Squatting in the age of austerity

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Abstract

In London, June 2012, the last of the remaining Occupy activists at Finsbury square were evicted. The evictions came as preparations for a historic piece of legislation to criminalize the act of squatting residential property in England and Wales were unfolding just miles away. While the emerging anthropological and geographical literature problematized the notion that the "return home" of Occupy signified an end to the movement, little attention has been paid to what a return home might have looked like for those, the last of the remaining activists, squatters, and homeless who had come to rely on the camps *as* home, and who now faced the criminalization of a practice that many had envisioned as a refuge for the movement. Based on twelve months of fieldwork with a group of squatters and ex-Occupy activists living in a derelict building ("The Black Stag") on the outskirts of London in 2018, the thesis traces some of the legacies of Occupy within the contemporary squatters movement, as its members looked beyond eviction and beyond criminalization, toward an alternative practice of dwelling the city. Through an emerging set of strategies of cooperation – "property guardianships", meanwhile contracts, and alternative housing arrangements – the criminalization of squatting has seen, I suggest, a complex entangling of interests between councils, property owners, and the anti-establishment roots of the squatting scene. These forms of cooperation have emerged as governments, put under extreme austerity conditions over the last decade, have turned to community iniatives as a nostrum for experimental urban development and policy-making. Property guardianships have had important implications for squatters working on the ground, as they weave discourses of regeneration into a practice and a movement that has long declared itself incommensurate with neoliberal development. But they have also given squatters a logic and a means with which to re-gain access to the city: to take up the call to "Occupy Everywhere", and bring the solutions of squatting to a broader set of struggles and places.

Preface

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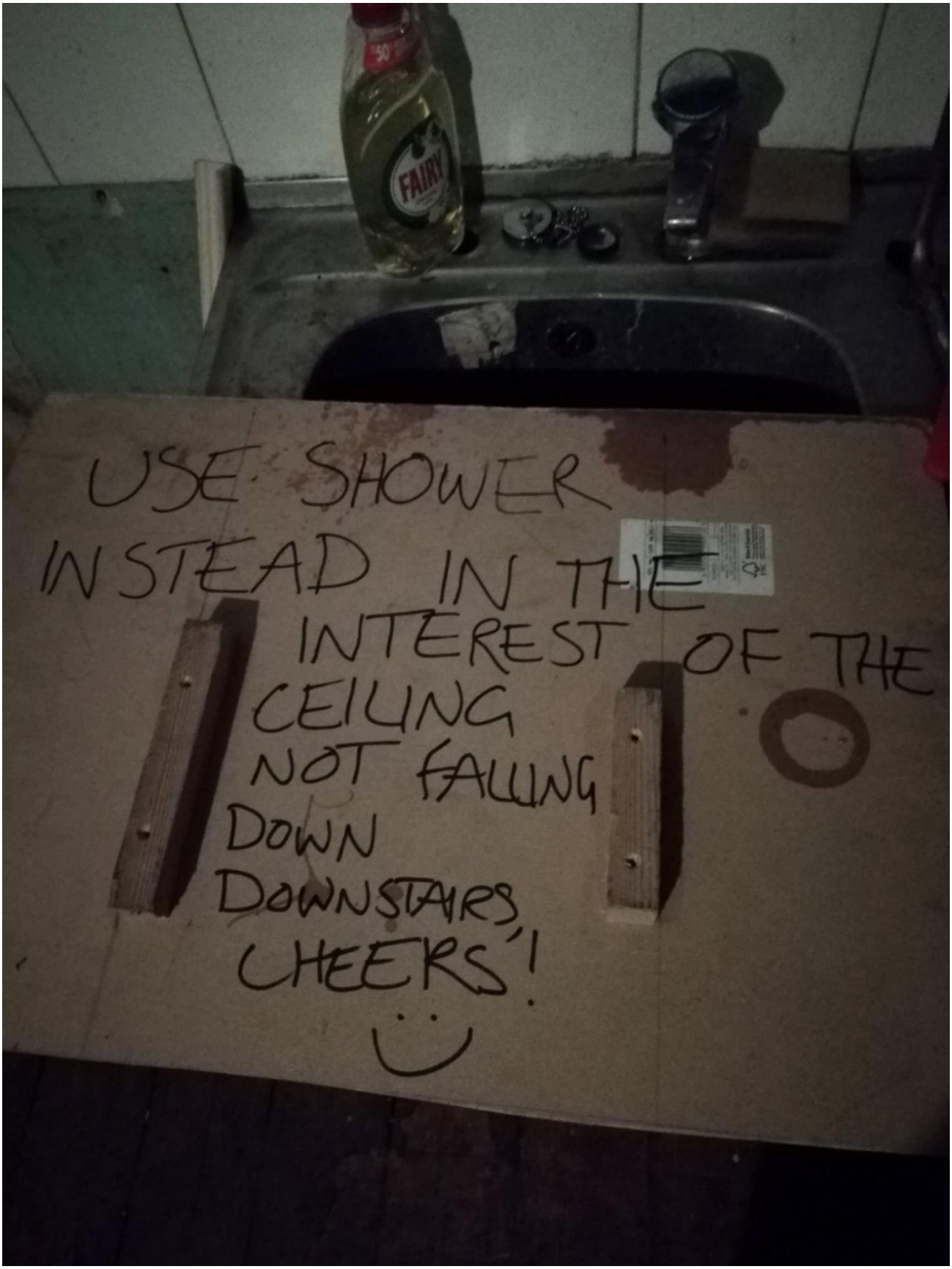
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Introduction

"To all the squatters out there: get out and stay out"

-*'Mad' Mike Weatherly, MP for Hove*

In February 2012, in the period after the eviction of Occupy London, thousands of protestors dispersed across London. Some, radicalized by the protests and unwilling to return to work moved to a second base of camps in Finsbury square, only to be evicted later that year in June. Others would return to St Paul's cathedral weeks later, or 'roam' to other locations outside the Goldman Sachs office, or New Scotland Yard (Mathews, 2016: 58). In May, three months after eviction from their main camp outside St Paul's Cathedral, a group of Occupy protestors released maps identifying near fifty buildings around London implicated in the financial crisis – hedge-funds, lobbyists, and organizations profiteering from the crisis – and declared them targets, no longer able to 'hide in the shadows' (Colvin, 2012). This shift from concrete space to the logic of the map represented 'a dynamic and developing de/re-territorialisation' of Occupy, but was also seen by those within the movement as contributing to an 'existential panic' that followed the evictions, and a desire to preserve the movement ethos and carry it out in new ways and places (Mathews, 2016: 109).

In his ethnography of the Occupy London movement, one of few ethnographic accounts of the internal dynamics of the London protests, Mathews (2016) writes of the terminal downswing experienced by the movement after its eviction from St Pauls (2016: 110). It could be said that many of the protestors following their eviction from the Occupy camps simply "returned home" from the protests. It was hard not to see the evictions as a defeat for a movement that had become increasingly reliant on the daily organization and rhythms of the camp. As measures to criminalize squatting residential property in England and Wales made their way through parliament, and Occupy faced eviction on a global scale, the movement found itself in search of a new narrative. The eviction of the camps outside St Paul's posed a series of existential questions that mirrored challenges faced by the squatters movement throughout the 20th century: what would it mean to think the movement beyond occupied space? If eviction is anticipated, and is to some degree always expected, what would it look like to imagine Occupy beyond eviction?

This provocation was taken up by a group of eight Occupy squatters and activists in London in 2013, who, after being evicted from Finsbury square, went on to participate in the occupation of a small community library in North London. The building had been closed due to budget cuts from the council, a story that was becoming increasingly familiar to communities across the UK as councils juggled the conservative government's new programme of harsh fiscal austerity. Council officials had been trying for months to persuade the locals that a relocation of the library, which was slated to be sold off for redevelopment, was in their best interests, although a stalemate between community and council interests had ultimately prevailed (Taylor, 2012; BBC, 2013). As Occupy activists moved in, the building was re-opened under the title of 'The Friern Barnet People's Library', and its members began negotiations with the council

over tea and cakes to transform the space into a full-time, volunteer-run project. With the help of a 'symbiotic alliance' between the squatters and local community (Democratic Audit UK, 2013), the project was awarded support by the council under the stewardship of a Community Library Trust. That the service was to be run voluntarily on a temporary lease by the local community, one historically organised and funded by the state, represented a success of sorts for the movement; a new convergence of historically opposed interests, and an opening for squatters to re-configure their practice in solidarity with local community efforts to resist austerity. But it also received criticism for its part in 'doing the work of austerity' for the local government (Tonkiss, 2013: 315). The replacement of a fully-funded public service provision with volunteers played into the hands of a state program designed to downplay the effects of its withdrawal from the public sector (Reydt, 2013).

Like the Friern Barnet People's Library, this thesis is about a group of 15-20 activists in 2018 who, after being radicalized by the events of Occupy London, sought to down-size the movement to the neighbourhood and re-calibrate its horizons to a local field of struggle. It is also, however, a story about a group of squatters on the frontlines of the London housing crisis, many without affiliation to Occupy, who after the criminalization of squatting in residential property in 2012 struggled to organize and re-negotiate their values in the face of these new, emerging regimes of legalization and co-operation. While the success of projects like the Friern Barnet Library have been hailed as a triumph by Occupy activists, and resulted in calls for 'more arrangements between owners of the 1.4 million empty buildings in the UK and squatter/homeless and community groups' (Squat!net, 2013), they are also staging internal disagreements within the squatting scene about whose communities are being protected, and on what basis such a politics can incorporate their autonomy. This thesis centres on the different regimes of autonomy that emerged between my informants as they sought to re-make their lives in and through these contradictory spaces as part of a partial, fragmented, and sometimes productive political effort to imagine squatting beyond criminalization. After reaching out to a small, outside organization of ex-squatters and ex-housing workers, *Ember*, the squatters had incorporated as an empty-building security company (known as a "property guardian") and negotiated a contract with the owner that granted them license to live in the building in return for free security and maintenance. This arrangement, which occupied a legal grey area between squat and licensed use, had allowed them to stay in the building for two years while it sat empty, providing a degree of longevity and security rarely heard of since the criminalisation of squatting residential property in 2012; suggesting a return to "old-school", residential-style squatting on one hand, and a growing normalization of temporary housing arrangements on the other (Ferreri et al., 2016).

The Black Stag, the primary space of my ethnographic research, was a towering labyrinth on the outskirts of Greater London: a four-story, heritage-listed property perched on the high street of a busy suburban town centre, known to the locals as a pub before it had closed its doors in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. During my twelve months of fieldwork, from February 2018-2019, it housed a crew of (majority white, male) squatters and anarchists, homeless, artists, musicians, and skilled workers, with ties to the festival and underground rave, party, art, and graffiti scenes, as well as the London Occupy protests, and a number of small-scale, agrarian squats and eco-villages in London's surrounding areas. While the building was large, and its membership fluid (with several group walkouts and internal evictions occurring over the course of my fieldwork) a core group of 10 or so squatters remained. As property guardians,

the squatters referred to themselves as "caretakers" and "security on rotation" in their correspondences with the owner and local council, and envisioned the building as a long-term project designed to be given back to the community in the form of its own, alternative social centre. After several more months of working to restore the building – a monumental task given the state of disrepair it had been left in by the owner – toward the end of 2019, the squatters were evicted. In many ways, this thesis is an extended meditation on the failures (and partial successes) of this project to be realized. Through my growing involvement with Ember, its scope has expanded to include the contradictory dynamics through which squatters, not-for-profits, and social enterprises in London are gaining access to the city. Within these spaces, an incipient *autonomism* is being mobilised to take back empty buildings across neighbourhoods and town-centres hit worst by the financial crisis. These projects are accelerating in popularity at a time when councils, put under extreme austerity conditions over the last decade, are turning to community iniatives as a panacea for urban development and policy-making (Ferreri, 2016: 183).

This thesis is a story about a group of squatters taking up residence at other scales: in the neighbourhood, beyond the frontlines of Occupy. It describes the forms and shapes that Occupy took in the aftermath of the protests, and the regimes of autonomy that emerged as my informants sought to preserve their livelihoods in the face of new efforts to police and discipline squatting. The criminalization of squatting residential property has seen a necessary turn within the movement to the occupation of non-residential properties, made possible by the growing number of vacant commercial buildings in London. It has seen the formation of new allegiances between squatters and local communities, as they act to protect public works from neoliberal dynamics of privatization (Ferreri, 2015). But it has also seen, I suggest, a complex entangling of interests between struggling councils, property owners, and the anti-establishment roots of the squatting scene, in ways that have generated new pressures to adapt and work alongside these agents of neoliberalization. In a desperate scramble to 'keep up the pretence of constant growth in the absence of real means to do so', vacant buildings and boarded-up high-streets have featured heavily in the recent rise to popularity of low-budget, community-led urbanisms (Ferreri, 2015: 184). This has had important implications for activists working on the ground, as they weave discourses of regeneration and renewal into practices of community activism, creative appropriation, and occupation. But it has also given squatters a logic and a means with which to move beyond eviction, to explore their autonomy within and alongside the state.

Where to for Occupy and the squatters' movement?

The continuities between Occupy and the squatting scene are a key theme in the following chapters, and yet there has been little attempt to track and trace the links between them, despite the role played by squatters during the protests and the 'substantive territorial shift' that squatted buildings represented within the movement (Mathews, 2016: 108). The Bank of Ideas, a squatted social centre erected near Finsbury square in the former headquarters of Swiss bank UBS was used widely by Occupy activists for meetings, lectures, and workshops. The School of Ideas, a former primary school in Finsbury cleared out and destroyed by demolition crews overnight saw the loss of 'a whole community centre's worth of things' and the flooding of Finsbury square with squatters displaced by the evictions (Marshall, 2012). And in December 2011, Occupy Justice, a squatted magistrate's court just minutes away from the occupation in Finsbury square, ran mock trials for the 1%, listing the names of politicians and financial

corporations on cell doors beneath the courthouse , while establishing ‘amicable’ lines of communication between the squatters and corporate owners of the property (Hackney Citizen, 2012).

These occupations marked a key transition for the movement, as Occupy’s main organisational capacities no longer happened on site after the eviction of St Paul’s Cathedral in February 2012 (Mathews, 2016: 58). But they also marked a key transition within the squatting scene, as activists grappled with questions of autonomy, movement identity, and increasingly, legality. As the Occupy protests were unfolding, just miles away in UK parliament preparations for a historic piece of legislation to criminalize the act of squatting in residential buildings were underway. The legislation, first introduced to the House of Commons in March 2011 by Mike Weatherly MP, proposed a set of options to escalate, amend, or maintain the existing squatting laws. In October 2011, almost immediately after a three week consultation on the proposal ended, which received widespread condemnation from squatter advocacy organizations, lawyers, and homeless charities (Cobb, 2015: 13), the justice secretary Kenneth Clarke fast-tracked procedures to criminalise squatting in England and Wales by amending clause 26 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPOA) to make it illegal to squat in *residential* property. The offence, which was “slipped” into the bill in its last stages in the House of Commons, would be committed ‘where a person enters a residential building as a trespasser (having entered as such), knows or ought to know that he or she is a trespasser, and lives (or intends to live) there for any period’ (Needle Collective & Bash Street Kids, 2014: 176), so that ‘the act of simple trespass would be punishable by up to “51 weeks” imprisonment and/or a fine of up to 5,000’ (Finchett-Maddock, 2014: 214; O'Mahony et al., 2015: 2). The amendment received Royal Assent in May 2012, and came into force on 1 September 2012, just three months after the eviction of the last remaining Occupy protestors in Finsbury square.

In the debates leading up to the vote in November, a small number of ministers raised concerns about the rushed nature of changes to the clause. Among those voices, Caroline Lucas MP remarked that ‘laws made in this way can only end in problems’, referring to the three weeks of consultation that occurred in October before the bill was introduced, of which ‘the option [to criminalize squatting in residential property] was not even included’ (Hansard, 2011: , col 887). John McDonnell MP quoted the consultation’s own findings, that there was ‘no consensus on the true extent of squatting, or the proportion of squatting that is in residential buildings’. And Jeremy Corbyn MP argued that the 1977 Act was already ‘designed to deal with such cases […] through selective, specific and well-thought-out legislation’ (Hansard, 2011: , col 881). These arguments mirrored concerns in a letter released to *The Guardian* by a group of academics suggesting that attitudes toward squatting in the consultation distorted the current laws, which already made it illegal ‘to remain in a property as soon as [the squatter] has been told of the displaced occupier or a protected occupier’, and would have far-reaching consequences for vulnerable people if amended (experts, 2014). Despite widespread criticism from squatter advocacy organisations, housing lawyers, and homelessness charities, on 1 November 2011, the amendments passed the House of Commons with overwhelming support (283 votes to 13). The changes appeared as a flagship policy in the coalition government’s subsequent housing strategy for England (O'Mahony et al., 2015: 14), where it was made clear that the real victims of squatting were everyday home-owners:

> ‘We think it is right that the criminal law should intervene to offer a greater degree of protection…This will deal with what we consider to be the greatest distress to victims, that of being unable to use one’s own home (HM Government, 2011 42).

Over the following year, some seventy people were arrested and charged under the new law. The first to be jailed was 20-year-old Alex Haigh, just one day after the legislation came into force. Haigh, an apprentice bricklayer, had travelled to London earlier in the year in search of work. He was found by police living with two others in a flat owned by the London and Quadrant Housing Association, a property that had been empty for over a year (Cobb, 2015: 14; BBC, 2012). In an interview, Haigh’s mother reported that he had briefly lived in a hostel before turning to squatting because it was ‘full of alcoholics and drug addicts […] like a lot of people, Alex just wanted somewhere where he felt safe’ (BBC, 2012). After the court case, in which Haigh was sentenced to 12 weeks in jail, neighbours to the flat expressed surprise, noting that the squatters had not caused any harm. A Ministry of Justice spokesperson defended the sentence. ‘For too long squatters have been playing the justice system and have caused homeowners untold misery in eviction, repair and clean-up costs. It is extremely encouraging that the new criminal offence [...] is enabling the police and other agencies to take quick and decisive action to protect homeowners against squatting’ (BBC, 2012).

These statements form part of a broader effort by legal and government officials to construct a moral panic around squatting and to refuse the practice as a legitimate recourse for the homeless (O'Mahoney et al., 2015; Dee, 2013). The amendment to criminalize squatting in residential property, which was “slipped” into the LASPO bill in its final stages in the House of Commons (SQUASH, 2012b), received overwhelming support from both the Labour and Conservative governments, striking a broad neoliberal consensus on the “problem” of squatting. Both governments have been criticized for downplaying the ways neoliberal housing policies have, over the last four decades, created the very conditions that have produced a need for alternative housing solutions in the first place (Cobb, 2015: 28). As Vasudevan (2017) writes, for many academics, legal experts, and charity workers, the criminalization of squatting residential property in 2012 was anticipatory: it legislated against future struggles in anticipation of what was to come: a deepening housing crisis fuelled by urban regeneration, state-led gentrification, and austerity (63). The depth and duration of this crisis has seen a shift in the conception of London’s housing crisis from a ‘critical moment’ to a ‘protracted narrative’ (Heslop and Ormerod, 2019: 45). In 1992, Brownill and Sharp (1992: 8, 23) wrote that London’s quickly rising property prices, housing insecurity, over-crowding, and the threat of homelessness ‘across all sectors’ would only get worse unless radical reforms were implemented. As Watt and Minton (2016) write, this situation did get a lot worse, in large part because the radical reforms that were implemented over the next decade were ‘conjoined under the twin lodestars of “privatisation” by Conservative and Coalition governments and “modernisation” by New Labour’ (Watt and Minton, 2016: 204).

Although the local and specific variations of housing crisis in the UK have changed over the last century, four decades of neoliberal housing policy have cemented its legacies and its effects. In 2004, a national investigation released by Shelter concluded that ‘the acute shortage of…social rented housing is at the root of the housing crisis…almost everyone now agrees that we need to build more social housing’ (Minton, 2005: 6). Despite overwhelming agreement from experts on the causes of this crisis, between 2007 and 2010, the delivery of new social-rented housing was less than half of the London Plan target, and only a quarter of the evidenced

need (Ambrose and Jenkins, 2011: 2). The election of the conservative Coalition in 2010 saw the introduction of a raft of neoliberal solutions to the housing crisis, including the introduction of a 'Help to Buy' scheme to encourage home ownership, a growing number of caps and restrictions imposed on access to housing benefits (Cobb, 2015: 27), as well as a move from "lifetime" tenancies in social housing to fixed-term tenancies 'emblematic of a US-style vision of social housing as a 'temporary welfare service, reserved only for the very poorest' (Fitzpatrick and Watts, 2017: 1021). Between 2008 and 2016, the cost of social renting in England increased by 40%. The private rental sector, a sector that historically represents some of the worst housing conditions in the UK (Reeve, 2005: 199-200) had around 1.9 million reports of issues related to condensation, damp, or mould in homes (Marmot et al., 2020: 30). Between 2010 and 2018, homelessness numbers increased by 74%, including 83,700 households and 124,490 children, and there was an increase of around 300% in the number of people sleeping rough (Marmot et al., 2020: 30).

On one hand, the new laws to criminalize squatting came swiftly and surprisingly. Squatting's threat level was at a historic low-point. Since the 1990s, the average lifespan of a squat in the UK was six weeks (Finchett-Maddock, 2014: 174). On the other hand, the changes could be seen as a natural extension of attitudes toward policing squatting. By the 2000s, police were disciplining squatters, fast-tracking illegal evictions, and 'curtailing legal dodges by the defense, while preserving squatting's ostensible legality' (Needle Collective & Bash Street Kids, 2014: 170). News of the legislation appeared to mark a turning point for the Occupy movement, which, toward its final stages had relied increasingly on the knowledge and expertise of squatters in opening up nearby buildings for collective use (Mathews, 2016: 108). A realization that residential squatting may soon come to an end appeared to be dawning on activists who, taking up residence in The Friern Barnet Library, Occupy Justice, and other commercial buildings, began developing new horizontal strategies of communication with councils and property owners. On the eve of their eviction from Occupy Justice, protestors released a press statement commending the owners of the building for the outcome of their court case:

> 'Occupy London would like to thank Mastcraft for having the imagination to work with us in giving this fine building a new lease of life – as well as perhaps the last ever trials to take place in the building – while it awaits redevelopment. We hope this agreement will serve as a model for others to follow' (Hackney Citizen, 2012).

These occupations represented a shift in narrative within the Occupy movement, a reinvigoration of squatter politics at the centre of the movement, and a desire to "live on" the political imaginary opened up by Occupy in alternative ways and places. But it also raised internal questions about the direction of the movement post-eviction – questions squatting was, perhaps, most well-equipped to answer. Mathews (2016) writes of the frustration and inability of Occupy activists to call the Friern Barnet Library an Occupy London action, despite being 'the nearest thing to a translation of Occupy tactics into another local context for concrete gains […] "that issue was given to the squatters; the squatters saved Friern Barnet Library! Thank you squatters"' (2016: 191). Up until the eviction of Occupy in February, the General Assembly (GA) had represented a performative voice for the Occupy movement, but not without imposing a certain 'problematic unity' and 'proto-bureaucratic' structure that carried over into the latter months of 2012, making any attempt at getting GA approval for follow-up actions more effort than it was worth (Mathews, 2016: 190). In the case of the small pop-up

social centre "Bread and Circuses", activists resigned to calling themselves 'supporters of Occupy' rather than Occupy London activists:

> 'It was just a bunch of us recognizing it's so much easier doing stuff with people you trust and work with well, rather than trying to go through the whole process of doing something as Occupy. Which you may say is not democratic, but is it really valuable to waste our time and energy by putting them into endless discussions, and the problems of power structures and relations?' (Jesse in Mathews, 2016: 192).

The eviction of the main camps staged a series of existential questions about the life and death of Occupy, and its ability to survive without those spaces of 'appearance' so crucial to preserving the collective life of the movement – where, as Appel (2014) writes, the radical imagination becomes possible only 'as unlikely people meet together' in spaces of collaboration, collation, and cohabitation (2014: 614). And yet, squatting gave Occupy a new set of tools to move quickly between evictions, to operate across territories in small groups, prioritizing movement and direct-action over questions of identity, reflexiveness, and movement cohesion. Mathews' (2016) ethnography of the movement paints a picture of a group of activists looking beyond eviction: from a movement that had become increasingly bound to the logic of the camp, to something more emergent and modular, an "idea" or a "concept" that 'defied all localisation' (103) . While the camps represented a home for the movement, they also gave them a certain fixity that downplayed the message of Occupy (captured in the slogans "Occupy Everywhere" and "We are the 99%") that gave rise to the demonstrations globally. That many of the planned follow-up actions did not materialize in the months following the clearing of the camps ultimately affirmed the worst fears of protestors, and revealed what had been hiding in plain sight all along: that the protests were not as impervious to eviction as was thought, and that the moment of creative expansion had ultimately passed (Mathews, 2016: 109-110).

While the eviction of Occupy London represented a defeat for many within the movement, it also signalled a rupture and a point of no return for the activists I encountered in my fieldwork. These were squatters who had largely operated within small, anarchist/libertarian and autonomous circles up until the events of Occupy, and yet to whom Occupy had posed an injunction: a challenge to take up the project of occupation (centred around collective identity and a view toward wider social change) in ways and places that had arguably been absent from the movement since its so-called "rebirth" in the 1960s and 70s. For those who had come to rely on Occupy as a home, squatting offered a place of refuge: a chance to live on the politics of direct action, housing, and care in new ways and places. But the turn to squatting would pose its own unique challenges. The legislation to criminalize squatting had undoubtedly fractured the movement – a movement that had, since at least the 1990s, begun to show signs of burnout and decay (Finchett-Maddock, 2014). What would it mean to imagine Occupy beyond eviction; to take up the call to "Occupy Everywhere" in a movement whose members were now considered criminal? How could squatters re-build in an environment where visibility actively worked against their claims to justice?

Toward an ethnography of salvage

In her ethnography of a small squatting community in Bristol, Grohmann (2016) anticipates some of the new challenges that face squatting in the UK today. On one hand, the new laws have given rise to a wide range of creative strategies that have enabled squatters to deflect and

fight convictions. The wording of the new laws places the onus of proof on the prosecutor, who must show that the squatter/s were 'living or intending to live' in the property in question – with at least one half of that equation, *intent*, being a notoriously difficult element to prove without some kind of major surveillance operation (Grohmann, 2016: 257; IMC-UK & Housing War, 2013). On the other hand, in its first year the law gave rise to 700 arrests and 10 imprisonments, and claimed the life of a 35-year-old squatter who reportedly froze to death outside an empty building after being arrested for breaking into the same building weeks earlier to sleep (McVeigh and Hunter, 2013). Grohmann expresses concern that what remains of the squatting scene today belongs to those who, out of sheer desperation, have no other choice but to squat. Perhaps this means, in Pruijt's (2013) typology, a resurgence of deprivation-based squatting over political squatting, although the distinction between these forms is tenuous at best. For Grohmann, at least, the days of openly squatted buildings are over. The eviction of a group of 60 squatters in Bristol in 2015 showed 'a picture of desolation – drugs, violence and mental illness', meaning, 'despite the fact that the building was a commercial property, police saw it necessary to evict for reasons of sheer safety' (Grohmann, 2016: 258).

'In one sense', Grohmann concludes:

> '[…] this book is something of a salvage ethnography – the criminalization of squatting meant that the practices I have described in this book are now, for the most part, illegal. This does not mean that squatting has disappeared […] But while squatting still exists, its face has notably changed. Gone are the days of openly squatted social centers, public film nights, people's kitchens, free shops, and all the other innovative and subversive practices emerging from squats that can be found in these pages. What is left now to some degree resembles the darker visions of squatting as they have long been touted by homelessness charities, as only those desperate enough to have no other choice still risk arrest and imprisonment for occupying vacant properties. […] I hope I am not considered frivolous for suggesting that what happened to the Bristol squatting 'scene' (and squatting in England and Wales more generally) in some ways resembles what has happened to the very indigenous tribes that the term "salvage ethnography" was coined for: stripped of their land and thus of their possibility to practice their traditions, these tribes often descended into abject poverty, drug dependency, and violent conflict' (Grohmann, 2016: 257-258).

Grohmann tentatively labels her research a form of 'salvage ethnography' in its orientation to a now dying practice; although the implication that the 'descent' of the movement into poverty and violence is both widespread and a logistical failure perhaps concedes too much to the agents of criminalization. Grohmann tracks an important shift in the politics of possibility of squatting. But the use of salvage ethnography – a term which recalls a troubled history of anthropological attempts to document Native American cultures considered dying or extinct – puts forward a conviction that this crisis is trending terminal, not open-ended. As Owens (2010: 222) writes, there is a tendency in research on squatter's movements to cling to narratives of closure; to attempt to 'render a complete history' of the movement in accounts of violence, eviction, and defeat. This may be because closed narratives are easier to reckon with than open-ended ones; they rely on familiar tropes of the rise and fall of civilizations, they provide coherence in times of uncertainty, and they mobilize emotions that activists can use to carry on the movement in new ways and places. But, as Owens notes, 'movements left for dead may, in fact, have some life left in them', and it is not a coincidence that there is often a tight correlation

between the publication date of research declaring the end of squatting as a movement and the movement's supposed end-date (Owens, 2010: 222).

The squatters movement in London has a long history, but as Vasudevan (2017: 117) insists, it also has a present and a future. In the UK, the remnants of the organized squatters movements that survived into the twentieth-first century have been embedded in a new, anti-globalization movement that has transformed squats into converging spaces for a growing range of political alliances and identities (Vasudevan, 2017: 61, 117). Criminalization has undoubtedly changed the face of the movement, as squatters are pushed into increasingly peripheral and derelict urban spaces. But to begin the work of salvage ethnography now, at a time when the need for squatting has arguably never been higher (Needle Collective & Bash Street Kids, 2014), overlooks the attempts at recovery and re-organisation that are already emerging from the ruins. This salvage work demands our attention precisely because it emerges, against all odds, in spaces and conditions that are not right, where things go to die *but die wrongly.*

How, then, do we capture both the sense of a total collapse of a way of life – the real and devastating effects of criminalization on squatter's worlds – and the refusal of squatters to go away? Perhaps a second alternative is an ethnography *of* salvage, which attempts to grasp, with a sense of the always imminent and potential return of these relations, how to relate to that which has been ruined, yet persists (Williams, 2010: 39). Even in the harshest moments of defeat, social movements rarely shuffle entirely off the stage. They are instead 'made anew and tossed aside, not broken but declared broken' (Williams, 2010: 43), at least until they can be hacked back into circuits of valuation. Whose circuits of valuation, and what possibilities for experimentation can emerge from this, is a question of the relationship between capitalist and noncapitalist systems. Salvage is the work of accumulation that brings new projects of value to light to capitalism Tsing (2015: 63); but it is also the practice of picking new possibilities from the scraphead where old value projects go to die. An ethnography of salvage then, is not a model for doing anti-capitalist anthropology: it is a metaphor and an ethos for understanding the ways people, practices, and things take on lives that persist beyond their supposed ruination. It is the 'graveside smile' (Williams, 2010: 37) that cuts through the heavy mood of melancholy and mourning, the voice that whispers *goodbye squatting* and *we'll be seeing a lot of you*.

This thesis is about where squatting went after the partial criminalization of squatting in England and Wales in 2012. It asks through what spaces and what kinds of formal arrangements it is possible to continue practicing squatting in London today. How has the transition of the movement, from empty buildings to non-residential zones and commercial centres, transformed the ways squatters envision their autonomy outside capital and the state? Autonomy is a recurring theme that runs through subsequent chapters. It ties the struggles for freedom and self-determination of my informants to the new social movement landscapes (Occupy London, Grenfell Tower, post-Katrina New Orleans) in which large-scale projects of state abandonment and decay have left ordinary people with the hard work of constructing alternatives in the absence of real efforts to do so by the state. These alternative projects can be deviant or excessive; like the commodities which fill our trashheaps, they can become targets of surveillance or objects to be policed and withdrawn from circulation – as in 2014, when three men were taken to trial for dumpster-diving a bin behind a supermarket in London (Gander, 2014). On the other hand, they can come to be seen as intensely valuable and creative, even emblematic of the entrepreneurial spirit itself – as with the rise of community regeneration projects like *Ember* (chapter 4) currently sweeping across councils and property development

firms in London. What is salvaged and what gets thrown back on the trash heap, I argue, reveals an important struggle over the construction of different kinds of communities in the face of contradictory efforts by the state to dissolve or commodify them.

In the next section, I turn to the anthropological literature on austerity in Europe, with particular attention to the diverse ways it has shaped and continues to shape urban life in neoliberal cities. Austerity operates by wedding urban structures to market dynamics, allowing complex processes of expansion and collapse, decay and growth, abandonment and securitization to exist side-by-side. In the UK, empty buildings and vacant lots have become visible manifestations of a neoliberal order bankrupt of solutions or ideas, representing key sites through which squatters have been able to intervene in the future planning and management of the city. At the same time, empty buildings have become important instruments through which private investment and real-estate speculation have accelerated during the financial crisis (Soules, 2014b). Who gets to distribute these resources in times of crisis, I argue, reveals an important struggle over the right to salvage the city. The criminalization of squatting, the management of vacancy, and the rise of community alternatives to austerity emerge against a wider backdrop of state withdrawal in which squatters and activists find themselves, at different registers and scales, working with and becoming inadvertently complicit in systems that were not set up to benefit them.

The neoliberal city

Over the last decade, squatting in London has survived in a continuum of austerity-wracked boroughs and councils that are turning to community alternatives in a bid to survive cuts from central government. But the degree to which squatting has survived as a movement in this landscape is less clear. Austerity poses new challenges to squatters, forcing them to negotiate between complex processes of autonomy and co-operation, criminalization and co-optation, eviction and gentrification. As Watt and Minton write (2016: 212), the tools and techniques of urban dispossession (state-led gentrification, functional zoning, suburbanization) have accelerated under austerity and neoliberalism – but they are not exactly stirring rallying cries for housing activism, nor do they provide a clear political injunction to be resisted. Writing of the problems faced by social movements in the age of austerity, Haiven and Khasnabish (2014) argue that, up until the Arab uprisings and the Occupy protests, it seemed almost self-evident that:

> '…the spark necessary to animate radicalized mass movements was conspicuously absent, extinguished perhaps by neoliberalism's enclosure of the lifeworld and the privatization of all things public. If people had once 'dreamed big' and sought unapologetically to change the world, more than two decades into the 'end of history' such dreams now seemed smothered by the rampant individualism, claustrophobic cynicism and reactionary backlash engendered by neoliberal social engineering and shrill neoconservative moralism.'

If there was a perception that neoliberal capitalism was too big to fail, the 2008 financial crisis offered a brief glimpse of something else, a collapse of endlessly available credit and of the promise of financial futures which spurred-on speculation in the present. Movements like Occupy and the Arab uprisings exploded onto the scene – as 'mass manifestations of rage and hope' (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014) they took to the streets to reclaim public space, transforming the imaginative landscape in which capitalism staked its claim to the future, and

insisted that, from here-on out, there could be no return to business-as-usual. What followed, Peck and Theodore (2019) write, however:

> '…certainly did not align with the script of a terminal, once-and-for-all collapse of neoliberalism represented (again, somewhat misleadingly) as a bracketable "era" of free-market governance. As if to affirm Thatcher's premature dismissal that there was "no alternative" to market rule, what followed in the wake of the financial crisis was, far from a retreat of neoliberalism, more like an audacious exercise in doubling down' (Peck and Theodore, 2019).

In the UK, the election of the Cameron-Clegg coalition in 2010 saw the introduction of harsh fiscal austerity – a policy of 'voluntary deflation' and 'extreme economy' (Blyth, 2013: 626; Peck, 2012), involving privatization, de-regulation, and the financialisation of public debt as a means of re-generating money flows into markets after the 2008 financial crisis. The coalition government prescribed a clear outline for the application of austerity across almost all government departments. Politicians used emergency stimulus packages to bail out the banks and avert financial collapse (Gray and Barford, 2018: 542), absorbing financial sector debts onto public sector balance sheets (Stuckler et al., 2017: 18), and turning the financial crisis into a crisis of public spending (Bear, 2015; Bear, 2017; Muehlebach, 2016; Muehlebach, 2017). The coalition successfully put forward a narrative that the financial crisis was the result of the previous administration's failure to cut down on excessive spending: a debt for which "we" all, equally, must pay. Despite these calls for moral and collective sacrifice, more than 80% of deficit reduction policies in Europe involved budget cuts rather than tax increases (Stuckler et al., 2017: 18). Between 2010 and 2015, the UK Local Government section of the Department of Local Government and Community lost over half of its funding, making these cuts 'one of the key drivers in restructuring local government and public service provision in Britain' (Gray and Barford, 2018: 542).

In order to survive cuts from central government, cities across the UK have been forced to compete for public funding and corporate investment, resulting in a constitutive breakdown in housing services (Watt and Minton, 2016), health and social care (Cummins, 2018), and various other forms of state provisioning. Typical of austerity, these new forms of productivity have emerged in close proximity to urban decline and decay (Bear, 2017; Tonkiss, 2013). Laura Bear's ethnography of debt along the Hooghly River in India shows how fiscal austerity, combined with new forms of financialized debt, has hollowed out the public sector, 'producing ruined public works and increasingly precarious work promoted directly by state institutions' (Bear, 2017: 4). As Andrea Muehlebach writes (2016), we are only now, in the last decade, beginning to see these same histories of debt and indebtedness in the Global South fold themselves back over into the Global North, and in some of the world's leading financial centres. In the UK, as social programs have been dismantled, and governments move away from speculative investment in welfare and infrastructure, cities like London have begun to bear the physical scars of abandonment, disuse, and decline (Tonkiss, 2013; Mah, 2010). In 2016, the Guardian reported that there were more than 50,000 empty properties in London alone, with that number rising to 600,000 across England (Foster, 2016). While infrastructure has stood in for a series of rhetorics of industrial pride, in May's promises of an 'industrial strategy', and in Trump's vision to kickstart American steel (Bear, 2017: 3), the ruins of financial crisis (bankrupt development projects, empty office buildings, weedy and overgrown plots) remain abandoned and obsolete.

In the last two decades, anthropologists and geographers have recorded a striking number of tendencies toward ruination in cities across the Global North: buildings that lay empty while planning permissions take years to process, social housing so decrepit it seems to exacerbate the very problem it was designed to solve, and construction projects seemingly abandoned mid-way or forgotten about. But the forms of urban break-down that have accompanied austerity must be contrasted with the sheer volume of global capital that is being moved in and out of cities like London, in ways that have intensified processes of decay *and* economic growth. In the UK, local demand for housing has been subdued by financial crisis and weak income growth, but foreign investment and speculation on property (homes, buildings, and land) has continued to rise, with an estimated £100 billion flowing into the UK property market from overseas between 2008 and 2015 (Crerar and Prynn, 2015). Investment properties in wealthy suburbs across London have been compared to ghost towns, with Kensington and Chelsea recording annual increases of up to 40% in empty buildings, and an actual *decline* in population between 2001 and 2011 (Deverteuil and Manley, 2017: 1319). These capital flows are contributing to the rise of a global housing market so large and so recent that we are yet to fully grasp its consequences. From the sub-prime mortgage crisis to the millions of "zombie" investment properties across Europe, the built environment 'being first and foremost treated as an investment vehicle is changing its physical form and social life' (Soules, 2014a: 2:23). Soules elaborates:

> Through the territorialization of urban/suburban/exurban expansion and the reterritorialization of urban densification, built form itself captures larger and larger amounts of capital—resulting in new correlations between finance and physical form. But simultaneous to this constructed capturing of capital are the cyclical dynamics of market value fluctuations in which capital is further channelled into property markets throughout the globe. […] the degree to which built space functions as an asset is increasing and in diverse ways of which the effects on the city are under-conceptualized (Soules, 2014b: 688).

What is revealed in this crisis is not a lack of supply of space or housing, which has been steadily rising in the UK, but rather a decline in affordable space and a massive and historic transferral of land ownership in cities from residents and governments to corporations and foreign buyers. Rapid de/urbanization, mass vacancies, and volatile fluctuations are symptoms of a new 'asset urbanism', in which architecture increasingly serves as assets, and urban structures are tied to market dynamics of expansion and collapse (Soules, 2014b: 686). This landscape has important implications for the anthropology of squatting, as the movement turns to the occupation of commercial properties at a time when its members and its practices are now considered "illegal". But the tendency to focus on these dynamics of dereliction risks downplaying the degree to which private companies and investors have continued to profit under these same conditions, and in so doing, have maintained strict regimes of securitization and enclosure over the built environment. At a time when the need for alternative housing solutions has arguably never been more urgent, punitive discourses around homelessness, the criminalization of squatting, and the regulation and securitization of empty space has only increased.

Squatting under austerity

With the election of the austerity coalition in 2010, the fate of the London squatters movement was put into question. Accounts of austerity crisis that emerged across Europe emphasised the dynamics of economic reversal, the collapse of hoped-for futures, and the ongoing attempts to make sense of these uncertain futures in terms of the past (Knight and Stewart, 2016; Knight, 2015; Knight, 2012). Austerity presented itself as a 'regrettable but unavoidable' solution to financial crisis, urging governments to rebalance their economies away from consumption and welfare to make way for a new, 'post-affluent society' (Tellmann, 2015: 22; Krippner, 2011; Seymour, 2014: 3). As Muehlebach (2016) writes, the capture of the state by austerity was accompanied by a radical intensification of moral languages and moral posturing. Whereas much of neoliberalism hinged on the encouragement and liberation of entrepreneurial freedoms, austerity indexed a reversal, a cutting-back or reigning in of previous excesses (2016: 363) through a new set of moralizing and discursive moves. Media narratives emerging from the sub-prime mortgage crisis in the US were quick to push the blame onto individuals defaulting on their mortgage payments, representing them as fiscally irresponsible, immoral, and even lacking patriotism (Stout, 2016: 88; White, 2010: 999). In the UK, similar narratives would pave the way for a decade of harsh fiscal austerity measures. The conservative coalition was elected, not on the back of calls for economic growth or recovery, but a campaign which '*explicitly promised* the age of austerity as a necessary solution to an out-of-control fiscal deficit' (Stanley, 2014: 896, emphasis in original).

If squatting represented a political alternative to the debt hysteria that had swept across the UK – in its insistence on housing as a right, not an asset – new efforts to criminalize squatting in 2012 seemed to dispel any notion of a "return" for the movement. Punitive discourses of debt and sacrifice played a crucial role in the 'highly authoritarian moral weaponry' of austerity (Muehlebach, 2016: 363). Across the world, austerity policies drew from a shared structure of feeling which tied unchecked public spending to common-sense wisdoms about household debt – that one should only buy what one can afford, and that one must always pay one's debts (Stanley, 2014: 910). In the US, austerity as a "common-sense" solution to an out-of-control fiscal deficit appealed to a class of middle-income homeowners who justified fiscal retrenchment through their shared experiences of overspending and related feelings of guilt concerning excess consumption (Stanley, 2014: 896). In the UK, the tabloid press played a crucial role in the campaign to criminalize squatting, creating a "moral panic" by depicting squatters as violent and parasitic, coming to Britain from an outside 'to exploit its alleged "soft touch" approach to crime' (Grohmann, 2016: 9; O'Mahony et al., 2015). It was no coincidence that the criminalization of squatting arrived after the introduction of austerity, pushing home ownership out of reach for large segments of the population while positioning squatters as a threat to those who had rightfully obtained it. Despite mostly targeting vacant properties, squatters represented a highly racialized and criminal excess at a time when neither state nor property-owners could afford to be seen giving handouts.

