Desiring space:
The affective politics of intimacy in shared rental accommodation

Faith Taylor

Royal Holloway, University of London, and
Green Group Greater London Authority

Faith MacNeil Taylor is a
researcher and educator based in
London. She teaches at Royal Holloway,
University of London and is also a
housing researcher for the Green Group
at the Greater London Authority.
Contact:
faith.taylor@rhul.ac.uk

Abstract

The exorbitant cost of housing in London requires an ever-growing sector
of the city's population to pool economic resources through sharing
rented accommodation. In such circumstances, tenants often occupy a
state of intimate 'thrown-togetherness', residing in quasi-voluntary
constellations of impermanent kinship and care. Here, the circulation of
feeling politically structures everyday life, as cohabitants jostle for space,
sovereignty, and economic subsistence. Drawing on an in-depth study of
twenty-three millennials living in rented housing in the Borough of
Hackney, this paper explores the ways in which the affective politics of
intimacy between cohabitants, lovers, friends and between tenants and
landlords are significant to the distribution of shelter, autonomy, and
subsistence within an unregulated housing landscape. Using relational
theories of affect, the paper explores the productive politics of 'sad
passions' among respondents struggling with involuntary proximity and
diminished personal sovereignty in shared homes.

Keywords

Intimacy, desire, rentier capitalism, affect

I. Introduction

The streetscapes of Hackney Wick, a south-easterly neighbourhood in the London
Borough of Hackney, tell an almost clichéd story of gentrification. Signage for local
manufacturers is counterposed by loud murals complaining about the glut of concrete and
glass being busily assembled into the latest stack of assets. It is April 2018 and I'm ambling
about, confused by the absent door numbers. Confused, too, because I have spent years in
rehearsal rooms, cycle pathways and stations here and I still cannot find my way around. The
streets seem suspended in time, always in the process of being unmade, remade (see Ferreri
& Dawson, 2018). As I reach the cusp of giving up, a head pops out of a graffitied metal

door. It is Maja, one of my research participants. She leads me into a warehouse building full of plants, chicken wire, a turntable, a projector. A long dinner table stands in the middle, with someone cooking at a makeshift counter behind. We snake around it and enter a small windowless room with magnolia walls. On the floor there is a mattress, and in the corner a few cardboard boxes yet to be unpacked.

Maja had contacted me in early 2018 on the advice of her boyfriend, who spotted one of my study advertisements. They had been having relationship trouble and my poster seemed to speak to it. Her boyfriend, Brandon, was staying elsewhere so they could have some distance from each other. Maja reckoned, nonetheless, that his erratic income meant he would move back in with her soon, and that this rented room would soon house them both. As our conversation got underway, Maja said many of their arguments stemmed from sharing unaffordable space. There was never enough of it, and Brandon craved solitude. Maja was patient but the conflicts were cyclical, and at times their excessive proximity had cleaved distance between them, especially sexually; they cuddled, but that was it. But could this new rented room in Hackney Wick be a space for rekindled desire? How might a desiring space be assembled when it is also a working space, a living space, a worrying space, an arguing space?

Such questions speak to intimate affects beyond those generated through romantic or sexual relationships, especially in the context of an ongoing housing crisis that has decimated home ownership for the under-40s in Britain (IFS, 2018), leading to long-term renting in a private sector that is largely unregulated. In financialised cities like London, rental relations are particularly venal; with soaring costs, private sector tenants are frequently forced to share home space in quasi-voluntary household constellations populated by a range of potential cohabitants: lovers, friends, acquaintances, strangers, landlords, family members. These precarious home spaces are thus assemblages of relational feelings and attachments; they are both riven and woven by relational encounters and the affects generated by them. Examining these affects is crucial, therefore, to understanding the political economy of rentier capitalism as it is lived and constructed through everyday life. This is especially pertinent in the absence of formalised oversight within the private sector, effectively run by individual landlords and funded by individual tenants. In other words, the sector is assembled by informal relationships and, in turn, uncertain affective footings. Borrowing from Patricia Clough's analysis of capital's 'real subsumption of life itself' (2009, pp. 221-223), this paper thus proceeds from the claim that the generation and exploitation of intimate affects is key to the reproduction of rentier capitalist relations. In so doing, I aim to shed light on the political-economic nature and function of intimate affects in shared rental housing.

