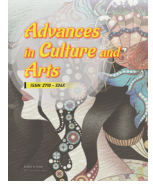




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ARTICLE

POSTFEMINIST DIVISION IN GEORGIA BLAIN'S *TOO CLOSE TO HOME* AND PEGGY FREW'S *HOUSE OF STICKS*

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ABSTRACT

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Throughout 20th century Australian novels, suburbs were often described as female areas, as opposed to masculine urban or jungle landscapes. The suburban home environment is trivial, ironic, or neglected because it's a place that doesn't fit the transition narrative—a place to escape. Traditionally, male protagonists begin these flight narratives, while female characters endure the boring life of "domestic integration" in the suburbs. It was not until the second wave of feminism in the 1970s and 1980s that female writers were liberated from the "cages" in the suburbs and became female protagonists, many of whom identify as feminist. Recently, "postfeminist" scholars such as Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, Mary Vavrus and Susan J. Douglas observed the rise of a "retreatist" narrative in popular media such as "chick-lit", TV series and movies. This public restorative narrative often describes the female protagonist's rejection of the public (assumedly male) realm and returns to the more family (assumedly female) realm as the final solution to the problematic "incompleteness" state. This article explores contemporary expressions and narrative techniques of female protagonists in the home, suburban environment of Georgia Blain's *Too Close to Home* and Peggy Frew's *House of Sticks*, published in 2011. Of particular interest is the evidence that rejecting, questioning or subverting this "retreatist" narrative is a viable feminist solution, or alternatively, a more creative reimagining of the suburban environment to achieve "new" narratives of feminine transformation.

KEYWORDS

Postfeminist; Australian novels; Retreatist.

Throughout twentieth-century Australian fiction, the suburban female protagonist has been unjustly maligned. Entangled in the antisuburban critique, which discounts suburbia as a site unworthy of narrative attention, stories of women in suburbia have, for the most part, been dismissed or ignored. Although this mistreatment was partially rectified by the "golden age" of women's writing, emerging in the context of second-wave feminism of the 1970s and 1980s, these emancipatory tales mostly mimicked an (arguably) masculinist trajectory of flight from suburbia to elsewhere—either the bush, the city, or overseas. Indeed, as Andrew McCann observes, flight from suburbia persists as the dominant narrative by which a protagonist is transformed in Australian fiction. Thus, stories of the suburban female within a realm conventionally designated her own have remained, and still remain, undervalued as "slighter" fictions of domestic realism. Moreover, "suburbia" novels written by women appear to suffer a similar fate. Nathanael O'Reilly's recent survey of representations of suburbia in Australian fiction, *Exploring Suburbia* (2012), inspects only one novel by a woman writer (Melissa Lucashenko's *Steam Pigs*) out of fourteen analyzed^[1].

Georgia Blain's *Too Close to Home* and Peggy Frew's *House of Sticks*, both published in 2011, are firmly situated within fictional Australian suburbia.

Moreover, both feature a suburban woman as lead protagonist and both are written by women born during the era of second-wave feminism. Using these two novels as case studies, I investigate the prevalence of ex-suburban flight as a transformative narrative in contemporary women's fiction. I also explore whether conventional and pejorative gender codings of suburbia as "feminine" and "feminized" are upheld, reworked, or resisted in these texts^[2]. As part of this query, I refer to postfeminist scholarship on the "retreatist" narrative by Diane Negra and Yvonne Tasker, Mary Vavrus, and Susan J. Douglas. This narrative, repeatedly emulated in "chick-lit" novels, permanently relocates the female protagonist into the private realm, thereby reinforcing "home" as exclusively feminine and feminized. Thus, although narratives by writers such as Helen Fielding, Allison Pearson, Adele Parks, Marian Keyes, and Jenny Colgan in the UK, Candice Bushnell in the US, and Maggie Alderson and Monica McInerney in Australia mostly figure an educated, middle-class, sexually liberated, professional female protagonist struggling with the postfeminist dilemma of "too many choices", they typically conform to a conventional romance trope of snaring Mr Right and settling down to have children, often abandoning lucrative careers to do so. Moreover, they regularly feature an unequivocal return to "home" and all things supposedly domestic—motherhood, housework, family values, retrogressive ideals of femininity, etc.—as a plausible

