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# Time to clean

## *On resistance and the temporality of cleaning*

### **Abstract**

Cleaning is a practice with low status. Most people single out cleaning as the least attractive of household chores and the people who clean as a profession are usually badly paid. This article is an attempt to discuss why these practices have such a bad reputation – in everyday life, in work, in popular culture and, not the least, in the feminist movement. Through ethnographic data primarily based on interviews, I investigate the historically imbedded meanings tied to practices of tidying up. Drawing on theories of queer temporality, I highlight what I want to call the temporality of cleaning – the repetitiveness and direction backwards and sideways instead of forward – as a possible answer. The circular practice of taking care of our physical remains remind us of our approaching death, rather than of progress, and thus generates feelings of anger and despair. But instead of ignoring or avoiding this reminder of another time, I argue for a feminist appraisal of the temporality of cleaning. In line with scholars within resistance studies who urge for a sensibility for the temporal aspects of everyday resistance, I propose that a feminist politics that puts cleaning at the center rather than in the margins would acknowledge our mutual dependency and co-living with the material world around us.

*Keywords:* cleaning, household work, queer temporality, gender, resistance, ethics of care

*Iris:* Most of my time is occupied by thinking about cleaning and all that has to be cleaned. I am only happy for a short while, and that's when it's completed. All time is, in some sense, time before cleaning. No clarity exists around it: the idea that I will simply take care of it now, it's more that I go around and try to keep the chaos at bay, some way or another. I feel constant discomfort, chills, anxiety because it is not tidy in the way that I want it to be. I feel like I do little bits and pieces of cleaning all the time, and then during the weekends I engage in bursts of cleaning, when I spend perhaps two hours cleaning intensively, and then afterwards I can experience satisfaction. But rarely as I remember from before, from the time before the family. There was a completely different satisfaction, you could really get it right. You knew that everything was clean, you were done.

*Fanny:* Do you have a longing for it to be complete, to have arrived?

*Iris:* Yes, and to be able to do anything besides thinking about it. To be allowed to rest. Just to get to sit down and take in how nice I made it. That it's done. The hope that one can devote energy to something else.

Iris is a woman in her forties, living with her partner and two children in a middle-sized town in the north of Sweden. She is one of the participants in my study on the practice and politics of everyday cleaning<sup>1</sup> – and even if her statement is rather pointed, it may serve as an illustration of a rather general opinion on cleaning. Most people I interviewed found dusting, mopping and sweeping the floor a boring task, something they preferred to avoid if they had the chance. Rather than removing dust, they favoured household chores like home decorating, cooking or taking care of children.

These findings are not too surprising. Even if there, for sure, exists both people who enjoy cleaning and rewarding aspects of the chore, cleaning in general has a remarkably low status in society. It is something that is badly salaried (if salaried at all) and unconcernedly unloaded unto those who have the least power and influence in society. Moreover, it is neither in science, popular culture, or feminist activism paid any particular attention or investigated.

The question is: how come? In this article, I will discuss cleaning through the lens of time, developing an argument where the temporality of cleaning, its specific rhythm and direction, is presented as a possible key both to its pertinacious gender connection, and its low status. Using theories on queer temporality I want to dig deeper into what is actually perceived as problematic with actions that are sideways or backwards facing, rather than forward. Departing from this discussion, and in relation to theories on resistance, I will discuss how the specific temporality of cleaning can be understood in terms of a feminist or queer resistance: a kind of politics of cleaning.

## Research on cleaning

There is strikingly little research on cleaning as a daily practice, internationally as well as nationally. In a Swedish context, one of the few dissertations that is directly concerned with cleaning was written by architect Gudrun Linn in 1985. In *Badrum och städning. Hur ska badrum byggas för att underlätta städningen?* [Bathroom Design. The Cleaning Perspective], Linn investigates *Svensk Byggnorm's* [Swedish building standard's] detailed minimum spatial dimensions for bathrooms from the perspective of cleaning — that is, how the standards correspond to experiences of getting the spaces clean. This was something no-one had previously done, and the reactions were swift. The day before the thesis was defended, the leading newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* published an article by an associate professor at the KTH Royal Institute of Technology, expressing the view that research on this kind of topic was ridiculous (Johansson

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1 The article is based on thoughts developed in the book *Tid att städa. Om städningens praktik och politik* (Ordfront 2018).

1985). To investigate the best way of cleaning one's bathroom, was, according to the researcher, a waste of time.