This paper draws on an in-depth study of twenty-three millennials living in rented accommodations in the London Borough of Hackney to explore the ways that the affective politics of intimacy mediate the distribution of shelter, safety, and subsistence. Amidst spatial constraints, imperatives to share costs and a lack of long-term housing security, I put forward that cohabiting relationships generate intense affects that assemble, in turn, uncertain intimacies, not only among cohabitants but also between tenants and other actants – landlords, partners, friends. This perspective of intimacy – as incorporating but untethered

from the couple form – draws on Lauren Berlant's view of intimacy as emerging from 'mobile processes of attachment', wherein 'contradictory desires mark the intimacy of daily life' (1998, pp. 284-285). Intensified neoliberal retrenchment in the thirteen years since the 2008 global financial crash has of course impacted desire and attachment. As theorists of post-Fordist social reproduction have shown, subsistence–and advantage–are increasingly mediated by intimate, social, and familial relationships (Katz, 2011; Bhattacharyya, 2018). The intimacies of this paper capture and speak to the re/domestication of social reproduction within 'private' households. And yet, the affective dynamics of these relationships are not simply the deterministic product of neoliberal 'social structures and institutions' (Juvonen and Kolehmainen, 2018); affects generated through sharing rented accommodation can also be activated to perpetuate precarious conditions (Blackman, 2012, p. 22).

The latter point is not meant as a pessimistic reading of the political agency of renting (inter)subjects. As Susan Ruddick writes on Deleuze's interpretation of desire, it is not 'the harmony of the senses that marks the possibility for thought, but their discord. Thought emerges in a cramped space, forced and under constraint, beginning with an overwhelming visceral refusal' (2010, p. 37). In the same vein, I consider the discordant intimacies and affects uncovered in this paper to speak to 'potentia'–in the Spinozan sense–for political transformation. This is owing to their entwinement with–and amplification of–participants' desires for emotional safety, relational harmony, privacy and personal sovereignty within space that is shared through financial necessity. It is still important to avoid identifying political potential when 'refusal' is not necessarily there; or, at least, when 'domination or alienation' (Ruddick, 2010, p. 25)– 'potestas' for Spinoza–diminishes, rather than enhances, affective capacities. The answer, for Ruddick, is in Deleuze's reading of Spinoza's 'sad passions'–a 'reservoir of knowledge' that reflect desire's 'multiple sites of irruption' (pp. 36, 40). The intimate accounts discussed in this paper echo this ambivalence; while they give voice to affects that are in/tense, awkward and resentful, they also convey desire. Here, the work of anarchist thinkers Carla Bergman and Nick Montgomery is resonant. Bergman and Montgomery argue that engagement with feelings of uncertainty–the 'risk' of trust, for example (2017, pp. 32-34)–is crucial for 'joyful militancy' to prevail against the affective manipulations of the late capitalist Empire.

The intimate affects discussed in this paper–even or especially feelings that are uncertain and fraught– are therefore politically subject-forming, with intimacy 'the sphere in which we become who we are, the space in which the self emerges' (Oswin & Olund, 2010, p. 60). That said, the individual explication of 'sad passions' is not itself necessarily politically mobilising; as Matt Wilde has observed of private renter organising strategies in London, resisting evictions and challenging local authorities constitute a 'mode of affective experience' in which 'the act of taking care of others constitutes not merely a vital survival strategy, but also a means of fashioning embryonic moral economies' (2019, p. 72). At the bedrock of these strategies are, nonetheless, solidarities forged by sharing feelings about individual experiences–even, and perhaps especially, those feelings that are mediated by the tensions, resentments and shame that circulate within quasi-voluntary housing

circumstances. It is important to note, too, that harmonious, durable, and healthy relationships can be made in shared rented households, where strangers may become comrades even amidst the alienation of late capitalist precarity. Nevertheless, few of these stories were found in the research discussed in this article. While the participants of this study cannot be considered representative of the breadth of renters' experiences in London, their accounts of intimate discomfort and fissure demonstrate the value of creating organising spaces where individual experiences of relational harm, disconnection and ambivalence within shared accommodation can be expressed in solidarity with others and taken seriously as an outcome of housing unaffordability.[1]

The research project drawn upon in this paper was conducted from 2017 to 2019, with the aim of exploring the ways that economic precarity shaped the intimate and reproductive lives of twenty-three millennial renters in Hackney. The geographical context of Hackney is significant when considering the *materialities*, costs and administration of respondents' accommodation. From 2009 to 2020, the proportion of privately rented households in Hackney more than doubled, accounting for a third of the borough's households in January 2019. The cost of private market housing is exorbitant; the average asking price of a home in Hackney is £626,095, a 568% increase since 1998 (Eleftheriou-Smith 2019). Moreover, while Hackney was the eleventh most deprived local authority in England in 2015, its gentrification has meant that average private market rents in the borough hover around £2,000 per month for a flat (Hackney Council, 2019, p. 4). Incomes are nonetheless comparatively low, with widespread inequality; in 2016 and 2017, over a third of Hackney residents were financially impoverished, and nearly a third of Hackney's children lived in poverty (Hackney Council, 2019, pp. 20-21). With half of Hackney's population, of 276,000, under the age of 29, a significant proportion of the borough's residents are both young and economically precarious, with many either unable to leave family-of-origin homes owing to the expense of the private market (Taylor, 2021), or reliant on the private rental sector's expensive and unregulated housing.

