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Temporary Measures: Housing Insecurity, Waiting, and Injury in Post-Grenfell London

By

Carolina Antoinette Talavera

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Joint Doctor of Philosophy
with the University of California, San Francisco

in

Medical Anthropology

in the
Graduate Division
of the
University of California, Berkeley

Committee:

Professor Charles L. Briggs, Chair
Professor Vincanne Adams
Professor Seth Holmes
Professor Karen Nakamura

Summer 2023

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Carolina Talavera

Abstract

Temporary Measures: Housing Insecurity, Waiting, and Injury in Post-Grenfell London

By

Carolina Talavera

Doctor of Philosophy in Medical Anthropology

University of California, Berkeley and University of California, San Francisco

Professor Charles L. Briggs, Chair

Temporary Measures: Housing Insecurity, Waiting, and Injury in Post-Grenfell London examines London's growing housing crisis, focusing specifically on the use of temporary accommodation (TA) and the provision of interim shelter for vulnerable populations by local government. TA was situated in the cracks produced by the undelivered promise of the English social housing program and the experience of chronic housing insecurity in contemporary London. Based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in the Borough of Newham, in East London, this dissertation examines the ways families in temporary accommodation experienced uncertainty in cycles of housing deprivation, and how they challenged their conditions in collaboration with a direct action housing campaign called Focus E15.

Only temporary in name, as I argue throughout this dissertation, the punctuated temporalities of the temporary and of waiting constituted the cyclicality of housing insecurity that generated diffuse practices of neglect for London's vulnerable housing-insecure population. Moving across scales, I analyze the embodied, existential, material, and temporal experiences through which housing insecurity manifested by focusing my analysis on such everyday phenomena as a set of stairs, mold, and geographic displacement. Through an analysis across these scales, I attended to the registers in which women came to articulate their individual experiences in the form of political and legal challenges against the management of housing and the temporal/spatial conditions of their waiting. When these women demanded safe and permanent housing, they were told that "your time is coming"—but this "time" was endlessly deferred. In the wake of the lessons learned from the Grenfell Tower fire, this dissertation reflects on what it means to live in endemic insecurity with the heightened sense of living in, and with, different and intersecting forms of exposures.

For Isabel

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To Isabel, my daughter, you came into my life at the beginning of this dissertation. You have showed me love that I didn't know was possible, and you have made me feel like I could do anything. As I wrote about mothers facing with impossible decisions and situations, your love gave me a better sense of what these decisions really meant, and what it was they were fighting for. Mothers are superheroes, but they shouldn't have to be. I dedicate this dissertation to all the mums.

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Prologue

Cracks: Grenfell Britain

I wasn't looking for cracks, but the woman, a client at the foodbank, pointed to the wall of the building next to us while we sat outside the children's playground during a brief lull in the afternoon shift. There were cracks spreading across the exposed wall from the building next door. "I'm not being rude," Nicki, the client, said to me as she pointed to the wall drawing my attention to the fissures of different sizes that were scattered along the wall of the neighboring building. The lines of cracks breaking off from each other, widening and narrowing at points. "This is my landing, cracks, cracks going through the wall," she said comparing the landing of her estate to this wall. A retired landscape designer, she was small and lean—the result of an undisclosed medical problem that had caused sudden weight loss. Nicki told me about the previous estate in which she had lived in Islington that had loose bricks falling down.[1] An inspector came to assess the wall but had told them what they already knew: the wall was dangerous, but if it fell on anyone, it wasn't their responsibility. She chuckled to herself and said to me, "It's like the Berlin Wall. I'm gonna sit there and go 'Oh look, the Berlin Wall's coming down'."

I met Nicki, a woman from Essex who was about sixty years old, while volunteering at the local food bank in North London during a summer conducting preliminary fieldwork. There was a lull in my shift, so I made my way to the playground for a brief break where I found her and another volunteer casually chatting on the child-sized plastic chairs that we had put outside at the beginning of the shift. It was a beautiful London summer day and so we were enjoying the standard foodbank offerings of tea and biscuits that were put out while people waited for their emergency food parcel.[2] She wasn't in any rush to leave, content to hang out and chat with the other volunteers also taking a break. They were talking about Grenfell when I sat down.[3]

The Grenfell Tower fire had happened only two weeks before our conversation, when a fire broke out in the 24-story block of flats in North Kensington, West London, killing 72 people. At 1:00 a.m. on June 14th, 2017 a fire sparked by an electrical fault in the refrigerator of a flat on the fourth-floor. It spread to the outside of the building, rapidly climbing the sides of the building in the narrow 50mm gap between the building's exterior paneling and insulation. As the fire spread throughout the building, 250 firefighters attempted to rescue residents. By 5:00 a.m, the whole building was burning. During a subsequent public inquiry of the event, it was discovered that residents were told by emergency dispatchers, who had no sense of the accelerating situation, to shelter in their apartments— a directive that was fatal for anyone who followed it. To this day, the death toll remains a disputed figure, as residents and the local community argue that there were residents living in the tower with unofficial sublets or with undocumented statuses who were not accounted for.

---

[1] In the UK, estate is often used as a shorthand to refer to council housing estates. Once used to name residential areas which had been planned and built at the same time, in contemporary usage the term can carry a stigmatizing weight similar to the US equivalent of the "projects" or the "ghetto".

[2] The food parcels provided by the Trussel Trust were specifically calculated and weighed to supply an individual with three days' worth of food.

[3] Grenfell has come to be a shorthand for the disaster—the worst residential fire since WWII.

While these unfortunate directions led to many deaths, the unusually rapid spread of the fire revealed that it was, in fact, the cumulation of institutional negligence that killed Grenfell's victims. The cladding and insulation that lined the exterior of the building were installed as part of an £8.6 million dollar refurbishment of the estate completed by Rydon Construction, a private organization, in May 2016. To reduce the cost, the local authorities in Kensington and Chelsea Council opted to use aluminum composite panels instead of zinc, for a total cost savings of £293,368. Prior to the refurbishment, the building was just a block made up of concrete, wood, and insulation.[4] Between 2012 and 2016, the refurbishment saw the addition of new windows, cladding, and insulation, with minor, but fatal, changes to the placement of the materials that would result in new gaps and assemblages of combustible materials that would result in the acceleration and spread of the fire. Despite resident complaints about the fire and safety standards of the work done by Rydon, these concerns were ignored by Kensington and Chelsea Council and its management organization, Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organization. As I sat down and joined the conversation, they were debating who was to blame and who was going to be held accountable. Nicki turned to me and said "I was gobsmacked….I cried all day".

Nicki went on to tell me that she had been waiting for over five years for the Council to install a bath rail in her bathroom. She feared getting out of the shower alone, relying on her partner to help her in and out without falling. The lack of response from the Council and the absence of the bath rail had been a source of daily uncertainty. Getting out of the shower, and picking up the saucepan from the stove on her own were ways in which she described the mundane encounters with the space she lived in, moments that created daily sources of uncertainty and exposures to forms of potential injury. "But I'm just frightened. I pick a pan up and I think 'shit it's going to go on me'. But me partner is there. And he says to me 'alright I'll do this saucepan' so I can eat. But I'm frightened on me own. There's no help forthcoming. Now Grenfell tower…". Her voice trailed off and we all sat in silence. Nicki bridges these everyday insecurities with the catastrophic event of Grenfell. The absence of the bath rail, of the uncertainty of being able to get out of the shower without injury. Now there was the threat of flammable cladding, institutional neglect at a mass scale, and calamitous death. After Grenfell, many started looking around their own homes and buildings with this uncertainty, perhaps seeing the cracks a little differently than before.

I never saw this woman again, but she offered an ethnographic starting point for me: to look at the cracks. Cracks as the accumulation of tension in the structure—brittle material can't absorb energy. Instead, its bond breaks irreparably, the result of the accumulation of microscopic episodes. Like the cracks in the crumbling wall, chipping away at the integrity of the building—deregulations, refurbishments, and bureaucratic (in)decisions create different kinds of cracks. For Grenfell, these came in the form of gaps and new spaces for heat and fire to accumulate and spread, but they also revealed the cracks produced by the compounding cuts of austerity. The result of a dizzying maze of bureaucratic actors and decisions, with over 60 organizations and subcontractors involved in the buildings' refurbishment alone, the tragedy of Grenfell cannot be pinned on a specific culprit. As the four-year-long Grenfell public inquiry was brought to a close, Sir Martin Moore-Brick, the chair, said in his closing statement: "Although it is possible to identify some decisions relating to the refurbishment that had an immediate effect, the wider

[4] Councils are the most common form of local government in England and are made up of councillors, locally elected public officials. There are a variety of local governments forms across England. Broadly, they are split across regional authorities, local authorities and parish councils. In London, there are 32 local authorities.

causes of the fire have their roots in the culture of the construction industry and the regulatory regime… Many decisions, taken by many people over the course of many years, conspired to create a building which in June 2017 was vulnerable to a catastrophic fire."[5] How can we understand institutional neglect when responsibility and accountability have been so profoundly dispersed through deregulation and privatization of housing regulations, and time? Over the course of this dissertation, I came to understand this question as central to the condition of modern Britain.

In its aftermath, the eventfulness of Grenfell penetrated the public consciousness, raising questions about how the managed decline of Britain's public and private infrastructures, including its public services, was producing morbid conditions of institutional neglect. The woman from the foodbank literally pointed my gaze to the cracks. In the affective aftershock of Grenfell, the woman's orientation to the cracks in the walls demanded a different kind of attention that reckoned with the production of uncertainty across multiple scales. In her reflection, she drew an affective connection between the cracks in front of us to her everyday bodily precarity and back to Grenfell. As this encounter lingered with me through my fieldwork, I began to understand that the uncertainty the woman located in her bath rail and the crumbling bricks was a recognition that Grenfell was not an incomprehensible moment. I rather formed the condition of her everyday life—the heightened sense of living in, and with, different and intersecting forms of exposures. But now the injury, or the anticipation of fatal decline, because of a broken wrist or hip from falling out of the bath, seemed as immanent as the neglected infrastructures that surrounded her.

This opening is a provocation, intended to reframe how we perceive the cracks in our everyday lives. How can we reckon with the normalized, but dispersed pressure points stress of, and on, bodies and buildings as they register this widespread decline? How do we recognize the proliferating array of cracks to which we have become so accustomed, that our eye slides over them? Beyond asking the obvious (but important) question of what the conditions are that made it possible, in this dissertation, I also ask why the catastrophe was necessary before we could see the cracks that built up to it?

[5] https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/jul/21/as-the-grenfell-inquiry-wraps-up-what-are-the-next-steps#:~:text=After%20308%20days%20of%20evidence,the%20survivors%20and%20the%20bereaved.

Introduction

Words are such feeble things. What is the use of a brief phrase like 'roof leaks' or 'four beds for eight people'? It is the kind of thing your eye slides over, registering nothing. And yet what a wealth of misery it can cover!"

- George Orwell (1937, 51)

Time Deferred

Walking into the accessible bathroom I was confronted with a powerful sewage smell. Salma, a Muslim woman who lives with disabilities, and her two young daughters, Nadia (12) and Zahra (14), invited me for a tour of their ground-floor flat in Brimstone House. Brimstone was a Council-owned building used to provide temporary accommodation to homeless applicants considered "priority need".[6] *In their nearly two years living there, they had tried several ways of cleaning the toilet, but nothing removed the smell. The smell was only one of many complaints they had about their living situation. The hot water only worked for short periods, so they had to spread out their showers. They showed me that the bath seat in the accessible bathroom; too small for the tub, it was propped over and would slip from the frame, making it unsafe for Salma to safely use it. The only way Salma was able to bathe was in the non-accessible shower, with the help and support of her two daughters. The girls also excitedly showed me the sink in the bathroom, demonstrating their ingenious solution to the tap that only put out ice cold or burning hot water: an*

Figure 1. The assisted seating for the accessible bathtub (Carolina Talavera)

[6] Under the 1996 Housing Act, the following categories fall under the term "priority need": "People with dependent children who are residing with, or might reasonably be expected to reside with them, for example, because the family is separated solely because of the need for accommodation; b. People who are homeless or threatened with homelessness as a result of any emergency such as flood, fire or any other disaster; c. Where any person who resides or who might reasonably be expected to reside with them, is vulnerable because of old age, mental illness, handicap or physical disability or other special reason; d. Pregnant women, or a person who resides or might reasonably be expected to reside with a pregnant woman; e. All 16 and 17-year-olds; f. 18 to 20 year-old-care leavers; g. Vulnerable care leavers; h. Vulnerable former members of the armed forces; i. Vulnerable former prisoners; and j. People who are vulnerable because they are fleeing violence." (Section 189 of the 1996 Act)

empty liter soda bottle connecting the two taps to create one temperate stream of water in the middle.

Nadia and Zahra, energetic and delighted to share their experience, showed me around the apartment and would eagerly point out problems and other temporary solutions to their living arrangement, while Salma, in her electric wheelchair, occasionally commented in her limited English. They showed me that the metal plating with sharp edges on the bottom of the bedroom door was falling off, exposing the faded lines of glue that were supposed to be keeping it in place—"if there were small kids here, this could be quite dangerous" one of the girls said to me while pointing to the plate. They had me kneel on the floor of the bedroom to get a better view of the skewed legs of the bunk bed, unstably holding up the bed that they both slept on. They weren't allowed to bring in their own furniture; thus, apart from the small wardrobe the Council provided, they resorted to stacking all their clothes on the spare bed and furniture. Despite having lived there for two years, the way the space was organized gave the appearance of a family in the process of unpacking.

Figure 2. An empty liter bottle used by the family to create a temperate stream of water. (Carolina Talavera)

Using their feet, the girls pointed to the gap in the floorboards at the entrance of the second bathroom and the hallway, where they complained about spiders coming. They also complained about the cockroaches that came out from the floorboards in the kitchen. The gaps and the uneven floor made it dangerous for Salma to navigate without her chair. The smoke alarm went off every time they cooked, they said. The pipes of the bathroom were exposed and rusty, a feature of all Brimstone flats I had visited. Once the bathroom flooded, they told me, and even maintenance couldn't tell where it was coming from. To deal with the damp left behind by the flooding, the Council managers and maintenance person had left behind a dehumidifier to filter out the excess moisture. Like other residents, they couldn't open the windows more than a couple of inches. The Council officers had told them that windows were restricted to prevent burglaries because they were on the ground floor. Not being able to open the windows fully meant they suffered from poor air circulation, which contributed to mold and mildew in the bathroom—issues many of the residents I spoke to complained about.

The day that I toured their apartment, we had just come from a junior councillor's office hours, which were held in a church a couple of minute's walk back from Brimstone House. We went to a meeting with Joanne, a member of a local housing campaign called Focus E15, to see if we could get information about why Salma and her two daughters were still waiting for accommodation after two years of living at Brimstone House.[7] *During the meeting, we learned that they hadn't yet been processed for their housing suitability assessment, which would allow the Council to begin looking for accommodation. When Joanne asked him how long it would take to house the family, the councillor responded that hypothetically, because there were only three of them and they were all the same gender, it shouldn't be hard to find them suitable accommodation. The councillor added: "But there's no false hope here. There is a duty to be rehoused, but there is no limit to when that will happen—it could be 10 years. I will say if there's a way to house yourself quicker, it may be quicker to house yourself rather than waiting."*

Figure 3. One of the girls uses her foot to show me the gap in the floor between the bathroom and the hallway where she said spiders and cockroaches entered the flat (Carolina Talavera)

As this research will illustrate, the practice of temporary accommodation—effectively a stop-gap measure used by local authorities to manage the overlapping epidemics of housing insecurity and homelessness—sat in the cracks of a diminishing welfare state and a predatory private housing and rental market. In England, temporary accommodation (TA) was the practice of emergency interim sheltering by local governments to satisfy a legal duty of care to homeless households in "priority need".[8] Yet, the number of households in TA had been rising in response to England's growing housing and homeless epidemic.[9]

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[7] Focus E15 were a direct-action housing campaign based in Newham. I will discuss their role and participation in more depth later.

[8] House of Commons Briefing Report on TA: "Local housing authorities in England have a duty to secure accommodation for unintentionally homeless households in priority need under Part 7 of the Housing Act 1996 (as amended)." TA is considered a legal obligation of care. You're legally homeless if, for example, you: have been evicted from your home, are asked to leave by friends or family, must leave due to domestic abuse or violence, cannot stay due to fire or flood, are sleeping rough or on the streets, live somewhere that is not reasonable for you to stay. Nevertheless, the council does not have to provide housing if you're only *threatened* with homelessness.

[9] According to a parliamentary research briefing published in 2023, households in temporary accommodation peaked in 2004, but have risen every year since 2011 (Wilson and Barton 2023). A report from Crisis, the leading homeless charity, suggests that homelessness is now more "closely associated with ejection from the private rental sector" than from mortgage repossession or social sector arrears (Fitzpatrick et al. 2018).

Salma, like the other residents I discuss in this dissertation, lived in Brimstone House, short-term housing not designed for long-term habitation that was owned and managed by Newham Council, who managed the majority of public services in Newham, one of London's 32 Boroughs. Residents of Brimstone were temporarily housed until Newham Council called them in for a "suitability assessment", a thorough assessment of finances, welfare benefits, debts, disability or medical needs, and dependents, which was then used to determine and find appropriate housing. Salma and her two daughters, like others, had spent two years not knowing when they would be housed but believing permanent accommodation would come any day. Without regulations around the limits of "temporary", households like Salma's waited for years for housing offers—generally one-year leases in the private rental sector brokered by Newham's housing office. As the junior councillor said, it would be a long time before the family was offered suitable accommodation. Thus, despite eventually being called in for the assessment, *when* they would be offered accommodation was still uncertain. Even after being offered accommodation, they would most likely be provided a year-long lease in the private sector secured through the Council with no guarantee that they would be able to renew it. They would, therefore, likely find themselves back in emergency accommodation if they were unable to secure a lease in the private sector on their own.

The alternative that had been recommended by the junior councillor to Salma and her family, to find their own housing rather than wait for the Council, didn't reflect the reality that finding affordable *and* appropriate accommodation was a myth—especially for families who depended on welfare support to supplement rent costs. TA was not free accommodation, and as I describe later, even welfare coverage through housing benefits was sometimes not enough to supplement the cost of renting in the private rental sector. For Salma and many others, between the limitations of an obliterated social housing stock and London's rocketing rental housing market, waiting for the Council to find them appropriate accommodation was an inevitable reality of housing insecurity today. These intersecting pressures were felt acutely in the rapidly gentrifying Borough of Newham, where I primarily conducted my research.[10] In 2019, it was reported that London's temporary accommodation crisis had risen 50% in the last five years—with 58,560 households in TA by the end of 2018.[11] The Borough of Newham, which is situated to the east of the city center and north of the Thames, had the highest rates of households living in temporary accommodation of all London Boroughs, 49 per 1,000.[12] It also had the highest rates of eviction in London, at 3.4 per 1,000 households annually, compared to 1.7 for London overall.[13] Significantly, at the conclusion of my research, over 24,000 households in TA had been relocated to another local authority district, in and outside of London.[14] Therefore, the qualifying homeless residents that I discuss in this dissertation were caught between the endless

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[10] According to data from the Greater London Authority, Newham was 72.6% BAME (Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic).
https://iao.blob.core.windows.net/publications/reports/f11c199d237c4cb79bca5427bfe8511d/E09000025.html

[11] Committee, Housing. 2019. "Living in Limbo: London's Temporary Accommodation Crisis."

[12] According to Trust for London, for London overall the figures of housing in temporary commendations was 17 per 1,000 in London overall.

[13] London Poverty Profile 2021, Trust for London

[14] DCLG [Department for Communities and Local Government] (2016). Statutory homelessness, October–December 2021, detailed local authority level responses. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistical-data-sets/live-tables-on-homelessness

waiting, insecurity of temporary accommodation, recurrent geographic displacement, and an unregulated and uncertain private rental market.[15]

As I reflected in the prologue, Grenfell necessitated a different ethnographic attention, an alternative apprehension of how vulnerability was differentially distributed in the context of housing. As Judith Butler writes in *Frames of War* (2010), the frame is a "politically saturated" visual field through which we apprehend, or come to sense, that some lives matter more than others. This lens is, however, always haunted by the "animated debris" of what was excluded. Therefore, Butler asks: "How do we understand the frame as itself part of the materiality of war and the efficacy of its violence?" (xiii). In other words, interrogating the frames through which we understand our contemporary condition may allow us to see things differently, to reveal the violence of the frame that positions everyday neglect as the inevitable casualties of our contemporary condition.

Central to understanding this temporary condition is an examination of the temporalities of waiting—the experiential, the embodied, the structural, and its refusals. By centering temporality in this way, this dissertation traces the ways in which experiences and encounters with space, the bureaucratic management of housing, and political challenges reveal that the temporality of housing insecurity is fraught with multiple, overlapping, and contested meanings. I examine the implications of these cyclical and unending temporalities of waiting as they relate to housing and homelessness, and as they closely parallel and sometimes directly intersect with other populations for whom the promises of security are neglected, deferred, disinvested—from migrants and refugees, to those detained in refugee camps, detention centers, and other carceral systems.

Specifically, this dissertation draws on ethnographic research on women living in temporary accommodation, caught in the precarious cycles of waiting and transience characteristic of London's housing crisis. I argue that the term "temporary" is a transient state in repeating cycles of waiting and stagnation, and therefore, elides the uncertainty of a broader housing crisis erasing what is, in fact, an endemic condition of contemporary life for many. In this cycle, resolution in the form of housing security was repeatedly deferred. As I argue throughout this dissertation, the punctuated temporalities of temporariness and waiting constitute the cyclicality of housing insecurity, that renders diffuse these practices of neglect for London's vulnerable housing-insecure populations. Its treatments are merely temporary measures in a landscape of proliferating systemic cracks—that manage rather than eradicate the problem.

As the prologue suggested, I take up cracks as an analytic foundation as well as an ethnographic orientation. First, I consider the fractures of competing temporalities of housing insecurity. By mapping the experiences of families in temporary accommodation, this dissertation considers how constructions of temporary are imbued with power, rendering them seemingly transparent and even humanistic—except for those caught in them. Second, I take up cracks as a lens through which to register the fluctuating pressure points of bodies and buildings in endemic insecurity, and to insecurity in its variegated forms (stitches, stairs, faulty gas meters, mold, damp, financial audits, housing meetings). Third, I reflect on how the embodied

[15] Many of the individuals and families I met living in TA had experienced a range of different emergency and temporary accommodation formats, including bed and breakfasts (B&B), hostels, night paid, self-contained accommodation, local authority housing/housing association stock, and private rental sector accommodation. Many people in TA recounted being moved through various types of temporary accommodation, sometimes across multiple homeless applications. This often didn't even account for informal housing arrangements.

experiences of people living in temporary accommodation served as the basis from which people could challenge their conditions and the entrenched institutional discourses around housing and welfare.

As I will discuss further, by focusing on the individual complaints, I am interested in the formulation of their refusals. In particular, I focus on how the experiences of women dealing with housing insecurity and urban displacement endured, negotiated, and challenged their treatment in collaboration with local housing activists. As residents insisted, their living conditions were unbearable, leaving visible and invisible traces on their bodies, injuries that were not considered "urgent" or severe enough to demand immediate attention. The spaces in which they were placed therefore were considered "liveable" enough for people to continue waiting in the space (and time) of temporary accommodation. Nevertheless, the conditions of their waiting (i.e. the space, the time, the housing system), produced chronic mental and physical distress that were difficult to capture and resolve within the bureaucratic management of homelessness. When these women demanded safe and permanent housing, they were told that "your time is coming", but this "time" was endlessly deferred.

But as I try to make clear, this dissertation is also concerned with the claims of injury that struggle to achieve recognition. As Elizabeth Povinelli reflects, rather than assess "whether this or that person didn't care about the vulnerable or that this or that social welfare program was or was not a failure" we need to instead ask "what are the measures of failures, the arts of failure, such that people believe and experience cultural recognition and social welfare as failures" (Povinelli 2011: 23). Within these terms, failure "is a socially mediated term for assessing the social world" (23). Therefore, rather than perceive these struggles as successes or failures, I understand the deferral for housing security as generating attendant social and political struggles that reveal the forms of abandonment people experience in systems of housing. *How did the families discussed in this dissertation understand and locate the failures of the Council?* Through these struggles, I attend to the registers in which women came to articulate their individual experiences in the form of political and legal challenges against the management of housing and the temporal/spatial conditions of their waiting. Insights from these legal and political struggles, formed with support from local housing activists, particularly a direct-action campaign called Focus E15, informed my insights into emergent and dynamic responses to housing insecurity that challenged pervasive discourses embedded in neoliberal welfare logics.

The "Homeless" Problem

In its focus on temporary accommodation as a form of sheltering—nested in the cracks created by a larger housing system—this dissertation also sits at the nexus of research related to housing and homelessness by bridging contributions within medical anthropology and studies of housing.[16] Recent anthropological approaches to housing have examined contemporary processes

[16] Studies of homemaking and the house occupied early anthropological studies, in which the house was merely understood to be the site of much symbolic production around kinship Pierre Bourdieu's (1970) study of the Kabyle House marked an shift away from the house as simply the vessel for social relations, but reflective of social cosmology. Whereas, Janet Carsten's (1997) study of Malay domestic life studied the ways in which the spatial and material organization of the home facilities and mediates the relations of kinship. For feminist anthropologists, the home has also provided a generative conceptual space to map gendered divisions of power (Abu-Lughod 1990). The home, therefore, has in anthropology provided a way to think both about broader social relations but also how they are reproduced in the intimate spaces of the domestic.

of dispossession and displacement through processes of accumulation (Harvey 2003, 2012), infrastructures of water (Gaber 2021), chronic experiences of displacement post-disaster (Adams 2013), and moral relations of debt after the 2008 housing crisis (Stout 2019). Moreover, anthropologists studying state infrastructure projects have reflected on the rhythms of life in the aftermaths of the unrealized promises of modernist state housing projects (Schwenkel 2015) and emergent socialities in contexts of urban renewal (Fennell 2015). Using different frameworks, medical anthropologists have also provided important contributions toward understanding homelessness and its "co-morbidities" (K. R. Knight 2015) to understand how experiences of housing insecurity intersect with mental health and addiction (Glasser and Bridgman 1999; Bourgois 2003; Desjarlais 2011; O'Neill 2014). This study diverges from these approaches by bridging the epistemological divide between housing and homelessness. As I try to show in this dissertation, being sheltered but homeless speaks to the need to account for the ontological and material need for security that is more than just temporary. Therefore, in the following sections, I discuss the stakes when scholarly research operates on the grounds that housing and homelessness are epistemologically and ontologically distinct categories. Through these discussions, I argue that adopting frames that better account for the patchiness or cracks proliferating across and between material and immaterial infrastructures might lend themselves to understanding systems of housing that better account for fluctuating and dynamic processes of housing deprivation. For anthropology, to understand contemporary processes of housing more effectively as a discipline we must push beyond these neat distinctions towards analyses that critically examine the logics and ideological presumptions that make possible their ontological divisions. Moreover, systems of housing are imbricated across other systemic problems of capitalism and society, from climate devastation to the ongoing afterlives of racial capitalism—therefore we need conceptual tools that more effectively account for the fluidity and complexity under contemporary arrangements of power in late stage capitalism. As Ryan Cecil Jobson writes in his important reflection "The Case for Letting Anthropology Burn" (2020), the material and existential threats of climate change and disaster demand that anthropology must abandon its "liberal suppositions" so that we might "speak between and across the ethnographic locations toward the urgent demands of the present" (263). This task requires a "patchy" method (Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt 2019) that resists easy fixes. As Tsing, Matthews, Bubandt argue "modular" simplifications can invite "feral proliferations" that demand a different anthropological method: "The multidimensional crises of our times call for an anthropology, we propose, that takes landscapes as its starting point and that attunes itself to the structural synchronicities between ecology, capital, and the human and more-than-human histories through which uneven landscapes are made and remade" (S186).

Unsettling

While this project focuses on an experience of homelessness, terms such as "the poor" and "the homeless" risk being limited to essentialized sociological categories through which their groupings are reduced to a binary set of reciprocal and moral relations. Indeed, these categories designate a set of relations that distinguishes some as recipients of aid and welfare on the one hand, and the rest of the population responsible for the charitable donations and taxes that support them. As Sociologist Craig Willse writes in *The Value of Homelessness* (2015), the

constraints and demands of research inevitably make defining the limits of what constitutes "homelessness" difficult, but problems are particularly apparent when these "constraints become naturalized" (57). In other words, conceptual boundaries around the category pose multiple problems. Terms such as "homeless" have been reduced to pathologized discourses, logics and practices that delimit it as a bounded and knowable category, designating it "as a special domain of expertise and intervention" (Knight 2015: 57). For example, Kelly Knight demonstrates in her book *addicted.pregnant.poor* (2015), how epidemiological studies have failed to account for the health impacts of different types of housing. As a result, the label of "homeless" has been varyingly deployed, sometimes meaning persons living on the street[17] or in public shelters but also people living in daily rent hotels. In other studies, people living in shelters or transitional living spaces have been labeled as "housed". These conceptual categories, therefore, occlude more inclusive definitions of what Willse has referred to as housing deprivation to account for the "active taking away of shelter, as the social making of house-less lives" (2). [18] As I discuss in the following section, the diverse range of experiences under what has been called "homelessness" suggests the need to consider analytic frames that widen our lenses, and can account for dynamic, fluctuating, and chronic experiences of housing as they are enmeshed in intersecting structures of power.

Yet, a study of housing insecurity nevertheless posits other ethical considerations, especially for the social sciences. Knight reflects that through ethnographic methods such populations as the "urban poor" risk becoming "ethnographically consumed" (23), objects through which ethnographic knowledge production reasserts the epistemological categories of homeless and the poor.[19] These are knowable categories that can be stabilized, counted, and generated as facts in which health and housing policies are justified (9).[20] Individualizing the frames through which we apprehend processes of housing insecurity can risk producing an anti-politics (Ferguson 1990) that, rather than addressing the problem, merely serves to maintain the status quo.

Alternatively, housing and housing deprivation might be thought together: "the systemic nature of housing insecurity is masked by the objectifying work of the term 'the homeless'" (Willse 2). Therefore, beyond attempting to understand one isolated facet of homelessness, this dissertation aims to think about the ways in which housing and homelessness are intertwined elements in *processes* of housing. Understood in this way, homelessness is not to live outside of housing, as Willse writes, but rather to be made "especially vulnerable in this system of housing, to be exposed to the worst of its violence" (2). As a term, "housing deprivation"—as the conditional and dynamic processes of housing—more productively facilitates the reframing of methodological and epistemological approaches that accounts for the connections across and between these processes. This framing provides a more nuanced approach to processes of housing that exceed punctuated moments of "crises" and that can account for the ebbs and flows of insecurity as endemic conditions.

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[17] Ironically, my grammar software suggested revising the wording of "living on the street" with "who are homeless" for improved clarity.

[18] Willse uses the term housing deprivation to more broadly to encapsulate house-ing processes as systemically produced, and a dynamic and fluctuating experience.

[19] Willse outlines a similar discussion of sociology and the social sciences' role in this epistemological production.

[20] To illustrate this point, Knight writes that categories such as addicted and pregnant are assigned to mobilize social, clinical and legal interventions, but as knowable biopolitical categories they offer restrictive understandings of the particular and complex daily lives of the women she writes about.

More than that, *how do other aspects of precarious life become intricately and impossibly intertwined with housing insecurity*? While examining the dynamic and unpredictable relationship between processes of housing, Knight's work offers a helpful reminder that while categories such as "homeless" or "poor" may offer restrictive understandings, ignoring them risks obscuring the way they are institutionally deployed or constrain how these life within these terms are experienced.

Homelessness and House-ing

Temporary accommodation sits in the fractures of an increasingly inhospitable systems of housing—one that is nested in the cracks of a predatory private rental market, the myth of home ownership, and the decline of social housing.[21] Its "co-morbitities" are too many to name, and they are complexly diverse and entangled with other institutions, such as immigration, detention, incarceration, welfare, health care, and social services. Housing and home are also sites of an unfolding kinship and care dynamics (Han 2012). For this reason, housing in this dissertation moves between being the ethnographic object and the "scene" in which other encounters take place—creating a conceptual challenge and opening. For example, at the same time that they describe being fed up with the uncertainty of their housing situation, Salma's daughters excite at showing me their ingenious solution to taps (or faucets) that only put out water in extremes. Nevertheless, they expressed their frustration with the Council's temporary solutions. Their complaints about the dehumidifier left after their flat was flooded and the inappropriately sized accessibility chair for the bath were, for them, evidence of the Council's absence. They were simultaneously critiques of the Council as much as they were examples of how they had to attune and adapt to the particularities of their housing situation. These were the ways in which lives uncomfortably inhabited the cracks of a housing system that prioritized combating "rooflessness" at the expense of other experiences, judged as less urgent. The bath chairs, overcrowding, privacy, warped floorboards, mold, and damp—these were symptoms of a rampant but generalized condition. Dispersed across space, time and bodies, these symptoms evade accountability and causal explanations (Adams 2023).