Despite the fact that Linn's dissertation was published more than thirty years ago, cleaning still generates remarkably little research interest. In particular, there is a lack of research within cultural theory (see Pink 2004, Martens 2007). On the other hand, there exist nearby research fields that concern issues of cleanliness, dirt and sanitation. Among other things, there is research on unpaid housework, where gender equality and work division are frequently the focus (see, for example, Elvin-Nowak 1999, Hageman and Roll-Hansen 2005, Magnusson 2006, Platzer 2009, Aarseth 2011). In these studies, cleaning is discussed as an integrated part of all care and household work that someone in the home has to attend to, and that is usually not held in particularly high regard.

Another field in which housekeeping figures in the periphery is research on the conditions of the housewife, historically (see, for example, Palmer 1989, Shove 2003, Johnson & Lloyd 2004) and in retrospect (Åström 1986, Danielsen 2002, Marander-Eklund 2014). In these studies, an alternative story is told about all the chores that were mainly women's responsibility, but that rarely qualified as real work. A pioneer in this area is Ann Oakley, who in *The Sociology of Housework* (1974) interviewed British housewives in the 1970s. Oakley's starting point was to consider housework as work in its own right. Her conclusion is that this type of work is characterised by being unpaid, lonely, mostly tedious and very monotonous. If independence was the quality that the women in Oakley's study appreciated most about their housework, then, symptomatically, household chores were the least appreciated. Worst of all was washing the dishes, ironing — and cleaning (Oakley 1974:42).

If the unpaid housework is given a specific meaning when performed by a housewife, it is partially differentiated when it is leased out as paid work to others. Research on household work in other people's homes, as well as the (growing global) home services market is relatively extensive. In the Swedish context, the introduction of tax deductions for household services, which includes cleaning, has been the focus of studies on both employers and employees (see, for example, Björklund-Larsen 2010, Calleman & Gavanas 2013, Kvist 2013, Pettersson 2013). An important perspective in this research is the gradual globalisation of housework (Anderson 2000, Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2004). Access to cheap household services have increased during the 21st century, partly as a result of greater income disparities, partly as a result of a global post-industrial service economy with increased labour supply (Calleman & Gavanas 2013). Today, there are more and more poor (preferably) women in the global south and east travelling to clean the homes in the north, sometimes with different types of entry permits, worse conditions and lower wages than other migrants, indicating that housework is not to be considered as real work (Sassen 2006, Cox 2011, Lutz 2011).

To sum up, there are a number of research fields that touch upon issues relating to cleaning in the home. However, it is remarkably rare that cleaning itself plays the main role, something that made me particularly interested in the chore and how it is experienced by people (see Ambjörnsson 2018). My material consists of approx-

imately thirty in-depth interviews, a strategic sample with people of different ages, sexes, sexualities, ethnicities, places of residence, housing and occupations.<sup>2</sup> To get in touch with the informants I have mainly used "snowballing", which means that informants recommend other people who might be of interest for the study (Widerberg 2002). I have also, via the *Institute for Language and Folklore (Dialekt- och Folkminnesarkivet)*, collected twenty questionnaires about everyday cleaning. An additional category that I, to a certain extent, use in my analysis, is fictional texts, where cleaning constitutes a theme. In this article, however, empirical data will have to stand aside in favour of a more theoretical discussion on the temporality of cleaning and the potential resistance this particular temporality might offer.

## Housework and temporality

Researchers agree that the ambivalent position of household work in modern society must, in part, be considered in light of the societal changes that occurred in the shift from peasant society to industrial society (Giles 2004). In peasant society, the production of food and other necessities was carried out within the framework of the home and the family, where women and children actively participated. With the growth of industrialisation, in the case of Sweden sometime in the late 19th century, large sections of production moved from the private to the public sphere, which labelled production as the domain of men. The "task-oriented" time was gradually substituted by a mechanical "clock-time", another way of organizing and conceptualizing time, society and power (Adams 1990). The home, and that which took place within the confines of the home, gradually became synonymous with consumption and reproduction, rather than production — and also came to be associated with the woman (Felski 2000, Gillis & Hollows 2009). The home also became tied to leisure, an activity that according to Henri Lefebvre (1984), among others, first arose with industrialisation. The public sphere, however, was linked to work.

