

ESSAY



Somebody has to do it: writing, housework, and being at home

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ABSTRACT

For Creative Writing students, feeling at home with writing and with the identity of being a writer can be difficult. Many try to separate their writing life from home life which can lead to a sense of not being at home with the writing process. As life necessarily involves care and a generative process of maintenance and repetition within the principles of living, so too, being a writer calls for a process of making that is embedded in acts of care and maintenance. By recounting a personal story of a home held together by my grandfather's daily acts of care and reflecting on a student writing workshop that transformed stories of cleaning domestic homes into a shared representation of a 'creative' house, I consider homeliness as a 'writing method that is less like writing and more like living' [Samatar, S. 2024. *Opacities: On Writing and the Writing Life*. Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 3]. Rather than treating the complexities of everyday life as interruptions to creative practice, I argue that these are the spaces in which creative work can emerge and be initiated. Framing homeliness as integral to creative practice can illuminate artistic process and make writing more like living.

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Feeling at home with the identity of being a writer can remain a distant goal for creative writing students in Higher Education (Forbes 2017). While the decision to be a writer often connects to individual goals about engaging in work that is intensely meaningful (Gouthro 2014), many writing students feel at home with their craft only *after* the work is done. Which is to say, when they have finished pieces of writing and gained final assessment grades, rather than during the ongoing process of writing creatively (James 2024). Within the process of writing, students speak about the discomfort and the vulnerabilities involved in forming an identity as a writer (Gouthro 2014; Hecq 2015; Tennant 2017). Added to this the competing parts of students' daily lives can challenge their ability to join workshops and to create new writing. My own work as a supervisor for Creative Writing PhDs and teaching on an MA in Creative and Critical Writing is often centered around supporting students' concerns and doubts about themselves as writers alongside any focus on their work. There can be quiet concerns about not being able to write, or

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worries about perfectionism, fears of getting writing wrong, or a belief that the writing is finished once the page is filled and that there is nothing more to be done, with an accompanying reluctance to consider further drafts.

Creative writing students can show a clear desire to produce ‘highly polished’ work, but the processes involved in *polishing* the work are not always clear, and like the process of maintaining a domestic home, it remains a form of labor that is often not considered. This is coupled with a sense that learning and development within creative writing curriculum relies on the ‘kinds of ‘tacit’ knowledge that people acquire [which] is perceived more to be a reflection of a person’s innate capabilities, rather than a learned skill set’ (Gouthro 2014, 173). For the student of creative writing, being at home with their identity as a writer asks for a familiarity with both process and production. It calls on constantly shifting knowledge and understanding of the craft of writing. At the same time, a writer needs the ability to step outside of and remain within one’s own life and experiences, while being able to depict the world as they imagine or understand it in imaginative and also recognizable ways (Harper 2018). It’s no surprise then, that the complex learning processes involved in becoming a fiction writer (Gouthro 2014, 201) make being at home with writing challenging and demanding (Hecq 2015, 26). Rather than treating these difficulties as interruptions to creative practice, I argue that ‘creative writing is a human practice’ (Harper 2018, 7), and that the complexities of life are always part of the conditions from which creative work emerges. In this article, I use the idea of homeliness in three related ways: as a feeling of being at home with creative practice, as a framework for understanding the care and maintenance that writing requires, and as a means of situating writing itself as a form of home.

Homeliness is not simply the feelings that arise from dwelling in a place. Feeling at home calls for an imaginative space that inhabits the complex social, relational, and material processes through which creativity is continually made and remade (Boccagni 2022). For a writer, I suggest, being at home with the ways creativity is made and remade requires a feeling of being at home with the specific labors of writing. These are found in rewriting, redrafting, researching, rethinking, returning to the page again, tracing, and reshaping the boundaries of its form. Given that all the spaces writers inhabit intellectually, emotionally, and materially can bear what Bachelard (2014, 27) describes as *the essence of home*, this methodology can redefine writing as an embedded part of living. It offers a continual exploration of where the boundaries between domestic space, academic institutions, and creative process overlap and inform one another.