The legislation to criminalize the act of squatting residential property emerged just one year after the election of the austerity coalition, turning squatters into an unruly excess at a time when it was precisely these excesses that were being put under government scrutiny. Media discourses were quick to construct a moral distinction between opportunistic, 'lifestyle squatters', who should be criminalized, and 'vulnerable squatters' who it was argued, instead

of squatting, should turn to homeless services, 'the very services that were being closed down due to budget cuts' (Grohmann, 2016: 227-228). The effect was to turn the discourse around squatting into an "all-out war" between lifestyle squatters and a coalition of (righteous, rule-abiding) property owners who had earned their homes through hard work. Tabloid media headlines ('SQUATTERS WRECKED MY HOME') encouraged homeowners to identify with the horror of 'having their most intimate spaces violated […] by squatters who were "sleeping in people's beds, watching their TV and eating their food", leaving them feeling "desecrated and dirty"' (Grohmann, 2016: 229). The message of the campaign against squatters, led by Mike Weatherley MP, was clear: 'For far too long squatters have been a plague on our city. They should get out and stay out' (Weatherley, 2012). While ordinary home-owners felt the brunt of harsh fiscal austerity, squatters 'contravened the basic rule of fairness' by "getting something for nothing" (Grohmann, 2016: 29), representing the same moral failure of the bankers responsible for the financial crisis, who had to be bailed out by the public for their reckless greed, high bonuses, and excess consumption. Squatters were:

> 'arrogant, […] believing themselves to be superior to the rest of society, and in particular…"above the law". They are "web-savvy", they have a predilection for high-value properties, they deceive us with their "guile and tenacity", and they are carefree, continuing on "their merry way" when they are evicted' (Middleton, 2015: 103-104).

The criminalization of squatting in 2012 saw a shift, not necessarily in the ways squatting was policed – squatting in London had long been treated as if it were criminal – but in the moral discourses deployed to represent it as unsustainable and irresponsible, a prelapsarian figure of excess. At the same time, the actual excesses of the financial crisis – the combined wealth of Britain's wealthiest individuals – doubled between 2005 and 2015 to the tune of some £547 billion (Garside, 2015).

At a time when politicians and technocrats were working hard to rationalize the introduction of fiscal austerity policies to the British public, squatting asserted the possibility of forms of economic life outside austerity, and outside the economic futures it deemed possible. Squatting posed a threat to the foundations of a crisis narrative that relied on everyday understandings of debt and indebtedness in order to justify the allocation of "scarce" resources away from public spending. In the UK, where empty homes continue to outnumber homeless families five-to-one (Hockaday, 2020), the criminalization of squatting served to clearly demarcate where abundance applied and where restriction was called for (Tellmann, 2015: 32, 33). What types of economy were imaginable, and who could be entrusted with the role of distributing these resources in times of crisis, were questions of moral economy that sought to redefine the public good in the interests of market stability and moral order. Squatting undermined one of the key tenets of this project: it insisted that where there is empty housing there is abundance, and it was the possibility of this abundance – the emergence of novel forms of economy based on non-market principles, the reappropriation of surpluses at a time of profound political uncertainty over the future of financial capitalism – that criminalization sought strategically to manage, contain, and enclose.

From squatters to guardians

As Vasudevan (2017) writes, it would be wrong to reduce and essentialise squatting to the singular pursuit of housing, and while the criminalization of squatting residential property has arguably succeeded in making the conditions of this housing more precarious and uncertain,

what remains of squatting today places new emphasis on the durable and creative practices of the movement. While squatters have become objects of intense legal scrutiny, this has not prevented them from participating in the rise of other, "temporary" market solutions, as renters seek out access to affordable housing under extreme austerity conditions, and investors look to extract quick, short-term profits from stalled or failed investment properties. Over the last two decades, property guardianships have offered an intermediate solution to London's housing crisis, enabling renters to pay below market rates to live as security or guardians in "unusual" (mixed-use, often substandard) commercial buildings.

Property guardianships are a form of "flexible" living arrangement that enable individuals to apply to intermediary guardian companies to become live-in security in vacant, non-residential buildings, typically to guard them from squatters and vandals (Ferreri et al., 2016: 246). Because this accommodation is temporary, occupying a legal grey area between tenancy and work, guardians typically relinquish their rights by signing a separate 'code of conduct', allowing landlords to inspect their homes at any time, to prohibit a wide range of social activities, and to evict residents with short notice (Ferreri et al., 2016: 246; SQUASH, 2012a). Property guardianships reflect a growing normalization of informal and "flexible" living arrangements across the UK. They work by merging forms of urban dwelling with informal occupation, the security industry, and housing, to promote schemes that work to deter squatters from breaking into vacant buildings (Ferreri et al., 2016: 246).

At face value, property guardianships work at similar registers to criminalization, deploying neoliberal anxieties around squatting by characterising squatters as a threat to private property, housing asset values, and market norms of private housing consumption (Cobb, 2015: 16). On the other hand, property guardianships have given squatters, community organisations, and not-for-profits who present themselves as community activists a logic with which to gain access to the city: as key agents in the provision of a low-cost, mixed housing, security alternative. The model has been criticized for offering a bleak, dystopian outlook for the 1 million empty properties across the UK (SQUASH, 2012a). But, as I show in Chapter 5, it has also given squatters a means with which to re-gain access to the city, in partial and contradictory ways, as guardians, the would-be agents of their own exclusion. As squatters face the criminalization of a practice that has long served as a refuge for victims of housing crisis, property guardianships, meanwhile contracts, and other temporary urban arrangements have played an important role in enabling squatters to re-negotiate access to residential and commercial buildings. These strategies of cooperation have emerged at a time when property owners and councils, put under extreme austerity conditions over the last decade, are turning to community iniatives as an affordable solution to profound dysfunctions in the property market. As the UK government continues to pull back its role as service provider in the shift to a permanent "smaller" state – including, more recently, a shift from central state subsidies for new social housing to 'an arrangement in which providers must fund their own building projects through the use of flexible social tenancies at "affordable rents"' (Cobb, 2015) – it has also opened up avenues for squatters and "community-based" volunteers in London to play an increasingly important role in the future planning and management of the city.

The rise of property guardianships follows a trend in community initiatives in London over the last decade, which operate in the 'cracks' between urban planning and speculative investment (Tonkiss, 2013). The ability of corporations and investors to keep urban spaces empty, often under tight fiscal restraints, has relied on their ability to draw on strategies of creative

appropriation and temporary re-use to incorporate these "forgotten" sites back into circuits of profitability. Squatters, grass-roots community movements, and not-for-profit enterprises have featured at the centre of a new, creative vision of budget-friendly, community-led urbanisms, as planners look for alternatives to conventional forms of urban development.

Organisations like Ember (Chapter 4) have sought to bring together a wide sector of not-for-profit and squatter groups by making use of London's empty urban spaces. The small company made ripples in the squatting community with the success of its showcase project, *Kindle*, which ran between 2015 and 2017. Using volunteers, recycled materials, and principles of circular economy, Ember lobbied the support of a wealthy landlord in London to convert an empty office block into a large-scale community venue. Originally scheduled to be a six-month contract, the project received four extensions and hosted up to 30,000 people over two and a half years, providing a wide range of events, conferences, and support services to the community. In Kindle's impact report, it was estimated that up to 31,000 hours of labour were volunteered over two-and-a-half years – or £310,000 of wages saved. After the project came to an end in November 2017, and the building was sold off for re-development, Ember extended its services as an umbrella company to other "temporary" regeneration projects, using its reputation to lay the groundwork for a new community-led infrastructure capable of taking on the thousands of wasted spaces across London.

The model has been broadly successful in gaining the support of small enterprise and councils across London, with the promise of free, temporary regeneration of empty buildings. It has also gained the attention of squatters – giving them a model and an ethos to replicate. In 2017, a public group of anarchists and squatters released a public statement in favour of this new, positive DIY focus:

> 'We must evolve to survive. It's time to take responsibility for our actions. We talk of social change, (re)volution, the consequences of needless destruction, waste, consumption…As such, [our group] is to be officially laid to rest & cremated. From the ashes, a new group will form, focused on setting the example of how to evolve society & humanity. Whereas previously we were focused on anarchy & destruction, we will now focus on construction & creation. Inspired by @Kindle & in collaboration with Ember, we will soon to be opening a new community hub (only better than Kindle, cos, y'know, that was a bit too hippiefied).'

The vision which organisations like Ember articulated to squatters was a new, potential harmony between urban developers, policy makers, and the anti-establishment roots of the squatting scene. This politics signals a broader shift under neoliberal austerity, as financial constraints become an imperative for planning and state institutions to innovate, and temporary use and related practices shift 'elements of alternative lifestyles to strategic features of urban revitalisation and creative city policies'(Honeck, 2017: 269).

At the same time, Ember revives long-standing debates within the squatters movement about movement gentrification, the co-optation of punk (Dines and Worley, 2016), and the commercialization of social centres (Hodkinson and Chatterton, 2006). Neoliberal recuperation, not just eviction, has long been a strategy of neutralizing the autonomous politics of the squatters movement (Dadusc, 2019: 171). Rather than a simple withdrawal of the state, austerity in the UK has seen the rise of wide range of experimental neoliberal programs and development initiatives. These initiatives provide new opportunities for cooperation between

state and non-state actors. They offer real autonomy to squatters on the basis that squatting, as a form of urbanism and as the 'root of temporary use' (Honeck, 2017: 276), can be part of a low-budget solution to systemic problems of deurbanization and degrowth. But, as Peck and Theodore (2019) note, these progressive initiatives are always coupled with the exclusion of forms of autonomy that are considered alien to the neoliberal project and cannot be usefully integrated. Projects of neoliberalization:

> ' […] have never been synonymous with a simple diminution, or withdrawal, of the state, but instead have been variously concerned with its capture and reuse, albeit in the context of a generalized assault on social-welfarist or leftarm functions, coupled with an expansion of right-arm roles and capacities in areas like policing and surveillance, incarceration and social control' (2019: 249).

Squatters are being called on to play a crucial role in the future planning and management of the city. But these new modes of participation – property guardianships, "meanwhile" contracts, and other forms of temporary use – have also emerged against a wider backdrop of criminalization in which squatters are being forced to adapt or surrender their homes and ways of life. This has important implications for squatters working on the ground, as they weave discourses of regeneration and re-use into a practice that has long declared itself incommensurate with neoliberal development. It has also led, I argue, to a series of disagreements in the squatting scene about what it means to be autonomous, and what kinds of political autonomy remain viable within these new configurations.

A new autonomy?

This thesis is about a group of squatters who, facing the criminalization of a practice that has long refused cooperation with the state, are opening themselves to new forms of organization and institutionalization in order to re-gain access to the city. It follows a group of squatters, working in collaboration with Ember, who sought to transform their homes from a squat into an official Ember "guardian" project. The turn to Ember has offered a strategic way forward for squatting at a time of profound uncertainty over the future legality of the movement: a chance to re-imagine the politics at the centre of the movement toward a more "positive" reappropriation of community and urban space. While the successes of these projects rest on a particular conception of "creative city" politics (Peck, 2005) and a new, emerging ethics of urban citizenship (Muehlebach, 2009) – these imperatives have often come into conflict with the autonomous and counter-cultural roots of the squatting scene. Rather than offer a linear narrative of the transition from "squats" to "guardianships", this thesis follows the struggles of my participants to preserve, contest, and transform their autonomy in accordance with value regimes that have become increasingly contested within the squatting scene and difficult to embody.

Vasudevan (2017) argues that the explosion of squatting in the UK that began in the 1960s spoke to the emergence an autonomous urban movement that 'positioned itself in opposition to the state and as an alternative to capitalism'(Introduction, para 29). It drew from a strong anarcho-libertarian ethos, providing space for a range of different identities to exist in ethical conflict with mainstream culture (Vasudevan, 2017; Martin-Iverson, 2011: 21; Bestley, 2016: 51). Vasudevan offers a non-linear history of the development of autonomous squatters movements through the 1960s and onwards. The diversity of these groups, he argues – from family and punk squatters, to anarchists, Black Panthers, environmental protestors, animal

rights and feminist activists – reflected a series of 'interlocking episodes' that sought, in different ways, to challenge the meaning of urban space and transform everyday urban life (Vasudevan, 2017). It was the freedom to explore new identities, to defy power and authority, and to experiment with alternative ways of living that brought squatters together as a movement. While criminalization has undoubtedly made the practice of squatting in residential properties harder in the UK, to reduce squatting to the practice of finding shelter would be to ignore the sheer diversity of identities that it has afforded life to and space to grow. As long there are empty buildings, there will be squatters (Vasudevan, 2017). The task of any future anthropology of squatting is not just to take stock of what was lost after criminalization, but to pursue the stories of those who, against all odds, continue to assert their autonomy.

But there is a need to reckon with the autonomous worlds that criminalization did, as part of a decades-long project to police and discipline squatting, successfully enclose. As Fisher writes, (2014a), it is difficult to quantify how much neoliberalism has had an effect on squatting, with its evisceration of the welfare state, its attacks on higher education grants, and its privatization and securitization of public space. The trickle-down effects of neoliberal policies have been felt, not just through criminalization, but through creeping enclosures, attacks on cultural production, and a decline in the quality of squatted shelters – the very material infrastructures in which movements like squatting, punk, DIY, and rave first emerged (The Free Association, 2016 300; Ferreri and Vasudevan, 2019: 168). By depriving artists, anarchists, and young people of the resources necessary to develop autonomous spaces outside capital and the state, the potential for individuals to experiment with alternative forms of cultural production has drastically declined (Fisher, 2014a). For Fisher, the spatial dynamics of this autonomy were crucial to maintaining a sense of surplus *time* and *energy* outside the flows of urban capital. If there was a single factor that contributed to the demise of punk, it was not the criminalization of squatting, but the vast inflation of financial technologies of mortgage and rent (Fisher, 2014a). The underground scene that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s would be unimaginable in the housing situation in London today (Fisher, 2014b: 34:00), in large part because the conditions that gave rise to movements like punk were predicated on the availability of cheap, empty housing.

Fisher identifies an important shift in the politics of tolerance of squatting. Squatting in London has long been a criminal activity, but it was the partial tolerance of this autonomy – an autonomy granted, not through the absolute exclusion of squatting, but through forms of inclusion which simultaneously disciplined and liberated (Forst, 2013: 7), that enabled new, autonomous subjectivities and counter-cultures to grow. The 1970s saw a number of foundational struggles for the movement (see: Vasudevan, 2017: 47-60), as activists grappled with questions of movement coordination, the political function of squatting, and its legal basis, forcing the Law commission to re-consider the statutes on trespass as a potential means of managing the growing numbers of squatters (Vasudevan, 2017: 58). These questions indicated a social movement looking 'beyond necessity […] towards a squatter organisation with a collective identity and view towards wider change'; but also one with conflicting values and ideologies, that articulated a vision of 'solidarity and unity' on one hand, and 'libertarianism and autonomy' on the other (Burgum, 2018a). Within the squatters movement, organized family squatting and other efforts to work alongside the state sat 'cheek by jowl' with criticisms from a more radical edge, from feminists and queer squatters, to members of the British Black

Panthers movement, who renounced cooperation with the state and its 'pacification of class struggle' (x-Chris, 2015: 117).

While the tools and techniques of disciplining squatters (private security, forceable evictions, police violence) were defining features of the movement, institutionalization and cooptation have equally shaped its politics and its scope of intervention. In the 1960s and 70s, most squatting, whether licensed or illegal, occurred in properties scheduled for demolition or renewal (Paris and Popplestone, 1977: 43). Large numbers of poorly maintained houses provided the material conditions for squatters to negotiate with local authorities; and in many cases, squatters were given licenses to remain (Ferreri and Vasudevan, 2019: 168). By the 1980s, these licenses had become one of the five main forms of housing cooperatives in the UK (Ferreri and Vasudevan, 2019: 168). Criminal squatting, by contrast, saw an overall decline, more as a result of concessions than outright repression (Platt in Pruijt, 2003: 135). The Greater London Council's (GLC) bid to rehouse all squatters in 1977 was a response to the sheer scale and cost of evictions that would need to take place if squatting was to be criminalized (Platt, 1980: 89). Instead, the GLC proposed imaginative and flexible integration policies, including the relocation of squatters into cheap housing, and the granting of tenancies in occupied properties – with the goal of implementing more rigid and controlled policies on the remaining squatter population at a later date. Attempts to gain control of squatting were two-fold: they were accompanied by policies of flexible integration that encouraged squatters to contribute to the push for a 'lively, low-income, people-friendly city', while expediting processes of eviction for activists who refused to be integrated (Pruijt, 2003: 134, 153).

If the 2012 criminalization of squatting in residential property marked a key turning point for the London squatters movement, it is not because it convicted squatters, but because it expanded the strategies of spatial control and containment available to enclose their autonomy. While squatting has long been tolerated in cities across Europe, allowing it to be neutralized as part of a 'constituent force of capitalist relations' (Dadusc, 2019: 171), the criminalization of squatting has seen a move toward a fixed mode of governance in which squatting offers no opportunity for profitable integration (2019: 182). Dadusc is careful not to represent this as a static process. The strategic uses of this conflict by the state have been:

> '[…] in a continuous process of reciprocal transformation, with local authorities being forced to reconsider governmental strategies according to the actions and reactions of those squatters who aimed at subverting the imposed order' (Dadusc, 2019).

In the UK, property guardianships have emerged alongside a rise in anti-squatting laws, creating a rift between the anarchist, libertarian politics of autonomy in the squatting scene and those who, in turning to more formal arrangements with local communities, councils and property owners, have sought to imagine their autonomy within and alongside the state (Mayer, 2013b). These strategies of cooperation – guardianships, meanwhile contracts, and other temporary housing arrangements – have given squatters a logic and a means to re-gain access to the city. But they have also been perceived as a threat by many within the movement, as the openness and visibility of their homes to local authorities places ever-tightening restrictions on the counter-cultural and militant roots of the squatting scene.

As I show throughout this thesis, these tensions are playing out in concrete struggles over the right to define squatter's autonomy. Anti-authoritarianism, direct action, localism – a persistent

localism, even as it reaches out to the possibility of global organization – these have long been core tenets of the squatter's movement. Part of squatting's strength has been its ability to create space for a range of political identities and to react to the challenges of local conditions. But this splintering of struggles and identities has also prevented the rise of a strong, organized centre. In Italy, the autonomist struggles of the 1970s that gave birth to the social centres movement, by the late 1990s, 'looked to be smashed to pieces' (Wright, 2007): leading militants and theorists were in jail or on the run, and autonomous social centres were either closed down by police or 'fell into disuse once heroin addiction reached epidemic proportions' (Cuninghame, 2015). In Germany, after the rise of organized neo-Nazism and the progrom-like attacks on asylum seekers in the 1980s and 1990s, the Autonomen were abandoned under the impression that autonomy 'lacked the ability to intervene' (Theory Organization Praxis, 2011), eventually giving way to the more recent Antifa movement (Smaligo, 2017). As cities like Amsterdam, Berlin, and London bite hard into an array of anti-squatting laws and security measures, the tolerances for squatter's autonomy and the types of counter-conducts that can be created in these contexts are increasingly limited (Dadusc, 2019: 2). What would it mean, then, to revive autonomy at a time when the possibilities for the widespread mobilization of squatting appear to be in decline?

We are, however, seeing a resurgence of autonomy in other movements and places. In the Zapatista uprisings in Mexico and the later anti-globalization movement, autonomy found broad resonance as a way to resist neoliberal empire by forging political alternatives without clear definitions or programs (Melenotte, 2015: 53). In the Occupy movement, the collective spaces of the GA were imagined as a form of 'autonomous politics' in which 'the process' was reconfigured as 'the point' (Halvorsen, 2012: 428), challenging the narratives by which movements typically measure their success. And in the UK, as the Covid-19 pandemic swept across the country, the implementation of a moratorium on all evictions saw an eruption of Mutual Aid groups across the country and the return of squatters to empty buildings in the hopes that 'they [could] be used to house safely those that need to isolate' (Squat!net, 2020). Reflecting on three decades of autonomous struggles wracked by failures and defeat, Brophy (2002: 298) notes that autonomy has shown a 'tremendously resilient ability to mutate along with the times'. Autonomy is slippery: 'ideologically heterogenous, territorially dispersed, organisationally fluid' and often, as a result, even 'politically marginalised' (Wright, 2005). Part of the strength of autonomy is its ability to encompass:

> 'a variety of movements, politics and thinkers who […] emphasize the autonomous power of workers – autonomous from capital, from their official organizations (e.g. the trade unions, the political parties) and, indeed, the power of particular groups of workers to act autonomously from other groups (e.g. women from men) (Cleaver in De Angelis, 1993).

Autonomy describes a long history of struggles to break with very different kinds of power: capital, the state, public/private institutions, housing and the built form (Vasudevan, 2017); even politics itself. It connects the practices of squatters to the search for new modes of social being and the desire to manage our own spaces (Vasudevan, 2014: 324). And it understands housing and 'all other personal and locally specific services' as key battlegrounds in which such a politics can be built today (Turner, 1976: 9). It is this emphasis on struggle, rather than domination, that is the concept's main strength (De Angelis, 1993). In terms of its ability to read systems of power, and the various and vicious rounds of neoliberal enclosure that

characterize the terrain of social movement struggles today, the Italian cultural theorist Alberto Toscano (2009: 90) is cautiously optimistic. The challenge today is to think an autonomy whose politics 'would not entail a doomed attempt at separation' (2009: 89), an autonomy that would not be entirely detached from the conditions of production and reproduction of that power. If the organized response to protest and agitation is no longer a 'high dose of repression' (Toscano, 2009: 79) but innovation, subsumption, and co-optation: what would it mean to pull back, to refuse, to retreat?

Autonomy spans the chapters of this thesis. It is not a work of political theory on *autonomism*, and autonomy does not play an important role in the ways that my participants theorized their practice. Rather, my use of it here attempts to salvage a continuity and a history, and perhaps even a shared language, with a set of struggles that are converging against the backdrop of the neoliberal city. As Alcoff and Alcoff write (2015: 223), autonomy, like Occupy, 'has become a meme, without textual or organizational centers, absent any foundational origin, yet extending globally'. Autonomy presents a scattered field of struggles. Because each struggle has its own history and cartography, there is often 'no automatic urge to argue together, across the viewpoints […] about the outrages of accumulation and power' (Tsing, 2015: 134). As anarchists and Marxists, squatters and punks, Occupy activists and community volunteers, these differences split my participants across clear, sometimes radically opposing political lines. And yet, just because these political differences do not assemble neatly into solidarity or mass-mobilization, neither does this mean the end of politics (Tsing, 2015: 134). Assemblages like Occupy show us that struggles for autonomy – autonomy from rent, work, and financial capitalism itself – can become the basis for a global social movement. The contours of this global movement are ceaselessly being shaped and redrawn around local struggles. The only thing for certain, as Anna Tsing writes, is that we will need a politics 'with the strength of diverse and shifting coalitions' if we are to work together (2015: 134-135).

The challenges are daunting, and ultimately the tone of this thesis is more critical than optimistic. At a time when political leaders have matched squatters in their calls for the "autonomy of communities" and the "withering away of the (welfare) state", austerity, I argue, calls for a fundamental re-thinking of the generative power and limits of autonomy. The programs of austerity that swept across the UK in the wake of the GFC are not just important in terms of the punitive enclosures they set in motion to enclose squatters' autonomy, but in the ways this autonomy is being enlisted by state and market interests to promote liberalization and the further retrenchment of the state. The conditions that were once recognized as a sign of strength of the movement – localism, autogestion, self-directed organization (Alcoff and Alcoff, 2015) – are today the same conditions that have left battered communities to fend for themselves against an increasingly opportunistic 'disaster capitalism' (Adams, 2013). As I show in subsequent chapters, these landscapes of abandonment are being salvaged and put to work by activists with varying success. They are drawing ordinary people into local organizations that have quickly learned to manoeuvre within the possibilities of a declining state form. And yet, in doing so, they have tended to privilege small, private, and individualized forms of autonomy at the expense of strategies that confront their obstacles to organization as a result of powerful, global formations.

In this sense, autonomy alone may not be 'the single spark that lights the prairie fire' (Alcoff and Alcoff, 2015: 234). And yet, as the victims of Grenfell Tower remind us, it is not the fire that lingers when the last blaze dies out, but smoke; not sparks, but smog. What can the

disparate stories of squatters, activists, and volunteers working across London reveal about the ways in which these new social projects and relations of care already loom around us? How can they be put to work in ways that operate for us, not against us?

Thesis Overview

Each chapter in this thesis can be thought of as a thickening of autonomy, and an exploration of the different landscapes in which such a politics is being waged today.

Chapter 1 begins with a retelling of the events of Grenfell Tower – the fire that led to the deaths of some seventy people in 2017, just months before fieldwork for this project began. Grenfell Tower was a spectacular moment of violence that captured the public imagination and promised to incite swift, political action. What came next, however, did not exactly follow the script of a coordinated, national response to this crisis. As residents found themselves without a home, some sleeping rough in parks and cars (Pasha-Robinson, 2017), others waiting to be permanently rehoused several years after the disaster (Bulman, 2020), questions about the lack of government assistance and the failure of the state to intervene became, I argue, paradigmatic. The efforts of activists and volunteers to take over the recovery effort in the days and weeks after the fires (Al Jazeera, 2018) point to an emerging politics of abandonment in which no one, not even the immediate victims of Grenfell, qualify as worthy of state intervention (Nixon, 2011). In some ways, this chapter is written and organized against the notion of Grenfell Tower as a singular moment of revelation or exposure. The public inquiry into the fire has offered little redress for victims who, some five years on from the disaster, continue to push up against a cold welfare state. And yet, by dwelling on the "slow" and "invisible" forms of decay that have come to characterise ordinary people's experiences of social/rented housing in London, Grenfell calls our attention to the way people, including those directly affected by the fires, are working to re-build their local communities in these spaces of abandonment. Such efforts, I argue, increasingly blur the lines between abandonment and autonomy, as communities work to fill the void created by a failed welfare state.

Chapter 2 continues my examination of the politics of autonomy in a context where communities, including those most affected by London's housing crisis, are searching for radical alternatives. I introduce the primary space of my fieldwork, "The Black Stag", and the diverse kinds of autonomy and creativity that characterised life in this space. The chapter opens with a discussion of some of the positive valences of living 'autonomously' in these spaces of social and state abandonment, and the possible forms of life that endure within them. While this abandonment was a condition of the squatter's autonomy, it was also the lingering threat of violence and disease which threatened to take it away. At its most extreme, autonomy to my informants represented the right to be alone, to self-isolate and take drugs, while accepting the risks associated with this lifestyle as a choice, not something to be resisted. Such an autonomy, I argue, must be situated within a contradictory set of tensions – between freedom and abandonment, harm and care, independence and co-dependence – that mediate and condition a politics of life 'at the margins' (Lancione, 2019). Following Andrea Muehlebach (2012), I re-examine autonomy at a time when the state is not only attempting to downplay the effects of its withdrawal from the public sector, but to craft an anti-state narrative at the heart of these neoliberal reforms (2012: 8).

What, then, would a robust alternative to state care look like: one that privileges the experience of autonomy without doing away with the public institution as a social form? Beginning with a biography of one of the key squatters and Occupy activists in my fieldwork, Big Tom, chapter 3 opens directly onto the social movement landscapes of Occupy London and post-Katrina New Orleans, as activists across the world took up the call to experiment with new forms of care and social service delivery. For Big Tom, these experiments offered a brief glimpse of a politics in which new relations of care for the homelessness, and new networks of solidarity with the "99%" could become the basis for a global social movement. Occupy challenged activists to engage, not just in local struggles against the financial crisis, but an enduring politics of "community" capable of 'prefiguring anticapitalist alternatives premised on new relations of care' (Jaleel, 2013: 5). As activists became swamped with questions concerning the management and maintenance of the camps, however, tensions over the responsibility of activists care, to provide for some of their most vulnerable members, appeared to clash with a desire to push the movement onward and outward, into new terrains of social life. This tension, between the protest site as a space of "effective resistance" and long-term care (Burgum, 2018b: 52) strikes at the heart of social movement organising today, as activists increasingly take on the work of recovery in the context of neoliberal retrenchment. While these landscapes have opened up new opportunities for autonomy and self-organization, they have also, I argue, threatened to distribute risk back onto the very communities they claim to alleviate.

Chapter 4 shifts its focus to the UK social sector, and the formal attempts made by not-for-profit company Ember to bring the solutions of squatting to a small-government, regulatory framework. Tracking out the shifts and grey areas in which Ember operates, I show how activists and ex-squatters are increasingly turning to formal arrangements in order to re-gain access to the city – breaking with "business as usual" urban orthodoxy and creating spaces for local communities to set the agenda. At a time when councils across the UK are facing unprecedented austerity, organizations like Ember offer an affordable alternative, promising to regenerate buildings and restore communities without the need for extensive financial models. They operate by empowering volunteers to take back their communities from the state and rediscover this autonomy in a positive light. But their successes, I argue, are also a symptom of a broader redistribution of services under austerity, enabled by a growing dependence on informal sector work and the organization of subjects into a new, moral economy of voluntarism (Muehlebach, 2012). This volunteer economy is so effective, not just because it plays on left-wing notions of compassion, empathy, and solidarity, but because it offers real autonomy to the elderly, the unemployed, and the sick, who have long criticized the failures of the state to provide them with adequate care.

These tensions are the subject of ongoing debate within the private service sector and, increasingly, within social movements. They have become a source of disagreement in the squatting scene, as squatters seek to preserve their identities and their autonomy in the face of growing pressures to work alongside these same agents of neoliberalization. Chapter 5 locates this politics centrally in the tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities that arose as a group of squatters, emerging from the Occupy movement and in collaboration with Ember, sought to transform The Black Stag into a community project. It is about the conflicts and frictions that emerged as different squatters sought to envision the future of the building in relation to two very different kinds of community: the squatting scene, and a wider, grassroots "public". For Big Tom, Occupy challenged squatters to think beyond the logic of the occupation, to take up

the call to "occupy everywhere" and bring the solutions of squatting to a broader, non-activist community. But it has also, I argue, staged a series of internal disagreements within the movement about whose communities are being protected, and on what basis such a politics can incorporate their autonomy. As squatters look toward more formal and institutional arrangements, the kinds of relations they model themselves on will offer rich materials for new understandings of autonomy and care.

Methods

The research for this project is based on twelve months of participant observation fieldwork in London, which I carried out between February 2018 and February 2019. I arrived to The Black Stag in winter, and slept in various rooms across its four floors before being given my own space in a shared guest room. I conducted 6 months of fieldwork from here, living with the squatters full-time, before moving into my own rental accommodation off-site and conducting another 6 months of multi-sited fieldwork with The Black Stag and Ember projects. Over the course of a year, I visited various sites around London, attended gigs and squat parties, wrote daily field-notes, collected pamphlets, zines, blogs, and news-articles, and took personal photographs to record and remind me of events, objects, and places I saw (Collier and Collier, 1986). I also conducted around 40 one hour, one-on-one, or two-person interviews, some of which included follow-up interviews. These conversations formed the basis of my analysis of Ember and the squatting scene. All identifying information collected during this fieldwork (names, places, and organizations) has been anonymized.

When I began reaching out to squatters in 2017, there were several doubts and concerns raised about the project. Planning 12 months of fieldwork in a context where squatters seldom lived together for more than a few months at a time appeared presumptuous at best, and resulted in plans falling through at various stages in the project. And if the criminalization of squatting had forced the scene into ever more peripheral and derelict urban spaces, an option available only to those 'desperate enough to have no other choice [but] still risk arrest and imprisonment' (Grohmann, 2016: 258), then the question of research ethics was paramount. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012: 2) writes at length of the ways anthropology has been implicated in the history and intensification of the colonial project, identifying research as a site of struggle between the ways of knowing of the west, and the ways of policing and disciplining vulnerable groups. 'Academic' is arguably one of the dirtiest words in the squatting community. Squatters have a long history of encounters with the state, and stories of misrepresentation continue to circulate among members of the community. Many of my informants relayed accounts of unjust and unfair representation in the media, or of being outspoken and sidelined by prominent figures during the Occupy movement. Academics, graduate students, and journalists thrived as public speakers in this environment. They were also, as one of my participants noted, the quickest to disappear when camp funds diminished and the kitchens began running out of food.

In my early conversations with squatters, this translated into a deep scepticism of the academy (and by extension, this project). These were squatters who had come to know neoliberalism, not as an abstract process, but as an intimate part of everyday life: a point of capture and a limit of possibility for activists *and* academics. The institutionalisation of debates within the university, an institution in which the policies of neoliberalism have been starkly replicated, has marginalised and erased the voices of people not directly affiliated with it, who nonetheless find themselves at the centre of its immaterial and cognitive forms of exploitation. The routine

forms of academic production: data collection and management, authorship, publication, and education-for-profit are in stark contrast to the dynamics of left-wing social movements: democratic participation, reflexivity, and collective organization. In the last decade, anthropologists have sought to overcome this barrier to engagement in various ways: by using their skills to produce knowledge in line with radical goals (Graeber, 2009), or promoting and opening up opportunities for dialogue with social movements by making use of the 'unjust, unearned, but potentially fruitful autonomy and resources that accompany academic-based research' (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2015). The forms of research community that Haiven and Khasnabish describe in their ethnography of a social movement in Halifax (2014) are beyond the scope of this project, but the solidarity-based research methods that they sketch out – in which social movement researchers 'invoke' disciplinary techniques in order to gain insight into movements, or 'avoke' (call-away-from) their privilege and power by putting their skills at the disposal of movements – were both strategies that I used to frame the project to the university and to my participants. In my conversations with squatters, the "success" of the project was articulated in terms of an activist community that both accepted the risk of the project, its failure, and its aims as meaningful (Dwyer, 1982: 273).

When I first moved into The Black Stag, I introduced myself at meetings and to individuals as a researcher, handed out pamphlets about the research project and its aims, and approached members of the building to conduct one-on-one interviews. While spending more time in the community, the nature of this relationship shifted, and my status as a researcher and my obligations to the university became less important. It became difficult to live-up to the conditions of success that I had set out at the beginning of the project. Over time, fewer squatters asked me about my research, people who joined the building assumed that I was a squatter without knowing more about me, and few expressed an interest in my studies when provoked. This is not to say that the labour of communicating research aims, obtaining consent, and meeting ethical obligations ever ceased, but that getting squatters to care was a labour of its own. As Kadir (2016: 39) writes, in her ethnography of the squatting scene in Amsterdam, most squatters are accustomed to interacting with researchers, ranging from 'undergraduate students writing a paper to tenured academics', and what privilege this holds in mainstream society is mostly rejected by squatters. On a practical level, these privileges demonstrate to squatters that the researcher always possesses an opportunity to leave that they themselves do not (Kadir, 2016: 39), or more specifically, that their social status, their networks of care, and their values and commitments are never entirely embedded within the scene, and that their commitment to the community can only ever be partial or incomplete.

Nevertheless, living with the squatters for the first six months of my fieldwork, I became intimately familiar with their routines and lifestyles, and they became intimately familiar with mine. Despite coming from different backgrounds, there were many shared qualities in terms of social position and experiences between myself and my informants: as educated, often young white men, as activists and students interested in social theory and politics. These commonalities earned me respect in a movement that values confidence, authenticity, and outward displays of political commitment. I went dumpster diving, shoplifted, shared communal dinners, and attended building meetings. And yet, as I argue in chapter 2, this autonomy was also mediated and conditioned in silent ways. It gave me a freedom and autonomy that was uniquely available to me as a young, white man entering these spaces. This gendering of autonomy is reflected in my interviews, of which only four were with female

squatters and activists. The precarity of life as a squatter meant that certain 'macho behaviours' – heavy drug-use, poor hygiene, a quiet hostility to rules and communal structures – were not uncommon in the building (Grohmann, 2016: 128). This anti-social behaviour privileged certain kinds of autonomy at the expense of others. It bound up our autonomy within the experience of a white, masculine body (Grohmann, 2016: 134-135), while silencing gendered, racial, and abled differences in the group.

But if my participants and I benefitted from this autonomy, we also did so within varying contexts of violence and vulnerability. My own struggles with mental health led to a greater attunement to these issues during my fieldwork. It pushed me, like others, to seek out forms of care and harm-reduction in the community that intersected closely with drug use and addiction. Reflecting on a year in the field, living and experiencing casual, numbing, and often repetitive forms of violence alongside my participants – breathing more second-hand smoke and dust than fit for a pair of lungs in a lifetime, losing a resident of the building to suicide, witnessing addiction, psychosis, and violent outbreaks (and occasionally becoming the subject of that violence), it became impossible to separate out these experiences from my role as a researcher. On her experience of *gendered* violence in the field, Megan Steffen (2017) reflects on the "bracketing" power of being an anthropologist that enabled her to disassociate from the potential risks of doing fieldwork:

> 'What was it about becoming an "anthropologist" that had made me feel I was safe from the kinds of gendered violence I had learned to accept as part of my "real life" in North America? What was it that had made me feel like fieldwork was life with brackets around it?' (Steffen, 2017).

These questions cut to the core of the anthropological enterprise, and Steffen cautiously situates them in the context of a discipline that feeds autonomy and the impulse to 'study everything, everywhere ' (Mogstad and Tse, 2018: 55). Experiencing violence in the field breaks 'the peace of the pretense' that fieldwork is a choice (Johnson, 2017), a planned, anticipated, and circumscribed set of experiences. Even as the vulnerability of the anthropologist has been reimagined as a critical tool in recent decades (i.e. Behar, 1996), it is still largely viewed as 'selected and strategic' instead of 'written on our bodies, regardless of our choice' (Johnson, 2017). Violence in the field brings questions about the autonomy of the researcher to the fore: it forces us to reconsider our very right to participation in the first place. To have a strong, shared disciplinary response to violence in the field would be to assert that 'we have a right to be there – precisely wherever we choose to be' (Johnson, 2017). Perhaps even more dangerously for a profession that values safety, planning, and precaution, experiences of violence in the field may also be a sign that we are, not only not exceptional, but an intimate part of our participant's daily routines and lifestyles (Steffen, 2017).

The following chapters navigate a contradictory set of these tensions, between autonomy and vulnerability, being inside and outside, doing fieldwork and doing real life. These tensions complicate my positionality as a researcher. This label can be useful in terms of making visible the institutional supports (and constraints) that have enabled me to carry out this research project. And yet, it can be overly prescriptive for those of us whose politics are derived outside the academy, even as we remain professionally enmeshed in it (Chesters, 2012: 156). It can alienate us from squatters, who see the academy as a neoliberal institution, 'silencing dissent' and 'parasiting on social movements for their own cultural capital gains' (Trespass, 2018). And it can open us to dangers prescribed by the neoliberal university, which sees activist research

as a form of "intellectual surrender" or 'becoming' (Chesters, 2012: 154). Recent research has sought to reframe these critiques in terms of an ethics of knowledge production that treats our participants, not as epistemic objects to be studied, but as theorists and co-conspirators, capable of situating their own knowledge and practices (Sultana et al., 2007; Halvorsen, 2015; Juris, 2017). The arguments in this thesis could only have emerged in the lively spaces of discussion and debate that occurred during my fieldwork. At the same time, to ignore the institutional supports that have sustained this research project would be to downplay the privileges that it has had in producing, sorting, and allocating these cognitive resources (Chesters, 2012: 156); and to whose benefit they are allocated.

Mapping out these tensions calls for ethnographic approaches that are porous, open-ended, and like the people who moved through the spaces of my fieldwork, capable of motion. To that end, this thesis complements the stories of my participants with wider reflections on social movements like Occupy. It attempts to weave their stories through shifting networks of autonomy, austerity, and housing crisis in ways that emphasize the movement's capacity for resistance and self-transformation. Tracking out these possibilities could constitute a form of 'revised salvage ethnography' (Kim, 2016). Instead of collecting and preserving the artefacts of "disappearing cultures", it could expand the possibilities for action that are always in a process of unfolding. Instead of failures and closed-forms, it could actively participate in the theorization of new openings for intervention. Working with activists requires that we see ethnography as part of the very salvage-work that brings these speculative futures into being. This is not to abandon critique altogether, but to emphasize the multiple and varied spaces outside of the academy where activists are engaged in critical reflection. As Juris writes, it is only through 'immanent critique based on solidarity and respect' that an ethnography with social movements is possible (2017: 168). 'We must learn to hope with teeth' (Mieville, 2018).

A final note on terminology. Over the course of my fieldwork, The Black Stag occupied a legal interstice between squat and property guardianship that had enabled the squatters to stay in the building for up to two years. While my participants, for the most part, identified as squatters, I also refer to them throughout this thesis as activists, security, property guardians, and caretakers-on-rotation. This reflects, on one hand, the changing legal and technical landscapes through which squatting is being practiced today. But it also points to lively tension among residents of The Black Stag, and the disagreements that emerged between those who, over the course of my fieldwork, saw the building as a home, and those who saw it as a guardian project. After breaking into The Black Stag in fall 2016, the squatters began a long battle to restore the building and open its doors to the public. Among the 20 squatters who were considered members in 2018, however, support for this project remained partial, uneven, and contested. As I show in chapter 5, these conflicts are staging important disagreements in the movement about what kinds of squatting remain viable after criminalization. I interpret these disagreements as struggles over the right to define squatters' *autonomy*. Squatting, as Vasudevan (2017) writes, has always taken the form of the local urban contexts in which it was developed. This history is shot through with failures and defeat; but also success and radical possibility. What remains are the stories of those who seek, however unevenly, to reimagine our cities along more collectively liveable and sustainable lines. From housing to headquarters, popup kitchens and community centres, it is these scattered projects that hold the promise of the 'autonomous city' (Vasudevan, 2017: 16).

Chapter 1: Grenfell Tower: London's housing crisis and the politics of abandonment

Countdown to a fire

July 2009 –

100 firefighters rush to a fire in a twelve-story residential council-block, *Lakanal House*, in South-East London. The fire, which begins in a flat on the ninth-floor, quickly spreads to the external envelope of the building and climbs – catches – onto cheap, composite (wood and resin) panels that were installed as part of a major refurbishment in 2006-7 by *Trespa*. The fire moving up along the Eastern wall of the building is excrescent. It spreads into the flat of the occupant above, consuming them. Black smoke billows into the main stairwell of the building, obstructing the only way in or out. Families trapped inside their apartments cry for help. Some throw their bodies against glass walls. Others threaten to climb down bed sheets hanging from windows on the upper floors (BBC, 2009). The lives of three children and two other adults are claimed in the smoke and flames: two inside the building, and three later in hospital. A number of residents are taken to hospital for smoke inhalation.