Important to note is the classed aspect of this construction. The woman who was set to be the "home maker", managing the "mall world", consuming for the domestic, originated from the upper classes or the growing bourgeoisie. The working-class women, on the other hand, had to simultaneously work inside and outside the home, often doing household work in rich households. Thus, the proliferating ideal of the housewife, peaking in the 1950s, was based on a naturalised class difference, dividing not only male workers but also women (Berner 1996, Marander-Eklund 2014). Regardless of who actually did the chores in the house, be it a low payed working-class woman or the housewife herself, it is possible to conclude that it is the norm of salaried work,

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<sup>2</sup> The interviews, which lasted between forty minutes and two and a half hours, have also been somewhat different in terms of form. In six cases, I have chosen to interview persons among cohabiting couples (both homosexual and heterosexual couples). These interviews have contributed interesting information about positioning related to household work. In one of the cases, the conversation took the form of a couple interview, which gave a unique insight into the ongoing negotiation of cleaning as a chore (see Martinsson 1997, Norberg 2009).

and the masculinisation of work, that makes housework appear as a less important, merely something for women to preoccupy themselves with. The underlying logic is that household work does not generate income, nor does it produce new goods, but instead essentially strives to maintain the *status quo*.

Besides being a low status chore in the private, with little regard and recognition, the impermanence and constant repetition seems to be the reason why most people I interviewed dislike cleaning. Like Iris stated earlier on, Lollo, a woman in her mid-fifties, explains that the ongoing decay, no matter how often you clean, causes feelings of anger and and even despair.

*Lollo:* It gets dirty sooo fast, it's not fair! Yes, I would say that's why I dislike cleaning, I feel offended! You tidy up, have some friends over for a coffee or dinner or sleep-over and you have breakfast together and leave home. And when you get back: what?? Cause, maybe you didn't bother to clear away or do the dishes, since you focussed on having a nice time with your friends. And it feels somewhat unjust! Because I really just cleaned the whole flat. And maybe someone comes to visit and says: Oh wow, what a mess! And you go: It wasn't like this the day before yesterday, I promise!

What, then, is the problem with repetition? Why is repetitive work so often portrayed as comfortless and meaningless? Henri Lefebvre (1984) advances the notion that it has to do with lines and direction, that is, temporality. The repetitiveness of everyday life is perceived as a problem simply because it appears to be opposed to modern society's focus on advancement and accumulation, that is to say, "progress" (cf. Freeman 2010). Routinely performing a chore means that it becomes a habit rather than a surprise. This implies an instrumentalisation of existence, where problematisation, intellectualisation and critical thinking — virtues in modern society — get pushed to the side. We often perform our routine tasks on auto-pilot: sinks are wiped while we listen the radio and the dirty clothes under the bed are sorted without much intellectual effort. By being static and predictable rather than changeable and dynamic, everyday life thus functions, in Rita Felski's words, as a "retardation device, slowing down the dynamic of historical change". (2000:81)

## Feminism and the home

Household work would then, according to this perspective, be characterised by a different rhythm — or another temporality — than the historical forward-looking time. It is routinary, monotonous, repetitive and non-productive, and is therefore perceived as less developmental and meaningful. The person performing the chore will thus also be regarded as less future-oriented, independent and free. Perhaps it is not so odd that feminists throughout history have had a strained relationship with both household work and the home. Felski (2000:86) goes so far as to formulate it as feminism's anti-home

narrative.<sup>3</sup> For a woman to leave the home and find paid work is simply a relatively unproblematic feminist exhortation (Giles 2004). From Ibsen's Nora, who leaves the "doll's house", over Betty Friedan's depressed housewives and Germaine Greer's female eunuch, to Maria Sveland's "Bitterfitta", the path to women's self-actualisation and freedom has been diverted away from the home, and instead redirected out into the wider world (Lloyd 1984, Johnson and Lloyd 2004, Gillis and Hollows 2009). In the feminist classic *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2010) equates homework with what she calls "immanence", that is, the opposite of creativity and transcendence. To wash, iron, and chase dust bunnies under the cupboards is, she writes, "holding away death but also refusing life" (2010:476). Thus, it is possible to assert that the person involved in household work is only able to grasp the negative aspects of life:

"Legions of women have in common only endlessly recurrent in a battle that never leads to victory (...) Few tasks are more similar to the torment of Sisyphus than those of the housewife, day after day, one must wash dishes, dust furniture, mend clothes that will be dirty, dusty, and torn again. The housewife wears herself out running on the spot; she does nothing; she just perpetuates the present..." (2010:474).

