IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Love, Honour, Obey, Destroy: Unmaking The Family Home In Rachel Cusk's Aftermath (2012) And Deborah Levy's The Cost Of Living (2018)

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the representation of the family home in the wake of divorce through a comparative reading of Rachel Cusk's memoir *Aftermath* (2012) and Deborah Levy's autobiography *The Cost of Living* (2018). Examining what is at stake in the "unmaking" of one iteration of home in these examples of contemporary life writing, this article contends that Cusk and Levy's texts illustrate wider cultural anxieties regarding the status and function of the family home. In doing so, feminist critiques of the home space and the family unit are invoked explicitly and implicitly in both texts to discuss the failure of the family home as a space of belonging and its ideological impact on women, specifically wives and mothers. This article brings close readings of the homes in Cusk and Levy's texts into contact with second wave feminist critiques of domesticity and feminist theories of family abolition.

KEYWORDS:

- **Deborah Levy**
- **domestic space**
- **feminism**
- **home**
- **life writing**
- **Rachel Cusk**

Introduction

Rachel Cusk's *Aftermath* and Deborah Levy's *The Cost of Living* both begin in "broken" homes. Cusk articulates on the first page of her critically-contested memoir that post-separation life is like "a jigsaw dismantled into a heap of broken-edged pieces".Footnote[1] "A plate [which] falls to the floor" is the chosen metaphor, only a page later, employed to describe the reality of separation.Footnote[2] Levy also begins the second instalment of her "living autobiography" with an image of a broken object: "To unmake a family home", she writes, "is like breaking a clock".Footnote[3] With their invocation of these broken and broken-apart objects—the jigsaw puzzle, the plate, the clock—Cusk and Levy's texts, both concerned with delineating the emotional reality of the end of marriage, centre on the literal and symbolic unmaking of family homes.

There are many parallels to be found between Cusk and Levy. Both are British authors (Levy is originally from South Africa and settled in England in the late 1960s; Cusk was born in Canada to British parents and settled in England in 1974), best known at the beginning of their writing careers for their fiction. Both authors have attracted critical interest for their non-fictional texts on divorce, feminism, and family produced during the 2010s, a decade in which the entities of "feminism" and "family" are often in conflict. While there are many similarities between these authors that could be explored at length, I wish to focus on two specific parallels for the purposes of this article. First is the language of dislocation and destruction employed by Cusk and Levy to describe the family home as it is experienced during marriage and in the wake of divorce, and the ways in which this use of language situates these texts in a larger conversation around feminist critiques of the family home. Second is the absence of the notion of family abolition in both texts. The presence of one and the absence of the other are important to consider together given the ambivalent and contradictory messaging surrounding feminism, domesticity, and women's relationship to these two particular entities, in the twenty-first century.

Through their representation of the "unmaking"Footnote[4]—a term I borrow directly from Levy's text—of one type of home and the remaking of another, Cusk and Levy's memoirs reflect wider contemporary anxieties regarding the function and status of the family home in the twenty-first century. Namely: who does it continue to benefit if women are (supposedly, through their increased and accepted involvement in paid labour outside of the home) freed from the sole obligation of domestic labour and what is its cultural power in an age of political instability? Both *Aftermath* and *The Cost of Living* query the individual and societal importance of the family home at a point in time in which there was a clear resurgence in "traditional" feminine domesticity in reaction to changes in women's lives. In doing so, feminism as a political project with individual ramifications is invoked both directly and indirectly in these texts to discuss the failure of one iteration of the family home—a home modelled upon a patriarchal and heterosexual paradigm—and the act of creating a new version of home outside the nuclear family after a divorce.

Feminism itself is a political and epistemological movement with a complex and at-times ambivalent relation to home, domesticity, and family life. Critiques and radical re-imaginings of the home space and private relationships are the cornerstone of feminist theory. Yet, as Dana Heller has noted, the home space is not a site of consensus for feminism: the domestic is conceived in various and often contradictory ways.Footnote[5] While feminism is not explicitly the cause of the marital rupture or the unmaking of home in *Aftermath* and *The Cost of Living*, it is implicated in Cusk and Levy's respective examinations of femininity, motherhood, and marriage. Indeed, both texts reflect the ways in which feminist critiques of the family home and gender roles occupy an ambiguous position in contemporary culture. Rather than engaging with the varied—and, at times, radical—explorations of domestic and family life, feminism is

understood in both texts as a broad cultural movement with tangible, though nebulous, effects on the contemporary family home. In this way, *Aftermath* and *The Cost of Living* reflect a very twenty-first century anxiety towards the changes that feminism—evoked in its most general sense—has brought to women's lives and the institutions of marriage and domesticity in the twenty-first century.