solution to a problematized state of incompleteness, which the female protagonist formerly experienced while pursuing a career in the public, assumed masculine, sphere^[3]. As Negra states, “the postfeminist promise is of coming back to oneself in a process of coming home”. This expulsion of the female protagonist from the public sphere back to the domestic domain is justifiably suspect to the aforementioned feminist scholars. Their central concern with the narrative and its ubiquity across literature, film, television, and even journalism rests in its power to obscure the need for continued progress in areas such as equal pay, childcare, home labor, and sexism. Retreatism’s rose-tinted superficiality, alongside its sunny “rhetoric of choice”, is especially problematic to Vavrus, who locates it with a “discursive legitimization of neoliberalism”.

As a creative writer, I have other more aesthetic problems with the narrative: first, for its lack of character complexity—and she lived happily ever after in her cozy little world of love and babies and marital contentment because this is, after all the feminist “hoo-ha”, where she actually belongs; And second, for its reliance on clichéd genderings of “home” as rigidly feminine and feminized. In making the retreat the solution, the realities of motherhood, domesticity, and home life are swept under the carpet (excuse the pun) because, as in a fairytale, the story ends with a soothing reassertion of the status quo. Thus, began my quest for more complex renderings of the postfeminist feminine experience in domestic, suburban settings. In addition to the critique of retreatism as noted, I apply Rita Felski’s reappraisal of “the everyday”—which, like suburbia, has suffered the burden of excess theoretical baggage—to the suburban-domestic setting. Finally, I use the term *postfeminism* in its broadest sense to define the period from the mid-1980s through until the current day, while acknowledging its multiple meanings and the possible range of feminisms contained within its scope^[4].

As is evident from their titles, Blain’s *Too Close to Home* and Frew’s *House of Sticks* focus on the theme of “the fragile home”. In addition, both feature thirty-something female protagonists of a postfeminist generation, and both are set in contemporary inner-suburbia—Blain’s novel in Sydney, and Frew’s in Melbourne. Interestingly, both protagonists are also artists—a motif deserving further attention not only for its significance in these novels, but also for its recurrence across other contemporary “suburbia” novels with a female lead. In *Too Close to Home*, Freya—successful playwright, mother of one, turning forty—is completing her doctoral thesis. Her partner, Matt, is an architect who has abandoned his dream of becoming a sculptor to support the family. The couple has recently moved from the inner-east of Sydney, where they rented for years, to buy a house in the “gritty” west, an area slightly out of their comfort zone as educated, middle-class liberals. Freya’s friends are artists, actors, writers, publishers, and film and theater directors. Among her set, she is the only mother (although by the end of the novel one of her friends is about to have a baby and another has miscarried). She is also atypical in that she has opted for a more suburban existence—writing in a converted backyard shed, looking after her school-age daughter—compared with her friends who still live as they did in their hedonistic twenties. The central theme of the book, as suggested by the title, is how middle-class liberal ideals of equality and tolerance are challenged when the fragile microcosm of home and family is threatened. As its title also suggests, *House of Sticks*, Frew’s debut novel, shares the theme of how easily the domestic construct of home and family can fall apart.

In both novels, this potentially destructive threat to home is excessively “masculine”, as well as “other”. The intrusion of a “masculine threat” to the domestic preserve, which is depicted as feminine, functions as the main dramatic impetus. It is also linked to a past predating the formation of the central heterosexual relationship. In *Too Close to Home*, the threat comes in the shape of Shane, an indigenous man, father of two, and an old friend of Matt’s, who coincidentally moves into the neighborhood. Shane signifies Matt’s youth, a time when mates meant everything and money did not matter much. Although an educated professional, Shane’s unorthodox approach to parenting, his drinking habit, and the problematic fact of his “otherness” make Freya uncomfortable in his company. She resents the way he calls her “missus”: “I am Freya, she wants to tell him, loud and clear. I am not the missus. I am just me.” By contrast, the arrival of Shane rejuvenates

Matt, as if the injection of this unequivocal masculinity into their domestic, feminine world allows him to recapture something of himself thought lost through age and parenthood.