Recruitment for this study proceeded from a relatively wide eligibility criteria of age and status as resident in rented accommodations, subsequently garnering a diverse cohort of residents living in a range of circumstances; council housing tenants, people renting from housing associations, single parents in private sector flats, friends in shared terraced houses, live/work warehouse tenants like Maja, among others. Half of the study's participant cohort lived in shared, privately rented accommodation; that is, in housing that was shared by multiple people that were not family members, and it is to these respondents that this paper primarily attends. The narratives shared with me were often highly intimate and involved stories about sex, attachment, trauma, and conflict. In order to ethically navigate this affective terrain, the study not only went through rigorous review by Queen Mary, University of London's ethics committee, but was designed in a way that eliminated any pro-active and direct extraction of painful memories and experiences. For example, I did not prepare any direct questions to participants about their intimate lives, but rather designed interviews to

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[1] Creating such spaces through neighbourhood meetings is a core relationship-building strategy of London Renters Union.

be grounded in the construction of intersubjective comfort, safety, and trust through open and general inquiry regarding their living situations and the social, familial, and romantic networks that shaped their households. This meant that respondents were, at times, comfortable enough with our rapport to talk at length about their intimate lives. It is also worth noting, of course, that respondents of this study were either self-selecting or proactively interested in participation after talking with me about the project; as such, all the respondents cited in this paper were autonomously drawn to mapping connections between their housing circumstances and their intimate relationships. I reproduce their stories here with their permission, and with deep gratitude for their time and testimony.

Given the socio-economic landscape described, the experience of sharing housing and pooling resources in Hackney is generally a far cry from intentionally collective housing endeavours, where overarching principles of communality may moderate or temper 'ugly feelings' among cohabitants. For example, Maria Törnqvist's recent study of 'communal intimacy' in Stockholm observes the ways in which 'formalization, egalitarianism, and exchangeability generate a communal belonging characterised by practical caring and sharing' (2020, pp. 14-15). Törnqvist conceives of the functional closeness of co-residents in collective housing as an 'intimate coolness' that decentres the individual in favour of communal belonging. Both aligning and departing from Törnqvist's analysis, the findings discussed in this paper reflect coolness, but also a sense of individual impingement owing to the unchosen nature of respondents' circumstances. This is not necessarily indicative of a desire for atomised, 'nuclear' domesticity. Rather, the affects generated through intense and sometimes unwanted proximities to partners, housemates and landlords remain evidence of a desire, fundamentally, for space, especially amidst overcrowding issues that are generally obscured from statistics owing to the informality and impermanence of residencies. This desire for space from cohabitants resonates with Heath et al.'s conceptualisation of 'ontological security' regarding shared-housing residents' access to privacy and control over their domestic environments (see also Wilkinson & Ortega-Alcázar, 2019). Michael Byrne's writing on the residential rent relation in Dublin complements this work, and speaks, too, to the affective political economy of rented housing in London. Home, for Byrne, is the outcome of the labour 'through which routines of care work are established in and through the dwelling' (2019, p.15). The home is thus

a resource which bundles together that which we generate in our efforts to feel secure and take care of ourselves and others, and it gives stability to this resource over time. As a consequence of both ontological security and care work, both of which have a strong affective dimension, home takes on a particular emotional intensity which is very different to the majority of commodities (p. 15).

Echoing Byrne, this paper hones on the affective navigation of uncertain intimacies within shared rental accommodation to reveal the primacy of affect in the replenishment of rentier capitalist relations. Mukta Naik's (2020) research on 'negotiation, mediation and subjectivities' among migrant tenants living in the informal rented sector in Gurgaon, India, highlights too, the leveraging of feeling to secure tenancies from 'urban village' landlords of various class positions, as well as the importance of such affective negotiations to the

replenishment of landlords' capital accumulation. Naik's observations of informal rental relations in Gurgaon indeed share remarkable points of synergy with the affective and intimate uncertainties documented in the empirical section of this paper, in particular for the former's emphasis on tenants' sympathetic–yet ambivalent–identification with landlord authority, in the absence of formal oversight within the sector.