Making yourself at home

Writing about domestic space and the home, Emanuele Coccia (2024) suggests that no home is ever finished because we are continually constructing it emotionally and materially. Writing contains the same ongoing process of imagination that makes endless the stories we tell ourselves. In both cases, creative agency resides not in completion but in the continual reshaping of forms, relationships, and possibilities through which home and writing come into being. Writing is a movement towards completion but is also an ongoing condition of becoming. Home too, is always elsewhere. It is what Coccia calls a ‘journey on the spot’ (2024, 110). Writing could be seen in this way as a journey with an imaginative destination in mind. Creative agency emerges through this

continual process of making and remaking, rather than through the realization of a finished work. In this respect, writing encapsulates the process of creativity as well as the books that we will never write and books that are being written but will never be finished (Samatar 2024). If home and writing are both practices through which creativity is continually made and remade, then, as Coccia suggests, ‘we need home for the same reason we need writing’ (2024, 105); as a means of continuing to experience life as a source of stories, dreaming, and vision.

Being a writer means attending to the endless maintenance needed to both live in the world and to be able to imagine other worlds. Writers can feel at home with the process of writing, but they continuously shift that idea of home because by its nature writing is generative and endless. So too, a house is constantly reshaped and reformed by the act of living in it, tracing its boundaries simply by the ways we pass through it. Housework and creative practice are both autobiographical and relational. Writing can be seen as a kind of housekeeping or home-making, insofar as writing is part of who we are rather than something separate from everyday life. By arguing that writing itself can be a form of home, writers can locate their writing practice within their ‘corner of the world’ (Bachelard 2014, 26). This article explores further this relationship between writing, care, maintenance, and creative agency via ordinary acts of dwelling and domestic maintenance that are not conventionally understood as creative. As an illustration of this I offer a personal family story concerning my grandfather’s *corner of the world*.

Routines of love and creativity

Some time ago, after my grandmother had passed away, my grandfather George, then aged 92, sold their house where they had lived for over fifty years, and moved into a private residential care unit, a nursing home.

The house he and my grandmother had shared had been a brick-built bungalow with well-tended gardens front and back. The back garden was highly productive, with a compact and weed-free green lawn that was mown, raked and reseeded as needed. This was framed by flower beds crammed with the kaleidoscopic colors of starry cosmos, shock-headed dahlias and tall red gladioli. Summer bean plants and their scarlet flowers climbed wooden trellis, fruit bushes hung heavy with soft fruits, an apple tree offered green cooking apples, a Victoria plum tree was beloved by wasps, and there was a gnarled and lichen-covered cherry tree whose meager fruits fed crowds of enthusiastic sparrows.

The house was in a line of bungalows at the base of tall limestone cliffs. Every time our family visited them back in the 1970s and ‘80s when I was a child and then teenager, I felt like we had arrived at the end of the world. That the people who lived here outside the town were pioneers, making new estates where before there had been fields, rocks, bramble, bracken, and farmland.

Out front, there was another tiny but pristine lawn and a low rockery full of purple heathers and alpine plants. To one side was a garage with its door painted pale yellow, leading to a vertiginously steep concrete driveway. Even well into his late eighties, my grandfather could reverse onto and park his car on that slope with the skill of a jet pilot landing on an aircraft carrier at sea.

The bungalow had picture windows and a honey-colored glass-paned front door. South-facing, sunlight poured into the rooms across the carpets, the beige three-piece suite, and the dark wood wall clock. Its insistent rays illuminated the gold-framed prints of old ships on the walls. All my childhood memories of that house are of summer and the way sunshine lit everything, how its bored slowness sank into every corner.

My grandmother liked to tell me the story of how she and Grandpa, when they first bought the bungalow, had walked all the way up the footpath that rose skywards to a rocky cliff overlooking an estuary. They took the winding footpath up to the top and then carried down stones for the rockery they built out front. The thought of those two small, silver-haired people dragging stones (small boulders really) down that steep path had surprised me as a child. It forced me to see them as people who put their mind to things. I liked to imagine them working to bring the rocks down the path, struggling together, using ropes and old sheets maybe, or a wheelbarrow that threatened to hurtle down the path if they lost control of it. The rockery, I decided, had been built with a hidden sense of danger and creative verve.

After my grandmother died, the bungalow was sold and my grandfather moved into the private residential home. Moving must have been difficult. But what turned out to be most difficult for him, and most baffling to me, was that the one thing he really liked to do, was not allowed in the Care Home.