Nevertheless, one consistent way in which the women experienced and articulated their experiences of being housing insecure was through their medical and embodied conditions. The women I discuss in this dissertation understood the conditions of their housing as detrimental to their health—framing their refusals to be caught in the cyclical traps of housing insecurity as a health demand. Yet, one of the haunting figures in this dissertation is the figure of the medical authority. In letters submitted by residents demanding reviews of their offers of accommodation, or challenging the temporary nature of the offer they would list medical conditions and reference doctor recommendations to demand that they be provided with decent and secure accommodation. As one letter stated: "Dr. ________, clearly mentioned that having a fixed address will allow a smooth running of my treatment. Dr. _______ also recommended the same." Some residents argued that being displaced out of the Borough would create dangerous interruptions to their care, while in other cases medical recommendations were used to insist that their current housing was exacerbating ongoing conditions, or creating new problems. Nevertheless, as will become clear throughout this dissertation, these recommendations did not

[21] Social housing (or council housing) are forms of public housing, owned and managed by local authorities intended to provide low-rent, uncrowded housing.

carry enough weight to immediately address a homeless residents' situation—resulting in neither more suitable *or* more secure housing.

This attempt to medicalize housing, and its apparent inefficacy is notably different from discussions in medical anthropology where medicalization can generate attendant politics of care. As these studies make clear, care is political—and can be understood as a socially mediated set of logics, discourses, and practices. Adriana Petryna (2013) illustrates that in post-Chernobyl Ukraine, damaged biology was used to make claims to health and social support on the state, demonstrating a form of "biological citizenship". As Charles Briggs and Clara Mantini-Briggs (2003) demonstrate, citizenship can also be used to justify exclusion and differential access to care through the politicization and policing of discourses of body, health and illness. Miriam Tickin (2011) and Didier Fassin (2011) argue that in humanitarian practices and discourses, the body had become the vehicle through which claims to asylum—and to a common universal humanity—become mediated by medical expertise and verification. As Didier Fassin writes, in the contexts of humanitarian care, the body had become "that which bears witness to the truth" and the vehicle from which people must "demonstrate their sickness or suffering" to become recipients of aid or charity (113). Fassin and Ticktin, both writing in the context of France, discuss how the "the illness clause" provided a humanitarian exception to immigration that prioritized exceptional forms of violence and suffering. As Fassin writes, authenticity of violence and suffering was verified and legitimized through medical expertise: "Scars, mostly physical but also increasingly psychic, become the tangible sign that torture has indeed taken place, that violence has been perpetrated" (113). Within a humanitarian ethics, suffering was universally recognizable on the body or mind, and therefore created a clear moral mandate.

Yet, what is apprehended and legitimized as a kind of suffering, or what is morally mandated, is not universal but is, in fact, embedded in hierarchies of morally legitimate suffering. Indeed, as Seth Holmes and Heidi Castañeda (2016) reflect on the refugee crisis in Germany, discursive representations of displacement can similarly produce hierarchies of deservingness that lend moral legitimacy to some forms of migration over others. Therefore, the morally legitimate suffering body is both "exceptional and deeply contextual" (4). In other words, the normalized conditions of suffering and violence are rendered disqualified within this regime of care while "unusual pathologies" are pathways to political recognition—"they become means to papers" (4). Within these structures of recognition, medical expertise is revealed to be conscripted into an anti-politics of care, verifying morally legitimate forms of injury that reproduce and reconfigure inequalities rather than dismantling them. As Sam Dubal (2018) argues, the concept of universal humanity is historically situated in racist legacies of colonialism, therefore the deployment of seemingly neutral humanist discourses can obscure its embedded ontological inequalities. As Dubal writes: "Humanity is not a neutral or non-ideological term" (2018, 12).

In the context of homelessness, as I describe in this dissertation, I was struck by the apparent inefficacy of medical expertise and letters. Yet, they were never completely absent. While it appeared in discussions with housing officers and with elected councillors, medical expertise nevertheless, would apparently fall back into the background of housing decisions—one data point amongst many others. While discussing this problem with health professionals, some recognized that the medical letter of support in housing cases was ineffective and a "waste of time". Of the various health professionals I spoke to, many referred to the medical letter of support for housing decisions as time-consuming and "useless"—fully aware that they had little impact. One practicing NHS physician, working in the neighboring Borough of Tower Hamlets,

said that if things "got really really bad" she would write a letter to the councillor for housing on behalf of a patient. Nonetheless, she reflected, while she might receive a generic reply, her letter would have little impact, because fundamentally there just wasn't "sufficient accommodation to house everybody that needs to be housed". While she had many patients that came to see her with issues of asthma, skin allergies, respiratory problems, and mental health issues, exacerbated by bad housing situations, there was only so much she could do in a fifteen-minute appointment: "why open that can of worms?" On the other hand, Joanne, a member of Focus E15 and NHS pediatric doctor, had observed that increasingly clinical encounters required responding to housing problems as patients' "idioms of distress" (Nichter 1981, 2010):

> Letters with the hope that the powerfulness of saying you're a pediatric doctor will give more weight to their situation. I mean, all of these things are individual attempts, aren't they, to make something a bit better? But I do think it does help people to have a letter from doctors to say that it's impacting on their health and welfare.
>
> Someone I work with the other day said: "why don't we have a template?". And it made me feel really awful because actually you can't have a template. You can't have something where you just fill in the gaps about every person who says needs a housing letter. Because that would just be throwing in the bin. Do you know what I mean? You actually have to understand what people are going through. Housing letter template… [she shakes her head].

Nevertheless, the housing letter, whether motivated by hope or obligation, played a minor or insignificant role in requests for Council support. What most health professionals that I spoke to agree on, was that actions needed to be addressed at the structural level, through political organizing.

Therefore, while the figure of the medical doctor played a limited role as a reference point in people's demands for more suitable or long-term accommodation, they nevertheless were still present. Indeed, the women that I write about in this dissertation felt compelled, unsolicited, to raise their medical issues, physical and mental, as an imperative for why they needed decent *and* secure accommodation. Health and housing switched back and forth in their refusals to accept anything other than secure and decent accommodation. This dissertation, therefore, reflects on the ways in which these interlinked infrastructures and experiences were articulated by women living in insecure housing. In this way, I understand housing as both analytic object and scene, moving between foreground and background, but nevertheless interconnected in the political and existential demands that they were making.

This dissertation explicitly moves between these scales and foci. For some, housing insecurity presented itself as the uncertainty of where they would be living next, the threat of eviction, or the feeling of being imprisoned. For others, it was untreated respiratory conditions or how they were going to get out of the bathtub on their own. All could be considered aspects of insecure or unsuitable housing, but, nevertheless, they fall out of the institutional frames of what constituted housing insecurity. Moving towards processes of "house-ing" might better encapsulate the diverse ways in which housing deprivation manifests, thereby moving between the cracks in the cladding to cracks in the systems of housing. This framing draws on the concept "house-ing" coined by João Biehl and Federico Neiburg in their introduction to their series *Oikography* (2021). Biehl and Nieburg propose an analytic that rethinks housing and home as

"stable" ethnographic objects in favor of examining the processes of "house-ing" that are dynamic and "modulated by tensions between stability and instability, borders and fluxes, stillness and movement" (541). Ethnography, they suggest, can provide insights into the "plasticity and relationality of the house across space-time" (540), as processes that are constantly changing and incomplete. Therefore, this dissertation builds on this conceptual re-imagining to examine housing insecurity as more than just being without a roof, or a limited episode of housing insecurity, but as a relational process between spaces, time, and people. These are dynamic and precarious arrangements that can generate new human-spatial living arrangements, produce experiences of ontological destabilization, or, as Salma and her daughters showed me, be both at the same time.

Precarity, Austerity and Cracks

This project is based on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork undertaken between 2018-2020. While the reflections in Grenfell's aftermath provided an ethnographic opening, the frameworks I have employed in this dissertation can be traced back to the 2012 London Olympics as part of a different research project in which I explored the compounding effects of austerity policies and increased policing of sex work in the lead-up to the Olympic games. While conducting research with commercial sex workers (CSWs) and sex worker activists in London, I began to observe that heightened policing and raids of brothels were predominantly directed in high-end areas in central London. While increased police raids were justified under intersecting rhetoric of immigration control and a carceral feminist politics of saving victims (Bernstein 2010), sex work activists highlighted the ways in which these attacks put CSWs, an already vulnerable population, further in danger by forcing them to work outdoors or alone. Activists challenged that police raids were a blatant attempt to "clean up" the city for tourism and regeneration efforts in London's city center.[22]

Through this research, I observed that the intersecting problems that CSWs were experiencing reflected broader ongoing structural transformations in the UK. While the nation's politicians were introducing austerity reforms that would hit poor and vulnerable populations the hardest, they were simultaneously increasing funding to the police to address this 'humanitarian' crisis of labor trafficking and sexual exploitation. I understood these shifts, the increased policing of sex workers and simultaneously cutting funding to the public sector, as symptomatic of a broader shift away from investment in social welfare and the public safety net, towards policing. Understood more generally, austerity, housing, policing, and regeneration were compounding the social and economic burden of London's most vulnerable populations.

Cuts, Cuts, Cuts

During preliminary fieldwork, as a volunteer at foodbanks across London, I observed the particularities of the growing wealth gap. At foodbanks, I learned how austerity was taking form

[22] Regeneration, according to geographer Paul Watt (2021), refers "to an urban policy involving spatially targeted reinvestment in and revitalisation of physically deteriorating, economically under-resourced and socially deprived areas" (1). As Watt writes, regeneration policies and projects have also targeted at deteriorating social housing estates with the aim of reinvesting in the built environment through refurbishments (such as Grenfell) and demolitions, and revitalizing social and economic life.

in everyday life, how emergency food parcels were helping alleviate the expected and unanticipated rhythms of scarcity—from arrears, evictions, sanctions, unemployment, to changes in household finances. Media outlets reported on the steady rise in food banks, where Britain's major food bank network, the Trussel Trust, reported that in 2015-16 it had fed over 1 million people.[23] The charity said that in 2013 it had seen a significant rise in numbers with the roll out of welfare reforms—resulting in nearly triple the numbers it had seen in 2011-12. These trends seemingly correlated with changes to the welfare system.

Thus, the following sections will outline some of the specific political changes to the welfare system; I illustrate the specific and punitive reforms that affected England's welfare claimants. Welfare reforms under austerity, more than introducing economic changes to the social insurance system, entrenched the already-existing perceived social problem of the failed liberal subject—"a poverty of aspiration" and "intergenerational cultures of worklessness" (Tyler 2013).[24] As I will outline, these deep-rooted pathologies of the poor set the foundations for welfare reforms that aimed to incentivize labor and punish dependency. My aim in outlining these changes is to illustrate how delimiting a discussion to specific housing-related reforms would obscure the complex ways in which broader and socio-political changes affected people in indirect and direct ways.

Big Society

In 2010, the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition government under Prime Minister David Cameron and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg committed to tougher austerity measures, making cuts to the £150 billion pound national budget deficit their number one priority.[25] Under these changes, specifically Cameron's "Big Society" agenda, severely impacted welfare reforms and housing more broadly. For one, Cameron's "Big Society" agenda pushed for the decentralization of power by investing discretionary powers back to local authorities as a cost-saving measure. Through this agenda, the coalition government introduced a series of reforms to public service provision and spending that gave local authorities more discretionary powers and less money.[26] As a result of these reforms, the biggest battles have been waged on the "welfare state" in the form of reductions to public sector (welfare) spending and to local government budgets.

In the decade that followed Cameron's "Big Society" plan, austerity measures, such as the 2012 Welfare Reform Act, radically altered the social fabric of the United Kingdom through targeted reforms to the benefits system. These changes, as I will outline below, are indicative of an ideological reorganization that heightened already pervasive narratives of underserving versus

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[23] https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/apr/15/reliance-food-banks-new-normal-trussell-trust-charity

[24] Just as in the U.S., there exists powerful stereotypes of Britain's welfare "cheats" or "scrounger".

[25] In the United Kingdom, discourses around public spending have flipped back and forth between investing spending in public services in the 1950s, concerns with overspending in the 1960s, and Margaret Thatcher's famous "rolling back the state" in the 1970s. Under Thatcher's government, Britain saw radical transformations in the welfare state including the infamous Right to Buy program which allowed social housing tenants to buy their homes (Williams 2019). By the 1990s, under "New Labour" Prime Minister Tony Blair, public spending increased by 4.4%, compared to the .7% of previous Conservative governments, with investments in schools and the National Health Service (NHS) reaching record levels.

[26] Meaning, that while local authorities received less money, they nevertheless have been given more discretionary power to determine where to allocate that money in the budget.

deserving subjects. One of the more controversial reforms involved a radical overhaul of the legacy benefits system, which was replaced by Universal Credit (UC), a new means-tested system that merged six "working-age" benefits programs into a single payment.[27] The new system claimed to simplify the process while also strengthening "work incentives". Under the new system, early reports suggested that claimants received less financial support than under the legacy system, with variably unpredictable amounts dispersed week to week.[28] Moreover, during its implementation, claimants on the new system waited five weeks for their first payment, often forcing them into debt. The Trussel Trust reported that 12 months after the roll-out of Universal Credit was introduced in an area, food banks saw a 52% increase in demand.[29]

In addition to this systemic overhaul, targeted sanctions and taxes were introduced to reduce the perceived "exploitation" of the benefits system. For example, the 2012 Welfare Act introduced the controversial "bedroom tax" (also known as "under occupancy charge" or "spare room subsidy") intended both to free-up housing and introduce cuts to housing benefits. Under this reform, tenants living in Council housing with spare bedrooms had their housing benefits cut by 14% (1 spare bedroom) and 25% (2 or more spare bedrooms).[30] This cap affected both Council tenants and tenants in the private sector. Kirsteen Paton and Vicki Cooper (2017) suggest that the "benefit cap" under the Welfare Reform Act 2012 could more appropriately be renamed the "rent cap", as this benefit was primarily distributed through housing benefits and therefore reduced a household's rent benefit coverage. It was estimated that one in three recipients of housing benefit were in the private rental sector and that around £9 billion pounds were going directly to private landlords in the private rented sector.[31]

These changes were compounded by the 2016 Welfare Reform and Work Act, which introduced a benefit cap that reduced household benefits from £26,000 to £23,000 for families.[32] Other changes included limiting the child tax credit to only two children per family, freezes on social security benefits, and tax credits for some "working age" benefits (including housing benefit); these hit already struggling households hard. For those seeking disability-related benefits, individuals were required to take "work capability assessments" (a points-based test) to assess whether people were "fraudulently claiming benefits when they are 'fit to work'" (Tyler 2013: 208). As these changes should illustrate, the roll out of UC and new sanctions altered welfare eligibility and distribution, in which an "increasingly liberalized model of social rights" made benefits contingent on an individual's engagement with the work force, "or one's status as

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[27] Child Tax Credit, Employment and Support Allowance, Housing Benefit, Income-Based Jobseeker's Allowance, Income Support and Working Tax Credit.

[28] https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/universal-credit-and-foodbank-use/#:~:text=When%20Universal%20Credit%20goes%20live,for%203%20months%20or%20less.

[29] https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/research-advocacy/universal-credit-and-foodbank-use/#:~:text=When%20Universal%20Credit%20goes%20live,for%203%20months%20or%20less.

[30] With a limited social housing stock, many social housing tenants who faced these sanctions were forced to make a decision between downsizing into the private rental market and enduring financial precarity or staying in their social rented homes. Those that stayed also endured financial precarity; those unable to cover for their benefit reduction fell into arrears and faced eviction. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), responsible for welfare and pensions, argued that "the policy had been implemented to bring housing benefit claims in the social rented sector in line with private rented sector rates, and to make available larger social housing stock to help reduce the number of households living in overcrowded accommodation".

[31] National Housing Federation https://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/pub.housing.org.uk/Housing_Benefit_and_the_private_rented_sector.pdf

[32] This figure was for Greater London, benefit caps outside of London were lowered to £20,000 per year.

a 'deserving citizen'" (Edmiston 2018, 27).[33] British sociologist Imogen Tyler (2013) traces these ideological shifts to Tony Blair's New Labour government, which reconfigured citizenship on the "axis of work/worklessness"—whereby work offered a route to citizenship and the "protective bosom of the state" (198) while poverty and disadvantage were indicators of a failed liberal subject. To understand this shift, I briefly trace a history of the welfare state's ideological frames and foundations to outline the significance of these moral shifts in welfare politics.

Social Contract

In 2018, Prime Minister Theresa May announced that the "end was in sight", declaring an end to a decade-long period of austerity.[34] "People need to know that austerity is over and that their hard work has paid off." As I will illustrate in the following sections, in England, austerity produced a complete restructuring of economic support networks. Under austerity, reforms signified both transformed economic relations and a moral-ideological shift in the duties and dependencies which undergird the welfare state. As May stated: "There must be no return to the uncontrolled borrowing of the past. No undoing all the progress of the last eight years. No taking Britain back to square one. But the British people need to know that the end is in sight. And our message to them must be this: we get it." The disconnect between the collective "we" in May's speech obfuscated the disproportionate impact of austerity on the UK's most vulnerable. Nevertheless, layered into the "we're all in it together" figuration, May's speech reproduced oversimplified economic metaphors that played a significant social and affective role in austerity: Britain is broke(n); austerity is a necessary evil; like household finances, we all need to tighten our belts to reduce our debt. In these framings, the national economy was compared to household finances: simply cutting expenditures would reduce debt. This oversimplification displaced any examination of failures to regulate the global economy or corporate capitalism; instead, the financial crisis "magically became a public sector problem" (Cooper and Whyte 2017, 7). As Vicki Cooper and David Whyte (2017) argue, through the household finance metaphor, the financial crisis became framed as a collective problem, perpetuating the "myth that *we* created the deficit problem through our own selfish making [sic] or recklessness, that we are all to blame in going along with this 'something for nothing economics'" (7). Framing the deficit as a *collective* moral failure played a central role in both providing the ideological foundations for austerity measures and justifying the reforms I outlined above—transformations that primarily impacted society's most vulnerable populations.

Moreover, May's remarks echo *and* flip the originary principles that undergird the welfare state. In the 1940s before the end of WWII, William Beveridge, social economist and politician, was tasked to chair a committee that would survey and make recommendations on the state of Britain's "social insurance and allied services" (or welfare system). Now referred to simply as "The Beveridge Report", the findings outlined recommendations for a system of

[33] Several single mothers I spoke to reported feeling frustrated and hopeless about this pressure to work, how were they supposed to better themselves to get out of being a welfare recipient if they constantly had to prioritize short-term employment. One woman was told she shouldn't be studying to become a nurse but should instead be looking for work.
[34] https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2018/oct/03/theresa-may-conference-speech-ambasts-labour-as-she-calls-for-tory-unity

national insurance that would become the groundwork for the modern welfare state.[35] In his report, Beveridge was clear that though the social security system he proposed was designed to eradicate "Want", which he identified as one of the "five giants of reconstruction". Nevertheless, neither he nor Britons, he asserted, wanted "a 'Santa Claus' state which appeared to give something for nothing" (cited in Timmins 2001, 57). Indeed, in his report, he stated that citizens should not be "taught" to consider "the State as the dispenser of gifts for which no one needs to pay" (cited in Timmins 57). What Beveridge proposed in his report was a moral and economic obligation—a "cradle to grave" insurance that was conditional on the reciprocal contributions of its citizens through their engagement in the labor force. As Marcel Mauss writes in *The Gift* (2000), the "modern social insurance legislation" emerging in post-war Europe represented a "spontaneous response to this need to forge links with individuals, to take into account the burdens they have to bear, and the varying degrees of material and moral interest that such burden represents" (2000: 86). Yet, as Mauss makes clear, establishing a relation through a reciprocal obligation was as much an economic obligation as a moral one. For this reason, the ideology of the gift embedded in the social welfare contract remains a powerful political myth and deeply-rooted origin narrative in post-war Europe. Within this understanding, May's affective interpolation that "we're all in this together" constitutes a punitive reconfiguration of early welfare state ideology. This reformulation transformed the terms: in which the collective "we" (read: you, the people) must bear the responsibility for "our" (read: your) overdependence on the state. Austerity, in this sense, was more an ideological reframing of this reciprocal relation of social obligation, manifested in the punitive reforms around welfare.

In anthropology, scholars have examined the reconfiguration of these ideals, of obligation and care, in response to the perceived shifting moral, economic, and social fabric in different European contexts (Muehlebach 2012; Davis 2012; Giordano 2014; Holmes and Castaneda 2016; D. M. Knight and Stewart 2016). Andrea Muehlebach discusses these shifting social configurations in terms of emergent ethical forms of citizenship in Italy. In her study, Muehlebach explored how cuts to—and privatization of—social services shifted practices of informal voluntary care into the "intimate space of the 'welfare community' or 'welfare society'" (8). This ethical subject could be understood in relation to emergent practices of citizenship (a relation between state and subject) through which the labor of "unproductive" and dependent populations was transformed through practices of voluntary labor, giving form to new moral and social relations. Building on this more recent ethnographic work in Europe, this dissertation explores how British austerity has spawned new social, economic and political configurations through which socio-political life was altered. I understand austerity as going beyond just economic changes but instead as reflective of broader ideological, social, and affective shifts. *How did wider ideological framings reconfigure moral and economic obligations between the state and its subjects? How are they being challenged*?

As I try to illustrate, these moral reconfigurations around austerity serve as the backdrop through which issues of housing insecurity were manifesting. The ideological shifts outlined above had very real consequences, so beyond documenting these transformations, this dissertation examines their stakes. Reflecting back on May's speech, delivered less than a year after Grenfell, the framing of collective hard work, which called on the sacrifice of individuals for the greater national good, was infused with vague references to wartime solidarity, hard

[35] The report is officially titled "Social Insurance and Allied Services". After their win in the 1945 General Election, the Labour party passed a series of acts such as the National Insurance Act 1946 and the National Health Service Act 1946, that would become what is now known as the modern welfare state.

work, and sacrifice.[36] In this accounting, the hardships of austerity demand collective measures in which differential exposures to precarity are recast as a collective sacrifice for the body politic. *Yet May's figuration also begs the question—what body politic were the people of Grenfell, society's most vulnerable, "sacrificed" for?*

Pressure Points

As an in-take volunteer at the foodbank, I sat and chatted with recipients as they submitted their referral vouchers to the shift leader and then I reviewed with the client how the foodbank worked. After calculating the number of adults and children in their households and confirming allergies and dietary restrictions, I then collected their food parcels and sat down with them to review the contents. Each parcel was packaged in re-used IKEA bags which contained "three days' nutritionally balanced, non-perishable food" calculated for the entire household.[37] *On one certain day, the second person we served was a man of medium height wearing worn clothing and a cap distressed from overuse. He carried an empty backpack that was nearly falling apart; nonetheless, he later used it to pack some of the food parcel contents. While some clients seemed to enjoy the sociality of the foodbank, sitting with clients and volunteers for chats while they waited, this client was quiet and didn't seem interested in socializing. The volunteer I was shadowing asked how he was doing before getting to the formal intake part. We asked whether he required any substitutions. Nothing that needed cooking on a hob, he said, because his oven was broken. While we reviewed his parcel, he told us about his terrible living situation in a privately rented flat. The landlord wasn't doing anything about mold, and he couldn't keep up with his fuel bills because of the new electric meter that was installed. He explained that he suspected that it must've been broken—hence why he wanted only foods he could cook in the microwave—but while he couldn't use the oven he was somehow still being charged for fuel. The faulty fuel meter was creating a vicious cycle of debt, where he struggled with finances as he tried to keep up with payments on the bill. He was grateful for the food parcels to help during those periods.*

[36] This nostalgic image of collective sacrifice during times of hardship could be considered a reinterpretation of post-War Britain's reconstruction ethos. William Beveridge chaired and produced a report titled "Inter-departmental Committee on Social Insurance and Allied Services" which became the building block of Britain's welfare state. In the introduction to the report, Beveridge writes that as the war abolishes and clears the field of all lands marks, creates an opportunity: "A revolutionary moment in the world's history is a time for revolutions, not for patching" (Beveridge 1942, 942:6). The program of services he proposed in the report, based on extensive social surveys of the conditions of life in seven British cities, outlined a program of social insurance that would eradicate the "five giants on the road to reconstruction": Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness.

[37] As Figure 4 demonstrates, these parcels contained precisely calculated measurements of tinned beans, fish, meat, rice or pasta, coffee or tea, cereals, biscuits, and depending on availability, requests could be made for toiletries, sanitary products, pet food, baby food, diapers, cleaning products. https://www.trusselltrust.org/what-we-do/how-foodbanks-work/

Food Allocation Form: One Person

Volunteer:	Voucher No:	Date:

Item	Allocation	Amount given
Cereal	1 small	
Soup (can/packet)	2 standard	
Beans/spaghetti in sauce	2 small	
Tomatoes/pasta sauce	2 small	
Vegetables	2 small	
Meat	2 small	
Or Vegetarian	2 small	
Fish	1 small	
Fruit	2 small	
Rice pudding/custard	1 standard	
Biscuits	1 small packet	
Pasta/rice/noodles	500g	
Tea or coffee	40 bags/small jar	
Long-life juice	1 litre	
Milk UHT	1 litre	

Extra items when available

Sauces	1 packet	
Chocolate	1 small bar	

Client signature to confirm food received:	

Additional requests:

	COMMENTS
Cooking facilities?	
Vegetarian?	
Any other dietary requirements?	
Children's ages?	

ITEM		REQUIRED	ISSUED
Cat/Dog?	Size?		
Washing Powder?			
Washing up liquid?			
Toilet rolls?			
Toiletries	Soap or Shower gel?		
	Deodorant?		
	Toothpaste?		
	Toothbrush?		
	Shampoo?		
	Feminine hygiene?		
	Shaving foam?		
	Razors?		

Figure 4. The Trussel Trust Standard Allocation form used to collect emergency parcels and distribute them to clients. (Trussel Trust)

Foodbank encounters, such as the one I described above, were ordinary and generally uneventful, but they provided me with insights into some of the routine ways people were responding to the unpredictable rhythms of scarcity. Much like Nikki's attention to the cracks in the wall and the tour of Salma's temporary accommodation that opened this dissertation, the faulty fuel meter appeared to me as one of the many "cracks" which came to hold the possibility for an ethnographic attunement and an analytic frame to understand how experiences of precarity "go beyond material scarcity" (Das and Randeria 2015, 53). [38] In this way, this dissertation builds on anthropological and conceptual work on precarity as both a politically-induced condition of insecurity and an ontological condition.[39] Judith Butler refers to this duality, the existential notion of precariousness and political precarity, as linked concepts that open us to think about the differential allocation of vulnerability as a politically-induced condition. Understanding precarity in this embodied and existential sense captures the inherent condition of

[38] Beyond describing the conditions of labor in contemporary life, the term precarity has also provided a framework for understanding how broader economic transformations are marked by the normalization of governing through insecurity (Lorey 2015). Anthropological studies of precarity have contributed to our understanding of how inequality is experienced and distributed in late-stage capitalism (Martinez et al. 2021). Therefore, precarity, conceptually, has been a guiding framework for understanding the endemic conditions of insecurity in late liberalism, and how this prevailing mode of governance in contemporary life has had the effect of altering the relations between peoples and states (Muehlebach 2012; Molé 2012; Bear 2015), social institutions (Kehr 2016), as well as reconfiguring the existential and social conditions of everyday life (Pine 2012; Allison 2013; O'Neill 2014). As Knight and Stewart argue, economic transformations under austerity have produced precarious arrangements that "expose the seams of temporality" in everyday life (D. M. Knight and Stewart 2016, 3).

[39] The term precarity, or precarité, coined by French sociologists in the 1980s, attempted to capture the broad transformation of economic and social life increasingly organized around informal, flexible labor, economic liberalization, globalization, unemployment, social abandonment, and structural adjustment programs.

life as being conditional on the material limits of biological life and our interdependency with others for survival— in which our need for care also makes us vulnerable to injury and violence. This vulnerability, social and ontological, to "failing social and economic networks of support" renders some people "differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler 2009, 25).

I draw on Butler's insistence on the potential of precarity to injure, in its multiple temporalities—the injury to come, the injury already endured, and the ongoing injury—to apprehend vulnerability as the lived condition of precarity across scales, spaces, and temporalities. Where evented moments (Das 2006) or "quasi-events" (Povinelli 2011) that have the quality of not quite happening, but are the scenes everyday life taking place in endemic insecurity, that elide broader structural analyzes or causal explanations. Indeed, attending to precarity, as Anna Tsing (2015) writes, "as an earth-wide condition" allows us to notice the "heterogeneity of space and time". This dissertation similarly aims to map these heterogeneous temporal conditions, as well as their embodied conditions and affects. As a starting point, we might linger on life's "pressure points" (Stewart 2007), of the ebbs and flows of tensions and stresses that accumulate across different spaces, and temporalities. Moving between these pressure points, can attune us to the always-shifting cracks and offer alternative perspectives for how to apprehend the accumulation of injury. These exposures or experiences demand a framework beyond linear causal explanations towards the cyclical, dynamic, and diffuse dispersion of injury as embodied and existential. For this reason, the pressure points signified in the faulty gas meter or a set of stairs, as I discuss in more detail in chapter two, can become ethnographic orientations that enable us to think across scales of space, time, and eventfulness. Indeed, by taking the ethnographic orientation offered by pressure points we might read attunements to the faulty gas meter or the stairs as sites of the "patchy unpredictability" (Tsing, Mathews, and Bubandt 2019) of endemic precarity. This unpredictability is taken up in two different but converging ways. First, as I outline above—the uncertain but anticipated exposures as they manifest in the context of urban displacement, temporary accommodation, and a housing crisis more broadly. In this way, a set of stairs or a broken accessibility bathroom chair point to sites of potential incapacitation.

Second, exposures to uncertainty, anticipated or not, offer "new roadmaps" (Tsing 2015) from which to challenge the ideological reconfiguration of citizenship and the moral obligation of the state. Despite May's affective interpolation that austerity was over and that "our hard work" had paid off (and despite critics claiming that in fact very little had changed), this dissertation focuses on the contested terrain in which these attempts to produce a collective responsibility based on a collective moral failing fall flat. I do so by examining the ways in which women living in temporary accommodation and housing activists deploy their own moral and political complaints that challenge Newham Council's justifications for why it was unable to fulfill its moral and material obligations. Through these emergent alliances, I reflect on how singular experiences were mobilized into political struggles to formulate challenges that placed a moral obligation on the state's duty of care. Many of the women that lived in temporary accommodation, as I discuss later, experienced temporal and ontological disorientation, straddling the promise of future security and the hopelessness of waiting. Yet, their demands attempted to override the weight of stigmas that might label them as "undeserving" by instead insisting to the Council that they were in immediate need of services and were underserving of their circumstances. Therefore, I interpret these demands as a representational tactic. Against widespread stigmatizing narratives that portrayed the welfare recipient, the "failed" liberal subject, as undeserving—their demands refigured the individual claimant as a site of

contestation. Demands to wait were perceived by many of the families I discuss in this dissertation as the Council's failure to fulfill their moral and material duty of care, that is, to provide housing that was both appropriate and secure.

Taking up the conceptual contributions on the conditions of precarity, this dissertation builds on Clara Han's (2018) suggestion that we examine how "vulnerability and politics are interwoven in concrete lives," such that we might move beyond the "privileging of statist discourse on precarity that would see it as simply a sociological category of the 'newly' vulnerable" (340). Indeed, the ethnographic cases discussed in this dissertation illustrate how individuals mobilized their embodied conditions in such a way as to challenge dominant statist discourses that attempted to minimize the singularity of their experiences within the bigger picture of the housing crisis. Therefore, building on Tsing's call to find stories that might guide us in navigating the aftermaths of capitalist ruin, I am less interested in offering reformist solutions to the structural failures of housing infrastructures, solutions or strategies that have the potential to be consumed by the state. Instead, this dissertation is interested in the lessons and insights gained from examining contemporary struggles responding to these reforms and reflecting on how we can extend them further. In this sense, my aim is not prescriptive, instead, I reflect on the productive possibilities embedded in the contradictions of these struggles.