As such, in the empirical section of this paper I focus on two broad themes – 'intimate proximities' and 'displaced sovereignties' – that emerged from in-depth interviews with respondents living in shared rented accommodation. These themes speak, respectively, to embodied affects of frustration, discomfort and awkwardness generated through the reluctant closeness of renting respondents; and to affects of fear, suspicion, and resentment circulating amongst cohabitants, landlords and material environments. I describe the latter as affects relating to 'displaced sovereignties' because they reflect, at their core, an overarching sense of lost control and autonomy amidst the uneven relations of private renting that is replaced and compensated for through identification with rentier authority. The thematic analysis of these affects as they arose in respondents' transcribed speech is in tension with an investigation of pre-cognitive feeling, wherein representing a person's 'inner world' can reaffirm the privileged position that interiority has occupied within interdisciplinary research on bodies and emotions (Blackman 2012, p.6). Still, feminist research on intimacy has long acknowledged interconnectedness across bodies and scales. With this in mind, our methodologies are politically invested in dismantling 'that which sets up the personal to be personal' (Donovan & Moss, 2017, p.10). Taking this into account, the empirical narratives I discuss are not testimonies of subject-boundaried emotions as simplistic products of a structure or circumstance; they are explications of affects that are relationally generated. As Robert Seyfert puts it, every affect is 'simultaneously of at least two bodies' (2012, p.33), and as such, our analysis need not be limited to human, sentient or even material bodies. The affects explored in this article are also generated through encounters between respondents and, for example, the inanimate bodies of their dwellings or the informational interfaces through which they communicate; thin walls, single beds, all-caps text messages, emails with numbered lists.

Seyfert's concept of *affectif* is useful for thinking through the many affects resulting from simultaneous-yet-differentiated interactions such as these. Analysing the stock-market ticker, Seyfert notes that affects are not only related 'to the desire for future profits', but to acoustic interactions with the ticker itself' (2012, p.39-41). An *affectif*, then, incorporates 'all relevant social bodies' and their interactions, allowing for a social perspective that does not flatten multiple affects out into a general 'atmosphere' or 'mood' (p. 41). As I demonstrate in this paper, respondents' narratives allude to affects generated by many different intercorporeal interactions. Not only this, but in a rental market assembled by informal/ised tenurial relationships, the distribution of housing through intimate relationships, and short-term household formations, these affects are woven in with the rentier extraction of surplus value. It is for this reason that this article concerns the affective politics of intimacy. These are not simply affects that are intersubjectively generated in shared dwellings and then captured or expressed by the respondents of this study as boundaried possessors of emotions; these

affects have lives and dynamisms beyond that expression – they are acted upon, responded to, instrumentalised. They are, after Williams (1977), structured and structuring.

II. The intimate political economy of the private rented sector

In the late 2010s, images of young people in cosy bedrooms started popping up on the concave walls of London Tube stations. 'Make room for safer renting', one advertisement read. A woman looked up from a rug on a bedroom floor, relaxed, secure. Other adverts promised they were 'for the renters' and called for onlookers to 'join the rental rebellion'. In a font reminiscent of Soviet agitprop, this slogan appealed to an assumed grievance: that London renters were being screwed over and were fed up. The two companies – Badi and Tipi – tap into a spatial imaginary of rented housing that is simultaneously nostalgic, antagonistic, and beleaguered: nostalgic for the promise of a laid-back flatmate sociality that pummelled televisions at the turn of the 21st century; antagonistic towards the insecurity and expense inflicted by the landlord class; and beleaguered by the sheer dearth of routes to secure housing for an ever-growing section of British society. Of course, the solidarity communicated by such images is mere marketing strategy. Both Badi, an AI-driven flat-share app, and Tipi, a Build-to-Rent property developer, exemplify corporate initiatives to profit from the managed scarcity of housing by evoking the intimacies and relational attachments that often elude private renters. These advertisements tap into a desire for space that is braided with desires for interpersonal harmony, embodied sovereignty, and camaraderie. Capitalising on the atomisation yet intimate thrown-togetherness of London's rental economy, these campaigns tell stories about the affective attachments that renters lack.

Behind this lack is the assetisation of housing, a cornerstone of Britain's economic, social, and cultural relations. This process of assetisation, while underway for centuries via imperialism and commerce, was accelerated by Thatcherite neoliberalism in the 1980s. For example, the 'Right to Buy' scheme in the 1980 Housing Act saw local authorities sell publicly owned homes to tenants for sometimes half of their value (Meek, 2014). Rentier society in Britain was further consolidated by the 1988 Housing Act, which oversaw the creation of the Assured Shorthold Tenancy, allowing landlords to carry out 'no-fault' Section 21 evictions at two months' notice. With the introduction of the Buy to Let mortgage in 1996 and New Labour's extension of Right to Buy to assured tenants in council housing and accommodation rented from housing associations, the growth of private renting was hastened as state housing stock shrank (Walker & Jeraj, 2016). Each successive government in Britain since Thatcher has deepened the role of the market in the provision of housing.