A week or so after moving, my father got a phone call from the home. They had concerns. Grandpa had put on his apron and gone into the kitchens after his tea to do the washing up. But he was not allowed to wash up. The next night he tried again and they sent him away. The following night he picked up his plate and cutlery after he had eaten and made his way to the kitchen again. He ignored the calls for him to leave. He headed to the sink, emptied his plate and cutlery into it and turned on the hot water tap. The kitchen staff tried to stop him. Grandpa splashed them with soapy water. They insisted he leave. He shouted and then became tearful.

'It is not safe for the residents to be in the kitchens,' explained the home manager to my father on the phone.

'Not safe?'

'We have staff who wash up,' the manager insisted. 'And we have dishwashers, machines that ensure everything is clean.'

'Can't you make an exception? Surely you could let him wash up his own plate?'

But this was not allowed.

My grandfather who had been the kind of man who could climb a cliff and bring down boulders to build his own rockery, who could maintain a house, park a car on a vertiginous driveway, and share his garden's harvest with wasps and birds, could live in the *home*. But he could not *clean* it.

Years later, the story still troubles me. My grandfather's actions were not acts of writing, though his desire for homeliness has shaped my writing practice and led to new writing that has emerged from his experience and my desire to write his story. It has also led me to think about how we risk *unhomeliness* when we assume that creativity belongs in some

spaces and not others. My concern here is not that washing dishes is exactly equivalent to the process of writing, but that both depend upon forms of care, participation, and maintenance through which a person sustains a sense of being at home in the world.

I understand the potential mayhem that might be caused by elderly people taking over a staff kitchen space. But it's sad that my grandfather was not considered capable of enacting some small act of creative care, for himself or others.

Institutional care in this respect becomes not only protection but also a form of restriction. It reorganizes the boundaries of what counts as appropriate action, and in doing so can diminish the forms of agency through which a person sustains their sense of being at home. This tension is echoed in the way care is often described. Care home literature almost always suggests that living in a residential care home removes the need for household chores, as cleaning and laundry are undertaken by staff. Such accounts frame this as a freedom, a luxury, a relief from burden. Yet what is offered as liberation can also be read as a withdrawal of everyday practices of inhabiting a space. Of being in the world.

Returning here to my original discussion about creative writing students, a higher education campus necessarily creates dedicated spaces for writing, but those spaces can sometimes encourage students to think of writing as something that only occurs in certain places. In which case, just as my grandfather could not wash up in the home, there is a danger that students may feel they are able to write in some places and not others. Homeliness as a structure of care and maintenance for the writer can offer a way of reconnecting writing to the wider practices of *living* from which it emerges, through a working method rather than a focus on the spaces we inhabit. In this way, my grandfather's attempt to wash up can be read not as disruption but as a desire for a homely practice. A desire to maintain, to participate, to remain involved in the creative processes through which life is sustained. Creativity and writing as part of lived life are not separate from maintenance but structurally close to it. For writing students, participating in the ongoing creative processes of writing is necessarily participating in the processes of life itself.

Across cultures, homes have long been central to literature, film, and visual art (Perry 2014) and often a site of both homeliness and *unhomeliness*. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper* (2012, 15), the protagonist's restricted domestic environment prevents both writing and forms of self-directed care. 'I must put this away, he hates to have me write a word,' she notes in her diary, linking her domestic confinement with the suppression of creative agency. The protagonist is prevented from writing just as my grandfather was prevented from cleaning. For both of them, contributing creatively to life is essential to living. When this is not available, what is lost is a way of being at home in the world.

One of the key elements of homeliness in creative practice and in representations of home is the abundance of meanings and relations it can inspire. For the creative writing student, this can be a confirmation that their knowledge of the world matters to their craft and to others. My grandfather's story similarly suggests that homeliness is not only a condition of being cared for but is also a practice of participation. It is in the doing, maintaining, and enacting the rituals of life that a sense of being at home in one's creative work is sustained.