Housework, the work imposed upon women, has thus often been formulated as opposed to self-realisation — as something dull, monotonous and meaningless. At the same time, feminists, not least feminist researchers, have wanted to bring attention to — and in some contexts appreciate — the invisible and unpaid care work that is the prerequisite of paid labour (and life in general). Introducing an ethics of care, based on the mother-child encounter as a model for a particular kind of ethical work that is not purely governed by autonomy, qualities like empathy, interdependence, nurturance, flexibility, responsiveness and receptivity were valorised and investigated (Gilligan 1982, Noddings 1984, Ruddick 1989, Holm 1993, Tronto 2013). Within a slightly different tradition, philosopher Iris Marion Young (2005) approaches the issue of the value of housework through a discussion of conservation. To preserve the existent, Young asserts, is central for creation of the home as a place. Young refers to Martin Heidegger's understanding of *dwelling* as the ultimate product of man; his meaning is that this in turn constitutes a combination of preservation and building. According to Young, however, preservation is seldom given the same attention as building. While creating, a male coded activity, has been regarded as productive, female coded conservation and preservation is usually perceived as less creative,

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3 This anti-home narrative of feminism has been criticised among other black feminists, such as bell hooks. In "Homeplace (a site of resistance)" (1990), she discusses how the home, as a place, was the central starting point for black women's struggle against both a patriarchal and racist society. To even have a place to call home, to fight for the home of one's family and the chance to spend time and energy on one's own home, rather than the home of other (white) people, in hook's reasoning, becomes a feminist issue permeated by experiences of racialisation and racism.

and therefore not as interesting. Young counters previous feminists' descriptions of the home and housework as unending, meaningless work that binds women to a subordinate position in society. Instead, she wants to emphasise the human value of the acts that aim at guarding "the things of the past and keep them in store" (2005:141). To organise, arrange and take care of our belongings and our corporeal imprints must, according to Young, be considered as at least as creative an activity as the production of something new.

Young's focus on the creativity of preservation includes, in principle, a task such as cleaning. To organise the things around us, to tend to and take care of, is to be considered a sort of preservation. At the same time, Young agrees with Simone de Beauvoir when she describes certain parts of household work, especially cleaning, as instrumental, mechanical and not particularly creative. This trend also applies to the feminist philosophers, which I referred to earlier, who want to reinterpret and raise the status of the female coded activities of care and household work, departing from relationality and mutual dependency instead of a sovereign liberal subject (Ruddick 1989, Tronto 2013). Even within these conversations, the act of cleaning is strikingly absent. Cleaning simply seems especially difficult to promote as constructive, self-developing and creative.

### The temporality of cleaning and the meaning of dust

One reason for this, as I have previously suggested, could be the relationship between cleaning and the temporal. For example, when we compare cleaning with interior decoration, child rearing and cooking, we see how the latter activities do in fact produce things both new and permanent, in the form of children who grow up or curtains that remain in place. Cleaning, on the other hand, differs from most of the reproductive activities, because it does not create anything new. Rather, it is perceived as best performed when it is neither seen nor noticed — and is therefore mainly about striving to maintain the status quo. If the unpaid domestic chores have been determined as reproductive rather than productive, cleaning seems to be the least productive of these chores. And if domestic chores can be characterised as impermanence — and therefore need to be repeated over and over again — cleaning appears to serve as the quintessential example of endless repetition. Earlier on Lollo described feelings of despair, hopelessness and even anger when confronted with the fact that the home was messy only a few hours after cleaning. And Iris, who admits that she is constantly thinking about what has to be cleaned, formulates the frustration in terms of an endless temporal loop: "All time is, in some sense, time before cleaning". When I ask her to tell me what goes through her mind during the interview, she answers:

*Iris:* I'm thinking about the dishes. There's a faint smell of garlic, and I have a guest staying, and I'm wondering whether she can smell it. I'm thinking that she probably did the dishes. It's that feeling of seeing what I could remove, but it's meaningless anyway, because it's just such a vanishingly small part of everything

that needs to be done. I see the newspapers and the dust on the windowsill, on the radiators. I see the dust coating the lamp, and the frames under the sink have a sticky coating, which I'll never get around to dealing with. It's hard.

Both Iris' and Lollo's descriptions of cleaning in the home concerns its repetitive character, i.e. that it is a chore that has to be carried out over and over again, and therefore appears to be hopelessly unfinished. But sweeping dust, wiping frames and scrubbing the toilet is not only to be regarded as an unproductive activity, it also deals with dirt and debris — that is, the deposits of life that remind us of the perishability of existence. The gaze is, so to speak, facing backwards and downwards, rather than forwards and upwards. Unlike care work such as childcare, cooking and home furnishing, cleaning is thus a task that necessarily moves in the "wrong" direction, with another temporality. It is also this motion that Iris reveals in her resignation over the dust that accumulates like a sticky residue in the cupboard under the sink, and her inability to "keep the chaos at bay". For Iris as well as for Lollo, cleaning is considered an understated and hopeless battle against the unavoidable decay. By definition, cleaning is simply to recognise oneself as dependent on the passage of time — stuck in the dirt and grime and the endless water treading.

