, but many admitted they had seldom given much thought to their reasons or ideas since they moved at a young age and were motivated by passion and idealism as opposed to adhering to concrete beliefs or formalised systems of thinking such as permaculture (which only emerged after 1976). Telling their stories, in the context of this broader longitudinal research, was one of the first opportunities many had had to reflect on their decision as more than youthful passion based on having few economic assets, but as one that embodied a set of core values and beliefs that had guided them towards self-sufficiency and, consequently, land restoration. As interest continues to grow in this type of lifestyle globally, those who went back to the land during the 1970s have found their decisions and reasons validated by successive generations keen to pursue similar actions, albeit through a more focused 'organic' and sustainability lens.[57]

ORGANIC LIFESTYLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

> I think about how I grew up. The streets were safe, a lot of people grew food, we borrowed and traded tools and people looked after each other, there was this great sense of community.[58]

56 Combining 'permanence' and 'agriculture', permaculture maps out a comprehensive design framework based on the management of a multi-crop of perennial trees, shrubs, herbs, fungi and root systems and looks to address the damage caused by humans on their surroundings and balance natural ecosystems with human agricultural systems. See Bill (B.C.) Mollison and David Holmgren, *Permaculture* (Ealing [England]: Transworld Publishers, 1978–1979).

57 Ryan H. Edgington, '"Be Receptive to the Good Earth" : Health, Nature, and Labor in Countercultural Back-to-the-Land Settlements', *Agricultural History* 82, no. 3 (2008): 279–308; Keith H. Halfacree, 'A "Place for Nature?" New Radicalism's Rural Contribution,' in *Innovations in Rural Areas* (Worcester: Presses Univ Blaise Pascal, 2003), 51–66.

58 Morag Gamble, interviewed by author, Maleny, Queensland, 27 June 2016, tape and transcript held by author.

As part of the 1970s back-to-the-land movement, Morag Gamble's parents built in an outer suburban semi-bushland neighbourhood of Melbourne. There they cultivated a native garden, designed a passive solar house and were committed vegetarians. In our interview conducted on Morag's property in south-east Queensland, she warmly recalls her parents' commitment to creating a home, albeit in the suburbs. To them the house was 'not a commodity, a house is where you are, you build it, and you create it, and you craft it and its where your life happens … You can see that. It's how we've created this place'.[59] Such thinking appears far from radical, but Morag's idealisation of her childhood, and construction of domesticity and locality belies a complex negotiation that integrates traditional aspects of home, work, family and community with a progressive personal political and global environmental vision. As Schlosberg and Coles have outlined, such a shift to a more sustainable materialism functions as a form of indirect environmental activism by moving 'beyond an individualist and value-focused notion of post-materialism, into a focus on collective practices and institutions for the provision of the basic needs of everyday life'.[60]

When asked about the conditions or ideas that led her towards her current lifestyle, Morag recalled a hugely symbolic moment that catalysed her thinking and behaviours – learning to make bread as part of a traditional grain harvest. As a young design student, she had travelled overseas and found herself in Ladakh in northern India, studying under academic Helena Norberg-Hodge as part of the English-based Schumacher College.[61] Although Morag could see that the locals were financially insecure as they transitioned from a more traditional to a neoliberal society, she reflected on a certain 'richness of experience' embodied by their connection to the land and seasons. With great passion she described the interrelation between the people, animals and their clothes, food and culture – embodied by a warm fresh piece of bread:

59 Morag Gamble, 27 June 2016.

60 Schlosberg and Coles, 'The New Environmentalism of Everyday Life', 160.

61 Helena Norberg-Hodge, *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1991). Schumacher College in Devon, England was founded in 1990 and runs holistic education courses on ecology and sustainability, in which 'students are encouraged to develop a deep, participatory relationship with nature'. Available at https://www.schumachercollege.org.uk/. Accessed 21 April 2021.