It is later revealed that those who died had been given "stay put" orders by 999 operators who believed that 'fire safety measures would be sufficient to prevent flames and smoke from reaching them' (Gayle, 2017b). Those who managed to escape with their lives were those who ignored safety instructions and fled. Like most residential towers, the building had been built to compartmentalize the fire for up to an hour, but cheap, combustible cladding wrapped around the building had failed in less than five minutes. No-one was prepared for it to spread up the sheer face of the building within minutes.

Southwark Council later pleads guilty to four counts of breaking fire safety regulations and is fined £570,000 (Gayle, 2017a).

2011 –

Grenfell Tower, a 24-story social housing block in London, juts up from the ground. Square, concrete, and featureless, it is built entirely of non-combustible materials. Grenfell is a monument to the low-cost, Brutalist architectural style that became a mainstay of social housing construction in the 1960s and 70s in London. It towers above luxury flats and gardens to the south and east, housing up to six hundred residents across 120 rooms. In the 1990s, it adopts the nickname 'Moroccan Tower' due to the high number of residents, immigrants, and families with ties to North Africa (Knight, 2017). By the 2000s, the building is home predominantly to Muslim residents with Moroccan and Somali backgrounds.

November 2011 –

Plans are submitted to build a school and leisure centre at the base of Grenfell Tower. Through a series of public-private negotiations, the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC) , discusses plans to regenerate Grenfell Tower with The Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organization (KCTMO) – the largest Tenant Management Organization in England. 'The TMO is also keen to investigate the opportunity to clad Grenfell Tower […] This will […] prevent it looking like a poor cousin to the brand-new facility being developed next door', an email reads (Apps, 2020). The visibility of the building from surrounding areas becomes a principal justification for the re-development.

> '[The materials have been chosen] to accord with the development plan by ensuring that the character and appearance of the area are preserved and living conditions of those living near the development suitably protected' (Griffin, 2017).

2012-2015 –

The architects tasked with the initial design of the new school, Studio E, select a solid zinc panel to clad Grenfell Tower. Artelia, a consultant firm acting on the behalf of KCTMO, estimates the cost to be around £2m higher than targets, and a meeting between KCTMO and RBKC confirms that 'value for money is to be regarded as the key driver for the project' (Apps, 2020). An architect from Studio E meets a representative of the cladding subcontractor, Harley Facades, at a coffee shop: 'They said', he writes in an email following the meeting, 'their recurring experience is that budgets force clients to adopt the cheapest cladding option: ACM' (Apps, 2020). Aluminium Composite Material (ACM) is a plastic, composite material consisting of Polyethylene sandwiched between two aluminium sheets. The ignition of polyethylene within aluminium cladding can produce 'a flaming reaction more quickly than dropping a match into a barrel of petrol' (Bowcott, 2018).

Peter Apps (2020) provides a detailed outline of emails exchanged between KTCMO, its contractors, and subcontractors over the refurbishments. As part of its 'aspirational insulation target', a cheap, combustible insulation is chosen to fill gaps at the top of windows near the cladding, instead of the non-combustible Rockwool specified in the initial designs. 'If the insulation […] is combustible you will need to provide a cavity barrier as shown on your drawing' (Apps, 2020), one email starts. Another subcontractor highlights an area at the top of the design, calling it a 'weak link for fire'. 'I just had a "Lacknall" moment', a project manager at KCTMO writes to Rydon, the organisation contracted for the refurbishment. There is no record of a reply (Apps, 2020).

2016 –

KCTMO celebrates the completion of the refurbishments on Grenfell Tower. Later that year, Francis O'Connor and Edward Daffarn, founding members of the Grenfell Action Group, release a blog post criticizing the conservative council (RBKC) and its ties to the KCTMO. The group had been vocal of their criticisms of the KCTMO during the improvements, when TMO staff had left bulk rubbish – mattresses, flammable materials, and electrical appliances – to accumulate in the entrance foyer, the only way in or out of the building (Grenfell Action Group, 2016a). 'It is a truly terrifying thought', they wrote, but:

> 'the Grenfell Action Group firmly believe that only a catastrophic event will expose the ineptitude and incompetence of our landlord, the KCTMO, and bring an end to the

> dangerous living conditions and neglect of health and safety legislation that they inflict upon their tenants and leaseholders (Grenfell Action Group, 2016b).

In 2013, the KCTMO had narrowly avoided a major fire disaster at Grenfell tower when residents experienced 'terrifying power surges that were subsequently found to have been caused by faulty wiring' (Grenfell Action Group, 2016b). Only two years later, a fire would ravage through a second KMTCO property in Kensington, seeing the evacuation of over fifty residents. Families described receiving specific advice by 999 operators depending on 'how the fire was affecting their flat' (Nerssessian, 2015). After safely containing the fire to the third floor, the London Fire Brigade commented that lessons 'had been learned' since the Lakanal House fire in 2009 (BBC, 2015).

14 June 2017 –
00:53

Behailu Kebede, a 43-year-old Ethiopian man, wakes to a smoke alarm siren in his kitchen. He lives in flat 16, on the fourth floor of Grenfell Tower. He quickly moves towards the sound of the alarm and enters the kitchen. Dark smoke, but no fire, is creeping up from behind a Hotpoint fridge freezer next to an open window. He rushes into the living room and dials 999.

00:54

The first emergency call from Grenfell Tower is recorded by North Kensington fire station. 'Yeah, hello?', Behailu's voice rings nervously through the phone, 'Hi, it's a fire in flat 16 Grenfell Tower'. The operator repeats the address back to him calmly. 'W11 1T for tango…'. Behailu says it again, twice, his voice getting more hurried each time. 'It's on the fourth floor. Quick quick quick quick, it's burning!' he exclaims. The phone call ends a minute later (BBC, 2018b).

Behailu rushes into the corridor and hammers the bedroom doors in his flat. 'Fire, fire, fire!', he shouts. He runs, barefoot, wearing a t-shirt and boxer shorts, into the corridor on the fourth floor and hammers the door of his neighbour, a Somali man. The man ignores the noise at first, but soon appears at his door. 'Fire, fire, fire!', Behailu shouts again. He runs to the next flat, and then the next, banging on the doors of all five other flats on his floor, seemingly incapable of forming any other words: 'Fire, fire, fire!' (The Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2018a: s. 72-73).

Behailu runs back into his living room and grabs his clothes. The smoke has not left the kitchen. He opens the panel to the electrical mains in his hallway and switches it off, before rushing out of his flat and slamming the front door shut (The Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2018a: s. 77).

00:59

Fire services arrive to the building. The fire is not yet visible to the firefighters, who begin to unspool hoses from fire trucks and tap them into nearby fire hydrants. The firemen move confidently, running the length of the hoses into the building (The Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2018a: 82). There is no reason to suspect that this fire poses exceptional risk. Accidental fires are common in high-rises, and these concrete monoliths are built from the ground-up to contain them. 'You knew that if you could get in quickly, isolate that fire, isolate that floor', a retired firefighter from North Kensington recalls, 'it was all quite easy to control' (Lamont, 2017).

01:07

Fire crews enter flat 16 and begin searching the bedrooms. They do not enter the kitchen until ten minutes later, when they see an 'isolated curtain' of flames rising from an appliance in the corner (BBC, 2019b). From the inside the fire looks contained; there is no larger threat to the residents of the building. But on the outside a warm glow spreads, rapidly, from the window to the extractor fan, to the new, aluminium-composite panelling. By the time the firefighters reach the kitchen, the fire has already become 'external to the building' (BBC, 2019b). It catches:

> 'unthinkably—the sheer sides of the exterior. Fat amber flames licked up Grenfell's northeastern elevation so quickly, so determinedly, that for a time firefighters stationed indoors and outdoors would have been responding to wildly different degrees of crisis. What would have seemed inside to be a manageable appliance fire was catastrophizing, outside, into the gravest threat to residential Londoners in 75 years' (Lamont, 2017).

Cladding peels from the exterior and melts, throwing toxic chunks of plastic and debris-on-fire down onto observers watching below. Despite the commotion outside, many residents inside the building continue to sleep. No communal fire alarm rings through the building. No automatic sprinklers rain down from the ceiling. The law that mandates the inclusion of sprinklers in high-rise buildings only applies to large buildings that have been constructed after 2007 (Lamont, 2017). Spot-checks will later reveal that only two of fifteen new tower blocks in London have sprinklers installed, suggesting a failure of private industry to heed official fire-safety advice and self-regulate (BBC, 2018a).

Those spying fires from windows above who dial 999 are given 'stay put' orders by emergency operators. The stay put policy is believed to be the official operating advice for concrete high-rises, which are designed to contain fires for as long as it takes firefighters to bring them under control. Hundreds of residents attempting to flee simultaneously could flood the stairwell with smoke, obstructing firefighters and the only path in – or out – of the building.

01:26

The blaze reaches the top floor of the building. It climbs vertically along the cladding between the window lines, well out of reach of firehoses below, and then torques, laterally, from the eastern face of the building to the north. Fire safety engineers would later remark that stay put policies 'substantially failed' at 01:26 (BBC, 2019b), and those choosing to ignore official advice were the ones who made it out alive. The stay put policy is not officially abandoned until 02:47, when some sixty-three flats are on fire and one-hundred people remain trapped in the building. Only 36 residents make it out of the building after stay put guidance is abandoned (BBC, 2019b).

01:30

Oluwaseun Talabi, a thirty-year-old man, wakes on the fourteenth floor to shouting below. Talabi is unable to make sense of the commotion. It is the middle of summer, and June is Ramadan. Parties are a regular fixture this month, and it is not unusual for the celebrations to run late. He crawls back into bed with his partner, Rosemary, and four-year-old daughter and falls asleep.

Some minutes later, Oluwaseun wakes for a second time to voices in the hallway. This time the words register. 'Fire!'. He shakes Rosemary awake. They rush to the kitchen and peer out of the window. Smoke billows to the right. To the left, a wall of fire licks the air from windows out of sight. There is no indication yet that the fire has reached his flat. Oluwaseun runs to the

front door and pulls it open. A wall of thick, acrid smoke engulfs him. The smoke is so heavy that it *tastes* more than it burns – wrongly – like something chemical, possibly synthetic. He slams the door shut. Oluwaseun and Rosemary peer at each other for a minute. Then Oluwaseun picks up his daughter and rushes out the door for a second time, disappearing into the wall of smoke. Within seconds, he and his daughter return, coughing, spluttering for air. There is no way out.

Rosemary stuffs the front door and letterbox with wet blankets to prevent the smoke from scudding in (The Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2018b: s. 37-40).

1:37

Rosemary dials 999. The advice of emergency operators is clear: you will be safer if you stay inside. Invisible fumes fill the halls, the rooms, the bedrooms. The towels filter out most of the irritant particles, but asphyxiant gases like carbon monoxide and hydrogen cyanide continue to seep in through porous surfaces. Celotex insulation used in the refurbishments between the windows and new cladding is 'effectively made of crude oil' and burns 'more or less the same way as any other petrochemical' (Grierson, 2017). These gases are so deadly because there is no indication that you are inhaling them, 'they have no real effect until the point where you suddenly feel dizzy and collapse' (BBC, 2019c).

Still, the air looks cleaner here than anywhere else on the fourteenth flour, and by the time two firefighters reach Rosemary and Oluwaseun at 02:00, they are carrying five neighbours – shocked, smoke-stained, struggling to breath, into his flat. The firefighters tell them they are the least-damaged, or at the least risk of damage staying here (The Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2018b: 43), and leave assuring them they will return.

02:06

The London fire brigade declares the fire a 'major incident', and forty fire engines are either at, or en route to, the tower (BBC, 2019b). By now, the fire has spread from the eastern face of the building to the north and south, as well as *into* the building. Compartmentation of the fires has begun to fail as the entire eastern wall of the building is engulfed in flames.

02:30

In flat 113, in the south-west corner of the building, Oluwaseun plots their escape. He rushes into the bedrooms and strips the bedsheets, pulls the spare blankets and pillowcases from the cupboards, and begins tying them to form a rope. He fastens the end of the rope to a metal fixture by the window, lowers it down, perhaps as far as the second or third floor, and then climbs out after it. If he takes his daughter with him, he reasons, he can cushion her fall, giving her the best chance of survival.

Oluwaseun grips the windowsill with one arm and tests the rope, not daring to look down. It holds. Dangling now from the fourteenth floor, waiting for Rosemary to pass his daughter through the window, his daughter – perhaps seeing the smoke and flames below – screams hysterically and kicks away from him. Oluwaseun realizes that she is not going to come out. He attempts to pull himself back up. His feet flail against the slippery cladding. For a moment he thinks that he is going to fall. And then two of the neighbours in his flat – brothers from Syria, Omar and Mohammed – rush over and help him clamber inside (The Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2018b: s. 48-50).

Oluwaseun stands. He looks at Rosemary. ‘So this is how…’, his face turns to disbelief. ‘Wow…’. They no longer believe they are going to survive (Lamont, 2017).

Sometime later

There are eight of them in the flat when the firefighters return.

Oluwaseun’s daughter is tied to his back with cloth, and he is preparing to descend from the window for a second time when a firefighter pushes the front door open and yells, ‘GO!’. The words do not seem to work, at first, and Oluwaseun appears reluctant. The air quality is safer here, but staying behind is also certain death. The firefighter pauses for a moment, staring at them expectantly. Then he throws them into the smoke. ‘I literally pushed [them] out of the flat’, he later recalls. ‘I held onto the female’s hand and pulled her out of the flat’ (The Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2018d: 5).

Oluwaseun and Rosemary disappear into the wall of black smoke now cascading into the room, the windows pulling the smoke into the flat like a vacuum. The firefighter enters to search for others. Pitch black, oxygen low, the threat of a building collapse immanent, he sees the silhouette of a man. It is one of the brothers – Omar. In one version of events, the firefighter shouts to Omar if he is alone. “Yes”, Omar replies, perhaps assuming, in the thick, boiling air, that he is the last person to be evacuated (The Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2018d: 5). In another, Omar is passed along by invisible hands, desperately reaching out for his brother but unable to breathe or call out to him (The Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2018c: s. 33). Omar is wrangled down the stairs behind Oluwaseun and his family, while his brother Mohammed and the three others, Dennis, Zainab, and her infant son, Jeremiah, are left behind.

As Oluwaseun is taken in by the smoke, the world turns dark:

> Oluwaseun: ‘I couldn't see anything at all, not even my feet or a hand in front of my face. It was pure black. I could hear people screaming, desperate screams like they were trapped. The smell was indescribable, a strong smell; it was like nothing I had ever smelt before. The most overpowering thing I felt as soon as I walked out of the flat was the heat. It was extreme; an energy-sapping blast of smoke and heat that hit me like I had just opened the door of an oven’ (The Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2018b: s. 57).

Oluwaseun makes it to the stairwell and pushes the door open. He drags his girlfriend down the stairs by her hand, tripping, one, two, or three times over fire hoses – possibly bodies, he thinks (The Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2018b: s. 59). In all likelihood, Oluwaseun and his family pass fireman and other evacuees on their way down, but he recalls none. Unable to see his own feet, the only indication that he is moving down is the sound of the screams becoming distant behind him (The Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2018b: s. 59-61). By the time he reaches the fourth or fifth floor, he can feel his energy beginning to drain from his body. His movements slow as he breathes the smoke into his lungs, deeply. For a moment he believes that he is going to die on those stairs. And then he sees a light below, and feels a second-wave of energy overcome him. Looking back, Oluwaseun swears that he leaves the tower at 03:30. CCTV cameras clearly show his family exiting the building at 02:44, with Omar following closely behind. In his statement, however, Oluwaseun is resolute: ‘I was sure, as I am now, that it was much later than this’ (The Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2018b: s. 66).

02:44

Outside the tower, Omar suddenly realizes that his brother, Mohammed, is not behind him. 'I think my brother is still in the flat', he says to one of the firemen on the ground floor. He pulls out his phone and dials his brother's number. Mohammed answers. '*Why didn't you come with us"*, Omar says to him. His brother responds. *No one took him out of the flat* (The Grenfell Tower Inquiry, 2018c: s. 36). He tells Omar that Dennis, Zainab, and Jeremiah are still in the flat with him. 'Please tell them that I am still in the flat', he pleads.

A firefighter below is handed a phone to talk to Zainab. 'We're going to come and get you', the firefighter assures her, 'we're coming. Lie down low' (BBC, 2019c). The firefighter is on the phone with her for over an hour. But after thirty minutes, Zainab tells him that her son has stopped breathing. She does not want to live anymore. The firefighter rushes over to one of the managers to see why no one has been sent back to the fourteenth floor, but he is turned away. 'I'm really sorry', the manager says, 'we ain't getting past the 12th at the moment' (BBC, 2019c).The next day, Omar identifies Mohammed's body in a photo circulated on Facebook, lying on the floor by Grenfell Walk.

The making of a tragedy

What remains of Grenfell Tower – blackened and excoriated, too toxic to be knocked down, still looms over North Kensington. When the fires burned out, almost sixty hours after they started, the building was left standing, stripped and bare, in plain view of local residents. Four months later, it was draped in white, plastic bandaging. Studies of soil samples collected in the months after the fire showed deadly concentrations of toxicants and particulate matter one-hundred metres away from the tower (Stec et al., 2019; Hopkins, 2019). Stories quickly emerged of local residents experiencing health problems, from vomiting and coughing-up blood (the "Grenfell cough") to skin conditions and breathing difficulties (BBC, 2019a). The building has come to represent a continued source of suffering and trauma for the local community. Its demolition, which is said to take up to eighteen months and require 'floor-by-floor dismantling' to prevent it from breathing more ash and debris into nearby homes and gardens (Gadher and Wheeler, 2018), may provide some closure to those who have grown accustomed to moving around the tower, walking by the messages to the dead on their way to work, and looking-on from council blocks knowing theirs, too, lacks sprinklers (Elcock, 2017).

But the effects of the fire on the community are still being felt. Even now, after a long, protracted legal inquiry that is not likely to be resolved until 2022, details of the full extent of the crisis are only really beginning to emerge. That the discourse after the fire largely centred on the actions of firefighters on the night, and not, for example, Boris Johnson's cuts to and closure of ten fire stations across London that led to a slow response-time and the need to call on fire teams outside London (Squat!net, 2017); housing policies and development practices that repeatedly ignored fire-safety warnings, and the complaints of residents who *unequivocally saw this coming* (Grenfell Action Group, 2016b; Grenfell Action Group, 2016a), suggest that there is still more to be learned from Grenfell. These stories bring into question a whole system of commercially driven procurements and public-private partnerships (Boughton, 2018), cost-cutting practices, and attitudes toward social housing and the people who live in it, that led to the deaths of some seventy people in the fire.

News of the Grenfell Tower tragedy broke eight months before I arrived in London. As the autumn months turned to winter, the city's volunteer workers and homeless shelters braced for

unprecedented need. Six months after Grenfell, that winter would claim the lives of another 70 homeless people across the UK (Greenfield et al., 2018); likely an underestimate, as no government department records homeless deaths at a national level (Greenfield and Marsh, 2018). There was a sense, among the people I met during my fieldwork – ordinary renters, students, middle-class workers – of a long, drawn-out hostility to the poor: that the city had become too expensive, and its conditions too cold and inhuman to be lived in. London was a city hurting. I listened to stories of families being evicted from their homes before Christmas, of people selling their things through second-hand markets in order to be able to afford food, of migrant construction workers bludgeoning their bosses to death, likely as a result of wage-theft (see: Independent, 2018). If Grenfell Tower signalled the state of social housing in the UK, then local recovery efforts and the failure of the government to intervene in its aftermath signified something of an end: a break-down of the *social* in social housing, and of the ideals which had inspired the great programmes of council house building from the 1890s through to the 1980s (Boughton, 2018: 3).

As Boughton writes, the history of social housing in the UK is a history of housing shortages, budget cuts, and tireless campaigns for better conditions. But it is also a history rooted in the lived experience of being *homed*, and here 'the account is far more mixed and, generally, far more positive' (Boughton, 2018: 3). Modern social housing, the "wobbliest" pillar of the welfare state (Torgersen, 1987), emerged to house mass numbers of the population returning home from the second world-war (Watt, 2017: 2), eventually becoming the preferred form of accommodation for its safety and security (Todd, 2014: 179-180). Cities like Plymouth, razed by bombings during German air raids, were subject to major redevelopment schemes. Images of new garden vistas, expanded urban centres and shopping districts were abound 'with all the idealism and breadth of vision' post-war planners could afford' (Boughton, 2018: 62). But those proposals would have to contend with the reality of a severe, austere economic situation, and while the Conservative government's election campaign ran on the promise of a new industrial vision for Britain, voter priority largely centred on the construction of housing, and not commercial centres (Flinn, 2012: 62).

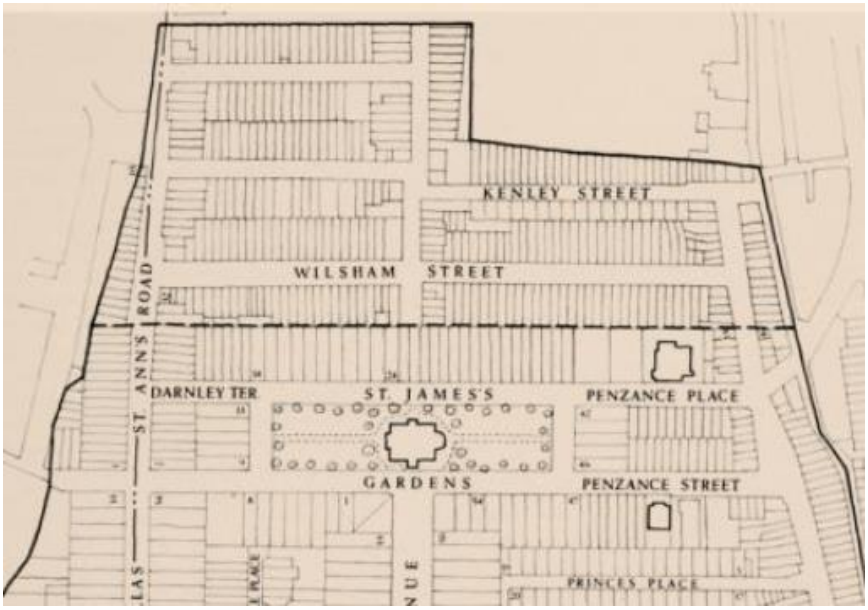
A snapshot of that optimism still partially exists in the residential estates raised across London in the following decades. When Grenfell Tower was completed in Kensington, in 1974, it was on the back of one of the last, major slum clearance programs designed to improve housing for residents living in some of the poorest conditions in London. Grenfell Tower was a "city in the sky" (Clancy, 2020: 9), and it retained all the post-war idealism and hope characteristic of house building programs of the 40s and 50s. But this idealism could not override a century of class division that had seen London's most affluent living in close (gated, secure) proximity to some of its most destitute and poor. In 1864, living conditions were so dire in the district that the wealthy estates of South Kensington and the slums of Notting Dale further north were separated by the construction of a 'nineteenth century Berlin wall' (Bray, 2018), with plans to link the two areas together by a single road. That road was never built. The greater area of North Kensington, which had historically owed:

> 'its existence to suburban expansion in the early nineteenth century, as speculative builders raced to establish the first bourgeois enclave west of the Royal Parks, [and] tracts of workers' housing cropped up to service the new railways and 'noxious' industries a little further west/northwest, the basis of contemporary Notting Dale […]

> had already begun to decline, failing to attract the wealthy clientele who preferred the newly blossoming South Kensington (Cartwright, 2020).

Notting Dale, the bedrock of present-day Grenfell Tower, served a 'definite economic function' and was one of several 'economic satellites of affluent West London' (Malcolmson, 1975: 28). Known as "Potteries and Piggeries" in the early nineteenth century, the primary mode of housing was unregulated. Shacks, cottages, and slum dwellings leased on short-term contracts brought violence and uncertainty to residents, as speculators sought to turn fast profits on high-risk investments (London City Council, 1973). Pig-keepers too poor to own separate dwellings lived with their animals; an industry kept afloat by the steady supply of scraps and food-discard from private kitchens in the West End, which were either fed on to the animals or boiled down to extract fat. 'In these hovels', an article in Charles Dickens' periodical, *Household Words*, writes, 'discontent, dirt, filth, and misery, are unsurpassed by anything known even in Ireland' (Wills, 1850). And in the hidden slums off Kensington High Street, Irish labourers who worked in the market gardens, or as launderers for the rich, lived in two-story tenements described too 'horrible to conceive'. 'In that narrow space are crammed nearly 1500 living souls' (Virtual Museum, 2006).

By the 1950s, communities of Caribbean and West Indian immigrants sat precariously alongside a sedentary English/Irish working class, and the 'aggressive commercial redevelopment' of neighbouring affluent suburbs (Cartwright, 2020: 8). It was this cutting up and imbricating of urban space that led Ruth Glass to label Kensington a 'zone of transition', a space of 'interlocking' social groups in which 'change and stagnation exist[ed] side by side' (Cartwright, 2020: 8; Glass, 1964). Glass' piece is widely read for coining the term



Map showing the physical barrier separating Notting Dale (top) from the affluent St James gardens in South Kensington (bottom), including the partially built but abandoned linking road (Branscome, 2020).

gentrification, but it also provides a detailed account of the dynamics of urbanisation in post-war London: a simultaneous 'drawing together' and 'moving apart' of the old inequalities of the past, as workers districts 'low on the list of municipal development and not "ripe" for investment [were] left to decay', and yet those who wished to maintain a foothold in the city,

in one of the fastest growing financial capitals in the world, were forced to pay ‘exorbitant rents’ for the privilege to do so (Glass, 1964: 24).

Grenfell Tower represented a dramatic improvement for the living conditions of residents in North Kensington. And yet it remained, well into the 1990s, a “commons” under threat (Hodkinson, 2018: 10), and a rotten tooth on the skyline of UK’s most expensive borough. Grenfell arguably survived the housing policies of Thatcher in the 1980s, with only a handful of flats sold to tenants under Right To Buy (RTB). In 1996, as part of a decade-long Large Scale Voluntary Transfer (LSVT) of council housing stock, the building was transferred to private control under the Kensington and Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation (KCTMO), with tenants elected to the board of members to protect their interests (Hodkinson, 2018: 10). TMOs arguably gave tenants more say in the management of their homes. But this was only one condition in a greater neoliberal program of demunicipalisation that sought to transfer the management, repair, and ownership of public housing from councils to private contractors and landlords (Hodkinson, 2019: ch. 1). The legacies of this program were slow to unravel, but no less catastrophic. By the time New Labour was elected in 1997, it had inherited…

> ‘a toxic mix of physical disrepair and social despair on thousands of council estates across the country. The Chartered Institute of Housing estimated for England an immediate £10 billion repair backlog, with an additional £10 billion needed to modernise homes lacking central heating and double glazing, replace kitchens and bathrooms over 20 years old, and renew vital structural elements such as roofs. Over 220,000 council homes (around 7 per cent of 3.2 million) were deemed unfit for human habitation and another 300,000 were categorised as in substantial disrepair or requiring essential modernisation’(Hodkinson, 2019: ch. 1).

In 2002, the KCTMO was returned to public/private ownership as an Arm’s Length Management Organisation (ALMO) in order to qualify for funding under the government’s new fiscal housing programme (Hodkinson, 2018: 10). While the KCTMO retained its title as a tenant management organisation, and tenant managers remained elected to its board, financial assistance was conditional on council housing continuing to run on a commercial basis, with a ‘chief executive and management board able to procure its own goods and services’, essentially preserving and maintaining ‘the strict financial straitjacket imposed under Thatcherism’ (Hodkinson, 2019: ch. 1). In 2015, under austerity policies introduced by the Coalition and Conservative governments, financial support for the training of new tenant managers was cut, along with funding for day care centres, local libraries, direct services, and building repairs (Power, 2017). The selection of combustible aluminium-composite panelling in the Grenfell Tower refurbishment was among £693,000 in savings negotiated with the private contractor, Rydon (O'Neill and Karim, 2017; Hodkinson, 2019: ch. 1).

Slow decay

As of 2021, the scale of the social housing crisis and the ‘time bomb’ left in Grenfell’s wake has only really begun to unfold (Hodkinson, 2019: ch. 7). What the inquiry has unveiled so far is not just the incompetence of the building’s management leading up to the fires, the failure of construction firms to heed official fire safety advice, and the lack of accountability for its victims, as private contractors and subcontractors involved in the building’s regeneration

continue to dodge responsibility through a 'bewildering transnational maze' and 'evasive geopolitics of deferral' (Nixon, 2011: 46; see: Davies, 2017). Grenfell signals a crisis much deeper and more difficult to trace through prevailing political and scientific logics of causation (Nixon, 2011: 47). Nixon (2011), writing in the context of the major environmental disasters of the 20th century, defines this crisis as gradual and spectacle-deficient, a slow decay 'out of sight' and an 'attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all' (Nixon, 2011: 2, 46). The regimes of toxic recognition that determine whose suffering counts and whose deserves compensation have shifted according to discursive strategies employed by the state: discourses which determine the research methodologies used to estimate and project long-term harm, and the political boundaries drawn (around bodies and the zones of decay) which define acceptable risk or 'shrink and dilate it' according to which political forces and which scientific rationalities 'achieve the upper hand' (Nixon, 2011: 47).

Thinking with Grenfell demands a different way of thinking about this crisis, in part because the ways that we conventionally imagine violence – as static, instantaneous, or as a single event – are 'profoundly and dangerously incompatible with the actual structures of time, and power, and geography that constitute global capitalism' (Williams, 2019: 15:30). These crisis moments have an important rhetorical affect: in an age where public policy is shaped around flashes of apocalypse and spectacular images of decay, they can incite quick, political action. But as the victims of Grenfell remind us – victims who are still very much alive and whose demands have still not been met (BBC, 2020), this crisis has no clear end in sight. For those who were exposed to toxic fire effluent and synthetic vitreous fibres spat up by the building while it burned, who inhaled heavy amounts of smoke, and who were treated for cyanide poisoning in the days and weeks after the fires, the long-term health implications of contamination are yet to be fully realized. The highly racialized dynamics of this crisis have also been doomed to play out, again and again, as a video of a group of men setting fire to a mock-Grenfell Tower surfaced on the internet in 2018, with paper-figurines of residents depicted raising their hands at the windows. In the video, a man can be heard in the background saying, 'that's what happens when you don't pay your rent' (Booth et al., 2018).

Thinking with Grenfell involves a critical mode of turning back and relating to historical time, one which shifts the dominant perspective to the forms of housing insecurity and decay (smog, not fire; mold, not floods) that persist long after the blaze dies out. Across the UK, thousands of ordinary renters continue to live in housing conditions too cold and/or too damp for human habitation. These forms of violence are slow and incremental: they represent the 'staggered and staggeringly discounted' number of casualties that result from living long periods of time in inadequate housing conditions – the "long deaths" (Nixon, 2011: 2), the gradual, ceaseless, witling down of bodies, whose suffering is largely invisible to "official regimes of recognition" (Nixon, 2011: 47). In 2015, a report administered by the Building Research Establishment revealed that 8.4 million homes in England posed a 'significant hazard' to residents health, costing the NHS around £2.0bn each year, or £.03bn shy of the annual health costs of smoking (Battersby, 2015: 1; Hodkinson, 2019: ch. 7). The majority of homes that contained category one hazards were in the private-rental sector (Battersby, 2015: 1). While the charred remains of Grenfell Tower will stand as an emblem of all that is wrong with social housing: that it is "ugly", anti-social, and high maintenance, that it was never really supposed to be lived in in the first place (Boughton, 2018: 252), private sector housing has continued to produce some of the worst housing conditions in the UK, with many of the costs of large-scale cladding repairs

unleashed by Grenfell Tower now being pushed onto renters under the terms of their leases (Dixon et al., 2018).

Grenfell Tower draws into question our own social worlds and the provisional infrastructures that support them. In 2019, in my home-town in Melbourne Australia, a five story blaze started by a cigarette saw the evacuation of hundreds of residents and some eighty firefighters called to extinguish the flames. The building, which had been identified as moderate risk due to the inclusion of ACM-style cladding along parts of the exterior (AAA, , 2019) quickly drew comparisons to Grenfell Tower, with calls to reassess the building codes that allow large apartment complexes to be covered in combustible material (ABC, 2019). As 200 residents were re-located to temporary relief centres, it was revealed that owners of the 40 story apartment-block had been served two notices from the city council over concerns the cladding was flammable. While some modifications to fire safety measures had been made, including the installation of additional smoke alarms, the cladding – which comprised a thin, vertical line of panels that extended up the western face of the building, remained in place. A forensic building inspector would later comment that it was precisely along these panels where the fire had spread (ABC, 2019). Sprinklers installed on each floor had managed to contain the fire to the balconies of affected apartments (Cox, 2019).

But what is distinct about Grenfell, in some ways, is that the immediate victims themselves did not qualify for recognition or compensation. Five months after the fires, just 26 of the 203 households who lost their homes had been permanently rehoused, while 130 households remained in emergency accommodation, hotel rooms, and bed-and-breakfasts (Olsen, 2017). It was community volunteers, not the state (Elcock, 2017) who came to the help of survivors in the crucial days and weeks after the fires, carrying flowers and supplies, making donations of goods, and listening to stories of the bereaved. While 426 adults and 110 children were in treatment for PTSD and other trauma-related mental illnesses by the end of the year, the number of people at risk was estimated by health officials to be more than 10,000, and families directly involved in the fires had yet to receive proper mental health assistance (Elcock, 2017; Booth, 2017). These failures are visible and concrete, and there has been no shortage of outrage from the victims of this crisis in the media. But attempts to enforce and coordinate a response across the private-housing sector have been slow and uneven. Of the 6,000 public and private high rise buildings inspected in the aftermath of Grenfell, 468 of those, or 1 in 10 homes, were found to be covered in flammable ACM cladding systems, with the majority of those in the rental sector (Hodkinson, 2019: ch. 7). By September 2018, just 32 of those had been remediated.

If there is a link between Grenfell Tower and the forms of violence faced by homeless and squatters in the following chapters, it is this ‘neutralization and management of apocalypse’ (Williams, 2010: 14:20), this democratization of decay, that has made London a site of increasing precarity and uncertainty for ordinary people. The number of people reporting health complications as a result of exposure to dangerous hazards in their homes numbers in the millions (Booth, 2018). As Booth notes, squatters no longer have a monopoly on housing insecurity: vulnerable workers, professionals and educated university students have been made to feel like “squatters in their own homes” (Booth, 2018). While the squatters I met during my fieldwork had seldom ever paid for accommodation, their stories and their experiences of decay have been made increasingly relevant to wider discourses of housing precarity, even as their practice has been criminalized. These experiences of housing precarity were prominent in the

19th century working-class districts and slums of London, and they have been made prominent again today by Grenfell and the dangerous, cheaply financed, multi-occupancy, "flexible" housing practices and policies that have prevailed under the neoliberal housing market (Ferreri et al., 2016; Watt and Minton, 2016).

As the rhythms of slow violence and decay settle back in after Grenfell – the images of red skies and bodies hanging from windows ultimately not enough to incite a large-scale rollback of the damage done to social housing through privatization and deregulation, we face the challenge not just of rendering slow violence visible, but of being able to collectively respond to this crisis at all. In some ways the following chapters are an attempt to address this challenge, tracking out the work of activists to re-build their communities within, alongside, and against these spaces of abandonment and decay. The efforts of the Grenfell Tower community to help victims in the weeks after the fires, in the absence of real efforts to do so by the state, offers an important window into how activists are negotiating the terms of this abandonment through their networks of community and care. This is not to say that the residents of Grenfell who were left to fend for themselves in the weeks after the fires – who slept on relative's couches and on warehouse floors after the fires transpired – weren't furious at the lack of empathy shown by the government. As one resident exclaimed: 'Where are the councillors? Where are they? They are nowhere to be found' (Gani, 2018). It was this outrage that led Theresa May to apologise for the 'failure of the state, local and national' to provide support for victims one week later. But this tension, between the need for residents to organize and prepare for attritional disasters that vastly outweigh their capacity to singularly undertake them, is a central tension in this thesis and the forms of activism it sets out to describe.

Chapter 2: Making autonomy in the hostile city

On a cold day in 2018, several months after I had moved into a squatted building ("The Black Stag") with a group of squatters on the outskirts of London, we discovered an abandoned elevator shaft above one of the ground-floor bedrooms. Our efforts to secure the room from rats had led us, first, to replacing the windows, then to stuffing the pipes with wire mesh, and eventually, to pulling down a large slab of plasterboard and fabric stapled to the ceiling in the hopes they might be nested there. I had watched in horror one night as a rat squirmed its way through a gap in the window – crashing in over it itself clumsily, and then, having righted itself in front of me, fled across the room and buried itself under the covers of one of the squatters sleeping nearby on the floor. As the squatters pulled away the plasterboard, piece by piece, they found no sign of rats. Instead, the ceiling opened out into a dark, empty space; an abandoned elevator shaft. Around this space, square, concrete walls plunged down from the ceiling before giving way to jagged bricks and empty air. A draft of wind kicked through the shaft, picking up ancient dust and debitage from old joints. As I surveyed the new discovery, which I took to calling The Tower, one of the squatters, a construction worker, shouted at me to move away. "We don't know what it's attached to", he said, "but it could come down at any moment." The thought occurred to me that many of us had slept under this thing, sometimes for months at a time.

This story is one of many examples of how The Black Stag, whose motives and agencies were opaque to us, sabotaged our attempts to transform it into a safe and habitable environment. These hostile agencies (Williams, 2011) were an everyday part of life at The Black Stag: from the air which poisoned us while we breathed it, to the floorboards which fell out beneath us, to the ceilings which threatened to collapse on us while we slept.

In this chapter, I introduce the primary space of my fieldwork, The Black Stag, and the diverse kinds of autonomy, creativity and violence that characterized life in this space. In rendering these everyday forms of violence visible, the chapter attempts to navigate a contradictory set of tensions: between the values of freedom and autonomy that enabled my informants to live a life "at the margins" (Lancione, 2019), and the forms of urban break-down and decay which threatened to take that autonomy away. The lifestyles of my participants were highly conditional on a particular kind of decay – one which gave them their materials to create, food to eat, and room to sleep. This complex of urban waste and infrastructures gave life to their autonomy, but it was also the material exoskeleton (Lancione, 2019: 538) through which their bodies intersected with the violent assemblages of the city. Against conventional claims to squatted buildings as 'gaps' or 'black holes' in the market (Lopez, 2012: 872), The Black Stag, I argue, was *hostile*, fundamentally infungible, and webbed to austerity and the larger processes of financialized infrastructure that produced its ruination. These ruins connect the seemingly banal and everyday experiences of violence of squatters to concrete shifts in the neoliberal governance of cities. The analysis that follows forms part of a broader disciplinary effort and anthropological refusal to let financial numbers obscure their lived effects (Muehlebach, 2016: 360), by scaling analyses of austerity crisis down to the narratives of decay that populate

people's lives and the urban worlds they live in. These stories provide important insights into the ways austerity crisis is being inscribed onto squatters bodies and the environments they live in.

The second half of the chapter turns its attention to the mental health crisis under austerity: how this crisis is playing out in autonomous spaces in London, and the internal dynamics of responses to it. The forms of physical ruin and urban degradation that have accompanied austerity policies in the UK, I argue, must be positioned alongside the ongoing effects of austerity crisis on mental health outcomes, and the physical and emotional toll this crisis has taken on squatters. I show how cuts to welfare and the attachment of new conditions to benefits (Cummins, 2018) have created a culture of avoidance in the squatting scene, giving rise to alternative strategies of self-medication and illicit drug consumption in order to cope with mental health issues. While breakdowns in funding for mental health in the UK have forced the burden of care onto ill-prepared and under-resourced civil society institutions, putting increased financial pressures on services at a time when demand is sharply increasing (Mattheys, 2015: 476), some squatters in the UK have embraced these policies of abandonment, in fraught and contradictory ways, through a politics that privileges the autonomy of the individual and their freedom from the state. At the Black Stag, this struggle for autonomy was waged in a culture of fierce individualism and casual drug use that threatened to intensify their experiences of violence while shutting down organized efforts to resist them. This was a form of autonomous politics that was deeply problematized by other members of the movement. It empowered individual autonomy at the expense of autonomy *from* the gendered, racialized, abled, and classed experiences of violence in the city. And it shut down collective efforts to resist austerity at the very moment that it articulated a coherent collectivity. As I show in subsequent chapters, these critiques are being used to explore the possibility of other forms of collective autonomy in the movement.

Creative autonomy

The Black Stag was a four-story building with two toilets, one shower, and one tap with working water. When I arrived to the squat on a wintery evening in February in 2018, the squatters explained to me that the newest renovations on the building were at least 100 years old, although its skeleton had been standing for centuries. As they led me through the building and I lost myself in its halls for the first time, I began to wonder how the building remained standing. Onto what invisible vertical structures did it cling to? The foundations to the building were fortified in layers. In the stage area, brickwork had been packed on top of old wooden bones. In the corners where the architecture began to break down, decorative walls like partitions extended out and then suddenly stopped, trailing off into hollow rafters. We craned our bodies to fit through the narrow walls of the basement, hopping through flooded floors and doorways extending into a network of hidden rooms like catacombs. In the belly of the building, three ancient wells dug into the ground connected to a main watercourse which surged beneath the town. With the plumbing now defunct, one of the squatters gestured to me with the torchlight of a shattered phone screen, the wells were flooding, thickening the air we breathed with microscopic spores. Like ruptured arteries they regurgitated a silt-black blood up and around our feet.

The front of the building led directly onto High Street. This was one of the quieter corners of town, with a large stretch of the road belonging to the squat. On the front of the building, a

notice read: “property to rent”. With the building closed to the public, High Street had become a through-way for taxis, drunks from local bars, and the occasional wayward shopper. In a small cove of backroads behind the building lay a sprawling mess of unused wood and bits of recycled material, upturned furniture, a half-built gate mangled out of rotten doors and fence posts, three caravans and a converted ambulance, a hand-made recycling bin – and in the uneven concrete where slabs of rock and sand had been dug up, sump pools of compost and rubbish. From the gates, the mouth of the building opened into a tunnel: once operated as a passageway for carriages in the 16th century, where years ago a fire had ravaged through the ground floor and scarred the walls with burn marks and soot. Inside, small corridors pitched off into giant warehouse spaces filled with recycled materials and equipment. The squatters had built living rooms and kitchens; there were two stairwells to a ballroom on the second floor, a residential area on the third and fourth floors, and above the entrance to the basement, a half-deconstructed stage area complete with holes where indiscriminate feet had fallen through.