It is important to note that neither text is positioned as feminist theory; both are marketed and received as examples of life writing. Nonetheless, a feminist lens is appropriate to employ as both *Aftermath* and *The Cost of Living* can be interpreted as having an implied feminist purpose, and are in dialogue with a more amorphous, even marketized concept of feminism. Both Cusk and Levy produced personal texts at a moment in time in which the personal is largely understood as having political currency. The political potential of life writing is also considerable given that both texts are about issues of home: a space and concept which is often framed in apolitical terms but is rife with political importance. Moreover, *Aftermath* and *The Cost of Living* consider the ways in which the patriarchal image of home is difficult for women to live within and provide an account of remaking home outside of the imbricated institutions of marriage and the nuclear family. While the patriarchal family home is indeed shown to be uninhabitable, it continues to shape the idea of home in these texts. As such, the lack of family abolition—a recurring concern in the history of Anglo-American feminist theory, and particularly British feminisms—as a means of imagining a home both welcoming and emancipatory to all is a significant absence.

In this way, I wish to connect the literary and the cultural in this study of *Aftermath* and *The Cost of Living* by offering a feminist, comparative close reading of the family homes in the two texts. Given the relative lack of scholarship on Cusk and Levy, this article will begin with a consideration of the critical reception of both authors. The role of genre—namely life writing, used here to discuss Cusk's engagement with the memoir form and Levy's engagement with the autobiography—also has an important part to play in the critical reception of these narratives of marital and domestic dissolution, and will be considered with regard to its relationship to women's authorship and the feminist movement. Following that, the recurring theme in both texts of dislocation within the family home occupied during marriage will be dealt with, with comparison drawn to similar articulations found in feminist theory. Finally, aspects of home unmaking and remaking outside of the nuclear family after divorce will conclude this examination of Cusk and Levy's depiction of the family home. I wish to explore both texts as lucid but slippery accounts of the contemporary family home as simultaneously a site for dislocation and dissatisfaction and also potential pleasures or avenues of liberation which are in conversation with, but by no means perfectly reflect, a number of feminist discourses on domesticity. This is not done to provide a prescriptive reading of Cusk and Levy as "good" or "bad" feminists but to explore the permeation of feminist ideas into literary texts and culture.

Cusk and Levy: Life Writing and Personal/Political Possibilities

Prolific, popular, but relatively underrepresented in critical scholarship, both Cusk and Levy occupy an interesting position in contemporary British literature. A cursory overview of their respective concerns, styles, and critical reception gives the impression that they are very different writers. Cusk is almost overwhelmingly thought of as a cold or even cruel writer, whose work has been the subject of "evaluative and highly personal" criticism.Footnote[6] While she now occupies a more secure position in the contemporary Anglophone literary marketplace, with each new title the subject of critical excitement and fanfare, her early reception was markedly different. Responses to her autobiographical works—beginning with *A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother* (2001) which inculcated critical "dismay" and

"contempt"Footnote[7], followed by *The Last Supper: A Summer in Italy* (2009), and *Aftermath*—have been particularly excoriating.

Aftermath represents a nadir in Cusk's reception, as it was subjected to a "vitriolic critical response for the candid and partial way that it portrayed the breakdown of Cusk's marriage", as Roberta Garrett and Liam Harrison have noted.Footnote[8] On its publication, critics did not appear to appreciate the at-times passive and obfuscating question of blame that Cusk's text presents through its focus on the breakdown of the distinction between "truth" and "narrative".Footnote[9] Indeed, the frustrations of *Aftermath* are many if the reader is expecting a confessional account of the breakdown of a marriage. This frustration of the confessional nature of memoir and reader expectation is characteristic of Cusk's practice of the form. Reflecting on Cusk's three autobiographical texts, Patricia Lockwood notes that they have achieved notoriety.

not for their actual content but for the degree to which they seemed to leave readers feeling thwarted. We know what we want from memoirs, and she did not give it to us—too much of her mind and not enough of herself.Footnote[10]

Undeniably, *Aftermath* occupies a significant place in Cusk's oeuvre. Acting as a sort of hinge between her early and current styles, *Aftermath* anticipates the autofictional direction of the *Outline* trilogy which would bring Cusk popular and critical adulation in due course.Footnote[11] Being conceived by Cusk herself as "creative death" due to its critical reception,Footnote[12] *Aftermath* arguably represents the early signs of creative growth. Its final section—entitled "Trains"—is narrated not by the memoiristic "I" employed and assumed to be representative of Cusk found in previous sections of the book, but by the third-person point of view of a live-in au-pair named Sonia, intimating Cusk's autofictional practice to come.Footnote[13].