"Labour Council hear us say, Focus mums are here to stay!"

Research with residents of Brimstone House was made possible through my work with Focus E15 (or simply 'Focus'), a woman-led direct-action housing campaign based in Newham.[40] In the following sections, I outline the role Focus E15 had in a housing struggle in Newham as well as reflect on being an activist anthropologist in the field. As I will argue, the research I carried out with residents of Brimstone House could not be separated from my activist engagements with Focus E15; indeed, my positionality as an activist and ethnographer generated unique insights that informed the theoretical foundations of this dissertation. Practically, it also allowed me to be present in certain spaces and times.

Focus E15

In 2013, a group of young "mums" who lived in a supported-living hostel (named Focus E15 at the time) for young homeless people were served eviction notices by East Thames Housing Association after Newham Council cut its funding to the hostel. With its proposed closure, the young mothers were told by Newham Council that because of cuts to housing benefits and the lack of affordable housing in London, they would be rehoused in private-rented accommodation outside of London, in cities such as Birmingham and Manchester. Relocation out of London was increasingly how Councils fulfilled their housing duty to homeless individuals, constrained by the availability of affordable private sector rents and social housing

[40] I have chosen not to anonymize Focus E15, as their priority is to have their efforts publicized as widely as possible. Nevertheless, I have anonymized names of specific campaign members. Brimstone House was also referred to as Victoria Street, by council officers. It was never explained why they were no longer calling it Brimstone House but organizers from Focus E15 suspected that they were trying to move away from any negative publicity the accommodation had received in the past.

shortage.[41] Faced with being moved away from their social networks, the young mothers organized a petition to challenge their forced displacement. While collecting signatures, they encountered organizers from the Revolutionary Communist Group (RCG) campaigning against the recently implemented Bedroom Tax. This encounter led to an unexpected alliance between the RCG organizers and the young working-class mothers. After a year of struggle and persistent demands for Council housing, including a widely publicized occupation of a nearby decanted

Figure 5. A Focus E15 Banner created by artist Andrew Cooper displayed at the weekly stall that reads "Brimstone House: COUNCIL HOUSING FOR ALL THAT NEED IT" (Carolina Talavera)

estate, the Focus E15 mums were offered privately rented tenancies in London by the Council.[42,43] This was considered a partial-victory: while not Council housing, not all of the mothers were forced to leave London. Nevertheless, Focus E15, as this alliance was now called, continued to mobilize on a campaign grounded in demands to end the housing crisis more broadly. Their key campaign slogan, “Social Housing, Not Social Cleansing”, was a challenge to what they perceived to be the intersecting issues of urban displacement and disinvestment of social housing. They continue to advocate in solidarity with local residents through weekly

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[41] “Social housing” is sometimes used interchangeably with “council housing.” While historically this has referred to state-owned housing for working class people, it now also can be used to describe other kinds of ownership-management, including not-for-profit housing associations.

[42] Decanting has been used to refer to the depopulation of a council estate.

[43] On the campaign’s first birthday, September 2014, campaigners occupied an empty block of council apartments in a social housing complex called the Carpenters Estate in Stratford, East London. The occupied units were opened to the public, and they operated as a social center for two weeks, raising awareness of the fact that this estate, in good condition, sat empty—while London’s most marginalized were being forced out of the city due to lack of affordable housing. Gillespie, Hardy and Watt (2018) document the early activist work of Focus E15, including this occupation.

Saturday street stalls and monthly public meetings, in addition to direct actions. [44] The current campaigners, most of the original activists, including one of the original Focus mums, as well as some Brimstone House residents continue to organize around these intersecting issues, sometimes shifting between challenging evictions in the private sector and Council-provided housing, resisting plans to demolish the nearby empty Carpenters Estate, and supporting residents living in Brimstone House. Indeed, by being based in one borough, the campaign has adapted to the always-shifting dynamics of housing insecurity as they have presented in Newham, including turning their attention back to Brimstone House—previously called Focus E15, but renamed when it was purchased by the Council as a short-term emergency accommodation for families.

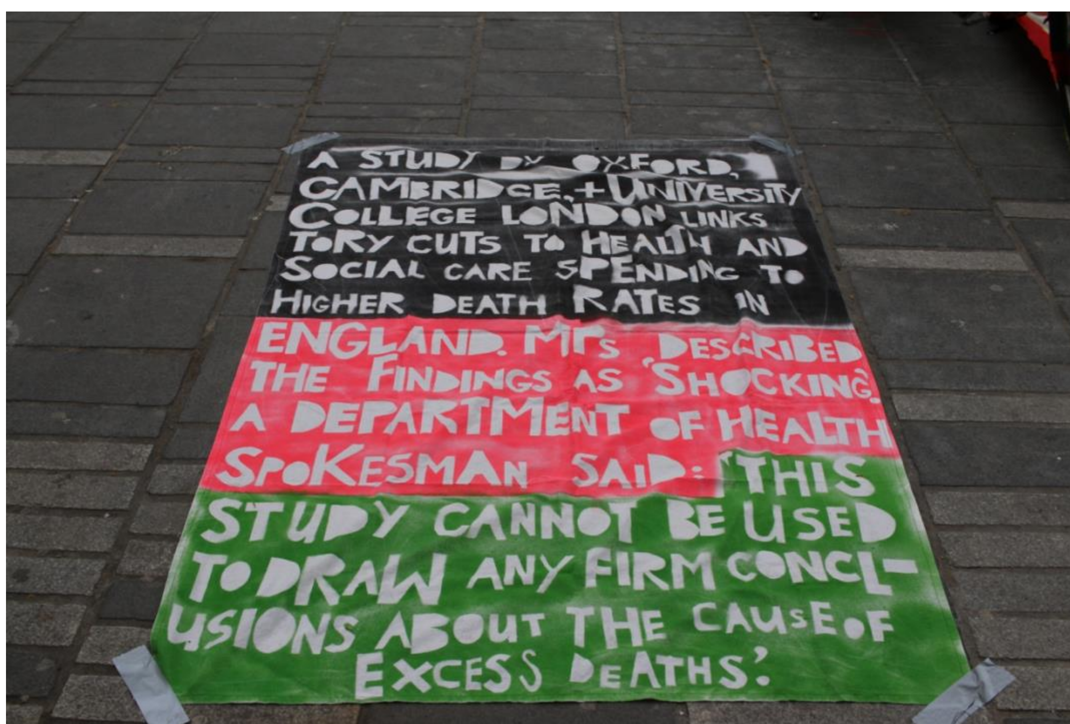

Figure 6. A Focus E15 banner by artist Andrew Cooper: "Study by Oxford, Cambridge, + University College London links Tory cuts to health hand social care spending to higher death rates in England. MPs described the findings as "shocking". A Department of Health spokesman said: 'This study cannot be used to draw any firm conclusions about the cause of excess deaths'. (Carolina Talavera)

[44] The public stall was a weekly meeting-place, rain or shine, for planning, creating, disagreeing, and sometimes just singing and dancing. The weekly stall acted as both a site of agitation around housing and art-activism as well as facilitated informal knowledge exchange with community members, international activists, artists, and academics. It also provided an informal space for providing updates, hearing back from residents who were challenging the Council with Focus' support about new developments, and volunteering to accompany someone to the housing office. The Focus E15 artwork featured in this dissertation was created by Andrew Cooper and Focus E15. https://andrewcooper-unseen.org/portfolio/banners/

Activist Anthropology

At the time of my fieldwork, Focus had primarily been organizing with residents living in temporary accommodation, so my participation in the group stemmed from an interest in learning about the problem as it was manifesting in Newham specifically, offering both ethnographic insights as well as geographic situatedness. Yet, as I became more involved, I began to realize that a study of temporary accommodation at Brimstone House specifically could not exist without a consideration of Focus E15's involvement. Indeed, residents' challenges to their experiences of housing insecurity and the management by the housing office more specifically emerged in collaboration and with support from Focus E15. Women who reached out for support with their cases were enveloped into Focus' network of community mobilization, which, for some, made the housing office and the Council more broadly seem less immovable. On the other hand, challenges also provided concrete examples from which organizers could learn about changes in the system and provided opportunities to agitate, educate, mobilize and make collective demands.

Following the experiences of families living in temporary accommodation as they encountered the housing system gave me intimate knowledge of the Council's management of its "duty of care" for homeless people. These experiences were made possible by my work with Focus E15, which is how I met all the individuals discussed in this dissertation. Conducting participant-observation with individuals seeking homeless assistance from the Council at different stages in their TA struggles gave me a unique perspective into the practical, emotional, and affective experience in this long and uncertain process. Residents collaborating with Focus were often engaged in ongoing challenges with the Council for various reasons, including refusing to be relocated outside of London, rejecting housing offers they deemed inappropriate, and refusing to be moved onto another form of TA. The women that I discuss in this dissertation, each at different stages in their housing experiences and their challenges with the Council, allowed me to reflect on how the Council constructed and delimited its conception of care, in such a way that it could claim to have fulfilled that duty.

As a result, the practices of temporary accommodation involved dealings with the Council in various formats and for different reasons. I conducted participation-observation in housing meetings, suitability assessment appointments, house viewing, councillor office hours, and case reviews and appeals. I also encountered these processes through housing office correspondence shared with me by residents, voice notes, messages and photos via WhatsApp, where residents provided updates as well as informal and impromptu meetings at the weekly Focus stall. In this way, I also came to sense the temporalities through which these cases were experienced—the rhythms of these developments, which fluctuated between anxiety-ridden silences to last-minute appointments. Sometimes we took things into our own hands, showing up at cabinet meetings in the form of silent protests; at other times we just had to wait for word from the Council. Bureaucratic and activist time often collided with each other, requiring a temporal habitus that demanded a readiness to move into action at any moment as well as to be prepared to practice patience as a "political stance…as a collective mode of inhabiting temporality rather than a cultivated virtue" (Procupez 2015, S65).

As an ethnographer and campaign member for Focus E15, my role often also moved beyond mere observation. In housing meetings with Council officers, I asked questions to clarify information that was being conveyed on policy or its practice, but at other times I became more explicitly involved. As a campaign member accompanying residents at the housing office, I

sometimes merely asked questions and provided emotional support, while at other times I demanded that a resident be given more time to decide on a decision or relayed promises made by a senior elected official, including the mayor. These were tactics used to hold a housing officer or an employee of the Council accountable as well as to generally disrupt standard proceedings.

As a campaign member and resident anthropologist, my dual role sometimes produced expected and unexpected friction. At housing meetings, when asked to introduce myself to Council housing officers, my role as Focus E15 campaigner often caused immediate tension, inevitably altering the tone and the direction of the conversation. As Focus was widely known by the Council, our presence in housing meetings and interactions with councillors often provoked responses that varied from passive-aggressive to guarded and resentful. With organizers, my role as a researcher was occasionally seen as a denial of my campaign allegiance. Early on, I experienced this tension once while accompanying another campaigner to a meeting at the housing office with a BH resident. Still unsure about my position in the group, I made a last-minute decision to introduce myself only as a researcher, and not as a campaigner, to the housing officer. This decision stemmed from my own reflection that because someone else was representing the group, disclosing my role as a researcher was sufficient. The campaigner expressed frustration at this when the meeting had ended, questioning why I didn't say I was with Focus. Her words conveyed a sense of betrayal and discomfort: was I a member or not? From that point on, I realized that these roles, though not always aligned, were nevertheless intertwined and inseparable.

My full membership in the group became especially important and valued by organizers as their high-profile status meant that the media, artists, students, and academics often had an extractive relationship with the campaign—conducting interviews or shooting footage but then never being heard from again. Long-term participation demonstrated my political commitment as well as my personal one. Consequently, my long-term presence and commitment fostered trust from some of the longer-term resident activists, which became an important part of my role as activist anthropologist. For example, at the beginning of my time with Focus, one resident activist, Brianna, initially rejected my invitation to interview her for this research. As I would learn through our conversations, Brianna had become disillusioned from intense journalistic attention that had done little to change her situation. I accepted this ethnographic refusal, but in my last week in the field, without asking, she offered to be interviewed. I reflect on this initial refusal, not to pat myself on the back for being rewarded because of my political commitment but rather because my interest as an academic sometimes felt uncomfortably close to the media and state attention the women I worked with endured. Many of the women, especially the young mothers I write about, worried in some way that their actions or emotions might invite unwanted scrutiny or intervention from state agencies such as social services. Therefore, methodologically, I was careful to respect individual limits to disclose—an ethnographic refusal I understood as a practice of "self-possession in the context of dispossession" (Shange 2019, 16).

Thinking with contradictions

Situated in the collaborations between Brimstone House residents and Focus E15 residents, this research focuses on their efforts to understand both the singular and the broader political challenges they made. As a researcher and member of a political campaign, I understand that "social contradictions and political struggles are generative sources of knowledge" (Hale 2008,

23). This can be understood as both a recognition of the tensions that emerge from research that are aligned with social movements as well as the contradictions that emerge out of social struggle. Rather than diminish the insights which this research generated, I attempted to understand how these contradictions provided unique insights.

Figure 7. A Brimstone living room and kitchen for a family of four (Carolina Talavera)

While the conclusions and analytic frames I use in this ethnography emerged out of the experience gained as a member of Focus, it also builds on the foundations of this political struggle and theoretically extends them. This research engages activist anthropology methodologically through my participation in the political struggles of Focus E15 and Brimstone House residents. The research process, and how I experienced and understood the dynamics which I discuss in this dissertation, were inevitably shaped by my role and participation in Focus and are grounded in the frames through which campaigners understood the intersecting issues of housing and homeless. However, the arguments I develop in this dissertation build *on* these insights and their contradictions.

For example, most individuals who sought support from Focus on their housing situations hoped that with the public support and experiential knowledge of the campaigners, their cases would result in swift and positive outcomes. Yet, sometimes residents would accept an offer, despite desiring to challenge it, rejecting the campaigner's advice to continue waiting it out for better outcomes. While as campaigners we did not want to make decisions for residents, sometimes residents chose an option that was more convenient for them and perhaps contrary to the approach of the campaign. Waiting, campaigners would say, rather than allowing the Council to move residents to another location, would allow them to continue placing pressure on the Council so as to publicly draw negative attention and force the Council's hand. Therefore, many who came to Focus seeking support or help chose not to pursue what that could often result in a drawn-out and very public challenge. For example, one family was offered a "non-secure" placement as a transition between temporary housing and something more "secure" (either

permanent Council housing or a private sector tenancy). Unhappy with the space (exposed concrete, no stove) and location, they were told to either take out a loan to cover the costs of furnishing it or risk being evicted from Brimstone. If they accepted, they would be able to challenge the Council's decision after moving in, but moving would nevertheless force them to accrue debt to temporarily make the space habitable. At their emotional limits with two small children in a single-bedroom flat in Brimstone, waiting was no longer an option. Caught between making themselves "intentionally homeless", losing the offered property, and continuing to live in an impossible condition, they accepted the offer rather than wait it out and engage in a public challenge of the situation. In a message sent to me via WhatsApp, Nura, the BH resident, wrote: "Feeling really crap dno if we did the right thing.. its just too much to think about if we didnt take the place.. after leaving at where we are for 2 n half years we are just fed up and just wna move out.."

Figure 8. Mold behind the toilet and on the pipes (Carolina Talavera)

A few days later, when I visited them in their BH flat before they moved, Nura asked me if I thought they had made the right decision. Reluctant to offer any opinions, I responded that I felt that they had decided between two different but bad options. I added that Focus campaigners believed that continuing to live in Brimstone would provide them with leverage to fight the offer, whereas accepting the offer and moving would make challenging the Council more difficult. In the end, it was their decision, but I reassured them that Focus would continue to support them however they wanted to proceed—whether they decided to pursue a review of their situation or not. Nura reflected on her decision to accept the housing offer: "I don't feel good with that decision." As her husband consoled her, she said they had been at Brimstone for over two years and had enough. "I literally can't do it anymore". At the public stall, right after my visit, I updated Joanne, a campaign member, about the couple's decision. She disagreed with their decision, suggesting that they should've refused and fought. "What's a few more months after two and a half years?" Her statement felt surprisingly close to the Council's imperative to wait it

out for a housing offer. I explained that after seeing how cramped and uncomfortable they were in BH, it was clear that they were done and couldn't take living in that situation anymore. She seemed to register my comment, reluctantly quelling the intensity of her initial disagreement, she said "you're right, they couldn't do it any longer". But I sensed that she still disagreed with their decision to accept the offer.

In this moment, the different experiences of waiting came into tension, the waiting and patience necessary in political struggle (Procupez 2015) and the struggle of waiting in conditions that feel "literally" impossible. This was one of many cases that informed my understanding of waiting as both a prolonged condition of harm and a political tool. Yet, these moments were also helpful in elaborating that waiting was also always unequal, revealing the "fault lines" (Hale 2008), between activists and residents, as well as between the residents and the Council. In social struggles like this, the contradictions of waiting as political tactic and waiting as impossible were always shifting. For some, the uncertainty generated from leveraging waiting as a political strategy was not always possible, while for others, as I will discuss further in this dissertation, the impossibility of waiting provoked political struggle. As I hope this dissertation will make clear, while political struggles are not always perfect alignments—forging allegiances across intersecting class, race, and gendered positions can produce obstacles—they can also generate the conditions of possibility for different political and analytic engagements.

Therefore, as much as I can, I stay close to the critiques advanced by the social struggle with which this dissertation is aligned. Yet, I seek to build on and advance these critiques, engaging and thinking with their contradictions and impossibilities. When resident activists demanded to be placed in social housing, they were challenging the *process* through which social housing was allocated and the demand that they "wait their turn"—my intent was to take seriously their demand as both a political claim of deservingness, and a literal material demand for housing security now. As I illustrated earlier, sometimes the immediate need for housing took priority over the political struggle. Yet, taking seriously the double meaning embedded in their demands is an attempt to think beyond the institutional frames of the "housing crisis", which can limit what is perceived to be structurally possible. Taking both meanings seriously attempts to sit with the "impossible demand"—to take the impossibility of a political demand such as "housing for all" as a provocation to move beyond what we imagine is possible. Therefore, I follow Savannah Shange's provocation of an abolitionist anthropology that is accountable to the "disorganized and disorderly excess" that cannot be simplified into "crystal-clear platforms and bold mission statements", that are subsumed into reformist desires in which "wanting to be free becomes wanting to win" (Shange 159). Following this provocation, writing this dissertation has required not being seduced by the political imaginaries of the state *and* at the same time holding some distance between the alternative political imaginaries of Focus and their ideological and material demands ("housing for all that need it"), despite inhabiting them during my research. The importance is moving beyond these ideological boundaries to push towards an analysis of housing insecurity that exceeds the state discourses of deserving or underserving, and the challenge that housing should be provided for all that "need" it, which oversimplifies and reifies the epistemological divisions between housed and unhoused. In other words, I sit uncomfortably with these competing positions: to not be placated by deferrals that secure, affordable and decent housing should be provided to just those that "need" it, succumb to the deferral that there "isn't enough housing", or accept the bracketing work of "wait your turn". Therefore, this dissertation aims "to be accountable to what is unaccounted for in social reform schemes", a provocation "to

care more than we can *know,* to extend our analyses past the ruins of the world (and the discipline) as we know it" (Shange 10).

Structure

The following chapters explore the different textures and frames through which I came to understand the particular and generalized conditions of cycles of housing insecurity through a study of temporary accommodation. In Chapter 1, titled 'Waiting', I explore the different dimensions of waiting that people in temporary accommodation experienced. Drawing on one woman's experience, Mary, I reflect on how the limbo of waiting and the unknown of what comes next, characterized the spatial and affective life of living in the chronicity of housing insecurity—an affective condition that exceeded the time-framed understanding of homelessness as an event. While seemingly stagnant, the periods of waiting in TA, were better understood as fragments in repeating cycles of housing transience, yet recent policy changes framed homelessness as time-limited events. This disconnect produced tensions, both in how people understood the function of housing provision as well in how they experienced it. In this chapter, by tracing Mary's housing history, I try to make sense of her demand for permanent accommodation as stemming from being caught in the precarious gaps between the Council's housing services and the precarity of the private rental market.

While 'Waiting' focuses on the existential drain of cycles of waiting and housing transience, in Chapter 2, titled 'Injury', I consider how a housing system that prioritized "rooflessness" exacerbated the existential and embodied vulnerabilities of those in the homeless system. I do so by focusing on a set of stairs to reflect on the spatialization and temporality of another aspect of housing insecurity—urban displacement. Through one woman's experience with a set of stairs, encounters that were harmful and precarious, I consider how these everyday injustices generated embodied and existential injuries that challenged the linear and temporally-specific understandings of housing insecurity and urban displacement. Through an analytic lens of injury, I examine how claims of harm and health, across spaces and time, were aggregated and packaged to make formal and informal challenges against the housing system.

In Chapter 3, I outline various encounters between Newham's Housing office and two single mothers. Drawing on Brianna and Ijeoma's experience, each challenging their housing cases, I illustrate how temporary accommodation generated a feeling of being feeling stuck while simultaneously being caught in a repetitive and cyclical "trap". As Brianna alludes, cycling between precarious spaces in the private rental sector and the distress of waiting in limbo might be better understood as "deadly". Therefore, this chapter takes seriously that their refusals to be relocated into the private rental sector were a political tactic as well as a legitimate material demand. Like the cracks that opened this dissertation, despite the persistent and enduring existential insecurity produced by being sheltered yet home-less, people's lives were nevertheless nested within the particularities of their home-spaces, spaces that "felt bad". Thus, this dissertation explores the different textures, temporalities, spaces, affects in which housing insecurity felt "bad" and "deadly".

Interlude

Silent Night: A Focus E15 Christmas Carol
Silent night
Depressing night
Crumbling walls
Broken light

Dangerous windows for
Mother and child
Electric cables
Dangling down

Sleep in freezing cold
Cramped room
Or sleep on wet and cold streets

Silent night
Depressing night
Damp is my only sight
Dangerous cladding
Keeps me up all night
Bed bugs and rats
Are the story of my life

Sleep in freezing cold
Cramped room
Or sleep on wet and cold streets

Sleep in freezing cold
Cramped room
Or sleep on wet and cold streets

Chapter 1: Waiting

Concepts have teeth, and teeth that bite through time."

Audra Simpson (2014, 100).

This chapter begins with the question: *"why must I keep waiting for a permanent home?"* It was a question posed by Mary, a 50-year-old Ugandan woman living in Brimstone House, in a meeting with a cabinet of Newham Council. In this question, she demands to know not just why she must keep waiting, but why, after so long, and so many moves, her next move won't be into permanent accommodation. Mary insists on the immediacy of her need for security while also reasserting the role of the welfare state in providing her a permanent home—a claim that had become fraught with competing political and social ideas about the role and moral-legal obligations of the welfare state. Mary's demand reveals a tension between Newham's legal duty to provide housing for priority homeless applicants, the moral expectations of this obligation and recent changes to Britain's housing policies.

Therefore, this chapter illustrates how housing and homelessness have undergone ideological and definitional changes in British welfare politics; changes that have positioned temporary accommodation as both a form of emergency housing provision and a temporary measure in the nexus of a housing/homelessness crisis. By exploring the experience of those living in temporary accommodation, this chapter does not propose to assess the efficacy or failure of temporary accommodation as a safety-net provision aimed at reducing the risks of homelessness. Instead, after reflecting on Mary's experience with TA, I will then consider the implications of specific housing policy changes introduced by the Localism Act that redefined the ideologies and temporalities of housing broadly and homelessness specifically. Through Mary's experience, and her demand for permanent housing, I illustrate how a disconnect emerges between the "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011) of the myth of Council housing and the endless cycles of housing transience and deprivation. In this way, I build on anthropology's scholarly contributions to homelessness by thinking about the overlapping and intersecting process of house-ing that extend beyond sociological analyses of "the homeless". For this reason, I aim to understand the locally situated process of house-ing, in London specifically, and how they have generated specific experiences of housing vulnerability and deprivation.

As I will outline, definitional changes transformed how housing provision was practiced and reflected an acute disjuncture between the ordinary rhythms of housing insecurity, increasingly unattainable homeownership, and a predatory housing market. These policy changes were indicative of a reconfiguration of the temporalities of the welfare state more broadly and specifically of the public and private housing sector. Beyond just providing a roof, TA was a temporal measure that dragged out a systemic problem, as opposed to addressing the structures itself. Therefore, central to understanding the contemporary problem of housing was examining how temporary or provisional housing was increasingly the mode by which housing was managed for England's most vulnerable populations. What I intend to demonstrate through a discussion of these changes was how a temporal disjuncture emerged for those living in TA, in part the result of disruption between the repetitive ruptures that characterized housing in the private rental sector and governmental policies that imagined conceptions of homelessness as a

singular “event”. I draw on Mary’s experience to highlight the temporal discontinuities produced when rooflessness, as provisional sheltering, was prioritized over long-term housing security. After being thrown out of the private rental sector and finding themselves in TA, Mary, like others living TA, endured a seemingly endless string of “non secure” placements between the private and public sectors. This disconnect generated by cycles of homelessness and the uncertainty of waiting while in temporary accommodation produced experiences of temporal disorientation as well as undermined people’s existential security. Through Mary’s experience, I will illustrate how this temporal disorientation was experienced as an ongoing disappointment: “You know, when you get a roof over your head you get so excited ‘oh thank god, I have roof over my head’ but you don’t know what you’re going to find there.” In addition to uncertainty about the conditions of your next accommodation, existential destabilization was also felt during the periods of waiting that punctuated and dragged-out housing uncertainty. The experience of waiting ranged from the experience of waiting in temporary housing to waiting for housing letters, waiting rooms, updates, and waiting for government officers—or sometimes it was waiting for something that might never come. Nevertheless, these periods of waiting had the potential to throw the prospect of any stability into question.

In this context, I understand waiting as playing a central role in the management of the house-ing pathways in which temporary accommodation was embedded. It provided one perspective on how space-time was lived and managed in contemporary structures of housing insecurity. In his chapter, therefore, I discuss how waiting was experienced and challenged by Mary. As a few residents of TA suggested, “how can I think about my future when I don’t know what will happen tomorrow?” Waiting is this sense was a disorienting effect of liberal governance as well as a political tool that was framed as a logical and “fair” approach to housing deprivation in the context of a housing crisis. Except, that is, for those caught in its trap.

Yet, by focusing on the challenges made against endless waiting, I consider how waiting is not passive but can be mobilized to make a political claim. In one sense, waiting was both a liberal democratic tool to justify the Council housing system as well as a political tool of refusal to allow ontological security to be endlessly deferred by residents of temporary accommodation. To understand TA residents’ challenges, I draw on Mara Ferreri's (2020) discussion of municipal dispossession to understand that these are not political claims to the “right of property” (as it invokes a liberal notion of personhood and its embedded right to property ownership); rather they are claims to propriety, “to be treated properly, to be acknowledged as proper political subjects” (1009). In this case, residents made political claims that challenged and made demands on the moral obligations of the Council and its duty of care while also refusing to be caught or put on hold within the stigmatizing discourses of deservingness through which welfare was organized.

The Meeting

I arrived at Mary’s one-bedroom flat in Brimstone House to attend an informal meeting Focus E15 had arranged with Newham’s deputy mayor and housing minister to discuss her ongoing homelessness case. While we waited for the councillor inside Mary’s flat in Brimstone, Mary offered me a seat on her daughter’s single bed in the living room while she sat at the small table. Joanne, a Focus E15 campaigner, stood in the corner, refusing to sit down, leaving the empty chair across from where Mary sat for the councillor. When I interviewed Mary a year

later, she described her space at Brimstone as a "corridor" that made her feel like she was living in a box. It was small and narrow, and the boxes and luggage stored up against the wall between the small table and her daughter's bed added to the feeling of being squeezed into a corridor. Had I not known she had been living there for two years, I might have assumed that the plastic storage boxes and luggage squeezed in-between the furniture and up against the walls were signs of having just moved in.[45]

The meeting that day was both to address her housing situation, which had been unnecessarily dragged out, as well as to provide an update on a harassment letter Mary and others had been the victim of. The incident involved an unidentified member of staff at Brimstone House, who had left a fake letter at Mary's door stating that if she did not visit the housing office that day by 3:00pm she would be removed from the homelessness list and asked to leave her home. The meeting was scheduled after Focus E15 had staged an action at a Newham Council Cabinet Meeting in which we had silently stood in the public gallery with a large banner that read "Homes not Harassment" and a blown-up image of the note. While waiting, we strategized how to approach the meeting. Joanne suggested to Mary that we needed to push for permanent accommodation. Mary agreed. As she looked around the apartment, she said that living in a space like that made one feel anxious. I looked back at the mold in the corners of the room, and, as I kept scanning the walls, I found it hard to look away from all the spotted areas where mold was spreading. Generally, residents had a myriad of complaints about the living conditions at Brimstone, but the primary complaints I heard from residents were related to mold, damp and the lack of ventilation in the units. Mary said that the Council's response to the mold in her flat was to paint over the patches. I didn't know how long ago that had been, but it had clearly been a futile tactic, as the black mold spores could be seen clearly penetrating the paint again. Both she and her daughter had started coughing when they moved in, most likely caused by the mold. "It affects you, but you don't know. But we were all the time coughing, all the time sneezing." Her doctor had written a letter to the Council stating that Mary's health was being negatively impacted by her living conditions Nevertheless, it had done nothing to speed up her case.

Dear Tenant

You are request to come to the office in Victoria Street today by 3pm. Failure to do so will lead to you being removed from the homelessness list and you will be asked to leave your home.

Figure 9. Letter Mary Received. Reads: Dear Tenant, You are request to come to the office in Victoria Street today by 3pm. Failure to do so will lead to you being removed the homelessness list and you will be asked to leave your home (Carolina Talavera)

[45] The Council had told her she needed to take her stuff out but she had told them unless they provided her with a storage unit she could not afford to pay for it herself.

As Michelle Murphy reflects in *Sick Building Syndrome* (2006), "exposures are made to matter" (18). Meaning that bodies and infrastructures, such as buildings, are connected through assemblages of discourses, practices, objects and subject-positions that them together. As Murphy argues, the perception or the suspension of perception of hazards can generate historically situated "regimes of perceptibility" through which bodies and builds are articulated or disarticulated, and a lens through which we can understand the unequal distribution of harm. As I write in this chapter, Mary's experience consists of complex arrangements of time, subject-positions, practices, discourses, space, matter—from the endless waiting, housing letters, the threatening note, cycles of housing, evictions, displacement, detentions, temporary accommodation, unpacked suitcases, medical conditions, to missed doctor's appointment letters, care responsibilities, mold, damp, etc. While theoretically, having a roof over your head was better than being on the streets, there were other ways in which being placed in unsuitable accommodation produced a different experience of distress, both embodied and existential. As Murphy writes, uncertainty is not ahistorical, but is generated through "concrete social and technical arrangements and the effects of power" (15). The same can be said about processes of housing. The mold, like the cracks, persisted as visual and toxic reminders of the "managed decline" of contemporary processes of housing. Like painting over mold in Mary's Brimstone flat, it was a problem that was managed just enough. But as Mary described "it affects you" in ways that were not always clear or diagnosable.

I met Mary, who had arrived in the UK twenty years ago as an asylum seeker from Uganda, two years into her placement at Brimstone House. Like many residents at Brimstone, Mary had been waiting for housing through Newham's homeless system for many years, across two applications and multiple housing relocations. A little after two years of living in Brimstone House, Mary had sought the support of Focus E15 not long before I joined the group. By applying public and private pressure on the Council, Focus E15 could draw the Council's attention to specific cases, pressuring the Council into speeding up and sometimes altering their established protocols, such as postponing eviction from Brimstone after a housing refusal. In this case, after pressure from Focus, the Council had reached out to schedule a one-on-one meeting with an officer higher up the bureaucratic food chain— John Gray, the Deputy Mayor and the Newham Senior Cabinet member for Housing.