The building, which was closed ten years ago, was an ashen monument to a time when young bands like Led Zeppelin and Iron Maiden had passed through local doors. Now, as one of my informants lamented, High Street was losing a culture war to an aggressive encampment of gambling casinos, expensive bars, and fast-food restaurants. In its lifetime, The Black Stag had served locals in the area as a wine and spirit merchant, a hotel, a stage-coach inn, a motor garage, a pub, a live music venue for rock and punk bands, a sauna, a gym, a restaurant, and a nail and tanning salon. After the 2008 financial crisis, the property struggled to stay in business. It was said of the couple who managed it at the time (then a pub), that the husband had hidden upstairs in its labyrinthine halls and rarely came down to be seen, while his wife, a dour and miserable women, would over-charge her customers and berate them “like an old school mistress”. When the business closed down there was no push to save the building from certain dereliction. The building served as a ruin, in all appearances and effects, fenced off from the public and preserved in a state of permanent decomposition. Yet as a property investment, it sat at the centre of a fierce political struggle between the council and owner, to whom it represented an enormous speculative financial asset. The council had submitted plans to acquire the building from the owner, who ran several more well-established properties in London at the time, but my informants reasoned that there was little point in giving the building away with property values booming in the area. The cost of refurbishing it was high, leading to an indefinite standoff between the owner, who did not have the capital to regenerate the building but could afford to sit on it as property values in the area rose (referred to as land-banking); and the council, who sought to re-possess the building from the owner over negligence of a heritage listed property. For several more years the building operated as a drug den until the squatters moved in and began clearing the floors of ash and needles.

A central tenet of The Black Stag that enabled the group to sustain itself and build a community project in the building without spending lots of money on it was the continued recycling of materials from skips, construction bins, as well as donations from local markets and businesses. This practical ethos was combined with a genuine passion for junk and discarded things, as I made several trips with my participants to scavenge thrown out furniture and commercial equipment, computer parts, timber, plasterboard, pipes, metal scraps, and food *skipped* from local supermarket bins. The Black Stag was filled to the brim with accumulated trinkets, books and ancient record collections, clothes, golf clubs, paintings, stuffed animals, bedding, spare mattresses, garage tools, and various other bric-a-brac. Salvaged items were continually fed

into the building, while excesses were recycled or siphoned off to other projects. The images of the building before it had been occupied were barren and desolate. Now it was an apocalyptic junkyard, four-floors of storage, a live-in construction site. In a city like London, where space is money, this amounted to a small fortune. It gave the squatters the ability to plan forward, operating under the assumption that if something was needed – to pull down a wall, to fix the fridge, to connect a new toilet – it was probably hidden under a pile of magazines somewhere.

Early in my fieldwork, I shared a guest-room room with one of the youngest members of the building, Jeremy. Jeremy (24) was an artist and a musician, and being the same age with similar tastes, we soon became friends. I learned that Jeremy and I shared a connection to Melbourne, Australia, where he briefly attended high-school before returning to the UK to study music and performance. Being new to the building, Jeremy and I became unlikely mediators when our room was turned into a four-bed guest room for visitors. We shared the extreme highs and lows of this space, being the first faces and the first port of call to anyone entering the building, having little to no privacy, and surviving occasional bouts of drunken violence from dubious strangers and friends of friends looking for somewhere to crash for the night. It became impossible to conduct anything close to fieldwork during these months. I found some sympathy from the squatters. "Anyone who has lived in a communal space like this," Jeremy told me, "will tell you that it's a full-time job". There was an interminable busyness and noise about the building: the turnover of gossip and drama, the bursts of creativity that came in all other areas except my dissertation; the daily throw of community, welcoming new faces, and making peace with strange roommates.

Late one evening, as Jeremy and I sat around a small table drinking and smoking, I set out my interview equipment and recorded one of our conversations. The room we occupied had just been decorated and re-homed. When I arrived in February, its owners, two squatters and their cats, had called its artistic direction *granny chic*: filling the walls and cabinets with skipped pottery, floral sheets, and antique furniture that had become stops for a local rat population that lived in the walls and ceilings. Some months later, I was invited to stay in the room and turn it into my own space. Some months after that, it had been cleared out and converted into a dormitory with a small communal area. As we sat in this room that everyone in the building had slept in at least once, squatters freely entered and exited, interrupted us, and listened-in. Our recording is filled with the ambient sounds of squatters winding down for the day, loud conversation, and people asking to borrow tobacco.

'A year after I graduated', Jeremy explained:

> '…I rented with some friends I'd made at university. I'd visited some squats in London, and I was interested in community living. I liked the opportunity to have the free time to do creative things, and um, I just found it kind of intriguing. And so some friends of mine that I had met at music events invited me to live in a squat which was actually just around the corner from the house I was renting. My contract was coming to an end and I didn't have money to put down a deposit to start a new contract anyway, and I didn't really wanna lock myself into renting for another year because I didn't have the guarantee that it was gonna…like I was already struggling to pay rent and everything else. I was only working-part time at a supermarket, but I wouldn't have wanted to work anymore than that, quite frankly. It was deadening to creativity enough. So mind numbing, coming out of uni and working a job that required literally no thinking. It was hellishly boring. […] Eventually the store's budget for the hours they could give

> were cut so I was getting less hours anyway which meant I was barely scraping by after paying rent and bills and council tax. I'd be lucky to have 20 quid for the month to eat, and well that wasn't going to work.
>
> Me: So part of it was about being able to do art, but also you were in a position where like, squatting did save you from not being able to afford a place to live?
>
> Jeremy: Well yeah, if I hadn't started squatting I would have been homeless. My rent contract was ending the same month I started squatting, and I couldn't afford to put down a deposit and continue renting. So it was either start squatting or be homeless […] It wasn't really about not paying rent, it was about having my life back to focus on what's important, and meet other people who felt similar.

When asked whether Jeremy considered himself to be an activist, he agreed, but only to the extent that squatting offered a creative solution for him, and not necessarily a political one:

> Me: So when you did start squatting, did you see yourself as part of a something like a social movement? As part of an artistic community? Being in a position where you no longer had to work to pay rent to be able to afford food, and that meant more time to do creative things…
>
> Jeremy: It was more of a philosophical rejection of those things, in regard to the fact that…I don't live for that shit. I don't live to work a mind-numbing job that doesn't even allow me to eat.
>
> Me: But do you think that that's not a problem that other people face, and so…
>
> Jeremy: Of course it's a problem other people face, but other people also subject themselves to that by choice. It's not my choice to make for anyone else. It's a matter of…I don't believe in it for myself, I believe that if someone wants to live like that…then they're an idiot, but let them get on with it and realize it for themselves. That's not who I am. I studied art through all of school, and performance theatre and music, I didn't grow up to become a slave to a system that doesn't in any way fulfill the needs of my soul. I'd rather kill myself.
>
> Me: So are you part of a community to resist that system?
>
> Jeremy: No, I'm a part of a community to create something.

Squatting for Jeremy was a claim to independence and self-sufficiency in the face of a system fundamentally at odds with his autonomy. This autonomy was personal, spiritual, and highly individualized. To the extent that it made him a part of a movement or a community, it did so only insofar as his autonomy was purposeful, necessary, and a condition of his mental health and well-being. Jeremy's understanding of his autonomy in the face of homelessness offers an alternative proposition of what it means to live life "at the margins" as a squatter. Not only does it show the possibility of 'homing' the city in creative and unlikely ways, it does so '*even within conditions that seem to announce its impossibility'* (Lancione, 2019: 538, emphasis in original). In order to decolonize our understandings of marginality and move away from a politics of the margins as "fringe" or "alternative", Lancione (2019) argues that this autonomy should be understood with a sense of immanence: it emerges from a particular urban assemblage, not in opposition to that assemblage, but as true and as possible because it persists (Lancione, 2019: 537). Jeremy's autonomy is propositional, as opposed to oppositional, because it does not need…

> 'alterity to be defined, and it does not need an external intervention to save it, […] it is already saved. Instead, it requires allowances and spaces to grow, forms of care and harm reduction that are crafted around its politics [...] on its own terms, according to its own practices, affirming the possibility of its autonomous existence in the face of wide-ranging powers of urban normalization (Lancione, 2019: 538).

Another informant, Will, a 29 year old squatter from a small town in east England, had been renting for three months in London when he was invited to join a squat in central London. The connections he made there soon earned him an invitation to The Black Stag, where he moved into a large room on the first floor of the building. It was, he described, in such derelict condition that the squatters had deserted it. By the time I arrived in 2018, he had converted it into the largest bedroom in the building; cleared the space of dust and debris, installed floorboards and a fire-door, and connected his own wi-fi which he shared, sparingly, with other members of the building. Inside, a large desk made of bits of recycled wood spanned two corners of the room, piled with salvaged tech, garage tools, lockpicking equipment, and a gaming computer connected to a monitor suspended from the wall. Some of this he had funded directly through part-time gig-work, but a lot of it was discarded equipment and materials he had picked up on the street and repaired himself. Squatting, for Will, was more than just occupying empty buildings. It was a lifestyle and an ethos built into practices of recycling and re-use:

> Will: Squatting for me is, how I view it, is taking an opportunity that's being squandered or not appreciated…taking something that someone is neglecting and turning it into something that benefits someone else. Whether it's taking food out of bins, to charity shops, to empty buildings…I'll take stuff that has got no relevance to me but I'll put it about because I know someone might have a need for it. The amount of times I've had someone ask me for stuff and I've actually had it because I've picked it up along the way, and I'm able to be like "yeah, I've got this, I've got that, I can sort you out with this. Do you need some of these? I've picked up some of these along the way too". Squatting to me is basically picking up the scraps that other people leave and making something of it, polishing a diamond out of it.

Squatting, for Will, was closely interwoven with practices of recycling, and it was this willingness to take matters into his own hands – to repurpose the enclosed workplaces, convert empty lots into community gardens, and occupy abandoned buildings – that opened up new opportunities and new avenues for creativity. This willingness to search through the junk, to pick diamonds from the refuse, allowed him to assert his autonomy within a network of 'people, places and things devalorized by market and state' (Giles, 2018: 113). Within this network of spaces and resources deemed too unprofitable and too expensive to repair, squatters like Will invert the traditional markers of exchange-value – newness, safety, and cleanliness (Giles, 2018: 117) – for a politics and an aesthetics of decay. It took months for me to realise that the layers of junk I had become accustomed to living with, tripping over, moving around, formed part of a larger assemblage of infrastructures diligently managed and maintained by the squatters. There remained, at all times, a sense of conviction in the value of all things: that the leaky ceiling was a quirk and not a defect, and that the paint-spill on the jacket was a badge to be worn with pride.

Still, for Lancione, writing in the context of the occupied tunnels of Bucharest, this complex of urban waste, provisional infrastructures, and non-human organisms that sustains life at the margins – that provides warmth and shelter, light, food to eat, and materials to create and un-

make – is also the material exoskeleton through which homeless bodies intersect with the violent assemblages of the city. At The Black Stag, the squatters' shared love for and commitment to hoarding derelict things was offset by the mould that grew in the foundations of the building, the dust and fumes unsettled by a day's work that continued to be lived and slept in, and the vermin life that chewed through our walls and our things. While this lifestyle was a condition of their autonomy, it was also the lingering threat of infection and disease that threatened to take it away, carving violence and discrimination into their experience of making home in a hostile world. This autonomy must be situated within the tensions and intersections – the forms of harm and care, abundance and scarcity, inclusion and exclusion – which operate through squatters bodies and the environments they live in.

The struggle for autonomy

A key element of squatting in London is living in hostile environments that are rotting, breaking-down, that seem to want to hurt you, or were never designed to be lived in in the first place. At The Black Stag, the structural damages of austerity were felt as the structural damage of bodies, forced to survive in hostile environments that attacked, poisoned, froze, and spread disease. In the basement to The Black Stag, a secluded room had been transformed into a recording studio, where mould slowly crept into the carpet and had to be regularly dried out with electric heaters. In one of the main stairwells, squatters spent days scrubbing away at grit and slime, where previous tenants had poured oil and grease down one of the stairwells to block police from entering the upper floors during an eviction resistance. For several months we showered with each other's food scraps while the only sink in the building was broken. Squatters in the building often downplayed their own health and safety in exchange for creative freedom in their lived environment: the freedom to paint rooms and adorn the walls with art, to hoard interesting books and salvaged objects, and to rearrange and install new rooms with scrapped materials and second-hand power tools. The piles of recycled materials which grew in the corridors and stairwells, and the mountains of clothes and bedding sitting in the ballroom put us in a precarious position with the local fire department, who could evict us at any moment if they were not satisfied with the safety of the building. Before inspections, there was often a scramble to clean the corridors of clutter and flammable materials. After one surprise inspection, when a member of The Black Stag exclaimed that he would need a pen and paper to write down the fireman's 'constructive criticisms', the fireman responded blankly that he wouldn't 'have enough ink'. 'If there was a fire in this building', he continued, 'I can't see it stopping'.

This lack of regulations and the freedom to build a community project in the building came with a flexibility that appealed to my participants, but also failed to provide them with adequate safety measures, support structures, or compensation for injury or illness (Millar, 2008: 28). These encounters with violence were an everyday occurrence, as the building sabotaged our attempts to convert it into a safe and habitable environment. Prohibition orders from the council threatening to throw us out of the building were a regular fixture, and served as a point of reference for work that needed to be done. In the early months of my fieldwork, one health and safety inspection listed, among other matters of concern: the poor and improper instalment of bathing facilities with porous surfaces, damaged and uneven flooring in corridors, poorly fitted floorboards, or the absence of floorboards altogether (including a 2.5m drop into the basement '…to the extent that a person could easily fall between levels', and had done so before)

damaged sockets, spliced temporary wiring, and excess cold caused by a lack of central heating and drafts through broken windows. From the council's perspective, these routine inspections operated under the pretence of *rules and procedures to be enforced* rather than regulations to protect us, our well-being, or our efforts to transform the building into a safe environment. This hostility was felt and enforced at a distance, waged covertly through the serving of legal documents on doors and windows, rarely in person.

While the property was classified not fit for "residential" accommodation by the council, the prohibition orders prevented the owner from renting the property to a new tenant until the orders had been lifted, and worked in favour of the squatter's long-term claims to the building. As opposed to legal residents, the squatters occupied a grey area as 'security' and 'guardians on rotation' in their correspondences with the council; meaning that, without further legal intervention, a final eviction notice would need to be served by the owner. Prohibition orders posed a legitimate threat, bringing in unwanted attention from the council and testing the owner's patience with the squatters and the boundaries of their meanwhile agreement, but these insecurities often faded away into the ambient background noise of life as a squatter. Legal threats, false evictions, and council bureaucracy were routine parts of life at The Black Stag. 'If they really wanted to take the building from us', one of my informants reasoned, 'then we would just squat it'. This betrayed a real anxiety and urgency at the heart of the squat: what was at stake was our homes and livelihoods, but these forms of life were always only partially permitted. The next eviction notice might be the real thing, but until the bailiffs come around to throw you out, all danger threatens to become all noise, and this noise is what life sounds like (Povinelli, 2011: 137).

This attitude was expressed in a story passed on to me by Ursula, a female squatter in the festival scene who travelled in a van with her partner:

> Ursula: 'I had a friend who squatted a hillside in Brighton, there's allotments up there. He'd lived on one side of the hill for about ten years and he'd hewn a cave out of the side of the hill with no power drills or tools. Literally him and a little pickaxe, he just made a cave. He did it by himself, he was the most tenacious person. And he got evicted from that side of the hill and basically moved on to the other side of the hill, at which point I started staying there. He was on that side of the hill for about six months. We knew the bailiffs were coming, they would be there tomorrow. That day I was like, cool, we should probably start packing up to make things easier for us. And he was like, "No". I said, "What do you mean, no?" He was like, literally, he made a fire bath that day, cementing the bricks in and lighting the fire, and he was like, "No, I'm having a fire bath. I don't care if it happens tomorrow, that is tomorrow, this is now." You've got to live for the now. Restricting yourself to what happens tomorrow will get you nowhere.'

The ability to surrender one's home, even in the face of eviction, indicates a certain degree of mastery over housing crisis and the ability to resist it (Kadir, 2016: 194). If I have no home, or conversely, "if the city is my home", then housing crisis cannot claim me as one of its victims. What is considered to be home – whether it meets a minimal criteria to be classified as home (security, warmth, shelter), or whether it encompasses the full spectrum of emotional and cognitive attachments to place (Low and Altman, 1992) – allows squatters to assert their autonomy in the face of homelessness. Eviction is traumatic, but always expected. This deflection allows squatters to invoke homelessness as a political cause close to home while

also inhabiting a space outside of it. In this way, squatting empowers victims of homelessness at the same time that it allows them to reject this victimization.

In other ways, however, squatted buildings are thoroughly circumvented by the larger processes that produce their ruination, and the possible forms of life that endure in them. At the Blag Stag, the squatters were fighting a war against austerity and its associated forms of collapse. There was a sense of apocalyptic death-drive at the core of The Black Stag, as its squatters, with blistering hands and gangrenous feet, filled their lungs with cigarette smoke, graffiti fumes, toxic rat piss, pigeon shit, and the fibrous dust of decay in old buildings, demolished walls, crumbling drywall, and rotting wood. One of the squatters was taken to hospital after working in the basement when he began coughing up black grit. This was one of few examples where the mould and dust we breathed on a daily basis surfaced as tangible illness. These buildings were not just gaps, passive ruins, or empty signifiers to which romantic and nostalgic notions were ascribed; they were historical objects, belligerent leftovers, unregulated and potentially toxic zones, artefacts of imperial rule, symbols of racial and gendered violence, and monuments to be reclaimed or transformed. These histories were buried into the walls of the city and confronted as hostile social relations that seemed to want to hurt us (Williams, 2011), that took on a malevolence of their own, webbing the everyday to modes of crisis, degradation, and collapse.

The area surrounding The Black Stag was also known for regular spates of violence, as Ursula explained that she rarely felt comfortable going out alone after sunset, or in the ballroom on weekends where our interview took place:

> Ursula: 'Most places aren't as violent as here, there is a lot of pent up aggression and more-than-casual vile racism that happens out here. On the weekend, I don't like sitting in this room by the window, because this road will have four or five fights on it, people just screaming at the top of their lungs. Somebody got their head caved in with a pole right at the end of the market last night. Apparently there were two very large pools of blood cordoned off by, you know, like the proper murder squad investigating unit or whatever. It's horrendous, I've never seen so much casual violence in my life, as someone who's lived in England pretty much their whole life.'

This violence took on a 'casual' nature that evoked a sense of banality. As Gorringe (Gorringe, 2006: 240) writes, violence is never commonplace: even when it appears routine it 'occasions fear, suffering, and death'. How this violence is encountered by squatters speaks to its simultaneous casual nature and its haunting physical presence. The Black Stag was a place of home and other-ness, familiarity and estrangement, as we were forced to negotiate the everyday violence of living in unsafe, un-secure, and precarious spaces. This hostility loomed in the building and in the streets outside it, given material force through frequent exposures to violence, ill-health, and threats of eviction. Ursula admitted that this violence, over time, appeared casual in its ubiquity. What were real threats became everyday occurrences. These interruptions were never fully normalized, as she expressed horror in witnessing the violence so close to home… 'by the window…', '…right at the end of the market'. But it did change the way she encountered the everyday and the mundane as potential threat, a form of horror that ought to have remained hidden but was frequently made visible in her home and outside of it. Violence haunts people, places, and things that it occurs in and around, and when this violence reaches a certain degree of saturation, the world and the things we take for granted

can assume a hostile, even *unheimlich* [uncanny] quality. *There are ghosts in the walls, figures in the shadows, and the bedrooms are made of asbestos.*

In the context of remote indigenous communities in Australia, Povinelli (2011) shows some of the ways decay becomes naturalized in the home and the bodies that live in them. From a health standpoint, home is defined by its ability to provide shelter, to keep us clean, reduce overcrowding, improve nutrition through the ability to store and cook food, reduce the health impacts of dust, control temperature, and reduce hazards that cause injury (Povinelli, 2011: 137). But if the home is an illusion, where 'no system of institutionalized expectation is in place to connect the physical structure (house) to the range of functions it is assumed to be able to provide', this does not make it "not-home" (137). Psuedo-houses do not explode under the weight of this contradiction, or stop being homes. Rather, Povinelli writes:

> 'They and the things that inhabit them slowly decompose according to a rhythm that feels natural. This decomposition occurs in a system of concepts, materials, and forces that locks together human and nonhuman agencies and organisms (Povinelli, 2011: 137-138).

This sense of slow decay makes it possible to feel at home in hostile spaces neither built *for* nor *by* the people who live in them. Squatting decomposes human bodies and non-human organisms, but this is a decomposition which feels natural, without explosions, as we become gradually accustomed to decaying bodies and environments without feeling the transition ever really click into place. This 'slow death' is an everyday drift toward to decay that only periodically arouses the attention of national and international publics: 'Any claim that these forms of decay matter can be referred back to the general condition of human life – everyone is slowly dying' (Povinelli, 2011: 145). But more often than not, the distribution of this violence is split across racial, gendered, and class-based lines. Slow deaths are not clearly documented: who and what is killing these people must answer to complex systems rather than people. Occasionally these deaths cumulate into a crisis, riveting the imagination of liberal society and demanding decisive action and justice (Povinelli, 2011: 145-146). But more often than not the lives of vulnerable people fall into a condition of decay, experienced, not as crisis, but as 'long, yawning duration' (Williams, 2010: 13; Powers and Rakopoulos, 2019: 3).

Self-medication

One of my informants, Roger, a 45-year-old squatter from Ireland, was invited to the project by another member of the building after sleeping on the streets of London for three years. Based on the stories that he shared with me and the bits I can piece together from them, in his early life, Roger had previously earned a degree in engineering and was employed offshore on boats and oil rigs, teaching seminars on the side in stock-market investment. In 2007, facing what he sensed was an immanent financial crisis, Roger left his job and sold his shares and moved to Thailand, where he started a successful night club. After being involved in a serious motorcycle crash and suffering severe brain trauma, he fled to the UK on the run from the Illuminati and Thai gangs, hiding in 24/7 McDonalds restaurants overnight and sleeping on the streets of London during the day, where he could rest in view of the occasional shopper or passer-by. Reflecting on his experiences of sleeping rough and his current circumstances, Roger referred to squatters as "the aristocracy" of the homeless.

After making friends in the squatting scene, Roger traded his skills and experience as an engineer in exchange for a room at The Black Stag. He could often be found in the basement, tracing wires and fixing cables to walls, building a virtual map of the plumbing and electrics in the building. Roger rarely talked about his mental health, a struggle which did occasionally coalesce into fits of paranoia. Sometimes he would forget where he placed his things. I became the brunt of this paranoia when he misplaced his new headphones and accused me of stealing them. One morning, Roger locked his possessions away in his room, pulled a mattress into the downstairs shed, and installed a padlock on the door. His involvement in the project came to a standstill. Tensions rose as the squatters became impatient with Roger's lack of productivity: there were serious accusations that he had assaulted a member of the community some years prior to moving into the building, and these accusations quickly turned into anger and bullying. He was asked by a group of squatters in the building to leave. Toward the end of his stay at The Black Stag, Roger was caught shoplifting and spent a night in jail, facing further charges. He'd just received news that his mother had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and given months to live. Over the following weeks, Roger slipped in and out of the building at night, sometimes re-appearing with bruises and cuts, other times sleeping on a bed of cushions discreetly under the ballroom windows. Weeks later we received news that he had committed suicide.

As Roger's mental health deteriorated, so too did the building's capacity to extend its networks of support to him. My informants were disproportionately represented in their struggles with mental health, violence, and poverty. As activists and anarchists, they placed the onus of care on themselves and their relationships with each other. The Black Stag provided a safety net for friends in the scene who were displaced by eviction, creating a sense of solidarity grounded in momentary enactments of community and the lived experience of freedom, autonomy, and mutual aid (Brissette, 2013: 222). But the fight for this autonomy took its toll: the daily struggle to create a home in hostile spaces, to maintain one's independence while providing shelter for the homeless and mentally ill (without resorting to "sectioning one's own friends") ate away at relationships between members of the building and their sense of solidarity. Infighting, cynicism, and political fatigue were common. There were high rates of undiagnosed and untreated mental illness, as well as casual violence, bullying, and drug use, and the forms of care and resources that the building could extend to its community were limited. The building was unable to house everyone who needed a home, and many of the squatters in need of care were the ones being forced to provide it. During one house-meeting dispute, a squatter exclaimed in frustration, "we don't get paid enough for this shit!" Without the fiction of work and of a higher obligation to care, the squatter's patience and understanding with each other only ran so deep.

Roger's story raises important questions about the ability of squatters to provide alternatives to state care as the system (and its subsequent hollowing out and collapse) fails them as its primary subjects. This collapse was precipitated by the global financial crisis and the waves of austerity and neoliberal healthcare policy that proceeded it. The numbers released on this crisis in the UK in last few years appear catastrophic, and follow three decades of structural adjustment policies that have ravaged public sector services in the global south (Pfeiffer and Chapman, 2010: 150). Between September 2009 and March 2016, the UK government saw a reduction of over 1 million in total UK public sector employment (ONS, 2016), with a projected loss of £27 billion in welfare spending by 2020-2021 (Beatty and Fothergrill, 2016). While 50% of

the cuts were applied to benefits and local government spending, these areas only accounted for 25% of the government budget (Cummins, 2018: 4). These cuts were frequently accompanied by new sets of conditions on existing benefits. Between 2010-2013, areas with some of the highest rates of re-assessment under the 2008 Workers Capability Assessment (WCA) were linked to a significant rise in mental health related issues, with 590 reported suicides, 279,000 additional cases of self-reported mental health issues, and 725,000 additional prescriptions for anti-depressants (Cummins, 2018: 5; Barr et al., 2016), with many claimants reporting outright fear of receiving the agency's 'brown-envelope' call to assessment (Baumberg et al., 2015: 19). After its creation in 2008, the WCA was sold to a private organisation in 2010 that employed staff with little to no professional experience dealing with mental health (Cummins, 2018: 5), suggesting a broader trend in policy toward the externalization of state contracts. Where benefits where awarded, they were seen as a neglect of individual responsibility (Cummins, 2018: 4-8), and therefore as a form of moral or character failure.

Rates of depression and anxiety among my participants were difficult to disentangle from casual drug use and addiction. In the last few days of my fieldwork, I spent an evening with Will, sobbing and drunk, as he delivered injection kits and ketamine to his girlfriend while she suffered heroin withdrawals triggered by a long-standing member of the building offering to "hook her up" in a communal area. As we staggered through the streets at night looking for a needle exchange and caught the train to the other side of London to meet his dealer, Will explained that the needle fixation from injecting ketamine would be enough to stave off her withdrawals. This was seen as a lesser evil than seeking proper medical care. Many of my informants described wrenching experiences of watching friends and family "sectioned" under the Mental Health Act (MHA): a process in which someone is compulsorily detained in hospital by concerned family, friends, or police, and treated 'against their will' (NHS, 2019). As part of the rehabilitation process, this often includes an assessment of housing benefit needs and compulsory employment programs packaged with them (Mind, 2018). As Will explained:

> Will: 'The way that the state deals with addiction currently is completely not the way to deal with it. Basically the law in England is like, if three or more people report a certain individual, they can be then put up for or become eligible to be sectioned, and then they have to be assessed and whatever. If someone really needs help, they can get themselves sectioned and spend time on pharmaceutical drugs in a mental institution, where they'll be given zopiclone or methadone, or other drugs like that to basically take em out for a few weeks, taper down the thing, constantly keep them in a doped up state, take them off the methadone, and then they get addicted to methadone, so they have to take them off that with something else.'
>
> 'It's dark. Basically the whole way we deal with the psychology behind addiction is completely archaic at the moment, but without doing that you wouldn't be able to treat large amounts of addicts in a centre without it being absolute chaos. You have to tailor to the needs of each person, but the cost of that would be too much. It is affordable if we budgeted correctly […] if the financial infrastructure was correctly laid out it would be easily affordable, and it would probably be through the NHS, and you would be able to go to centres where they focus on taking your mind off the habit, and you know, rehabilitate you as a person as opposed to drugging you out.'

Many of my informants, including Will, saw rehabilitation as a threat to their lifestyle and their autonomy. They saw in state care, critically, a system built on coercion and de-humanisation,

commercial exploitation, and commodified care. This loss of trust in formal care pointed to a heavy reliance on illicit drug consumption and self-medication in the scene to cope with undiagnosed mental health issues. If help was needed, it was rarely sought after through formal networks. When I first moved into the squat to begin my fieldwork, I spent hours clashing with staff at the local practice as I attempted to sign up as a new patient without an address – a form of structural discrimination that threw up several obvious barriers to support. At the squat, I was frequently bemoaned for taking anti-depressants while my participants lectured me on the corruption of the pharmaceutical industry. They saw, in my passive adherence to pharmaceutical norms, a failure of political commitment to seek help in my community, which they compared to their own experiences of self-exploration through illicit drug use.

Among those on the Left, the place of drugs in the squatter movement has occupied a point of contention. On one hand, the rugged, grungy, and dark elements of underground politics are difficult to disassociate from the movement, and represent part of its appeal to young people entering the scene. The squatting scene is linked to the youth movement in its perceptions of youth as rebellious, in its search for adventure and the desire for autonomy, and through the practical reality of sharing space with young people and the resulting need to organize those spaces around shared values and norms (Freidrichs, 2005: 17). The 1980s anarcho-punk and youth roots of the UK squatting scene are often associated with a negative and counter-cultural project that promotes critique through organized anarchy and destruction. In cities like London and Bristol, this subculture was built on subversion and political malcontent, with influences from the animal rights movement, vegetarianism, anti-nuclear protest, and feminism, as well as the bleak and horrific aesthetics of anti-war punk, addiction, nihilism, and homelessness (Dines and Worley, 2016: 9; Webb, 2016: 180). The dual currents of anarchy and youth culture had a heavy influence on the squatting scene in London and cannot be disentangled from it. Yet for older, experienced members, there remains a certain degree of disillusionment with squatting as a result of this entanglement: the failures of first-wave punk to resist co-option and commercialisation (Webb, 2016: 182), and of squatting to turn its politics of anarchy and destruction into a positive political project. Writing from the perspective of the squatting scenes in Zurich and Berlin, Freidrichs (2016: 88) argues that drug use in the squatting scene represents both a radical refusal to participate in society *and* a 'loss of self-determination and hence the basis for political activism' itself. In activist circles, the latter critique implies a culture of self-blame in which addicts appear, at best, lost for the purposes of political struggle, and at worst, a tool in the hands of the state.

Attitudes to drug use at The Black Stag were often shrouded in a language of fierce individualism, and it was seen as the responsibility of the individual, rather than the community, to make sure that their habits did not turn into an unhealthy dependence:

> Will: A lot of people I know are actually quite healthy recreational users…I'm an extreme example in the community from what I've got a feeling of, and I'm not even a mega user. I think generally, it all depends on the attitude of people doing it, do you know what I mean? There's a lot of people who can't handle it. [Someone else] was telling me there's a squat [they] came from where everyone was shooting speed, not really saying anything just staying awake for no reason whatsoever with no productivity behind it. There's groups like ours where we're relatively on it, we're relatively productive, and have a good time with it. People rarely see me come down in a foul mood here. Whereas speed is known for turning people into shitcunts. It's just

> how you deal with it as an individual. I know when I need to be alone for a while, and I'll do that.

For Will, drugs were used as a way to heighten productivity in the building, to increase socialisation and have a good time, whereas the negative aspects of coming down from a high were managed on an individual basis. Because these negative emotions were usually censored, or represented a failure of the individual to regulate their drug use in front of the community, their status as care or discipline was left ambiguous (Garcia and Anderson, 2016: 452). For power users, a combination of skills and the ability to perform 'emotional sovereignty' – what Kadir (2016: 95) defines as an asymmetrical relation of care, in which authority figures are needed by others in a group more than they express the need for any individual in return – makes them seem elusive, independent, and in control of their own impulses. This monopoly on emotion raises questions of power. What emotions are appropriate to express in a group environment? Whose interests are being served when we suppress them? And how do cultural imperatives condition us to act this way (Fineman, 2008)? For Kadir, emotional sovereignty is a way of performing 'a totalizing emotional and structural independence' (Kadir, 2016: 110-111). This totalizing individualism brings squatters respect in a community that '…preaches communal living, solidarity and interdependence as superior to an individualist mindset and lifestyle'. Yet it is these "relations of independence" that paradoxically create structures of dependency.

The rule of structurelessness

As someone who experienced the ripple effects of addiction while living at The Black Stag – sharing space with silent strangers, irritable drunks, and squatters experiencing mild or violent psychotic episodes – the emotional and physical toll that this can take on individuals and the patience and care that it demands from the group can be exhausting. One night in my fieldwork, I was forced out of the guest-room I shared with Jeremy when two of our visitors, Adam (32) and his partner Liza (20), kept us awake shouting into the early hours of the morning. Adam – a quiet, friendly drug dealer – had lived in the building for a brief period of time in 2017, but was evicted by the group for reasons not disclosed to me. He was invited to return one year later as a visitor, remaining adamant that he was to move back into the building full-time. Although the prevailing sentiment from squatters in the building seemed to be that Adam was a guest, Adam had made several large financial donations to the project. As a rule, Adam generously shared his belongings with other members of the building. Each night, Adam and Liza put large amounts of money toward group dinners, including the donation of two slow cookers which they shared with the group. Some weeks after they moved in, Adam bought a second-hand fridge from a local dealership, which he installed in the communal kitchen.

Although these donations were welcomed by the group, the expectation that Adam had "earned" his way into the community was a sentiment not returned by other members of the building. That night, an argument between Adam and Liza turned violent. Adam was angry that he was being forced to share a room with Jeremy and I. Liza insisted that she did not feel welcome by the group and wanted to leave. Frustrated, Adam shattered his phone, tossed his mattress across the room, and spray-painted the word 'SQUAT' in big letters on the wall. I took refuge in the kitchen next door, where the argument soon followed. Doing my best to avoid being dragged into the argument, I slipped away into a caravan with two squatters outside. Adam soon found

us, insisting that we let him in to talk, at one point attempting to kick his way through the door when he was told, blankly, by one of the squatters to fuck off and go to bed.
"Am I not allowed to have a bad day?" Adam shouted from outside, hammering his fists against the van.

Sometime after the argument died down, Jeremy, Liza and I crept upstairs and knocked anxiously at Will's door. He appeared, rubbing bloodshot eyes.
"*What the fuck is going on with Adam?",* he said. He went on to explain that, while we had been downstairs, Adam had wondered into his room upset. Will had kept him there briefly to calm him down.
Jeremy explained that he and Adam had been drinking heavily earlier in the evening when they were offered a dose of Xanax by Adam's dealer – a relatively common anxiety medication that I would later learn was potentially fatal when mixed with alcohol (Moss, 2018).
"How much did you take?" Will asked.
"A handful", Jeremy said.

Scrolling through my phone, I began digging up articles about the rise of a drug called 'fake Xanax' in the UK – a mass-produced, illegally-made, counterfeit imitation of the popular tranquilizer that numbers third in the most prescribed psychiatric drugs in America (Bryant, 2018). In the UK, the drug was being produced locally with powders imported from overseas; distributed to dealers in packs of 1,000s, and doled out by 13-year-old-kids on street corners (Izundu, 2019). Stories were beginning to emerge of mass-hospitalizations of school-children (Bryant, 2018), stemming from an assumption that the reputation of the drug as a prescription medicine made it safer to consume than other drugs (Edge Rehab, 2018). In 2019, the BBC reported that the misuse of fake Xanax had led to the deaths of some 200 people since 2015 (Phillips, 2019; The Day, 2019). As users came forward, a common set of symptoms – drowsiness, disassociation, violence – were beginning to emerge:

> 'My head was away. I started fighting with my family, I tried to stab my mum, I was going to stab my dad, getting into fights, getting into debt […] One night I took 56 of them. That was on a Friday. And I didn't wake up until the Sunday. That's when I went round to my Mum's and smashed her TV, then had her pinned up against the car. I didn't know what I was doing' (Izundu, 2019).

The following morning, we woke to more shouting in the courtyard. Tired, emotionally exhausted, we stumbled outside to see a group of squatters standing in a circle. In the centre, Adam was swinging a fire extinguisher aggressively at anyone who came close. One of the older squatters, Big Tom (29), appeared behind me and stormed through the circle.
"That's it", he boomed, "you're out. Done. I don't want to see you here again".
Adam took a swing at Big Tom. One of the squatters, cut and bloodied from the brawl, charged Adam to the floor and pinned his arms behind his back.

Moments later, two cops arrived to the building. I wondered if one of the residents in the neighbouring apartment blocks had called them – to my surprise, I discovered, it was one of the squatters. I couldn't help feel, however relieved, that the reliance on cops to de-escalate the situation represented a failure of the group, and a failure of the autonomous community to self-regulate. Inviting cops to enter a building where drugs were left loosely scattered across tabletops was unequivocally bad news. It was bad news for members of a community who wished to remain anonymous, who used the building as somewhere to quietly sell and take

drugs. But it was also bad news for a politics which preached the withering away of the state through practices of self-organization and mutual aid, while simultaneously calling on the police – time and again – in moments of need.

Soon after Adam was taken away in handcuffs, one of the cops returned and followed us into our room to pack his things. We were informed Adam had been let go and was prohibited from re-entering the area. Hours later, we received a call that he had been stabbed in a confrontation with a family member and air-flown to a major hospital. He survived, waking days later with a large gash stretching down the length of his chest, blanking completely on his part of the story. Later, in an interview, I unloaded some of my concerns on Jeremy. This was the second time someone in the building had experienced a psychotic episode as a result of drug use. How could we reconcile the group's commitment to autonomy with the ways that money and drugs circulated in this community?

> Me: '[…] the way that money penetrates this community, in this building, how for example we've had a lot of problems with drugs…Adam put a lot of money into the building, but then during his episode the lack of recognition for that contribution sort of *drove* his psychosis. The people weren't appreciating the money he put into the building so he expected to get something back in return…'
>
> Jeremy: 'But then you've got a serious culture clash there because there's those of us that respect money and those of us that don't. Most people in this community don't. It's a tool. You can't buy respect in this community. Putting in 100 pound to get new plumbing won't be appreciated as much as plumbing in a toilet yourself, even if that toilet's a piece of shit. That's how we work.'

For Jeremy, Adam's anger and entitlement represented an error of individual judgement, a failure to read the room, to realize that 'you can't buy respect' in this community with money. To "think that he could" was a failure to recognize the appropriate rules and attitudes toward money in the building – a failure to privately intuit or feel these rules out. Drawing on Hoschild's (1979) concept of "feeling rules", Kadir describes the ways power dynamics operate invisibly in squatted spaces, in the gaps between what is said and what is done. Because feeling rules are experienced privately, on a case-by-case basis, without being named or negotiated, these rules remain silent, unspoken, and somewhat resistant to formal codification (Hochschild, 1979: 566). Their status as power or as rule only becomes an object of awareness when:

> '[…] the individual's feelings do not fit the situation, that is, when the latter does not account for or legitimate feelings in the situation. A situation (such as a funeral) often carries with it a proper definition of itself ("this is a time of facing loss"). This official frame carries with it a sense of what it is fitting to feel (sadness). It is when this tripartite consistency among situation, conventional frame, and feeling is somehow ruptured, as when the bereaved feels an irrepressible desire to laugh delightedly at the thought of an inheritance, that *rule* and *management* come into focus (Hochschild, 1979: 563, emphasis added).

The concept of emotional labour has been extended to describe a common tendency within egalitarian social movements to privilege the values of freedom and autonomy while simultaneously allowing informal hierarchies of power to persist with impunity (Burgum, 2018b; Freeman, 2013). While members of the building welcomed Adam's contributions to the project, the expectation that these contributions would be rewarded, that they would earn "respect" in a culture which valued independence, authenticity and principles of radical left

communal living – was a failure to mirror the appropriate feelings, to realistically set his expectations in line with the emotion rules of the group. As Hochschild (1979: 566) writes, while feeling rules may have more in common with rules of etiquette than laws or policies, who has the authority to determine what feelings are appropriate in a given situation reflects a more general power to shift and assign blame. Power in these spaces is thus silent and self-effacing. Adam's feelings of anger and entitlement represented a failure of the individual: a failure to identify the emotional expectations of the group, to adapt to and internalize these expectations, and to perform them 'without explicitly naming this process of management' (Kadir, 2016: 137).

A lack of clear rules around drug use, rather than fostering safe places for the consumption of drugs, created an atmosphere of intense emotional isolation between those who could manage the emotional labour of doing hard drugs in a community environment and those who couldn't. This was a culture of ethical and informed self-medication which claimed a progressive and community-oriented approach toward drug use, while also making discussions about it (or acknowledging drug violent behaviour as a problem in this community) a taboo. On the "front-stage", being outspoken and acting impulsively were valued as a means of challenging the status quo and performing dissent (Kadir, 2016: 131). But on the "backstage", where the highest values were 'to maintain a lively and peaceful group dynamic', such traits were minimized 'to promote a cohesive and peaceful home life' (Kadir, 2016: 131-132). Monitoring others' drug use in the building was seen as a breach of individual rights, and challenging this right was antithetical to the principles of autonomous living and the peaceful ideological co-existence of the group. In an environment where everyone 'should be able to interact as equals' and 'no one should feel more or less privileged' (Kadir, 2016: 153), establishing clear rules around drug use contravened the basic rights of the individual, admitting that *not all squatters are equal* and *not all squatters are free*. Yet those who did eventually lash out were evicted, undermining the ability of the group to register care outside of traumatic and violent crisis points. The use of harsh punitive measures such as eviction created a zero-tolerance policy toward drug violence in the building at the same time that it failed to challenge the conditions leading to individual breakdowns and problematic drug usage. This threatened to reproduce the same neoliberal logics of abandonment that the squatters sought to overcome through alternative methods of self-medication and mutual aid.

Autonomy or abandonment?

For residents of the Black Stag, structure, authority, and official organisation were deeply contested categories. This was one of the few political ties that brought them together – a principled rejection of authority that carried over to building meetings and interactions with the local council; the desire for freedom and a life lived with autonomy. For some, this autonomy was highly individualised; it encompassed a wide range of individual aspirations and desires in the squatting scene – the desire to be independent and non-conformist, to appear emotionally self-contained while expressing a rejection of capitalist values and establishment norms (Kadir, 2016: 5). This realisation occurred to me in a series of discussions with Victor, one of the squatters that had been forced out of the building after refusing to turn over a downstairs room; and who, after his eviction, had spent the following weeks with a separate crew breaking into buildings and throwing parties. Despite the initial shock of being evicted by his friends, after returning to retrieve his things, Victor expressed no resentment. The Black

Stag, he remarked, had admitted defeat as soon as it allowed the council to walk through its doors. 'If they really wanted to open the doors to the community then they would have opened them years ago'. His activism was incompatible with state power – the moment you allow someone else to define what can and cannot be done in a space is the moment you lose its radical potential.