Cusk's decision to end *Aftermath* from this imagined perspective of a domestic worker is indicative of her work's recurring interest in home life and domesticity.Footnote[14] Typically, this has taken the form in her autobiographical writings of examinations of her own experiences of maternity and heterosexual marriage. On the publication of *A Life's Work*, Cusk wrote in an essay for *The Guardian* that "[u]nravelling femininity and maternity has become for me a compelling ambition, both personally and in my creative life".Footnote[15] This is also felt in her fiction, in which real estate, interior design, and familial relationships are recurring themes. Cusk's career-long focus on the domestic and maternal, Roberta Garrett argues, is in line with the millennial turn towards the domestic in women's writing and the proliferation of "maternal memoirs" during this period.Footnote[16].

In contrast to Cusk's perceived writerly cruelty and froideur, critical reaction to Levy's work is notably warmer. "A natural surrealist", Levy is generally perceived as an enigmatic writer.Footnote[17] While Levy has been framed more positively by reviewers than Cusk, Levy's critical reception and publishing history has not been any more straightforward. Levy made her debut as a writer with the short story collection *Ophelia and the Great Idea* (1988), which was quickly followed a novel, *Beautiful Mutants,* in 1989. Though highly prolific throughout the 1990s, and producing poetry, plays, and fiction, Levy's earlier works—including *Swallowing Geography*, *The Unloved*, and *Billy & Girl*—were out of print by the 2000s.Footnote[18] Interest in Levy's work increased after her 2011 novel, *Swimming Home*, was published by independent publisher And Other Stories and was subsequently shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2012. Levy has attracted more critical and popular attention in the wake of her 2016 novel *Hot Milk* (also shortlisted for a Booker Prize) and the popularity of the "living autobiography" series (which includes *Things I Don't Want to Know* [2013] and *Real Estate* [2021]), which have been praised for "show[ing] the continued importance of (auto) biographical women's writing and feminist conceptions

of subject-formation".Footnote[19] Subsequent interest in Levy's earlier works resulted in the reissue of *Beautiful Mutants* and *Swallowing Geography* in 2014—notably marketed as "Early Levy" by Penguin with a minimalist blue cover to a millennial readership, and included an introduction by Lauren Elkin.

While Cusk's treatment of domesticity and maternity has placed her in an ambiguous critical position throughout her writing career, Levy has received positive critical attention for her treatment of domestic matters. Kate Kellaway, in a review of *The Cost of Living* for the *Observer*, compares Levy to Virginia Woolf on the basis of their writing about "the liminal, the domestic, the non-event, and what it is to be a woman".Footnote[20] In her review, Kellaway concludes that Levy "is a writer with nothing much—and with everything—to say".Footnote[21] Similarly, Olivia Laing contends that Levy's autobiography "provides slightly less information than you might expect, [it is] the enigmatic opposite of an over-share".Footnote[22] Although the tone of the criticism is noticeably different, Kellaway and Laing on Levy, and Lockwood on Cusk, when compared, suggest another parallel between the two writers. That is, the elusive manner in which these writers choose to depict their personal and domestic lives in a genre—life writing—which favours directness and claims or expectations of veracity. On some level, both Cusk and Levy are perceived as being at best evasive, and at worst ungenerous with the information or insight they provide in their life writing—giving nothing or "nothing much" away.

In their reception as life writing, *Aftermath* and *The Cost of Living* are exposed to cultural anxieties regarding gender, subject formation, and the act of confession. Despite the long history of women's contribution to life writing, particularly autobiography and memoir, the genre has had an uncertain place within feminist literary criticism.Footnote[23] For example, Linda Anderson queries the radical nature of "writing about oneself … given that it participates in a genre—autobiography—which, however anxiously it does it, still underwrites the subject".Footnote[24] Relatedly, Nancy K. Miller has defined the contemporary memoir as "the record of an experience in search of a community, of a collective framework in which to protect the fragility of singularity in the postmodern world".Footnote[25] Regardless of this schism in feminist literary criticism, life writing has an important connection to the feminist movement due to the prevalence of women's authorship in the genre and feminist literary critical engagement with it.Footnote[26] This connection has only intensified in the contemporary era:

