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Washing and White Goods

Liam Grealy
University of Sydney and Menzies School of Health Research
liam.grealy@sydney.edu.au

Tess Lea
University of British Columbia
tess.lea@ubc.ca

Abstract

On the Aṉangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in northwest South Australia, an environmental health worker salvages discarded washing machines to reinstall in remote community homes. Tracking the fate of washing machines and householder well-being, this essay traces the militarized genealogies running contemporary settler colonial occupation in Australia. We are particularly interested in how the colonizing project decants militarized operations into the intimacies of domestic inhabitation. Where once this project facilitated a gendered labor reserve, today it enables the continued pathologization of Indigenous residents, such that renewed interferences and dispossessions may be authorized at policy convenience.

This essay is a part of the Roundtable called "The Housewife's Secret Arsenal" (henceforth HSA); a collection of eight object-oriented engagements focusing on particular material instantiations of domesticated war. The title of this roundtable is deliberately tongue-in-cheek reminding readers of the many ways that militarisms can be invisible to their users yet persistent in the form of mundane household items that aid in the labor of homemaking. Juxtaposing the deliberately stereotyped "housewife" with the theater of war raises questions about the quiet migration of these objects and technologies from battlefield to kitchen, or bathroom, or garden. Gathered together as an "arsenal," their

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uncanny proximity to one another becomes a key critical tool in asking how war comes to find itself at home in our lives.

Keywords

housing, policy, maintenance, washing machines, remote communities

Figure 1. Old washing machines on the red dirt of the APY Lands. Image: Liam Grealy

It is a stark scene, this washing machine purgatory that sits on the ancient soil of the Aṉangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands in northwest South Australia (Figure 1). The desert dryness preserves salvaged machines, and the sands and artesian waters destroy them too. Visualize broken pump impellers, dust ingress at the electronics console, cracked suspension cups, faulty lid locks, corroded tap connectors, and deteriorated washers, from grit and hard water.

Figure 2: Scott Robinson installing a Maytag washing machine. Image: Liam Grealy

The washing machines are the salvaged rescues of Scott Robinson (Figure 2), an environmental health worker servicing APY Lands communities through the Indigenous community-controlled health organization Nganampa Health Council. Robinson periodically gleans through machines discarded by operators of the Yulara tourist resorts near Uluru, the famous sacred rock in the heart of Australia. The machines are typically Maytags or Speed Queens (Figure 3), commercial brands with industrial strength capacities that few Indigenous residents could afford to purchase but that are robust enough to wash heavy blankets and serve crowded households (Lloyd 1998; Rainow 2012). They are also relatively simple in their componentry compared to newer digital models and thus easier to repair. While many discarded machines are not functional, they can still be disassembled for recycled components such as drive belts and hose fittings to extend the life of other machines in remote community households.

Figure 3: Speed Queen. Image: Liam Grealy

Tracking the fate of washing machines and householder well-being, this essay traces the militarized genealogies running contemporary settler colonial occupation in Australia. We are particularly interested in how the colonizing project decants militarized operations into the intimacies of domestic inhabitation. Where once this project facilitated a gendered labor reserve, today it enables the continued pathologization of Indigenous residents, such that renewed interferences and dispossessions may be authorized at policy convenience.

Domestic Demands and Learning to Labor

Under the successive moral tutelage of settler policies following the enforced sedentarism of land enclosures via cattle stations, church benefices, and water theft, and more respectfully through their own community-controlled health service programs, Anangu householders are well versed on the importance of domestic hygiene to their own health. Yet, in the contradictory enforcement of domestication under enduring settler colonial governance, the means to execute expected labors are often in poor repair.

Historically, doing laundry was a central practice in the sexualized economies of colonization. Indigenous women and girls were forced to work in laundries, unpaid, to imbibe their expected future role in the colonizer's socioeconomic hierarchies. Most children stolen from their families and forced into servitude in dormitories, reformatories, hospitals, and private homesteads prior to the 1950s were girls, given the huge demand for their labor (Robinson 2014). These disciplinary factories, including the architectural style of gender-segregated dormitories, have clear military colonial genealogies (Burgess 2008). British colonizers developed a systematic knowledge of disciplinary architectures to improve sanitation, order, and custody within its military orders: "These reforms were subsequently institutionalized and disseminated throughout the Empire as a series of barrack synopses and type plans to ensure uniformity and replicability" (Chang 2016, 52).

The militarized architecture combined with models of disciplinary subjugation for impoverished British children (Murdoch 2007). Assimilationist policies to "whiten" the Australian Indigenous population pulled this militarized approach into synergistic alignment: Indigenous girls would be reformed *and* prepped for servitude, in the lowest rung of the settler order (Cheater 2010; Robinson 2014). "All the woman bin washin' clothes, cleanin', cartin' water … waterin' garden, White lady never do nothin'. Big queen" (Tonkinson 1988, 38).