> All of a sudden, I had this immense sense of … deep purpose and connection. I thought … I never knew how to make bread before! I could earn some money, go buy a loaf of bread, and buy some butter, but there was no meaning in that. The meaning embodied in this bread that I was eating and knowing all the processes that were a part of that and being connected to the animals and the land and the seasons and the people and the culture and the song. Everything about it … and seeing an amazing joy that people got out of living like that … had this enormous impact on me.[62]

It is difficult to convey the immense passion and aliveness evoked in Morag's telling of this story, but this memory was clearly significant to interpreting the evolution of her family life, home and profession, and in her own thinking about ethics, rights, duty and responsibility. The ritual and relational processes of harvesting, milling, milking and baking became a seed to start engaging seriously with agriculture and self-provision, to co-operate in shared economies, and to enliven her life with simple activities based around the unit of the kitchen table. As a poignant representation of domesticity and wholesomeness, bread making is transposed into ethical and bioregional relationships between seasons, processes and networks – where good food and good social practices can be both traditional and progressive, nostalgic and forward looking.

Food scholar Michelle Phillipov has pointed out that in this context, nostalgia works to reframe the potentially conservative dimensions of food politics (especially in relation to class and gender) as pleasurable, politically progressive choices.[63] She writes further that in presenting the ritual of home-based bread making as ethical, certain domestic tasks become an appealing alternative to the consumption patterns fostered by industrial food systems, elevating certain rituals from 'domestic drudgery' to a freely chosen political act.[64] In this way, we can identify in Morag's decision to

62 Morag Gamble, 27 June 2016.

63 Michelle Phillipov, 'Resisting "Agribusiness Apocalypse": The Pleasures and Politics of Ethical Food', in Michelle Phillipov (ed.), *Media and Food Industries: The New Politics of Food* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 17.

64 Phillipov, 'Resisting "Agribusiness Apocalypse"', 46.

re-orient her day-to-day life around the home as an act of social reform within an ethic that the personal choices and behaviours of how and why we structure our everyday life, becomes inherently political. While going back to the land also meant going 'back to the kitchen' as depicted in the 1960s and '70s, for Morag it became a critical basis from which she could reassemble and re-establish pre-modern traditions vital for creating networks of trade and relationship missing from post-industrial societies. Supporting Schlosberg and Coles' observations, though this ambition may seem minor, it signifies the gradual reconstitution of a number of 'individuals, communities and practices of (agri)cultural production, fabrication, distribution and consumption'.[65]

Following her experience in India, Morag and her husband Evan moved to a rural ecovillage called Crystal Waters in the subtropics of Queensland in the early 1990s, where a large proportion of its 220 residents live self-sufficiently.[66] With a mind to the particular subtropical climate and the seasons, and with little previous experience, the couple hand built their home and set up systems to harvest rainwater, solar power and built a bountiful food garden as they grew their family. Unlike some negative connotations associated with previous generations who went to 'drop out', Morag's move was very differently constructed. From the outset, Morag wanted to establish an 'outward looking lifestyle' that drew heavily on 'organic social relationships' that replicated the values and systems of economy of her suburban childhood, and later identified in the traditional village life of Ladakh.[67]

Veneration of so-called 'organic lifeways' is also problematic as it is a selective interpretation of what constitutes the 'good life'. By removing singular activities like bread making from their political, economic and historical context, proponents can romanticise pre-modern societies while rejecting the notion that technology,

65 Schlosberg and Coles, 'The New Environmentalism of Everyday Life', 177.

66 Though they vary greatly in their constitution, principles and practices, ecovillages are defined as communities that share a low impact way of life. See Karen Litfin, 'Reinventing the Future: The Global Ecovillage Movement as a Holistic Knowledge Community', in Gabriela Kütting and Ronnie Lipschutz (eds), *Environmental Governance: Power and Knowledge in a Local-Global World* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 124–42.

67 Morag Gamble, 27 June 2016.

modernity and the developed world contain the answers to eco-societal problems. While the concept of organic lifeways plays into the nostalgia pertinent to maintaining the rural idyll, the low-impact qualities of pre-industrial civilisations become divorced and elevated from the allegedly destructive political and economic systems of which they are a product. Critics of the selective appropriation of traditional societies have long pointed out the inconsistencies, pointing to the ubiquitous paradox of those who most benefit from urban-industrial capitalism as the first to believe they must escape its debilitating effects. Such powerful mythologising, as historian Alistair Thomson observes, means earlier activities become a 'bright affirming memory … [and] draw upon the language and meaning of the wider culture to create stories about our individual lives'.[68] While Morag did reflect on her selective appropriation of traditional culture, a certain ambivalence remains over who gets to access lifestyles of simplicity, and under what terms. As Melanie DuPuis and David Goodman observe, when the global becomes the universal logic of capitalism, identifying with the local becomes a point of resistance to this global logic, but such 'reflexive' localism often contains problematic social justice consequences.[69]

