

Diverse Economies and Dwelling  
Sensing Surplus in Self-Provisioning: the case of Urban Homesteading

In this paper I explore how notions of dwelling might be adapted to explain how diverse economic practices produce spaces and subjectivities within and beyond the home. In my current research on urban homesteading - home – provides a site for diverse economies and dwelling to gather, and stretch their theoretical bodies in new directions in order to make sense and meaning out of the everyday practices of household self-provisioning in cities.

1. Dwelling

Dwelling, according to Heidegger is how humans inhabit the world, and "man's mode of being in the world". To be human is to dwell in the material world. To dwell is to make a place in the world, and to take care of that part of the world.

1. Building is really dwelling.
2. Dwelling is the manner in which mortals are on the earth.
3. Building as dwelling unfolds into the building that cultivates growing things and the building that erects buildings (Heidegger 1971: 146).

Through the practice of transforming nature to meet our material needs, Heidegger believed that human beings produced space. From the practice of transforming nature humans come to understand their position in the world through an assemblage of things ranging from natural objects and landscapes, to tools, tables, and buildings (1971). Making the world habitable requires not just the building of material shelters that might protect our bodies, but the caring for place through cultivating and growing things.

Humanistic approaches to dwelling from Heidegger on have failed to conceptualize dwelling as an economic practice based on an unequal gender division of labor in which (to paraphrase Iris Marion Young) men build shelters and women serve as the construction materials (Young 2005: 129). The care work that women have traditionally performed in the maintenance of home as shelter and retreat for children and fathers serves to maintain the subjectivity, sense of place, and sense of self for others

– a process which turns women into home while simultaneously leaving their subjectivities homeless. Young seeks to develop an alternative, feminist, conception of dwelling, noting that this patriarchal mode of dwelling is particular to western capitalism. The spatial and ideological separation of work from home, public from private, and isolation by suburbanization are characteristic of capitalist development in much of the western world. The ideology of homeownership, in which private property, home, citizenship, and identity are mutually constitutive is also deeply intertwined with the production of economic subjectivities who can desire and reproduce capitalism. Workers in pursuit of the dream home are able to justify denying themselves their surplus labor and life-time. And the dream home is expected to give them back, everything that they have sacrificed by providing the space in which authentic non-alienated arts of living can be practiced.

But what might happen if, for just a moment, we dislodged the dual conspiracies of capitalism and patriarchy that tie home and dwelling to oppression and exploitation and considered the ways that practices of dwelling and imaginaries of home might enable other subjectivities and economies?

Drawing on Iris Marion Young's critical revaluation of home I conceptualize dwelling as an everyday practice of inhabiting and caring for the world, transforming and arranging the material world to meet our needs, and creating spaces of ethical engagement and subjection. This requires a more fluid notion of dwelling and subjectivity. Dwelling is a multi-scalar process, that can be felt and practiced at a variety of embodied, intimate, and everyday scales from the body the globe (Marston et al. 2005). Subjectivity is our spatially and temporally contingent position in a relational assemblage of things, landscapes, places, homes, humans, and more –than- human others that are gathered together through the practice of dwelling (Heidegger 1971, Hetherington 2003).

J.K. Gibson-Graham's feminist political imaginary of "starting where you are" in order to enact personal transformation and economic change asks us to change our selves in order to change the world and vice versa (2006). In order to spur this process of self-transformation they encourage us to adopt new affective and emotional stances toward the world, from which we can begin to cultivate ourselves as economic subjects who can desire something besides capitalism. These affective stances are embodied, and material, often existing at the "visceral register" beyond discourse and representation (Connolly 1999, Massumi 1995, Thrift 2004). By stretching the perspective of dwelling to diverse economies I aim to develop a materialist account of the everyday embodied practices that shift our affective stances, and generate the visceral, gut reactions, and feelings that might enable us not only to desire something beyond capitalism but maybe even enjoy it !

A decentralized feminist political imaginary of dwelling would ask us to change the way we dwell – this would involve changing our homes, and our relationship to home, in order to change both ourselves and the world. Through the decentralized transformations of self and world at the fine scales of the home and the body, an uncoordinated but perhaps highly contagious cultural shift might begin to spread new habits of dwelling through the assemblage of homes, habitats, and nests that compose our world (Roelvink and Gibson-Graham 2009, Plumwood 2008). It is with this spatial and political imaginary that I approach urban homesteading in its ubiquity as an intensely material, affective, and embodied politics of personal transformation practiced through learning to "dwell" differently in our "homes" however located, mobile, big, or small, local or global those are.

As Shannon Hayes (2010) documents in her book *Radical Homemakers* all over America men and women are changing themselves in order to change the world, by replacing consumption with self-provisioning and re-learning practical skills of food production and preservation, lost domestic arts of knitting and sewing, and Do-it-

yourself skills like fixing, repairing, and building. Through these material practices men and women re-invent themselves as domestic subjects – refashioning themselves as producers and “prosumers” rather than consumers, and reinventing home as a place where it is possible to enact tangible economic and environmental change. Through homesteading home is recast as an ethical space from which it is possible to shift to an economy of care and reciprocity, and away from an economy of exploitation and environmental destruction. By taking back the household economy, homesteaders domesticate the economy at large whittling it down to a scale at which they feel empowered to experiment and act ethically. Acting ethically at the scale of the household does not mean achieving resilience through autonomy - instead resilience is achieved through cooperation and interdependence. While homesteaders seek to dis-embed themselves from an over consumptive capitalist economy they simultaneously re-embed themselves in a community economy. Shannon Haye’s documents homesteaders who strive to become more economically and ecologically resilient by refiguring the spatiality of home and cultivating community and interdependence rather than autonomy and isolation. This observation is echoed by Christine Muhlke’s *New York Times* report on food communities in which she writes “happiness and pleasure involve depending on others”.