Post-millennium, the cultural shift towards ever-greater reification of the individual … has seen a trend towards ever more life writing entering the public domain. In a literary and cultural zeitgeist in which the cult of the individual is so pervasive, life-writing nevertheless retain the possibility of communicating political messages through personal storytelling.Footnote[27]

However problematic or tangential, the feminist axiom of "the personal is the political" impacts the reception of women's life writing in the contemporary era. Increasingly, speaking to a personal experience in the public sphere is perceived as an inherently feminist act because of the historical tendency to occlude or silence women's experiences. The mixed reception of Cusk and Levy's autobiographical works is unsurprising given the complicated status of women's life writing as a form that is conceived of as too personal to be political, and yet constitutes much of the canon of feminist writing.

Adding another layer of complexity to the reception of Cusk and Levy's life writing is their decision to employ this form to explore the domestic space—often framed as ubiquitous or mundane in a literary context—and draw attention to the family home and its personal and cultural complications. Taking the domestic as a literary subject—and using the contested form of life writing to do so—is particularly important given that women's writing of the quotidian is often caught in a double bind in contemporary culture. While male writers are often celebrated for their focus on the domestic (and particularly praised

for outlining the entrapping nature of family life for men) women's writing of the same is routinely denigrated, held to a different standard.Footnote[28] The woman writer, writing about her personal experience of home and domesticity can pick one of two paths: write about the pleasures and value of the home and she is promulgating conservative, traditionalist values; write about the home's ability to ensnare and engulf one's life, and the woman writer is an ungrateful wife and (possibly unfit) mother.Footnote[29].

Aftermath and *The Cost of Living* seek to offer a compromise between these two dominant ways of reading. They recount ordinary narratives of dissatisfaction, emotional hurt, and loss in the family home and accord importance to the quotidian through a literary lens. In this sense, Cusk and Levy's texts reflect Kathy Mezei and Chiara Briganti's position that women's writing of the "house, house-hold, and family … bestow[s] literary value on domesticity and domestic space".Footnote[30] This focus on the ordinary may only be of note because of their authorial power—the cult of the individual author. Yet, it is equally true, as Riley suggests regarding life writing, that they articulate something political, and at times even blur the hierarchy between the personal and political, by engaging with the pleasures, pressures, and problems of the family home through the mode of life writing. By focusing now on the specific strategies that Cusk and Levy use to represent the home in their life writing, beginning with images of dislocation, I wish to draw out some of these contradictions and possibilities that circulate around life writing by women and its representation of the home.

Dislocation in the Family Home

In *Aftermath* and *The Cost of Living* feelings of dislocation dominate the retrospective recounting of married life. For Cusk, the experience of the home while married is marked by isolation and a feeling of homelessness—an affective state distinct from the material reality of being unhoused. Motherhood leaves Cusk feeling "homeless, drifting, itinerant", characterising herself as a "vagabond".Footnote[31] She goes on to describe her experience as a married mother:

Like the adopted child who finally locates its parents only to discover that they are loveless strangers, my inability to find a home as a mother impressed me as something not about the world but about my own unwantedness. I seemed, as a woman, to be extraneous.Footnote[32]

Levy, like Cusk, also accounts for the dislocation—the ironic homelessness—felt by women in the family home. While Cusk directs the feeling of homelessness inward, not accounting for the influence of political structures and institutions, Levy, at certain points in *The Cost of Living*, looks beyond the structures of family and self. "To not feel at home in her family home", Levy writes, "is the beginning of the bigger story of society and its female discontents".Footnote[33] She directly names the phenomenon which continues to impact upon women's experience of the family home as "the patriarchy".Footnote[34] While Cusk's text almost overwhelmingly utilises the "I" of direct experience, Levy employs a vocabulary and rhetoric found more commonly in feminist literary and theoretical writings. In a conceit which melds the imagery of a folk tale with the notion of woman as "the architect of everyone else's well-being", Levy articulates that the "fairy tale of The Family Home", is designed by "the old patriarchy … for the nuclear family".Footnote[35] That women follow this plan and add "a few contemporary flourishes of her own"Footnote[36] points to the complex interplay between the individual and the structural, a bind between agency and entrapment that echoes critiques of gender and space found in feminist theory and is particularly evocative of second wave feminist rhetoric. The tone of Levy's work, as well as being deeply personal in its recounting of her own experience of married life and the recreating of a home after divorce, is also that of a polemic through its use of a language shared with feminist theory. It is this

language that Cusk's text appears to be deeply wary of, if not wholly resistant to, and is evident in the ways that *Aftermath* engages with the notion of feminism.