In the moral economies of continuing liberal settler occupation, when non-mission housing started to become available from the 1960s, access in some central Australian communities was conditional on Aboriginal women attending courses to learn to "sweep, wash, scrub and polish to maintain a normal home

environment" (Fleming quoted in Keys 2000, 122). Yet, then as today, because laundering facilities are now considered a private matter, owing in part to their gendered nature (Watson 2015, 877), remote area residents across Australia face the paradox of both hyper-determined hygiene expectations and reduced structural means for complying. More standard housing designs (Figure 4) have replaced child separation in military-style compounds, but the equation of cleanliness with responsible tenant behavior remains—even while tenants are faced with the perpetual amenity failure that goes with crowding and housing undersupply. Despite insistent cultural messaging on the necessity of laundering, where "people can't *not wash* and still be socially acceptable" (Jack 2013, 666), industrial-strength washing machines are not considered a necessary infrastructure in contemporary government-funded housing or health programs.

Figure 4. APY Lands new house. Image: Liam Grealy

Amid minor uptake of community laundromat and mobile laundry programs (Aboriginal Investment Group, n.d.), doing the washing remains largely a labor of Aboriginal women. Not only is this labor "marginalized, sidelined, and disguised" (Van Herk 2002, 893), without appropriated industrial machines, ordinary domestic laundries cannot facilitate a load of washing. Of interest to us here is how the earlier insistence of the colonial enterprise on militarized discipline and domestic functionality has transmuted more recently into the military playing a role in disguising the causes of dysfunctional housing.

Child Removal and Housing

Just as the specter of irreparable damage was used to authorize the forced removal of Aboriginal children from their family groups, the endangered child reappeared in contemporary times, to fundamentally alter land tenure and housing tenancy (or, if you will, domesticity) arrangements. In 2007 the Northern Territory National Emergency Response ("The Intervention") was instigated by the Australian government under the guise of remediating child sexual abuse in remote communities. The Australian Army was highly visible in policing remote

communities newly subject to alcohol and pornography restrictions under the Intervention, its presence underlining the "emergency" invocation. To "normalize" remote service provision, the Indigenous community-controlled housing sector was dismantled, replaced (under duress) by long-term government leases to Aboriginal land. Harsher tenancy arrangements became the condition for securing further housing and infrastructure funding (Grealy 2021). To avoid eviction, leaseholders had to cease large kin gatherings, manage noise, and keep the house "clean."

Three years after the Northern Territory Intervention and in the shadow of its responsibilization agendas for Indigenous public housing tenants, the Australian Army shifted from being emergency law enforcers to humanitarian soldiers on the APY Lands. Under the Army Aboriginal Community Assistance Program (AACAP), the 21st Construction Squadron built three new houses at Pukatja, the former site of Ernabella Mission (Australian National Audit Office 2010). Despite the imputed superior efficacy appended to military efforts, after a mandatory one-year defects liability period, these houses deteriorated. Within a decade, at least one bathroom requires a full refurbishment. A vinyl laminate used to repel water throughout the bathroom cracks with the harsh waters, allowing stagnant pooling between the slab and the floor (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Bathroom floor at AACAP house in Pukatja. Image: Liam Grealy

Inheriting these army houses, the South Australian Housing Authority ("Housing SA") is atypical of remote housing property maintenance in its sustained attention to property maintenance (Lea et al. 2021). Under Housing SA's regimen, APY Lands houses receive ten scheduled visits per year by various tradespeople, and known weaknesses in such mundane fittings as the toilet roll holder are fixed or replaced (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Housing SA toilet roll holder design. Image: Liam Grealy

But even the unusually detailed, proactive, and design-conscious maintenance program managed by Housing SA is not comprehensive. Evaporative coolers and stoves are supplied and serviced, but not fridges or washing machines. These other white goods must be sourced by residents, either transported in from the town of Alice Springs many hundreds of kilometers away (Figure 7) or purchased at significant mark-up from community stores on the Lands.