House of Sticks has a different milieu—still domestic, but more firmly entrenched in the messy realities of being a stay-at-home mum. Bonnie, thirty-four, has three children—five-year-old twins and a baby. Before motherhood, she toured with a rock band headed by the enigmatic and eternally single singer-songwriter Mickey Myers. Now though, Bonnie has put her music on hold to be a full-time mother, while Pete, her partner, earns the household living by making furniture from a workshop in the backyard. Although she says she does not regret having children, Bonnie struggles with the tedium of domestic chores. She especially loathes grocery shopping, about which she exhibits a “sort of paralysis”. In this novel, the “masculine threat” comes from Doug, a drifter and old mate of Pete’s, who turns up looking for work. Again, Doug embodies an “excessive masculine”, which is also “other”—he is dirty, he smells bad, and he is homeless. Like Shane, he calls Bonnie “missus”, evoking retrogressive notions of the feminine, and spurs Pete into resurrecting youthful behaviors like drinking and gambling. Confined to a domestic world of child raising and housework, and suffering from mild postnatal depression, Bonnie fixates on Doug’s presence around the house, in particular his jocular interactions with her children. She finds it harder and harder to cope with his “invasion” of her home, which she repeatedly refers to as “her territory”. Increasingly paranoid and distressed, but passive in her inability to take action, she constructs a sinister narrative around Doug’s largely innocuous presence.

Although Freya guards the home territory less fiercely than Bonnie does (perhaps because she is less confined to its borders), she finds Shane’s presence unsettling in a way she admits is connected to his Aboriginality. Instinctively, she also senses that his arrival and its links to Matt’s past carry a potential, if unspecified, threat to their cozy world of three. This fear materializes when Shane mentions that a woman with whom Matt once had a brief liaison has a teenage son. From there the story unfolds, with Freya becoming more and more insecure about her relationship with Matt and their future as a family unit. This masculine infringement on the “feminine-domestic” establishes gendered tensions that direct the narrative in both texts. Although use of the retrogressive label “missus” offends both protagonists, they assert home as *their* territory, especially in *House of Sticks*. Thus, home is mostly feminine, although not suffocatingly feminized. The preservation of home and the relationships it sustains are a critical part of who these women are, and they assume the roles of protector and border controller. In Blain’s novel, Freya is the one who wanted to buy a house; Matt would have been just as happy to keep renting. Moreover, in Frew’s novel, Bonnie’s decision to settle down with Pete is related to his associations with home and belonging, as antidote to the itinerant life of a musician. Nonetheless, despite the representation of home as feminine and its potential destroyer as masculine, both texts subvert some stereotypes associated with domestic life in the suburbs. In contrast to the antisuburban view of the “suburban domestic” as stultifying and mundane, certain aspects of home are celebrated, even exalted. Children, for example, are described in glowing, sometimes lyrical language reminiscent of Helen Garner’s *Honour and Other People’s Children* (1980) and *The Children’s Bach* (1984)—a parallel also drawn by Kate Veitch in her review of *House of Sticks*. On seeing her daughter, Freya is “light with the wonder of her” and Bonnie describes “the sweet abandon of children sleeping, the absolute perfect beauty of them”. For both protagonists, their offspring occupy the emotional center of their universe, thus validating the importance of home.