Unlike Levy, in articulating dislocation within the patriarchal, nuclear family home, Cusk turns not to the social structures outside her, nor to a language that might allow her to identify those structures, but inwards to the family to speak about her placelessness within that institution. Motherhood, occurring within the framework of heterosexual marriage, turns her into an "adopted child". Cusk's language is overpowered by the family; not even in the metaphorical realm can she operate outside of its images. As such, *Aftermath* communicates the powerful hold of familialism on women, and particularly mothers, in its ability to occlude the family's status as an institution, and therefore open to critique. However, the family home cannot sustain the weight of its own ideology; the strain it creates is implicated in the breakdown of Cusk's marriage as she tells it. In accounting for the dissolution of her marriage, Cusk turns to examining her feminist bona fides. She explains how she was financially independent of her husband and how domestic labour and childcare were shared between them in their marriage. These elements of her marriage do not accord her feminist status. Instead they are characterised by Cusk as "male-inflected" actions, bolstered by her desire to engage in the public world of writing.Footnote[37] Rather, it is the fact that they are examples of "anecdotal evidence"—or personal experience—beloved by feminists according to Cusk, that makes them so: "perhaps a feminist is", Cusk conjectures, "someone who possesses this personalising trait to a larger than average degree; she is an autobiographer, an artist of the self. She acts as an interface between private and public".Footnote[38].

By her own definition then, Cusk—as author of three autobiographical texts and three autofictional ones—is a feminist. However, Cusk articulates a rather negative view of feminists in *Aftermath* as women in "reverse"; a "woman turned inside out".Footnote[39] Cusk takes a general and at times amnesiac view of feminism. Cusk's ambivalent relationship to feminism has been most recently noted by Andrea Long Chu who holds that "[o]f feminism, Cusk knows very little", arguing that Cusk espouses a belief in gender essentialism through her writing.Footnote[40] *Aftermath*'s unclear relationship to feminism becomes particularly apparent in its consideration of feminism's effects on the gendered division of labour—for example, her summation of the feminist as someone in "pursuit of male values" which lead "her to the threshold of female exploitation", or how the contemporary phenomenon of "having it all" (motherhood and work), is "a stunning refinement of historical female experience".Footnote[41] In *Aftermath*, feminism's relationship to the home is cast as an antagonistic one. Cusk considers, between her husband's repeated taunts of "Call yourself a feminist",Footnote[42] that a feminist "wouldn't be found haunting the scene of the crime, as it were; loitering in the kitchen, in the maternity ward, at the school gate" and so Cusk cannot count herself as one.Footnote[43] As such, if feminism can be considered a space in which women find a means of identifying, articulating, and acting on their lack of agency in the patriarchal home, Cusk exiles herself from that space. This ambivalent position towards feminism may account for the lack of actual engagement—despite the repeated conjuring of the censorious figure of "the feminist"—with feminist thought. Feminism, in *Aftermath*, is merely a social phenomenon or cultural movement with which Cusk, as a married mother, finds herself at cross purposes. In this way, the text is demonstrative of the postfeminist shift of the end of the twentieth century and first decades of the twenty-first century wherein feminism—employed monolithically as a metonym for the concerns of second wave feminism—was routinely conceived of as a historic but ultimately obsolete political movement.Footnote[44].

Were *Aftermath* to engage with feminism as more than just a vexatious cultural movement impacting upon Cusk's ability to be a wife and mother, it might find itself in good company on the subjects of family, marriage, and their respective limitations.Footnote[45] Across various strands of feminisms, the home is a

space and cultural concept in which values and norms about domestic architecture, labour, and relationships have been challenged, re-orientated, and perhaps most importantly, framed as a problem with a solution for women. Much of this work has been the purview of materialist feminists.Footnote[46] However, it has also been a concern of a more mainstream iteration of feminism which in culture and media stands in for feminism as a whole. Theorising the issue of the home in feminist theory has a long and varied history but perhaps reached an apex during the 1960s and 1970s during the second wave of Anglo-American feminist political action.Footnote[47] Several texts produced during this time captured both academic and popular imagination in their articulation of the "problem with no name" as Betty Friedan termed it in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963).Footnote[48] Although hardly the first mid-twentieth century feminist text to provide a critique of gendered labour and the entrapment of the family home—Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was published in 1949 and its English translation pre-empted Friedan's work by a decade—*The Feminine Mystique* is seen as a starting point for the second wave's critique of housework and the obligations of the housewife role.Footnote[49].