The lived outcome of these processes is that private renters do not live within their own homes per se, but within other people's financial assets. In the absence of any governmental controls on the value appreciation of these assets, escalating rental costs in global cities such as London are often pooled among multiple occupants. For a nation socioeconomically engineered around the enshrined right to 'buy', this is an ironic feature; while neo/liberal politicians all but define themselves in opposition to state-imposed collectivisation, state-backed market provision economically coerces people into sharing limited space to survive.

A crucial ramification of this imperative to share housing is the role of intimate, social and familial relationships in mediating access to shelter, resonating with Valentine's observation that, while neoliberal practice presumes 'a subject freed from the obligations of social ties', the retreat of the welfare state has made people 'increasingly dependent on family or other intimate relations for material and moral support' (2008, p. 2106). In the context of the private rented sector in (predominantly) urban Britain, the contemporary significance of relational access to material subsistence is evidenced, not least, by the fact that flat-sharing services like Badi exist, capitalising upon anxious desires to share homes with not-so-strangers.

Like private landlords and letting agents, proliferating intermediary actors in the housing sector such as these also rely on the enforced mobility of private renting to extract profits. A shorthold tenancy coming to an end presents an opportunity to increase rents, to refurbish properties using deducted deposits, and, on the part of letting agents, to charge 'administrative fees' to new tenants. By the same token, then, we might consider the private rental market to be financially invested in short-term household relationships–with all the loose ties or implosions that household impermanence may entail. At least, we can say that intimacies among renters are mediated by the affective-economic relationships of different financial stakeholders. Again, and as this statement suggests, I conceptualise intimacy throughout this paper as mobile processes of attachment between both human and nonhuman actors (Berlant 1998). Just as affect is relational, intimacy also speaks to intersubjective encounters and attachments that are processual and inter-scalar. As Courtney Donovan and Pamela Moss observe, writing about intimacy involves 'finessing connections, awareness and attachments to things' (2017, p. 4). To this end, while the empirical focus of this paper is on the affective dynamics of different relationships among and between lovers, friends, cohabitants, landlords, and material/technical bodies, the intimacies that are of interest to me are those connections, *awarenesses* and attachments that are affectively assembled through the highly uneven relations of rentier capitalism–that reach beyond the 'domestic' into the 'complex web of relationships' (Valentine, 2008, p. 2105) spanning different scales of political-economic life.

III. Intimate proximities

Maja initially showed me Polaroids of friends from her student days. She was a keen photographer with full shoeboxes to prove it. When I asked about her boyfriend, the images she held of nascent friendships morphed into artefacts of loss. 'Whenever he's stressed and we start to have an argument, it's always about he doesn't want to share a room', Maja said. 'And sometimes he gets angry at me for–this is a bit backward–but for like, letting him take up so much space'. The boxes in the corner spilt cable and notepad innards onto the concrete floor. 'So, he takes up more space physically, like he has more stuff', she went on, 'and whenever we have shared a room, I can do my things in the kitchen, or I don't know, sometimes he'll be like, "How can you agree, you know, to go halves on the room and let me take up the majority of the space?"' As Maja continued, these conflicts over space seemed to reflect a more fundamental disparity in their relationship, where her own identity and

passions were diminished in the service of Brandon's. To explain further, Maja interwove a memory of watching Lee Krasner shrink into her and Jackson Pollock's shared kitchen:

> She was mostly known as 'Pollock's wife'. And you know, there's a scene where he's splashing his thing to–you know, take up that space. And she's in the kitchen with a little canvas […] And I remember watching that film as a teenager and being like 'That's fucked up', but like you know, initially, that's probably exactly what I've been doing. I've been letting him take up more space and I've just been giving myself enough space to put one canvas down.

Maja relayed this with a mixture of embarrassment and deflation, but she was clearly glad to be on her own for a while. She was wistful, too, about previous homes with Brandon. Both artists, they first met at a warehouse rave and teamed up as promoters, putting on techno nights to supplement their incomes as bartenders. Brandon had been in and out of employment for the duration of their relationship. Their experience of room-sharing was thus one of constant proximity–most of the week was spent job-seeking, working, eating, and sleeping in the same space. For Maja, this relentless closeness had dampened desire. When I first interviewed her, she and Brandon were still sharing a room. Touch was part of the day's choreography, but its interspersal with practices of production, consumption and rest left little room for sexual intimacy. Maja explained,

> There's just one chair and one bed, so someone winds up on the chair and the other person winds up on the bed. If you do work, you can do a quick cuddle and then go back. That's a quite common cycle of work or just being–make two cups of tea, someone ends up there, someone ends up in the chair, eventually tea's finished, you cuddle, and then you go back to work.