Urban homesteaders are engaged in diverse economic practices that redefine the household economy and expand the spatiality of home. This inventory (figure 1) is compiled based on popular news reports and books on urban homesteading, the practices that women document on their homesteading blogs, and some preliminary observations of the urban homesteaders league in Boston.

Transactions	Labor	Enterprise	Property
<b>Alternative Market</b> -Barter “Trading Post”	<b>Alternative</b> <b>Paid</b> -Self employed Artisans	<b>Alternative</b> <b>Capitalist</b> -etsy.com -Non-profit learning	<b>Alternative</b> <b>Private</b> -shared back yard
<b>Non-Market</b> -Gifting -Sharing skills, and surplus. -seed swap -gleaning -gathering	<b>Unpaid</b> -self provisioning -volunteer work party -Housework	<b>Non-Capitalist</b> -Households (communal, feudal, and independent).	<b>Open Access</b> -internet knowledge commons -seed saving library

Figure 1. : Diverse Economies of Urban Homesteading.

The most popular practice by far is self provisioning - urban homesteaders devote considerable time and energy to DIY projects, crafts, gardening, cooking, preserving fruits, pickling and fermenting vegetables, brewing beer and kombucha, and raising backyard animals. The surplus from self-provisioning may flow out beyond the immediate household as gifts, barter items, or commodities sold at local specialty markets and global craft markets like etsy.com.

Even though popular media representations of urban homesteading give the impressions of individual households “going back to the land” and achieving some measure of autonomy – most urban homesteading practice are supported by some form of knowledge or resource commons. Urban homesteaders strive to learn to dwell differently by teaching themselves and each other the practical skills that will enable them to live more environmentally and economically resilient lives. Learning to dwell differently is made possible by a growing number of Home Economics courses and skill

sharing workshops on topics ranging from kombucha and alcohol brewing, gardening, canning and pickling, to goat, chicken, or bee keeping. In addition to localized workshops and events hundreds of bloggers, mostly women, document their everyday domestic lives through personal web blogs where they share homesteading stories, successes, failures, and favorite recipes accompanied by photographs of food, hand-made crafts, preserved seasonal treats, back yard animals, and children. Through blogging urban homesteaders build a vibrant knowledge commons through which they share skills and tips, encouragement and motivation, and recipes. These web-blogs are often linked to other homesteading blogs and etsy.com shops where women homesteaders also sell their hand made crafts on the global market place. Through the internet homesteaders expand the spatiality of home by making it public and collaborative rather than private and autonomous.

What the perspective of dwelling brings to diverse economies is a focus on the material, embodied, and affective processes by which subjectivities and spaces are formed through practices of self-provisioning. Dwelling and phenomenological theory more broadly attune us to the ways that economic practices are embodied and felt, in ways that can bring pleasure and pain, self-affirmation and alienation. Combining the diverse economies framework with the perspective of dwelling allows us to consider the rich materiality of our economic worlds, and the embodied experience of enacting and transforming those world.

Practices of self-provisioning are often linked to affects and emotions that result from the embodied practice of doing, making, and building. Historians, sociologists, and journalists have documented the material pleasure and enjoyment as well as bodily strain and frustration that accompanies self-provisioning practices such DIY, craft, and food production (Campbell 2005, Gelber 1991, 1997, Hackney 2006, Watson and Shove 2008, Roland 1958, Williams 2004, Leadbeater and Miller 2004, Woginrich 2008). As one urban homesteader writes on her blog *You Grow Girl*, "Canning in a small,

claustrophobic apartment kitchen can get a little gnarly at times but I actually enjoy the process quite a bit. I feel like I'm getting one over The Man with every jar that seals". Reading self-provisioning through the minded body gets us to the affective heart of why an economy beyond capitalism is desirable. Through self-provisioning individuals experience affects and emotions that are quite different from those associated with other forms of surplus appropriation and distribution, such as the alienation traditionally associated with capitalist exploitation. The enjoyment that coincides with the material practice of self-provisioning points to the complex emotional and embodied character of surplus. If surplus is little more than pieces of lifetime (Marx 1867), then the ability to appropriate, savor, gift, and share pieces of life time with friends and family through self-provisioning can be gratifying and transformative.

How might we harness positive affects generated through non-capitalist class processes like self-provisioning for the cultivation of an ethical community economy of enjoyment? I realize it might sound like I'm advocating for some kind of hedonistic economy based on maximizing pleasures, but positive feelings are not an end in themselves instead they are the means by which we learn how to dwell differently, politicize everyday practices of self-provisioning, and learn to desire something besides capitalism.

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