Figure 10. The mold in the corner of Mary's living room in Brimstone House (Carolina Talavera)

When John Gray, a middle-aged white man, arrived, he was accompanied by a junior councillor. After awkwardly attempting to come to an agreement about his companion's title, Gray introduced Shaban Mohammad, a tall

South Asian man, as his housing deputy. It was uncomfortably crowded with five of us in the room. Our clothes were wet from the misty weather; filling the room with the smell of musty clothes heightened the general smell of damp—undoubtedly caused by the mold infestation.[46] Sitting across from Mary, Gray leaned forward and apologized on behalf of the Council for the aggressive notice, suggesting that they hoped it would not happen again. While he did not disclose who had been responsible, Gray did admit that an action against the employee was taken but refused to clarify what kind of action. He told us that everybody was horrified, "because it must have been upsetting and was unnecessary". Sitting quietly, Mary looked down at the floor, her hands in her lap, and quietly whispered: "it was so disturbing".

The councilor, clearly unsure about how to respond, looked at her and asked her whether she had any questions about what happened. She quietly whispered "yes" but remained silent, looking down at her lap. After a moment Gray repeated his question. It was as though they were speaking past each other. Mary, finally looking up from her lap, looked at the senior councilor directly: "Yes, I want to know when am I going to get permanent accommodation?" Mary's testimony streamed out of her, not giving the councillor an opportunity to speak. She told him she had been moved from temporary accommodation to temporary accommodation to temporary accommodation. She had been told she was a priority when she arrived at Brimstone House two years ago, but "I am still here," she said firmly. As she spoke, her voice broke as she explained that she had no permanent address to give the GP:

> You can't give them a permanent address because you have nowhere to sleep permanently. You don't know what's going to happen the next day. I have mental problems, I have medical issues. And all the time they are moving me from place to place. So, when am I going to get a permanent place?

Her question lingered in the room and the councillor stumbled a little in his response, speaking broadly to what kind of accommodation Brimstone House was intended to be, avoiding speaking to Mary's specific situation. People placed in Brimstone House, he added, should only be there for weeks, months—or at least that was the intention when the Council bought the building. He said that what the Council was trying to do now was move people on to "proper" temporary accommodation, from which they would be able to wait while they bid on Council homes. What was unsaid was that for many people, in temporary accommodation or not, "bidding" for Council homes could take years and sometimes multiple decades. With Mary's health conditions and homeless status, she had priority status, but how long it would take to win a Council home remained uncertain.

We returned the conversation to Mary's housing offer. We asked for clarification: "It's a Council home?" What Mary was being offered, he explained, was a "move on" Council accommodation at a social rent price—a significantly lower rate than the private rental sector. It was a "Buy Back" Council-owned house, meaning it was a Council property that the Council had bought back after it was sold to tenants during Margaret Thatcher's Right to Buy program—a program characteristic of Thatcher's economic policies of the 1980s—limit public spending and increase privatization of state services. The sale of state-owned housing was a key component of this economic program. The Right to Buy program led to the mass sale of social housing in the UK over several decades—from 1980 to 2020, just under 2 million social homes had been sold

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[46] It is common in Britain to use damp as a noun. Mold was such a pervasive problem in older British buildings that as a noun, damp was used to describe that particular odor.

through the scheme.[47] Recently, the Borough of Newham was the largest beneficiary of the "Buy Back" program, introduced by London Mayor Sadiq Khan, as part of an affordable homes initiative.[48] The program provided London Councils with the funds to buy back Council homes that had been sold into the private sector and intended to address the affordable home crisis in London.

"Why can't it be permanent?" Joanne asked the councillor. We don't understand the logic: if it's a Council property now, why not make it permanent for Mary? According to Gray's explanation, the housing Mary was being offered was more suitable accommodation than Brimstone, but there was no certainty around how long she would have to wait there until she successfully bid on permanent Council housing. In the letter Mary was sent prior to the meeting, it stated that she was being offered non-secure accommodation, so we asked Gray what that meant. Temporary, he clarified. "You're still going into temporary accommodation. But a much better…a proper flat. It's a Council flat." This housing offer, while not in the private rental sector, nevertheless meant another move, with another uncertain time-frame.

Mary refused to be placated: "The issue is, when will I get a permanent? Why should I move from temporary, to temporary, to temporary? I've told you my medical issues." Mary's response to the councillor's indicated the core of her problem with this offer. She has already lived in housing insecurity for close to 20 years since arriving in the UK as an asylum seeker. It wasn't even her first time in TA, having already lived in supported housing through social services, and then as a homeless applicant in TA after she was officially granted asylum. She already had her duty of care discharged by Newham Council once before. She repeated her demand: she wanted to be housed permanently. "Sure," Gray responds. "We're trying to do the right thing for everybody. And…it's no secret that we haven't got enough homes for…" The longer I worked with Focus E15 and families living in Brimstone, the more I heard that exact speech from John Gray. When met with demands for permanent or more suitable housing, individual pleas were deferred with references to long waiting lists and other people in greater need—intended to make the person understand that demand was high and supply was low. These statements were meant to be persuasive, that what was being offered was the best option and there was nothing else the Council could do.

Mary didn't allow him to complete his sentence before firmly interjecting, "But there are homes there." She pointed in the general direction of the Carpenters Estate, just on the other side of the train tracks from Brimstone. Sitting across the Olympic Park, the main site for the 2012 London Olympics, was a 23-acre social housing estate built in the 1970s. The estate was made up of three high-rise tower blocks that were surrounded by low-rise houses, totaling 710 homes. It was also a site of community tension since the decanting and depopulation of most of its residents in the mid 2000s during then-Mayor Robin Wales' controversial tenure. Under Rokhsana Fiaz, Wales' successor as mayor of Newham, the proposed plans were paused and the estate's future undecided.[49]

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[47] This data does not account for estates that have been demolished. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/social-housing-sales-and-demolitions-2020-21-england/social-housing-sales-and-demolitions-2020-21-right-to-buy-sales#fn:1

[48] https://www.insidehousing.co.uk/news/news/more-than-1500-right-to-buy-homes-returned-to-council-ownership-under-gla-scheme-76894

[49] While most of its residents had moved out of the towers, the terrace buildings surrounding the three towers were still occupied by a mixed community of residents made up of leaseholders, council tenants, freeholders. According to Estate Watch, the increase in foreign investors in the surrounding areas and gentrification, the result of the

The depopulation of the estate under Wales' Labour government occurred following a joint venture with a private developer on a proposed regeneration project for the estate. In similar cases across the UK, the outcomes of regeneration proposals and subsequent decanting of residents and leaseholders of Council-built housing generally led to full-scale demolition and redevelopment. While most Councils generally committed to keeping a percentage of new flats "affordable" (though these rates were often still unattainable for many), often the numbers of affordable rent units were significantly less than as promised in the final redevelopment proposals.[50] These regeneration plans have been critiqued by housing activists, including Focus, as contributing to the widespread displacement of communities and the steady decline of Council housing, an issue I will return to later.

Claims around the Carpenters Estate revealed tensions between the competing priorities and demands of community residents, homeless people, decanted residents, and Council bureaucrats. While the Council claimed the towers were uninhabitable, residents and community members argued that the buildings were in fine condition before the Council's "managed decline" of the buildings allowed them to justify their demolition. Other community members argued that demolishing the towers would improve conditions in the surrounding area. Activists, including Focus, pointed to the estate as a challenge to the housing "crisis"—why were there people sleeping on the streets while the Carpenters Estate sat abandoned? These intersecting issues reflect broader ongoing changes in London—the pressure points created by rising numbers of homeless people and by regeneration projects that displaced communities unable to afford the new developments that replaced Council estates. In a way, Focus E15's use of the Carpenters Estate in their campaign was both a demand and a reminder of what many believe local government used to and should *still* be doing: creating permanent Council housing.

In the meeting that day, everyone in the room knew that the estate had been sitting empty, habitable but uninhabited for over a decade. Nevertheless, in response to Mary's question, Gray evaded the remark about the Carpenters—an implicit refusal to engage the premise of the challenge. Gray continued to clarify that the Council's planned to move people out of Brimstone was a change that he had advocated for a long time but acknowledged that it still wasn't enough: "as a short-term emergency…. cover, Victoria Street isn't perfect, but it is probably better than bed and breakfasts and some less than desirable properties out there… ". Joanne quickly corrected him: "This is impossible for two years." Joanne did not allow Gray to deflect the

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Stratford International and train links, Westfield Shopping Mall and the Olympic Park, put more pressure on the redevelopment of the estate. (https://www.estatewatch.london/casestudies/carpenters/)
After her election Fiaz paused the proposed redevelopment. After this research was conducted, Fiaz promised a different approach, including greater input from residents, requested reviews to consider the possibility of refurbishing the estate and promising the right to return for decanted residents. Though, as scholars have noted, often promises to return only resulted in a small percentage of original inhabitants returning. (https://www.newham.gov.uk/news/article/439/all-options-for-carpenters-estate-tower-blocks-remain-on-the-table-)

[50] Affordable rent, introduced in 2011 under Boris Johnson's tenure as Mayor of London, set rents at 80% market value. Various affordable housing programs have since been introduced by Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan. These programs included the London Affordable Rent (a non-binding benchmark target) that aimed to keep a two-bedroom property at £152 per week in 2017/18. Other schemes included in the London Living Rent, which calculated rent at being at a third of an occupant's income. The confusion around the term has been capitalized on, as councils can promise that a percentage of redevelopment projects will be within 'affordable' housing rates. Often led by private developers, these projects generally end with fewer 'affordable' housing options than in the original proposals.

impossibility of Brimstone's current living conditions with the "better than" other properties offering TA.[51]

In a sense, both these statements were accurate: Brimstone might not have been *the* worst compared to other properties, but it was still impossible. It wasn't only a matter of their condition, but both the condition and experience of their waiting. For Mary, this wasn't her first experience with temporary accommodation. As Mary recounted to me later, she had ended up homeless when the landlord of the flat she had been renting with her daughter in the private rental sector decided to sell the house. When Mary went to the Council to receive support for her impending homelessness, she was instructed to wait until the bailiffs arrived.[52] Most likely, Mary was served a section 21 notice, which allowed the landlord to initiate the legal processes to repossess the property—it is effectively a legal no-fault eviction and a common eviction method. After going to court, a landlord might be granted a possession order and a warrant for eviction, whereby a court bailiff could legally evict a tenant. In Mary's case, while attending a friend's funeral, the bailiff changed the locks of the flat without giving her notice, locking her out of her possessions, and more urgently, her medications. Her friend dropped her off at the police station after Mary had arrived home only to realize the locks had been changed without warning. When she arrived at the police station—because she had nowhere else to go—the police officer told her to go to the hospital to pick up emergency supplies of essential medications and then come back to spend the night there while they helped her contact Newham Council. The next day, the officers called the Council on her behalf and were told that the Council had discharged their duty of care and that she had to find somewhere to live. The reason for their discharge, as Mary understood, she had traveled to Uganda to visit her family, and if she had enough money to travel, she no longer needed the Council's support.

After this unexpected interruption to her housing, Mary was forced to submit another homeless application. Mary spent five months sleeping on her friend's couch after the eviction, until the Council finally sent an inspector to assess verify her homeless status. Following this assessment, Mary was finally placed back on the homelessness register and placed in emergency accommodation. With disgust, Mary described the "horrible" Travel Lodge hotel room in Forrest Gate that had cockroaches and damp and where various residents experienced multiple break-ins. The Council told her that she would only be there for four months maximum, but she lived there for a total of 15 months. Even then, she wasn't moved out because of an offer of accommodation but because after resident complaints a health and safety inspector concluded that the conditions were unsafe and uninhabitable. The inspector recommended to the Council that all residents be immediately rehoused. This is how Mary arrived at Brimstone House.

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[51] Several reports indicated the horrifying conditions of people living in TA, as well as how councils were contracting out this form of accommodation to private contractors. As many councils didn't have sufficient housing stock, many have relied on contracts with for-profit privately managed nightly paid accommodation. This fueled an unregulated temporary accommodation 'market', where brokers mediate between councils and private investors. According to a report from Shelter, the lack of social housing put pressure on councils to seek out contracts for high nightly rates in the private sector, as opposed to the even more expensive rates of budget hotels like Travel Lodge Hotels. According to this data, the Borough of Newham spent £31.8 million in Local Space, an independent housing association funded by Newham Council to secure and provide temporary accommodation (Garvie 2020).

[52] In England, a county court bailiffs "in possession of a writ" by are the only people with the legal power to access residential and commercial properties "to conduct evictions under the 1977 Protection from Eviction act" (Baker 2017, 148). Court bailiffs have the power to "force entry, with a locksmith, and transfer the property to the owner" (149).

The experiences I outlined here are only a fraction of her longer housing history, but I use this example to illustrate why the Council's offer of non-secure accommodation was unsatisfactory. Gray's explanation reflects what Mary and others have gone through—moving from temporary to temporary. Yet, Gray's narrative elides the cyclical and recurrent experience of "temporary" and the reality that for many the promise of permanent accommodation might require decades of waiting—or be entirely unattainable. Mary lived this endless cycle for two decades—describing the variety of placements she had cycled through from accommodation provided by social services, informal sleeping arrangements, private rental sector, emergency, and temporary accommodation. After a decade of interruptions to her life—from several forced detentions through her pending asylum application and resulting housing insecurities—Mary's mental health suffered. As she described it, the chronic insecurity produced by her housing situation led to a feeling of being spatially and temporally unmoored:

> I had no future. I was just saying I don't know where I will be next year, I don't know where I will be next month, I don't know what I'm going to do. You know? That's how it was. Because I had nowhere I could call a home. I was just being moved from one place to another. Temporary this, this. You know? You know when you don't think about what will I do next year? That's how it was. I would just think, what is tomorrow? Because you just take day by day as it comes.

Beyond being housing insecure, the uncertainty of day-to-day life reverberated and affected other aspects of her life. The stress of her housing situation led her to pause her studies to become an accountant, postponing her certification and stable employment for several years. Feeling adrift left Mary without a sense of direction: "There were times when I would sit not thinking of anything, I would just be sitting. I had withdrawn. I didn't want to talk to people. I didn't want to eat. You can imagine when you spend three days without shower…that was me," she chuckles despite the seriousness of what she is telling me. The burden on her mental health also affected her daughter. While living in an emergency placement in a hotel, Mary's daughter paused her own studies to look after her. Mary claims she was so disoriented that her daughter had to count her pills to make sure she had remembered to take them, and, in 2015, her doctor recommended that she submit herself for a psychiatric stay at a local hospital. Did that help? I ask.

> It did because I was with other people who had mental problems. I could see they would behave and the way they are talking. And I said 'ok, I think I am much better than them'…. and even talking, you could talk to the nurse, you could express your feelings, it really helped. And they referred me to 'you need to exercise', they sent me to a gym. They tried.

I asked if the mental health professionals knew about her housing situation. She said they knew and had written a letter to the Council recommending secure housing for continuity of care. "That uncertainty is really really bad," she said, "because you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow." Because she felt her mind couldn't focus ("couldn't reason properly") and was easily diverted, Mary postponed finding work. A clinical psychologist, Carrie, who had done research on temporary accommodation described the experience as "madness making situations". Both in terms of how people were told it was temporary but continued for much longer periods,

but also in the conditions in which people were having to endure that waiting. As she described it, pathologizing distress as an individual problem obscured the ways in which unlivable situations were distressing families and communities. The concern she had as a clinical psychologist was that people would be referred to mental health treatment for experiencing depression and anxiety as a result of their housing situations—and offered a psychological answer to a social problem.

While managing her housing situation, Mary also had to keep track of her medical care as well. She had been seeing the same doctor since she arrived in the UK as an asylum seeker. Nevertheless, during her numerous relocations, the idea of changing doctors seemed impossible because of the range of medical treatments she was receiving. Instead of changing GPs, she had her medical letters and correspondence sent to a friend's house in that area. Mary said that this was stressful, because it often meant risking not getting letters notifying her of appointments in time. Not knowing how long she was going to be in any temporary placement, she was reluctant to switch to a surgery closer to her or to change her mailing address at her current surgery for fear of losing her ability to access care there.[53] Mary's concern was the possible disruption to the continuity of her care.

It was for this reason, I believe, that Mary distrusted what she was being offered by Gray, on behalf of the housing office, and why she refused to be placated. Being offered another temporary accommodation did not provide her with any assurance that she wouldn't end up back in the same situation. As she communicated to Gray, her concern was that if she accepted this flat, the Council would turn her away as they had in the past: "You know how the Council works. You are in a comfortable place, you are not a priority for us", she says referring to the first time she was discharged. Mary had lived in TA for long enough to be concerned with the real possibility that she might be thrown back into the private rental market, displaced out of London, or discharged of the Councils' care entirely. Joanne added that Mary's concern was that if she accepted what it sounded like a nice offer, it would provide only time-limited security. "Not the end of the story, is it?" It wasn't, Gray agreed. "It's another move. It's another…" Joanne softly added.

I draw on Mary's meeting with the deputy Mayor to illustrate the disconnect between the lived experience of homelessness and its management. As a form of homeless management, temporary accommodation is more than just a short-term measure, it has become the central response to widespread and chronic housing precarity. As I try to establish in this chapter, living in the in-between of house-ing—houseless but sheltered—produced its own unique vulnerabilities generated by endless waiting and the constant threat of yet another displacement. Vulnerabilities extended beyond insecure living arrangements, from psychological distress to disruptions in life. As Mary reflected, missed health care letters could mean missed appointments, followed by long waits for rescheduled appointments. Switching health care providers wasn't an easy alternative, as changing her doctor's officer though offering a temporary solution, posed other concerns from long waits for specialist referrals to potentially creating dangerous interruptions to her care. If she was moved again, she would have to go through that change all over again.

For this reason, understanding contemporary housing insecurity requires an understanding that to be unhoused is not to be outside of housing. Craig Willse (2015) reflects that being without a home or to be "without the guarantee of continued access to a house, is to be made

[53] In Britain, a doctor's surgery is the equivalent of a doctor's office or facility, where general practitioners receive and treat patients.

especially vulnerable in this system of housing, to be exposed to the worst of its violence" (2). Therefore, Mary's refusal of accommodation was based in first-hand knowledge of this vulnerability—of previous encounters with the housing system. It was the necessary context for the question: "Why must I keep waiting for permanent accommodation?" Indeed, Gray's explanation of Newham's homeless practices, being moved from emergency to temporary, to move-on accommodation, was reflective of specific changes to housing and homeless policies in the UK. As the following section discusses, Mary's experience as a homeless applicant can be understood within the context of two significant changes to housing and homeless policies introduced in the 2011 Localism Act.[54]

The Localism Act: From Homelessness to Rooflessness

Social historian John Boughton writes in his book *Municipal Dreams* (2018) that Council housing was ideologically rooted in building long-lasting "communities of butchers and doctors". Municipal housing planning beginning from the 1890s and after the two world wars were positioned as "aspirational housing: the mark of an upwardly mobile working class and the visible manifestation of a state which took seriously its duty to house its people" (3). While there exists a disconnect between this idealized accounting of social housing and its reality, nevertheless, the policy changes introduced by the Localism Act reflected ideological and legal shifts in the intended purpose of social housing and homeless housing provision. Indeed, the Act had the effect of transforming social housing allocation from lifetime to temporary tenancies, bringing an end to the historically aspirational ideologies of Council housing provision that emerged out of early welfare policies. These changes were also crucial for understanding the practices of temporary accommodation as they are connected to broader housing policies.

First, the Act gave local authorities the option to end lifetime tenancies for social housing and introduced "flexible" tenancies.[55] As a result, the Act saw thousands taken off the social housing waiting list who were deemed to have "no need" for it.[56] While lifetime tenancies were intended to create community and stability, under the Localism Act councils could choose to provide more flexible local authority tenancies. As a result, lifetime tenancies, and its embedded legal

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[54] The Localism Act aimed to redistribute power from central government and provide local authorities more discretionary powers, but it also introduced significant changes to the ways in which social housing and housing benefits were managed. The act also reflects one example of the Coalition government's broader effort to decentralize power—shifting power from central government to local authorities.

[55] I use the term social housing intentionally to include housing that is now managed by social landlords as well as local authorities. While council housing used to be directly managed and owned by local authorities, now most social housing is owned and managed by "so-called social landlords, usually housing associations" (Boughton 5).

[56] A parallel, but overlapping, change to social housing tenancies was the bedroom tax, introduced as part of the Welfare Reform Act of 2012. The controversial bedroom tax (also known as under occupancy charge or spare room subsidy) was intended both to free-up housing and create cuts in housing benefit. Under this reform, tenants living in council housing with spare bedrooms had their housing benefits cut by 14% (1 bedroom) and 25% (2 or more bedrooms). With a limited social housing stock, many social housing tenants who faced these sanctions were forced to make a decision between downsizing into the private rental market and enduring financial insecurity or staying in their social rented homes. Those that stayed also endured financial precarity; those unable to cover for their benefit reduction fell into arrears and faced eviction. The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), responsible for welfare and pensions, argued that "the policy had been implemented to bring housing benefit claims in the social rented sector in line with private rented sector rates, and to make available larger social housing stock to help reduce the number of households living in overcrowded accommodation" (Nowicki 2017, 124).

rights, were no longer automatic features of local authority tenancy. The end to lifetime secure tenancies, scholars argued, would lead to increased social tenant displacement and uncertainty, leaving social tenants unsure about when or if they would be asked to leave.

To contextualize this housing policy change I will explore how it relates to issues of housing, class and welfare in England. Despite the "municipal dreams" ushered in during Britain's era of Council housing planning and development, under neoliberal government policies the Council estate, in Imogen Tyler's (2013: 160) words, "would come to mark the moral boundaries of the nation-state." As Tyler outlines, Council estates were "imagined as a self-induced pathological condition" reflecting a moral panic surrounding the rise of a culture of poverty and worklessness (160). From Thatcher into the present, the "culture of poverty" stigmas attached to Council estates transformed these aspirational modernist projects into spaces disconnected from "society".

Much like its parallel narratives in the U.S. ("the projects" or "the ghetto"), Council housing and its inhabitants came to reflect what was framed as a pathological cultural degeneracy, and therefore contagious, problem to be rectified through welfare reforms that would incentivize work (and punish dependency).[57] As I describe in the introduction, recent punitive welfare reforms exacerbated already existing stigmas of deservingness, oriented around the so-called capacity to work. These moralized narratives intersected with discourses around housing in arguments that claimed lifetime Council tenancies led to "social housing dependency" (Bevan 2021, 969).[58] Scholars have argued that this territorial stigma and pathologization of the working class has been used to justify the "managed decline" and eventual state-led dispossession of Council housing (Tyler 2013; Elliott-Cooper, Hubbard, and Lees 2020).[59] For example, Mara Ferreri argues that dispossession of the Haygate Council Estate began with the "discursive association with social failure and urban decay" (2020, 1011). Through an examination of the Haygate, Ferreri illustrates how the managed decline of the building produced a circular effect—first through disinvestment of maintenance and repairs, increasing temporary accommodation tenancies with high turnover, and then eventual depopulation.[60] As Ferreri argues, therein lies the problem: when the political promise of "a secure, low-income home is kept by a municipal entity

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[57] Though public discourse would position welfare claimants as unemployed, this binary does not reflect the reality that in fact many on welfare also work.

[58] For example, Tony Blair, in his first address as prime minister outside the Aylesbury council estate, said: "Today the greatest challenge of any democratic government is to refashion our institutions to bring this new workless class back into society" (Blair 1997, cited in Tyler 159).

[59] Loic Wacquant (2008) defines territorial stigmatization as the powerful stigma attached to the segregated spaces where marginalized populations have been "condemned to redundancy" (2008, 169).

[60] As Ferrari documents, the estate's association with social and economic deprivation was produced and reified in visual culture. Specifically, the Haygate became the site for over 70 film and television productions, many of which used the estate as a set for 'urban dystopias', due to its modernist social architecture. The cultural production between the urban dystopia and the material deterioration of the urban, through the backdrop of the British council estate, gave "rise to 'sink estate spectacle'" (2020, 1012). As the estate was presumed empty, after its systemic but not total depopulation, the Haygate became the site of "intensified representational dispossession" (2020, 1012). This structural disinvestment generated perceptions what is now referred to as a "sink estate". Tom Slater (2018) argues that the term 'sink estate' entered parliamentary discourse in the 1980s to directly link council housing tenure to deprivation, and then entered popular discourse with Tony Blair's first speech as Prime Minister, as cited above. As Wacquant argues in *Urban Outcasts* (2008), that during this period European nations worried about the Americanization of European poverty, of the emergence of "novel forms of exclusion" that were "(mis)identified with the black ghetto" (2008:164). Stuart Hall's (1978) important study of the "mugging problem" outlines how a moral panic was generated in Britain, in which racialized discourses reinforced the policing of black bodies. The issue of "mugging" was framed as an imported American social and racialized "disease".

that is, simultaneously, the local government, the landlord and the regeneration agent, each different function having a different rationale" (1009). The end to lifetime tenancies through the changes introduced by the Localism municipal housing depopulation will no doubt contribute to this perceived "disarticulation of social, cultural, legal and political relations around the historical promise of municipal housing" (Ferreri 2020, 1009), through which the stigma of people and places simultaneously contributes to their disposability and displacement.

Second, the Localism Act introduced major changes to homelessness duties through two central reforms. Prior to the act, if a homeless applicant was made an offer of accommodation in the private sector but then refused it, the local authority could not discharge itself of its housing duty. After the reform, refusals of housing offers were grounds for the local authority to discharge their legal obligations ("duty of care")—refusals that were controversially referred to as "intentional homelessness". Moreover, the reforms essentially placed private sector accommodation (private tenancies) on the same legal footing as local authority accommodation, leading to heavier reliance on the private sector to provide TA. Relocations into the private rental sector, therefore, legally allowed a local authority to end its duty of care. As a result, with fewer tenant protections in place in the private sector and poorer housing conditions, compared to tenancies through a local authority, these changes placed "priority need" homeless applicants in increasingly vulnerable positions. Criticisms of the act charged, and as Mary's experience illustrated, that these reforms to housing provision exposed already vulnerable populations to evictions, negligent or predatory landlords, and a variety of health and safety issues. Moreover, with a growing homeless population, social housing shortage, and rising housing costs, the act also facilitated the displacement of people in TA outside of their boroughs and sometimes out of London entirely, where rents were cheaper.[61]

Between these changes to policies around housing and homelessness, we can trace the reconfiguration of housing along different temporalities of need. Legal scholar Chris Bevan writes that these changes suggested a transformation in government understandings and practices of homelessness as a time-limited and singular "event" as opposed to a dynamic process susceptible to various forces; "a trajectory rather than a situation" (2021, 976). The shift from homelessness to "rooflessness" prioritized the need for shelter as opposed to addressing the underlying causes of homelessness, reflecting a "transition to an ambulance service approach to social housing" (2021, 975). Indeed, the result of this "ambulance service" approach was that social housing became provisional "last-resort" sheltering—a significant move away from the creation of "mixed" communities.[62] As a result, housing provision for priority need homeless households in the form of provisional sheltering and then eventually private sector tenancies

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[61] Housing activists, including Focus E15, have been challenging the practice of relocating homeless applicants out of borough, arguing that it was a form of 'social cleansing'.

[62] As John Boughton (2018) writes in *Municipal Dreams,* the purpose of council housing has always been divided along political lines. He describes that in the 1940s, Nye Bevan (Labour Minister of Health and Housing who also founded the British National Health Service) introduced the 1949 Housing Act in which he stated that the new estates should not be just housing for the poor, that they would become 'castrated communities' (cited in Boughton 2018: 96). It was in this speech, that Bevan recited that the new estates should aim to be mixed communities: "We should try to introduce what was always the lovely feature of English and Welsh villages, where the doctor, the grocer, the butcher and the farm labourer all lived in the same street" (cited in Boughton 2018: 97). Boughton outlines that this understanding of council housing serving a 'general need' by the left was always understood by the Conservative party as housing for the poor. The Housing Subsidies Act of 1956 "consolidated this shift….abolish[ing] completely the general needs subsidy, requiring that new council housing (unless financed by borrowing from the open market) be reserved for two designated groups—the elderly or those displaced by slum clearance" (2018: 107).

carried the expectation that a "roof" or a "box" to live in was enough to transition out of state-supported services.[63] Whereas previously, Council-owned housing tenancy provided protections and opportunities for class mobility, Council housing tenancy has been re-configured as a temporary event to discourage dependency. Between Council tenancies and the private sector, understanding these temporal changes is necessary for determining how these intersecting and overlapping processes of house-ing can generate fragmented and precarious conditions. As Mary's demands should remind us, this time-framed understanding of housing obscures the chronicity of housing transience, as a precarious and persistent condition.

Inevitably, understanding homelessness as a limited event contradicts the challenges of its lived experiences. Mary's housing history and Gray's explanation of the Council's housing practices provide evidence of how different forms of temporary housing create the illusion of a teleological trajectory—one that ends in the aspirational permanent social home or home ownership. On the other hand, it also exemplifies the provisional measures central to contemporary housing.

Specifically, as a practice of provisional housing, TA is fundamentally caught and constrained by the broader landscape of rising property costs and limited social housing stock as well as the recent legal changes to social housing I outlined. Therefore, the violence of TA's current practice comes from framing homelessness as a temporary event, when in fact, secure lifetime tenancies in social housing that no longer existed, home ownership, and the private rented sector were no longer tenable options for large numbers of London's population. Indeed, while social housing had previously offered a parallel, but alternative form of security to home ownership, it was now framed as temporally limited. As a result, while "temporary" carries the promise of homelessness as a limited event, the reality of living in this limbo results in a temporal disjuncture for those waiting in this uncertainty; waiting for promises that may never be fulfilled. For example, Mary's insistence that she be given permanent accommodation comes from two decades of insecure housing. As she said to Gray, she knew that the Council would find an excuse to discharge her unless she insisted, with the support of Focus E15, on permanent accommodation. What does priority mean after years of waiting? Mary knew that these were empty promises and, as she said to the deputy mayor, she had waited long enough. Mary's refusal to continue waiting might be read as a refusal to continue to allow "waiting" to be framed as a virtue—to be placed in the imaginary waiting line of housing that Gray and the Council continue to insist on. Mary was stepping out of time. As the next section will discuss, waiting, in this context was a deferral to wait your turn, a central practice of the structures of democratic "fairness" that govern welfare politics. What role does waiting play in this system? Especially, in light of these recent changes to housing policies, when you're waiting for something that no longer existed.

The Cost of Waiting

One Saturday afternoon at the Focus E15 street stall, an older man and woman approached me on the busy walkway where I stood handing out flyers. They stopped to ask me

[63] Examining the language used in the introduction to the Localism Act of 2011, with its emphasis on "fairness" and "freedoms" and creating a more democratic process, the reforms can also be read as attempts to lessen the responsibilities and duties of local authorities by limiting social housing applications and restricting how and the limited social housing stock is distributed.

what we were doing. It was still early in my time at Focus E15, but I talked about what Focus understood to be the intersecting issues of street homelessness, lack of social housing, and high rates of temporary accommodation. The man nodded in agreement as he signed our petition form. As he handed me a pound coin donation, I repeated a statement often used by Focus to highlight the contradictory housing situation: "How can Newham have the highest rates of homeless in the entire country, yet the Carpenters Estate has been sitting empty for nearly 10 years?" He immediately shook his said, "they're not empty" he responded. While some of the terraced houses (smaller 2-3 story buildings that surrounded the estate) still had leasehold occupants, the three major tower blocks remained uninhabited except for from twenty-nine units held by leaseholders.[64] *I briefly panicked, relieved when Joanne walked over to rescue me just as he was commenting that the Carpenters should be knocked down and that the Council should build terrace houses in its place. Both Joanne and I disagreed, but he responded that it was in terrible condition. He had heard that residents reported problems with rats and other things wrong with the estate. Joanne's response was that the Council wasn't going to do what it should do, but in the meantime those empty flats could be used to shelter homeless people—an attempt to remind the man that Newham has the highest rates of homelessness in the entire country. We were all a little tense. The man immediately disagreed and responded that people who have been on the housing waiting list should take priority. "We're not talking about jumping the line here!" Joanne quickly responded. Everyone was clearly frustrated as the friendly encounter turned into a tense disagreement. The couple slowly extracted themselves as it became clear that we were not going to agree with each other and continued to walk down the street. As the couple continued walked, Joanne shook her head and rolled her eyes, leaving the debate unfinished and unresolved.*

British welfare discourse is loaded with moralized language—you can get a Council home, but you must wait patiently for one. Every Saturday morning I spent at Focus E15's street stall, I encountered polarized opinions in response to the idea of "housing for all that need it", written on the banners hung up around the stall, hand painted by the campaign artist. Rain or shine, we encountered people who adamantly agreed with our message and work, came to us for support with their situations, or occasionally, loudly disagreed (sometimes shouting abusively) at us as they walked down the busy street. These experiences gave life to the polarization of welfare politics, in which disagreements often centered on the distribution of "limited" resources and who deserved them.