The embodied rhythm of this routine was childlike, almost; each room-worker parenting the other, punctuating the day with brief cuddles and beverages. As Maja elaborated on the topic of sex, this dynamic was emphasised, their too-close bodies and the thin walls of their room generating stresses, awkwardness, and anxieties that muted erotic desire:

> I don't know if it is the thin walls that makes it a bit awkward. I know there's been times where we've just been more anxious and more stressed and then we've rarely touched and you know, we spoon but that's it. And I think at times our relationship has been very platonic. At one point he brought it up, like, 'Maybe we should stop seeing each other because we don't, you know'. But I think just mentioning it, we were like, 'Yeah but is that important?'

Sharing constrained space and managing Brandon's sporadic income heightened anxious tension in their shared room and diminished sexual desire. Maja's anxieties around the thin walls added another layer of discomfort; while she already problematised sex as a measure of wellbeing, the stress of people hearing her was another barrier. A platonic, quasi-parental dynamic was almost easier to manage amidst involuntary proximity.

Thrown together by unaffordability and spatial scarcity, there was an overarching sense among many of the renters I interviewed across this study that desire was alienated, separated

from the self–transformed, after Marx, into an entity unrecognisable to the creator (1867/1967, p. 174). Junior doctor Caitlin, for example, had started dating someone who needed a place to stay but couldn't afford short-term London rent. Amidst the abrupt closeness of his presence, Caitlin described her difficulties in asserting boundaries. He needed accommodation, but the only option was her single bed, and she was not ready to share it. 'I feel like I do that really feminine thing of accommodating people, she remarked,

> I do think that his living situation might have changed the pace of my relationship. I think that I'm quite uncomfortable with being physically intimate but not being emotionally close, and I pushed the emotional closeness to make myself feel more comfortable with the physical intimacy.

Caitlin's reduced capacity to hold boundaries reflected the affective politics of troubled consent that sudden closeness to her new partner produced; she 'pushed' her feelings so they could catch up with physical circumstances. Indeed, affects of awkwardness and discomfort, generated through excessive proximity and hastened romantic relationships, were mirrored in numerous interviews across the study. Supply teacher Claire, for instance, had just moved out of a shared house lacking communal living space. The only place she could socialise was her bedroom, which, like Caitlin, contained a single bed. At 34, Claire had struggled with dating, and said that since experiencing a break-up from a long-distance relationship, she mainly used apps for casual sex, but the lack of communal space in her home obstructed even that:

> (There was) nowhere that isn't your bedroom which is a bit awkward. It felt as though I couldn't really invite people back unless it was 'bedroom-inviting' people back […] I felt that it would be difficult to sustain a relationship without having to share the burden of whose space do we go to. And also, if I tried to get with anyone in a similar situation to me, it's always going to be slightly uncomfortable. I had one relationship, but it was long distance, so that was not a problem.

For Claire, the only autonomous space available in her shared household was her bedroom, which was already coded as intimate. This manifested awkwardness around the possibility of implied sexual advances, to the point where a long-distance relationship was easier than risking mixed messages. Among other respondents, similar discomforts stemmed from the porosity of spatial boundaries between housemates' sexual lives. Twenty-nine-year-old construction worker Leon, for example, lamented his proximity to a housemate's sexual endeavours. Echoing the 'thin walls' in Maja's reflections, Leon's unease was grounded in acoustic intrusion; his bedroom was below the living room, and, in his words, he 'could actually hear shit going on': 'I'm talking like, he's rolling in at three in the morning with four Lithuanian girls and I'd be like mate I'm trying to sleep but I was also like I kind of respect what you're doing'.

There is bravado here, of course. Yet, the involuntary blurring of boundaries between his housemate's sexual life and Leon's personal space generated affects that were difficult to articulate; an unwanted affective exchange occurred by virtue of their physical closeness, with Leon passively brought into the sounds and movements of sexualised bodies – a passivity

perhaps compensated for, in this quote, by his stamp of 'respect'. Indeed, as all the examples here demonstrate, porous boundaries within limited shared space generated complex affective assemblages wherein frustration, discomfort and awkwardness circulated among and between cohabiting bodies. Further, these proximities generated affects that were unevenly and politically activated. This was particularly true in terms of gender. Throughout Leon's, Caitlin's and Maja's reflections, men's haptic and sexual desires dominated, resulting in territorial claims that impacted respondents' sense of spatial autonomy or entitlement. Each of their shared dwellings, then, might be read as *affectif* wherein interacting bodies are attuned 'to the same interactive frequency'–but not without reluctance and not without geopolitical struggle (Seyfert, 2012, pp. 33, 42).