More broadly, home as a space of belonging is evoked in positive terms, contradicting the antisuburban critique, as well as the feminist one, against domesticity and the limitations of the private sphere. Felski argues the case for “making peace with the everyday”, and, in many ways, these texts do this—both through a partial degendering of the home territory, but also via a reassertion of the psychic and emotional centrality of home. Admittedly, the protagonists experience this yearning for home most keenly following an aborted flight (or “mini-flight”) from the suburban domestic. During an affair, Freya describes wanting to be “close to home, in the small grid of streets around the house in which they live, around Matt and Ella; Grounding herself in this”. Bonnie displays an even stronger

yearning for home, augmented by her memory of the loneliness of being a touring musician. Her greatest fear is of being ostracized, without a home, shut out of a perfect domestic scene but looking in, and she has a vision of “the five of them, their family, spinning on, moving in the paths of their beautiful, sensible constellation”, signifying the family as axiomatic. Despite this, both women, as well as the male characters in the texts, acknowledge how domestic life becomes boring and routine. Housework is mostly portrayed as onerous, especially to Bonnie. However, there are exceptions even to this. In moments of extreme stress, both women find solace in the detached familiarity of domestic chores in the mode of “shelter writing” as identified by Susan Fraiman. Unsettled by the news of Matt’s possible son from a former relationship, Freya cannot write and so mows the lawn; At another crisis point, she ferociously digs up onion weeds. Domestic routine also gives Bonnie succor when Pete leaves home after her confession about her minor infidelity in Sydney. Thus, Blain and Frew partially contradict stereotypes of domestic life as monochromatically oppressive. Simultaneously, both writers resist retrogressive “genderings” of household chores. Indeed, both writers attempt to flip gender stereotypes, eschewing the stereotypical portrait of domestic femininity and motherhood, which, as Naomi Milthorpe notes in her review of *House of Sticks*, is “so frequently sentimentalized or sugar-coated, or painted as a hilarious series of slapstick events”. Moreover, in their partial inversion of gender roles, the writers present a modest critique of conventional divisions of household labor. For example, Frew depicts Pete as *more* domestic than Bonnie is, when he manages to rustle up something for dinner after she fails, yet again, to face her supermarket demons. Despite this, Pete’s primary domain is the workshop, not the house, and his role as breadwinner is traditional. Blain’s portrayal of Freya is also often less than feminine. Not only is she shown doing more stereotypically “masculine” chores like mowing, but also her play is described in a review as “unusually political work for a woman”. Stephanie Bishop comments on this particular motif—that a woman writing a political play is somehow unusual—as “not only painful but foolish”. Moreover, Bishop argues that the novel’s assumptions—“that the presence of overt politics in women’s writing lifts it into a new realm and that the domestic is ‘a site of death for most women writers’”—infect the novel “as a whole”. I agree that unless Blain’s intention is to be ironic, this contention is problematic, more so given the novel’s mostly domestic setting. Perhaps, with its upfront domesticity set against the backdrop of political machinations and current affairs, the novel aims to contradict this stance, revealing its protagonist as a product of creative insularity, or more broadly, that Australia is culturally misogynistic as recently argued by Anne Summers. If so, it is a clever, albeit thin, conceit. For example, there is a suggestion that Freya does not actually believe that the domestic and the political are mutually exclusive, but in the face of a compliment, she is not brave enough to argue from a feminist standpoint. She simply accepts a male director’s reading of her script and, by doing so, confirms her status as outside feminism or employing a restrictive use of the term *postfeminist*. However, for the most part, the novel does not operate at the level of gender analysis. We are too close to Freya and her daily dilemmas about family and work to read her character as representative of postfeminist malaise or entrenched gender inequalities. Similarly, although she is portrayed as a highly successful playwright, Blain does not capture much of Freya’s artistic interiority, the writer’s mind at work, and as such the novel lacks a complexity that might have come from the juxtaposition of Freya’s creative self against her other “selves” as mother, friend, partner, and lover. Interestingly, Freya, like Pete in *House of Sticks*, does not work creatively inside the house proper, but in a backyard shed converted to a workroom. This distinction partially mimics antisuburban notions of the home as antithetical to creativity, in comparison with more liminal zones *beyond* the home: the garden, the veranda, the shed, or the street, for example.