The politics of class, therefore, is central to a new economics of the home as the reconstitution of the domestic realm is selective, and it exposes a growing disconnect between those who can afford to make sustainable choices, and the traditional communities and cultures that inspire these positions. That class, race and social justice issues were seldom brought up during the interviews I conducted reflects a general silence in accounts of alternative lifestylers, whose proponents have long identified as having political and activist orientations stemming from a crisis within the middle class rather than across class.[70] As the economic chasm between the classes grows deeper, to opt in or out of the system – whether in regard to consumption,

68 Alistair Thomson, 'Moving Stories, Women's Lives: Sharing Authority in Oral History', *Oral History* 39, no. 2 (2011): 303.

69 Melanie DuPuis and David Goodman, 'Should We Go "Home" to Eat? Toward a Reflexive Politics of Localism', *Journal of Rural Studies* 21, no. 3 (2005): 359–71.

70 Patrick Williams and Erik Hannerz, 'Articulating the "Counter" in Subculture Studies', *M/C Journal* 17, no. 6 (2014). Available at http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/912. Accessed 12 April 2019; Tom Philpott, 'The Racist Roots of Joel Salatin's Agrarian Dream', *Mother Jones* (blog), Available at https://www.motherjones.com/food/2020/11/joel-salatin-chris-newman-farming-rotational-grazing-agriculture/. Accessed 20 November 2020.

living situations, education or other lifestyle choices – can signal shared values on the exploitation of the natural world, but the ability to choose to work, or work from home, or reconstruct one's homelife can only be undertaken by a certain class that has the leisure, freedom, opportunities and education to do so.[71] This phenomenon is not restricted to Australia, as much of the literature on lifestyle amenity and sustainable materialism echoes this selective narrative of simplicity, organic lifestyles and return to traditional values in movements found across North America, England and Europe.[72]

The cycles of harvest, bread making and other traditional activities may have shaped Morag's version of what constitutes an organic life, but they also reveal more than an admiration of simple living as an anti-corporate rebellion. They also suggest a complex negotiation with modern feminism that looks to carve out a space for liberation within the back-to-the-land project. In moving beyond the self to the political, Morag participates in Valeria Padilla Carroll and Emily Matchar's idea of 'new domesticity' that sees simple living as a radical but positive counter to environmental and social injustice.[73] Although home-based self-sufficiency activities arise within a 'politically ambiguous nexus of compliance and resistance', both men and women are forced to reconceptualise and navigate the demands of paid and unpaid work through ethical, if not moral, frameworks.[74] Contributing to a wider de-growth movement that has called itself 'anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist and de-colonial' as it seeks 'different gender relations and roles, [and] different distribution of paid and unpaid work', in many cases women have to work to navigate their personal and ideological values if they want to be able to bake their ethical bread and eat it too.[75]

71 Alethea Scantlebury, 'Black Fellas and Rainbow Fellas: Convergence of Cultures at the Aquarius Arts and Lifestyle Festival, Nimbin, 1973', *M/C Journal* 17, no. 6 (2014). Available at http://www.journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/923/. Accessed 12 August 2019.

72 Keith Halfacree, 'Back-to-the-land in the Twenty-First Century – Making Connections with Rurality', *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 98, no. 1 (2007): 3–8; Andrew Wilbur, 'Growing a Radical Ruralism: Back-to-the-land as Practice and Ideal', *Geography Compass* 7, no. 2 (2013): 149–60.

73 Carroll, 'The Radical Possibilities of New (Feminist, Environmentalist) Domesticity', 51; Matchar, *Homeward Bound,* 3–21.

74 Douglas Sackman, 'Putting Gender on the Table: Food and the Family Life of Nature', in Virginia Scharff (ed.), *Seeing Nature Through Gender* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 169–93.