I also heard them repeated Gray's response to Mary: the Council is just trying to do right by everybody. In this statement, Gray was compelling us to consider that Mary wasn't the only one in this situation—an affective call to Mary to place herself back into the invisible waiting line, which I discuss in more depth later. According to Shelter, the largest housing charity, there were over one million households on the social housing waiting list—in which eligible households could "bid" weekly for available Council housing.[65] In Newham specifically, Mary was one of 28,000 households on the housing waiting list. While this invisible line was difficult to visualize, Gray's statement was nevertheless a placation that what they were offering Mary was the best they could do under the circumstances. As he said later: at least it's a nice house to wait in. Waiting, and the housing waiting list, as it was mobilized by Gray was as much a

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[64] A leasehold is a fixed-period lease-ownership agreement where ownership returns to the landlord after, whereas a freehold is the outright owner of the property and land.

[65] https://www.theguardian.com/society/2018/jun/09/more-than-1m-families-waiting-for-social-housing-in-england

postponement of Mary's demands as a supposedly fair mechanism through which this deferral could be justified.

In the British imaginary, the waiting line has a potent visual presence that is hard to escape—from welfare and rationing lines during the World Wars, to the dole lines of the 70s, to the food bank lines of the last decade's bout of austerity measures. But what role does the queue or waiting do to supposedly resolve the question of fairness in British political life? This question was most publicly raised during Queen Elizabeth II's passing. The nearly ten-mile-long line, referred to as simply "the Queue", to see the coffin of the recently deceased monarch in September 2022 was perhaps the most unexpected realization of the British affinity for queues. It was reported that mourners waited in line for 24 hours to see the Queen's coffin before the funeral. While this quintessentially British spectacle was highlighted widely in the media, its manifestation reflected something firmly held in the British imaginary. As an article in *The Economist* wrote, the event raised the question of "fairness": was the queue perhaps privileging those with more time or the able-bodied? The article continued by examining alternative approaches, weighing the benefits and downsides of either a market or lottery system.[66] In a lottery system, those who really cared could lose out to someone who might not care enough, and a market system would seem "distasteful and unfair", the author speculated. The article states: "As a rationing mechanism, a queue has some advantages", but left unregulated it was susceptible to market mechanisms—the reason why queuers were given wristbands to identify their place in line and prevent "queue jumping". This analysis reflected uncanny parallels to the social housing bidding system where bidders with "no need" for Council housing were removed from the housing list. Nevertheless, this unique spectacle clearly reified the British preoccupation for queuing, but also raised questions about whether the queue was the most democratic technology. I highlight this historical moment not to argue that the queue is a social fact of British life or to contribute to its reification but to demonstrate how strongly the "queue" exists in the British public imagination and more specifically in welfare politics.

In an ethnographic study of the National Health Service (NHS), British anthropologist Sophie Day (2015) argues that bringing an end to waiting and the queue would potentially have unexpected and unintended consequences for the care the NHS can deliver. While complaints have increased around the health system's bureaucratic management and frustratingly long wait times, waiting, Day argues, is an "intense form of occupying the NHS and being held in place" (180). Through this relational way of inhabiting the NHS, waiting produces a "hyphen" that mediates the production of citizen-subjects, "producing a recognition of care that produces a particular public" (180). As Day argues, waiting produces a sense of ownership over the NHS through which subjects are "defined, contained, and put on hold by 'the system'" (180). Moreover, this understanding of waiting within the NHS posits it is a central condition of the national habitus. This perspective follows Javier Auyero's conceptualization of waiting as a mechanism of neoliberal subjectivization of the urban poor, through which the "habitual" exposure to long delays and waiting "molds a particular set of dispositions" among the poor (2012, 9). As a mechanism of governance, Auyero argues that waiting produces the conditions of submission and uncertainty and therefore can be understood to be a successful state strategy of domination. These anthropological perspectives understand waiting as a mechanism of governance, wherein waiting holds together a sense of "order" and produces relations of power. Indeed, as *The Economist* argues, the queue attempts to both create fairness in the system but also to hold people in place and prevent its abuse.

[66] https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/09/15/why-britons-love-to-queue

As these considerations of the poetics of waiting suggest, as a mechanism of state organization and power, the conditions of waiting can be felt differently as well as contribute to reinforcing already-existing inequalities. As postcolonial scholars have suggested, to wait is a set of relational subject-positions shaped by histories of colonial extraction and violence—where racialized difference emerges through the temporal spacings of cultural difference. As Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) argues, historicism, as a philosophy and theory of development, positioned a cultural and developmental distance between the "West" and "non-West". It both enabled the idea of civilization outside of Europe while also "enabling completely internist histories of Europe in which Europe was described as the site of the first occurrence of capitalism, modernity, or Enlightenment" (7). These ideas, exemplified in liberal notions of the "art of self-government", were selectively and differentially applied to non-European peoples who were perceived to be not civilized enough, not sovereign subjects.[67] Charles Briggs and Clara Mantini-Briggs warn in their study of the cholera epidemic in Venezuela, these rhetorical divisions of cultural difference can circulate, "shaping institutional practices that permit or even multiply unnecessary and unconscionable deaths" (2003, 48).

Specifically, histories of colonialism offer necessary insights into how property laws and ownership were central in the production and construction of the prevailing regimes of race, racial difference, and liberal subjects. As Branda Bhandar argues, property law, as part of Enlightenment discourses of modernity, was a "central fixture" in the "teleological vision of modernization that has set the standard for what can be considered civilized" (2018, 4). The differentiation between civilized versus non-civilized subjects was central to understanding how selfhood and property were co-articulated with race and through colonial encounters, and this recognition must be central to understanding modern laws of private property ownership. Robert Nichols (2020) argues through a legal analysis of early American colonial homesteading acts reveal how racial categories emerged dynamically and recursively out of early property practices. As Nichols illustrate squatters and homesteaders had a "sui generis form of right—the retroactively legitimized, quasi-legal claim of preemption" grounded in the "Lockean ideal of restricting appropriation based on good standing, improvement, and sufficiency" (40). Whereas "Indians" (American Indian laws codified native people as a hybrid legal category) were determined to not possess the "full rights to sovereignty and land ownership…theirs was a sui generis right of "occupancy" or "tenancy" (41). In effect, while homesteaders had the right to purchase property, Indians only held the "preemptive right to *sell"* (41). Nichols argues that as one part of the practices of property appropriation, these legal practices illustrate one way in which the recursive logics of dispossession operated to transform land *into* property while simultaneously establishing the state as the originator of law—legally encoding racial difference through recursive property rights. In effect, the English common law of property "became the *sine qua non* of civilized life and society", and Enlightenment ideologies and values designated value to some ("as differentially having the capacity, will, and technology to appropriate") and not to others (Bhandar 2018, 4). Audra Simpson (2014) argues that anthropological knowledge production and the law are two "spaces of knowledge production and contention" that have

[67] These boundaries also marked the internal borders of what was geographically and ideologically considered "Europe" or European. Michael Herzfeld (1989) argues that the myth of Europe as the birth place of "modernity" haunts the construction of Europe. That while 'Europe' traces its "spiritual ancestry" and heritage to Greece, Greece nevertheless held a contradictory place in European history and imaginary because of its perceived contamination with the "East". Europe, in this sense, might be better understood as ideologically and geographically contested, a concept always in flux.

justified these practices of dispossession historically and in the present (2014, 100). As some scholars reflect, anthropological discourse and its "modalities of knowing" (2014, 95) have reified this distance spatially *and* temporally, generated in the uneven terrain of colonialism, imperialism, power, and domination (Fabian 1983; Simpson 2014). [68]

These ideologies of liberal personhood continue to echo and reverberate historically. Property laws, as Bhandar writes, "reflect and consolidate language, ways of seeing, and modes of subjectivity" situating colonized populations "as outside history, lacking the requisite cultural practices, habits of thought, and economic organization to be considered as sovereign, rational economic subjects" (2018, 3). For example, writing in the US context, Ofelia Cuevas (2012) argues that racialization might be read through practices of home ownership, not merely in its quantitative differences[69] (e.g. the systemic denial of home ownership to non-whites), but through the myth of home ownership as guarantor of ontological security. As Cuevas writes, even if Black and Brown people own their own homes, the "routine violence" their homes are subjected to by the police and the state suggests that for the racialized subject home ownership offers no ontological security. Therefore, the racial subject is denied not just the possibility of protection, but of the possibility of self-determination, "of projecting oneself forward in time, of a relation to the future outside the 'horizon of death'" (611).

In discussing the relationship between time, waiting and property, my aim is to consider how housing, historically produced and ideological grounded, can defer the "possibility of self-determination". Indeed, contextualizing the ways in which liberal ideologies were justified and generated through violent histories of property, colonialism, and personhood are helpful for better understanding their contemporary implications, as Cuevas illustrates. As I discuss throughout this dissertation, this obstruction produced an ontological disorientation for Mary and for others told to continue to "wait". Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) argues that in the politics of recognition that we might understand this "recommendation to the colonized to wait" (Chakrabarty 2009, 8), as a distinction articulated through the grammars of tense. Drawing on Povinelli's discussion of the politics of postcolonial recognition, waiting might be understood as a "*social* division of tense" that structure the conditions of belonging and abandonment in late liberalism (2011, 11). As Povinelli elaborates, this division is "socially enunciated" (2011, 12). In other words, we might understand the housing waiting list as a figurative and literal "bracketing" that deflects the durative present for the future anterior. As the epigraph at the beginning of this chapter suggests, concepts such as property can reverberate through time, continuing to "bite" into the present.

Within this politics of time, those demanding that they can no longer wait are perceived as willful subjects (Ahmed 2014), refusing to be held in place (or time) within this imaginary waiting room.[70] As the man on the street suggested, jumping the queue signifies an underserving and selfish transgression of the "fairness" of the system. Yet, alternatively, we might read Mary's question ("Why must I continue waiting for permanent accommodation?") as a refusal to be bracketed and subverted into the "1 in 28,000" waiting room—a stepping out of tune. While

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[68] Fabian refers to anthropology's reinforcement of this distance a "denial of coevalness".

[69] According to the English Housing Survey 2017 to 2018, at every socioeconomic status or age, "White British" households were more like to own their own homes "than all ethnic minority households combined". https://www.ethnicity-facts-figures.service.gov.uk/housing/owning-and-renting/home-ownership/latest

[70] Sara Ahmed theorizes that we might understand willfulness as being out of tune: "those who are not in tune or who are out tune become the obstacles" (2014, 51). This willfuness, or "not withness" is perceived as a problem or as a refusal to adjust, to become a part of the whole. Wilfulness can also mean being "willing to receive its assignment", claiming willfulness as a political craft of disobedience (134).

Day and Auyero's studies of neoliberal institutions considers how waiting operates as a technology of power and as a mechanism of subjectivization, this dissertation offers a different perspective. As I understand it through my conversations with Mary and other TA residents, waiting is not necessarily passive but can produce affective attachments and orientations to imagined futures and desires, engagements "in, and with, time" (Janeja and Bandak 2018, 1).[71] A willful refusal to fall back in line.

As I have tried to reflect, Mary's refusal is both a material demand for permanent housing as well as willful defiance to continue waiting. "Why must I keep waiting for temporary accommodation" is a material and temporal demand. Recent work on temporality and waiting has illustrated the ways in which "time-tricking" can be used to understand how time is manipulated or extended to certain ends (Procupez 2015; Moroşanu and Ringel 2016). For example, Chloe Ahman (2018) writes that understanding waiting as an active engagement provides conceptual openings for identifying spaces and places where time is being manipulated to address experiences of slow violence that are otherwise difficult to aggregate. In the context of toxic exposures, attunements to the accruals of "slow violence" (Nixon 2011) can generate tactics through which to generate demands and appeals of accountability. Ahman refers to these political tactics that consolidate the temporality of harm as moral punctuation, "the explicit marking of time that condensed protracted suffering and demanded an ethical response" (2018, 160). In the context of long-term exposure to environmental violence, moral punctuation as Ahman develops it, is a "creative reconfiguring of history" that challenges the institutional erasure of slow violence while also "recalibrating" praxes of "noticing" that can register the dispersed "accrual of wrongdoings" (2018, 161). This is both an embodied praxis of attunement to the slow buildup of injury as well as a community praxis in which harms are used to make moral claims of temporal urgency where otherwise time might diffuse, overlook, or even justify injurious exposures. Indeed, the women I worked with in this project were part of a social network of people challenging the temporalities of housing insecurity and its management. As I will illustrate in the following chapter, this involved translating ordinary experiences of housing insecurity into moral punctuations that challenged both the protocols and time-frames of the Council's involvement.

The following chapter examines urban displacement through the experiences of a single mother, Ayo, to reflect on her encounters with a set of stairs to illustrate the precarious encounters between spaces and bodies as ordinary exposures in the context of housing insecurity. Dynamic and relational encounters between infrastructures, space, bodies can tell us much about how intimate life and political are negotiated and configured in contemporary life. As a dynamic and relational site of dwelling which sensed the impacts of larger structural shifts and shocks (Han 2012), the house can be understood as "a sensorial archiving machine of sorts" (Biehl and Neiburg 2021, 544). The body similarly registered these shifts and shocks of housing insecurity that were not always clear or diagnosable. As Mary described it, "it affects you"—like a generalized cough, mold penetrating paint, or damp lingering in the corners of your home. These were embodied attunements to different spacings and temporalities of injury. Therefore, the following chapter attempts to think with the moral punctuation of diffuse forms of injury that exceed the time-framed temporality of homelessness.

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[71] In their introduction to *Ethnographies of Waiting* (2018), Janeja and Bandak write that anthropological discussions of waiting have not yet concerned themselves with waiting as a concept. They propose that ethnographic attention to waiting should be open to both the politics as well as the poetics of waiting to facilitate a discussion of the "uncertain interplay" between the structural and existential perspectives of waiting in contemporary life.

Chapter 2: Injury

"The body consumes and is consumed. Like one big pressure point, it is the place where outside forces come to roost."

— Kathleen Stewart (2005, 1024)

It was pouring outside, so the cabby let us sit in the taxi to keep dry and warm. Four adults and three children were crammed into the large black van, paid for by Focus E15. Ayotunde, seventeen days postpartum, had made her way with three children and with the help of the kind taxi driver from Southend-on-Sea, a town in Southeast England about 34 miles from Newham. The Council moved her to Southend over a year and a half ago and had refused to relocate her to Newham, despite her multiple requests. As an immigrant and single mother, Ayo's social network was important to her, and being displaced to Southend had isolated her. After putting pressure on the Council, and perhaps because of her recent birth, the Council was now offering her a ground-floor flat in an East London Borough near Newham.

While we sat in the muggy warmth of the car, Chelsie, the sibling of one of the original Focus mums and the youngest member of Focus E15, entertained the two older children in the front of the car with the taxi driver while we waited for the housing officer to arrive and show us the accommodation they were offering. As I sat in the backseat with Ayo, her infant son in a car seat between us, I asked how she had been doing the past two weeks since leaving the hospital. Despite the doctors' recommended recovery instructions, she didn't have a choice but to keep moving around and pick up her children, as the sole caregiver for her two young children with no help in Southend. How was she recovering? She tells me the stitches from her cesarean were agitated, they keep bleeding from exertion and from not being able to properly rest.

> "It was horrible. There was a day they needed milk when I was home I couldn't walk. Nobody to go and get milk. Ah I was crying! I looked at the children when they were still sleeping in the morning 'What are they going to eat this morning?' With the way I am, I didn't have a choice. I couldn't walk. I had to."

She described how she made it halfway down the stairs when her neighbor came out the door, expressing shock she said, "do you want to kill yourself?". The neighbor ushered her and her children back inside and went to the shop to get the food they needed, but as a recent acquaintance, Ayo knew that she couldn't rely on her for full-time support.

"I didn't have the strength, but what can I do?"

Stairs and Stitches

When I met Ayo, a Nigerian-born woman in her 40s, four months before, she had been living in Southend on her own with two children for almost a year. After an eight-month stay in

Brimstone House as a temporary accommodation resident she had been moved from Newham to Southend. Sitting in the cab, in response to my inquiry into her health, Ayo recalled this moment at the stairs to illustrate the conditions of her postpartum state. Rather than tell me about her localized cesarean wound, she situated her stitches in the social and spatial context in which she felt she had been abandoned. Her stitches precariously holding together, the stairs threatening to undo them. I often returned to the mental image of Ayo at the top of the stairs of her second-floor flat— recovering from her cesarean delivery a few days before, caring for three children, and contemplating the idea of walking up and down one set of stairs to get milk for her children. She had been worried for months that this moment might be forthcoming: being isolated postpartum and being on her own with her three children. As I discuss in this chapter, this situation was the manifestation of Ayo's fears—concerns that she had communicated desperately to the Council in various ways prior to the birth. Before going into labor, Ayo oriented the Council's attention, and mine, to the stairs, insisting on their importance as a site of injury and abandonment. Therefore, in this chapter, analytically "sitting" with the stairs, the anxiety they provoked, and the everyday struggle they posed takes seriously Ayo's complaint and sense of urgency. Moreover, it provides an alternative orientation—the stairs as a daily problem *and* the site of potential injury. Despite several reviews, Ayo's complaints were not considered sufficient enough reason for the Council to relocate her. Yet, the stairs proved to be an ongoing burden, a constant, as Ayo's body changed throughout pregnancy and postpartum adjusting, accumulating injury through her movements in everyday life.

Ayo's struggle and complaint can be understood as part of a phenomenon of displacement and housing insecurity. In his sociological study of the housing crisis in London, Paul Watt (2018) draws on Saskia Sassen's (2014) concept of "logics of expulsion" to write about the variety of ways housing insecurity generates susceptibility to displacement and eviction in London, from reduced housing capacity to accelerating rates of evictions in the private rental sector, lengthy stays in temporary accommodation, recurrent displacement, to discharges of care from homeless services. While broader sociological studies are helpful frameworks for understanding the structural dynamics of the "housing crisis", this chapter aims to develop a different perspective—to think about the problem of homelessness and displacement through a lens of "injury". Injury, in this sense, was orientated towards the stairs and stitches as sites where the temporal and material relationship between the anticipation of injury and the harm endured was articulated. As part of Ayo's complaint, the stairs and stitches can tell us about what lives in the cracks produced by housing provision procedures. Therefore, her complaint about the stairs offered a different vantage point through which to comprehend the particularities of the injuries and experiences, that might challenge the frames and temporalities in which institutional neglect was framed.

This chapter explores injury from two perspectives. First, I consider injury as an ongoing exposure. I examine Ayo's experience of housing relocation in the accumulation of everyday injuries (i.e. going up and down the stairs, in her hip pain, and not being able to cope) and the anticipation of injury as the defining condition of her displacement. These everyday injuries were the result of exposures to the visible and invisible structures (i.e. the Council, isolation, stairs, waiting) that the body absorbs in the time-space of homelessness and geographic displacement. Second, I attempt to reflect on thinking with injury across scales, times, and space. By attending to Ayo's insistence on the stairs, I understand the stitches and the stairs as compressions of material, symbolic, and social encounters that structured the everyday conditions of her housing experience. In this way, stitches and stairs are both social and embodied woundings—injuries

that accumulate in the body beyond singular impacts, the material and affective amalgamations of visible and invisible infrastructures of care and violence. As I discuss later, these injuries reverberate in time, and across spaces. These conceptual frames draw on Omar Dewachi's analysis of woundings as "embedded in everyday social relations" and as having the potential to "reveal broader ecologies of violence and care" (2015, 77).[72] Ayo's injuries were as much a social condition as they were marked in her body and flesh—woundings that speak to the ways in which human life is precarious, or ontologically dependent on infrastructures of support and care. As Dewachi writes, being attentive to the way injuries move through space can expose the limits of institutional care and discourse. Beyond just limiting or incapacitating, injury might also be thought of as generative of alternative possibilities. Lawrence Ralph's (2014) work on gun violence and disability theorizes how injury can also be read in the social-economic violences created by systemic disinvestment in communities. In this way, Ralph reads injury through bodies, affective attachments, geographies to consider how "renegade" dreams and aspirations generate from both physical injury (bullet wounds) as well as the structural ones (mass incarceration, gun violence).

Therefore, injury offers a conceptual lens that I use to might remap the complexity as well as the stakes of these embodied and existential woundings through diffuse temporal and material processes of house-ing. Ayo's experience can be understood through, and in, various scales: in the geographic displacement of urban regeneration, the gap between "rooflessness" and her accessibility needs, and sequelae of her physical injuries, and the everyday experience of her isolation. Consequently, they are not reducible to cause-and-effect explanations that would reduce her injuries to singular encounters.

While I was never able to visit Ayo in her apartment in Southend and therefore cannot describe her living arrangement, this ethnographic "absence" shifted my attention towards Ayo's complaint and its significance. By shifting the ethnographic focus away from "witnessing" the site of Ayo's grievance, this chapter is neither concerned with assessing if Ayo was deserving of her situation nor claims to assess whether Ayo's concerns were "valid"—frames that complicity reproduce narratives of deservingness around housing and attendant humanitarian logics. These perspectives risk reinforcing the narrow frames through which "priority" and "temporary" delimit how housing deprivation can be apprehended.

Priority Need

The day we met, outside of a Focus E15 public meeting, Ayo had her braids rolled up into a bun on the top of her hair, the tips dyed a fuchsia pink and matching her lipstick. She always carried a powerful energy, her gold tooth shinning as she smiled, and explained with fierce indignation the way she was being treated by Newham Council. How could they expect her to live like this? She was around six months pregnant at the time, dealing with ongoing pelvic dysfunction (PD) from a previous pregnancy, coping with depression, caring for her two younger children by herself, and worried that she would not be moved back to Newham before

[72] Conceptually, injury has also been examined to understand how legal discourses constitute what counts as injury as well as determining the limits of accountability (Jain 2006). While Jasbin Puar's *The Right to Maim* explores how specific populations are targeted for debilitation and injury in contexts of imperialism and settler colonialism, and constitute the "shadow" of mainstream disability discourses (2017, 89).

she was due to give birth to her next child. [73] She had, reluctantly, but at the insistence of her friend, reached out to Focus for support. She later admitted to me in an interview that while she was at Brimstone House, she had been made aware of the group, but skeptically thought it was a waste of time. "What can they do for *me*?". Her friend insisted she had nothing to lose by reaching out to Focus. Until that point, she had requested several reviews as well as legally challenged the Council's decision to offer her accommodation that was inappropriate and outside of the borough. While she had already made several attempts to formally challenge her displacement, this time she would copy Focus E15 in the email to get the Council's attention. Like many others, Ayo's arrival at Focus E15 was a last resort option—she had reached the limits of what she could do on her own and through the legal mechanisms available to her. With her encroaching due date, she needed help.

Prior to her relocation to Southend and her homeless application with Newham, Ayo explained to me that she had been living and sleeping on a friend's couch but when she became pregnant, she was asked to move out. As an immigrant with no recourse to public funds, Ayo sought out assistance from social services first. She lived in a social services refuge until she was able to apply for a "leave to remain" visa change sponsored by her newborn son's British citizenship status. For Ayo, this change in visa status granted her recourse to public funds and meant that she would be moved from social services to the local authority's homeless system. Legally, a local authority (Newham Council in this case) had a duty of care to provide accommodation to someone designated under priority need. As a single parent to one child and pregnant with her second, Ayo was provided emergency accommodation under the Council's duty of care, and she was moved into Brimstone House in December 2017. A month after moving in, she gave birth to her second son. After a total of eight months in Brimstone House, a relatively short stay in comparison to most residents, she was called into the Newham housing office near Stratford station on July 6th, 2018, where a housing officer presented her with a housing offer in the private sector, contracted through the Council, but located in Southend.

As she recounted it to me, Ayo was not given much of a choice or say in the matter. When she viewed the apartment for the first time, she told the officer who accompanied her to the viewing that the second-floor apartment would not work because without access to a lift, the flat was going to be difficult to physically maneuver with her PD, ongoing pregnancy, and with two young children to look after on her own. How was she supposed to carry a buggy and two children up and down the stairs?[74] The location of the flat, she complained to the housing officer, was also too far away from Newham where she attended church and had developed a solid social network she relied on for support. The officer reassured her that they would make of note of this, but in a meeting a couple of days later her complaints were not taken into consideration, and she was only given ten minutes to decide on the offer. The options she was presented: accept or have the Council discharge their duty of care. As discussed in the previous chapter—changes under the 2011 Localism Act dictated that housing offers were conditional—if Ayo declined, she would have made herself and her children "intentionally homeless". So, Ayo took the offer. In a letter we co-wrote later, Ayo wrote in her own words: "I cannot describe this as a choice as a mother cannot choose to make their children 'intentionally homeless'."

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[73] When Ayo was six months pregnant with her second child, while living in Brimstone House, she fell while getting off the train, and had since then struggled with walking long distances, carrying things and going up and down stairs.

[74] Buggy is a British term for a stroller or pram.

Despite her challenge that the place was unsuitable, the housing officers informed her that to submit an appeal to review the Council's offer, she would need to accept the offer first. After accepting the offer and moving to Southend, with some legal support, Ayo requested three separate reviews through Newham's housing office. These reviews included letters from her doctor verifying Ayo's health conditions with recommendation that she be placed in more suitable accommodation. As was the case with any doctors' recommendations, however, they did not carry significant weight in the housing office's decisions and no reason was offered for why these letters were not impactful enough to change Ayo's housing situation. Despite medical recommendations, all three of Ayo's legal appeals to be relocated were rejected. Without explanation, I might argue, her medical needs were subverted within the structural constraints of housing availability. Ayo described how she tried calling the housing manager herself and pleaded that they reconsider her situation. But the officer's response was, as I heard many times, that there were other families dealing with the same thing. On one phone call with a housing officer where she requested to be moved back, Ayo recalled the officer's response: "If you don't like the place, go and find something else. Just give us the key."

Ayo's displacement through an out-of-borough housing allocation was common practice by Councils across London.[75] As I have noted, social housing shortages and rising private sector rents have led local authorities to look outside of London to place homeless applicants in TA. Scholars of London's housing crisis suggest that temporary accommodation constitutes just one facet of broader recurrent displacement occurring in London, the result of public land being sold to private investors, the demolition of Council estates, and the dwindling rates of new social homes being built (Minton 2017). The result has been geographic and social displacement, protested by housing and regeneration activists as a form of social cleansing. Activists, including Focus E15, argued that the specific practice of displacing temporary accommodation applicants outside of London has created ruptures in the social fabric of communities by extracting people from their social networks and forcibly abandoning them in places with no social support. As Watt (2018) argues, these geographic displacements were not necessarily singular events, or one-off relocations, but rather reflect trends of "recurrent displacement"—the normalized condition of London's housing crisis whereby move after move produced a subjective, and chronic, sense of being unmoored ("displacement anxiety").

While, as Watts argues, these might not be permanent displacements, they nevertheless have practical, social, and financial repercussions. Displacement can disrupt community connections making it difficult for homeless applicants to base appeals to be relocated in specific geographic areas. Hardy and Gillespie's (2016) write in their study of TA that residents of temporary accommodation reported that they were encouraged to leave jobs to accommodate out-of-borough placements or to take on the costs of long commutes back into London to retain their employment. Others reported incurring costs for having to pay out of pocket to store belongings in storage facilities, buy new furniture entirely, or lose belongings that they could no longer afford to pay to store. My research elicited similar frustrations. As I discuss in the introduction, a family with two children under the age of three reported to a housing officer that the flat they had been offered (a non-secure Council property and tenancy) had no flooring except for exposed concrete, and no stove or fridge. They were instead handed a flyer for a loan company in Newham. As the officer stated, the Council was only responsible for providing them

[75] According to Trust for London, as of 2022 Newham relocated 16.3 per 1,000 of households in TA in accommodation outside of the the borough, "one of the highest of any local authority in London". https://trustforlondon.org.uk/data/temporary-accommodation-borough/

with a “box” or “shell”, not necessarily all the amenities inside. They were presented with two options: after accepting the property they could appeal the Council’s decision, or they could reject the offer but their homeless case would be legally discharged. Reluctantly, the family accepted the burdensome costs, choosing to incur this debt over continuing to live in their cramped Brimstone House single-bedroom flat.

Studies of gentrification and urban displacement might frame Ayo’s experience and her complaints as merely the inevitable outcome of capital accumulation and gentrification, the result of shifting global-local movements of capital. While the processes and effects of urban displacement have been widely analyzed and discussed by geographers, my focus here is not to elaborate on the structural conditions under which gentrification or urban displacement were occurring in the London context—though they are important analyses of the destructive effects of global capital. [76] Instead, I argued that “staying” with the stairs and stitches provide a different vantage point. Holding onto the stairs as a central concern, my aim is not to dismiss Ayo’s complaint as merely a side-effect of the structural processes of urban displacement, but rather one of the conditions of this displacement. So how do we take seriously the urgency of the stairs, as a site of affliction within this context?

To think through the injury of stairs and stiches, I turn to feminist and postcolonial scholarship of environmental and chemical entanglements (Murphy 2006; Fortun 2012; Agard-Jones 2013; Shapiro 2015; Murphy 2017; Roberts 2017), writers who analytically linger with the “chemical sublime” (Shapiro 2015) or “residues” (Agard-Jones 2014). Their work reveals to us how bodies and environments are engaged in a multiplicity of alterations and elaborations, social and embodied, through and with material and immaterial infrastructures. Like the cracks and painted-over mold, the stairs can be thought of as a “linking figure” that cut across temporal and spatial scales—producing relational understandings between bodies and environments. I borrow this term from Shapiro and Kirksey (2017), who argue that chemicals have become “linking figures” as ethnographers examine ways of being in relation to our environments that span multi-sited and multi-scalar frames. For example, these studies have examined how multi-scalar ecologies attune us to material and immaterial infrastructures and the “alterlives” (Murphy 2017) of the “late industrial present” (Fortun 2012) and how contaminations can be used to think through the uneven but ongoing relations of colonial/postcolonial power (Agard-Jones 2013).[77] As Agard-Jones writes, reflecting on the theoretical contributions of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, analytically beginning with chemicals as a unit of analysis “recalibrates the scale of ethnographic practice” (2013, 192). Beyond recentering the body in multi-scalar analysis, this approach might

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[76] In geography, urban displacement has been argued to be the effect of accumulation by dispossession (Harvey 2012) and the relentless processes of capital investment, speculation, and development as a form of urban warfare (Rolnik 2019). As Yiftachel (2020) argues, these theoretical paradigms, are primarily generated from empirical evidence in the urban setting of the global north. Yiftachel argues for analyses outside of the global north demonstrates that processes of expulsion, displacement and eviction are varied and cannot be reduced to “subsets of global capitalism or gentrification, and at times work against the interests of capital”. Writing from the perspective of the UK, Paul Watts warns against reducing analyses of urban displacement to “*singular* gentrification logic” (Watt 2018, 73). Watts suggests that “austerity urbanism and its variegated housing and social policies” have their own dynamics and repercussions and can contribute to gentrification processes and effects.

[77] Murphy’s use of “alterlife” is a recognition of enmeshment and enfleshment of life with infrastructures, such that life is already-altered and open to alteration. As Murphy writes: “It is a figure of life entangled within community, ecological, colonial, racial, gendered, military, and infrastructural histories that have profoundly shaped the susceptibilities and potentials of future life” (2017, 497).

"calibrate" our attention to how "individual bodies and individual people come to be in dynamic relationships to the world around them" (2013, 192).

Within this framework, the diffuse nature of exposures to perceptible or imperceptible harms (e.g. toxic chemicals, mold, stairs, faulty gas meters) provide a different way of registering the conditions by which violence is differentially distributed across space and time. Within this field of (im)perceptibility (Murphy 2006), injury may not necessarily always be felt in a moment of impact or aggregated into an urgent demand. Instead, it might be experienced as an accrual felt in the body, building up through repeated woundings as it moves through social and material worlds. Indeed, while Ayo's PD was the result of a single fall disembarking from a train during her first pregnancy, her discomfort was ongoing and exacerbated as she moved through different environments. This is one way in which she experienced the impossibility of her accommodation in Southend. Christin Smith (Smith, n.d.) refers to this embodied aggregation, in her discussion of anti-black state violence, as kinds of palimpsestic embodiment that "bear the visible, traces of earlier experiences, dislocated, repetitive moments that, like phantoms, disappear only to reappear in other places at other times" (6). It is in this way that I understand the everyday specificities of Ayo's displacement: the stairs and stitches precariously holding things together and threatening to tear apart as she moves through her everyday life. Her pelvic injury reverberated through time and space to exacerbate the present feeling of abandonment and echoed the compounding effects of her geographic displacement.