Months went by without seeing or hearing from Victor. One day, I found him drinking in the yard outside the squat with a group of people. After striking up a conversation with him, our attention once again turned to the project to renovate the building. Victor had never shown much interest in the project, and saw it, I think, as an affront to his autonomy. But despite the endless capitulations, I insisted, the barrage of threats and orders from the council, and the uncertainty of the relationship with the owner, the fact the squatters had managed to hold onto the building for two years was worth some recognition. Victor was adamant in his response. Squatters with much less had achieved more in two weeks than the squatters here had in two years. In the time that he had lived in The Black Stag, not one attempt had been made to reach out to locals in the community. Without external support, the goodwill of the owner would eventually run thin. How would the squatters meet rent payments? The question was not if, but when the project would be forced to commercially adapt or fold. Squatting, he argued, was in a constant struggle to resist gentrification. The only radical act left – the purest form of autonomy left over in a world sold by neoliberal ideas, was homelessness. 'It's harder to work a nine-to-five job than it is to be homeless', he explained. 'You have to try to be homeless in the UK'. The homeless were more liberated than the wage slave: they chose where they slept, what drugs they took, and how they took them. 'The old man in the street has no care for waking up early in the morning to go to work'. This was the ultimate expression of a life lived free and with autonomy.

Although Victor's claims to autonomy were highly individualised, they were also *physical* and *gendered*, and should be viewed in terms of a spatial claim to the body as a site for the production of an "autonomous self". As Grohmann (2016: 80-81) writes, among the many vulnerabilities that are endured by squatters, a particular 'spatial vulnerability, stemming from the simple fact that physical bodies are spatial objects and spatiality […] therefore an integral feature of conscious experience', means that the body must be experienced as its own spatiality in order for the production of physical selfhood to work (82). To assert the body as the last site of autonomy, when one's home, environment, and possessions have been stripped away, is to draw a boundary between the self and the physical world, and to assign that which is inside this boundary 'the quality of "internality" or "mineness"' (Grohmann, 2016: 82; Metzinger, 2004: 267). As one of Friedrich's (2005) informants notes, 'the skin is my home, my chance to retreat'. In an environment where everything is public, the body is the only private space to which the squatter can withdraw (Freidrichs, 2005: 178). As soon as violence does cross the threshold of the body, it must become a choice, rather than a structure to be resisted. I "consent" to my homelessness because to do otherwise would be to lose my autonomy, to admit that I have no other choice.

Victor's argument is an extreme example of the autonomist position, one which I don't think is a useful representation of most squatter's attempts to establish a life apart from capitalist society. But it does show, perhaps in more dangerous ways, how this autonomy can assume a particular conception of the body that is uniquely open to young men, and fails to account for a wide range of alternate experiences of racial, abled, and gendered violence in the city. The

experience of the body, not as private or "my own", but as violated, at risk of disproportionate levels of harm, or as an object of criminality and public scrutiny, challenges the taken-for-granted distinction between ourselves and the world around us (Grohmann, 2016: 82; Butler, 2004: 26). As Judith Butler (2004) writes, in *Precarious Life*, while bodily autonomy and self-determination have become a key focus of struggle within so many political movements today, the insistence on a certain discourse of "freedoms" and "rights" to bodily autonomy risks downplaying the extent to which the body is, even before it is experienced as "not mine", inscribed, socially constituted, '[g]iven over from the start to the world' and thus 'bears its imprint' (Butler, 2004: 26). This perhaps takes Victor's autonomy one step further than what it really is: an attempt to give agency and self-determination back to a group of people who have it stripped from them, forcibly, on a daily basis. On the other hand, even where homelessness is for squatters like Victor a choice ("you have to try to be homeless" in a country where housing and social benefits are just one phone call away), this autonomy routinely fails to provide them with adequate alternatives to housing and care: flattening their experiences of violence, and valorizing this violence as a form of self-destruction as transgression and solidarity with the vulnerable

More problematically, Victor positions this autonomy as a radical point of departure at a time when the retraction of state services and the privatization of housing in the UK has actively called for a boycott and sustained retreat from its services. While not outwardly calling for more austerity, Victor's embrace of the privatization of risk choses abandonment as a condition of his (and others) autonomy from the state. The argument that squatting is a choice, rather than a structural violence to be resisted, quickly strips the experience of homelessness of force within a 'neoliberal language game' that sees all risk as the private responsibility of the individual (Povinelli, 2011: 158). By asserting this autonomy as anti-state and anti-power, it allows squatters to remain critical of austerity in a manner that is both antagonistic *and* consonant with it ontologically (Muehlebach, 2009: 496). As Muehlebach writes, a key dynamic of neoliberalism, and part of its persuasive power, is its ability to contain these opposing forces without destroying their oppositional character. Neoliberalism operates, not through the production of a coherent ideology or a stable moral order, but through its ability to incorporate difference, folding leftist ideals and new rightist utopias into a single order, and bringing them into neutral conflict, a healthy antagonism (2009: 495-496). Instead of neutralizing antagonisms, neoliberalism 'nurtures and accentuates them; instead of totalizing or inserting the particulars under the umbrella of a single concept, it permits them to clash and derives its political energy from this enduring standoff' (Marder, 2008: 29-30; Muehlebach, 2009: 499). In this way, squatters are able to participate in the neoliberalization of the welfare state – promoting precarious housing and practices of self-medication that amplify their experiences of marginalization – while contesting it.

Conclusion

While squatters like Victor saw drug use as a form of freedom and self-medication at a time of harsh fiscal austerity, the importance they placed on individual autonomy threatened to reproduce, rather than challenge, neoliberal discourses of freedom of choice and the sovereignty of the individual. As Muehlebach (2009) writes, this is crucial to understanding the large wave of neoliberal successes that have swept across Europe and the world more broadly, which have won support, not through rupture or division, but through their ability to

seamlessly incorporate neoliberal and Left forms without destroying their oppositional character. It is not consent but rather critique that animates citizens to participate in privatization, who see their labour and their bodies, not as exploited or complicit, but as linked to past leftist ideas of solidarity, autonomy, and the withering away of the state (Muehlebach, 2009: 497). It is precisely this indeterminacy, of whether decay is a structural discrimination to be resisted, or part of a new project to be positively embraced in opposition to the mainstream medical establishment, that enables squatters to critique *and* participate in the privatization of care at the same time. These contradictions challenge us to think through the blurry lines of social movements: how resistances to capitalism intersect with and culminate in acute forms of violence and decay, often while advancing seemingly progressive goals.

At its most extreme, autonomy stood for a conviction in "my" way of doing things (Kadir, 2016: 196); it represented the freedom to destroy "myself" and the autonomy to choose how to do it. The refusal to be a victim was taken up as a form of bodily self-destruction as transgression. We squat *because* it hurts, because our bodies are already dying: the fungal infections and dirty clothes are 'visual signifiers of a solidarity with all dirtbags' – a utopia defined by its semi-permanence and 'inevitable collapse' (Broomfield, 2017). Such a politics can give way to moments of utopian and dystopian possibility. For squatters like Jeremy and Will, decay was not just a vector of oppression, but part of the very system of assemblages that gave life to their autonomy. Squatting was both a necessity and a choice, marking their responses with a sense of resignation from society and virtuous creativity in the face of changing conditions (Ferreri and Dawson, 2018: 436). This autonomy emerged in conditions of precarity, but it also saw itself as more than just the effect of these historical circumstances: an appropriation, as much as a constitution, of marginality and decay (Lancione, 2019: 539). As Lancione (2019: 428) writes, decay is never simply inherited; it is always negotiated, and this negotiation produces entanglements that are productive of new experiences, subjectivities, and politics. While squatting can intensify experiences of decay, it also challenges them through its desire for alternatives (Ferreri and Dawson, 2018: 428) and through its demand for recognition as a mode of urban life.

Chapter 3: The new landscapes of autonomy: Occupy and hurricane Katrina

At 1am, on the 14th of June 2012, over a dozen police vehicles silently raced through the streets of London towards the Occupy encampment in Finsbury square – the last remaining Occupy encampment in London, and the longest-running Occupy site in the world. Police, accompanied by another two or three coaches of bailiffs in orange jackets, formed a line around the sleeping protestors and began dragging them from their tents (Squat!net, 2012). One activist recounts a group of Occupiers climbing onto a barricade built on top of wooden pallet houses, fending off police from the safety of the rafters; another from a tree in the centre of the square. By early morning, most of the activists had been evacuated, and 'the human figure in the tree [had] climbed down' (Squat!net, 2012). Images of the emptied camp showed an image of desolation: broken pallets, shelving units that had once stood as part of the library of radical books, now toppled and their contents de-shelved; wires, tents, and food trampled together with needles and human waste. Local newspaper and long-term critic of the movement, the Evening Standard, ran headlines the next morning decrying the "mammoth" scale of the clean-up operation (Blunden, 2012). As contractors moved in to clear the space, the MP for Islington Council declared that the area would once again be returned to "community" use (ITV, 2012). Nineteen lorry loads of waste and several weeks of work later, the square was re-opened to the public. In the months that followed, a brand new installation appeared commemorating the casualties of the Moorgate underground train disaster of 1975, an attempt to gain control of the narrative and to re-assert an 'official urban history' of the space (Burgum, 2018b: 42).

Like Finsbury square, the eviction of the Occupy movement outside St Paul's cathedral several months earlier had precipitated an existential crisis for the movement, as activists faced questions concerning the form and shape of the movement after eviction, and began calling on each other to carry out its ethos in new ways and places (Mathews, 2016: 109). The Finsbury occupation provided a partial response to that provocation, as activists took to the square as a 'last stand of the Occupy movement'. Others denounced the mess and chaos of the site as a 'lost cause' (Burgum, 2018b: xiii), representing a return of the movement to well-trodden ground. While the Finsbury occupation outlived the camps at St Paul's by several months, it also began to catalyse debates around the place of the homeless in the movement, and the responsibility of Occupy to care: to provide for its most vulnerable members while building a political project to confront the banks and "resist effectively" (Burgum, 2018b: 52). Some of the voices most critical of the protests would come, not from outside the movement, but from within it: '[The remaining campers were] the fringes of society', one protestor observed, 'prone to the afflictions of being on the fringes of society … I was quite saddened by what I saw … it was mass alcoholism, drug-taking …it stank of piss, it really did…and I felt a bit sad about that' (Harry in Burgum, 2018b: 52).

Occupy London anticipated a growing concern with questions of movement autonomy, self-sufficiency, and community care. These questions strike at the heart of social movements

across the UK and across the globe more broadly, as activists increasingly work to "occupy" the neoliberal vacuum created by decades of austerity and structural adjustment policies: the gutting of public spending, the shutting down of direct-service provisions, and the privatization and restructuring of the welfare state. This chapter explores a contradictory set of these tensions, between the abandonment of these communities by the state, and the forms of autonomous care that are beginning to emerge in its vacuum. Beginning with a biography of one of the key informants in my fieldwork, Big Tom, the chapter explores his reflections travelling through New Orleans in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina: a zone of simultaneous revival and ruination, as local communities struggled to re-build their homes and neighbourhoods in the absence of coordinated relief or state support. Following Adams (2013), I chart the openings and closures of a late liberal condition in which ordinary people hit hardest by neoliberal policies are being forced to construct alternatives within vast, emerging landscapes of abandonment and decay. While these alternatives offer glimpses of hope for local activists seeking to take back their communities from the state, they are, as Adams (2013) writes, increasingly being enlisted to take on the work of a failing public service sector.

The second part of the chapter uses these tensions as a window into Big Tom's involvement in Occupy London in 2012. As activists pushed the home onto the front-stage of the protest, challenging the separation between public and private, the political and the everyday (Jaleel, 2013), questions about the ability of Occupy to care, to extend space and resources to some of its most vulnerable members appeared to clash with the movement's desire to control appearances and 'avoid being dismissed as "nonsense"' (Burgum, 2018b). As site funds diminished and threats of eviction grew, calls to move from the territory of the "camp" to a broader engagement with the flows and shifting landscapes of City power challenged activists to think Occupy beyond eviction (Mathews, 2016: 109; Crane and Ashutosh, 2013), toward new geographies and terrains of social life. On the other hand, practical questions concerning the movement's homeless population after eviction were seemingly erased or left behind. While anthropologists and geographers were quick to follow the transition of the movement into other spaces (Crane and Ashutosh, 2013), the clearing of the last few activists and homeless from Finsbury square, I argue, calls for a profound reckoning with the ways that this eviction generated a loss: a loss not just of the camps that became many people's homes, but of the networks of solidarity and care that afforded them place and voice in the context of a global social movement.

The refusal of activists like Big Tom to compromise on Occupy's homeless population (Penny, 2012) challenges the commitments of a global social movement to confronting local issues of mental health and housing crisis. On the other hand, the breakdown of planning and the eviction of Occupy's main camps (Mathews, 2016) reveals an ongoing tension between the marginal politics of homelessness in the squatting scene and the desire to connect these experiences with the wider objectives of a global social movement. What, then, would a locally embedded, globally coordinated autonomous movement look like? I interpret Big Tom's subsequent turn to the "neighbourhood" as an attempt to reimagine the critical imaginary of the square, to open it to new forms of organization within and alongside the state. This project can be understood as part of a wider network of place-based occupations – from squats, to mutual aid groups, and community-run services – that are attempting to redefine the city as a 'flexible resource' for political experimentation (Simone in Vasudevan, 2014: 318). These movements challenge us to think the home, the square, and the relations of care that sustain them, not as exceptions to

the city, but as part of the very urban movements they seek to enact. They allow us to ask, not why occupations fail, but under what material conditions they can be assembled and made 'in common' (Vasudevan, 2014: 332).

The politics of abandonment in New Orleans

With the criminalization of squatting residential property in London in 2012, squatting has survived a concerted effort in the UK to outlaw, outpace, and undermine it. Despite opposition from all sides, the scene remains supported by a large network of homeless, students, skilled workers, artists, punks, festival "hippies", partiers, activists, and protestors. These networks extend across the UK and across European and global borders, but also involve tight-knit forms of face-to-face community that, after decades of fending off bailiffs, the media, and research proposals from graduate students, have developed a recalcitrant indifference to most forms of public interest. I expected difficulty when I first approached activists with my research, digging through Facebook groups and email lists sourced via news articles and old activist blogs. But within the first few weeks of talking back-and-forth between local protest organizations I was put in contact with members of The Black Stag and offered a place in their guestroom. Through my conversations with activists at The Black Stag, I learned that Occupy had left a deep impression on the squatting scene in 2012. It was not hard to see the recent wave of anti-squatting legislation (announced a month prior to Occupy London) as an attempt to enforce the ongoing commodification of housing at a time when many people were looking for radical alternatives (Vasudevan, 2017). For a number of my participants, Occupy was the place where they had first developed a political critique or learned to squat. This was true for Big Tom, a tall, twenty-nine year old squatter – one of my closest informants in The Black Stag, and the closest person to an "authority" figure in the building, insofar as he was the first person squatters sought out with matters concerning the group as a whole.

Big Tom was born into a working-class family on the south coast of England, where he drifted in and out of schools until the age of 8, before settling with his family in a small, waterfront town off the coast of England. His first exposure to radical politics was through music. Folk, punk rock, and protest songs offered an escape and an alternative morality to the 'backwards conservatism' of the small-town residents around him: people, he explained, who worked for money and spent money to work. A popular beach spot for celebrities to sail their yachts and watch the annual regatta, its tourist hotspots were juxtaposed with rows of ghettos and poor estates, soaring crime rates, and five prisons spread across the island – including a maximum-security penitentiary to which England sent some of its worst sex offenders. Now, Big Tom remarked, the island was 'slowly corroding itself into the sea'. With rising waters, coastal erosion and periodic flooding were intensifying. Sea defenses that once stood as bulwarks of economic prosperity were beginning to fail. And if there was any hope of getting off that sinking ship, the crossing to the English mainland remained, mile-for-mile, one of the most expensive on the planet.

After being left by his parents to earn his own way through college – never being one for asking, and his parents 'never really being the type of people to give' – Big Tom spent his early twenties working and travelling cheaply across the US, where he eventually fell into the festival circuit in New Orleans and visited the studios of some of his favourite political bands. That trip, he remarked, ended up being, not just an opportunity to see the bands that had given him a political education, but:

> Big Tom: '…a chance to see how they squatted down there. After hurricane Katrina, basically every alternative in the US descended on the place, from hippies, to crusties, to metalheads, and got to work rebuilding the city. It was like Mecca for anyone remotely alternative. I'd heard all this music, seen The Fest, and got to know a big swathe of that scene, from bands all over the state, to everyone that had road tripped down with as many people as they could, or jumped trains, or got flights from fuck knows where all over the globe and all over America. It was so empowering to meet so many people that were of the same ethos. And then to go to New Orleans and see how those people *operate a city*, the entire lower side of it that got wiped out by Katrina, was essentially, was like something out of Mad Max. It was incredible.'

Big Tom's descriptions of post-Katrina New Orleans offer a radical contrast to the accounts of loss that dominated media coverage of the crisis in the weeks after the disaster. Although hurricane Katrina had devastated 80% of the city, and seen a decline in total population of up to half (Irazabal and Neville, 2007: 131-132), local recovery efforts presented an opportunity for 'alternative visions for housing and economic justice and human rights frameworks to be heard' (Casper-Futterman, 2011: 7). In the absence of external aid, citizens took to the streets to rebuild their homes and their communities. The emergence of neighbourhood collectives and grassroots planning groups across the city formed a 'low-intensity citizens revolution' that was said to have already begun to topple 'some of the old structures that had helped cement pre-storm New Orleans in poverty and despair' (Nossiter, 2006; Irazabal and Neville, 2007) . Those structures, like the public schools, had seen a transfer of two-thirds of students into the hands of parents and neighbourhood communities, while responsibilities typically exercised by the state –clean-up operations, the running of public facilities and parks – fell under the control of local citizen activists (Nossiter, 2006).

For Big Tom, New Orleans offered, not just an image of abandonment and decay in the aftermath of Katrina, but an empowering of communities to construct lived alternatives in the absence of real efforts to do so by the state. As national relief efforts were delayed, and the press turned its attention away from New Orleans to coverage of the Iraq war and the presidential election campaign (Robinson, 2009), local neighborhoods launched their own planning alternatives, complete with surveys, social media services, and plan and section view drawings of new proposed districts. Common Ground Relief Collective, a community health clinic started by former Black Panther activist, Malik Rahim, quickly expanded its mission to include the distribution of legal resources, salvaging homes, and research on soil quality and environmental toxicology (Adams, 2013: 156). Accounts of those working on the ground were filled with stories of spontaneous self-organization and meetings in the streets, with over 300 grassroots planning networks, not-for-profits, and neighborhood committees registered in August, 2006 (Irazabal and Neville, 2007: 140-141). Local communities mobilized in spite of the lack of intervention from the federal government, and the "mass evacuations" of the professional classes, doctors, and psychiatrists: those who could afford, unlike many of the city's poor, to leave (Nossiter, 2006).

These activists and volunteers fueled the growth of a political movement committed to addressing previous inequalities and injustices. They channeled public recognition toward local struggles and re-directed private-sector funding to efforts to rebuild communities that had otherwise been 'slated for abandonment' (Adams, 2013: 158). In this sense, the contributions of activists during the recovery and the relations of care they facilitated between nieghbourhoods and communities cannot be understated. While many activists made practical

efforts to protect and rebuild, other not-for-profits and neighbourhood committees 'emerged to fill a vacuum created by preexisting gaps in infrastructure in various public sectors, from health care to education' (Adams, 2013: 156). These organizations…

> '[…] revealed an ongoing antagonism and mistrust of local and regional government, and they embraced the private sector as a radical and plentiful alternative to what they saw as the social, governmental neglect of the poor and underresourced sectors of the city. In other words, these types of organizations were a response to what were seen as governmental failures to protect citizens. Rather than calling for better government policies, these groups were turning to the private sector to solve their problems' (Adams, 2013: 158).

In her ethnography of the recovery effort in New Orleans, Adams oscillates between stories of revival and ruination. On one hand, she writes, the rise of private-sector organizations allowed social justice groups to embrace new opportunities for growth, recognition, and fiscal support (Adams, 2013: 158); key structures that enabled them to continue to deliver relief and mitigate long-term harm within communities hit worst by the disaster. On the other hand, such groups found themselves in competition for funding alongside other not-for-profit businesses, government subcontractors, and NGOs. Public-private partnerships provided opportunities for community organizations to gain recognition within a growing market of private services – but in order to qualify funding, were often forced to adopt organizational structures aimed at turning needy communities 'into sites for entrepreneurial growth and profit-making, even though […] such practices excluded large numbers of potentially worthy recipients' (Adams, 2013: 167). Organizations like the International Coaching Federation (ICF) acted as a firewall between government and citizens, drawing faith-based and community initiatives into a tributary structure of profit and free labour. The government became 'a partisan bystander – a sort of sleeping partner' to a set of institutions 'governed almost entirely by private-sector business and corporate principles' (Adams, 2013: 168). What was remarkable about New Orleans, Adams writes, was not just the growth of public-private partnerships, but the increasing reliance on such partnerships to deliver essential public services (Adams, 2013: 166).

Edwards (2015) traces some of the catastrophic effects of these partnerships: the breakdown of communication between private, state, and federal agencies, the lack of adequate training and preparation, the obstruction of relief efforts by FEMA, and the spread of misinformation that led to a 'general confusion over mission assignments, deployments, and command structure'. Public-private schemes like the Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) were, as late as 2011, still absorbing tens of millions of state funding to operate. By 2013, the HMGP had disbursed '$81 million of the $750 million in its budget. Only 8 percent of the approved 37,000 home mitigation projects had been paid' (Adams, 2013: 182). Such programs were rife with corruption and contractor fraud. Adams tells the story of family who, after arranging $100,000 of repairs through HMGP on a home they were told they had to elevate – nearly one year later, were informed they did not qualify for financial assistance and would 'have to return the $20,000 [they] had received' (Adams, 2013: 184). Now shouldering the debt of repairs on a home they could no longer afford, the father, Grant, began struggling with depression. His wife:

> 'tried to talk with him and told him they'd "get through this." She said to him, "If we got through Katrina, we can make it through this." But […] things deteriorated faster and faster. Grant became manic about little things. He started mowing the lawn obsessively. He was in a constant state of agitation. He kept talking about how angry he was about the HMGP settlement. One afternoon, as his wife was taking their

> youngest child to the doctor and while their oldest child was upstairs watching her sister, Grant went into his basement and shot himself (Adams, 2013: 184).

These stories of suffering and loss challenge the narratives of recovery for many residents who lost their homes to flooding, who some five years after the disaster were still awaiting emergency payments that never came. The tent encampments of the Duncan Plaza "Homeless Pride" occupations that emerged in 2008 highlighted an ongoing tension between the abandonment of these communities by the state, and the politics of autonomy that emerged in its vacuum – a tension that would return again in the 2011, as Occupy activists took to the plaza alongside groups of the homeless to provide necessary protection from the elements *and* spaces of political critique of the housing crisis (Feldman, 2004: 141; Casper-Futterman, 2011: 66). This elision of autonomy and abandonment, protest and care, captures an important dynamic in Occupy movements across the Global North and South (Ishkanian and Glasius, 2018), as activists turned to practical questions concerning the management and maintenance of the camps: access to electricity, the creation of food distribution networks, and the opening of centres to provide clothing, books, and hot meals for the vulnerable (2018: 540). While Occupy activists in Greece mobilized their protest alongside a responsibility to care – not just to provide space and food, but to teach others 'how to fight for their rights themselves' and 'support [their] self-organizing' (2018: 539), in London, the place of homeless in the movement appeared to clash with a desire to move beyond the moment of the square: to carry the protest forward in new ways and places.

The Occupy London movement

After returning from a second trip to the US in 2011, with little money and few job prospects, Big Tom moved to London with a friend and began working in a pub. The next few months, he explained, felt like a gradual letting-go of the forms of political community and creative organization that had been made possible in New Orleans. New Orleans, for Big Tom, had called for the radical proliferation of autonomy in all aspects of social life. It had challenged communities to think politics beyond protest, to broaden an understanding of what it meant to be political in the here and now. What would it mean to understand politics as predicated, not just on protest, but on the construction of schools, workplaces, and houses? Not on the public, but on the private? Not on floods, but on the hard work of re-building after apocalypse?

One evening while Big Tom was at work, news broke that Occupy Wall Street – a protest he was closely following through his contacts in the US – had reached London:

> Big Tom: 'At the time I'd been talking to people about Occupy and Wall Street online and what had been going on. I wanted to go [to the US] but obviously was abroad and had no money. And then one morning, up on the big wide-screen TV at work, at like 10 in the morning or something horrendous […] one of the reporters mentioned "Occupy", and I was like, "what?", suddenly ignoring anything that's going on in the pub around me and any work I might be doing, and I was fucking *hooked*. And I remember, it was Steve, bald guy with classes leading the tech tent, and he was speaking on the BBC telling people to come down. And I was watching the site get taken, fucking so excited. Occupy in England? I wanted to go immediately, hoping to see a bit of what's going down in the US happening here.'

Looking at the following week's roster, which had him off five days in a row, Big Tom went home, packed his bags, and left for Occupy. Low wages and infrequent shifts meant that, 'even

if I did return to work after those five days, I *still* would have been homeless'. Armed with the conviction that there was more of a future with Occupy than in this dead-end job, Big Tom 'left to investigate the protests, and when my five days off work were up, I just continued squatting'. Although he had participated in some small housing squats prior to Occupy, it wasn't until 2012 that Big Tom became a full-time squatter. The 2011 Occupy protests served as a formal introduction to the London squatting scene, and an injunction to never go back:

> Big Tom: A lot of people I know now ended up going through Occupy or being involved in Occupy and then becoming squatters. It was a financial protest aimed at the *everyman*. It wasn't for the lefties against "them", it wasn't for the vegans…it was cab drivers, bankers, teachers, professors, doctors, everyone that was being hit by cuts, everyone that was losing out on their jobs, everyone that wasn't able to pay a mortgage, everyone that was sick and tired of seeing fat cats getting paid big tickets, they all came out. So it was just this really broad spectrum of different people from different worlds. And then yeah, a lot of people didn't go back to that life, after sitting in a tent for 9 months fighting about how corruption is bad, going back to work and putting on your chains isn't the first thing on your to do list.'
>
> Me: 'So you knew a few people who worked previously and then became squatters?'
>
> Big Tom: 'I was one of them [laughs]. So was "Little" Tom [a prefix used to identify squatters in the community who share the same name], who started this building with me, him also, he was a door-to-door salesman. Little Mike was studying politics in university, but had watched too much *Keiser Report* on Russia Today and never went back. I know loads of people who were average joes until Occupy happened.'
>
> Me: 'And what are they doing now?'
>
> Big Tom: 'Squatting, or travelling, or activist routes, or artists, musicians. They decided to find their true calling rather than go back to work.'

For Big Tom and others, mobilized by news of the protests in the US and through left-wing news sources like *The Kieser Report*, the terrain of political possibility opened up by Occupy created a rupture, a point of no return and a branching out of political possibilities that rendered previously stable futures obsolete. The idea of a "return" to work after Occupy for Big Tom implied a surrender of political principles and a reversal of the forms of political autonomy discovered through the movement. His narrative was one of radicalization, brought on by an exposure to the forms of community and participatory democracy that had emerged in the wake of the Katrina disaster – and strengthened through an encounter with the direct-action politics of the Occupy movement; its forms of community solidarity, de-centralized decision-making processes, and the promise of a new social order (Razsa, 2015; Razsa and Kurnik, 2012). Occupy, captured in the slogan "Occupy everywhere", rallied the "everyman" as an object of struggle, and where the barrier between inside and outside, public and private, political life and normal life began to break down, a new common humanity – the "99%" – began to emerge (Dowling et al., 2012: 608).

Over the period of Christmas 2011-2012, Big Tom played a crucial role in the opening of the second Occupy London camp in Finsbury square, and participated in a nearby squatted office complex, the Bank of Ideas, for three months, where he learned to squat, and which he added excitedly, was the old office of the 'Nazi gold bank' UBS just over the road from their new

head-office. In Big Tom's descriptions of the protests, he articulated the appeal of Occupy in terms of a practice of squatting that featured heavily in the culture and strategy of the movement. This ongoing collaboration between squatters and occupy activists, and the turn to occupying buildings as an alternative to the occupation of the squares, represented a 'substantive, self-confident territorial shift' for a movement facing its eviction (Mathews, 2016: 108). As legislation to criminalise squatting in residential property made its way through parliament in 2011, government ministers lined up to 'denounce [Occupy] protestors as mere "squatters"' (Vasudevan, 2014: 317). This elision of squatting and Occupy highlighted the legal discourses that dominated the media's coverage of the protests leading up to the eviction of the main camp outside St Pauls cathedral in February 2012. But it also brought into view the complementary nature of the two strategies, as Occupy protestors increasingly relied on the knowledge and expertise of squatters in opening up buildings to house members from evicted sites (Mathews, 2016: 108). Techniques commonly seen in squats: the sharing of space, food and resources, and the ethics of do-it-yourself activism and mutual aid (Lopez, 2012: 870), were characteristic themes in the emerging anthropological literature on Occupy (Juris and Razsa, 2012; Juris, 2012; Nugent, 2012; Razsa, 2015). The movement of the camps into empty buildings was consistent with a wider belief that Occupy should work as a 'generalized mode of action' with a certain global, dynamic, and creative capacity to extend (Mathews, 2016: 108).

Nevertheless, the positive valences of autonomy and care that Big Tom did briefly describe – in terms of his own experience living alongside protestors from various backgrounds, from plumbers and electricians, to homeless people, academics, finance workers and journalists – were contrasted with the power struggles and class tensions that continued to be refracted within the movement. Despite its obvious influence on him, Big Tom was deeply critical of Occupy London and its constraints. 'Squalitics' (infighting, and cynicism) were rampant, he explained, as he relayed stories to me of ideological division, the splintering of political groups into liberal factions, middle-class co-optation, and the mishandling of resources and finances by third party interests:

> Big Tom: Occupy lost very quickly the focus it started with. It was working…funnily enough, the whole thing worked in a really 1% kind of way. I was trying to explain this to someone earlier, in that it wanted to attack the top, but all it did was chip the top off of a really corroded pyramid. Within the first two months of Occupy London starting we had 36,000 pounds in a bank account, it dwindled away and it stopped coming. If me and my friends who were on site actually had our way we would have taken that money, gone to Tower Hamlets, one of the poorest boroughs, or any other borough, and then found every grandma that wanted a living room repainted and gone to paint recycling places and just started buying masses of paint, and then sending the 400 people out who probably were painters and decorators and had done all sorts of tradesman jobs, and just going and fucking beautifying loads of poor people's houses. The bank account would have carried on filling up and we could have stayed there exponentially until something happened.'

For Big Tom, these conflicts expressed a deeper crisis of identity within the movement, as its core targets – the banks, oil companies, and corrupt politicians – dissolved behind questions of movement identity, group cohesion, and the sustainability of the camps. Big Tom's vision to retake the city with paint and decorations, to beautify the homes and gardens of elderly people reduced to poverty after the financial crisis, underscored a desire to reconnect the local feel of the protests to the global objectives of the Occupy movement.

> Big Tom: When the St Paul's relocation didn't land, on Paternosters square on the other side of the exchange, we took Finsbury square. It was more, it was right banking district, right in their faces outside their offices in their park where they would normally go have lunch. If they wanted to come and sit in the sun they were going to have to talk to us. So my first priority there was, cos a lot of us had moved there and there was far too much separation going on. There were a lot of banners, but they weren't unified. So we went around and took all the banners down, repainted the whole lot as "Occupy Everywhere", which was the name of the main website. If you went [to the website] it would give you a global map and show you all of the occupations, and you could click Occupy London from there and it would go "bloop", fall straight into the Occupy London scene. You'd have to go through the global front to find the local one. All of the sites were in black, white and red, but there was nothing black, white or red about anything in London's sites. We were using oranges and greens. So we changed everything to red, whites and blacks, which was the website's colours. Globally, it was the colour scheme they all adopted.

As Mathews (2016) writes, in his ethnographic account of the Occupy London movement, these calls for unity constructed an imaginary 'counter-hegemonic bloc against the rule of "the one percent"', working as a 'radical call to arms' for the various groups and individuals being attracted to the movement (2016: 142). But the organization of protestors under a single, unified 'front', with refrains of "the 99%" and the "voice of the people", also risked subsuming difference, creating a practice blind to inequality and the race, class, and gender-based oppressions operating in broader society and within the movement. Indigenous critics of the movement in the US would increasingly call into question the strategy of territorial appropriation as a distinct alternative to the colonial logics of the settler state (Grande, 2013). For those who were young, disaffected, unemployed, and/or homeless, Occupy did impart a new sense of historical agency tied to the inclusion of these groups within 'a politics they had long supported but not found a way of participating in' (Mathews, 2016: 143). However, strategic questions concerning the handling of camp funds, representations of protestors in the media, and the treatment of the camps as projects of home-making or as bases for coordination, largely fell outside the remit of this vision of unity.

Big Tom's retelling of events sits within a contradictory set of tensions between the desire to grasp a real sense of praxis and solidarity with the global Occupy movement as "one" people, while remaining critical of the failure of Occupy London to remain radically committed to the particular, local groups it was supposed to represent. As professional and middle-class workers were increasingly attracted to Occupy, Big Tom identified a shift in narrative within the movement, from a protest for the victims of the financial crisis against the banks, to a movement that could and should accommodate a growing range of political networks and identities:

> Big Tom: 'The Americans definitely got it a lot more on the nail, in that it was a protest about financial corruption. It was more specifically targeting Wall Street, whereas in England the message became kind of diluted. It was as if the only way to move forward was to give weight to every side. Everyone had their own banner, everyone was fighting for their own thing, so we were weakened. Even though we were all in the same place together, doing the same thing together, everyone was flying different colours, and that showed weakness rather than solidarity.'

He continued:

> ‘People were coming out to join in the political conversation because they were writers or professors, or they worked for the banks, and they wanted to get involved in like, the occupation, which is what Occupy was about, it was about taking to the streets and holding space so that people could communicate with us. But the others who came from the outside brought a different agenda. They thought the sites were a waste of space, or they were just becoming a haven for the homeless. But they…it’s a classic example. Most of the homeless were in jobs before the financial crisis. One drunk we were living with, we got him sober for a week and managed to get a straight conversation out of him. He used to work for like, Apple, fixing iPhones and stuff and working in their labs in the UK. And he’d just take their phones apart, take the names of screws, swap out batteries, change the screens. No problem. But his branch got shut down. Apple decided they could make more money by cutting back that factory. He lost his job. Done. [He] was military, couldn’t go back to living in houses after so much military service, and they just dropped him on his face, didn’t give him any help. We had people working for banks, we had people who were builders, self-employed contractors completely out of work because there wasn’t any to be had - if you saw them as a problem for the Occupy site, well, they were the exact reason we were there.

The efforts of those within the movement to include a range of voices had the effect of “diluting” the core objectives of the protests. The “global” disappeared behind nebulous conceptions of identity and self-reflexivity at a time when it was precisely this impetus to act and to engage in forms of direct action that had given momentum to the occupations in the first place.

As camp funds diminished and questions of movement sustainability and “what was to be done next” began to dominate the political conversation, Big Tom saw the downfall of Occupy in the gradual loss of focus on the stories of victims of the financial crisis. The presence of homeless – those hit hardest by the financial crisis and subsequent austerity – was taken up as part of a widespread media campaign to undermine and delegitimize the camps. In the court case that would hand down the final eviction notice to the St Paul’s occupation, the City of London corporation cited concerns of safety, sanitation and vandalism (The Guardian, 2016), with references in the media to odour problems, an increase in fire hazards, and the ‘spread of rats’ (Kelly, 2011; Daily Mail Reporter, 2011). This exclusion was biopolitical: it appealed to systems of understanding that reproduced homeless bodies outside of what was perceived to be productive, acceptable, or in “good taste” (Giles, 2018: 114). That the St Paul’s occupation had attracted large numbers of homeless people was a reminder that the protests ‘[did] not stand apart from the very society they…emerged from to transform’, (Dowling et al., 2012: 610).

But, as Big Tom notes, the homeless were not just excluded by the media and the broader public commentary around Occupy, but the politics of Occupy itself, and the distribution of labour and resources that made re-producing that vision possible. In London, this became known as “the homeless problem” (Penny, 2012) or “homeless question” (Burgum, 2018b: 51; Penny, 2012), a term emanating from the Wall Street protests in the US to describe an ongoing set of tensions between the politics of care within the movement and the desire to “resist effectively” and control appearances for the sake of being taken seriously. In London, this became:

> ‘one of the main points of contention that accelerated the fracturing of the movement […], with some seeing the provision for those in need as distracting from their protest activity by directing scarce resources away from direct action, and others seeing the movement as rooted in such questions of social justice and provision for those suffering under the very system they were protesting against (Burgum, 2018b: 51).

Burgam's interlocuters contrast the beginning of Occupy London Stock Exchange (LSX) with the transition of the movement to the more popular "Occupy London". What had started as a unified but diverse set of occupations against the banks became increasingly concerned with questions over movement identity and programs of "inclusivity for the sake of it". Paradoxically, these programs tended to privilege the voices of educated, middle-class voices in GA meetings, while shutting down the efforts of marginal groups to intervene (Burgum, 2018b: 65-72). The more that strategies of inclusion began to dominate the political conversation, the more vulnerable the movement became to unequal distributions of authority and voice (Burgum, 2018b: 70). Efforts to include professional workers and university students as "equals" meant that homeless voices were increasingly excluded from the conversation in favour of educated speakers. This allowed Occupy to 'appear and make noise with relative impunity and with less risk of reprisal' from the broader public, favouring strategies that appeared inclusive while foreclosing the possibility of a radical inclusion of marginal groups (Burgum, 2018b: 71). That the homeless question was increasingly articulated as a problem of resource distribution and movement longevity seemed to suggest that their presence, in the eyes of urban authorities, the public, and protestors, could no longer be rationalized or reasonably sustained. For Big Tom, this suggested something more fundamental about the limits of Occupy, and by extension, squatting itself:

> Big Tom: '[People saw Occupy] as a breeding ground for homeless people, which to be honest it was. It was probably 2/3rds homeless. It was always a difficulty on the sites dealing with the homeless, and like, trying to find balance between being a protest site, and actually trying to make a point, and being a homeless shelter. It goes back to squats because there's always...it's always, are you taking this squat as a protest? Have you got a basis? Is there an ethos behind this building? Or are you just wanting to pack, sack and rack homeless people? Is it a housing crisis issue, or is it a systemic crisis issue? Do I wanna deal with the fact that there are so many homeless, or do I wanna deal with the fact the state can't deal with the fact that there are so many homeless?'

Beyond occupation

After Occupy's eviction from city centres around the world, anthropologists and geographers traced the movement's legacies and political lessons. Crane and Ashutosh (2013) argue that Occupy's subsequent disappearance and "return home" from its sites of occupation offers an important insight into the ebb and flow of social movements, their journey through contested urban centres, and back to familiar space. Rather than signaling an end to the movement, the *return home* opens up familiar terrains to struggle through which "hoped-for" futures might be lived on (Crane and Ashutosh, 2013: 168; Haraway et al., 1995: 514). In the US, the debates that emerged in the wake of the Occupy evictions in New York once again turned to the movement's long-term aims and goals. The eviction of activists from Zuccotti park and other cities across the US represented a major setback for a movement that had become increasingly reliant on the logic of place-based occupation. But rather than theorizing the home as a space "without politics" to which Occupy made its return, Crane and Ashutosh argue that the return home must be understood through the ongoing 'place-based transformations that frustrate taken for granted spatial distinctions like public/private, inclusion/exclusion, and movement/settlement' (Crane and Ashutosh, 2013: 168). Going home throws the supposed fixity of place into relief: through taking the movement home, activists produce new material and imagined geographies, but also collapse and resurrect old ones, shifting between scales of

struggle that disrupt the common-sense notion that the protest ends when the demonstration is over.

Similarly, in Kadir's (Kadir, 2016) ethnography of a squatters movement in Amsterdam, the home is represented as the primary stage of politics, rather than a "back-stage" to which the "front-stage" makes its return. In contrast to the ruptures and spectacular events that transform history, Kadir's (2016: 8) ethnography re-asserts the importance of the back-stage in advancing larger movement goals. What appears on the front-stage to be spontaneous, improvised, and without historical predicate, is often the result of painful and meticulous attention to detail on the back-stage; activist meetings, reading groups, public lectures, and planning sessions. While open-days, eviction resistances, and protests, serve as performative interactions with an outside (consisting of the state, media, and public) these events also serve to 'compile' capital on the movement's back-stage, encouraging activists to live and breathe the ideals they perform on the outside, and advancing them toward their realization as autonomous activists (Kadir, 2016: 8).

As Feigenbaum et al (2013: 74) write, Occupy, perhaps more than any other protest movement in recent history, troubled the distinction between public and private, front and back-stage, by making the home the primary stage of protest. In this sense, the clearing of the last camps from Finsbury square represented not just a final call to retire the pickets and return home, but an eviction of activists and homeless who had come to inhabit the camps as home, and as spaces of critique of the "home" – as private, walled-off from political and economic life, and as the primary space of social reproduction and care labour. The increasing reliance of activists and homeless on the camps meant that the eviction of the squares was more than just a clearing out of protestors: it was, importantly, a '*state-backed enclosure that left Occupy and Occupiers bereft of a home'* (Jaleel, 2013). Eviction was 'always a counterpoint to [the] occupation itself, and one of its defining dimensions'(Mathews, 2016: 114). In the panic that followed the loss of the initial occupation outside St Paul's, there was a sense that Occupy London, however global, mobile, and dynamic, still largely existed in the moment of the square. Activists across the world were quick to downplay the significance of the evictions, with chants of 'you can't evict an idea' ringing through the streets (Jaleel, 2013: 1). But this resulted in a 'poverty of planning' for the event itself, as Occupy could no longer agree what the movement would look like without the guiding logic and daily rhythms of the camp (Mathews, 2016: 113-114).

In the days leading up to the evictions at Finsbury square, Big Tom was approached by a group of activists from the direct-action camp and invited to move to a squat nearby. This would become a catalyst for a number of secondary occupations (party squats, squat centres, and "crack dens") that would occur over the following months, as Big Tom and others sought to resume a practice of occupation after the criminalization of squatting (some three months after their eviction from Finsbury square). Big Tom's first crew, a group of squatters and activists below the age of 22, dubbed "Orphans of Occupy" by local press, took a series of commercial buildings in central London. Drugs, raves, and squat parties served as an escape from the intensity of the political atmosphere at Occupy. But this experience would also mark for Big Tom a growing discontent with the youth politics of autonomy, and what he saw to be a "retreat" of the Occupy movement onto the back-stage of the squatter's movement. The breakdown of Occupy and the failure of activists to sustain the movement after the closure of Finsbury square had a profound influence on his perception of the squatting scene, insofar as squatting was no longer enough.

> Big Tom: '[Occupy] was like, it was heavy duty. It was amazing, it wasn't fluffy in any way shape or form. Which also gave us a certain maturity when we did leave there. Even though we were so young we'd been around so much stuff and seen so much stuff and heard so many people's stories, we came out of it a lot more rough and ready, and from there we started taking large scale buildings in central London and housing as many people as possible. But now, half the crew, they say squatting alone is protest enough. They say that having a squat in itself is a protest, but I consider that them lying to themselves.