75 D'Alisa, Demaria and Kallis, *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, 1.

Across ecofeminist scholarship, discussions of feminism and domesticity have largely been concerned with the transformation of women's activism beyond the private sphere, the role of women in the developing world as food providers, and the role of women as both homemakers and activists in broader campaigns, but not the changing nature of domesticity as a form of environmental stewardship that can respond to issues of growth and materialism.[76] Sherilyn MacGregor has pointed out that writing by ecofeminists has been almost completely written out of the evolution of environmentalism's engagement with new materialism, and that its 'key analytical insights into intersectional power relations and questions about the distributions of time, work and duty – who does what in the reproduction of daily life – are rarely addressed'.[77] In the testimonies of Jaki and Morag, there is a desire to conflate traditional boundaries of work and labour, duty and care, the home and the outside world through the daily practices of self-sufficiency, gardening, building and childcare, even if the yearnings are seldom articulated in a feminist or environmentalist (read anti-capitalist) framework. By breaking down the binaries of conservative/radical and private/public, we can see how new frameworks emerge such as 'radical homemaking' (coined by writer Shannon Hayes), that reframes domesticity in an era that has benefited from feminism, 'where the choice to stay home is no longer equated with mind-numbing drudgery, economic insecurity, or relentless servitude'.[78] Beyond a 'housewifery' that is shaped around an empowered feminist choice, this conscious domesticity encourages people to live more lightly on the earth, decommodify food provisioning and care, and contribute to a less consumerist, more sustainable future in what Valerie Padilla Carroll has termed 'an altermodernity project'.[79]

76 Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare Women and the Environment* (New York: Imprint Routledge, 1996), 139–209; Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993); Nancy Unger, 'Women and Gender: Useful Categories of Analysis in Environmental History', in Andrew C. Isenberg (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 600–643.

77 Sherilyn MacGregor, 'Making Matter Great Again? Ecofeminism, New Materialism and the Everyday Turn in Environmental Politics', *Environmental Politics* 30, no. 1–2 (2020): 42.

78 Shannon Hayes, *Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity from a Consumer Culture* (Richmondville, NY: Left to Write Press, 2010), ix.

79 Carroll, 'The Radical Possibilities of New (Feminist, Environmentalist) Domesticity', 52.

Figure 3 Morag Gamble and daughter Maia in front of their home under construction at Crystal Waters (date unknown), cited at PacificEdge [blog], 'Liberation Permaculture: a response to Nicole Vosper and Graham Burnett', https://pacific-edge.info/2015/08/liberation-permaculture-a-response-to-nicole-vosper-and-graham-burnett/. Photograph courtesy of Russ Grayson.

While Morag admits her lifestyle is not without concessions and inconsistencies, the decision to centre her work and home around self-sufficiency as distinct from campaigning for forest protection is more than home economics. Bringing the discussion back to how home-based activism can reflect broader understandings of ecological justice and preservation, Morag sees her move as a conscious choice to interweave her work, the building and running of her home, and the education of her children into one project:

> By using sustainable technologies and natural buildings and by diminishing our footprint, [we were] helping to protect forests, by growing more of your own food you were helping to prevent more forest clearing, by helping to replant areas you were improving habitat, by diminishing your energy consumption you were lessening your need for more power stations, and by using solar … it was changing everything but still talking about the same thing.[80]

Seeing her basic lifestyle choices as a catalyst for broader change, Morag encourages her community, and an expanding online following, to establish a relationship and

80 Morag Gamble, 27 June 2016.

duty to place, codified through a regular program of courses and workshops focused on food sovereignty, seasonal harvesting and homemaking skills that she sees as vital to engendering stronger resilience, and promote a more local, self-sufficient network and system of exchange.[81]

Oral history has proven critical to tease out these complex ideas, while providing a space to explore and discuss the deeper values and sentiments that transcend specific relationships to place or landscape – an approach seldom embarked upon by environmental or social historians. In this article, oral history has helped explore how understandings of place and connection to the land do not always have to happen through large-scale events, protests or campaigns. Connecting through memory, place and belonging has been cultivated through daily physical labour on the land and is expressed through a nostalgia for old-style customs, traditions and practices based around an ethic of frugality. Participants in this project have viewed their desire to live more simply and self-sufficiently as one lived in close proximity to nature, which could only be experienced away from the cities and urban environments. To them, living in a holistic relationship with nature through growing food, tending the garden, having independent utilities, self-building and making deliberate consumer choices carries a high degree of integrity and a vision for positive global outcomes. Living from the land, and within community, may include a multitude of meanings for each individual but can also serve as a way of connecting people to places they inhabit.