Nevertheless, being exposed to various infrastructures (housing, architecture, the Council) that produced a "bodily knowledge" (Shapiro 2015) through which Ayo understood her housing displacement. Yet, throughout my discussions with Ayo, she never expressed a social critique of temporary accommodation or of the dynamics of a larger national housing crisis. She was always unapologetically insistent on the singularity of her experience, and it was through her lived encounters with her space and geographic isolation in Southend through which she communicated her disagreement with how she had been housed. This embodied attunement to the anticipations of her condition (due date, stairs, parenting responsibilities) were what constituted her articulation to the perceived injustice of her situation.

As I discuss in the following sections, the process of communicating to the Council Ayo's complaint required consolidating and simplifying these everyday anticipations. In the following section, I outline the process by which Ayo and I co-constructed a letter to the Council, demanding that she be moved back to Newham Council. This letter was written after our first meeting, while Ayo was six months pregnant with her third child and living in Southend. In the final version of the letter, Ayo described to the Council that she was faced with choices that weren't really choices: between forced relocation or intentional homelessness; between her hungry children and the wellbeing of her body. The tension between these "choices" constitutes the structures and materiality of normalized housing insecurity. What might have been different had Ayo's concerns and fears about this moment been taken seriously by the Council?

The Letter

In my first phone call with Ayo, a few days after we met, I collected her details and a rough timeline of events to draft an email that we would then use to email the Council. As she recounted her story in desperation, it was clear that the uncertainty of how she was going to manage life with a newborn, two young children and no social support was causing her deep

anxiety. "It's too stressful", she said as she described the fear she felt as her pregnancy advanced and it became increasingly difficult to climb the stairs up to her flat. She explained to me over the phone that she struggled to carry the groceries up the stairs while carrying her youngest son. The delivery services weren't allowed to carry the food up the stairs, so they would leave the deliveries at the bottom of the stairs. In these situations, she often had to decide to leave her two youngest sons unattended while she carried items up. Multitasking carried other risks, she explained, as she had already fallen once and injured herself carrying her youngest up the stairs with bags in her hand. The fall had worsened her anxiety and pain.

When we ended our call, I reviewed the notes I had written down, struggling to make sense of the timeline she had told me, most of it out of order and in fragments but also full of general statements about her concerns and frustrations with the Council. I had only recently started taking a more active role in supporting people through Focus E15, and I was still overwhelmed by the bureaucratic maze that was the homeless system of Newham. In drafting the email, and with no template, I struggled to make sense of Ayo's complaints, reviews, and moves. What details were relevant? When did her homelessness begin? What aspects of her case should I emphasize? What evidence did I need to provide to make Ayo's demands legible? As I struggled with these questions, I attempted to translate everything she had recounted to me into a coherent narrative while also trying to retain the urgency and frustration with which Ayo communicated her experience to me.

My first draft briefly summarized the timeline in which Ayo had described her move from Brimstone House to Southend, making sure to emphasize the pressure she felt in making that "decision". I followed this timeline by outlining what I understood to be Ayo's major concerns: the danger of the stairs as a pregnant mother of two and the geographic and social isolation she had experienced as a result of the move. In the end, the letter underwent five revisions with changes made by myself, Ayo, and Sophie, one of the original Focus E15 campaigners, who suggested places to "beef" up the testimony. In the following excerpt, Ayo adds more details in her own words to the draft in which she highlights her struggles, more than in my original version:

> "*Have been struggling with pelvic dysfunction since 2016 and wen I get pregnant it get worsen which I have been advised not to go on stair, carry heavy things and not to walk on a long distance which have attached all my medical letter to the previous emails av sent."*
>
> *"I cannot be expected to endure these conditions. Dis as bin causing me sleepless night."*

She writes the name of the anti-depressant medication she is on as an addition to my statement that her mental health had worsened since living at Brimstone House.

In her comments, Sophie outlined places to elaborate on the details of Ayo's case: Why is she challenging the accommodation? Is it too expensive? What happened for Ayo to be offered Brimstone House accommodation? Was she informed by letter or in a meeting at the housing office? What are the ages of her children? How long was she given to decide on the offer? Does she have the medical letter from her doctor to attach? Between Ayo's edits and mine, the final version of the letter outlines Ayo's reasons for needing temporary accommodation, why the housing in Southend was unsuitable to her health, needs, as well as her interactions with the

housing office, and the isolation of living outside of the borough where she had developed social ties for the last six years. We emphasized her doctor's recommendations that she needed to live somewhere where she had access to a lift or on the ground floor. Sophie added a sentence connecting Ayo's individual concerns to Focus E15 and the practices that the campaign had been challenging. In this final version, she insisted that the Council was not just doing this to her but to others as well—placing emphasis on the moral obligation they have through their legal duty of care.

In the process of writing this letter, at the request of Ayo, who felt she did not have the time or capacity, I was struck by its formality, despite my attempts to convey the indignation and desperation that Ayo voiced each time we spoke about her situation. In translating her concerns, experiences were reduced to broad statements of struggle, of the unsuitability of the space, and the need for social support. As the final version below illustrates, we outlined her concerns as reasonable by illustrating the danger of her current situation, but in consolidated terms (i.e. physical and mental distress) and in their forms (i.e. formal reviews, emails) that might be read as practical and justified.

> *"While living in Brimstone House was not conducive for me, when I was in Newham I had community support from friends and family that could help me with my children. In Southend, I have no support and worry about my physical and mental health. How am I expected to cope in this situation?"*
>
> *"My current housing situation is unsustainable and increasingly becoming dangerous. The flat I am in is on the second floor and the building has no lift. I have to climb 30 stairs with my two young children, as well as my shopping and with my double buggy, in an advanced stage of pregnancy. I regularly injure myself because of this, and I fear that something worse could happen. I feel scared to leave my children in my flat (when I leave to go get my shopping & buggy from downstairs) as they are very young (ages 2.5 and 1.5). This will become even more difficult after the birth of my 3rd child. I have absolutely no support networks in Southend-on-Sea, and when I go into labour in August I worry that I have nobody who can stay at home with my young children. All my support networks are in Newham where I lived for 6 years.*
>
> *I have requested 3 separate reviews (from Newham Housing office) citing the property as unsuitable, but my reasons were rejected. I do not accept this, as it's clear that this property is not suitable, as my medical professionals have stated. I have met with Focus E15 Housing Campaign and know that this situation is happening to other people, but I would like to request that I be returned and rehoused to Newham, as my duty of care is still with Newham Council, and I cannot continue in the situation I am in now."*[78]

The day after Ayo submitted this letter to the Mayor and deputy Mayor (also the senior housing officer of Newham), she received a short reply from John Gray, the deputy Mayor—the same councillor that met with Mary. In his brief response, though he apologized for her housing situation, he stated that he personally could not intervene but would refer her case to the Newham Council housing office to review "in light of this medical information". His email was

[78] These are select segments from the final version that was sent by Ayo to the council. Other sections were left out to protect Ayo's identity.

recognition of receipt, but that he would be passing on the email and the doctor's letter for the housing review—giving no assurance that it would make a difference or that he could intervene in any significant way. Before ending his response, he thanked her for reaching out but concluded: *"I am sure that you are aware that we have a dreadful housing crisis in Newham and London with some 28000 families waiting for a home and over 5000 in temporary accommodation."*

It is through the letter, responses by the deputy mayor, appeals, denials, reviews, and Ayo's priority status as a single parent that we can understand how the Council understood Ayo's situation/injury—how and what became intelligible within the bureaucratic discourses of homelessness provision which emphasized housing as a structural problem to be managed. As discussed in the introduction, studies of war and humanitarianism reveal how the structures of recognition that make up humanitarian bureaucracies (e.g. legal discourses and certification, medical tools and therapeutics, etc.) produce hierarchies of suffering and vulnerability. Despite the differences across these contexts, categories such as "priority need" in welfare practice similarly produce hierarchies through which the allocation of "scarce" resources, such as housing, are differentially distributed. Yet, *who* counts as vulnerable, and *when,* is constrained by the law. As I discussed in the previous chapter, this reorganization around "need" has reconfigured both the definition of need as well as the temporality—casting homelessness as "need" that is temporally limited as opposed to a "recurrent" state of insecurity. Yet, these reforms and bureaucratic calculations of "priority" and "need" cannot account for the fluctuating and unpredictable ways in which housing insecurity manifests.

As Ayo's case illustrates, vulnerability can mean different things at different times. Obtaining state support was not as straightforward as providing verification of medical conditions or being housed. By focusing on the stairs and the stitches, my goal was to understand in what way prioritizing "rooflessness" comes at the expense of other forms of housing security –accessibility, isolation, spaces that felt bad, unhealthy environments. Therefore, understanding Ayo's situation within the limitation of this frame obscures how her suffering was also contingent and responsive to her body, past experiences, the waiting, her concerns about the future, the material space she was forced to endure. As Dewachi writes: "unraveling the articulations of wounds and their history may help us better understand the material and social vulnerabilities of afflicted lives and bodies" (2015, 6). Framing homelessness as a temporary condition was insufficient for understanding how vulnerability existentially and materially manifested, or how it exceeded the logics, discourses and practices of homeless provision. Instead, by "unraveling articulations of wounds" (Dewachi 2015, 65) across space and time, we might better perceive what is at stake in the ontological and material cracks produced between "rooflessness" and housing insecurity.

Legal Complaint

Around the time we submitted this email, Ayo, along with other current and former residents of Brimstone House, contributed testimonies to a formal legal complaint, organized and submitted on behalf of residents by the Public Interest Law Centre and Focus E15.[79] The formal complaint, based on individual testimonies from Brimstone residents, challenged that though the conditions were not as bad as other TA habitation, the accommodation at Brimstone House was

[79] PILC is a not for profit legal organization made up of solicitors and legal case workers.

unsuitable. The complaint consisted of witness statements compiled by PILC and volunteers who interviewed residents of the building on the conditions of Brimstone House. The complaints outlined were: overcrowding, length of stay, lack of ventilation, broken lifts, delays in dealing with repairs and complaints, no parking facilities, prison-like security presence, inadequate washing machines, and the Housing Register.[80] While the complaint, based on resident interviews, concluded that general improvements were needed to Brimstone House as a "place of residence", the primary complaint was the length of stay households were forced to endure and the "negative effects of such occupancy". Residents reported that they were told by the housing office that they would be rehoused in 1 to 6 months, but all reported that they had been there at least a year to two and half years. The length of time was exacerbated by the poor conditions.

Focus E15, on behalf of residents, requested to speak at a public Council meeting, known as a deputation, to formally and publicly present the legal complaint. At a public deputation on July 15, 2019, four single mothers, and Zahra, current and past residents of Brimstone House, formally presented the legal complaint to Newham Council. [81] Each woman took turns testifying to the mayor, her cabinet, and to the public, the effects and conditions of living in temporary accommodation. Ijeoma, a young British Nigerian woman who I discuss in Chapter 3, pleaded that the legal complaint should not be "pushed into the long grass", because Brimstone residents had already spent months and years in their current situations. To be asked to be patient was thus "beyond the resilience required of any individual". Brianna, another single mother who I discuss in the next chapter, emphasized that having a stable, secure and decent home was a central demand of the legal complaint: "We as residents of Brimstone House doesn't (sic) have that, our children doesn't (sic) have that". She went on to say that as residents of Brimstone House, they lived in constant worry about when and where they were going be rehoused. As residents who had refused to be moved into more temporary accommodation or relocated out of London, despite pressure to accept what was offered, they were at risk of becoming labelled intentionally homeless. As Brianna said: "How do we cope as parents seeing our children being deeply traumatized by the stress that we have to live through and being powerless to even help ourselves? This is not what Newham stands for."

In her unscripted statement, Ayo, eight months pregnant, took the microphone and pleaded with the Mayor, seated amongst her cabinet in front of a hall full of constituents. She noted that instead of acting on her concerns, the Council had told her to "deal" with the situation, as other families were facing similar problems. Ayo insisted that she was different from other families and that what she was going through was different, but no one was listening to her.

[80] The document recorded that there were 210 units with an estimated 600 residents with the majority of households made up of families. The average stay for residents was 1.5 years despite the council stating that the accommodation should only be 3-6 months. Residents complained about the lack of accountability and confusion about where to report maintenance needs, with many residents reporting that their requests for repairs went ignored. Several residents reported injuries to childing as a result of these ignored maintenance requests, as well as exacerbating health conditions such as anxiety and asthma due to mold and damp. There were only eight washing machines for the 210 units in the building. Residents reported that the machines were moldy, and the washing room had problems with pests. The complaint also registered frustration with the security, that residents had visitors turned away, visitors had to give reasons for their visit, and the security described as "generally oppressive". I explore some of these issues in the following chapter. They also reported a general confusion around the housing register, with many residents reporting that they had a difficult time communicating with officers about the bidding system and their bidding numbers, or were taken off the bidding list without notice or explanation. Brianna, who I discuss in Chapter 3, said that she had been unable to bid for several years because she was misreported as incarcerated.

[81] I introduced Zahra in the introduction as one of the young girls that gave me a tour of the flat she shared with her disabled mother and older sister.

"They just want to get rid of me!" she cried out over the microphone. On the verge of tears, Ayo concluded her emotional testimony:

> *"I just want you to put yourself in my situation, Madame Mayor. If I were to be your daughter, or your relative, would you just be looking at me staying in a second floor, with children, [she starts crying] I am heavily pregnant, there's nobody to stay with me. I don't know anybody. I am feeling so sad. I am under depression. I am just about 6 weeks to have my child and these people…they don't want to listen to me.*
>
> *It's really sad. I have no home. I really hope something will happen within the next 6 weeks because I am fed up and I am tired of it. If anything happens to me, it's under Newham. Because I have told them my situation and what I am going through and they don't want to listen to me."*

Ayo pleaded for the Mayor and the councillors present to understand the urgency of her situation, that what was happening to her demanded accountability. I contrast Ayo's speech at the public deputation with the email to illustrate the various ways in which Ayo attempted to call attention to her situation. Her testimony during the deputation contrasted with the formality of the email, demanding that the Mayor and everyone present imagine her suffering—standing on the second floor with her children and no help. While the email perhaps did not convey a sufficient sense of the urgency needed to bring the Council's attention to her situation, her testimony in front of the mayor and public was a last resort attempt to elicit accountability. What happened to her after, she said, was on Newham Council.

Like many, Ayo's experiences can be understood as a kind of crisis of ordinariness (Berlant), the everyday struggles that are "uneventful", lacking the inflammatory impact of crisis. Instead, her experiences make up the normalized and unexceptional incapacitation in the ordinariness of housing insecurity—that is, until she attempted to make them cohere into something more "eventful" in the narrative we co-construct in the letter to the Council, in her speech at the deputation, and in her testimony through the legal complaint. Through these complaints we attempt to produce an event as a "time-framed phenomenon", as opposed to what Lauren Berlant refers to as the "domain of living on", the rhythms, textures, potentialities, disjunctures, episodes or scenes, that constitute the everyday ordinariness of life "while not changing much of anything" (2011, 759). Elizabeth Povinelli refers to these as "quasi-events", or the forms of life that "never quite achieve the status of having occurred or taken place" (2011, 13). Within these terms, Ayo's complaint around the stairs didn't quite elicit the response she required. Povinelli, for this reason reflects on the quasi-event to understand that stakes of what conditions are, or are not, "aggregated and thus apprehended, evaluated, and grasped as ethical and political demands" (13). As opposed to the eventfulness of a crisis or catastrophe, quasi-events don't elicit the same kind of ethical imperative, reflection, engagement but when they do, nothing consequential happens.

"Not this"

What happens between the "not changing much of anything" of the quasi-event and the "not much of anything happens" once it is aggregated into a crisis? As I have tried to illustrate, the "injury" of this institutional neglect is ongoing—through the experience of waiting, in the spatial-temporal encounters of everyday life. For Berlant and Povinelli, to focus on the episodes

or scenes of everyday life is to take seriously the lethality of what Berlant refers to as "slow death", in its own terms. As an ethical position, it aims to take seriously the forms of life that emerge in the aftermaths of capitalism's ruin, rhythms or engagements with life that may not correspond to normative aspirations. Following Berlant, anthropologists have examined the "cruel optimism" of societal attachments to normative trajectories by attending to the ways in which the impossibility of fulfilling these aspirations generates different kinds of rhythms of survival or alternative socialities (Allison 2013; Wool 2015; Wool and Livingston 2017). This form of ethical and ethnographic attention demands recognition that emergent attachments and socialities can provoke the need for reimagining an ethics of care entirely. For example, Lisa Stevenson argues that discourses of suicide among Inuit youth "echoed" the colonial discourse of public health", in which a politics of care oriented to the preservation of life reproduced a colonial biopolitics that felt "murderous" (Stevenson 2014, 17). Stevenson writes that "presuming the value of life, staging it as the ultimate good, could be as dangerous as negating it" (2014, 11). Therefore, despite the rates of suicide, ethnographic work in this context demanded reflecting on forms of persistence that didn't conform and cooperate to her desires (oriented towards life) and instead generated a consideration of a "mournful form of care" that allowed for "new forms of life to exist" (18). These are affective attachments that may not necessarily "feel good", or what we normatively attribute to be "good", but nevertheless are exemplary of the societal and ethical possibilities of living "otherwise", outside of normative attachments to progress, life etc. Povinelli (2011) writes that this kind of "sociology of potentiality", the persistence of living otherwise and the endurance of the possibilities that do or do not emerge from it, requires understanding these "social projects" within their own terms, without making them conform to the spectacular or the crisis.[82] Perhaps by meditating on the significance of the stairs and stitches themselves necessitate a different kind of ethical response than perhaps offered by the Council. The difficulty lines in considering ethical and political frames that don't perpetuate the liberal impulses that might feel murderous.

Ethnographically, what might this look like? Both Povinelli and Veena Das (2015) consider what it means ethnographically and methodologically to attend to the quasi-events or ordinary life that is "evented" to apprehend forms of suffering and abandonment that persist or evade capture. Das outlines in her text *Affliction* (2015) a subtle but nonetheless, significant, point of disagreement with Povinelli—that ethnographic description, while able to contribute to discussions of the structural, and ideological, conditions of abandonment but can limit ethnographic accountings of how it "unfolds" in the everyday lives of people and communities. As Das argues, Povinelli is "intimately engaged" with her interlocutors but ethnographically "refuses to yield to her readers" (Das 14). Das outlines her disagreement by reflecting on Povinelli's story of a schoolteacher who visits the house of an elderly Indigenous woman dying of oral cancer to illustrate where both writers diverge. As Das argues, Povinelli's descriptions of the schoolteacher's shock and disgust transform this scene into an event through the school teacher's gaze. Rather than stay with the unfolding of the quasi-event, Das argues, Povinelli "halts the ethnographic description", turning the focus from the everyday by introducing this institutional gaze of the state as the "privileged organ of seeing" (13). Das suggests that while Povinelli's approach tell us about processes of "mediatization, creation of a scandal, and mobilization of a new public by manipulation of affects, [….] it cannot tell us how and when a

[82] Povinelli understands potentiality as "between striving to preserve and any actual idea or action that emerges from this action" that is "socially constituted and materially distributed" (2011, 128). As Povinelli reflect to "*persist* in potentiality, we must *endure* it as a space, a materiality, and a temporality" (2011, 128).

young man is abandoned or a mother gives up trying to shore up a deteriorating relation with her son" (Das 2015, 15). Fundamentally, for Das, this ethnographic shift away from the "register" of the everyday day means sacrificing an "ethnographic unfolding" (2015: 13). Rather than turn away at the doorway, Das proposes that anthropology as a "dwelling science" can provide an opportunity to understand how the quasi-event unfolds: "I want my reader to enter the doorway and not turn away after a first impression" (Das 2015, 16).

This point of disagreement illustrates an epistemological disagreement in how to write about the violence and suffering of social abandonment that don't quite have the quality of crisis. Das points to Clara Han's (2012) concept of "critical moments" as an example of how theory can emerge from ethnographic attention to the intimate unfoldings of everyday life. For Han, attending to the intimate life of a household demonstrates how greater economic processes (i.e. reorganization of labor regimes, expansion of systems of consumer credit, and changing consumer practices) can have "evented" repercussions on the urban poor. In Han's work, focusing on critical moments between kin, partners, and neighbors allowed for an ethnographic method and theory from which generated a different perspective on how national economic changes complexly entangled with precarious relations of care. In her contribution to the debate between Povinelli and Das, Han writes that she resisted turning to notions of abandonment, as used by Povinelli and others, that reduced the experiences of social abandonment as simply the effects of neoliberal markets and values. By understanding how relations were made or undone, how hardships were felt and dispersed amongst kin or neighbors through practices of credit and debt, Han argues, can "expand our perceptive range on the subtleties of relationships and material pressures that may or may not be perceptible under a notion of abandonment" (Han 2013).

Understood broadly, Das, Han and Povinelli share an essential agreement—the insistence that dwelling with others is to take seriously the dispersed suffering of everyday life as a condition of persistence and potentiality. As I understand it, where they diverge is in their approach to the foundational question concerning the role of ethnography and the possibilities it holds for "striving against" the violence of the social. While Das and Han offer important reflections on the possibilities of ethnography as a "dwelling science", I am equally compelled by Povinelli's provocations surrounding the political and ethical question raised in her discussion of the Ursula Le Guin's "The One's Who Walk Away from Omelas". In this short fictional story, "Omelas" describes a city in which the happiness and well-being of its people are dependent on a small child's confinement to a small broom closet—a child, naked and abandoned in its own excrement that is known by all inhabitants of the city. By reflecting on the child's suffering, Povinelli uses this dystopian story discuss the paradox of empathic identification in neoliberal governmentality, and the "practical relationship of subjects to the unequal distribution of life and death" in late liberalism (2011, 3). As Povinelli reflects, every member of this society must take a position between their own personal happiness, the happiness of others, and the suffering of a small child. The recognition that the "good life" of citizens of the Omelas is tied inextricably to the child in the broom closet demands an ethical imperative. But as Povinelli reflects, the ethical imperative in this story isn't generated from liberal empathy: citizens putting themselves in the child's shoes, or from the "anxiety of potentially being put in her place" (4).

As I discussed previously, homelessness produces a similar ethical imperative that is contingent on the epistemological divide between housing and homelessness that imagines them as being distinct problems and therefore demanding different interventions. As Kelly Knight (2015) writes, the knowledge production of homelessness produces homeless subjects as

biopolitical projects through individualized interventions—submitting them to what was socially constituted as care within the dictates of liberal empathy. To borrow from Knight, this "vulturistic" relationship demanded a reflection of how the social sciences, as well as societally, our positionality in relation to the problem. Homelessness has been designated a sociological category and a humanitarian problem, one that can be addressed through individualized biopolitical intervention and humanitarian provisions. This designation has produced epistemological and ontological distinctions through which reciprocal and moral relations of aid (those that donate or provide aid and recipients of welfare and humanitarian aid) are naturalized. The urgency and ethical imperative generated around crisis, scholars write, have informed the very subjects of study of the social sciences. Yet, by becoming knowable categories, the tactics necessary for transforming the uneventful to the visible and eventful produce a paradox—in which making the quasi-event conform to the "spectacular event and its ethical dictates of empathic identification" means not being able to understand that form of suffering within its own terms ("its dailiness, ordinariness, livedness") (Povinelli 2011, 153). Knight's ethnographic study argues that while different social services providers all took an ethical stance towards the problem, pregnant and addicted women nevertheless differentially suffered the "heavy burden of the heightened morbidity and mortality" (213). Within the parameters of and prescriptions of liberal empathy, interventions can exacerbate the exact problems they propose to alleviate—a paradox that produces a stalemate where not much of anything changes.[83] It is through this reflection that I consider Povinelli's refusal to "yield" her interlocutors to her reader, a skeptical refusal to engage in the anti-politics of liberal empathy.

So, Das and Povinelli move towards similar, though quite distinct, conclusions by different means. Das and Han don't want their readers to turn away at the doorway after a first impression so that we that might "expand our perceptive range" (Han 18) to a method of attending to everyday life in which theory emerges from how people "strive to bring about a different everyday" (Das 24). For Das, this method takes the form of ethnographic descriptions that stay with ordinary life as a series of unfoldings—"at the risk of making the reader lost in the ethnographic descriptions". Indeed, as their respective works make clear, this ethnographic approach cautions against ethnographic theorizing that reduces the nuances of everyday life to tidy conclusions. While Povinelli's refusal to "yield" her interlocutors to her readers is a practice in the "suspicion of the ethics of empathy" that is predicated on imagining ourselves in someone else's shoes. More than that, this position reveals the limits of liberal empathy, with its conditional solidarity and compassion, to generate a liberatory politics.

Alternatively, as Povinelli argues, LeGuin's story offers a provocation to recognize that the good life (and the life you have grown accustomed to "thinking of as 'yours'") is inextricably tied to the diffused suffering of the child in the broom closet. The ethical imperative instead might be generated in the radical possibilities of the "not this" that the ones who walk away from Omelas offer. As Povinelli reflects, LeGuin is not prescriptive. Her story leaves open the radical

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[83] This is the paradox of crisis—it can generate moral economies (Fassin 2011) of care and compassion that appear to be universal or self-evident, therefore lending it moral legitimacy as it appears to be outside of power. Miriam Ticktin (2011) refers to the dual effects of regimes of care, such as humanitarianism, as a form of "armed loved" where compassion can also "act as a form of policing" that operates as an anti-politics. As Povinelli similarly reflects, after the waters of the tsunami recede and the earth stops shaking after an earthquake, "empathy also evaporates," as the imperative to act returns to "doxic accounts of poverty, its causes and consequence" (2011, 162)—and in effect marks a return to socially-mediated assessments of failure, cost, etc. Because, as Povinelli reflects, what we consider care to consist of is contingent on "where we believe failure resides or what we believe failure consists of" (2011, 160).

alternatives made possible by this act, by not disclosing where those that walk away go. LeGuin's open-ended possibility rather can be understood as a silence that reproduces the "bracketing" of the child's suffering that is "part and parcel how power operates" in late liberal society. Instead, it could be understood as a radical possibility: "'Not this' makes a difference even if it does not immediately produce a propositional otherwise" (191). This story offers a reminder that while we must interrogate the "lethal conditions of late liberal society", we also need to question and interrogate our attachments to "certain modes of time, eventfulness, and ethics" that may find themselves aligned with regimes of care and accountability that "feel murderous" (Stevenson 2014).

The Hugging Mayor

Ayo's call to the mayor to see her standing at the top of the stairs, to imagine the suffering she must be enduring was in a sense calling on this ethical gesture—provoking liberal empathy that called on the mayor to put herself in Ayo's position. For Ayo, this was a last resort attempt to elicit the Council's recognition that had so far been unsuccessful—one last attempt to place both her present suffering and the potential of something worse in the hands of Newham Council. At the end of the speech, Mayor Fiaz walked over to Ayo and brought her a chair and glass of water—appearing concerned and affected by Ayo's testimony in particular. Yet, despite Ayo's demand that the mayor imagine what she must be going through attempted to elicit an affective response, not much of anything changed.

As campaigners had speculated early on in my research, Fiaz had been proving to be an unexpected challenge—primarily because she appeared to care. While Fiaz's predecessor, Robin Wales, had been antagonistic to their campaign, Fiaz's election into office had been a victory for local activists in successfully removing Wales from office, but also signaled the possibility of change. During a public meeting a few months prior to the deputation, Joanne emphasized that they needed to "keep the pressure up and struggle together" because so far it had been easy for the Council to divide and rule. The Council was addressing individual cases put forward by Focus by rehousing some, while others were left to wait. This approach by the Council, of putting out individual fires, was generating frustration amongst residents of Brimstone House who were still working with Focus E15 and waiting to be rehoused: it was hard to be happy for someone's success when you were still uncertainly waiting.

The meeting then turned back to Anne, a Focus campaigner, who recounted an incident at the housing office as she accompanied a young Muslim woman and her children, who had been threatened with relocation outside of London. With help from Focus, the young woman contacted the new mayor about her case. The mayor responded that the Council could not make exceptions for a single family, but with pressure from Focus E15 on social media and after a meeting with the mayor, Brimstone residents in attendance (including the young mother) had been promised better outcomes to their cases. Despite these promises, Anne recounted how at a review meeting with a housing officer, the young woman was told that there would be no changes to her situation: her best recommendation was to go take out a loan, find a private landlord that would take her and use the loan to pay for the deposit—or move out of London. They were kicked out of the meeting room. As Anne described it: "and of course, she's one worker, a cog in this crap system. And she really holds no power. So you're debating with someone who can't do anything anyway." But rather than leave the housing office defeated, Anne recalled how the young mother adamantly refused to leave until her situation was

resolved—so they sat in the housing office for seven hours. What started as a regular housing office meeting had turned into a spontaneous protest. While they waited in the lobby, a campaign member tweeted about the quiet protest on social media. As it turned out: the Mayor had been monitoring her social media feed and not long after, "everyone appeared out of the woodwork," including the Mayor herself. They were treated "like royalty". Anne recounted how they went from being ignored to being important people: "meanwhile everyone else was going through their normal meetings and being treated like crap and being told to get out. It was just surreal." The mayor spent half an hour in the waiting room with the children while the meeting carried on. In the end, the resident was not given a Council home, but was at least secured a long-term tenancy in the private rental sector, as opposed to being moved outside of London or having her case dismissed entirely. As Anne concluded telling the story, she turned to the resident and reflected: "And people kept saying to you to stop being upset, which I found extraordinary. Well, you've been through all this, and of course you're going to be upset. And just because someone now says they're going to help, it doesn't mean it goes away, you know?"

As those in attendance considered the differences between this mayor and their previous opponent, a graduate student writing her dissertation on the campaign reflected that the dangerous thing about Focus was its power: "It's that it's not just an advocacy group, right? You're pointing out structural injustices and fighting that through particular cases. It sounds to me that what Rokshana is doing is pushing Focus to be an advocacy group. And I think that's how she's trying to pull out the teeth…the fangs of the campaign. And I think that's so fucking clever." There were general nods of agreement, and Joanne added enthusiastically "We won't have our fangs pulled out by our hugging mayor!"

At the time of this public meeting, Fiaz had only been in office for around seven months. Since her election, she had met with Focus E15 and Brimstone Residents, where they reported that she had responded emotionally to their testimonies with tears, hugs, and promises of change. The hugging mayor, they suspected, whether genuine or performative, was perhaps neutralizing the affective power of the campaign; initially it did have an unsettling effect on how to strategize their protests. Sir Robin Wales, Fiaz's predecessor, who held the position of Mayor of Newham for twenty years, was a clear villain in the campaign's rhetoric. After having an obviously antagonistic villain from which they could generate productive political momentum from the anger he provoked, this new compassionate and hugging mayor was presenting a new political and affective challenge. Nevertheless, as they had begun observing not long after Fiaz's election—the tears and the hugs were only followed by promises that *might* only become concrete in some distant future, and even then might hold little resemblance to what had been originally demanded. Meanwhile, campaigners speculated about when these promises would be realized—a future anterior postponement in which Ayo and others continued waiting.

Reflection

In this chapter, I describe the letters, stitches, ignored doctors' notes, the choices that aren't choices, and the appeals to illustrate the varied ways in which Ayo experienced this social and embodied injury, in the anticipation and anxiety, as they reverberated across different spaces and time. In the taxi, waiting for the possibility of another home, this one at least on the ground floor, Ayo recounted the reality of what she had anticipated. The words that Ayo wrote to the Council did not register the intensity of her anticipation—of the looming birth of her third child, the stitches, the milk, the everyday isolation, the anxiety of caring for three children, the repeated pain in her pelvis as she climbed up and down the stairs, how daily decisions to care for her

children agitated her wounds even further. These experiences point to the ways in which displacement produced both embodied and social wounds, both of which caused her deep distress, but that didn't change "much of anything". Instead, they cohered in the spaces of ordinary life and that accrued in the fleshy memory of the body—like the repetition of Ayo going up and down the stairs. Nevertheless, the affective and embodied matter of these experiences provided the aggregated substance, in the letter and the complaint, through which Ayo connected her experience of temporary accommodation, displacement, and repeated and reverberating woundings endured during her housing situations. Prior to the birth of her child, prior to the stitches that she described to me in the taxi, her injury and the anticipation of further injury, nothing was resolved. While the medical note recommending that she live somewhere more accessible might have made a difference, it didn't make a difference in the short term. It was only after her birth, when her household went from three to four, a household calculation, that the Council was required to provide her and her children with accommodation that was suitable for her family size. At the very least—this one was a little more accessible and a little closer to Newham, but nevertheless, still temporary.