Heavy drug use, addiction, and the youth politics of autonomy became a threat, not just to the forward movement of Occupy, but to squatters themselves.

> 'All of the progress that had been made [at Occupy], a lot of it, 5 years down the line, seeing the people who I was living with who I knew at Occupy turn into a really weird sort of Lord of the Flies psychosis, where they hadn't really been around many people other than in their own circles for ages, and they had all deluded each other into oblivion. You had people with money paying people within squats to do menial tasks for them for a bit of cash, which they then in turn spent on weed or alcohol, because it's not enough to do anything substantial with, and it just perpetuates a circle that prevents creativity, really. And then on top of that, a heavily politically minded ethos, because of Occupy or being around protestor type squats, but without ever having the energy or skills to do something. It got quite sick, to be honest.

For Big Tom, the withdrawal of activists and squatters from the spaces of Occupy into non-residential buildings stripped the productive elements of community from the movement, failing to challenge wider societal structures or offer viable alternatives. As the laws to criminalize squatting came into effect, some three months after their eviction from Finsbury square, activists turned to drugs, raves, and parties; the very things that immiserated them. Big Tom's account mirrors fears emerging from within the Occupy London movement that the remaining camps at Finsbury square were becoming 'plagued by violence, alcoholism, drug (ab)use', and homelessness (Burgum, 2018b: 52). Attempts by protestors on the ground to distance Finsbury square from the original St Paul's occupation represented a struggle over the right to define and interpret the movement, to preserve a memory of the movement's "better days".

But the homeless were, for Big Tom, the defining image of the Occupy London protests, even as the labour and resources necessary to house such a population came to be perceived as a threat to the unity of the movement. "We are the 99%" became a universalism that excluded homeless voices and ultimately failed to re-direct the energies of the global Occupy movement into a coalition of local struggles around homelessness or addiction. This also marked, for Big Tom, a growing tension between Occupy as protest *and* social service, movement *and* shelter. On one hand, the turn to squatting represented a refusal to part with the lived, embedded experience of an autonomy in which new relations of care for the homeless, and new networks of solidarity with the vulnerable could become the basis for a global social movement. But the retreat of activists from questions of movement organization to the 'militant particularism' of squatting (Harvey and Williams, 1995) represented, in similarly problematic ways, a surrender of the possibility that this autonomy could have political import beyond local struggles for housing and mental health. As Harvey and Williams write, militant particularism claims 'that the defense and advancement of certain particular interests […] are in fact the general interest'

(Williams, 1989: 249). Ideals 'forged out of the affirmative experience of solidarities in one place get generalized and universalized as a working model of a new form of society that will benefit all of humanity' (Harvey and Williams, 1995: 83). The difficulty of building a movement on such experience is that:

> 'because it [begins] as local and affirmative, assuming an unproblematic extension from its own local and community experience to a much more general movement, it is always insufficiently aware of the quite systematic obstacles which [stand] in the way' (Williams, 1989: 115).

While the squatting scene had, for some, provided a necessary refuge for those who lost their homes in Finsbury square, it also failed to answer several key problematics that had been posed to the Occupy movement after its eviction. If eviction is the counter logic to Occupy, what would it look like to imagine occupy beyond eviction? What would it mean to take seriously Occupy's injunction to reclaim the home as a space of common struggle: to question where, how, with, and *on whom* do we build our homes (Jaleel, 2013: 3)? And what are the limits of a movement for equality and "for the 99%" that is, itself, disproportionately homeless and unequal?

Conclusion

These questions remained, for Big Tom, point of inspiration, a call to further action, a limit of possibility, and an enduring critique of the politics of occupation. Mayer (2013b: 7) writing in the context of the US on movements like "Occupy the 'hood!'", describes some of the ways squatters and Occupy activists after their eviction from city centres 'fanned out into the neighbourhoods' to reclaim abandoned properties, scaling up local struggles and turning them into regional movements against the banks. There are some parallels here with Razsa's (2015) account of activists in Zagreb, who, in the months after the 2003 counter-summit protests in Thessaloniki, turned their energies to squatting and freeshops, allowing them 'to reach out to a broader public, engaging their neighbours in viable alternatives rather than primarily expressing their refusal of the existing system and authorities' (Razsa, 2015: 130). Rather than looking inward for an emancipatory politics, activists expanded their struggles outward into the neighbourhood, putting their knowledge and expertise in the service of concrete actions: eviction resistances, disruptions of auctions at foreclosed houses, and occupations of refurbished homes. Through these actions, 'new connections [were] forged between the Occupy movement and community-based groups', and participants increasingly saw themselves as 'part of national and international movements' (Mayer, 2013b: 7).

Occupy London expanded the space of the home beyond the private, bringing an ethics and labour of care into the streets and challenging the family as the 'natural and socially transmissible site of care work' by opening its doors to those who were presumed to dwell beyond it (Jaleel, 2013: 4-5). This politics of care directly draws from feminist and queer critiques of the home, not just as a site of potential destruction and dysfunction, but as a site of care that extends beyond the family, the household, and the privatized domestic labour on which capitalism depends. As Jaleel (2013) writes, Occupy reformulated what home occupations could be by painting a 'public portrait of home as a movement'. It insisted that 'how we live, who does what work, and who suffers what kinds of abuse [should be] on full display' (Jaleel, 2013: 7), and that this lived experience could become the radical basis for a

new, global social movement. Such a movement could be glimpsed in New Orleans, as the political landscape opened up by Katrina saw new solidarities being forged between neighbourhoods, and new skills and tactics were directed into local struggles for social justice and welfare. Occupy and New Orleans proposed an autonomy against the state, but also an autonomy engaged in forms of state-building where these very structures – of housing, healthcare, and community – had broken down. The very presence of these alternatives challenges us to rethink the city, not just as a space of absolute financialization, but of conflict, struggle, and resistance, in which people come together to make and un-make the urban worlds they live in.

But the presence of homelessness in the Occupy movement, and the scale of the housing crisis being faced by ordinary people in London, foregrounds some of the problems with representing the abandonment and devastation of these communities as somehow politically opportune or desirable. While Occupy offered a glimpse of the forms of autonomous organization that emerged in New Orleans in the aftermath of Katrina, it also became pre-occupied with questions of inclusivity and care that threatened to call away from the antagonistic, anti-corruption, and protest strategies of the movement. As Feigenbaum et al (2013) write, protest camps often emerge 'precisely to take on the limits and failures of the state form', embracing open borders, consensus decision-making, and new ways of distributing resources (228). The risk is that, when care takes over, activists 'may start to engage primarily in social support work instead of focusing on their antagonistic questioning of […] the status quo'(230), dissolving the original outlook of the group behind questions of identity, formal organization, and camp bureaucracy. While these spaces can play a crucial role in the processes of social reproduction that sustain social movements, they can also obscure the very concrete obstacles and external pressures that stand in their way. The eviction of Occupy, and the criminalization of squatting residential property some months later, would call into question the lived, transformative potential of the occupations at a time when it was precisely these spaces that were being put under scrutiny by policy-makers and urban authorities.

For Big Tom, at least, the solution could not be a return to squatting. In the closing minutes of our interview, Big Tom positioned himself against what he identified as an inward, regressive culture of squatting, in the search for new forms of cooperation and new ways of being-in-common with a wider community. He saw squatting and its calls for autonomy as a withdrawal from politics, rather than an opportunity to explore alternative networks of solidarity and self-sufficiency from the state. Occupy became a counterpoint to the youth politics of the squatting scene – a recognition of the strategic versatility of the "99", but also of the failure of squatters to remain accountable to broader social movement goals and to extend that politics onward and outward, into new geographies and new terrains of social life. As I explore in chapter 5, Big Tom's desire to open The Black Stag in cooperation with *Ember* suggests a turn away from squatting "in itself as protest" to an engagement with local groups and small government institutions in more lasting and enduring ways. This discourse of cooperation would have to contend with a group of squatters who had come to see The Black Stag as private and as the intimate space of their home. It would also have to contend with a squatting scene that has, historically, seen itself as radically incommensurate with neoliberal development.

Downsizing Occupy to the neighbourhood and recalibrating its horizons to a local field of struggle would present new obstacles. Given the successive attacks on squatting and its legality, how could squatters play a meaningful role within local communities hit worst by austerity?

Could a turn to organizations like Ember offer a path forward where squatting had not? Understanding the rise of organizations like Ember over the last decade requires close attention to the ways squatting as a practice is being wound through the market and back out again, from an element of alternative lifestyles to an ‘essential ingredient of sub-local regeneration’ (Mayer, 2013a: 12).

Chapter 4: Rekindling the city and "regeneration from below"

On a cold and wintery night in December 2018, I caught the train from London to Portsmouth to visit the Nest Project: a commercial property recently gifted to not-for-profit organisation *Ember*. The building, just a five-minute bus journey from the town centre (or a 30-minute walk at midnight after the bus service closes, I discovered) had been handed over to Ember last month under a 'meanwhile lease' after a series of negotiations with the local council, and under miraculous terms that granted the landlords a full discount on business rates on the property in return for free and unrestricted use of their building.

I arrived to the Nest at 1AM and navigated my way through the yard (which had seen several years of overgrowth, and was filled with the recalcitrant upchuck of previous homeless tenants, addicts, and teenage explorers), two sets of unlocked gates; and after a dusty walk through a series of pitch-black rooms, opened the door into the building's main hall. Inside, two of Ember's directors were at work on the building: John, in his overalls and face-mask, scrubbing the floors with the nose of a vacuum cleaner; and Arnie, filling holes in the walls with polyfiller where workers had previously stripped the building of valuable materials after it had shut down in 2017. On a couch in the corner, Arkady – plumber, electrician, and professional Ember tinkerer – was battling sub-zero degree temperatures with an electric fan heater powered by a bare-bones extension cable running through the building's electrical mains. I dropped my things and took over from Arnie, filling holes with recycled putty to prepare the walls for painting the following day. Arnie explained to me that, because the ceiling tiles had been stripped, there was only a layer of wood and felt between us and the cold air outside. We worked for another hour, hands freezing, breathing ancient dust that had sat dormant in the carpet for over a year, and was so thick there was a round of shared astonishment when we discovered that the floor was carpeted. Eventually someone called it a night. Arnie returned to the closet he had claimed as a bedroom, John pulled up a couch for himself on the stage, and I rolled out my sleeping bag on a pair of red gym mats. We stayed up for another hour talking excitedly about our plans for the Winter Fair on Sunday, envisioning the market stalls spread out in the room around us. I switched off the lights, and we fell asleep huddled in our sleeping bags to the clicking sounds of the fan heater which struggled audibly to keep our corner of the room warm.

When Ember first pitched the Nest to the conservative council in Portsmouth – establishing the terms of use of the building, and the degree of council intervention in it – it became a matter of principle for John that the property rates be waived by the council. A free discount on building rates set a precedent for Ember and its future projects, establishing a "hands-off" approach with the local authorities, a willingness to "fix the books" until the project could be self-financed, and to overlook regulation in the interest of promoting social good. This approach – a condition of Ember, which did not make income from its projects – did not come without some opposition from the cabinet member for resources, who insisted that the money would have to come from somewhere. And yet Ember's insistence on running the project for free seemed to be hitting all the right chords, when, in a surprise turn of events, they were

forced to turn down donation offers from the labour opposition leader that were then matched by the council. It would prove, over the course of my fieldwork, that there was something about Ember that councils just could not turn away. Recycling, re-spacing, and re-using were the fashion *du jour* under austerity, and to the local council, facing budgetary cuts of up to 80% since 2013, it was hard to turn down Ember's three-point pitch. No money exchanged – a derelict space given a new face, on your terms, re-using your waste, to re-build your community, and reduce inequality.

And yet, having become close friends with Ember's directorship during my twelve months of fieldwork, it was still never made clear to me how certain aspects of their projects were financed. Energy bills and property rates seemed to rack-up and dwindle away in accounts never seen or heard from. Health and safety inspectors had a ghostly presence, threatening to close the project down at any moment, but never revealing themselves to hand down a final ultimatum. This ambiguity came with a price when, some months into the end of my fieldwork, Ember were hit with a fine over the running costs of one of their former projects, *Kindle*, which closed in 2017. When I pressed John about this, he admitted that the Ember model wasn't imperfect. Due to a set of practices that were considered partial, without any basis in law or council regulation, the idea was designed to fail, for someone to come along and do it legally, better. Perhaps, I interjected, it was this freedom that made Ember radical in the first place. The housing crisis, combined with growing rates of abandonment and decline in infrastructure had produced a set of solutions that seemed inevitable to the private sector, already seeing the rise of "property guardianships" – promising affordable accommodation to low-income people in poor quality, repurposed housing, marked by exploitative landlord practices and a doubling-back on tenant rights. This begged the question for Ember, with its own identity on the line as an organisation, the growing visibility of empty spaces in London, and a real sense of urgency regarding the housing and environmental crisis. If not us, then whom? And if not now, when?

Building on the arguments laid out in the last chapter, which centered on the rise of private care services in New Orleans, in the vacuum created by neoliberal austerity, this chapter shifts its focus to the UK social sector, and the formal attempts made by Ember to bring the solutions of squatting to a legal (small-government), regulatory framework. The demand for organisations like Ember has accelerated at a time when councils in the UK, hit by extreme austerity conditions over the last decade, have turned to community iniatives as nostrums for urban development and policy making (Ferreri, 2016: 183). Among these initiatives, Ember offers itself as an attractive solution to austerity crisis, with the potential to unite communities under the aegis of small-scale, 'meanwhile' interventions. But high turn-over rates and the tendency of these organizations to remain indefinitely meanwhile, is often downplayed by the same people who, now tuned to the speculative possibilities of "cool cities" and "happening places" (Mayer, 2013a: 11), continue to support and enforce planning retrenchments, subsistence funding, blind-eye regulation, and redundant space (Tonkiss, 2013: 323). How do we reconcile the rise of organisations like Ember with their ongoing struggles against eviction and enclosure? What are the conditions that enable these collective forms of rekindling from below at the very moment that they are fenced-off and shut down?

In the first section of this chapter, I introduce the Embers model, and the conditions that have enabled the model to flourish: the emergence of 'meanwhile contracts' alongside old development orthodoxies (Tonkiss, 2013), and the growing small-government interest in civic networks of regeneration. As well as tracking a shift from autonomy to formal organization

among a group of ex-squatters, what some of my Ember informants termed an 'evolution of squatting', this section raises questions about the role of community initiatives like Ember under neoliberalism at a time when the state is not only attempting to downplay the effects of austerity, but to force a narrative of community autonomy and voluntarism at the heart of these reforms (Muehlebach, 2012: 8).

In the second part of the chapter, I explore some of the localized effects of financial crisis in Portsmouth, UK, and the context in which Ember emerged as an attractive solution to the scarcity thinking imposed by austerity. While the Nest Project offered an opportunity for a number of my informants to rediscover work in a positive light, I situate their narratives within the contradictory regimes of work and labour that governments are increasingly turning to under austerity (Muehlebach, 2009; Muehlebach, 2012) that re-envision disposable populations (pensioners, the unemployed, and unemployable) at the heart of a new, indispensable (unpaid, and unprotected) volunteer workforce. Initiatives like Ember, though embedded in forms of neoliberal governance, reflect a politics of Do-It-Yourself characteristic of the squatting scene. This direct-action pragmatism operates by making small-scale incursions in the urban form, creating lasting impressions through lived experiences of solidarity and community. This does not, however, necessarily solve the impacts of eviction and enclosure that come from operating within these structures of compromise; nor does it necessarily pose a direct challenge to (so much as it attempts to mitigate) the intensification of austerity conditions at a time when the state is looking for alternatives. The chapter concludes by questioning the ability of "meanwhile" spaces to offer effective solutions to "permanent" problems.

Rekindling the city

Ember was first described to me as a way of "thinking", rather than a model, with an emphasis on recycling and reducing waste, in particular *space*, in order to build community engagement through access to broken down, neglected, or disused spaces. Re-building old spaces and hosting local art exhibitions, winter stalls, cooking workshops, indoor skate-parks, yoga, therapy sessions, and lectures, were tools which Ember believed would enable it to address the health impacts of inequality – a belief predicated on the assumption that community is embedded *spatially*, and that there is, fundamentally:

> John: '…a need for space in London, a need for legislation that makes it easier for groups to be able to use those spaces, and a need for clarity, in terms of the impenetrability of government documentation, and the difficulty for communities to directly communicate without space.'

In its pilot project, *Kindle* – an empty office-block gifted to Ember under the terms of a 'meanwhile' lease (until the property was sold off or brought back into commercial use), Ember leaned heavily on the skills of its directors – John (45), Nadia (32), Arnie (53), Arkady (48), and Anna (36) – who had, between them, accumulated decades of experience throwing squat parties and underground events. Anna, one of two female directors at Ember, and a live-in volunteer at one of its ongoing projects in London, described the importance of underground culture to Ember, and its influence on their approach to building community in empty spaces:

> Anna: 'John and I, we used to do events […] before Ember, before Kindle, when we were still squatting. The whole idea was to create a platform for underprivileged artists

> and musicians and facilitate the spaces for events and bring live music, performance art, burlesque, exhibitions, fashion shows, or immersive theatre together in one space. That was that kind of event-making. We just had quite a lot of friends who were musicians and artists who needed space and needed opportunities, so it was created out of a love for underground culture. Along the way we always dreamt of having a building to be able to facilitate all of those things we had in mind […] Ember is similar, it's using those empty buildings, those empty properties, but it's doing it for social good. Creating a platform of delivery for social good. With sort of social responsibility in our ethos.
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> Anna: 'We owe a lot to squatting, but [Ember is] more of an evolution of squatting. It's more…it's kind of almost coming back to the roots of squatting, where the movement comes from. The true premise of squatting is caring for the land and taking care of the community that is rooted within that environment and providing for that community. That's what squatting actually is. It's been saturated by lots of different people and characters along the way. That created a slightly different perception and definition of squatting. But we're not trying to do squatting. We're trying to work with the existing system and help improve it, and that window for us is empty spaces.'

In the UK, meanwhile contracts have become a popular way of opening up community engagement with empty spaces in the down-time of development cycles. Though not illegal, they often emerge from "informal" negotiations between activists, squatters, property owners, and developers. There are some examples of meanwhile contracts emerging from government and council initiatives, although their effectiveness has drawn scrutiny. In the run-up to the 2011 London Olympics, and as a bid to draw future investment into peripheral areas, the winners of a London design competition were given meanwhile access to several properties in East London's Royal Docks. As Tonkiss (2013) writes, the enthusiasm from the London mayor may have proved fatal, with one of the projects running large losses and unpaid debts, a second closing several months early after struggling with theft and security issues, and a third remaining unbuilt (Tonkiss, 2013: 315). The recent surge in popularity of meanwhile contracts has also been criticized for taking part in a broader neoliberal project to "cash in" the good faith of community activist and volunteer projects, redirecting their energies toward neoliberal regeneration. Though meanwhile interventions have provided a 'critical testing ground' for squatting activism and other forms of community experimentation…

> 'They have also become subject to intense valorization, as the gestures of occupying and re-making *terrains vagues* and leftover spaces now come as readily to property developers, alert to the speculative possibilities of 'acting interstitially', as they do to green nomads and architectural co-operatives (Tonkiss, 2013: 315).

My fieldwork with Ember and The Black Stag suggests that one of the ways squatting survived the 2012 wave of criminalisation was through the use of "meanwhile contracts", shifting the terrain of squatting from long-term autonomous spaces (generating zones of antagonism and dissent "outside" networks of surveillance and control) to community projects contiguous with landlord's and council's visions for those spaces. John, founder and director of Ember, saw this as an opportunity to give an organizational basis to an otherwise fractured and disconnected movement:

> John: 'I started Ember because…because basically it was really clear to me from being in the kind of protest and activist environment that there were fundamental infrastructural issues that were stopping the work from having the effect the people that

> were doing it wanted it to have…I could see what they wanted to do and I could see that a lot of their ideas were really good, but there just was a kind of joined-up thinking and pattern matching that was missing, you know a perspective. And that's something that I'm quite good at, so I just started doing it, I started trying to bring some more organizational thought to it.'

After one of John's previous projects closed – a squatted social centre in London which ran for 12 years before it was sold and demolished for a block of luxury flats –John and several others formed a campaign to secure their next building:

> Anna: 'The whole time we were building up a portfolio of our achievements. Then, in 2012, the legislation came into law about empty residential properties not being able to be squatted, and the guy, Mike Weatherly, the MP at the time for Hove in Brighton, one of the very guys that brought that legislation in, came to visit our squat. They were doing a program […] like a morning program, super popular, they were doing a short thing about squatting…visiting a few squats, and they visited our squat. [The host] brought this MP to come and visit us and see what we'd done. He came to a live drawing class and some acoustic concert, and he saw the beautiful gardens that we had, and the guy [Mike], on camera, said that he was going to help us to find a building to facilitate those things, even though we were squatters'.

In May 2015, off the back of their success on national TV, Ember was founded in an empty office block dubbed 'Kindle' through a series of negotiations with a local property owner and the council. During the initial stages of the project, Ember negotiated a meanwhile contract with the owner that granted limited use of the building in return for free security and maintenance, as well as (perhaps their singular most important innovation on the meanwhile contract) an exemption on empty building rates under the Business Rates Relief system (GOV.UK, 2018) – a system which Ember is now pushing to be legislated as an official classification. In the case of empty properties in London, when a building has a commercial value above a certain threshold determined by a council, the owner must continue to pay a percentage of those rates while the property remains empty (known as an empty building tax). During the early stages of Kindle, Ember discovered that it was possible to discount these rates through a series of direct, informal negotiations with local councils. If the model was able to be replicated, it would add an extra incentive to property owners to donate their empty spaces to Ember, saving them costs that typically add up to thousands of pounds a month.

As a testament to their policy of recycling and re-using spaces without ever having to pay for them, during my fieldwork, Ember recycled a rent-free company headquarters through their connections with local social enterprise, and were affiliated with four buildings that had been recycled by squatters, activists, and community volunteers. In 2017, Ember hosted a three-part series of conferences in Kindle, offering free memberships to its member organisation, and inviting decision-makers (politicians, urban planners, property developers, architects, estate agents, government trusts, and housing associations) to participate in an open dialogue with the local community. By building a network of spaces in a way that governments and corporations were structurally unable to, as a result of the grey areas in which Ember operated, Ember hoped to extend its resources to small communities, generating alternative pockets of thinking where local people, if only temporarily, were able to set the agenda. This architecture of free space, built on relations of trust between councils, property owners, and the invisible labour of activists and volunteers, would allow Ember to operate as a powerful entity in local communities, opening lines of dialogue between those at the bottom and those at the top.

The Nest Project

At first glance, Portsmouth is a blip in the grand arc of UK politics, built on a manufacturing sector that has mostly declined since the 1970s with a population size of around 200,000. On further inspection, over the last decade, it has become a primary testing ground for experimental financial policy. Between 2013 and 2020, its budget was reduced by 80% under the central government's austerity program, and became a testing ground for social bonds and other forms of experimental financial innovation. At the same time, it underwent large migration influx and some of the fastest population growth in the UK, with a near 30% population size increase between 2001 and 2018. With low-housing costs and a one-hour commute to the country's capital, the city became an anchor for London's population overspill, sustaining high immigration rates from Pakistan, India, Italy, and Poland, and boasting an employment rate of around 80% (well above the national average), comprised of light industry work, logistics, warehouse parks, financial services and digital media.

Although my fieldwork in Portsmouth was short, reading scattered news reports from local sources and sitting in on discussions with councilors, I discovered these figures had been accompanied by a rapid and unprecedented growth in homeless numbers, overwhelming local support services hit by the cumulative effects of austerity, and gripping the social sector in a form of crisis mentality – faced with the scale of a problem that could not be outpaced with existing resources, and leading a turn to increasingly desperate measures of funding and support. Between 2017 and 2019, the assistant director to Housing, Communities and Youth reported a surge in the number of home evictions and an increase of around 50% in homeless numbers, from 1300 to 2350 persons seeking help. In 2019, the council was caught selling off £24 million of public property to balance its books - a growing trend in small government across the UK, where 12,000 libraries, community centres, playgrounds, and other public spaces have been sold off since 2014, most likely to pay for expensive government redundancies, which have risen 75% in councils with these new spending powers.

Portsmouth was first brought to Ember's attention in 2018 when a local woman – a mother, disability pensioner, and busybody known for her self-described strong political views which were 'neither left nor right, but firm' saw news coverage of Ember on a morning program and reached out. Sez (61), who became closely involved in the project over the following months, and whose spare room I slept in on several occasions during my visits to Portsmouth, had lost her job as an English teacher after becoming chronically ill, working briefly as a civil servant in Portsmouth before being made redundant:

> Sez: 'Before I moved to Portsmouth, I couldn't work. As a result of my disability, I almost became homeless myself. The mortgage company handling my mortgage had called it in because they knew I wasn't going to be able to pay. And so I was forced to sell what I had and downsize. I had, because I'm so old, built up a lot of equity already, and went looking for a house, and by the skin of my teeth I avoided homelessness and ended up here. If you cannot pay the mortgage, you cannot have the house, and so anybody that hits ill health will have financial difficulties. Benefits won't cover your mortgage; they pay the interest paid on your mortgage. Most mortgage companies now won't accept that. So that's it. If you are suddenly overcome with ill health, you not only have to deal with your health, but the instability and financial stresses that go along with that.'

> Sez: '[When I saw Ember on TV] I thought 'Oh, I haven't really heard about anything like this happening for two-thousand years'. It chimed with my Christian beliefs, and, you know, my experience of nearly being made homeless, having just about survived that, and going through the stress of what that meant for me and my family, small though it is. And my neighbours as well, who nearly lost their rent because there was a benefits mix-up and they got behind on payments and were threatened by the bailiffs – and another neighbour who did actually end up being made homeless, having to take her family into a hostel. I thought, we have a homelessness problem in Portsmouth, and it's actually far larger than official statistics will show for various reasons. So I looked at it and I thought we need this in Portsmouth.'

This was a common theme among the group of volunteers in the Nest, a form of shared anxiety that one is only ever a few steps away from homelessness, based on past experiences of ill health, sudden break-downs in job security, and eviction. Another founding member of the Nest project, Louis (43), had narrowly avoided long-term homelessness when he was forced out of home by his parents at the age of 15:

> Louis: 'I had a huge break-up with my mum and my step-dad, huge fight, and I lived on the streets for 6 months. When I was at school, we used to have these things called permits, and if you could get a part-time job, the school would authorize you with a permit. Before everything went wrong in my life, I landed a permit, a cleaning job, and I did a 3 hour shift a night. Then I had one in the morning, and then they added more. So, when I left home, I actually had money coming in, but because of my age I couldn't rent a room, I had nowhere to stay, I tried a BnB, but they wouldn't accept me because I was 15 years old. Hotels wouldn't accept me because I was 15 years old, so the only thing I could do was buy a tent and live in a treeline, which is what you see now.'
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> Me: 'This happens a lot?'
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> Louis: 'It still happens now, you drive around the parkway 'round here, the ring-road, and if you look in the treelines you'll see tent cities. Literally, there's loads of people living there. Back then it was different, I was on my own. And eventually I was offered a room by one of my ex-teachers, when she found out I was homeless. For the rest of my education, for the 3 years I was at college, I slept on the floor in her living room. […] If I hadn't been given that opportunity, my children probably wouldn't be here, because of the route I could have gone down. So yeah, so you see, life is funny, it gives you a spur, and you must take that spur.

After spending a lifetime working and raising his children, Louis suffered a back injury during a fall, and went from earning a full-time wage to barely scraping by on benefits:

> Louis: 'It meant that, I *can* work, but…I've got to find a company that will take me on, where their insurance can cover me. It was a prolapsed disk, so if it happens again, I could be paralyzed for the rest of my life. Insurance companies don't wanna know. For insurance purposes, I'm now unemployable as an insurance liability, which really pisses me off. I've got skills, I've worked all my life.'

For Louis, unemployment was tied to the structures of risk assessment and financial speculation that ruled his body inadequate for work – a ruling that can, in some circumstances, lead to worse outcomes for the individual (Waddell et al., 2007). Unemployment has been widely linked to higher rates of mortality: more illness, and more premature death (Marmot and Wilkinson, 2003), suicide (Classen and Dunn, 2011; Nordt et al., 2015; Milner et al., 2013),

heart disease, and stroke (Brenner, 2016); and there is evidence that long periods of time spent on benefits can increase health risks, poverty, and "dangerous" behaviour (Lindsay and Houston, 2015). Driven by a sense of charity and work ethic, Louis and Sez described volunteering as an opportunity to rediscover work in a positive light, on their own terms:

> Louis: 'When Ember came along, I said to John I've got a huge skillset, not many of those skills I can back up with paperwork, but because of the jobs I've done, them skillsets are transferrable, you can cut the piece to fill the hole […] When Sez told me about the project, I was sort of skeptical, I thought, 'how is that gonna work?' I'm a great believer in standing back and watching, and at the start I stood back and listened rather than joined in. Then I went away and thought about what was happening. You could see how it was coming together. And I wanted to be a part of that, to work out how things would roll out, how they would come together.'
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> Me: 'Have you done something like this before, where you've…'
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> Louis: 'No, and as I said to Sez, I've got skills. When I spoke to John, I turned to him and I said, 'what is it you would need from me?' And he just said, 'time'. So yeah, everyone has time on their hands, whether it's five minutes, ten minutes, it's still time that's wasted […] It just came down to, yeah, I can do that. I have various things in life that take priority. I have a grandson; I look after him so his parents can go to work. But I look at it, I've now kept two people in work, and I'm trying to keep something else going for me. And this is allowing me to put my skillset to use. The Ember thing, when it actually came up, I saw it as an opportunity to getting back into doing something, rather than going stale, standing by, brain freezing…'
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> Sez: '[The project has] been really invigorating, because while I can't stick with my health issues to 9-5 work, I still feel as though I've got a lot to give. I can't not work, it's a basic ethos, always has been in my family, that we work no matter at what we can, we get money through the door. And it hurts very badly that I'm not able to do that.'

Volunteering to Louis and Sez was more than just work, the desire to work and be desired, or stem the tides of boredom – it incorporated an ethic of feeling, motivated by sentiment rather than intellect, and mobilized these sentiments as a productive force (Muehlebach, 2012: 8). The difficulty, as Muehlebach notes, is that volunteering has risen in popularity at a time when the state is attempting 'not only to mediate the effects of its own withdrawal', but to force a narrative of community and affective organisation at the heart of these neoliberal reforms (Muehlebach, 2012: 8). One of the loudest voices to emerge in the last decade in support of voluntarism is the European Commission, notorious for its support of harsh fiscal discipline, when it declared 2011 the 'European Year of Volunteering', emphasising its ability to 'provide people with new skills and competences and […] improve their employability', especially 'at this time of 'economic crisis' (Muehlebach, 2012: 39; European Commission, 2011). Though the experience of volunteering can be positive, the pressure on volunteers to fill the void newly opened up by a failed welfare state, to "reconstitute" the public (and to some extent, private sphere) and create social wealth in 'a country wracked by relational poverty' can act as a counter-weight, taking its toll on an unpaid workforce already predisposed to unemployment, under-paid work, or varying capacities to work (Muehlebach, 2012: 38-39; NCVO, 2019).

Despite the overwhelming positive impact of the Nest on the community, the hours which Louis spent up on a ladder, and Sez transporting materials around in a mini-van despite her

chronic fatigue, remained unchecked and unpaid, always one step away from potential tragedy. As Muehlebach (2012: 39) writes, this is a curious contradiction of voluntarism, which attempts to revalue dispensable populations as indispensable, sometimes with the full force of national recruitment and advertising campaigns, but which paradoxically reaffirms their disposability through its reliance on an unwaged, often unregulated and unprotected, workforce. Voluntarism 'renders active those populations who hover at the edges of the labour market' by making them productive through what is essentially considered by the state to be 'nonwork' (Muehlebach, 2012: 39).

Regeneration from below?

The progressive potential of local spaces in small communities has recently become the object of research into 'interstitial urbanisms' (Tonkiss, 2013), neighbourhood collectives (Wulff, 2014), and community development initiatives (Moulaert et al., 2010; Unsworth et al., 2011). These initiatives, like Ember, have framed community spatially, and merged together public, private, and non-profit motives to address limitations within urban policy relating to environmental sustainability, arts, and culture (Rabbiosi, 2017: 833). This regeneration "from the bottom up" comes at a time of restructuring in the governance of cities in the global north following the global financial crisis, and the forms of 'extreme economy' that have emerged under the aegis austerity (Peck, 2012). Austerity conditions in the global north have turned autonomous spaces into a panacea for urban development and policy making (Ferreri, 2016: 183). As local government authorities bite hard into their municipal budgets, an array of professional networks and experimental, low-budget initiatives promising to "reinvigorate urban growth" have emerged (Tonkiss, 2013: 314; Ferreri, 2016: 184; Mayer, 2013a: 7). City authorities who are now finding that they lack the resources, power, and control to implement formal masterplans are experimenting with new ways to develop planning visions and temporary initiatives designed to 'unlock the potential' of empty, ruinous, or autonomous sites (Bishop and Williams, 2012: 3).

Ember presents itself as an attractive solution to the scarcity thinking imposed by austerity, and is part symptom and solution to this crisis, promising to regenerate buildings and restore communities without the need for extensive financial models. As I sat in on meetings with Ember and local governors, it became clear to me that councils in the UK were desperately looking for reasons to offload empty buildings to Ember with the hope of generating positive community outcomes. The proposal seemed almost too good to be true: Ember would sweep in without any financial demands, recycle materials in the area to restore the building to a usable condition, and build a community platform to address homelessness and housing issues, open creative spaces, and host community events; all while subject to the council and owner's planning visions for those sites. Before the Nest had a chance to open, being awarded a six-month contract by the owner, the project was offered several donations by political parties, and plans were already in place to receive a second space in an abandoned residential property nearby.

In my observations, councillors were well aware of their obligations to community and the critical role that community plays in social integration and public health (Marmot and Wilkinson, 2003). They were also facing unprecedented budgetary constraints from central government, with Portsmouth council losing close to 80% of its budget between 2013 and 2020 despite being one of the fastest growing cities in the UK. Facing harsh austerity, councils in

the UK are turning to local, self-organised, civic networks of regeneration. Still, these initiatives are often ambiguous insofar as they replicate 'good neoliberal citizenship by discursively appropriating neoliberal goals' (Changfoot, 2007: 130) and 'may fail to challenge the larger structures that lead to uneven development' in the first place (Rabbiosi, 2017: 833), challenging the notion that regeneration "from the bottom up" offers a radical alternative to conventional forms of regeneration.

These questions were a point of concern in my discussions with Ember. If the goal of Ember was to build local communities under the umbrella of meanwhile use, how vulnerable were these communities to being rendered permanently meanwhile by changes in local council regulation, or shifts in the property market? What parts of the squatting and activist community could survive under a system based on relations of trust between squatters and property owners, politicians, and decision-makers? And what room was there for Ember in an already crowded field of Not-For-Profits, Non-Governmental Organisations, social enterprises, and forward-thinking community initiatives?

Stride (2016; Hankinson, 2000), for example, cites an estimated 10,000 new charities joining the UK sector every year, for which there is a finite amount of public and private funding. The competition for brand recognition, identity, and a value set that stands out from the rest has created a field in which few opportunities for organisations can emerge. The effect, Herrold and Atia (2016: 389) argue, has been to 'fragment and weaken the sector and prevent it from forming an 'effective oppositional bloc'. Instead of valuing forms of pluralism that build solidarity to create sector-wide growth, organisations like charities and NFPs have been splintered into identity groups that compete against each other and struggle to coalesce. As Rabbiosi (2017: 840) writes, organisations like Ember are limited to the extent that they propose micro-scale interventions in response to macro-scale disinvestments. They work by recognising the potential of untapped resources, challenging and going beyond business-as-usual urban orthodoxy (Unsworth et al., 2011: 183), but in doing so, render those resources visible to capital, and provide the grounds for the mobilization of volunteer labour and the subsequent withdrawal of state provisioning that exploits that labour, making it intrinsic to an ethics and pragmatics of "active citizenship" (Muehlebach, 2009: 497-500).

In Bishop and William's (2012: 3) account, the relationship between experimental spaces and neoliberal development is not an antagonistic one. In some cases, pockets of creative autonomy and innovative praxis are not only possible, but even temporarily desirable (Ferreri, 2016: 183). In the context of austerity crisis, Ferreri (2016) demonstrates some of the ways 'alternative' spaces have become desirable to urban planners as 'positive visuals' and 'experiential fillers' with the capacity to transform failed development projects into new objects of experimental community and growth (Ferreri, 2016: 183). 'Temporary re-use' in the development paradigm has become a seductive narrative of incorporation, able to encompass a wide variety of practices across a broad spectrum of political positions (2016: 181). Through a wedding of forms of social solidarity to moral community and productivity, the left is made 'ambivalently complicit' in the neoliberalisation of care (Muehlebach, 2009: 501). A central component of neoliberalism is its ability to bring concrete differences into unity without destroying their oppositional character. During periods of financial crisis, capitalist growth pivots on the ability of neoliberalism to integrate urban planning with people's need for spaces 'alternative to the world ruled by capital' (Ferreri, 2016: 182). As Gershon (2011) writes, neoliberalism folds these processes into a single configuration. It recognises that markets must be constructed and

continually maintained, and that the spreading of market rationality is a labour of translation and transformation (Gershon, 2011: 544). Through gentrification, strapped local governments are able to offload some of the pressures of austerity onto community-led or activist regeneration projects, and neoliberalism is able to symbolically reposition this apparent conflict of interests through the promotion of an 'active, solidaristic citizenry' (Muehlebach, 2009: 513).

At the Black Stag, working conditions did enable its squatters a certain degree of autonomy, but the emphasis on regenerating the building back to its former state "by-the-books" meant adhering to legal and regulatory standards set by the council. While squatters at The Black Stag were in a position to determine the schedule, pace, and intensity of their work in the absence of disciplinary practices that typically arise in conjunction with capitalist wage labour (Millar, 2008: 27), there was also no guarantee that the building and the labour they put into it would remain theirs for an indefinite period. Their work undoubtedly contributed to the restoration of the building, its maintenance and uptake, and the recycling of resources otherwise destined for landfill. But the Black Stag's autonomy came at a price, with no direct correlation between the freedom of labouring conditions that enabled its squatters a certain degree of autonomy from capital, and the freedom of the objects of that labour from being absorbed by capital. At best, modifications the squatters made to the building created more work for planners to reverse or tear down after they were evicted. At worst, the Black Stag replicated forms of precarious work and exploited labour under capitalism, organising squatters into unpaid and unregulated regimes of work, the effects of which were felt, not by capital, but by their own bodies and the hazardous environments they lived in.

Ember were not exempt from the concerns and questions raised above. While undoubtedly complicit in these forms of neoliberalisation to some extent, insofar as Ember assumed the neoliberal terrain as a given rather than openly seeking to contest it, they also recognised that austerity conditions in the UK had forced councils into a position of desperation, calling for extreme alternatives to extreme problems. These alternatives emerged in the form of councils, fire departments, and health and safety authorities occasionally willing to turn a blind eye to see a building restored for "a good cause". What separated Ember from other not-for-profits was its willingness to push boundaries and limits without paying its directors or hiring employees. And it was precisely because it was a company with financial accounts, a paper trail, and public liability insurance, that it was allowed to operate outside of conventional urban orthodoxy; that is to say, was afforded the same liberties as any company to dwell and thrive in legal grey areas and push regulatory limits:

> Nadia: **'**And also, on another level, we found there's a lot of people within very standard, even corporate organisations within government at all levels…people who want to bend the rules who see that what's going on is wrong and don't want to do it anymore. By creating credible projects like Kindle, where we've gone look, you were a bit flexible with us at the start there and that was really helpful […] they saw what we were doing and tried to help rather than kick us out immediately. Same with the council, same with da da da…'

The key, John explained, was to see the company model as a front, while enabling the exchange of space and resources to go on between projects that affiliated themselves with the Ember network, empowering local communities to organise themselves through space regardless of their political intentions or whether those spaces were forced to shut down. 'Every single entity in Ember that proclaims itself to be an Ember project and behaves with social good and integrity

and intention', John explained to me, 'has license and remit to use any Ember resources to achieve those aims'. To be able to communicate with other organisations and gain access to those resources, Ember was forced to adopt a corporate front, transplanting organisational models and structures into its community. 'Change starts', John continued, 'not by doing things illegally, but by doing things that cannot be stopped legally and giving them a legal basis'. By running on recycled materials and the donations of volunteers, Ember has been able to evade some of the financial pitfalls of conventional not-for-profits and charities. In my first community meeting in Portsmouth, a desperate local soup kitchen turned up to discuss the possibility of opening its own Ember soup kitchen, in response to being smoked out of the sector by mounting expenses, rent hikes, and rapidly growing demand for its services.

Whether Ember's reliance on volunteer work bolstered the state's withdrawal of social services, substituting it for low-budget, temporary community alternatives that cannot, ultimately, be held to the same legal or regulatory standards – such criticisms often downplay the extent to which these organizations are, within the limited pool of funding and resources available to them, attempting to respond to conditions that are largely out of their control:

> John: 'Fuck what they're supposed to be doing, because they're not. We're doing what needs to be done regardless. We're not even doing what needs to be done. We want to create a situation where people can do what needs to be done regardless of what councils or governments do. That is what people will do, because it is what people just do. This isn't about creating a solution to the world, in fact it's about saying the exact fucking opposite. Anybody that tells you they have a solution is lying. They're selling you something. Really the only thing that exists is the opportunity right now to work out the solutions.'
>
> Nadia: **'**We believe in system change and so whilst we're in the middle of a massive transition…energy transition, social transition…this all needs to be happening and it's not going to be a doctored version of this system.…We're not saying we're changing the world like this, but by changing what we can change, and putting things in place for people to help themselves, then it kind of just makes everything better. It's a transitional thing. Projects are supposed to be temporary.'
>
> […]
>
> Anna: 'We're not trying to take away funding from anyone, and we're not saying that our methods are better than anyone else's, it's just that our methods are as they are *because there is no funding*. It's creating a solution that in these times, when there is so little money being put toward art and youth centres and education, training, and keeping community hubs, grass-roots music avenues. 90% of UK councils have cut their funding towards youth centres, quite a lot have been closed down and so on so on. This is more about an emergency response and creating solutions where and while we still can…'

The implicit politics presented here, a variation of Do It Yourself direct action pragmatism, is characteristic of the squatting scene. DIY can be seen as a form of political practice that actively engages in the production of alternative social values rather than simply making demands or expressing opposition (Martin-Iverson, 2011: 145; Graeber, 2009) DIY is driven by a profound alienation from mass society, and a determination to do something about it (Graeber, 2009: 260). While political and counter-cultural forms of resistance are often put into conflict by activists, DIY is an attempt to bridge this divide. Ember seek to minimise their consumption of

corporate products through recycling and dumpster diving, asserting their autonomy from corporate power at the same time as acknowledging that a certain degree of entanglement and compromise in those structures of power is inevitable (Martin-Iverson, 2011: 146-147). By putting the tools in place for people to build their own communities, Ember hoped to create a domino effect, opening up room for experimentation with new, ethical forms of consumption and community (Fridell, 2007; Kozinets, 2002; Rumbo, 2002). Still, this orientation to action may not necessarily translate into funding or volunteer numbers when Ember needs them most. As Anna noted, in a moment of exasperation leading up to the launch date of the Nest Project:

> Anna: 'We have 460 likes on Facebook, but no one came to help today. But it's fine, because [they] all have valid excuses. Bullshit. They don't understand the blood, sweat, and tears that go into making these projects work'.