While Friedan's work articulated the dissatisfaction of university educated, middle-class American women in light of a post-war domestic revivalism, other writers and other texts were focusing on more radical solutions by reading "the problem" through a more concertedly structural lens. Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) not only articulates domestic ennui in the urgent and polemical manner of texts such as Freidan's but it also offers its own "brutally clear rethinking": reject home and family.Footnote[50] Greer explains the individual and familial benefits of such a rejection enacted by the unhappy wife and mother. Husbands will learn about housekeeping and childrearing, while children will not have to take on the burden of their mother's unhappiness.Footnote[51] Four years later, Ann Oakley offered much the same solution in *Housewife* (1974): "[t]hree political statements point the way to the liberation of housewives: The housewife role must be abolished. The family must be abolished. Gender roles must be abolished".Footnote[52] Oakley pointed to the psychological identification between mother and daughter—the manner through which the housewife role is sustained and reproduced in the nuclear family—as the primary impetus for the role's (and the family's) abolition.Footnote[53] Like *The Female Eunuch*, Oakley's text, while calling for abolition and rejection of women's naturalised roles of wife and mother, also implicitly relies upon an ethic of care and responsibility associated with the mothering role, encouraging family abolition on the basis of mitigating harm on future generations.

This focus on rejecting, deconstructing, or otherwise reimagining the family unit and its primary space of the home waned throughout the 1980s and into subsequent decades.Footnote[54] Angela McRobbie postulates that from the 1980s onwards political culture became increasingly pro-family and pro-domesticity, with a "defensively sentimental celebration of femininity" being inculcated.Footnote[55] The pro-domesticity tenor of contemporary culture is positioned in response to the perceived "attacks" or challenges mounted by second wave feminism on the home and traditional family life. Relatedly, the political power of the family became stronger during this era even while it is considered simultaneously, as Melinda Cooper has articulated, to be in a state of "perpetual crisis".Footnote[56] In defiance of the oppressive home of second wave feminism, the embrace of domesticity, particularly at the beginning of the new millennium, "rebranded [the home] as a domain of female autonomy and independence, far removed from its previous connotations of toil and confinement".Footnote[57] Academic feminism—particularly in feminist cultural studies—began to consider the radical or liberatory potential of domesticity, with work by Diane Negra, Joanne Hollows, Stéphanie Genz, and Stacey Gillis examining the postfeminist cultural desire for home.

While narrating dissatisfaction and dislocation within the space of the family home puts them in conversation with a prominent and culturally canonical (if misunderstood) history of feminist thought,

neither Cusk nor Levy display a comfortable or straightforward relationship to that history—or even, in Cusk's case, to the entity of "the feminist". The more radical aspects of feminist thinking pertaining to the family home, namely family abolition, are absent despite the clear articulation of dissatisfaction with the institution and personal experience of the space. Regardless of this absence of explicit political engagement, both Cusk and Levy's texts ask a political question: If a woman is rendered homeless by her expected and socially sanctioned position within the heterosexual family home, where can a woman find a home? What might that home look like? Although offering no concrete answers to this question, both texts suggest differing visions of the family home after divorce through ambivalent practices of destruction and recreation.

Unmaking The Family Home

Descriptions of the post-divorce family home—one housing the non-nuclear unit of the single mother and two daughters, another commonality between Cusk and Levy's texts—offer some idea as to how the home may be reconfigured outside of the sanctioned image of the "the family". In Cusk's text, this new, reconstructed home is markedly bleak. Cusk characterises her life post-marriage as "a regression", "chaos"; it is "a virginal life".Footnote[58] The family home, on the exit of her husband, becomes a feminine ruin of emptiness and grief, in which the absence of the male, as some central component, is glaring and disorientating. The house ceases to function in his absence: "the dishwasher breaks, the drains clog, the knobs of the doors and cupboards come away unexpectedly in the hand".Footnote[59] On the day that Cusk's husband moves his possessions out of their home, she describes the front hall of their house "like an opened tomb in the grey daylight" and later suggests that "some rigour has gone from our household, the rigour of the male".Footnote[60] There is a clear binary established between male and female spaces in *Aftermath*. If the male space is rigorous, the female space, as depicted in Cusk's recounting of a friend who has also gone through a divorce, is figured in childlike or virginal terms: this home is likened to a "doll's house", "dainty and white and fresh", and holds little appeal to Cusk.Footnote[61].