IV. Displaced sovereignties

Throughout this study, the impermanence of private renting assembled spaces that were fraught with feelings of unbelonging, instability and a loss of control over material, geographical and intimate destinies. These affects are generated through an interconnected web of attachments to, and investments in, economic and relational ideals, futures, institutions, and desires. Especially in the wake of collapsed routes to home ownership in Britain–a symptom of the artificial property inflation that has been central to the reproduction of an economically conservative electorate in the country–I align with Bhattacharyya et al.'s observation (2021) that a 'longing for authority' has socially and culturally manifested within post-crash British society. And I claim, in turn, that this longing for authority can be identified within many of the micro-relational practices of millennial renting respondents who are, owing to housing unaffordability (and, relatedly, real wage decline), 'downwardly mobile'. In their exploration of the affective investments assembling housing markets, Christie, Smith, and Munroe (2008) observe that 'housing attainment' (i.e., purchasing a house) is 'as much about emotional returns as it is about financial investment; as much about affective ties […] as about speculating on the prospects for wealth accumulation' (2008, p. 2302). Conversely, the narratives explored in this section speak to the lost or displaced affective 'returns' that assemble the 'other side' of the markets that Christie et al. explore–namely, the private tenant funding the appreciation of their landlord's asset. I characterise these heterogenous affects as 'displaced sovereignties' owing to the discomfort, resentment, and mistrust that circulate amidst quasi-voluntarily shared space, specifically in the absence of routes to 'chosen' household formations. As such, these affects are not only generated by the relational and material encounters structuring everyday life in shared rental accommodation; they are also a product of collective attachments to, in Berlant's words, the 'good life' (2011)–attachments that are especially pertinent to understanding millennial economic experience in post-Keynesian societies like Britain, where political regimes have pursued intensified neoliberal governance since the 2008 financial crash (Worth, 2015).

These feelings of lost and displaced personal sovereignty were often generated through encounters that were explicitly political-economic; for example, frustrations, suspicions and fears regarding decision-making authority and bill-sharing within shared households

frequently cut through–or at least discordantly resonated with–cohabitant solidarities. Here, Ahmed's conceptualisation of hate as circulating 'between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement' is useful, since 'emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments' (2004, p. 119). In a similar-but-different vein, the narratives I discuss in this section speak to affects that circulate between social bodies in shared rental accommodation, often aligning them, in turn, with institutions and actors that financially profit from their insecurity.

For example, respondents shared stories about the intrusive and manipulative actions of private landlords, but with distinct disparities in the ways such actions were felt and evaluated. While describing a shared house where every room was individually rented out, Claire expressed both frustration and respect for the extensive rules her landlord had devised. She read out a litany of his directives from an email on her phone:

> 'This is your responsibility, to keep your stuff on your own space. For example, when Room 1 leaves, I'll check all Room 1 spaces and if I see any items, I will consider it left from Room 1 and will throw it away without asking. Once again, I won't take any responsibility if that happens.'

With rules designed to limit the sharing of space, the language is clinical; tenants are referred to only by room numbers, any landlord liability denied. The technicity of the phone screen as an interface affectively deadens his infringements but reifies his surveillant authority. Resonating with Naik's observations of tenants' sympathies with informal landlords in Gurgaon, Claire said she had been bothered by the email. But she was also sympathetic because she saw herself as a good tenant. 'He wanted to make sure that everyone was having a good time', she said. 'I was fine with him because I wasn't doing anything wrong. He was trying to look after us, but it was a little bit paternal. It's like, we're all adults, but I mean, he wanted to keep things tidy.' While Claire remarked that he could have given the tenants some warning before discarding belongings, her assessment was that he was 'quite naïve' and 'just trying to run the household well for everyone'. She rationalised her landlord's intrusions as part of the job of maintaining order amidst a rapid residential turnover, a rationalisation that was underpinned by minimal trust in her housemates. Indeed, Claire explained that most of the problems in the shared house were down to their inconsiderate behaviour. 'I don't create trash, but it would always be me that's taking it out', she remarked. 'I don't know who it was–I had suspicions.'