### **Cleaning as resistance?**

The special rhythm and direction of cleaning, its specific temporality, is thus a possible explanation for its low status. It is also this point I suspect will be the most politically urgent. Is it possible to embrace the temporality of cleaning, rather than to shun it — to discern a potential political point in lingering on the repetitive and apparently unproductive motion backwards and downwards? Is the temporality of cleaning even to be considered a potential resistance?

Over the past years research on resistance, what it is and how it can be conceptualised, has grown within different and related fields such as poststructuralist, feminist, queer, post-colonial and subaltern studies. The plurality of definitions of the key concept, including for instance "civil resistance", "everyday resistance" and "critical resistance", illustrate the vivid and productive ongoing debates (Baaz et al 2016). In "Conceptualizing resistance" Joselyn Hollander and Rachel Einwohner (2004) made an ambitious overview of the literature, mapping some key disagreements among scholars, but also singling out the only two features that are agreed upon: 1) that resistance is an act 2) which is always in opposition to power. The questions remaining to be solved are: who needs to recognize an act in order to be defined as resistance? Does the act necessarily need to be intended? And does it have to result in change?

Departing from these discussions, researchers within the emerging field of resistance studies are suggesting a perspective that recognises the plural, malleable, productive and fluid character of the phenomenon, viewed as a complex and ongoing process integrated into daily social life (see f.i. Baaz et al 2016, Johansson & Vinthagen 2016). Following James Scott (1985), Baaz et al (2016) argue that everyday resistance might

be seen as a kind of "infrapolitics", i.e. informal, non-organized, non-confrontational and hidden. However, and apart from Scott, they want to highlight unintended or "other-intended" acts as possible resistance – i.e. acts that has the possibility to undermine power relations through its consequences rather than through its intentions. One example of this is the current worldwide movement of digital file sharing, in which millions of people undermine some of the biggest multinational corporations in the world through illegally sharing films, music and software. The intent is not necessarily formulated as a critique of the capitalist system or intellectual property rights, but is rather to be seen as a desire for the products at stake. To not recognize these kinds of un- or "other-intended" acts as resistance would, however, be misleading. Rather, intentions must be considered "plural, complex, contradictory, or evolving as well as occasionally something that the actor is not sure about, views differently in retrospect, or even is not able to explain" (Baaz et al 2016:140).

So, what about cleaning? Might there be a point of analysing the temporality of cleaning in the light of these ongoing discussions within resistance studies? In a recent article, Anna Johansson and Stellan Vinthagen (2016:427) highlight the temporal dimensions of resistance, urging for an analysis that recognises "everyday resistance as temporally organized and practiced in and through time as a central social dimension" (cfr Lilja et al 2015, Baaz et al 2016). Their call taps into a recent trend within the social sciences and humanities, where scholars "revisit" the concept of temporality, pointing at its naturalised connection to power, discipline and control (Foucault 1979, Weston 2002, Grosz 2005). For instance, Elizabeth Freeman (2010:3) discusses the use of time "to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity", including the production of goods as well as the reproduction of new citizens. Through introducing the concept chrononormativity, Freeman explores how the temporal ordering of time reflects a logic of heteronormativity that delimits difference. Understanding temporality itself as a tool of power, she calls for a "deviant chronopolitics", closely related to the concept of queer time, used by Judith Jack Halberstam. According to Halberstam (2007:182), queer time is "the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence – early adulthood – marriage – reproduction – child rearing – retirement – death, the embrace of late childhood in place of early adulthood or immaturity in place of responsibility". Turning against what might be defined as "family", "reproductive" or "heteronormative" time, praising the "here and now" instead of the future, queer temporality is then understood as a form of resistance.