Conclusion

A question that continues to challenge organizations like Ember is whether meanwhile is enough. The conditions under which community spaces typically arise in cities are highly provisional, and even when granted, have high rates of burnout (Cooper and Baer, 2019; Tonkiss, 2013). These concerns heightened for Ember when it was forced to close down the Nest after 6 months without much-fought-for extensions. But while meanwhile spaces have an end-date, often coming to abrupt ends, as a movement they form an 'infrastructure of common life' that can provide momentary glimpses of autonomy and everyday intervention in the making and un-making of the city (Tonkiss, 2013: 322). As Tonkiss (2013: 322) writes, it is neither policy nor property law that will 'extend the range of land, things, and resources that may be made commonable', but rather social action, in whichever form that takes, however fleeting, interstitial, or contested. At a time when the need for social and environmental action is more critical than ever, Ember have scaled the need for 'massive' social transition down to the level of manageable, small-scale interventions. This may concede that neoliberalism has outpaced and undermined a mass direct-action movement for social change so far, and continues to thwart the terrain in which these iniatives grow. But it also expresses the bind of the historical situation in which Ember found itself in, the nuances of the political situation opened up by austerity in councils, and the ability of communities to mobilise in 'micro' scales on issues that otherwise outweigh their capacity to singularly undertake them.

Though Ember is as an attractive solution to councils facing budget reductions, its success is also a symptom of a broader redistribution of services under austerity, enabled by a growing dependence on informal care, and the organization of communities into a new, moral economy of voluntarism (Muehlebach, 2012: 164). As Muehlebach writes, the rise of this economy anticipates a new 'politics of rights and rightlessness' – one which gives with one hand while taking away with the other. Even as it represents access to support for some, for others it is a sign of 'an anxiety-ridden labor market, one where citizens wrangle over the right to work', and the right to be paid for work (Muehlebach, 2012: 227). The volunteer economy is so effective, not just because it plays on feelings of intimacy, compassion, and solidarity to encourage participation, but because it gives real autonomy to communities, the disabled, and the sick, who have long bemoaned the failures of the state to provide them with sufficient care. Ember is a "call to action" at a time of emergency, to create practical solutions when there appear to be no better alternatives – but in doing so, it allows the state to evade accountability as it pulls back with a certain degree of abstraction – slashing budgets, increasing redundancies,

creating barriers to support, and worse outcomes for the sick and unemployed – that re-affirm the need for more action, more organization, and more community alternatives.

Chapter 5: Squat or not? The politics of community in an occupied building

Late one night in March, the squatters and I plowed out into the darkness and erected a large wooden fence outside The Black Stag. Securing the building, which contained a large, open tunnel that ran through the first floor, was one of various conditions listed in a "215 notice" served on the landlord by the local council – a notice typically served when the condition of a building is determined to 'adversely [affect] the amenity of an area' (Practical Law Planning, 2020). With the permission of the building owner, the squatters, as caretakers of the building, had resolved to settle the notice themselves. First they hauled heavy doors that had been stolen from another abandoned building into the carpark, one-by-one, making several trips back and forth into the tunnel until the materials were set in place. Then they slotted them horizontally into rails that had been run along the pavement, each cut to size to fit the length of the carpark. They stepped back, surveying their work, and then did it again; this time forming a square trench that they filled with scrap, concrete, and soil. Through the night they worked, huffing cold air, hammering pickets to the box structure now beginning to bow from the pressure of debris inside it. It was ugly. A fence nailed to a blue garden-bed that looked like it was going to burst. I was sceptical that anything would grow inside that thing, if it was still standing the next day. I received some assurance from Big Tom, not a carpenter by trade. Another squatter, Luke, who was, picked up a plank of wood and nailed it to the inside of the garden bed. "There", he remarked, "that ought to hold".

A few months later, the council sent an inspector, head of local planning, David Prat, to survey the building. A familiar face to the squatters, we found him with a digital camera strolling up and down the pavement outside taking photos of the fence. One of the older members of the building, Arnie, approached him and began talking with him. Soon Big Tom joined them. Five minutes later they were arguing about the fence. 'Do you want people walking into our property, taking our things?'.
I intercepted Big Tom on his way back to the building. 'What the hell happened?', I asked.
'The council want us to tear the fence down. We just put it up, and now they want us to take it down'. He let out a roar of laughter. 'We refused to take it down. He couldn't even respond, just stood there dumbstruck, like, "these people are…they're talking back to me"'.

This chapter locates some of these tensions – between cooperation and contestation, autonomy and formal organization – among residents of The Black Stag as they sought to transition the building from a squat to an organized community project. It is about a group of squatters who, emerging from Occupy London and facing the criminalization of a practice that has long served as a refuge for young activists in the underground scene, have sought to take up the call to "occupy everywhere", to carry out the movement ethos in new ways and places. As Occupy London faced eviction, it challenged squatters to engage, not just in local struggles around housing or financialization, but an enduring politics of community capable of extending beyond the boundaries of the occupation. In this chapter, I chart the movement of The Black Stag from a "squat" to an "Ember" project, and the arrangements between squatters, councils, and

property owners that make squatting an abandoned building in London possible today. The success of organizations like Ember has given squatters a model and an ethos to replicate: a chance to reimagine squatting at the centre of local and community iniatives to regenerate urban space. By adopting a "positive" ethic of recycling and re-use, squatters have been able to gain access to commercial centres and assert a flexible autonomy that exists inside and outside the state.

The second part of the chapter introduces the internal tensions, contradictions, and ambiguities that arose as members of the group sought to preserve their autonomy in accordance with these new value regimes that became increasingly contested and difficult to embody. It is about the conflicts and frictions that emerged as different squatters sought to envision the future of the building in relation to two very different kinds of autonomy: the squatting scene, and a wider, grassroots "public". Like the evictions at Occupy, the criminalization of squatting has seen a necessary turn within the movement to commercial buildings at a time when squatters and ex-Occupy activists have sought to expand the occupations and carry them out in new ways and places. Organizations like Ember have offered an alternative conception of community as predicated on voluntaristic acts of solidarity and care (Muehlebach, 2012), appealing directly to squatter's principles of self-organization, voluntary association, and mutual aid (Graeber, 2004: 4). But they have also required the adoption of forms of authority and hierarchical organization in the movement that have raised a series of questions about whose communities are being protected, and on what basis such a politics can incorporate their autonomy. In many ways, this chapter is about the radically different ways community is being put to work in the squatting scene after criminalization – as a defense of already existing relations of autonomy in the movement, and as a call for wider, grassroots engagement with neighbourhoods, private enterprise, and local government institutions.

The Black Stag project

In 2016, a group of three anonymous squatters approached the owner of an abandoned property (The Black Stag) on the outskirts of London, with a proposal to renovate the building and, through principles of recycling and re-use, restore it to a usable condition. After receiving approval from the owner, who was reportedly being pursued by the council for negligence of a heritage-protected property at the time, the squatters incorporated as an official "community guardian company", approaching the council as a corporate entity with a board of directors and a proposal to turn the building into a public venue in the "meanwhile" stage of its re-development – until it was leased or sold off by the owner for commercial use. In December 2016, a crew of "working squatters" (Big Tom and a small group of five or six squatters who had since moved on from the project by the time I arrived in 2018) were assembled and invited to move into the building. With the backing of the owner, the squatters initiated a series of discussions that would transfer the building to them as "caretakers on rotation" – until the building was re-approved for commercial use. The squatters would occupy the building on temporary shifts, providing free maintenance and security, but also completing renovations, fixing leaks, and clearing out the rats nested in the rooms and walls.

This was the narrative I received when I first arrived to The Black Stag. In reality, Big Tom explained, there was no water or electricity when they had entered the building. The gas had been disabled, permanently, after flames had swept through the ground floor of the building some years earlier, leaving ash and debris caked into the floors and brickwork. And what was

left of the fire-safety equipment (fire alarms, extinguishers, steel doors) had either been stripped out, repurposed, or destroyed in the fire. 'The owner basically gave us the go ahead before we heard from the council', Big Tom explained. Big Tom was one of the last remaining squatters from these initial weeks. He scratched his head and pulled at his beard as he tried to recall the series of events that had led to the squatters first entering the building. Apart from a few facebook photos, copies of emails, and documents confirming the registration of The Black Stag guardian company, nothing from these first weeks remained. No written contract existed between the squatters and the owner, and no agreement was ever finalized with the council. 'I think it was initially Alli and Joe that approached the owner', he continued, 'but it was me and the others, maybe five or six of us that first moved in.'

> Me: 'Was it derelict?'
>
> Big Tom: 'It was completely derelict, it was fucked, it was in a terrible state of disrepair. It had sat empty for five years. There was electricity coming in from the ground floor down there, on the other side of the building [pointing to the back of the building]. The electricity wasn't going anywhere around the building. No water. Really dusty, it had been a shooting gallery for smackheads for a while so there were needles everywhere and broken bottles and Johnny wrappers. Someone had tried to burn it down the Christmas before. The walls were still burned. People had squatted it, they were having punk parties downstairs. Everyone from The Dead Kennedys to Rise Against, to Black Flag, to Rancid sprayed up all the walls in skulls and crossbones. The stairs were totally covered…it must have been an eviction resistance, they covered the stairs in fat and oil to prevent the police from using the stairwell. Because the police won't take it if it's slippery, which means they're able to funnel them back towards a central point.'

Despite the terms of their agreement with the owner, Big Tom explained, the squatters were awarded entry to the building on the condition that the owner remained absent from any direct negotiations with the council. The building had been so heavily barricaded before it shut down that they were forced, physically, to break their way in:

> Big Tom: 'We lived like wolves in a cave. I cut a hole into the tunnel. We couldn't get any of the doors open with any of our stuff because they were all fortified and too small for our kit we brought from other places. I just took a crappy drill and a crowbar and a hammer and I chiselled away until I got a hole, and then ripped our entry into the building. We weren't even inside the building yet. We just set up in the tunnel for the first week.

Over the course of the next year, the grey area which the squatters occupied with the local council and the informal nature of their agreement with the owner enabled them to stay in the building while it sat empty, providing a degree of longevity and security rarely heard of in London since the criminalisation of squatting in residential property – suggesting a return to old-school, residential style squatting practices on one hand, and a growing formalization of temporary living arrangements on the other (Ferreri et al., 2016).

Despite the promise of initial negotiations with the owner of The Black Stag, over the course of 2017, the project to renovate the building was set back by multiple disputes, walk-outs, and safety concerns along the way. By the time my fieldwork began in February 2018, the squatters had made little progress toward the original ambitions of the project. Alli and Joe had walked away when it was discovered that they would need to assemble thousands of pounds of fire safety equipment in order to continue legally residing in the building. Renovations on the

building had proven to be a monumental task, and it was quickly decided that the squatters would remain "squatters by agreement" with the owner until the building passed strict council building and residential codes; a decision made, in part, so that the council would…

> Big Tom: '[…] stop breathing down our necks about safety concerns. They would have had kittens if they had seen the stuff, the place, right at the start. Six months in they were still bricking it when they saw this place.' [Being a squat by agreement] allowed us to get the building to a state so it could then be run as a guardian, rather than us have it for 2-3 months, and before we could even get out of the starting gate, the council would have shut us down.

In 2017, the terms of directorship over the guardian company became entangled in a series of disagreements between two of the squatters then spearheading corporate negotiations with the council: Big Tom (29) and Little Tom (40). Little Tom was an older, ex-Occupy activist and former door-to-door salesman who had, like Big Tom, entered the movement during the Occupy protests, and found refuge in the squatting scene after the evictions at Finsbury square. I briefly met Little Tom in a separate squat at the beginning of my fieldwork in 2018, not long after he had walked away from The Black Stag – a split that had occurred, partly because his position as co-director of the company made him liable for any damages that occurred to individuals while they lived in the building, and partly as a result of a personal falling out with Big Tom over the future direction and management of the building. Little Tom was rumoured to be hiding from the police, and fought to preserve the informal nature of the squatter's agreement with the owner. Having left before my arrival, Little Tom exerted a distant presence in my conversations and interviews with other members of the building. He came to represent, for some, the militant face of the squatting scene, and a camp of the remaining squatters who resisted (or were apathetic about) attempts to transform the building into an official guardian project.

While the project to renovate the building had substantially slowed by the end of 2017, the owner's "hands-off" approach put the squatters in a position of relative stability without compromising their freedom or autonomy. The building had served, for the last year, as a place of long-term accommodation for the homeless, a hideout from cops, a stopover for activists facing legal charges in London, a storage space for party equipment and sound-system gear, a place for generating political discussion, for creating and storing art, and for inviting friends to socialize, party, and take drugs. Sensing that the project had come to a standstill, Big Tom began agitating to continue work on the building with the goal of eventually turning it into a formal guardianship. Mounting pressures from the council, in the form of Prohibition Orders that placed legal restrictions on the owner until a number of structural hazards were amended, raised concerns that the squatters were becoming more liability than asset. Little Tom's departure from the project some months earlier had anticipated a growing set of tensions in the building, as its membership doubled over the course of 2017, and its squatters sought to preserve their identities and their autonomy in the face of growing pressures from the council to adapt. By 2018, the membership of the building had grown from 10 to 25 squatters, and Big Tom remained the last signatory to the guardian company contract, and the sole point of contact with the owner.

In 2017, Big Tom began spending time at Ember's *Kindle* project. The Black Stag had been in communication with Ember for some time, and there was an initial exchange of recycled materials and fire safety equipment between the two buildings. Toward the end of the year,

lines of communication between the two projects had fallen radio-silent, and the community at The Black Stag had become ‘more squat than guardianship’, Big Tom explained. The twenty or so members of the building were variously split across its four-floors; with Big Tom and a small group of close friends on the ground floor, a contingent of party squatters and sound-system guys on the second, and the remaining ten or so squatters occupying the residential halls on the third and fourth. Not being in a position of authority to pursue the building as a guardian project alone, but growing concerned with pressures from the council to move forward with the building, Big Tom expressed interest in turning the building into a Ember-affiliated guardian project. This quickly attracted the attention of one of Ember’s directors, Arnie:

> Big Tom: ‘I was at [another Kindle event] in July. It was about 5 in the morning, and I was sat on the sofa smoking . Suddenly Arnie bee-lined across the event at me and sat down. We chatted for about 2 hours. It was the first time I'd actually properly spoken to Arnie. He'd heard a lot about what we'd been doing, and heard that I'd been away for a number of years, and had come back with a new fire to get something done, and that I was at Occupy, and that we knew all the same heads. He had a lot of respect for what I was doing, and vice versa. At that point I said I could really do with your help, and he said he'd start coming over a couple days a week to help out. Eventually Kindle was shut down, and he started moving some of his things. I got to have some of Kindle's scrap materials, and Arnie had two shipping containers full of materials that needed storing. So, we started working together, exchanging things. And then when Kindle officially ended […] I invited him to live with us’.

The involvement of Arnie would bring a fresh face and a new outlook, but also a sense of community and belonging to a group that had lost any notion of collective identity:

> Big Tom: ‘It took a while to shake off the people that said they wanted to do something but weren’t actually willing to do anything. Once that happened, more people wanted to come and get involved. And as there’s been a flow of people coming through, like Arnie for example, lots of stuff has been done. Having that older head around has really helped, and having someone older that could put their foot down has really helped, because it's really difficult working in a situation like this with your peers. It goes back to squats. Squats have a habit of…friends let friends do stuff, even when friends know that stuff is stupid. Whether it be drugs, whether it be actions, whether it be protests, just like, yeah. You kind of egg each other on in a really school-yard kind of way’.
>
> Me: ‘And you don’t want someone else telling you what to do, because…’
>
> Big Tom: ‘…because it’s not cool. But neither is becoming a dirty crackhead, losing all of your friends, and robbing people, and living in your own filth. That's not cool either, so there is a line. And as I approach 30, I'm really starting to know that line’.
>
> Adrian: Does that translate into more organization? More authority?
>
> Big Tom: ‘It becomes a form of empowerment. The ability of people to understand themselves, understand their own personal needs, understand where they stand in a community. *Then* people can act accordingly, be in the appropriate place. I think that’s where it really starts. And from there, you can get to organization, you can get to telling others how you feel about a situation with their best interests in mind […] not being a downer or going against any sort of anarchist code, because it is anarchist. It still is. It’s about finding that line, and getting youth culture to understand that you can tell people that, without bullying them or patronising them’.

Big Tom's positioning of himself as an older, experienced squatter suggests a "maturation" of his politics and a desire to break away from the youth politics of the squatting scene. Squatting has had a significant impact on the lives of young people, providing them with spaces to challenge dominant notions of nationality, identity, and class. But, as I argue in chapter 2, these spaces can operate as 'both a response to and an intensification of the precarious experience of urban youth' (Martin-Iverson, 2011: 383, 107). In Kadir's (2016) descriptions of the various "life" phases of squatting, in which the transition from being a squatter to becoming a renter usually coincides with a mastery and rejection of the movement lifestyle and its consumption norms, squats can also become spaces of "marginal entrapment" for those who either lack the capacity to outgrow or break away from the movement (Kadir, 2016: 162). The safety and transparency of an environment that privileges the self-realization of the individual can, paradoxically, create spaces of homogenization which 'enable individuals to be themselves by becoming identical with others' (Melucci, 1989: 210), sheltering them from the stresses of mainstream life (Kadir, 2016: 185) and enforcing a 'purely defensive enjoyment' of the security offered by life in a group (Melucci, 1989: 49). For Big Tom, this self-realization could only take place in a community where people were empowered to intervene in each other's lives. Arnie's involvement in the project would bring, not just a new collective identity, but a voice of authority in a culture of fierce individualism that had come to resent any organizational imperative as suspect and any cooperation as a vector of oppression.

The politics of community

In March 2018, Arnie moved into The Black Stag full-time to work alongside Big Tom. I first met Arnie, a tall, gangly, and tremendously strong 53-year-old activist, on my initial visit to the building in the winter weeks of February. As we huddled around a small lounge in the kitchen, barricaded in from the snow by a giant, steel fire-door that would, over the course of my stay, serve as a crucial choke-point for cops and unwanted intruders, Arnie described, with a degree of conviction and authority that I would come to learn was deeply contested by the other squatters, the terms of the squatters' agreement with the owner, and their plans to renovate the building.

Before joining Ember as a director, Arnie had accumulated thirty years of experience volunteering in housing cooperatives and producing decorations and lighting shows for some of London's largest underground events in the 90s. After Kindle, in whose successes he had played a key part, Arnie developed a renewed appreciation for Ember as a distinct organization. Like The Black Stag, Kindle had relied heavily on the work of volunteers, and in an effort to accommodate the contributions of these volunteers, much of the crew had been moved into the building full-time. One evening, Arnie explained, a group of crew members had approached Ember and informed them that the building was open too often because it 'interfered with their lifestyles'. It was this 'squatter politics', he continued, predicated on the notion of the right to be housed and to take what is rightfully gained, that had anticipated a key ethic of Ember *and* its point of departure from the movement. While Ember was largely comprised of ex-squatters and housing activists – both sharing ties to the movement and openly inviting squatters into its projects – it broke with the scene in its attempts to recast this activism as a resource for influence on the small government and corporate-stage.

Arnie's understanding of community was informed by his involvement in a number of Ember projects across London which relied on the contributions of older, middle and working-class

volunteers, whose participation stood apart from their work and personal lives. Their activism, he explained, was driven by a sense of moral duty to one's community. The expectation that volunteers might "never see each other again", and that they "take nothing from it", came not from a desire for personal freedom or autonomy, but from an 'ethic of dutiful subservience to the collective good', a form of spontaneous charity shared between individuals committed to a vision of society as 'wrought out of dutifully compassionate and empathetic acts' (Muehlebach, 2012: 96). Kindle was, as Ember put it, a place 'made by people who shared an intrinsic responsibility to aid social change and offer an example of how to care for others'. Volunteers were driven by a 'fundamental urge to influence the environment around them, to have […] empathy for others, and to expand [their] interests in other cultures. To be part of a bigger cause'.

In our conversations, Arnie espoused the values of listening, encouragement, and mutual support. As an initial outsider to the project and a Ember director, Arnie believed in the importance of 'listening to what people believe they want to achieve', and carefully weaved his aspirations for the project into the building through his relationship with Big Tom and through his commitment to doing the work nobody else wanted to do:

> Arnie: 'If I have my hand down the toilet and ask someone to do something, it's not because I'm throwing my power and ego around, it's because I have my hand in the toilet and you don't want to have yours in there instead.'

This new ethos was accompanied by the introduction of a probationary period and guest rooms for new members, workdays, and DIY workshops. Group meetings became an important point of contact with the building: a chance to hash out disagreements, discuss council orders, and implement group actions. Although Arnie and Big Tom had no formal authority to implement these new measures, the benefit of weekly meetings and a probationary period for new members was, to my surprise, recognized by residents of the building as mostly positive, and attendance to meetings was generally adhered to:

> Arnie: 'The importance of meetings here has massively escalated, because they allow people to know what is being planned. Also it allows that...that dear old thing, conflict resolution. Because no matter how many people there are who are friends…or how well people know each other, sometimes the more they know each other, the worse the politics get. So trying to put a system in place to deal with guests if there's an issue with a guest – being an open house as it is, people were just turning up to begin with – being able to have a level of accountability is important because not all personalities get along.'

For Arnie, the transition from a squat to a formal guardian was about reconfiguring the squatter's conceptions of themselves as a community. He believed, in order to re-build a sense of community at The Black Stag, that its members should be signed on to a company contract, creating "accountability", a sense of responsibility to one another, where previous nostrums of community in the squatting scene had been found wanting. Meetings were an attempt to shift the group mindset from an individual to a communal one, where autonomy in the squatting scene had failed to offer alternatives:

> Arnie: 'There is no community…there is no longer a community. Community is an excuse for people to take advantage of you in these circles. The community that Ember works with is very different. That's an example of people helping people who they may

> never see again. They're helping people on a regular basis they never see, and they take nothing from it. That's community.'

For Arnie, Kindle had proven a model of success that was difficult to replicate in the squatting scene, working with '…a group of people who believe that the place that they are is their home'. Community at The Black Stag was embedded in pre-existing claims to freedom and autonomy – the need to protect one's own lifestyle against eviction, to maintain a stable homelife, and to claim space in an environment where everything that is mine is yours, but the very concept of "mine-ness" is ephemeral, fraught with contradiction, and up for contestation. Before group meetings became a regular fixture in the building, signs and noticeboards were heavily relied on to do the work of community: to communicate important information, distribute the work of communal areas, organize bin days, settle noise complaints, and even resolve personal conflicts:

'YOU ARE NOT ANIMALS OR KIDS. CLEAN UP AFTER YOURSELVES'

'DON'T BE A LAZY CUNT'

'USE SHOWER INSTEAD OF SINK IN THE INTEREST OF THE CEILING NOT FALLING DOWN DOWNSTAIRS. CHEERS! :)'

These routine elements of communal living were complicated by real and infuriating laziness in the building: the endless struggle to find clean plates and cutlery among the piles of dirty dishes that seemed to accumulate in the building without anyone willing to acknowledge or own up to them, the unconditional sharing of food, tobacco, and drugs with members of the building deprived of work and money, who pushed acceptable boundaries of give and take, and the delicacy of asking squatters who had overstayed their welcome to leave. For Big Tom, the return of the weekly meeting, a closed door policy, and other measures to facilitate community engagement in the building were reminiscent, not just of Occupy, but of pre-criminalization residential forms of squatting:

> Big Tom: 'With the help of Arnie, who's really old school, we've gone back to really old, early 70s/80s formations of squatting. We have meetings, we have a locked door policy, you come around by invite only, you have to know someone, you have someone who vouches for you when you enter the door and that person becomes your guardian, essentially.'
>
> Me: 'Is that old school because it was previously legal to squat residential property, so the squats lasted longer?'
>
> Big Tom: 'Yeah, it was legal to squat residentials up until September 2012.
>
> Me: 'Did it change the way you lived?'
>
> Big Tom: Yeah I only had one house, squatted one house with a crew of friends.
>
> Me: Was it like living in your own house?
>
> Big Tom: It totally was, we were all really young, I think I was the oldest out of our lot at 23, they were all like 16, 17, 18, 21. And then, there was one other older guy, a really nice cyclist called Larry who was about 27 or 28, and his friend and an electrician we lived with previously in another squat, it was really lovely. It was right in Kentish Town, and we used to go and eat for free every day and then go play football in the park in the evening. The houses…they had a completely different ethos. They were colourful and

> people were squatting them for up to two years. And then they were living in them with a particular number of people but there wasn't an expanse of space so there was a limit to the amount of people that could be in there. Living with that many people in such a small space, you had to sit around the table and eat together and have a meeting, you know?'

For Big Tom, meetings should emerge spontaneously between a community of individuals committed to the same values and lifestyle norms. Community was realized, not through the workshop or the general assembly, but through the shared rhythms and routines of life lived in common spaces. While meeting attendance at The Black Stag was encouraged and recorded, a general policy of structurelessness and flexibility was adopted to allow squatters to openly voice their opinions, interrupt others, add or remove items from the agenda, even at times to refuse to participate at all.

I was eager to see, based on Big Tom's past criticisms of Occupy, how meetings would function at The Black Stag. While Occupy was widely celebrated for opening up new avenues for democratic subject-making, dialogue, common study, and reflection (Razsa and Kurnik, 2012; Razsa, 2015: 196), in London, Occupy's organizational forms were roundly criticized for doing the opposite: silencing critical perspectives and stifling political activity (Mathews, 2016: 196). The difficulty of establishing a consensus in General Assembly (GA) meetings meant that proposals were frequently discouraged and demoralized. Minority voices were silenced to include others, discussions were derailed to accommodate suggestions, and new proposals were side-lined by individuals interrupting to mount personal attacks (Mathews, 2016: 189). As Mathews (2016: 196) writes, Occupy London 'sought a type of unity that did not deal well with difference', and while activists insisted that it cover every corner of the movement, the GA cultivated 'an individualistic culture of "self-expression" that was debilitating to any ongoing collective enterprise'. One of Burgum's informants (2018b: 69-70) notes that the very structurelessness of the GA meant that men, frequently 'white-cis-gendered men', typically 'old Marxists' with 'those kinds of "physicalities"' … those identities"', prevented discussions from progressing along lines they did not agree with. Occupy's commitment to structurelessness and to an insistence that all personal beliefs and all individual choices should be included meant that powerful groups were never forced to 'compromise or alter their personal beliefs in order to commit in the direction of a collective organisation' (Burgum, 2018b: 82). The difficulty of achieving a GA consensus led to an organic transition away from the official Occupy London movement toward small, autonomous working groups 'driven by a pragmatic urgency to actually make […] decisions' (Burgum, 2018b: 74). As a result, the GA became 'just as exclusive and hierarchical as a more formal movement might have', but without structures in place to hold those working groups accountable.

The return of the weekly meeting was a chance for me to see The Black Stag organize together as a group – to put the lessons and principles that many had witnessed at Occupy London into practice. Big Tom was quick to dismiss my optimism. Less important were how meetings ran than whether they happened at all. This pragmatism rarely extended to discussions of democratic representation or consensus decision-making processes – meetings at The Black Stag were 'dysfunctional […] disorderly, a complete circus show', he explained. In one of my first meetings, which ran for one hour in the communal kitchen, an extensive list of jobs were accumulated by the squatters: broken toilets that needed to be fixed, the availability of fire safety and first-aid kits in the building, rubbish-tip runs, paint donations from local businesses,

and important news from the council. As we sat in a circle around Big Tom and worked our way through the agenda, squatters talked too loudly, people came and left too frequently, and discussion points dragged on too long. At one point, a squatter who had been drinking stumbled in the centre of the room, breaking up the circle of people. After an almost comical degree of patience from the squatters, someone volunteered to take him outside and prevent him from re-entering the room. 'How can we run a community', one of the squatters exclaimed, 'if we can't get through a single fucking meeting?'.
'It's all good', Arnie insisted, 'it's all positive'.
'If it's all positive then there's no flow', someone else said, 'electricity needs a positive and a negative charge'.

After the meeting ended, expecting the group to disappear into their rooms upstairs, I sat on the couch and watched as the squatters splintered into groups. Outside, three squatters from the second floor coalesced by a van and began clearing hard rubbish that had been sitting in the car park unattended for weeks. Karl (30), an electrician, tinkered with a faulty power-point, and another group of squatters volunteered to cut glass for a set of broken windows upstairs. Despite the chaos of the meeting (the inference from multiple squatters that this had been a waste of time), something had clicked together. In a building where the autonomy of the individual reigned supreme, the meeting had opened up a space of encounter: a moment of appearance and political possibility where squatters could meet together, eat together, and discuss news that concerned the group as a whole. The meeting entangled our bodies in space, creating points of convergence and lines of sight where we were forced to confront each other as a group, laying the groundwork for notions of collective identity to be contested, negotiated, and transformed. While this process was messy, and relied on the natural goodwill, trust, and friendships that squatters had with each other over formal structures– it made for (relatively) expeditious decision-making (Poletta, 2002: 207). There were no roll calls, voting procedures, or structures of formal consensus. The expectation was that we were there to get through an agenda, and as long as there were no major disagreements, this proved to be an effective process.

In October 2018, a friend of Big Tom's was invited to stay in the building from an anti-nuclear peace camp in Scotland – one of the longest running permanent settlements in the northern hemisphere. Jake (24) had lived on-and-off at the camp since the age of 18 with a dozen activists of the same age. That experience, he explained, had taught him the value of living with 'a group of people who have common ideas, a common purpose':

> Jake: '[At the peace camp] everyone was there for the same reason, in order to stop that thing, or to help each other live, they wanted to skill share and all that. There was a different attitude because there was a lot of pressure to keep things running. There was a list of things that we had to manage, the daily runnings of camp, weekly maintenance, and then someone else would be doing the media side of things; facebook, the mail that's coming in, the emails. We also had a phone-line coming in because the peace camp has been there for thirty-eight years or something. So, we'd all take turns answering the phone. And then maybe take turns...someone would be in charge of the stall that we'd take out. It'd all be delegated around at the meetings. And then the next part of the agenda would be what's going on in the space, that would be the meeting's main topic, just filling people in.

Jake's approach to community marked a key shift from the political experiments and creative organization of movements like Occupy. The peace camp, he explained, 'was a working space,

not a living space. We were consensus based but…we didn't do "jazz hands" [a form of silent applause indicating consensus]. We just talked about it'. Like Big Tom, Jake believed in *keeping activists busy* in order to avoid getting bogged down in questions of movement identity or group organisation. Individuals entered the camp by choice, encouraging them to define themselves, not by their identities, but by who they were in their relationships with each other in the pursuit of a common goal (Little, 2002: 158-159; Gorz, 1999: 119). As Little (2002: 158) writes, while this type of community may reject old political orthodoxies (race, nationality, ethnicity) in exchange for more fluid forms of membership, it can also underestimate the degree to which members expect a high degree of effort and cohesiveness from one another. On one hand, the benefit of living in a such an environment was obvious:

> Jake: '[At the peace camp] we always help each other out, we've always got each other's backs. If someone's hungry, if we know someone's hungry, we'll tell them to shut up, get over themselves, come over and eat something. Don't care if you can't afford it, just come over and eat! We can't have someone starving while we're eating our fucking dinner. That's why we cook communally, because no matter what, everyone gets fed. It's swings and roundabouts. It isn't solely just "me me me", or everyone in their own little bubble. No one has the attitude of "fuck you, I'm doing what I want". The attitude is, "we're living together, so let's get on with it."'

On the other hand, when major conflicts did arise, activists were quick to shut down dissent. The ability to evict members from the camp, to draw clear boundaries around drug use, and to enact authority was essential to maintaining a peaceful living environment.

> Jake: 'You still get people who take drugs and who use, because it is still an open gate policy of come live here, come get involved. But then, when things get out of hand it's like, well we're all here trying to fight, or get involved, and stop this thing from happening that's up the road. And now this is where it can get quite cut-throat, cos I feel like, don't come and get involved and put all your energy into something, to then completely flag up and mess up your head. If not, leave, because it's quite an intense place to live, for your own mental health, and come back later.'
>
> Me: 'Did you ever have to evict someone from your own community?'
>
> Jake: 'A couple times, cause they were just drinking all the time, not doing nothing. Someone used heroin on the site once, and we were like, "this is not the space for that. You can fuck off". We had to literally cart him out.'

Jake characterized drug abuse as a form of *anti-community*, promoting behaviours that drained productivity, morale, and the emotional energy of the group. In a working environment where there was always more work to be done than bodies available – wood to be chopped, food to be cooked, actions to be organized, councils and local authorities to be managed – addiction posed a threat to the welfare of the individual *and* to the peaceful function and living environment of the group. The adoption of rules, structures, and forms of (negotiated) exclusion were central to preserving the peace and well-being of the group, even if that came at the expense of the individual. At The Black Stag, in contrast, while meetings did happen, they often relied on interactional frameworks that remained invisible and unchecked. When there was disagreement, or the natural bonds of friendship between squatters broke down, the precarity of these interactional frameworks was thrown into relief (Poletta, 2002: 207). This was made clear when it came to the various reasons why the squatters were occupying the building, and what they wanted from the project:

> Jake: ‘Here, a lot of squatters will move in because they need somewhere to sleep. But of course, there’s this second agenda of, it’s not a home, it’s a working space. [At the peace camp] we were all working together trying to achieve the same goal. Here, it’s all just a mish-mash of why everyone wants to be here. There's a pocket of people here, a pocket of people there that want something to happen with the project. A lot of people are just using it as a stop-off, somewhere to take drugs. They don't really get involved. The gossip and politics, that's why I didn't really get involved in squats. The squalitics of it.’
>
> Me: ‘It was mentioned the other day…someone said that drugs were too visible when we had visitors around. But it's difficult to put the foot down and make a rule of that here. There have been a few meetings where we've discussed the idea but...’
>
> Jake: ‘Everyone has different point of views.’
>
> Me: ‘Yeah, well there's just no way to actually…enforce a rule.’
>
> Jake: ‘There's not gonna be a way to sort it out until this space is open to the *public* public. As soon as we're open to the *public* public, then those dynamics would change, because there's a whole ethos, a whole attitude shift.’

For Jake, the lack of accountability structures at The Black Stag reinforced a politics of the individual that prevented the project from reaching common ground. He emphasized democratic participation and consensus decision-making over the freedom of the individual, welcoming measures that constrained his autonomy in the interests of promoting the well-being of the group. As Poletta (2002: 14) writes, such an approach can be useful because it reinforces member’s solidarity, clarifying group preferences and bringing ‘fragmentary information to bear on joint problems’. But too much emphasis on consensus may stifle difference, conjuring away individual perspectives through processes that attempt to regulate behaviour and enforce commitment to the group (Little, 2002: 158; Poletta, 2002: 14). For Poletta, a strong deliberative process is characterized, not by its ability to generate unity, but rather:

> ‘[its ability] to delineate a range of individual positions that are consistent with a group position. By requiring that participants take seriously each other’s concerns and priorities, the process balances individual initiative with solidarity, both of which are critical to successful collective action’ (Poletta, 2002: 9)

As I show in the next section, while Jake and Big Tom tended to emphasize the gap between individual and collective interests, this often excluded other members of the building who saw their autonomy as a distinct practice and way of ordering their relations – as a community, one that was emergent, decentralized, and profoundly incompatible with structures of authority and formal organization. This had the effect of turning concrete questions concerning what kinds of community the project could accommodate into an irresolvable conflict between individual initiative and solidarity, self-indulgence and unity, autonomy and community.

Whose community?

While the introduction of meetings and group workdays among members of the building was cooperated with, the practical labour of transitioning the building from a squat to Ember project remained gradual, uneven, and contested. Those who saw The Black Stag as an Ember project were forced continually to defend their intentions in the face of seemingly insurmountable obstacles: a derelict building that required months (if not years) of work to open to the public,

a verbal contract with the owner that had no written or legal basis, and a group of squatters with various levels of commitment, work ethic, and expressed needs for and from the building. While this new agenda was tolerated by some squatters in the building, it also threatened to push others away.

Will (29), a web design student who was employed part-time as a chef at an events venue in London, struggled to share his responsibilities between work and the project. Working 12-14 hour shifts overnight without breaks, Will regularly sustained weeklong drug binges before locking his door and crashing in his room, sometimes for days at a time. Will's contributions to the building were erratic, and his absence from building meetings and workdays quickly became a problem of *being seen* by the group. Meetings served as an important building ground for the formation of a collective group identity, but pressure from Big Tom to participate – taking the form of personal confrontations, call-outs in group meetings, and passive-aggressive notes on his door – pushed Will further away, hardening a conviction that group activities were superficial attempts to create community in a building comprised of distinct squatters with their own views, beliefs, and lifestyles:

> Will: 'Having multiple aims makes a cohesion harder to make, y'know?' If you've got people that are on the same page, working to make a building better, then they can all work together, but if you've then got political ideals involved in that then there's going to be a lot of differences. This building isn't a cohesive...there's not enough like-mindedness here, do you know what I mean? I find myself having very different ideals to a lot of people here, general politics, why we're squatting this building, views on life, a lot of things. Most things. I can get along with squatters, but there is a difference of opinion in certain subjects that we see black and white on.'

While Will had moved to the building with a group of friends from a protest squat, his emphasis on autonomy put him at odds with efforts by Arnie and Big Tom to push for a new, collective ethos in the building. Will firmly held to a belief that The Black Stag remained a squat, not an Ember project, invoking a period in the building's history when squatters like Little Tom had lived in the building without forcing participation in group actions.

> Will: 'Some people are just here for the shelter, some people are here to take advantage of each other...It wasn't even initially an Ember project because there's too many people that aren't involved in that side of things. It's [another] squat-lot which fuckin broke in two and fuckin split in half…half stayed here.'

Another friend of Big Tom's, Travis (31), an artist who mostly travelled in the festival scene and arrived to the project in the last months of 2018, began butting heads with Arnie when making space for his things. Travis, who spent long days with his fiancé painting and filling art commissions, saw the project as an opportunity to lie low for a while, settle down, and develop passion for his craft – an imperative that came into conflict with the collective focus of the building:

> Travis: 'Arnie has a real solid idea of where he's taking this project, but I've also got a solid idea of what I wanna do and where I'm going, and sometimes those things clash. When Arnie and I first met and started living and working in the same space together, that started to come out a bit. So, we had a falling out. The first few times we fell out was over…I've come in and I'm just sort of cracking on…but it's not quite part of what he's got going on, you know? So he's stepped in to stop it. And it's like, well, you're

> not going to be able to stop me, I'm just going to do it. I'd be interested to see what you do do to try and stop me.'

For Big Tom, these disagreements tested his relationships with squatters in the building, creating a constant tension between the individual and collective focus of the building. Too much autonomy threatened to collapse into a politics that failed to sufficiently challenge the present order – resting on or inadvertently perpetuating neoliberal values of freedom of choice and the sovereignty of the individual (Lauri, 2019: 162), and assuming an "equality" of rights between individuals that silenced attempts to introduce rules or boundaries in the group. But too much emphasis on collectivity presented its own exclusionary logic, in which rules, formal structures, and chains of command became centralized and unaccountable. Rather than formalizing or openly acknowledging their relative positions of power, Arnie and Big Tom tended to downplay their authority in order to avoid confrontation with other squatters in the building. But this had the unintended effect of informalizing the relative authority and control they did have over the project. Pressure to contribute was often justified in in terms of *displays of commitment* to the project – insofar as it could be agreed (a line which Arnie and Big Tom frequently employed in their negotiation of support from the squatters) that there was no future in the building without the support of the owner and council.

While Arnie and Big Tom made an active effort to maintain a positive dialogue with the building owner and the council, their monopoly on information concerning the group, and their use of this information to leverage participation in the project, proved a continual source of disagreement in the building. Participation in the project was actively rewarded by Arnie and Big Tom, in terms of access to information, what information was shared with the squatters and when, and whose work and skills were seen as most valuable to the project. Over the course of my fieldwork, these responsibilities were shared between an increasingly select few members of the building – including Arnie, who showed, in his daily actions, an unwavering work ethic and commitment to restoring the building and serving the local community. On the other hand, if a robust work ethic demonstrated a commitment to the safety and well-being of the project, then to withdraw from work on the building was to implicitly sabotage or exploit it. But a lack of involvement in the project did not always neatly map onto laziness or withdrawal from the group. For squatters like Will, who shared their time between work and the building, there was less free time and energy to devote to the project. Other squatters, who suffered quietly from addiction or mental illness, were expected to compete with the mental and physical demands of the group. And those who withdrew from the politics of the building, yet whose labour fulfilled "mundane" or "domestic" roles, such as care labour or emotional support, struggled to show their commitment to the project.

As Kadir (2016: 135-137) writes, a principal contradiction of showing commitment is that it only becomes legible negatively, when the majority of squatters do not want to commit. While commitment is highly regarded in communal spaces, openly acknowledging this commitment in an environment defined by the 'fiction of equality' and principles of 'radical left communal living' can be a taboo (Kadir, 2016: 135). Displaying commitment is deliberately vague and ambiguous, open to interpretation, and relies on 'the recognition of other people to whom one endeavors to show their commitment' (132), and not necessarily any clear hierarchy of rules or ethical procedures. Through receiving and acknowledging commitment, authority figures express their dominance and expectations of others, and squatters with lesser status are forced to *feel* out the contours of this 'terrain of unstated hierarchy' – often while authority figures

deny it exists (Kadir, 2016: 132). The emergence of these unstated regimes of commitment generated disagreement between the squatters, who complained about being unfairly pressured into making contributions to a project that they felt did not have their best interests in mind. On the other hand, figures like Arnie and Big Tom expressed frustration that they were seen as monopolizing power, no matter what they did.

On more than one occasion during my fieldwork, disputes emerged between members of the building over its ongoing ties to the squatting scene. Despite attempts to implement a probationary period for new members of the project, the number of people at The Black Stag fluctuated dramatically over the course of my fieldwork, and overlapped with safety concerns from the council about the maximum capacity of people in the building, illegally parked caravans, and housing children on site. During one of our house-meetings in August, it was announced that a young woman, Alexa, and her four-year-old son, James, would be staying in the building for two weeks. Alexa was fleeing her violent ex-partner (and father to her child) after being threatened at another site in London. It was agreed that Alexa and James could stay in the building while looking for somewhere permanent to live. This generated some disagreement among the squatters. The building was torn between helping a member of the community in genuine distress, and on the other hand, upholding the safety concerns of the council. As Alexa settled into the building and took over one of the upstairs guest rooms, it became increasingly difficult to justify having a child on site, where sharp and unstable objects, holes in the ground, and dangerous chemicals lay unattended. Despite our best efforts to share the responsibility of watching James, a number of squatters, including Jake and Big Tom, expressed doubt over whether the project could be held accountable for his safety.