Figure 11. "The Ear of Newham Council Connected to a Brick Wall" by artist Andrew Cooper and Focus E15 (Carolina Talavera)

Chapter 3: Impossible Demands

Rob England, don't let this England rob you.

—- The Receipts Podcast

I was late to the house viewing, even though I had left as soon as Joanne had texted me the address. Rushing out of the station, I immediately observed that this part of East Newham was clearly undergoing regeneration. As I walked quickly, I passed new modern buildings with signs advertising luxury apartments available for purchase at prices that were far beyond what most residents of Newham could afford. The further from the station I walked, the more chain stores like Tesco's and Costa Café's (the largest grocery and coffee chains in the UK) gave way to more local corner shops (small local grocers in mainly residential areas) — markers of the shifting class dynamics of regeneration and gentrification.

With only 45 minutes' notice, Joanne had texted me that she and Brianna were going to a last-minute apartment viewing with one of Newham's senior cabinet members, John Gray. Despite leaving as soon as they called, I was still nearly jogging through the streets, only to get there ten minutes late. When I arrived, I continued calling them repeatedly to let me in, eventually getting through to Joanne who hurriedly shouted over the second-story balcony that I needed to be buzzed in. I arrived at the flat a little out of breath and walked into the doorway where the senior councillor, a social worker, a housing officer, the landlord, Joanne, and Brianna stood awkwardly in the small entryway already past the small talk and mid-conversation. I came in as the senior councillor, a white middle-aged and middle-class man, was in the middle of telling Brianna that she wasn't the only person on the waiting list and that Newham currently had "28,000 other people waiting for that property".

"I understand that," Brianna said to him. "There's a *process,"* the senior councillor emphasized. The awkward tension hung in the air as Brianna insisted that though everyone had their own circumstances, she was demanding her situation be considered at this present moment. What Brianna was asking for was a Council home with a long-term tenancy that would bring an end to the housing transience she had already endured. A twelve-month tenancy in the private sector, which was what the Council were currenting offering her, would most certainly not provide that security. Barely making eye contact with Brianna, the senior councillor repeatedly stated that there was a "process" and that as it stood in the moment, Brianna would not be offered social housing anytime soon. "Based on?" Brianna was never placated with such vague deferrals to the "system". "Based on your assessment, *which* I'm not party to." His response attempted to make clear to all of us that he was not involved in the specifics of her case. Gray, as a senior official, did not generally attend housing viewings like this, but he and the Mayor of Newham had become involved as a direct result of Focus E15 campaigning around Brianna's situation.

"But that was in the past! This was over a year now. So many things happened in a year. Within a year I was hospitalized several times. My medical was done from 2016, and still I'm standing here in 2019, still not being rehoused. Still arguing to be rehoused in decent, affordable housing in my borough." Brianna had expressed to me the psychological struggle of living in

insecurity. Living in Brimstone had negatively affected her mental health, resulting in panic attacks and as she said to Gray, including several hospitalizations. Yet, Brianna's insistence to be seen at that moment and for her situation to be considered was met with a deferral: "There are thousands of people like you, Brianna….There are thousands…". The senior councillor trailed off as Brianna continued to argue that she had lived in Newham for 10 years: "I don't understand…what…why do I have to fight!"

From where I was standing in the doorway, it was a nice two-story flat in a nice and well-kept building. It was spacious, clean and had plenty of light, a dramatic change from the small and boxy studio flat she currently shared with her daughter. It also looked like a vast improvement from the photos Brianna had shown me of the previous flat she had been offered: a filthy oven, cracked walls, broken locks, disgusting bathroom, and old stained mattresses. This place was clean, spacious and the landlady seemed nice. By all accounts, the place was a winner in the housing lottery: good condition, recently painted, lots of light and room, and within the range of local housing allowance (LHA) —meaning that under the new benefits system, Universal Credit, her rent would be covered by housing benefit so long as she was completing her studies and unemployed. With housing credit from the state, the offer was a good deal compared to what I was having to pay in the private rental market.[84] At that time, my partner and I were paying about $2,500 USD a month for a tiny "1-bedroom" (the bedroom was more of a closet that could only fit the size of the double mattress) basement conversion flat in North London that received very little natural light and was frustratingly small for two people living in it. Not immune to London's precarious housing market, it was also our fourth apartment in a period of 18 months. Guiltily, I often had to suppress initial feelings of jealousy when I glimpsed offer letters with the low monthly rents of Council-procured tenancies which could range anywhere from £100-200 per week.[85] Nevertheless, for most, weekly variations to their universal credit could make covering the cost of their housing uncertain.

The offer was also conditional — as soon as she stopped being a student and started working, she would have to earn enough to cover rent herself. Brianna's refusal of the property wasn't because it was unsuitable. She knew that by accepting the property the Council was placing her in a different precarious situation. Going back into the private rental sector meant that Brianna could not guarantee that when she completed her studies, that she would continue to receive housing benefit or find employment that paid enough to cover the rent, this precarity would inevitably place her at risk of eviction, again. "What makes you think the problem will end moving into this property now?" Brianna already knew this because she had lived this insecurity before—what she had been demanding was permanent Council housing. Gray continued to insist that Brianna look at the "bigger picture" and that her demands were incompatible with the "process" by which housing was allocated in the borough. By reciting the current homelessness list, 1 in 28,000, Gray was trying to implore Brianna that if she did not accept the generous offer it would be passed on to the next person in the queue.

Gray was clearly exasperated with Brianna, many times appearing tired of the conversation going in circles—but this also wasn't their first meeting. He pleaded to Brianna that this was an imperfect situation, "we can all agree on that", but that this was the "better option".

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[84] LHA is a calculation that determines how much housing benefit a person who is living in private rental accommodation is entitled to receive. This benefit calculation was a standardized benefit that varied by region and local rental market. For this postcode, the LHA two-bedroom rate was calculated at £299.18 per week, or $377.55 USD per week.

[85] Given current exchange rates in British Pound Sterling (GBP) these rates convert to about $130-250 USD.

But throughout the encounter, it was as though they were speaking past each other—he spoke about Newham's housing problem, and Brianna countered with repeated demands that he focus on her: "This is my concern. The fact that you're looking at the wider picture and you're not willing to look into *my* personal circumstances**."** Brianna here was asking not for a statistical analysis of a housing crisis but demanding that the particularities of her situation be considered, to recognize that this offer wasn't the better option.

When the meeting ended, there was no resolution. Brianna was offered some time to consider the offer, but it was clear on our walk back to the tube station that she was probably not going to accept the offer. With her housing case still uncertain, we stood outside the station chatting about her schoolwork as well as the training program she was enrolled in. She told me about her family back in Jamaica, and about the recent death of her aunt: "my aunt died of stress… stress kills, you know". It was a statement, not a question. A recognition of the toll this housing stress had taken on her own body and health. She knew that this endless cycle of housing, not homes, was detrimental to her long-term health. She repeated something I heard her say at various points during my fieldwork: "it's a death trap".

Throughout this dissertation, I have reflected on the different ways women in temporary accommodation resisted and challenged the conditions of their accommodation, the waiting they were made to endure in those conditions, as well as the way they have perceived the injustice of their situations. What was clear in these interactions between homeless residents of Newham, Council workers, and elected councillors was the disconnect between where failure resided and how success was measured. As this encounter between Brianna and Gray illustrates, while Gray was operating within the perceived structural constraints of housing supply and a growing list of homeless residents, Brianna insisted that though the apartment was decent, it could not guarantee her material or existential security. Her demand for permanent accommodation was framed as impossible.

In this chapter, I present two women, Brianna and Ijeoma, who challenged the Council's attempts to move them into the private rental sector. I place these two women's stories into dialogue to illustrate related but distinct trajectories of the temporary accommodation experience. Drawing on Ijeoma and Brianna's encounter with the Council through housing reviews and through this housing visit, I take seriously the way they each spoke to the structural contradictions of being placed back in the private rental sector. In this way, I contribute to Kelly Knight's discussion of the pressures of poor women in insecure housing as they navigated multiple and competing temporal demands of housing insecurity. It builds on Knight's discussion of how the everyday understanding that bureaucratic technologies attempt to "stabilize problems of temporal incongruity, reifying problems as time-limited events" that simplify and "erase the complexity of temporal demands" on the lives of the urban poor. More than just simplifying, they generate a belief that complex lives can be reduced to "categorical, measurable behaviors" (9). In the context of housing provision that this dissertation focuses, I have noted the different ways in which lives were consolidated and simplified, in which some needs were prioritized over others. As the previous chapter discusses, certain problems related to housing were perceived as less urgent than others, resulting in exposures to injury that were not considered urgent enough. For Knight, paying attention to how women narrated and understood their experiences was necessary for accounting how the incongruity ("limbo state betwixt and between") produced by the competing temporal demands of addiction, housing insecurity, and motherhood created the conditions in which "affective, behavioral, and material choices were structured in ways that felt literally impossible" (10). The sections that follow consider how

Brianna and Ijeoma managed the bureaucracies of homelessness and temporary accommodation, encounters and demands that produced conditions "that felt literally impossible" (10). Yet, to simply frame their experiences solely defined by this "impossibility" would be a disservice to the women that I write about in this dissertation and their willful refusals. Therefore, this chapter reflects on how Brianna and Ijeoma, like others, rejected the logics of the Council, refusing to be comforted by the supposedly "decent" options they were being offered.

While the Council's frame was limited by the logics of homelessness as a "singular" event that could be resolved through temporary provision of a roof, Brianna and Ijeoma both argued that this wasn't enough. For these women, and others, existential security was tied to a material security that could not be afforded by a temporary tenancy. Through their ongoing encounters with the housing office, they both came to understand that what the Council were offering was the satisfaction of its own legal duty, and that it was not necessarily in women's long-term interests. Indeed, their "long-term" was exactly what they were fighting for, and for this reason they both demanded material and existential security—something that the private rental sector could not guarantee. In effect, their refusals spoke to the inherent precarity of temporary housing and the symbiotic relationship between Council homeless provision and the private rental sector—what I came to understand as the "death trap" that Brianna spoke of. In this way, their demands challenged the meaning and the logics of the "decent" housing option—that "decent" housing was unsustainable in the present and could not guarantee the long-term. For Brianna and Ijeoma, their refusals to be pressured, persuaded, and ignored were central to the ways in which they navigated their experiences of housing insecurity and its management. As I reflected in the introduction, there are two ways of understanding the impossible demand of secure housing that Brianna and Ijeoma were insisting on. First, as a bargaining position from which they could leverage better outcomes from the Council than what was being offered. Second, to understand the impossible demand as an in insistence to see and move beyond the conditions of possibility, to push beyond what was possible. This chapter considers the impossible demand in these two ways.

Ijeoma

Ijeoma, a Nigerian-British woman in her late 20s, grew up in Council housing in Newham so when she went to the Council while pregnant with her first child, she believed that the Council would help her secure Council housing through the housing register. As she described herself, she was a hard worker, had been saving money and doing all the right things and never imagined herself to be in the position that she had once criticized. "I was conditioned to think it was ok to be this hard on people." After her own experience, she said her views on the system had changed, believing that England had become more "antagonistic" and that the benefits system could no longer be considered a "safety-net". "I should receive a Council house not because of my contributions in the past but because of what I feel Britain should be in terms of helping me out."

In 2017, she became pregnant and wanted to move out of London, but the father of her child wanted her to stay in London. Yet when she tried to find housing through the private rental sector on her own, she was turned away—maternity pay, they said, would not be enough to cover the cost of rent. After going to the Council to seek homeless support, she said described the process as "longwinded" and complex after which she had to wait four weeks before having a housing officer visit her to confirm her homeless status. Ijeoma moved into Brimstone House in

April of 2018. She said that at first, she thought it would be "amazing"—Brimstone was the first place she lived in away from home. "I felt…I don't want to say prison because it's so extreme but it felt segregated." As she reflected on life in Brimstone, she said that not long after she moved in she began to see the cracks and the failures—this wasn't acceptable in 21st century London, she said. Once her son was born, she felt it was unsafe because of chips and cracks in the flooring, exposed wires, limited ventilation, and circulation, forcing her to restrict his crawling space and be constantly vigilant. I asked her if it felt like home for her. "In my ideal home, I've always wanted to live in a one-story house, with a garden. At the moment I feel like everything is all in one space. I'm living in a box. It's meant to be temporary, but because there's no end in sight, I can't call it home."

The following sections describe the process Ijeoma went through in refusing an offer of housing made by the Council after living in Brimstone house for over a year. As the scenes that I describe in the following sections illustrate, Ijeoma was refusing them both because they were unsuitable for her family but also because they did not provide her with a guarantee of long-term security. By outlining these ethnographic moments with housing officers, I reflect on how Ijeoma spoke to the paradox and structural cyclicality of housing provision while also expressing frustration that her concerns were disregarded over the housing office's assessments. Moreover, they exemplify the subtle and sometimes overt policing that homeless applicants experienced through their encounters with the housing officer.

Discharged

We sat across the desk from two housing officers, older black women, in one of the many sterile rooms of the housing office, with a clear plastic barrier separating us. The officer leading the meeting looked at Ijeoma and tried to explain her options: "If you're happy for us to discharge duty, whether or not, you know, you want us to discharge duty, you will request a review, then the reviewer will look at your case. If at the end of the review, the outcome is in your favor, then your case will be reopened. That means that the property is not suitable. But where the review is in our favor, where we upheld the review decision, that means your case remains closed. But again, the other option is for you to sign the tenancy where you still request a review. If the review is in your favor, then they would move you from that property. If the review is not, then that means the property is suitable for you. And you have to remain there. We are now at the stage where we want you to make a decision. What do you want to do?"

After sitting in the housing office for thirty minutes going back and forth with the housing officer, these were the options. I sat next to Ijeoma, trying my best to take notes of what they were saying. Ijeoma explained to the officer, again, that she was refusing this offer on the grounds that the space was unsuitable for a child but also that if and when her financial circumstances changed with employment, she would still not be able to afford the lease. Her concern was that when she got a job, her housing benefit supplement would be readjusted to account for her new income, and therefore the lease would be difficult to pay. Ijeoma firmly said, no, she would not be accepting the offer. The housing officer said that the Council would discharge their duty of care and asked her if she understood what that meant. Ijeoma responded that if they did discharge their duty, she would take it up with the mayor. "I have been told by the mayor that I have the right to refuse." It had been a few months since Ijeoma and some of the mothers in Focus had stood in front of the mayor and her cabinet at a public deputation, to present the legal complaint regarding the living conditions of Brimstone House. After a private

meeting with some residents and Focus, the mayor had made promises that things would be different from then on. Knowing she had the support of the Mayor and Focus E15, Ijeoma stood firm and reiterated that she could not accept because the rent was unaffordable. The officer asked her if she could currently afford her temporary accommodation.[86] Ijeoma explained that, no, she could not—with her current debts, even now she couldn't afford the temporary accommodation the Council was providing her.[87]

"Ok, that's the problem," the officer responded. "With regard to multiple debts: we are not going to take everyone's debts into consideration in making offers. For every offer that we make…." Ijeoma cut her off, this was exactly her concern—the offer was for a twelve-month tenancy and after twelve months she would stop being a Council tenant and become a private tenant. "Will that landlord renew my contract based on my poor credit history, based on the fact that I'm a single mother, based on the fact that…" As she had already experienced, private landlords had refused her applications because of her credit history. In twelve months, when the lease needed to be renewed, they could not guarantee that the rent wouldn't rise or that the landlord wouldn't refuse to renew her contract without the LHA subsidy. The housing officer disagreed, clarifying that this was different from a private rental sector tenancy agreement. Though she didn't explain in what way it would be different, when Ijeoma asked to review the terms of the lease before accepting, she was told that to see the lease she would have to accept the offer first. Without that information, we could only assume that Ijeoma would go back to being a private tenant in twelve months, thereby putting her back in an insecure housing situation once again. You could always come back to the Council, the officer insisted, if the landlord served notice of a raise in rent or did not renew—confirming the inherent precarity of the private rental sector. "If you've discharged duty, how do I seek recourse?" Ijeoma asked her. The office insisted again: "You can always come back to the Council!"

This kind of cycle was exactly what Ijeoma was concerned about –if she was discharged, any kind of tenancy in the private rental sector increased her risk of going back into temporary accommodation in twelve months. "What is the point of that?", she asked. The officer instead insisted that this was the same for everyone, citing the Council's duty of care listed on the website: "You can always come back to the Council!" Another officer who had been quietly sitting there, except for the occasional loud disruptive cough, tried to reassure Ijeoma that in most cases if the tenant was not in arrears, the landlord would renew the lease. "That's my point!" The discussion moved in circles, but Ijeoma insisted that the estimates of what her universal credit would cover to pay rent were just that, estimates. They provided no guarantees that she wouldn't struggle to pay rent and inevitably fall into arrears that would compromise her housing situation when it came time to renew. "I can't gamble my future based on what you are promising me today. It's not concrete enough." Ijeoma said (to no one in particular) that she felt like she was being forced into this decision: while they insisted on the suitability of the housing according to their calculations and estimates, she wanted the conversation to be about the stability of the housing situation beyond a twelve-month lease. The two officers shook their heads, suggesting that they were only trying to encourage her to come to a decision*:* "We're giving you an option, we're not forcing you. It's your decision." Ijeoma was clearly frustrated, and she responded resentfully, still feeling like the options she was being provided were not really options. "I know my circumstances; I know I won't be able to afford it. Regardless of what

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[86] Temporary accommodation was not free accommodation. It was usually charged on a nightly or weekly basis, and despite housing benefit often was a financial burden for many.
[87] Ijeoma was paying about £190.58 per week for her stay in Brimstone House.

you feel…" One of the officers attempted to diffuse the tension, reiterating that this wasn't about what they believed but what was in her best interest. Nevertheless, they told her to make a decision: either to accept the offer and request a review, or be evicted from her current TA residence and be discharged from the Council's care.

Ijeoma refused the housing offer and requested a review process with the Council to determine whether the officer had discharged her lawfully. Had Joanne and I, representatives of Focus E15, not been present there with Ijeoma, she most likely would have been pressured into accepting with the promise that she could request a review after moving in. Perhaps our presence, and knowing she had the support of the campaign, emboldened Ijeoma to refuse the offer there and then. Nevertheless, the housing office would allow her to stay in Brimstone House while the Council reviewed the case and her reasons for refusing the housing offer—a symbolic eviction that nonetheless produced as much uncertainty as a forced eviction. Ijeoma had been surprised that she had been offered something so soon after the legal complaint. What surprised her more was that she was being offered something in the private rental sector, despite her demand to the Mayor that she be offered permanent accommodation. In her statement at the deputation, she had put into question the city of Newham's own mission statements that emphasized instilling "personal resilience" to be able to respond to challenges and have good relationships. The hypocrisy, Ijeoma emphasized, was that these attributes seemed to be missing from the way that Council employees dealt with Newham residents. Residents of Brimstone, she stated, had been met with hostility, intimidation, and were constantly reminded that they were a burden on the Council's resources—and for this reason told that they should accept any help with "undying gratitude".

After the meeting in the housing office, she said to me: "I feel like I'm being punished for the deputation." Ijeoma had held some hope that the public deputation and presentation of the legal complaint might have some effect on the outcome of her situation—but it didn't, at least not in gaining a more favorable outcome. Instead, at the housing office weeks later, she was reminded that if she did face eviction after her 12-month tenancy, she could always come back to the Council if things didn't work out. While many chose to accept this, for Mary, Ayo, Brianna and Ijeoma, this rhetorical ploy did not have the effect they intended it to have. For these women, they knew that this was just an attempt to get another person off the homeless list, and, once they were out of TA, the Council could wipe their hands of any accountability. Their challenges revealed a tension in how success and failure were being measured differently: for the Council, housing Ijeoma in the short-term was a success, while for Ijeoma relying on the Council represented a flaw or a trap that was built into the system. Ijeoma's refusal of this housing offer nevertheless invited intrusive examination of her situation by the Council.

Review

The review process took place over two long meetings with the assigned review officer, who conducted a meticulous survey of the case. The officer, Harry, was an older Black man, who explained that he had come out of retirement to assist the Council with reviews. Sitting in the cold and sterile housing office meeting room, Ijeoma, Joanne and I sat on one side of the cramped room while Harry, on the other side of the plastic barrier, proceeded to enact the review, with painstaking attention the details of her case. The review he had conducted prior to this meeting included an audit of her suitability assessment (i.e. personal finances, accessibility needs, benefits, etc.), which had been used by the Council to assess her housing offer. The

review itself included these assessment tools and other forms of “evidence” (i.e. the offer of accommodation, her reasons for refusing the offer of accommodation, and a review of the housing officer's discharge letter). During the two and half-hour meeting, Ijeoma, with incredible restraint, endured this tortuous interrogation that would determine whether her reasons for refusing the previous offer of accommodation (unaffordable and inappropriate layout) were in fact valid, and, consequently, whether the Council had discharged her inappropriately.

Looking over Ijeoma’s suitability assessment, taken by another housing officer months before, he reviewed basic details about her situation. Have you joined the housing register? Yes, she says. He informed her, as he looked over a document with her bidding history, that while before she had been nowhere near success, recently she had been bidding with a homelessness “preference”, a change in status that she could not see on her side of the system. This change in status, Harry clarified, gave her higher priority. Nevertheless, he clarified that she needed to have nine months of employment before she could successfully bid. Ijeoma had been trying to find stable employment with enough flexibility to enable her to meet her childcare responsibilities. However, any increase in income also had the consequence of reducing how much housing benefit she received that might help her cover rent.

He looked down at the papers in front of him and proceeded to review Ijeoma’s printed bank statement, in which he had marked and highlighted various charges. After looking into her case, he said, it was possible she might receive a rebate for one of her utility bills, possibly for £80 per month. He mentioned another potential rebate for Council tax. At first he said £8-10 a month, but later he said £4 a month; he never clarified which was the right number. Moving on to her outgoings, he moved the papers neatly in front of him: “There are a number of entries I wanted to ask you about…”. He asked her about her monthly phone payment: where did she purchase the contract, what were the terms, etc. He made notes and nodded his head occasionally as she explained. He asked if she needed a phone. She explained that it was the only way for people to contact her. According to the guidelines, he said phones were considered discretionary expenditures, but yes, he added, the Council also recognized that mobile phones were necessary.

Looking down at his documents, he moved on to the next line, her car payments: “Have you considered restructuring your car loan?” “What do you mean?” He clarified: could she go back and renegotiate the monthly payment? Ijeoma explained that when she purchased the car, she had been working and she could afford it. But when things changed, to get a lower monthly payment, she exchanged the car for an older model. With this new information, they spent over ten minutes going over the loan, how much she paid the car and the terms of the exchange. Did she have to buy a hybrid car? He sighed and asked her: “Do you need the car?” “Without it I wouldn’t leave the house,” she replied, “I wouldn’t see my family. It would affect my mental health as it stands right now”. He nodded gently, “I’m asking, that’s all”, accepting her answer and moving on.

Yet, he continued to ask about the car and its value. How much did she buy it for? As she replied with the figures, he wrote them down to calculate. The value of the car was £8000, £2000 for the estimated repair cost of some dents, so the car might sell for £6500 to £7000. Mostly speaking to himself, he speculated that if she could sell the car, that would eliminate her £270 monthly car payment. “Believe me, I’ve considered all this”, Ijeoma responded firmly. Harry replied that for his assessment, he needed to consider it too as he moved on to other car related expenditures.

“£30 in Road Tax. Why are your service costs so high?”

She defended the cost by saying that she took it to the dealership because it was reliable.

"That's a very high expenditure," he replied.

Ijeoma defensively responded that she'd rather consider the safety of her child.

Harry paused before concluding that, according to him, the car payments were "nonessential debts" that she was going to have no matter what her housing situation was. In this review, he had to consider her finances, because she had argued that the cost of the housing she had refused was unaffordable for someone in her financial position. "I have to make a decision here…soon," he said to himself, while looking down at his papers and occasionally looking up at one of us. Ijeoma defended herself by arguing that he was looking at her current situation and not considering the factors that led up to this. "Which is the downside of this system…", she whispered to her herself. From entering the system to the suitability assessment to now, her situation had fluctuated–going from stable employment, maternity leave, being unemployed, eventually finding precarious short-term flexible employment, all the while continuing the search for more stable work while balancing childcare duties. Her finances reflected these inconsistent cash flow rhythms. "It's just one of those things", Harry said to us, explaining that the offer that was made was based on the information submitted at the time of the suitability assessment, and that is what they had to go by.

He moved on as there are some deposits and payments he had to review: £100 bank deposit and another £10 bank deposit. Ijeoma responded that those were in-branch bank deposits, explaining that when she was short on money after paying her bills she would borrow from friends and family. The second deposit was from her sister who contributed to her son's savings account. Though this account mainly served as backup funds when there wasn't enough for electricity bills or food, it was currently empty, she said. Harry noticed another deposit and Ijeoma explained it was a payment from her child's father. "Though he was meant to give me more," she added. There was a pause as he considered the rest of the document. They reviewed the change in child support—not much he said, but he had to consider every new income since the initial suitability assessment.

"Ok there are other things…I'm not going to go in too deep, but they are lifestyle related." Harry listed a few specific purchases:

"Payment to membership fee £29…I'm not sure what that's about."

"Vodafone."

"Amazon."

"There are quite a lot of purchases," he concluded.

Ijeoma took a deep breath, and I could sense she was getting tired: "This was when I got a little money from tax credits and I thought, 'ok let me make the house a little better, a little safer' and purchase these safety things. So ya…that's the last Amazon purchase I've had in a year and half." She said this a little defensively. The membership she explained was when she registered her son for a child modeling agency, hoping to make a little extra, but nothing ever came of it. "It's something I had cash for at the time, and I thought 'ya, let me try it". Harry looked over the documents and considered these responses. "I accept that. Umm…ok… I'm just going to go…I notice you pay Netflix £9.99. Yes, you have to watch…you have to do whatever you have to do to keep yourself calm. Discovery Children £12.30." It's not necessarily a question, but they lingered in the space as judgments. "That was a one-time purchase. A treat for my son," she

shook her head in frustration and scoffed quietly under her breath. We looked at each other shaking our heads at this invasion. Ijeoma was becoming a little defensive as she addressed each of his concerns. The assumption being that Ijeoma was here because of a personal failure, and not a structural one.

He brought up another savings account transfer. How many savings accounts did she have? "I'm trying to understand," he said, because he noticed that she had made certain "one-off" payments to a toy shop, a sporting goods store, and others. That particular month, she tried to explain, she had a rebate or some kind of refund where she admitted that she went on a "spending splurge". Feeling like she needed to defend herself, she said: "In terms of how I've been living since I've been unemployed, this was the only period in my life that I've spent as much as I've had. I admit."

As Ijeoma attended to her son who had been quietly sitting there, Harry rustled through his papers. He acknowledged that the meeting had been long— at that point exceeding two hours. We had already sat through an in-depth discussion of the layout of the flat which Ijeoma believed was unsafe for her son—a ground-floor house with two bedrooms separated by a galley kitchen. She argued with Harry earlier in the meeting that her son was not deterred by child-proofing techniques; thus, not being able to close off the kitchen from access without risking his safety concerned her. Despite her various points, Harry's response was that he had also lived in similar housing layouts with his young children and therefore did not see her concerns. He also offered several suggestions for house-proof items he had found online as suggestions to address her concerns, despite later pointing out charges for similar items on her bank statement. Ijeoma shook her head and said those might work for other children, but not hers, who frequently got past them.

Harry asked Ijeoma, based on the conversation so far: did she still think the accommodation was unaffordable? She did. The numbers that the Council had used to determine that this offer was affordable were just estimates, she repeated. In addition to the unsuitable layout, Ijeoma felt that she couldn't plan for her future without a concrete guarantee that what she would receive in housing benefits could cover the cost of the tenancy. A tenancy in the private sector was inherently insecure, whether it was secured by the Council or not. What would happen to her once she went back to being a "private" tenant and her homeless case was discharged, she asked.

British social anthropologist Deborah James and Samuel Kirwan (2020) argue that in the household accounting practices of citizen's advice agencies (advice centers funded by local authorities), advisors act as conduits between welfare claimants and the local authority. Drawing on a hydraulics metaphor, James and Kirwan illustrate how an adviser can control the floodgates where payments flow out or open up the "taps" to allow payments to leak through—both to help clients in need of help with balancing intersecting issues of welfare overpayment and repayments, as well as debt. They argue that considering a hydraulics metaphor might better account for the ways that advice concerning debt is inseparable from welfare, that is more reflective of "householding" than disciplinary. They highlight that as a local authority funded agency, citizens advice services had a self-interest in helping clients maximize claiming centrally-funded benefits they were entitled to that might redirect more money into the community through rent as a social landlord and through local taxes.[88] James and Kirwan argue

[88] This is in the form of rent, as a social landlord, and through council tax that helps pay for the services they provide. As James and Kirwan write: "While such management of household budgeting increases Local Authority revenue, it also reduces the amount these authorities would be obliged by law to spend on rehousing people should

that these practices of household accounting diverge from scholarly analyses that would frame householding economics as punitively transforming subjects into "nothing more than a 'debtfare' dependent or debt-payer" (682). While their paper provides a useful lens through which to understand the role of Council-funded agencies, such as advice centers, it was not reflective of the housing office experiences of TA residents.

Ijeoma's visits to the housing office illustrate the affective burden of having to navigate the "armed" care of the Council officers, where recommendations are framed as prioritizing her best interest. All the while, Ijeoma's insistence that a permanent Council home was what was in her best interest went ignored. While her demands insisted on the precarious and inevitable cyclicality of the private rental sector, short-term stability was persistently prioritized. Yet the Council did not see this as a problem because, as they repeatedly said, she could always come back to the Council. The hydraulic metaphor might be more aptly applied to the logics of housing provision applied by the housing officers and John Gray earlier in this chapter. Although moving Ijeoma into housing outside of Brimstone was a priority, it was a temporary solution that removed one more person from the homeless register and made space for someone else to occupy her place in Brimstone House. As Ijeoma was suggesting, this was a repetitive and unnecessary loop. Yet, their insistence that Ijeoma and others accept the housing offers that they were given illustrates a tension between what was designated a success or failure: while coming back to the Council was intended to exemplify the "safety-net" of the welfare system, the housing officers and councillors insisted that the option was suitable while also refusing to recognize this inevitability as a condition of a broader systemic failure. This logic merely produced a paradox that reinforced welfare dependency on the safety-net rather than eliminated it. Therefore, success was at the same time the "art of failure"–moving people out of the care of emergency accommodation was prioritized over the structural conditions that produce cycles of security–therefore preserving a fantasy of upward social mobility, the "caring" welfare state and facilitating independence from the state.

As the meeting came to an end, I observed that Harry seemed to be conflicted. He had repeatedly said that where he currently stood in his review decision was "50/50"—meaning that perhaps the Council did not discharge her lawfully, but also perhaps her change in circumstances might tip his decision in agreement with the Council. Harry was struggling to reconcile multiple temporalities—Ijeoma's situation recorded at the time of her suitability assessment, her current situation, her life history, her child's safety (the danger of the kitchen), her future insecurity (in universal credit "estimates" and debt repayment schedules). Hence, this ambivalence seemed to explain why he had spent the better part of that two- and half-hour meeting reviewing every expenditure in her bank statements and assessing income sources. "From my point of view, a review is considering all the information, new and old," he said looking down at his desk full of papers. He said, more to himself than to us, that if she could remove nonessential costs, the property would be considered affordable. "It's really hard, sitting on a precipice of 50/50 — we don't know where we're moving," Joanne says softly to him, hoping to appeal to him gently. Nonetheless, he said he wouldn't be deciding that day.