Cusk attempts to reconstruct a rather more provisional family home after the departure of her husband, where she and her daughters "arrange the furniture to cover up the gaps … economise, take in a lodger, get a fish tank".Footnote[62] The lodger, Rupert, who rents a room from Cusk, becomes a sort of spectral husband by virtue of his maleness.Footnote[63] Cusk and Rupert share the space of the family home in what she terms the "opposite of marriage; this endlessly recurring randomness through which we find ourselves thrown together".Footnote[64] This arrangement continues until, while Cusk is away with her children, Rupert disturbs the neighbours with drunken singing and shouting; the strategies to remake the home in the authoritative image of "the family" are not only provisional but unsuccessful. By replacing her husband (or the place marked by his absence) with the impermanence of a lodger, Cusk arguably undercuts the perceived rigour and authority of the "male space" by showing its source to be exchangeable, easy to remove. Yet, *Aftermath*'s relationship to the male authority of the family is frequently contradictory and difficult to pin down. In many ways, Cusk appears to express a rather conservative view of the family home even in the wake of divorce. While Garrett has persuasively argued that *Aftermath*'s use of modernist techniques and uncanny images culminates in a criticism of the heteronormative family,Footnote[65] these strategies exist alongside a clear lament for that family's authority. The images of family that Cusk points to are the Holy Family of Christian doctrine and the families of Greek tragedies—contrasting a sentimental and sanitised version of family with a more complex, yet no-less authoritative form of "the old passionate template".Footnote[66] These particular invocations are not incidental but echo contemporary cultural anxieties regarding a perceived crisis at the heart of the heterosexual family, many of which stem from the Christian Right. Loosed from its

authoritative origins, the family is exposed to a host of modern, progressive freedoms, such as divorce and economic supports for single parents.

In contrast, Levy is much less concerned with the absence of the husband-patriarch and its authority over the family unit. Unlike the effacing work of maintaining the family home of the "old patriarchy", building a family home post-marriage is "self-sacrificing" but also **"**profound and interesting".Footnote[67] While Levy does not reproduce an idealised or utopian domesticity to match that of the patriarchal model—"the fairy tale of the Family Home"—other modes of homemaking are attempted and ambivalently lived. Levy's descriptions of making a new home for herself and her daughters in a decrepit Art Deco apartment block, fixing and redecorating her home, and cooking and sharing food with others are indicative of what Iris Marion Young terms the "positive valence to the idea of home".Footnote[68] This—alongside critiques of "women's sphere" and family abolition—is another significant strand of feminist thinking on the home which underscores Levy's autobiography. A range of texts emerged throughout the 1990s and 2000s which responded to the increasing valorisation of domestic ideology in contemporary culture. Rather than taking the desire for home as mere feminine "false consciousness", as Hollows termed it, this writing reconsidered the positive values of the home. It has sought to develop feminist thinking on the home beyond the second wave's concern with the entrapped housewife as the feminist's "other" and "reimagine this relationship between feminism and domesticity" differently.Footnote[69].

The new home that Levy creates post-divorce is "a flat on the sixth floor of a large shabby apartment block on the top of a hill in North London" with which Levy finds herself identifying due to its state of disrepair.Footnote[70] Beyond offering an apt metaphor, the move from detached house to apartment means that there is literally no room for the material markers of Levy's old family home and so she must begin again.Footnote[71] Levy details the process of remaking a new version of home in the apartment by—on a friend's advice—"living with colour", painting the walls of her bedroom yellow and hanging orange curtains.Footnote[72] This experiment with colour is not depicted as a means of self-discovery through interior decoration and consumerism, but is presented alongside more mundane descriptions of Levy unclogging bathroom sinks and the heating in her building being cut off. Yet, the focus on colour in the home is significant as it recalls the same—although evidently more anxious—consideration of interior decoration in Cusk's memoir and her fear of virginal white walls.