Overall, the proposition of feminine flight as escape from the suburban domestic is explored, but ultimately rejected by Blain and Frew. As in Joanne Murray-Smith’s *Sunnyside* (2005) and Amanda Lohrey’s short fiction, a perceived failure of second-wave feminism to deliver a plausible solution is highlighted by the incongruity of permanent abandonment, especially when it comes to leaving young children. However, both Freya and Bonnie *do* embark on attempted flights from the suburban domestic. Indeed, the protagonists’ forays into the public sphere, partly prompted

by a masculine invasion of their domestic “territories”, constitute the greatest threat to familial stability. Once again, the city, that site of adventure, danger, and narrative potentiality, is where *stuff happens*. Now the threat to home is infidelity but also the resurgence of youthful recklessness, the contemplation of another kind of life, the possibility of a radical transformation. Note the switch from masculine to feminine threat to home, as Freya and Bonnie transit into the public realm. For Freya, her “mini-flight” comprises a sexual affair with Frank, a theater director friend, although their liaison is short-lived and somewhat insipid. At the end of the novel, there is no sign that she will confess her adultery to her partner—rather that she will drift back to the nest, the repository of all that is good in her life. At the final performance of her hit play, Freya is shown “nestled” between Matt and her daughter, Ella. For Bonnie, her decision to do a gig with Mickey’s band propels her back into the public world, where she feels strange after so many years at home, dressed in UGG boots and tracksuit pants, coping with the kids—or as Veitch describes it, “deep in the transformative crucible of early motherhood”. Her brief encounter (she does not actually have sex) with a man whom she does not even find attractive is explained in terms of self-hatred, a kind of nihilistic act that she does not fully understand; She is also very drunk. Unlike Freya, Bonnie suffers extreme guilt about her dalliance, and she is about to confess all when Pete finds a condom in her jeans’ pocket. Pete leaves, staying with Doug in what is, to Bonnie, a horrific confirmation of her fear that what men really want is to hang out with their mates. Surprisingly, and not quite convincingly, it is Doug who mends the rift between Bonnie and Pete, coming around drunk to the house one night and prompting Bonnie, at long last, to tell him to get out of *her* house. As in Blain’s novel, *House of Sticks* concludes with the restoration of an uneasy domestic balance. Although damage has been done, it is revocable, and there is a sense that the family unit is stronger than first reckoned. The final scene is of Bonnie outside the home, looking in, a direct reference to earlier passages in which she identifies ostracism as her greatest fear. She sees Pete and the children sitting around the kitchen table. Doug is with them, but his presence no longer destabilizes her. Bonnie goes inside and joins them.

Too Close to Home and *House of Sticks* can be read as explorations of the possibility of flight from suburban domesticity. However, in both novels, life “on the other side” fails to deliver. The protagonists flirt with flight, but in the end, return home. In his review of *Too Close to Home*, Peter Pierce describes how the novel “traverses the barren landscape of betrayal” within urban middle-class life, as opposed to the more common setting in Australian fiction of “overseas, the past, the bush and country towns, none of which represents much of the experience of mainstream and majority Australian readers, who are more likely to resemble the female characters in this book”. In reviewing *House of Sticks*, Veitch goes further to argue, “It would be a bold step to recognize how the story of a young mother in the suburbs also holds some of the big issues of our times up to the light and skillfully, lovingly, allusively examines them.” Indeed, 2011 was the year in which the Miles Franklin Award was criticized for being “too bushy, too blokey and too set in the past”. By contrast, *House of Sticks*, a novel firmly grounded in the suburban, the feminine, and the contemporary, was awarded the Victorian Premier’s Literary Award for an Unpublished Manuscript by an Emerging Victorian Writer and shortlisted for the New South Wales Premier’s Literary Award for New Writing. Likewise, *Too Close to Home* was shortlisted for the Barbara Jefferis Award for the “best novel written by an Australian author that depicts women and girls in a positive light or otherwise empowers the status of women and girls in society”. More pertinent to my enquiry, however, is the fact that both novels reject the recurrent trajectory of linear flight out of suburbia, in preference for a circulatory return to the suburban home. Although both writers go some way toward subverting feminine and masculine stereotypes, the preference for the suburban home and family as the final destination ultimately privileges the conventional feminine over the conventional masculine setting, as far as these codings hold. Moreover, their fiction sits squarely within the often-subordinated literary silo of “domestic realism”. Frew in particular repeatedly chooses the suburban home as the primary setting for her work, as in her short stories, “Home Visit”, “No One Special”, and “Harvey Street”. Likewise, Blain’s a short story collection entitled *The Secret Lives of Men* contains several stories set in suburbia, albeit focused on atypical scenarios of childless middle-aged women or women who *do*

take permanent flight, abandoning marriages and children, only to regret their decision.