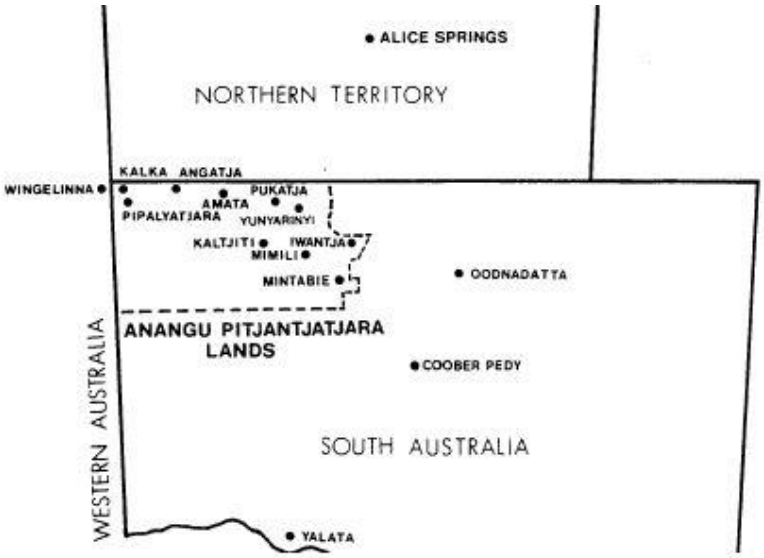

Figure 7: APY Lands map. Image: Nganampa Health Council (1987, iii).

Predatory companies lease white goods to remote residents on high interest or rent-to-own schemes, under which a 5.5-kg top-loading washing machine retailing at $499 can assume a rent to own price of $1552 (Consumer Action Law

Centre 2015). In contemporary Australia, where Indigenous people are objectified by both nefarious companies as a market demographic and tenancy regimes as pedagogical subjects, it seems effective white goods are effectively for white people: visualize tourists at Yulara resort. Between the paternalism of the state and the free market, washing clothes becomes an index of welfare conditionality.

In the United States, which has its own racialized history of laundering (see Wang 2004; Wooten and Branch 2012), the manufacture of domestic washing machines was disrupted by World War II but expanded dramatically postwar with the Bendix company selling 600,000 units in 1947. Magazine marketing promoted the time-saving impact of automated washing machines ("not only electric muscles—but an electric brain"), shifting from war service to the home front to liberate white suburban housewives from "washday slavery" (*Life* 1950, 118; Figure 8). Yet, while expertise in wringing, mangling, and boiling laundry, as forced onto Indigenous women and girls, is no longer required, access to working domestic facilities still matters.

4. When the war broke out, all washing machine manufacture halted. By this time, there were 330,000 Bendix Washers taking the washday load off their fortunate owners. But this was only 1¼% of all the washers in American homes.

5. Bendix Washers saw war service on many fronts. An American submarine that sneaked into Tokyo Bay carried a Bendix with it. Many other naval vessels found room for Bendix Washers.

6. On the home front, this so-called "gadget" of 5 years back really proved itself. Help, time, laundry service were scarce. Bendix owners pitched in to help war-working neighbors with their wash. Millions became Bendix-conscious; determined to own a Bendix themselves.

Figure 8: The domestication of war. Image: *Life*, April 24, 1950, 118.

Invisible Conditions

As with many practices needed for health, laundering is a series of discrete activities that requires multiple systems working together (Shove 2003). For many Indigenous householders in regional and remote areas, houses are of such poor original design that keeping domestic hardware in working order is near impossible. The army's construction program helps to invisibilize the state's larger neglect. The three army-built houses at Pukatja were not only short-lived amenity-wise, AACAP itself is mediatized to overclaim its role in addressing acute housing shortages. The army engineers do not reappear year in, year out to steadily improve or increase housing stock but migrate to undertake once-off work at one community per year, just enough to sustain an image of action.

This is not the sustained attention required to keep amenities like washing machines and bathrooms in working order. On the APY Lands, basic material factors are the chief impediments to sustaining functional appliances and getting such overdetermined tasks as the laundry done. For Stephan Rainow, co-founder and co-director of the not-for-profit company Healthabitat, which has for decades driven greater attention to health, housing, and the functionality needed to enable healthy living requires, "We always said you've got to take a broad approach…to ensure that when people were at home, they can wash their kid. That relies on the bore working, it relies on the delivery, the pipes. It relies on the taps not falling off, [people's] capacity to buy a towel in the store and the soap and the shampoo…The house has got to be well designed, constructed, supervised; there's got to be money for maintenance; there's got to be a store that can supply the essentials" (interview with author). So much of this being in place relies on barely noticed infrastructural care, for forms of enforced sedentarism that all but removes the state's obligations from view. Where once the military know-how provided the disciplinary apparatus, it now helps load the apparent responsibility for failure onto Indigenous organizations and tenants, as emergency enforcers and benevolent partners.

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Author Bios

Liam Grealy is Research Fellow in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies at the University of Sydney and at Menzies School of Health Research. At the University of Sydney, Grealy works in the Housing for Health Incubator, where his research examines housing and infrastructure policy in regional and remote Australia and southeast Louisiana. At Menzies, Grealy is evaluating the Northern Territory Government's Healthy Homes program.

Tess Lea is Department Head and Professor of Anthropology in the Department of Community, Culture and Global Studies at the University of British Columbia, Okanagan Campus. Lea's work interrogates the qualities of dysfunction: to whom, what, and how it is ascribed and remedied under conditions of continuing settler colonialism.