Another aspect of home remaking is presented by Levy in her autobiography through the "family meals" she and her youngest daughter share with a "borrowed" family in her new home.Footnote[73] Although it is not articulated in such terms, this action extends the concept of family beyond the nuclear image, to mitigate "the empty table and lack of shouting" that follows in the wake of Levy's divorce and move.Footnote[74] In contrast to the solace offered by cooking and sharing meals in *The Cost of Living*, there is a rejection of sustenance and community through food in *Aftermath* which again highlights the power of the ideal of the family home pervading Cusk's text.Footnote[75] Yet, Levy's expanding definition of family cannot be considered as being precisely in the spirit of family abolition. The fundamental (and confronting) aim of family abolition is to create something outside of the familial imaginary: "moving beyond the family—as opposed to 'expanding' it—is desirable".Footnote[76] As Sophie Lewis argues, the model of family, borrowed by everyone from individuals and corporations to describe non-blood forms of relation, is an empty and exclusionary metaphor that even if loosed from the kin-bond still perpetuates inequality.Footnote[77] In this sense, Levy's use of the word "borrow"—indicative of a temporary state of ownership—suggests that this strategy of unmaking the family home and its signifiers is in many ways a restricted or limited action. At the same time, it offers an alternative to the exclusionary authority of the nuclear family that, in the case of *Aftermath* and *The Cost of Living,* caused such detrimental feelings of dislocation in the married home.

Conclusion

In comparing Cusk and Levy's respective narratives of the unmaking of the family home, a tension arises. In both works, a language of destruction is employed to narrate the end of marriage and a desire to restructure the family home in a different image. Yet, such language does not destroy the power of these entities or ideals which seems to overwhelm even the literary imagination. The sustainment of that power—familialism—throughout the first two decades of twenty-first century is significant when considered alongside the proliferation of texts (mostly, though not exclusively, in the form of life writing by women) published during the same period regarding women's ambivalence and dissatisfaction in the home space. Cusk and Levy's texts speak to similar concerns found in Jenny Offill's *The Dept. of Speculation* (2014), Elisa Albert's *After Birth* (2015), Rachel Yoder's *Nightbitch* (2021), and more recently Minna Dubin's *Mom Rage* (2023) and Sarah Manguso's *Liars* (2024), as well as a range of non-fiction texts that "popularize Marxist feminist analyses of domestic and emotional work as forms of unwaged labour".Footnote[78] Such writing and its adaption of a range of ideas rooted in feminisms, points to a desire to imagine the domestic scene (family, marriage, childcare, labour) differently. Yet, identifying a problem—as Cusk and Levy's texts do—is not the same as proposing a clear solution. Family or marriage abolition is off the proverbial table in *Aftermath* and *The Cost of Living* because the personal and the structural do not just overlap in these texts but are presented as being inextricable. This inextricability—and the contradictions that arise therein—is one of the fundamental pleasures and frustrations of literature and its refraction of cultural movements and political thought.

Although *Aftermath* and *The Cost of Living* do not position themselves as explicitly political texts they both invoke political rhetoric in their discussion of marriage, family, and self. Unlike the cohort of writers practicing what Jennifer Cooke has identified as "the new audacity", the texts considered in this article engage with feminism as a broad cultural movement, in Cusk's case, or with a rhetoric inherited from second wave critiques of the home, in Levy's.Footnote[79] As examples of life writing by women writers, these texts are open to the interpretation that the personal and political reflect upon or intersect with one another other; as well as the perception of women's life writing as having a political purpose on the basis of authorship alone—these are feminist assertions, even if the texts themselves often frustrate a straightforward feminist reading. The ways in which Cusk and Levy engage with or distance themselves from feminist critiques or reconsiderations of the family home, including family abolition, reveals that contemporary culture and politics works on a sweeping, disengaged, and monolithic understanding of the home and the feminist movement.

Yet, feminist considerations of the family home, even those like abolition that are engaged in fervent critique, frequently draw attention to the fact that domestic spaces house not only living people, going about their domestic practices, but a complex web of histories, memories, behaviours, and emotions. Through critique, feminist theory—like literature—acknowledges a value to the home space but not on the basis that it conforms to a "natural" and assumed gender order. Reading the homes in *Aftermath* and *The Cusk of Living* on a textual level, paying attention to Cusk and Levy's respective use of language, achieves something similar, yet offers something more complex than perhaps theory can provide. It allows us to consider the real and symbolic advantages of the home spaces rebuilt or reconfigured after divorce. Perhaps more evident in Levy's work, feelings of homelessness inculcated by the patriarchal family home are replaced by a tentative or ambivalent feeling of being at-home. While the question implicit to these texts—is the destruction of the family home, specifically as a by-product of a patriarchal or heterosexual marriage necessary for the emancipation of all individuals?—is never resolved, the homes in *Aftermath* and *The Cost of Living* are destroyed and remade, and function as the material and imaginative site of interrogation of the institutions of marriage and family. In this way, both

Cusk and Levy provide two vital examples of the complexities of the home, as wives, mothers, and crucially, as writers.

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