The meeting came to an end and the tension dissipated from the room. Harry, a grandfather himself, playfully interacted with Ijeoma's son as we gathered our things. "That wasn't so bad," he said lightly, trying perhaps ineffectively to diffuse the tension, as we said goodbye and exited

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they face eviction or become homeless in settings of limited state housing supply….In this way, resisting central government's top-down austerity regime, Local Authorities invest their (limited) funds to divert flows of payment from it towards their own coffers" (2020, 678).

the room. Outside, we all exhaled visibly. Throughout the meeting, my body had felt hot with anger and indignation at how invasive and infantilizing the process had been. From questioning her finances and asking her whether a phone was a necessary expense, I felt angry. Yet, Ijeoma had endured the meeting, her anger never breaking to the surface though clearly boiling underneath. For most of the meeting, she appeared calm, but she said that she had received emails from Harry prior to the meeting with questions similar to what he had just asked. She had been expecting these invasive questions, and she therefore tried to stay calm and cooperate with every single inquiry. This, she said, was so that any perceived lack of cooperation couldn't be used against her in the review.

A few weeks later, we walked along together towards the public library while Ijeoma told me about her initial housing suitability assessment meeting months prior. While explaining the housing allocation process, they told her that if she didn't accept the property they were going to offer her, they would refer her to social services: "Social services—two words I hate." She took a deep breath before saying that she worried that if she didn't accept their housing offers that they would use that as grounds to take her son. We had heard from others that the Council had sometimes housed children separately from parents. Therefore, Ijeoma knew that her stubbornness or any kind of emotional outburst carried the threat of social services getting involved. Before Brimstone, she had self-referred herself for therapy, but her mental health had suffered with her housing situation. "But since, I haven't talked to anyone about it. I know I should." She knew that by not dealing with her mental health, she was maybe undermining her relationship with her son, which might give social services grounds to take her child from her. She reflected that social services should be there to support her but, instead, she worried about their involvement. A deep sadness fell over both of us. We wouldn't let that happen, I said to her, knowing there was a limit to any guarantee I could offer her. I couldn't give her that security either.

Brianna

The security officer at the door buzzed me into the building; once I had signed in, he called Brianna to confirm that she was expecting me. The housing office had reached out to Brianna about a meeting, with no warning regarding the purpose, so I offered to join her to take notes and provide support. Once my entry was confirmed, the officer directed me to the door around the corner and told me to go to the second floor, buzzing me through to the other side. The stairwell was bare, cold, and gray, like the other parts of the building. As I walked up, there was a security marshal in a yellow vest sitting on the stairs. He moved to the side while holding his phone to his face with whatever program he was watching. Walking past quickly, I felt uneasy as his eyes followed me up the stairs. A notice on the stairwell door warned people against vomiting in the common areas—"the common areas should be respected", it said.

Brianna poked her head out of her doorway as I was walked towards her flat. Her daughter, Jasmine, was in a jacket and backpack, about to head out with Brianna's mom to get food at McDonald's. As they began walking down the hall, Jasmine looked between me and Brianna, the realization that her mother wasn't coming with her began to dawn on her. Turning back, she buried her face in Brianna's stomach and refused to leave without her mother. Brianna tried to make her feel better, but her daughter continued to cry as she walked away. "Aw, she's just worried about me", Brianna said, though I knew that this concern had increasingly become more apparent. Brianna's five-year-old daughter, who had lived with her in Brimstone for the last two years, once innocently expressed to her teacher that she was independent and made her own

breakfast. Brianna was reported to social services by the school. Why was her daughter getting her own cereal? Where were you? Their concern was that Brianna was leaving her daughter alone while she was in college. But social services coming into her life again deeply worried her. “I had to put on a brave face, because if I acted scared, I would’ve looked guilty.” These were sentiments that other young mothers like her shared with me. Enduring this invasion of privacy as well as having the perpetual threat of social services produced unbearable amounts of stress for Brianna.

Following her back into the flat, I immediately felt the oppressive feeling I had felt when first visiting Mary’s apartment, but Brianna’s space was even smaller. A small studio apartment, the hallway was narrow and dark with the bathroom and the tiny kitchen nook crammed along the small entryway before you entered the small bedroom/living area. The refrigerator sat in the corner of the bedroom next to a small 2-person table, on the other side of the table was a slightly worn black pleather futon. Opposite the couch, there was a bunk bed, with a double bed on the bottom and a single bed on the top stuffed with their clothes, toys, and other belongings. Brianna walked to the single window in the flat and fidgeted with the blinds, leaving them down, covering the unimpressive view of a bare courtyard and the other side of the building, and then turned to the TV, switching the children's program her daughter had been watching to the BBC. I started to ask Brianna about what she thought the meeting might be about when there was a knock on the door. Walking over to the door she quickly said she thought maybe it was a housing offer. In the background, the TV continued to play the live broadcast of another parliamentary discussion of Article 50 and Brexit negotiations.

We didn’t learn anything new during that unusual meeting, which took place a few weeks before the housing viewing that I described at the beginning of this chapter. The housing officer, a middle-aged white woman, briefly stopped by to provide an update: they had sourced a property for Brianna and her daughter. It was a 2-bedroom property in Newham, but they didn’t have the address yet—the meeting was merely intended to inform her they were getting it ready and to let her know that they hadn’t forgotten about her. Did we have any questions? The TV filled the silence with the occasional raucous outbursts of members of parliament. Brianna responded: “Ya, well obviously my concerns around private is just like it’s just like a cycle that never ends, really.” She added that her concern is that as someone who is low-income, she had to consider how something would affect her in the long term. A private rental was not a sustainable option for her and her daughter, because she might find herself in situations where she couldn’t afford it anymore. The officer tried to reassure her that because the property was within the local housing allowance, her housing benefit would be adjusted to make it affordable for her. That response didn’t make Brianna feel any better. A little dejected and overwhelmed, she told the officer she would think about it.

With the help of Focus E15, Brianna had several meetings with the mayor and senior Newham cabinet members. Thus, while she was uncertain about what would happen to her next, she tried to hold onto the hope that with public support she could challenge the way the Council was trying to place her back in the private rental sector. “To be honest,” Brianna said as we debriefed about the meeting, “I’m in a position where I don’t feel like I need to accept a private rental property from the Council. I can’t. I have to stand up for myself. Because, ultimately, I can see myself exactly in the position I am now. Going in and out. Do you know what I mean? It’s just never settled. It’s unsettling to know that as soon as my daughter and I find a little stability and a little structure and routine in our lives that could easily be taken away.” For Brianna permanent accommodation would both provide long-term stability as well as the conditions for a

settled routine with her daughter. We discussed her frustration, the stress of living in this uncertainty, and the potential dangers of finding herself in the private sector again. Considering her next move demanded that she weigh the knowledge she gained from her prior housing history against the stress she felt in her present situation. Despite these factors, she felt she needed to stand by her demand for permanent housing. "The reality of the situation is that, even though I'm eager to move out, I'm still not eager to put myself into a whole dilemma where I'm literally faced with more stress than I'm going through at the moment." She was struggling with weighing multiple uncertainties across different temporal frames. Living in cramped conditions with her daughter, in a living space that caused her panic attacks, she carried the looming uncertainty about her future as well as an embodied knowledge that she might end up back where she started. As a result, Brianna, like others living in Brimstone House, experienced her existential insecurity as stemming as much from the uncertain limbo of her homeless cases as in the unbearable space of her living.

More than a roof

What does it mean to need more than a roof? As I have illustrated throughout this dissertation across many examples, a roof was just a roof. As residents regularly pointed out, a roof could produce more uncertainty than it might promise to alleviate. What I came to learn, however, was that the uncertainty generated from temporary housing, whether in the private sector or through the Council, could provoke a deep existential disorientation. This was as much produced by the uncertainty of waiting, as it was in the oppressive conditions in which the waiting was taking place. It was from Brianna's reflections about life in Brimstone that I came to better understand both the spatial and affective conditions of living in this uncertain limbo, sometimes oriented towards the mold, the damp, or to the building's security, social services, the housing office. As Brianna and other described it, the oppression of Brimstone were felt in the structures of life in temporary accommodation, and the built environment of the building which dictated how residents inhabited the space. These sentiments were felt within the individual apartments as well as in the general spatial organization of the building itself, the security, limitations on visitors, the lack of communal spaces, and feelings of being surveilled.[89]

In this section, I try to take seriously and reflect on the affective and material conditions that provoked complaints that temporary accommodation *felt* like a prison. I do so to reflect how housing insecurity echoes the existential and spatial conditions of carceral systems. Rashad Shabazz reflects in *Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago* (2015) that carceral power is not limited to the space of the prison but extends its reach by being built into the architecture, urban planning, and "systems of control that functioned through policing" (2). As homeless services, temporary accommodation satisfied a legal obligation through material relief but also produced conditions analogous with incarceration. This was reflected in the sentiments of many residents that connected their existential conditions with the affective and material conditions of being "stuck" in temporary accommodation.

[89] One of the original members of Focus E15 that lived in the building while it was supported living for young women said that her mother was not allowed to come up when she went into labor. Until residents put pressure on the council, residents were not allowed visitors. I spoke to a resident of Brimstone, a single mother with a pre-teen daughter, who said that while she was out with her daughter a maintenance worker in the building had gone into her apartment without warning not long after moving in. She knew this because an heirloom of hers had gone missing. She experienced this as a violation, a moment that dramatically undermined her feelings of security living there.

As Brianna said to me in an interview: "I feel lonely. I feel stuck. I feel imprisoned in a free world. I feel completely imprisoned. Maybe I'm exaggerating and it's not so extreme as being in prison. But that's how I feel mentally." She went on describe that beyond feeling trapped in a psychological sense, she also felt that the space and layout of the building itself contributed to this feeling.

> "[It's] literally like prison. The environment is like prison. So that's like…it doesn't make you hopeful. You look through the window you see other blocks. You don't see flowers, you don't see trees. You don't see normal stuff that motivates you that makes you wake up and feel good in the morning. I don't see stuff like that. You don't see a way out. And getting a sentence and not knowing when you're going to be released."

Mary also described her apartment in Brimstone as just a box or a hallway, but significantly, alluded to how the physical space felt like a prison: "It's like you are in a cell, you know? You have no freedom. You have no choice. You can't do anything." Brianna and others said that they experienced different kinds of harassment from staff, including having visitors denied entry, to threatening letters. For example, several residents had been on the receiving end of an unauthorized letter written by a staff member threatening residents with eviction if they didn't attend a made-up housing office appointment. This incident in particular left her feeling distraught, and it inevitably had an impact, both in how she experienced her environment adding to the distress she was already experiencing. Other residents also described how the building management team imposed arbitrary visitor rules, sometimes not allowing visitors in, or making residents physically come down to receive them. As Mary described it: "You don't want to go through all that. Because already the trauma you had before was too much. You think at least I have a roof over my head, I'll have my freedom, but no, not Brimstone House." These experiences generated feelings of having lost freedom or control and had disorientating effects, as the quotes from residents suggest. These conditions reverberate, echoing past injuries while also exceeding the "event" of homelessness.

Figure 12. View from a Brimstone flat (Carolina Talavera)

Residents often complained that they were not allowed to make the indeterminate waiting time more bearable with their own furniture or other small changes to make it more comfortable—a carpet, their own mattress. Nevertheless, Brianna described the small ways in

which she attempted to "make-do" with the space she had, but the rules limited what she could do to her own space.[90] Constrained by both these rules and her finances, she did things like buy a rug and nice decorations to create a more inviting space for her and her daughter. Yet, these changes did little to mitigate the distress of being stuck or the existential heaviness she felt every day. Brianna said she didn't live in fear, but rather was plagued by a deep uncertainty of what was going to happen next. "What could happen next? What are they going to throw my way? Are they going to come and say they're going to evict me again? Are they gonna come and say if I don't accept this property…?" What else could they throw her way, she speculated, but she trailed off not knowing what *might* happen if the Council suddenly discharged her from their care for not accepting the multiple "reasonable" housing offers they had already made her. Constrained by this, it became difficult for her to plan her future when it remained so uncertain. Instead, she felt disoriented and unmotivated. How was she supposed to look toward the future when she had no stability or structure? "I don't even want to go to college.[91] I have to be trying so hard. And I'm…I have to be thinking years in advance. Instead of just thinking today. But while you're in it. It's so hard." As she had said previously, she knew that a housing offer did not offer a "way out". Taking these comments of residents seriously, we might understand their refusals to be trapped in the cycles of insecure accommodation as an embodied understanding that housing didn't not necessarily offer a way out, or rather, that having a roof over your head wasn't enough. If housing didn't necessarily offer a "way out" or, guarantee ontological security, then we might better understand temporary accommodation as part of the processes of housing that produce insecurity more than alleviate it.

With the compounding stresses of living in Brimstone House, dealings with the housing office, uncertainty about her future, Brianna often expressed a circular and fluctuating hopelessness. "You get no privacy here! There's just so many people asking you questions about your life and random people entering your life." In this way, she felt constrained in multiple directions—not able to express emotions in front of her daughter and having to contain her emotional responses when dealing with the Council. Yet, she knew her daughter was attuned to the burden she was carrying, and this, she said, manifested in her daughter worrying about her. She worried about the effects that the stress of her living situation was affecting her daughter and therefore worried that social services would involve themselves. Part of the problem was the physical space and the close proximity they lived in didn't allow Brianna or her daughter enough space to live, to play, to have privacy, or independence. As Brianna described it: "It just gets on my nerves. Sometimes I think I just need space. And I'm suffering mentally being in here with my daughter. Cuz we don't have enough space […], even just getting space to speak on my phone, having certain conversations." I'm not even allowed to be upset, she said, because there was no space to be upset. If she cried in the bathroom, her daughter would follow her. If she cried in the kitchen, her daughter would hear. "And even if I want to discuss what's going on over the phone, I can't have certain conversations around [her]. It's like …I'm stuck in this place. That's why I feel imprisoned. Because I don't feel free to function. I don't know how the

[90] Writing on temporary accommodation in the UK, Harris et al. (2020) argues that the precarity of being homeless is produced as much through the "spatio-temporalities of moves and displacements from and between properties" as in "the micro space-times of everyday life; interactions with objects, or indeed, their absence" (2020, 1306). The stigmas of housing insecurity, they argue, are reproduced in the material elements of homemaking which can have the effect of reinforcing the "infantilization" of those not "fulfilling expectations of private ownership or rental (2020, 1305)."

[91] College in the UK refers to school programs for students between the age of 17-18, similar to a form of community college.

hell I'm living through all of this." Brianna had lived through her own version of the psychological burden of housing insecurity and was just beginning to understand the toll it had taken on her youth now. Was the cycle repeating itself? How was this insecurity affecting her daughter's psychological and developmental wellbeing? Brianna's priority was to avoid this happening to her daughter, but to a certain extent, it was out of her control. As a clinical psychologist who worked with young mothers and children living in temporary accommodation said to me: the consequences of homelessness outlast the periods of homelessness.

With the support of Focus E15, she had been putting pressure on the Council to place her in permanent and decent accommodation, and more importantly, in London, where she had family connections. As a result, Brianna had refused several offers of accommodation, resisted being placed back under the care of social services, and successfully reversed the Council's discharge of care. Despite pressure from Focus E15 during this time, Brianna sat uncertainly in the limbo of intentional homelessness and the unknown of a Council tenancy in the private rental sector. Reluctant to name her psychological state in this "in-between", she spoke around her mental health, moving between statements of "staying strong" and feeling completely powerless but never explicitly saying she was depressed.

> "I don't want to speak it into existence. I don't wanna tell myself that there's something wrong with me, because eventually, I'll start to believe it. Do you know what I mean? And I don't want to be like "oh I'm so depressed, this is going on. I feel so down." Because I want to speak through positivity and uplift myself. By telling myself bright things. Things that I can hold onto. Things that can move me out of that state of mind […] Of course, every day is not the same. I don't think for anyone every day is the same."

Yet, after the first housing offer, Brianna knew she had to continue her fight:

> "But something in the back of my mind keeps telling 'no, just keep pushing, just keep pushing'. Cuz it's unacceptable. But nobody understands where you're coming from, what you've lived through and for why you're not willing to settle. Going through that whole trauma again… They don't understand the history and how far I'm coming from and why I'm so defensive now."

Nevertheless, despite the distress she felt throughout her TA experience, as Brianna noted she had not been passively waiting for her situation to change. She realized that she had to take matters into her own hands. Brianna recognized that the strength and endurance that this would require would either help her bring an end to this cycle for her daughter and herself, or keep them in it: "But I'm trying so *hard* to not let it have that effect on me. Because if it gets to me, I'm finished. I'd be no use to myself or my daughter. That's why I'm literally just fighting through it. I can't let it get to me." In describing these battles, Brianna reflected that she persisted through the mental challenge of this uncertainty and the potential repercussions of her decisions: "But… It didn't break me, it's only building me to be stronger, kinda thing. Cuz I think if it had broken me down I wouldn't even be able to have this conversation with you, cuz I shut down. You know what I mean. I shut down. I will disappear. I won't answer my phone, I'll keep myself to myself. But I'm realizing that doesn't help, you have to be strong."

Craig Willse writes that as a technology for the management of bodies, housing insecurity has the effect of drawing some "futures close—shortened life spans, illness, suffering—and foreclose the likelihood of other possible futures" (2015: 3). Indeed, as Brianna's experience illustrates, housing transience can do more than just foreclose some futures, it can also destabilize one's sense of the future entirely. As Brianna makes clear, her wellbeing was inextricably tied to the persistent temporal disorientation of persistent and cyclical process of housing deprivation. Similarly, Ijeoma's sentiments reflected a tenuous relationship to the future where living in uncertainty was difficult to endure: "Temporary: the word itself, is quite…a horrible word. Because you're in-between, you don't know if you're in or out." More than just living in uncertain conditions, being in TA affected her state of mind: "You're always in a binary state: Should I do this or do that? I don't think I'm making the right choices as well because I'm thinking of the short-term too much and not necessarily of the long-term." They both expressed the difficulty of being in a position where managing the pressures of multiple temporal demands of the present and the future sometimes felt impossible.

It's all temporary

"In August, it'll be 3 years." Brianna sat on the rug, her back against the bunk bed where she and her daughter slept, while I sat three feet across from her, my back supported by the generic black pleather couch bed that could be found in most units at Brimstone House. It was December, one of my last days in the field before leaving the country and many months after the house viewing that opened this chapter. "I don't know if I'll be out by August," she said to me, "but I'll let you know." As I learned about Brianna's ongoing struggle with the Council while working with Focus E15, I also slowly began to piece together a more complex understanding of insecurity beyond the immediate homeless case she was challenging. Brianna's story moved back and forth through time and space—her history with insecurity was constantly pressing into the present. Brianna's experience was impossible to disentangle, partly because it was the culmination of many experiences over many years, but also because her present experience was as much shaped by her immediate circumstances as it was by her past. "I've gone past the 'should'ves' and 'could'ves' and what the expectations of normal people should be." While engaged in an ongoing and indeterminate challenge with the Council she fluctuated between being realistic and trying to hold onto faith that she would get what she was demanding: a permanent Council home.

> "How do I explain it? … I know I'm going to be moved at some point. But at this point I'm just thinking: It gives me great anxiety and stress, putting a lot of pressure on it and trying to get a date on it. So why not just see what happens? Because eventually… I can't be here. And I sit down and reflect on the amount of houses I've been through and the addresses I've lived. It's all been temporary. So the way I look at it, this is a temporary situation too. My final move now should be permanent. That's why I'm not willing to accept another temporary house. That's why you've seen me go above and beyond. Because I've had that trauma, I've not ever been settled. Why should I continue to live like that with a child now?"

"Since you were 12," I reflected, but this statement seemed to be the tipping point in our conversation, and Brianna broke down in tears. She didn't expect to get upset talking to me about

her history, and she hadn't cried in a long time, but holding things in had taken its toll—carrying this had caused her mental health to deteriorate. Her statement reflected an insistence that what she needed was permanent accommodation, but her experience with housing had been so precarious that she knew she wouldn't be at Brimstone forever. Brianna had spent nearly an hour telling me about her housing history leading up to the present, spanning a fifteen-year period, in which she described address after address— an impressive list of informal sleeping arrangements with friends and family she had throughout her youth living in East London and then later years of moving around with her mother from apartments to shared houses. It became clear that since Brianna left her grandmother's house in Jamaica at the age of 12, she had never known housing security in the UK. For this reason, settling down and ending this cycle was important for Brianna—it was important for her daughter as well. Brianna held onto an insistence that her next move should be permanent but holding that line had been difficult.

What would it mean to take seriously Brianna's critique that the housing system was a death trap? As I began this chapter, I try to stay with Brianna and Ijeoma's refusals of housing as both a political strategy as well as an impossible demand. Drawing on Savanna Shange, we might read both of their refusals to accept what is being given as charged with a "willful defiance"—"Like the Cali proverb 'fuck tha police,', willful defiance is an abolitionist ethos that privileges the necessary over the possible" (2019: 16). In this sense, we might take seriously Brianna's impossible demand, a willful defiance of what was possible, as a demand of what was necessary to get out of this endless cyclical loop of housing insecurity. In the vignette that opened this chapter, Brianna refused to allow her individual situation to be subsumed within the platitude of "1 in 28,000"—an attempt to interpolate her into the senior councillor's "society", to be subsumed into the anonymity of 28,000 other people on the waiting list. As a challenge to Gray's statistical logics, she rebutted with a demand of the "me" of "now"—in which she communicated a refusal for her suffering to be bracketed in the present with promises that her "time would come". In her own way, Brianna was demanding the impossible: by refusing another temporary solution she was asking for an end to this cycle of insecurity. Gray's analysis was limited to the time-framed understanding of homelessness as an event, constrained by solutions that framed homelessness as resolvable by a roof. Brianna's demand challenged this by linking her spatial demands to temporality—to the time and space of her insecurity and to the death trap that was the never-ending cycles of housing deprivation.

Both Ijeoma and Brianna's refusals are an insistence that existential and material security could not be alleviated by being temporarily sheltered—whether in the private sector or by the Council. They knew this, because their experiences in temporary accommodation and other forms of insecure housing had given them that knowledge. Their critiques of the structures of housing were embedded critiques—a recognition that if they allowed themselves to be moved on by the Council, beyond being displaced, it would jeopardize their stability and health in the long-term. These are the stakes of their refusal. Throughout each of the different encounters I describe above, Brianna and Ijeoma maintained a strong attachment to the security of permanent accommodation. These demands might be understood as a "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2011), an affective and material attachment to the existential security provided by secure housing, one that might never be realized. Yet, I argue that their refusal of insecure housing and their demands for permanent accommodation are attempts to demand what is necessary over what is possible, a challenge to the status quo that tries to escape the cyclical logics of housing deprivation.

Conclusion

Burning: Between Grenfell and Brimstone

"It was a nightmare" Mary laughingly sings to me in response to my question about what it was like living in Brimstone House. We both laughed knowing that her playful response was made possible by the distance created by space and time. We were in her comfortable, spacious Council home, and it was as though I was sitting in front of an entirely different person. Mary was engaged, laughing and her spirit seemed a thousand pounds lighter then when we had first met at a Focus E15 event. The Council home we sat in felt more like a sanctuary in comparison to the dark, oppressive energy of Victoria House. After that meeting with John Gray, Mary reluctantly but with a little hope, accepted the offer of "non-secure" accommodation and almost a year later had successfully won the London housing lottery: a Council home. Nevertheless, as I discussed previously, Council housing legislation had effectively removed "lifetime" tenancies, so though Mary was secure—that still wasn't guaranteed. Mary waited for a good outcome, but at what cost?

In many ways, Mary's story was both typical and atypical. While her case had moved to a somewhat positive phase, others, like Brianna and Ijeowa, continued to "long it out", as a clinical psychologist described the conditions and endless waiting of temporary accommodation. I met many people on the streets of London while campaigning with Focus E15 who would stop by the stall and say how they had been bidding for Council housing unsuccessfully for 20 years while privately renting, or they had also been cycling between temporary accommodation and the private rental sector without successfully bidding. For example, Jane, a middle-aged white British woman that I met through the Focus E15 stall, described how she and her children were homeless because she had refused an offer of accommodation that would've required her going up five flights of stairs. Jane was increasingly limited in how far she could walk, noticing that she was struggling to breath even going short distances. She had been to the doctor, but the exam results had been borderline so she wasn't diagnosed with any specific lung conditions. Therefore, unable to give medical reasons, she was discharged from the Council for refusing the offer. Nevertheless, this had not been her first time in temporary accommodation. Jane and her family, though they had been bidding for Council housing since 1995, had spent over a decade being housing insecure, cycling between private and temporary accommodation, including being formally evicted from multiple properties when landlords wanted to reclaim or sell their property.

Jane had grown up in Council housing, a three-bedroom house in Newham—so for her Council housing was "everything". Her dad, a former employee of the Council, had been given Council housing, but when he died her mother tried to apply to get her name on the tenancy so that it might pass to her. That was in the process of happening when her mother passed away unexpectedly as well. Jane tried to continue the process after her mother's death, formally applying for the Council tenancy to be passed to her, but because she had not been living there for a consecutive year prior to her mother's death, her request was denied. At the time that we spoke, she and her children were living in the living room of her brother's Council flat. Jane had tried to reach out to her local Councilors for help, but she said that nothing seemed to make a difference.

This dissertation started as a study of temporary accommodation, aimed at understanding how conditions under austerity were exposing and deepening cracks in the system—embodied

and structural. It became clear during my research, listening to these stories, that uncertainty was more entrenched and cyclical than temporary. For this reason, I became interested in how the dispersed suffering of housing insecurity was experienced as a generalized condition, unexceptional but impossible, and persistently chronic in its temporality. As I write in the prologue, the condition of life after Grenfell demanded an ethnographic attunement, a way of seeing the cracks not just as something that needed fixing, but seeing how the temporary "fixes" to these gaping social wounds generate different kinds of maladies. Or as the charred remains of Grenfell stand to remind us—temporary fixes can be deadly.

Housing as an infrastructure can encompass a diverse range of experiences, therefore, examining people's housing stories allowed me to understand the complex ways in which housing can determine the conditions of our lives. Though I began with the understanding that temporary accommodation was a problem of homelessness, the lens through which I initially came to frame this social problem, these frames shifted through observations that experiences of housing insecurity extended beyond being sheltered. Indeed, widening the lens to account for faulty gas meters, undiagnosed conditions, mold, damp, waiting, austerity, and the repeating cycles of housing attuned me to a different way of understanding processes of housing that challenged simple explanations of housing deprivation as limited to being without housing.

During my time with Focus E15, a student volunteering collaborated with the campaign to create a wheel of fortune for a school assignment titled "The Housing Lottery". The different results reflected the range of possibilities of being a resident in contemporary London. For several weeks, we placed it on the stall so people could spin it and get one of many possible outcomes: offered a house 100 miles away, put in cramped temporary accommodation, forced out of your home of 14 years, offered unaffordable private accommodation, still in temporary accommodation two years later, offered a house full of mold and pests, or "Success! Collective actions gets results". My aim in centering Focus E15, was to illustrate the strategies and tactics that challenged welfare ideologies that were seemingly unmovable. But as Mary's story illustrates, the success of collective action wasn't without its costs: time, energy, and her health.

Indeed, the simple question of "can you tell me your housing history" elicited long and complex experiences of housing that pushed my analysis beyond simply understanding temporary accommodation as an instance of homelessness. Responses were rather caught in complex entanglements that moved between scales—from mold, to waiting, to processes of housing more broadly. As such, health and housing can be understood as enmeshed bodies—to account for the movement and entanglement of injuries between bodies, spaces and infrastructures.

As I try to illustrate throughout this dissertation, this entanglement of bodies and spaces also required thinking with and mapping the temporalities of insecurity more broadly, and housing specifically. From framing homelessness as an event to the seemingly humanist and democratic structures of "waiting your turn", these strategies were imbued with power and authority that normalized the chronicity of housing deprivation and its ailments. Brimstone, with its references to fire and sulfur, was one example of the social burning of post-Grenfell England. The waiting times, the cyclicality of housing, and the generalized uncertainty of life are normalized, or as one inspector concluded "not the worst", yet rendered invisible within the temporalities of precarity. The struggle people experienced were as much the embodied injury of these conditions as demanding recognition that the cycles of housing insecurity, bad housing, and deferred promises were bad for them, and for their children. Yet, as I illustrate, communicating these problems individually required strategies of refusal that challenged the

conditions of possibility. Sam Dubal et al. in their article "Beyond Border Health" propose an infrastructural determinants of health framework that more critically reflects on the specific infrastructures of ill health. By examining correlate systems and structures, material and immaterial, their aim is to rethink the problem of migration and the border through an abolitionist-oriented framework. As they propose, abolition as a form of "liberatory solidarity", might prevent us from shrugging our shoulders at the "seemingly insurmountable structures or process" which make addressing issues of housing seemingly impossible. As my research tries to illustrate, the challenging the ideologies and practices of housing is as important, or more, as providing housing itself.

In December 2019, a couple of independent filmmakers asked to come to one of the Focus E15 public meetings to present an idea for a fiction short film that might be picked up by the BBC, inspired by Jasmine and the campaign. The young women sat at the front of the small meeting room and described to a room full of Focus E15 community supporters, organizers and mothers living in Brimstone their idea for the film they wanted to make. The film was going to focus on a young mother and her daughter, based on Jasmine, who were being evicted on Bonfire Night, a national celebration commemorating the failed plot to blow up the House of Lords in 1605. All the mother and daughter want to do is go see the fireworks, so they decide to go to a field and watch the fireworks. The pair, now homeless, decide to go into an empty home and sleep on the floor. The film's final shot, they described, would be of the house on fire. The filmmakers then go on to explain that the ending is purposefully ambiguous—the death of the mother and daughter is only a suggestion.

Immediately, people in the meeting start offering their comments on the proposed film—but the tension in the air made it obvious that people were uncomfortable with the proposed storyline. Laura, a middle-aged Focus E15 support from the RCG, exclaimed loudly "But why does it have to be so tragic?" The filmmakers responded, leaning forward, clarifying that they felt it needed to be a tragedy to make a point, to show how the mother and child got lost in the media. It's not that they've died but rather a suggestion by the flames. Laura raises concerns about the tragic structure of the storyline. There are a lot of films and documentaries about tragedy, she reflected, and after watching most people don't know what they can do about it: "If you're just going to put a mirror up to show how bad things are…the mirror is already there!"

The filmmakers continued to try to defend their idea, that they wanted to portray the characters with lots of energy at the beginning of the film. The fireworks, they explained, was a way to show that the mother and daughter just wanted to live their lives, but because of their situation, their lives couldn't be normal. It ends in tragedy, but the aim was to show that people were struggling. By having them sleep in the empty home, they wanted people to come away thinking "why aren't they in their home?". It was intended to provoke emotion, they said.

As the conversation continued, what the meeting attendants and campaign members felt was that they needed to be thoughtful about images of burning buildings after Grenfell. What people might fixate on is the burning building. As other commented, the story of Focus E15 wasn't just about a single mother, it was about a whole campaign. Focus E15 wasn't an advocacy group; while the media focused on single individuals during the early parts of the campaign, Jasmine and the other mothers represented the movement, not just themselves. The Carpenters

Estate, which marked the early visibility of Focus E15, wasn't just occupied by an individual—this isn't about two people in a show room, some commented, it was about building a movement.

I outline this scene from a public meeting during my last days conducting fieldwork on temporary accommodation because it speaks to the affective afterlife of Grenfell, the affective struggles and tensions of knowing what to do. For Focus E15, collective action required sustained and organized efforts, local engagement, and solidarity building across geographies. As the filmmakers suggested, it was about emotion; but for Focus E15, the aim was to provoke emotion in the service of collective action. Thus, while the Focus campaign presented individual stories, these were primarily deployed toward broader structural critiques of a housing problem, nationally and locally. The struggle, of course, was that by highlighting and organizing individual cases, the Council could seemingly address the issues they presented by putting out little fires.

As I have tried to demonstrate in this dissertation, these individual stories can speak to both the cyclical conditions of housing insecurity as well as to the political strategies in which we might challenge the ideological and material conditions in which they are entrenched. Drawing on Michelle Murphy (2017), we might reflect on the post-Grenfell alterlife, the recognition that we are already entangled with chemicals, bodies, infrastructures in assemblages that are constantly being articulated and disarticulated. This tangled mess might offer an alternative orientation for "world-building and dismantlement" (Murphy 2017, 497). Indeed, as I write in this dissertation, the "not this" of the impossible demand is both a political-strategy and a "world-building" tactic—one that recognizes the need for security across temporalities and spaces. As an orientation, I continue to sit with the "not this" that the impossible demand posits, challenging the conditions of possibility in which processes of housing are currently grounded.

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