There were several attempts to help Alexa find a new home. Some weeks into her stay in the building, Arnie offered to loan her his caravan to migrate to a small land-squat nearby. Will offered his phone and internet connection to reach out to family services and arrange housing support. Alexa turned these offers down, citing concerns about having a permanent address, which she worried put her in a vulnerable position. Frustration with her unwillingness to compromise soon turned to anger. During a heated encounter in a hallway, Big Tom accused Alexa of being a witch and a succubus, sucking the energy out of the building – representing her failure, especially her failure as a mother with a child, to negotiate the work/life balance of the project. On another occasion, an "anonymous caller" reported the building to child protection services to complain of unsupervised children on site. This was the last straw for many in the building, who saw Alexa as a threat to the security of their homes and who brought in unwanted attention from the council. During a house meeting, Alexa was given two weeks by the group to move out. Alexa shouted that she was being targeted and victimized. Others responded that they had done everything they could while remaining in good standing with the council:

> Jake: [People are] so focused on the idea that someone wants them out that they can't see the big picture. They're not listening to the rest of it, which is really immature. To think about it sensibly, you should be listening to the whole story, because it does involve the whole building. It's not just an argument between two people, it's the whole building that is involved in relation to the council. And to be honest, people need to step up, grow up, and pay attention to what other things are at risk here. It's not just about them.

For Jake, the building could not be an Ember project and a shelter. The project needed the support of owner and council in order to establish a long-term foundation for support and care in the community. He put greater emphasis on the organizational and developmental pre-requisites to enduring change (Poletta, 2002: 181). For squatters like Will, on the other hand, who stepped in to defend Alexa, it was exactly these kinds of possibilities for direct action and mutual aid that the squatting scene (however local, ephemeral) was best equipped to offer. He put greater emphasis on the immediate provision of support and shelter to members of his own community. For Jake, Alexa had ignored their attempts at support while putting the squatters, and her child, at risk. For Will, the squatters were evicting one of their most vulnerable residents in the name of thinly-veiled political calculations about what was best for the future of the building.

Ultimately, the squatters were forced to make a choice between the project and extending shelter and care to James and Alexa. In chapter 3, I explore how a similar kind of tension, between local struggles around homelessness and the wider commitments of Occupy London to addressing problems that extended beyond community borders, led to calls to move outside the camp as a long-term space for political organizing (Mathews, 2016). These tensions are playing out in similar ways, albeit on a much smaller scale, in spaces like The Black Stag. The need to make pragmatic decisions that serve some demands at the expense of others is a key part of any political decision-making process. For Occupy activists, the move away from the GA to autonomous working groups and protest actions freed up room to make urgent decisions as new events unfolded (Burgum, 2018b: 74), but weakened communication between active elements of the movement (Mathews, 2016: 192). In contrast, the lack of centralized authority at The Black Stag allowed for quick decision-making and complex forms of individuality and collectivity to exist side-by-side, but ground to a halt when ideological differences could not be resolved. As Poletta (2002) writes, a lack of formal process can turn disagreements into mounted attacks, personal disputes, and bullying, as informal positions of power come to substitute formal ones. It can ‘discourage economies of scale as well as [make] it difficult to coordinate anything wider than local action’ (12). And it can turn discussions inward, to the detriment of efforts to bring about external change or identify problems that have their sources elsewhere (Poletta, 2002: 213-214). As I show in the next section, this was especially true when it came to the complex relationship between the squatters and the council.

Eviction

Toward the final months of my fieldwork in 2018, there was a sense that, despite the best efforts of Arnie and Big Tom to organize the group around a common cause, the energy behind the project had dissipated. A number of the squatters remained resolute that, if and when a final eviction notice ever came down, they would formally squat the building against the interests of the owner. Big Tom and Arnie’s belief that the project would eventually secure the support of the public rested on a particular conception of creative city politics, and a faith in its receptivity to their vision of a new, community-led urbanism. This faith was tested over the course of my fieldwork, and cast doubt on the group’s ability to earn the support of local authorities and the community. The constant barrage of council orders served on the building, and the sheer scale of work required to lift the building out of its derelict condition, cast doubt on the ability of the group to maintain any narrative that this was a “community” project. As the building faced threats from the council and talks of a new tenancy began to circulate

between the owner and squatters, eviction became, for the first time in my fieldwork, a real threat.

This is not unusual for movement organizations. As Cooper and Baer write (2019: 194), negotiating the planning process and regulatory landscape in urban areas has been a significant barrier to development for ecovillages, cohousing, and other community projects. 'The practical realities of chasing idealistic visions [have] quickly come into stark relief', and financial and emotional strain can result in 'burnout, tension, and even participants walking away' (Cooper and Baer, 2019: 195). Often these constraints emerge as a result of opposition between local organisations (acting as advocates and innovators in the social sector) and councils. The proposals of community-centric developments, while lawful, have faced repeated financial issues, delays, long-lines, and increased costs as a result of resistance and inertia from local government and business, with the failure rate of some cohousing communities reaching as high as nine in ten (Cooper and Baer, 2019: 195). To some extent, the Ember model circumvented many of these initial barriers, occupying buildings with the consent of the owner and council while retaining some degree of autonomy as a community project. For Arnie, this required, fundamentally, a relation of trust and mutual benefit between Ember, property owner, and council:

> Arnie: 'The Ember model is about approaching owners of properties and inviting them to enter into a business transaction, where through having the building occupied by the Ember model is of financial benefit to both parties. Both the Ember party, in the shape of not having to pay ground rent to enable the community, and through the community use of the building, to be able to save the owner money in business rates.'

To what extent, however, the squatting scene could survive under this new configuration was left ambiguous.

> Big Tom: '[This project], on a personal level, has given me the stability to rebuild where I am at. There's always a selfish note to it, to house myself and be in a situation where I feel comfortable. But there's always a worry, which is always with a squat mentality, that "it's not your house, it's a building that you've squatted". People should be able to come and use it. But then with this being something more secure, I do have to keep the rules and regulations under control properly, I can't have everyone come in, I can't house everyone, I can't do those things. Which is great for me because I *can't* actually handle the squatting anymore, living with that many people, constant noise, living on different timescales and schedules, living with people that love to party every weekend.'

Big Tom's comments reflect an underlying tension in the building over its status as a squat – as "not mine", "something I've merely squatted" – and as an Ember project, a formal organisation that followed "the rules and regulations" and produced financial benefit to council and owner. These feelings of mutuality, however, were seldom returned by the council, which made itself felt through a hostile set of tools and techniques to undermine the squatter's project in the building. The delicacy of the squatter's footing with the council was often tested in its encounters with the local head of planning, "Michael Pratt", who invited himself into the building to direct the squatters to do inane and repetitive work according to council regulation – such as erecting a gate to secure the property one month, and then ordering them a few months later to tear it down. For squatters like Arnie and Big Tom, there was a concerted effort to follow council regulations if the building was to eventually open to the public. But these

regulations heavily constrained the use of the building, reinforcing to the squatters that their homes were categorically illegitimate to the council, and their community politics *never really welcome in the first place.*

The Black Stag's roots in the squatting scene and their values of autonomy-against-work and DIY activism proved a constant barrier in the building's attempts to negotiate its legitimacy to the council. As Deslandes (2013) writes, while DIY urbanism may signal to neoliberal governments an image of the "creative class" and the "creative city" to be realised through the renewal of urban communities and the "activation" of previously abandoned parts of town, the presence of squatters often suggests a failure of governments, urban planners, and concerned citizens to police those spaces and realize their commercial value (Deslandes, 2013: 218). Squatting constitutes a piecemeal claim to spatial justice, in that it uses the rhetorics of amateurism, marginality, and informality to make room in the city, to occupy it and put to use its derelict spaces (218). But in order to appeal to councils and private building owners, it must also rely on positioning the movement as part of a new "moral community" and "urban citizenship" (Muehlebach, 2009: 513), conforming to strict planning regulations, public policy, and land and building speculation (Cooper and Baer, 2019: 190). While Ember's success lay in its ability to start each project on a level footing with councils and property owners, and to perform its authenticity as an organisation to those authorities, Arnie and Big Tom still continued to value their autonomy, their practices of DIY amateurism, and a politics of antagonism against the council.

Of the one or two members of staff in the local council who maintained communication with The Black Stag, these members proved to be an exception rather than a rule. Prohibition orders, surprise inspections, complaints and notices were the primary medium through which a hostile relationship was waged between the squatters and the council. When the squatters first moved into The Black Stag, the council had submitted a 'complaint of alleged breach of planning control' for an illegal change of use from pub to mixed-use residential. An inspection carried out in the following months found no *legal* residential arrangement between the squatters occupying the building and the owner, on which either party could be charged. Failing this, in the early months of my fieldwork, the council submitted a Notice Before Exercising Power of Entry to conduct a thorough health and safety inspection of the building. The inspection resulted in a prohibition order being placed on the building, preventing the owner from leasing the property to a new tenant until a list of 'category 1' hazards had been resolved. With no 'realistic possibility [of] adequately addressing the hazards without significant work being undertaken', the estimated costs of carrying out such work were deemed 'prohibitive'. In a final bid to repossess the building from the owner over 'neglect of a heritage-listed property', in the last months of my fieldwork, the council served an Enforcement (215) notice, giving the owner a one-month period of compliance to restore the building's 400-year-old façade. If the deadline was not met, Arnie explained, the council could forcibly purchase the building from the owner, with the estimated costs of the restoration work (estimated by the council's planning department) deducted.

At times, these orders could be interpreted as minor wins for the squatters, and further established their standing in the building. In the period following the enforcement notice, the owner began advertising for a new tenancy. This one was of the first indications that the owner was in financial straits with the council, and was seeking out other ways to service the building. Arnie accompanied these inspections as a manager and guardian of the property, pointing out

to prospective tenants, among other concerns, the council notices placed on the building, the costs and delays of restoration work, the flooding basement that leaked mould into the walls and air, the exposed wiring and electrical problems, the lack of central heating, and the invisible leak that had crippled the gas system after a fire had ravaged through the ground floor some years earlier.

There were also minor wins for Big Tom and Arnie, for whom the notices presented an opportunity to generate enthusiasm and participation in the project. Arnie and Big Tom used the prohibition notices to build momentum in the building, claiming that they were served on the squatters directly, and concerned '…everyone's place in the building equally'. After an emergency meeting, news of the order whipped the building into a frenzy, with the squatters assigning workgroups to jobs that could be completed within a short time frame (cutting and measuring glass to be re-installed in broken windows, scrapping wood and other materials from local construction bins to replace broken floorboards); while others made plans to recycle stolen copper and wire from a nearby derelict building to rally up funds for a new boiler (the irony, seemingly lost in these moments, that every improvement the squatters made to the building, which brought them one step closer to lifting it from prohibition, gradually untied their own claims to the building as a space "outside" official circuits of profitability and exchange).

There was, however, a real and tangible threat from the council notices, which through targeting the owner financially, left the squatters in a vulnerable position. After receiving the enforcement notice, and holding onto the building for several weeks past the deadline, the owner ordered Arnie and Big Tom to clear the top two floors, splitting the building in two: with the bottom half occupied by the squatters, and the top half by a new (informal, foreign speaking) live-in construction crew hired to restore the top floors of the building. During the transition, which would involve hauling literal tons of the squatters possessions through narrow corridors and down flights of stairs, Arnie continued to work on maintaining good relations with the owner, mitigating incidents between the workers and squatters, where the squatters, he explained, had begun '…shouting and having a go at the workers for entering their space'. With half of the squatters leaving for festival season over the summer, the building seemed to be slipping out from underneath our feet.

> August 2018 (Fieldnote Entry): 'At the moment, the game of dice Arnie is playing with each party: the council, the owner and his real estate agency, and the squatters, all vying for control over the building, has swung in the squatters favour. But it also means that their priorities have shifted. The struggle now is to hold onto the building rather than use it. Plans to convert the ground floor into an art gallery have been put on hold. The number of bedrooms has halved. Should we be asking questions about how much longer we wait before finding somewhere else to live? With the majority of squatters away at festivals, very little is being achieved. Arnie's optimism is, as always, unmoved. But our footing with the owner seems shaky at best.

Anxieties about the security of the squatter's homes deepened when, in November, the building received an anonymous eviction order, served on the upstairs construction crew and '…all other occupiers'. After the initial shock of receiving the order, one of the squatters identified the document as fraudulent. Important information concerning the eviction had been written in fine print, and the names and court dates obscured or left out. Rumours began circulating that the owner had caved to pressure from the council, looking to evict the squatters while side-

stepping a lengthy and expensive eviction court process. With these changes came a sudden turn of faith in the project, and it seemed as if the squatters could no longer continue work on the building with the pressure being exerted on them from above. One morning in October, I arrived to find Big Tom and another squatter piling scrap from the basement in the back yard. Arnie appeared in a window on the second floor, shouting and waving at Big Tom to put things back. There was a short back-and-forth. Arnie rushed into the yard, exasperated, picking through the pile of materials to salvage what he could; a brass tap and pipes, large iron beams…'We're losing the building anyway', Big Tom said, 'we may as well get something back'.

In a conversation later that day, Arnie explained to me that he had once made his reputation with a group of squatters breaking and entering buildings, planting gardens, refurbishing the rooms, and moving out. That same ethos had informed his approach to The Black Stag. 'This isn't a squat', he continued, 'we're better than that…we're keeping this building and people should respect that. And even if we lose it, we're not just going to empty it out and fuck off'.

Conclusion

In 2019, some months after I returned home to Australia, the squatters were served another informal eviction notice by the owner. This time the squatters caved in. Big Tom took his pets and belongings and disappeared with a small group of squatters (Jeremy and Ursula) to take up work at a pub. As the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the UK and placed them out of work, they were put on Furlough and moved into an empty building further out of London. Others, like Travis, who relied on part-time work at festivals and events, were forced to apply for unemployment support. Arnie left the building toward the end of 2018, splitting his attention between family and the Nest Project (then building momentum). Will returned to his hometown and found employment as an IT professional. Many others disappeared into land squats and building occupations around London, remaining committed to the lifestyles of freedom and autonomy they had enjoyed at The Black Stag. For many this lifestyle remained, throughout the pandemic, profoundly incompatible with social distancing and quarantine mandates from central government. I caught glimpses of a response to COVID-19 from squatters who filled my social media feeds with doubt and scepticism about the spread of the virus and subsequent vaccines, stirring a mix of sympathy and criticism from other members of the movement who were just as loudly critical of the failures of squatters to follow official medical advice.

The lesson, for Big Tom, was clear: you cannot build a community organization with a group of squatters. There was an acknowledgment of other factors that had hindered progress: an intractable council, a negligent owner, a building that was falling apart as quickly as they could piece it back together. After two years of living and working with various squatters, however, Big Tom remained resolute that fundamental differences had prevented the project from reaching common ground. Friendships had grown apart, if they had not fallen through altogether. Lifestyle incompatibilities had become political ones. There was already talk about saving up to buy a private lot of land further north. "It would be something to work on together", Big Tom explained, "all the squatters here who have done something, who helped with the project; Jake, Ursula, Jeremy…". As Big Tom had put it, earlier in my fieldwork:

> Big Tom: 'When the others are shaken off and their opinions are taken out of the equation, because they don't have the stuff to back up their wants and their whining, then things will start to click. Then things will start to roll forward.'

In some ways, this chapter is an attempt to dwell on these tensions and differences; to draw out the moments in which collective decision-making processes were defined and negotiated. While Big Tom tended to emphasize the gap between autonomy and community, my impression is that, for those who weren't actively opposed to meetings or workdays, a recognition of the different capabilities, concerns, and limitations of the squatters to contribute may have enlarged their sense of individual autonomy while encouraging participation in the group. On the other hand, while Big Tom and others made efforts to introduce regular meetings as part of this transition, formalizing leadership structures and establishing clear chains of command was seen as transgressive. This often hurt the ability of the squatters to act when informal consensus was reached. When it came to settling disagreements, or asking unwanted visitors to move on, the use of formal structures may have actually strengthened, rather than undermined, feelings of trust, solidarity, and mutual respect in the group. As Poletta (2002) writes, what makes rules so hard to implement in these groups is that they force activists to move beyond the normative frameworks that typically govern their interactions:

> 'To implement formal rules would [be] to abrogate friendship's voluntary character. To override people's invocation of personal conscience would [be] to violate the very basis for their— for all members'—activism. And to define an agenda for residents would [be] to defeat the purpose of the learning process altogether' (Poletta, 2002).

The Black Stag relied heavily on friendships to mediate conflict – an informal process that, when it functioned well, allowed complex notions of individuality and collectivity to coexist. As Poletta (2002: 210) writes, formalizing these processes may not always be the solution: when activists model themselves on friendship, they create relationships that feel authentic and affectively rich. Informal structures allow activists to negotiate complex relations of equality and make decisions without constant deferral to the rules of engagement (2002: 222). The issue is that, when major conflicts do arise, informal frameworks may encourage norms that undermine transparency in the group – informal hierarchy, exclusivity, conflict avoidance, even an 'antipathy to the rules that may have made for more accountability' (Poletta, 2002: 222). Nor do informal frameworks necessarily scale with larger, movement-based organizations. Differences that serve as a form of enrichment and solidarity in one group, in another, may become oppressive and stifling. While Occupy London sought consensus through formal institutions like the General Assembly, the "structure-lessness" of the GA often led to unequal distributions of authority and voice, silencing marginal perspectives and pushing activists toward smaller working groups driven by a desire to actually get something done (Burgum, 2018b: 70).

Are there better alternatives? As squatters look toward new alliances and new forms of organization, questions about whose communities should be prioritized and what kinds of autonomy they can incorporate will be critical. For some within the movement, this will necessitate a return to the lifestyle experiments that animated the new social movements of the 1970s and 80s (Feigenbaum et al., 2013: 24), retreating from questions of movement organization in order to privilege activist's immediate experiences of freedom and autonomy from the state. Projects like The Black Stag, on the other hand, push the limits of autonomy by broadening the scope of what kinds of political relations are possible within state networks.

Rather than claiming absolute autonomy from the state, squatters have turned to neighbourhoods, private enterprise, and government councils; some of the very institutions social movements in the last century claimed autonomy from (Böhm et al., 2010: 27). This autonomy will require a strong deliberative process. In order to grow and expand, I have argued, squatters must be willing to experiment with new kinds of formal organization – to embrace formal leadership structures at the expense of informal ones, identify long-term goals at the expense of short-term ones, and privilege some communities at the expense of others.

Conclusion: Autonomy in an age of abandonment

In the days after the Grenfell Tower tragedy, volunteers flooded into North Kensington to join in the relief effort. As stocks and supplies quickly piled-up in local warehouses, a number of churches and community groups moved in to assist. The outpouring of generosity from the community was so overwhelming that, due to the sheer volume of items being received, some had to turn donations away (Bowcott, 2017). At the same time, questions about the lack of government assistance and the breakdown of communication between sites began to take on an added urgency. 'Nobody is helping', one volunteer exclaimed. 'If you look around there's no one here with a council vest on' (Bowcott, 2017). At a Radical Housing Network meeting, activists called on the Kensington and Chelsea council to take over management of the relief effort:

> 'These are very uncoordinated [efforts] and my question is: "Where is the council?" This is something that we cannot do without an enormous level of planning and coordination. Stuff is going to deteriorate at these centres so they won't even get to people. If the council is going to have to pay people to do that, that is what they are going to have to do. This is not going to go away. Grenfell is going to be with us for weeks and weeks' (Bowcott, 2017).

Three days later, during her Queens Speech, Theresa May apologized for the government's response to the Grenfell Tower disaster. After outrage that residents of the tower were being given a mere £10 a day, Downing Street announced a flat payment of £5,500 to cover the costs of food, clothes, and temporary accommodation for immediate victims of the fires. In addition to the payment, May declared, 'all those who have lost their homes will be rehoused within three weeks' (Queen's Speech, 2017). The statement appeared to mark a turning point for residents who had been displaced by the disaster; who, in the days after the fires, were forced to sleep rough in parks and cars (Pasha-Robinson, 2017), on relative's couches, and in relief centres run by volunteers. But the sudden outpouring of support from the government seemed only to deepen confusion among residents of the tower. Many were refusing to receive the donation over concerns that it might impact their ability to access benefits (Pasha-Robinson, 2017). Two weeks later, only 9 of 158 households had accepted an offer to be rehoused. Leader of the Kensington and Chelsea Labour group Robert Atkinson remarked that 'traumatised people were being pushed to make decisions too soon because of Theresa May's promise' (BBC, 2017). Distance to local schools, the suitability of housing for elderly people, and access for disabled residents were among some of the factors reported to be causing delays. And because the offers were for intermediate (not permanent) accommodation, residents would have to uproot for a third time when a permanent offer was made (BBC, 2017).

The public inquiry into the fire pushes on. Occasional updates ('Grenfell Firm Took Some of Cladding Savings For Itself'…'Project Manager Admits "Binning" Notebooks') still make major headlines (Booth, 2020; PA Media, 2020). But as the days turn to months and years, the real targets of this crisis – privatization and deregulation, financial corruption, subcontractor fraud – have seemingly vanished behind questions of who did what on the night, how the

situation was handled by emergency services, and whether the firefighters were too slow to adapt (e.g. Economist, 2019). As I argued in chapter 2, such questions are far removed from the reality of victims who lost their homes in the tragedy; who, some three years later, are still being displaced by the fires. Just recently, 81-year-old survivor, Hermine Harris, was asked to leave her apartment when it was discovered the building she had been relocated to – a new-build recently purchased by the council to house victims of the fire – was 'another potential Grenfell' (Martel, 2020). After an inspection of the building revealed unsafe doors, issues with ventilation, and problems with fire protection between floors, the council was forced to install a 24/7 fire warden to patrol the complex. Harris turned down an offer from the council to move. '[I]f she moves out without a secure tenancy', her lawyer explained, 'there's a worry in her mind they won't allow her back in again. Because the trust has broken down between her and the local authority' (Martel, 2020).

Grenfell stands as a singular reminder of the disastrous effects of neoliberal housing policies in the UK. The withdrawal of ACM-style cladding systems in cities across the world is a good example of the power and reach of this tragedy. Grenfell invites us to consider the vulnerability of our own homes and livelihoods. But it can also work to neutralize and contain aspects of this crisis that are, in contrast, slower, less visible, 'spectacle deficient' (Nixon, 2011: 47). This thesis begins and ends with Grenfell, not just because the fire itself is emblematic, epochal even, an indictment of austerity politics in the UK; but because of what it spells out to us in the months and years after the fires: the catastrophic failure of the state to intervene in its aftermath, the breakdown of trust between citizens and local authorities, and the growing effort of activists and volunteers to rebuild in spaces where these state infrastructures (housing, community, and healthcare) have broken down. In many ways, this thesis is a reflection on the different kinds of autonomy that have begun to emerge (and re-emerge) in these spaces of abandonment by the state. Autonomy ties the experiences of freedom, creativity, and self-medication in the squatting scene, to the forms of experimental solidarity and care in Occupy that sought, unevenly, to imagine a place for the homeless at the centre of the movement; to the rise of volunteer workers in cities like London and New Orleans that are taking on the work recovery through a growing range of commercial and public-private partnerships.

In this chapter, I explore three separate yet interconnected moments of autonomy – The Black Stag, the Occupy movement, and Ember – as part of a wider set of struggles to take back the city from the state. There is a risk, of course, in subsuming these practices under one heading, and this partly contradicts one of the primary tenets of localism: to resist 'rote formations' of correct models and actions (Alcoff and Alcoff, 2015: 240). And yet, as Vasudevan (2014: 318), writes, we cannot take for granted the ways these differential claims to autonomy are being made across multiple spaces, sometimes in radically common ways. The diversity and heterogeneity of these spaces challenge us to think, not just why movements fail to connect, but under what conditions they can be collectively assembled and made in common.

But if autonomy has offered new ways of thinking about inhabiting the city, austerity too, I have argued, has offered new ways to divert these energies, abandon local communities, and shut down squatters' autonomy. In what follows, I revisit the spaces of The Black Stag, Occupy, and Ember as key sites in which such a politics is being waged today. I invoke these spaces, following Khasnabish (2016), not in order to identify the most "effective" channels for political action, but to critically explore what each of them illuminates (2016: 232) in terms of the systems of oppression they seek to resist and overcome. These struggles demand a conceptual

architecture that is attentive to the ability of activists to work together and build solidarity across diversity and difference; and at the same time, that recognizes their embeddedness within local conditions, horizons, and constraints.

The Black Stag

The ripple effects of austerity crisis in the UK have been slow but catastrophic. Over the last decade, austerity policies have hollowed out the public sector, stripping access to housing and healthcare while shutting down alternative spaces for young people to explore their autonomy. If chapter 1 explored one of the most visible manifestations of this crisis – Grenfell Tower – chapter 2 turned its attention to the ways squatters are re-appropriating these landscapes of abandonment and decay. It explored how concrete shifts in mental health policy and the financialization of public services are being felt, not just as a pressure exerted on but also through vulnerable communities being forced to negotiate the terms of their abandonment by the state. For many squatters, this abandonment has been simultaneously liberating and disciplining (Forst, 2013: 7). Squatting, recycling, and dumpster diving have given rise to a wide range of creative possibilities for young people to continue to explore their autonomy. For activists like Jeremy and Will, squatting was a lifestyle choice, an identity, an expression of creativity, and a claim to independence in the face of 'wide-ranging powers of urban normalization' (Lancione, 2019). It offered 'an alternative forum for autonomous personal dignity' (Bourgois, 2012: 8) in an environment typically overdetermined by rates of poverty and violence, giving them space to explore alternative identities "outside" capital and the state.

At a time when welfare and community services continue to decline (Cummins, 2018), autonomy for my informants also offered an alternative (but not always productive) pathway to self-medication and self-care. It promised squatters the freedom to experiment and take drugs on their own terms, in a context where formal approaches to mental health and addiction remain largely punitive (Burraway, 2018: 202). And it allowed them to critique these existing systems without compromising their refusal of pharmaceutical companies or their rejection of carceral care. But such a politics also spoke of extreme marginalization (Lancione, 2019). Autonomy, for my informants, encompassed the right to be alone, to self-isolate, and take drugs, while accepting the risks associated with this lifestyle as a choice, not a structural discrimination to be resisted. It meant embracing this abandonment as a condition of their autonomy, and forging solidarity out of these shared experiences of precaritzation and decay. At its most extreme, autonomy was characterized by a refusal to participate in society on almost any terms (Broomfield, 2017: para. 11). For squatters like Victor, it represented the freedom to destroy himself and the power to choose how to do it. These rhetorics, I argued, can vastly exaggerate the agency of the individual in personal narratives of freedom and self-empowerment (Blackman, 2005). They can work to silence collective experiences of violence, and ignore the ways social hierarchies (class, gender, and race) are interpolated in autonomous spaces (Blackman, 2005: 15).

More dangerously, squatters like Victor have instrumentalized their abandonment as a condition of their autonomy, embracing precarity as a path to freedom from a corrupt and failed welfare state. Moved by a new sense of freedom and control over their lives, these squatters risk inadvertently enabling the neoliberalization of care through a politics grounded in the possibility of life outside and beyond the state. In the context of such acute neoliberalization,

what is so striking about stories like Victor's is the state's ability to incorporate their autonomy without friction or resistance. Neoliberalization puts squatters to work precisely 'because they think of themselves as belonging to an actively oppositional tradition' (Muehlebach, 2009: 497). Autonomy *works* because it offers real power to individuals, the homeless, and the sick, who have long bemoaned the failures of the state to provide them with adequate care. But it can also have ramifications that fall especially hard on these same individuals. As Calhoun (2006: 257) writes, the privatization of risk makes 'individuals bear the brunt of hardships that are predictable in the statistical aggregate, without effective mechanisms to share the burden, let alone reduce the risk'. Autonomy is always about community. But when the individual is emphasized, we risk losing sight of the complex social relations that sustain (and sometimes contradict) that autonomy.

The Occupy movement

For squatters like Big Tom, the challenge was to think an autonomy that could build solidarity across a broad variety of different struggles and terrains. What would a radical politics look like if it were grounded in this commitment to autonomy *and* collective organisation? Writing in the context of hurricane Katrina, the question for Calhoun (2006) is where to divert resources and exert pressure without abandoning the public institution as a social form. Managing risk was 'one of the basic reasons for the development of social institutions' (Calhoun, 2006: 260). The welfare society was always a combined effort between government and civil society. But where the former was lacking, the latter could only ever be a partial solution:

> 'In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, there was ample evidence of Americans' vaunted willingness to engage in acts of private charity. Individuals made sacrifices, and […] Americans responded with care to those who seemed wounded by events beyond their control. But Americans have yet to respond with similar care to the wounds suffered by the social institutions that could be providing care equitably and effectively, let alone with an interest in changing the structural inequalities that unfairly distribute risk' (Calhoun, 2006: 263).

In chapter 3, I showed how Occupy provided a brief glimpse of an autonomous organization in which new relations of care for the homeless, and new networks of solidarity with the vulnerable could become the basis for a global social movement. When Occupy first exploded onto the scene in 2012, activists were quick to name their targets – the propping up of the financial sector at the expense of human life and collective livability (Jaleel, 2013: 3) drew activists into cities around the world to contest those main sites of financial reproduction and accumulation: – the banks, large oil companies, investment firms, and bank-seized homes. As time passed, however, Occupy's objectives and capacities shifted. In the UK, Occupy London Stock Exchange (LSX) evolved into the more popular, "Occupy London". The occupation adopted an official policy of open borders. Activists built pop-up libraries, held democratic assemblies, distributed food in kitchens, and shared tents to rest. Occupy became a home, for many, an experiment in communal living, a chance to enact alternative networks of distribution and care. For others, it represented the rediscovery of a radical imagination 'so long dormant' (Haiven and Khasnabish, 2014: 30). Occupy was proof that another world was possible, and activists sought, not just to pinpoint the causes of the financial crisis, but to propose alternatives to it (Occupy Movement, 2021).

Movements like Occupy are increasingly taking on the work of recovery and care in the absence of state alternatives. Large scale disasters like Hurricane Katrina, the 2008 global financial crisis, and the subsequent politics of austerity have led to what Fraser (2016) and Sutherland and Visdhmidt (2015) have called a 'crisis of social reproduction'. Aggressive neoliberal policies have seen the closure of a number of crucial state services and the externalization of care labour onto volunteers, families, and communities. Mothers and single-parents, always major providers of unpaid domestic labour, have been forced to take up paid work or become secondary earners. The decline in real wage-growth has multiplied the costs of having a family, pushing services like child and healthcare out of reach for large segments of the population. And in order to fill the "care gap" created by the hollowing out of the welfare state, public service workers have been replaced by a fast growing private sector (Sutherland and Vishmidt, 2015: 7), often comprised of migrant women recruited through campaigns that have 'actively promoted women's emigration to perform paid carework abroad for the sake of remittances' (Fraser, 2016: 114). The result, Fraser (104) writes, has been a deepening of inequality across racial and gendered lines - a commodification of reproductive services for those who can afford them, and a privatization and precaritzation for those who cannot.

But we are also seeing this crisis hit in other ways, even as 'the feminization of domestic and care work remains firmly in place' (Sutherland and Vishmidt, 2015: 6). From New Orleans to Occupy, activists around the world are taking up the call to experiment with new forms of care and social service delivery. In cities across the US (Casper-Futterman, 2011), London (Mathews, 2016; Burgum, 2018b), Zagreb (Razsa, 2015), Athens (Arampatzi, 2014) and elsewhere, homelessness became a key political issue and point of struggle. In London, the confluence of homeless in the camps transformed housing from a "slow" to "fast" crisis, urging action by 'visually disrupting tourism and consumption-based economic activity' (Casper-Futterman, 2011: 4). This same visibility, however, also brought to light some of the darker elements of the camps. As the winter months dragged into January, and activists battled sub-zero degree temperatures, the framing of homelessness as an emergent "problem" rather than an opportunity to care arose alongside fears that the movement was beginning to lose its 'radical bite' (Penny, 2012; Burgum, 2018b: 52). As Burgum writes, the so-called "homeless problem" was one 'gladly answered by the eviction of St Paul's'(Burgum, 2018b: 51), but this also spatialized the division between the remaining campers in Finsbury Square and those who sought to push the movement onward in new directions (Mathews, 2016).

As Penny (2012) writes, by the end of winter, the remaining Occupiers in Finsbury square could be divided into three camps: 'those who were homeless before the occupations, those who will shortly be homeless, and those who merely look homeless'. While critical of media narratives representing the camps as dirty and poor, Penny notes how Occupy's commitment to open borders created an atmosphere of fear and exhaustion; how the occupation went above and beyond to meet demands for housing, food, and accessibility for its residents while turning 'even the most fresh-faced student into a jittering bundle of aching limbs and paranoia' (Penny, 2012). For Big Tom, Finsbury square came to represent a last stand for those in the movement who felt no one – not even the dirty or the sick – should be left behind in the fight for a just and equal society. But it was also these same activists who, in putting their bodies on the frontlines of London's housing crisis, assumed the risks and failures of a declining state form. In many ways, this thesis has been a meditation on the profound concessions that are being made by activists to sustain a radical, autonomous politics today. It is about the ways the crisis

of care is being displaced and distributed (not necessarily reduced) onto the very populations at highest risk, or at high risk of harm when things go wrong – and who share very little of the profits when things go right.

Ember

After the eviction of the last remaining activists in Finsbury square, and the criminalization of squatting some months later, anthropologists followed the transition of the squatters movement into criminal and non-residential spaces. Some continued to document the alternative lifestyle and consumption practices of squatters, and their growing involvement in anti-systemic actions, eviction resistances, and anti-austerity protests (Capponi, 2020). Others were more adamant that the face of squatting had changed. Grohmann (2016) argued that the new criminal laws had forced the squatting scene into a purely defensive position, with only those desperate enough to risk arrest and imprisonment still continuing to squat. The closing comments to her ethnography offer a grim outlook for a scene that was, in 2015, beginning to show signs of burnout and decay: 'gone are the days of openly squatted social centres', she wrote, 'public film nights, people's kitchens, free shops, and all the other innovative and subversive practices emerging from squats that can be found in these pages' (258). Evictions happening around the UK indicated that non-residential buildings were more hostile, derelict, and prone to violence. And while the organized strands of the movement shared a growing identification with wider struggles around housing and gentrification (Capponi, 2020: 491), what was left behind:

> 'was not just a form of activism, but a particular way of ordering the world and human relations, a distinct ethics, and a way of life' (Grohmann, 2016: 251).

One of the ways this ethos survived, I have argued, is through an unfolding set of strategies of (partial and uneven) cooperation with the state – property guardianships, meanwhile contracts, and other temporary arrangements. These temporary urban strategies have given hope to the squatters movement at a time of continued uncertainty over the future legality of the movement. They have given organizations like Ember and The Black Stag a logic and a means with which to re-gain access to the city – to participate in community initiatives and offer cost-effective solutions to urban planning at a time when property owners and state institutions, put under extreme financial restraints, are increasingly looking to radical alternatives.

Ember has flourished in this environment. In the UK, aggressive attacks on public services have given rise to a wide range of opportunities for community and not-for-profit organizations to take over the work of recovery and care. In chapter 4, I showed how organizations like Ember have provided an attractive solution to the scarcity thinking imposed by austerity. Ember worked by scaling the need for 'massive' social transition down to the level of manageable, cost-effective solutions – promising to regenerate empty buildings and restore communities without the need for extensive financial models. These projects have channeled activist's energies in the context of growing rates of social abandonment and urban decline. They have led to a positive re-valuation of work among volunteers, the disabled and the unemployed, who have long been barred access to stable and/or fulfilling employment on the basis that they are "inadequate" for work. But these successes have also been matched by an intensification of predatory functions of the state that have expanded privatization and de-regulation while thwarting the terrain in which a coordinated, grass-roots service sector has been able to emerge. In New Orleans, Adams (2013) shows how the disastrous effects of an

economic recovery predicated on private sector growth and volunteer labour often distributed risk back onto the very communities it claimed to alleviate. Efforts to re-build were slow, and the reliance on volunteers to complete works that were…

> 'already paid for in some sense by government and taxpayer funds at best […] raised questions about the distribution of not only risk but cost, as the double dip of payment was made on the backs of victims and volunteers' (Adams, 2013: 186).

As Adams notes, the contributions of hard-working volunteers, while well-intentioned, were simply 'nowhere close to the number [of homes] that were gone or still in disrepair'. Initial estimates placed the loss of homes to the hurricane somewhere near 800,000 (World Vision, 2005). By 2012, seven years after the disaster, organizations like the St. Bernard Project had managed to re-build just 400 (Adams, 2013: 135, 186). While the efforts of volunteers should be applauded, the fact that the St. Bernard Project was the largest active rebuilding group raises 'serious concerns about the limits to charity and about the continued production of enormous amounts of unmet need' (Adams, 2013: 184). Organizations like Ember will continue to draw deeply from the contributions of its members and volunteers – people who, in my experience, had the least to give and yet gave most. For some, these challenges will reinforce the importance of compassion and personal sacrifice over the coming decades. For others, they remain a warning sign of a labour market rapidly becoming hell: one where, as Muehlebach writes, citizens wrangle over work and the right to work (Muehlebach, 2012: 227).

These tensions are the subject of ongoing debate within the private service sector and, increasingly, within social movements. They are a source of disagreement in the squatting scene, as squatters seek to preserve their identities and their autonomy in the face of growing pressures to adapt and work alongside these same agents of neoliberalization. Property guardians, while providing a refuge for my informants after the criminalization of squatting in 2012, have been criticized for contributing to a growing normalization of substandard housing arrangements, enabling the very 'self-amputation' of the welfare state that squatters – particularly those engaged in struggles for better housing conditions – have historically fought to prevent (Pruijt, 2003: 135). The criticisms of squatting which Arnie and Big Tom expressed in chapter 5 resonate with a broader critique of individualized autonomy in the squatting scene, and the desire to explore more lasting and enduring forms of solidarity (or "collective autonomy") with their local community. But if this community is to extend beyond the squatting scene, such a movement, I have argued, will require a strong deliberative process: one that is willing to open up to new modes of formal and institutional organization, and one that can accommodate a range of both individual and collective positions, while having the knowledge and experience to know where fundamental differences apply and where compromise is called for.

The limits of autonomy

Is this still autonomy? For anarchists like Victor, perhaps no. There are, however, diverging perspectives. The American Zapatista, Harry Cleaver (1993), argues that Peter Kropotkin always envisioned autonomy – not as a political horizon, but as an already present set of relations (of cooperation, care, and mutual aid) that were in constant struggle with individualism, competition, and private property. Kropotkin sought autonomy at all levels of organization:

> '[T]he more the social phenomena he studied had been reshaped by the rise of capitalism, private property and the world market, the more difficult and subtle his analysis had to be. He had to seek out and identify, at every level, from the local workshop and industry to the global organization of the economy, signs of the forces of cooperation and mutual aid working at cross purposes to the capitalist tendencies to divide all against all. It remains singularly impressive that he was able to do this. He was able to cut through the rhetoric and the reality of competition to perceive and demonstrate the omnipresence of social cooperation at *all* levels of society (Cleaver, 1993: 6, emphasis added).

It was on similar grounds, Cleaver writes, that the Italian workers movements of the 1970s sought to theorize a new, 'autonomously developing working class subjectivity' that could parallel Kropotkin's work on mutual aid (De Angelis, 1993; Cleaver, 1993: 9). Where Orthodox Marxists emphasized the dominating power of capital, seeing workers as reactive to oppression, Autonomous Marxists emphasized the power of workers to rupture those mechanisms, pointing instead to examples where those mechanisms were already being overcome (Cleaver, 1993: 10; De Angelis, 1993). Where Orthodox Marxists emphasized the importance of strong party leadership to lead the worker's revolution, Autonomous Marxists emphasized the power of the working class and its various and divergent 'sectors' to resist this subordination and construct alternative ways of living (Cleaver, 1993: 8, 9). In the US, similar perspectives were taken up by the movements of the New Left, who stressed the autonomy of workers while largely rejecting 'the party politics of the Old Left' and 'the bulk of its Marxist theory' (De Angelis, 1993). In response, Cleaver writes, the revolutionary horizon was conceived, not as a 'some-day-to-be-achieved utopia', but as a 'living reality whose growth only needs to be freed of constraint' (Cleaver, 1993: 10).

In many ways, this thesis has been about the partial and contradictory ways in which such a politics is being nurtured in London's squatted spaces today. The criminalization of squatting has represented a major setback to this project, as the territories that largely supported the gathering of squatters in occupied spaces are now considered illegal. But it has also signalled the need to push this movement onward and outward: into the neighbourhood, through local and civic networks, toward an ever-expanding global movement. The stories presented here offer a window into an autonomous movement that has sought to reclaim the home and the neighbourhood – not just as sites of protest, but as spaces of collective autonomy in which everyday relations of solidarity and care can become the basis for a global social movement (Jaleel, 2013). For squatters like Big Tom, it was these relations of care, embedded in a historically specific moment of austerity, that could offer a path forward and an escape from the prescriptions of capitalist society.

But the obstacles these movements have faced also challenge us to think through the limits of autonomy at a time when these same logics of solidarity and care have featured heavily in the rationalization of neoliberal policy in the UK. From David Cameron's 'Big Society', to the Blairite discourse of 'rights and responsibilities' and 'self-policing communities', autonomy has become such a refractory term precisely because of the many contradictory and antagonistic registers to which it is being put to work (Böhm et al., 2010: 28). In the UK, the "Big Society" became the driving concept behind the Conservative Party's 2010 election platform, and the main ideological vehicle for its restructuring of the public sector and subsequent delivery of 'radical politically motivated austerity' (Grohmann, 2016: 157). By contrasting an image of

the ‘paternalistic Big State’ with a new, bottom-up, grass-roots ‘Big Society’, the government wrapped its understanding of community in an agenda of localism, self-help, and social entrepreneurship; invoking left-wing notions of autonomy that, as Grohmann (2016: 159), writes, squatters could be forgiven for believing were addressed to them.

Can autonomy be the grounds for a radical politics today? In the face of ongoing austerity, where neoliberal governments have urged people to take control of ‘the very services they are cutting in the name of a radical redistribution of power’ (Sutherland and Vishmidt, 2015: 12), I have argued that such an autonomy will be defined, not by its retreat from these questions, but by its willingness to experiment and open up to new forms of collective organization. This thesis offers a brief sketch of some of the possible directions this organization may take. It indicates the critical worth, not just of a theory of autonomy that sees itself as compromised from the very start (Böhm et al., 2010); but also one that is intimately bound up within the contradictions of wider society, producing a knowledge and an intimacy that can only come from living (and learning to live) in some its most violent and indeterminate spaces. Perhaps it is on these grounds that such a politics can be mobilized today.

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