Through an imaginative consideration of the often-invisible home-making practices that align closely with the care, repetition, and habit that writing requires, students

might usefully be able to consider their perceptions of themselves as writers. Sofia Samatar suggests that the desire to be creative is necessary but endless. Just as my grandfather wanted to continue his ways of caring for the home, so too, Samatar insists that 'I have to do what I'm doing, to go on producing my repetitive scraps' (2024, 49). This is the work of writing that is needed to sustain it and to develop as a writer. And it is in this that the work of being a writer can be identified within a framework of maintenance and care. Considering creative practice in this way, with its need for home-making and home maintenance, can be beneficial to writers, connecting as it does to the art of writing within the act of living. My grandfather's story taught me to understand how we live in creative spaces, whatever they might look like for each of us. As a writer and as a teacher, I can see the need for students to be at home with their writing identity. It equips them with something they can take with them wherever they are in the world, reinforcing the connection between lived experience and homeliness as writing method.

The story of my grandfather was one that I told a group of MA students in a creative writing workshop. The account of the workshop that follows draws on my own observation and experience as facilitator rather than on formally collected student data. Instead, I explore here how the performance and the process created the product (Bacon 2017), which in this case was an imaginative house of cleaning. The students were from different creative programs, music, dance, and creative writing. We were in a university theater space, and I stood on stage and recounted my grandfather's story to them. I then asked them to reflect on his desire to clean up and consider if they felt it was for him, a creative act. I asked them about their own daily and necessary creative practices and to consider also the ways they cleaned (or didn't clean) their homes. With this in mind, I then asked them in groups or on their own, to draw, illustrate, or write about cleaning a house. I asked them to imagine what home might mean to them and offered them lists of domestic spaces: a front step, a backyard, inner hallways, bedrooms, kitchens, attics, and all other familiar spaces they might consider cleaning (or not cleaning). Using felt tip pens and A3 sheets of paper, they wrote creatively about the actions involved in cleaning these domestic rooms and places, turning routine into stories that made visible the often-invisible maintenance and care that life demands.

Students wrote poetry about noisy washing machines whose faulty drums made terrible grinding sounds in the house. They described bedrooms where dirt lurked under the bed and lost socks gathered in the diurnal tides of dust and debris that gather in a domestic home. Some chose to write about sweeping or washing. Others drew pictures of themselves laboriously picking up dirty washing. Some actively looked at *not cleaning* and instead wrote evocatively about the anxiety that dirt might bring to the home, of the mold that grew in bathrooms and its health consequences, of things under the bed, like the monsters of childhood, brooding in the shadows.

All wrote of actions, which are at the heart of stories inasmuch as something has to *happen* in every story. The students drew images of hoovering communal living rooms, doing the dishes in shared student kitchens. They wrote about the comfort too of returning to family homes. While they discussed their own creative lives, there was much laughter and groaning about domestic space and the repetitive nature of housework. At the end of the workshop, all the illustrations and writing on the A3 sheets of paper were assembled collectively into a paper home covering the stage of the large theater space. The students gathered around the drawings, talking, walking the length of the

house they had made together. This was a house of creative thinking and doing, of secrets, confessions, celebrations, anxieties, declarations, communal values and personal stories. Homeliness became the 'material blueprint, the framework, but also the objective atmosphere, the climate for a shared life' (Coccia 2024, 31). If a writing workshop is an 'initiation into tacit understandings shared by a community and not just a familiarity with core subject knowledge ... students should feel they are co-contributors to it' (Stockwell 2016, 262). The shared stories that the students created related to their own lived experiences via their imagination. They were at that moment at home in their creative making.

Stories of home offer creative details, often small details that make up the emotions, understandings of ourselves, and ways of being. For many people, not least me, household chores are often viewed as undesirable tasks yet need to be completed regularly (Rodriguez-Stanley et al. 2020). And in this respect, that reluctance might align with many writers concerning the resilience needed to return to a manuscript and a work in progress, again and again. But still, to be at home with this is to tell a story of being at home with creativity, in ways that embrace writing that can be more like living. The workshop showed how playful narratives of domesticity naturally offer a dwelling space for storytelling.

If 'a building becomes a home from practices of cultivation' (Donohoe 2014), then so too, do creative acts need practices of cultivation. In this way, as the self-care that life requires came to the fore in the workshop, there was a realization that creative work and cleaning can both be seen as forms of maintenance and care that enable us to imaginatively create art, music, and ongoing bodies of work and of life. 'No home is ever finished, we never stop building it' (Coccia 2024, 101). We never stop building our identity as writers either. To be grounded in a sense of being at home with your art is to be actively participating in the complexities of life. Stories of domestic life layer relational details, reimagining hidden or shared interiors that make up emotions and generate narratives within the realm of each student's experience of the everyday, which can be seen as 'the most alive, vivid and dynamic terrain for invention and innovation' (Perry 2014, 25). Writing about home and domestic space thus offers a creative canvas, a clean page that is ready for writing but is not *blank* because it is already situated in experience.

