

For Now, Our Own

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Editor's Note

This was originally posted to [Kate Bowles's blog](#) on September 6, 2016.

In open online spaces, opening doors is not enough.

Maha Bali, '[Reproducing marginality](#),' September 2016

We so easily forget our bodies.

Mary Freer, '[This body goes to work](#),' August 2016

Over the last week I've been skirting a significant conversation begun by Maha Bali ("[I don't own my domain, I rent it](#)") and continued by Audrey Watters ("[A domain of ones own in a post-ownership society](#)"). Never far away is Andrew Rikard's Edsurge post "[Do I own my domain if you grade it?](#)"

The question for me is how the idea of "own" works as a metaphor. It's complicated enough as it is: my own, to own, owned, [owned](#). We own our mistakes, we own our work, we own our politics, and none of this is quite like the way we own our homes—which for most of our working lives means some version of renting, in a funhouse world in which access to credit, like debt itself, has become an asset.

Conceptually, home ownership makes an ironic pass at all this, promising dominion over property that is actually quite a temporary thing in geohistorical time. Home ownership offers a misleading sense of permanence in relation to our provisional space in the world. A home that's owned is always haunted by both its past and future. Far from sheltering us against the churn of things, it's a daily reminder that we're not here for long.

And inside our own homes where we might think of ourselves as free to do as we please, we remain legal subjects, subordinated to the local laws or ways of being to which our citizenship is bent. We house our human bodies, our social selves, our presentability. Our houses face the street; and behind the scenes, who knows what.

As legal subjects, we have modest rights to allow our homes to fall into disrepair, although these are limited by heritage considerations, public health and safety and so on. Zoning laws fence us in. Meanwhile there are all the social obligations of habitation to keep up: from the pragmatics of rent, rates, taxes, body corporate fees and utilities, to the labour of being a considerate neighbour, maintaining a yard, planting a tree that will outlive you. All this takes some skill, some literacy. No one really remembers how we learned to pay bills, or manage our garbage, but we do.

The implication that ownership of things is the beginning of practice of civic participation is something we both assume and overlook when we use ownership as a tech metaphor, without thinking ahead to use. It's as if the ownership of a domain becomes an end in itself. Domain names are fetishised, like novelty license plates. They're collectable and tradable, despite having no inherent functionality except to indicate an empty lot where something might be built, or a lot where something has been abandoned, that might be recaptured at a price for a new project. But achieving naming rights in the use of a domain doesn't come with the skills you need to know what to do next, how to build what people will find if they search at those coordinates.

This is where I've come to in the conversation about whether personal domain ownership is a useful or socially equitable project for higher education. Maha's post set off a deep and thoughtful exchange among some of higher education's most experienced and engaged champions of student and personal blogging. Really, go read through those comments, they're a model for the conversations we should have when we think about bringing tech innovation as a requirement into the lives of others.

As companion pieces, I read Maha's further post on [how things get paid for in Egypt](#); Audrey's post on [the impact of student debt on credit score](#); and two articles by Tressie McMillan Cottom, on [the \\$20 principle](#) and on [preferential student recruitment as reparations for slavery](#) (spoiler: it's not reparations.) Then I fell into [this exchange](#) on Twitter about the critical importance of making small barriers to educational participation visible, kicked off by Robin deRosa reminding her students to bring a credit card and working laptop to class.

To lower these barriers while keeping them visible, which is very much Robin's project, we have to get much better at noticing them. We need to be scrupulous in attending to the assumptions that lie behind our metaphors, our proposals, our sense of being agents for change largely on the side of the good. We are teaching people with different life experience than our own—different educational capital, cultural capital, actual capital. I teach students for whom a missed shift at work may mean a lost job in a sinkhole local economy; a required online textbook with a digital key may prevent joining the class at all; a credit card may already be maxed or cut up; a laptop may be both so cheap and so broken that it's hard to see through the cracked screen. All of these are actual barriers to participation that actual students have discussed with me in the last four weeks.

And it's easy to say that we have policies or options for students who can't do what we expect, and measures to show that they are in a tiny minority; but in reality we rarely check what disadvantage and/or risk comes with our Plan B. We don't think nearly enough about students for whom the language of digital making is unfamiliar, or the demands of content generation are disempowering and demoralising. We don't adequately accommodate the students who have poor internet access, exhausted data plans, or have to do everything through a second hand phone.

So when we say that it's a good thing for students to own their domain, we need to ask what we mean by owning, and what we think home might be as a metaphor—especially given that the metaphor for our times is not home ownership, or even post-ownership; it's homelessness.

It's the global political scale of this homelessness, the mobility of whole populations for whom the modern projects of both nation and property have entirely fallen apart, that presses an anxiety of ownership on the rest of us. Having a home is more than a matter of shelter, it's the presentation of a certain kind of survivorship, assessed in cultural competence, the assertion of literacy, the visible privilege of know-how. And like home ownership, domain ownership is the practice of insiders, survivors, using the skills and languages that flex their cultural power by asking to be taken entirely for granted, not just in terms of what appears on the screen but increasingly in terms of the coding that lies beneath it.



This weekend I walked past a house that I like. It's in a gentrifying Sydney

neighbourhood, defying the trend. It's been taken over by an unpruned wisteria draped over its rotting balcony; curtains are never pulled back from its verandah doors. Who knows what's inside? Who lets their property, in Sydney of all places, fall into this unproductive, vegetative state? But now there's a notice stapled to the fence. Development is planned. The house will be demolished and replaced. There will be a plunge pool. This abandoned property will retake its place in the proper, and properly owned will become an asset to the whole neighbourhood in house price uplift.

Ownership can never be less of a public spectacle than this. Its whole point is to be knowable by others, to turn exclusivity of access and control towards a model of social order and a vision of security that will miraculously extend to all, including those who are most obviously excluded. Owning and gentrifying are inseparable economic forces. So when we talk about securing a domain of one's own, we're also talking about this privatising vision of the proper—and we're at risk of missing the fragile, important lesson that just as with homes, the security of ownership is always measured against the temporality of the bodies walking past.

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