However, to return to the central question, does a dominant narrative of return, as seen in *Too Close to Home* and *House of Sticks*, equal a retreat as criticized by Negra, Vavrus, and others? Not entirely. Freya and Bonnie display no signs of giving it all up to bake cookies and darn socks. Freya is a high-profile playwright, her work attracting critical adulation and robust ticket sales. In addition, at the end of Frew's novel, Bonnie is writing her own songs, a long-held ambition that reasserts itself amid the "happy chaos" of raising three children. Indeed, these women hold tenaciously to their artistic selves, which are as important to their identities as family and home. The novels' conclusions offer hope that the preservation of their creative side, however hard won, is at least possible for these mothers. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see how this narrative resolution, albeit messy and imperfect, could work so convincingly for a female protagonist whose work and identity is more firmly rooted within the public sphere or one who does not have access to a self-sustaining artistic life, which offers periods of imaginative "escape" inside the domestic realm. From my reading, contemporary "suburbia" narratives exploring this particular version of postfeminist dilemma are far less common than that of mother-artists juggling kids and their creative livelihoods—perhaps because these stories are not so easily resolved and often go to dark and disturbing places. Camilla Noli's *Still Waters* (2008) and *Broken Fences* (2009), for example, belong to a different category of narrative concerned with mothers trapped in suburbia, but without access to an artistic alterity. Postnatal depression underscores these stories, which chart the consequences of women severed—either by "choice", inflexible workplaces, or the prohibitive cost of childcare—from former public lives, which had previously granted them identity, status, social interaction, intellectual stimulation, and an income.

Thus, although *Too Close to Home* and *House of Sticks* are much less rose-tinted than the picture of wholly satisfied femininity offered by the retreatist storyline, the geographical coincidence of these protagonists' roles as mother and artist elide a far darker portrait of contemporary gender inequality experienced by other women once they have children. Granted, both novels are illuminating for the ways in which they explore the struggle, the temptations, the contradictions of domesticity, the experience of women veering in and out of public life, doing their best to make things work without losing their identities. In their high realism, these novels are more progressive than the retreatist narrative, which suggests that women cannot transit between the public and the private without emotional and

/ or moral damage to themselves and to their families. Freya and Bonnie possess independent will and test it, embarking on "mini-flights" from the suburban coop, only to return to their original configurations. As daughters of feminist mothers (note Blain's upbringing by high-profile feminist commentator, Anne Deveson, as recounted in Blain's memoir *Births, Deaths, Marriages*), they have been tutored in the dangers of a life lived exclusively within the confines of domesticity and motherhood. Indeed, in both novels, the protagonists' mothers are portrayed as embittered by the toll of motherhood and married life. For example, Freya's father left her mother for a younger woman when Freya was a child, and Bonnie's mother Suzanne describes her years raising small children as "bloody miserable". However, it is not in wholesale retreat that they secure these trappings. Moreover, although the transformations of these female protagonists are muted compared with the dazzling reinvention possible through the drama of flight-led narrative, they do change.

Have these women gained enough from their territorial trade-off, or have they surrendered too much for too little? Further, what about the rest of womankind, ostensibly sidelined from public life once they have had children but without the consolation of a psychically sustaining (and, in Freya's and Bonnie's case, financially rewarded) artistic life? Indeed, is this another form of retreatism dressed up as equitable degendering? Is this, to recycle Amanda Lohrey's phrase from "The Liberated Heroine", just a "new variety of defeat"?

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