Invisible labors

The stories of both my grandfather and the MA workshop reflect the importance of an ongoing practice of participation. In each example, acts of maintenance generated meaning. My grandfather's desire to clean the dishes was a desire to remain involved in the daily practices through which life is sustained. Similarly, the students' stories of cleaning, tidying, washing and caring transformed ordinary domestic routines into imaginative acts of creative making.

For writers, this has implications for how creative practice is understood.

Writing is often associated with moments of inspiration or with finished works, yet much of writing consists of repetitive and largely invisible acts: drafting, redrafting, rereading, researching, returning to the page and beginning again. And just as no home is ever fully finished (Coccia 2024), no piece of writing emerges without continual acts of maintenance. The published text, like the clean home, can conceal the labor

involved in its creation. To shape a writing practice around this is to appreciate that creative work depends upon care, renewal, attention and return. Understanding the complexities of creative practice, not as an obstacle to creativity, but as part of the conditions through which it is given agency and is sustained, offers writers a place to consider their identity as a writer and the stories they want to tell.

Considering housework and housekeeping as a metaphor for creative practice forms a framework which naturally interrogates and highlights the precarity of home in ways which 'exchanges, generates, explores and sometimes challenges knowledge' (Kroll and Harper 2013, 98). If a sense of homeliness is inseparable from felt, lived, and embodied experience (Martins and Horta 2025), then it can generate narratives of joy and loss, separation or belonging, while also functioning as both a space of imagining and a site that requires ongoing maintenance and care. Such practices necessarily engage with what Hecq describes as 'the reality of the unconscious and the importance of rational and critical process' (2015, 178). A writing practice that does not differentiate between writing and living recognizes the human desire to carry our home with us, to search for it, to stay, to leave, to mourn and experience exile, and to know this is found in all aspects of our writing. To attend to writing as we attend to our lived lives then, is to position writing as 'closer to a heartbeat than a craft' (Samatar 2024, 80). In this respect, ways of being-at-home with writing offers students a way of situating artistic practice within the rhythms and complexities of life not as background to creativity, but as part of it.

This becomes visible in the ways both literary and domestic labor are structured around processes that resist completion. The published novel and the clean home both present an illusion of end-product that conceals the labor involved in producing them. Writing is generative, shaped through layers of drafting, erasure, memory, and return. Domestic space functions similarly. And it is continually rewritten through the repetitive acts of living that sustain homeliness over time and through histories of humanity.

Conclusion

This article has argued that homeliness is not simply a feeling associated with home as a place, nor as backdrop against which creative work takes place. Rather, it can be understood as a creative practice in its own right: a process of maintenance, daily participation and care through which creative work is generated and sustained. Drawing on Samatar's suggestion that writing could be less like writing and more like living, I have argued that writing is a creative practice of care, maintenance and participation. This approach to writing offers a way of recognizing the necessity of the labor of creative practice and locates writing within the processes of living from which it emerges. Coccia suggests that a home is a 'mental and material artefact that makes us inhabit the world better than our nature would otherwise allow' (2024, 19). Being at home with being a writer means inhabiting the process of writing as part of our world. Bachelard (2014, 27) suggests that 'with all the dialectics of life', how the writer chooses to 'take root' in their own work becomes vital to how they understand their work and how they create a corner of the world for themselves.

Through a personal story and a reflection on a writing workshop, I have considered how writing and homeliness are not fixed but are enacted or brought into being in specific sets of practices which are the ways we make and remake our place in the world.

Finally, my grandfather found some kind of peace in the care home towards the end of his life and spent fair-weather days sitting in the gardens of the home where perhaps he recalled his own garden or maybe relived his parking skills on his vertiginous driveway. His story returns to me often. I still imagine those two silver-haired people carrying boulders down from the cliffs for their rockery, creating a home through acts of effort, care and creative imagination.

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Notes on contributor

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