In his polemic book, *No Future*, philosopher Lee Edelman (2004) pleads what he calls the anti-social turn in queer theory, drawing on theories of queer temporality. His point is that the only possibility of politically countering the capitalist idea of endless growth and progress, an ideology intertwined with and organised through the absolute primacy of heteronormativity and the figure of the child, is to embrace negativity and abandon investments in the future. To simply make oneself impossible to exploit in favour of the future. Edelman's concern is a theoretical one: what happens not so much to actual queer lives but to a queer principle of refusal of all forms of normative identity. Still, it is relevant here, since it reveals the potential

opposition that other temporal rhythms constitute in our society. In an era saturated by exhortations to go beyond, break up and glance forward, the dingy temporality of cleaning appears almost an insult. Like Lollo and Iris cited earlier, we simply get annoyed by the idea of having to bring out the vacuum cleaner once again — despite having just vacuumed. The repetitive rhythm of cleaning, the seemingly hopeless cycle, therefore offers resistance to dominant beliefs about what is considered to be proper and important in society.

What is more, the direction of cleaning, facing backwards and downwards — the direction of decay and transience rather than the seemingly constructive — constitutes a potential wrench in the system. That, at least, is how I interpret the lack of commercial exploitation of cleaning, in a culture that otherwise makes money on everything else possible. The plethora of products, newspapers, television shows and books about home and household chores rarely focus on cleaning. Lifestyle programmes, interior design magazines and podcasts about the small things in life are largely devoid of cleaning. Cleaning can, indeed, be subcontracted and avoided, in the form of low paid work. On the other hand, it seems harder to make it a hobby or a lifestyle. That way, the dust could be compared to the queer position in Edelman's figure of thought — something that only with difficulty lets itself be "domesticated".

Unlike Edelman's dark utopia, which is based on the antisocial and introspective, cleaning, on the other hand, is relational. Ultimately, it is about care-taking — perhaps not primarily of the future, but rather the current, and the constant decay: the remnants of living. In an attempt to rethink the often-despised forms of time required by practices of care, Lisa Baraitser (2017) introduces the concept "time of mattering". Combining insights from feminist writings on care ethics with theories on queer temporality, Baraitser (2017:92) wants to uncouple "maternal time from chronoheteronormativity, and align it, instead, with queer time in the sense of being radically outside of the time of normal development". Doing this, she draws attention to the political potential in an ethics that illuminates our world as one of time-consuming practices of staying, remaining, repeating, enduring and taking care of one another and our mutual remains. One of the few people that I interviewed who claims to enjoy cleaning, puts it like this:

*Johanna:* When I look at that armchair, for example, it's like having a relation to it, because I know that I've wiped it. A bit like that. It's like a relationship simply. Yeah, whaddya call it?

*Fanny:* Tactile?

*Johanna:* Yes, something tactile, exactly. But not only tactile, also something that has to do with taste and smell and touch. Sensuous. Yes, sensuous! It's a very sensuous experience to clean. It is both sensuous and spatial. And, spiritual, actually, I think. There is something in just knowing that *this one here, is here*, although *this one* I clean in that way. Like as if you were able to know someone

else's body, how it feels and what it wants. It's like a relationship, but a relationship to the room and the objects. In a way, cleaning reminds me of an act of love. You show that you take care of the place where you live and that there is something nice about that. It's like a healing process, something reparational, or how to put it. There is something about the act of caring. I think you can say that I like fiddling around with my things. That it's nice to fiddle with one's stuff, simply put. That's what I do, I think.

To "fiddle with one's stuff", as Johanna puts it, involves signing oneself into a motion of bodies, cleaning, over time — thus transcending oneself and one's individuality. The act of surrendering to the basic facts of life: deterioration, decay and the passage of time — reveals how dependence and care must be regarded as the prerequisite of life, rather than a hampering burden. Following this line of thought, Simone de Beauvoir's description of the housewife's hopeless water treading, formulated as such: "She does nothing; she only perpetuates the present" (2010:474), serves less, I imagine, as a description of Edelman's embrace of the asocial negativity, than of a kind of care for the present. It is a solicitude in drab colours, which, through its stubborn repetition and focus on decay, does not shy away from the dead or dying. Such solicitousness, I suppose, can also point to a possible different source of meaning than prospective individual self-realisation.

From this perspective, cleaning might be perceived as a form of resistance, transcending the whole idea of being against something, but rather making space for other ways of organising life and society (Baaz et al 2016:143). Following Lisa Baraitser's call for a recognition of life as conditioned by repetition and endurance, I thus propose cleaning, with its backward and downward motion, as a reasonable starting point for a feminist politics. This is a direction in which the smallest common denominator is the recognition of the repetitive character of everyday life, our coexistence with deterioration and the affirmation of common vulnerability. The way a society cleans, how we deal with the remains, rubbish and left-overs, could simply be formulated as the starting point for how well we deal with our common needs.

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#### **Author presentation**

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