Through the interview process, Morag and the other women involved in this limited sample, have been able to reflect on and critique their individual life decisions in the context of contemporary cultural norms rather than 'positioning themselves as passive objects of patriarchal structures and ideologies'.[82] Although Morag was the youngest woman to provide a testimony, and began her journey through the more neoliberal 1990s, her views were shared by others of her generation who expressed similar ideas regarding subverting male and female roles, and sharing of domestic and childcare duties in a way they didn't see possible in their previous urban life, or

81 See the range of programs and courses offered at *Our Permaculture Life*. Available at https://ourpermaculturelife.com/permaculture-courses/. Accessed 5 June 2021.

82 Abrams, 'Heroes of Their Own Life Stories', 220.

felt supported to do so by their family or community. For Linda, Jaki and Morag, the search for meaning and their desire to join in the environmental movement, albeit from home, was tied to a sense of duty and responsibility for both the properties they moved to and, by extension, the immediate and larger environment.

As a form of 'stay at home' environmentalism, self-sufficiency thus occupies a space between domination and extraction, and challenges the Edenic visions of untouched wilderness as small farms become a worked landscape that works for the environment. Revealing more than a personal dialogue with the local landscape, it provides a model for wider conversations concerning sustainable agriculture choices and consumer pathways where individual stewardship and personal responsibility become the basis for broader environmental and economic reforms. Feminist discourses and the normalisation of gender equality have, in many ways, enabled these women to speak to their experiences living and working from home, and crafted their narratives of independency, autonomy and self-sufficiency from a traditional vision and construct of yeomanry. These women have fashioned a narrative of equality, empowerment and choice that has defined a critical aspect of their life and given a critical insight into 'what people do, why they do it, and how it functions as an expression of their most deeply held values and beliefs about what the world should be like, and how they want to live in it'.[83]

CONCLUSION

From the late 1970s, going back to the land, for both men and women, took on wider social, political and environmental objectives as its adherents began to question humankind's relationship to nature and a small but growing number of urbanites began to engage their concern for environmental destruction through small-scale self-sufficiency projects that were responsive to the environment and landscape where they were located. These people looked to simple living and self-sufficiency as a tangible yet universal reference point for a more collective, interdependent and sustainable future, seeking out solutions far beyond a detached rural idyll or isolated, imagined utopia. They are often acting out latent versions of cultural dissent in an attempt to live a good

83 Gould, *At Home in Nature,* 3.

life; and it is their questioning that leads to a broad challenge for a civilisation geared toward continued growth and productions, while it slowly and tentatively re-evaluates the importance of strong communities, physical and mental wellbeing, and a flourishing natural environment for a happy and prosperous life.

Through this practice, the women in this article have found they can transcend systematic disadvantage and subordination within the labour market, family and dominant culture; a return to domestic life enabled a freedom from systems of control and dominance within both the masculine and capitalist spheres. In their quest for simplicity and 'organic lifeways', these women have engaged both a process and a relationship to place that has involved re-creating and reframing the domestic as a form of environmental awareness and rejecting the feminist doctrine prominent from the 1960s that sought separation from the home as a means of empowerment and social engagement. In line with trends increasingly prevalent internationally, in lieu of returning to a space of constriction, the home has in many cases come to represent a site of liberation, as a site of resistance, where values and practices that defy the competitive or exploitative norms of the public sphere can germinate and be nurtured.[84] Nested within broader constructs of environmental limits, stewardship and home-based activism, back-to-the-land self-sufficiency provides a model for ordinary people to connect to simple activities that embody an everyday sustainable materialism enacted through the domestic sphere. Moving beyond the walls of the home, it has also led to a desire to restore local habitats and live simply and harmoniously in the landscape as a tangible response to broader social, economic and environmental concerns and a destructive societal vision of progress and development.

84 Genevieve Bell and Paul Dourish, 'Back to the Shed: Gendered Visions of Technology and Domesticity', *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing* 11, no. 5 (2007): 373–81; Andrew Wilbur, 'Back-to-the-House? Gender, Domesticity and (Dis)empowerment Among Back-to-the-Land Migrants in Northern Italy', *Journal of Rural Studies* 35 (2014), 1–10.