For others, generous assessments of landlords' intentions were muddied further by the flagrance with which affects of offense and lost control were captured and calibrated into punishments against tenants. Twenty-three-year-old Hannah, for example, recounted a time when her landlord, Carol, threatened eviction because of a complaint about the heating. Hannah described Carol as 'really nice' but 'not overly professional' because she was 'overly friendly'. There had been a 'weird blip', however, when the heating and hot water stopped working for a month and Hannah requested a slight rent reduction:

She just flew off the handle. She was like, 'I've treated you like family, this is so cold. We normally just text about things; you've betrayed my trust' It was mad. My contract was up for renewal at the end of January, and she was like, 'I don't think I can renew your contract'.

Hannah described Carol's stance towards them as oscillating; Carol called another housemate and 'ranted to her for half an hour' about how she needed the rents because 'that's part of my income; I use it to pay my bills'. Shortly afterwards, she instructed all the tenants to leave because they had betrayed her trust. The following day, she changed her mind again, and Hannah texted her to say they all wanted to remain there but were 'troubled' by her response. Once more, Carol U-turned, replying with: 'Wow, well I don't know if I do want you to stay'. The see-sawing continued–'it was this horrible, horrible, horrible weekend where we didn't know whether we'd be able to stay'–until Carol manipulated Hannah into remaining at the house by informing her that if she left (as she's been originally told to), everyone would have to follow suit. 'Either we all have to leave, or we all have to stay', Hannah said, 'but the thing is, I don't think that's true. In many ways our landlady is quite reasonable and will try her best to make it work but it feels very unstable'.

Despite extraordinary trespasses, both Hannah's and Claire's reflections reveal the affective politics assembling informal/ised relationships between private landlords and tenants, such that even when boundaries are flagrantly crossed, the good intentions of the more powerful agent are clung onto, at least in part. These sympathies did not mean either respondent felt much sovereignty within their homes–Claire's legitimation of her landlord's intrusions, for example, was connected to her position that other co-tenants did deserve this treatment because of their irresponsibility. Read in tandem, these narratives convey the complex political circulation of affects relating to sovereignty, stability, control, and sympathetic identification in the composition of shared rental accommodation, where the informality of private rental relations can assemble intimacies that draw tenants into compassionate alignment with institutions that oppress them. Moreover, as both Claire's and Caitlin's words suggest, the affective politics of these relations are not only unchallenged owing to feared punishments–the disposal of belongings, or eviction–but also because of a perception of the self or co-habitants as culpable provocateurs and potentially deserving recipients of mistreatment. Claire's story in particular, crystallised a wider theme emerging from this study; namely, that the unsettled affects of sovereignty within shared housing can be captured and calibrated into interpersonal suspicion towards cohabitants and their perceived failings–evidence, nonetheless, of affect's 'social productivity' (Wissinger 2007, p. 232).

Indeed, the spatial proximity of rental relations and their awkward, oscillating intimacies were common features among renting respondents, for whom the imbrication of life's everyday intimacies with surplus value extraction could create everyday spaces of tension and relational fissure. This was especially acute in circumstances where tenants were technically 'lodging'. Under current law in Britain, lodgers have significantly fewer rights than assured shorthold tenants; if they live in the same home as their 'resident landlord' and share common spaces with them, they are considered 'excluded occupiers' and landlords only need

to give 'reasonable', unwritten notice–defined as the length of the rental payment period–to evict them. Jonathan, a 29-year-old charity worker, was renting a room in a childhood friend's home, and thus technically lodging. 'Initially it seemed like a really, really good scenario', he recalled, but there was a 'change of dynamic' when the friend's family member had suggested raising the rent. 'Overnight it just went from this thing that was like, well we know we don't really have any rights, but that doesn't matter because we're all mates, to a sort of really awkward "OK so quite soon I think I'd like you to pay quite a lot more", and us being like, "Shit well we don't have any rights whatsoever", so there was a lot of tension'. Jonathan elaborated on the awkward lexicon of negotiation he began to develop in the hope of resolution:

> It becomes very complicated, a situation like that, because there's no rules to regulate really. You debate something transactional in a way that you wouldn't do if it was just a transactional relationship. So, it was sort of like, 'You can do this but it's going to be shit for us!'… But if you were talking to Foxton's [a letting agent company] it wouldn't come into the conversation. And it never fully ruptured, we came to a temporary compromise. Essentially, we started paying slightly more but then we were like, 'We're going to pay slightly more, and then we're going to move out'.

Jonathan pursued the laborious path of finding alternative housing over 'rupturing' his friendship, after failing to elicit his resident-landlord's empathy–something he admits he could only attempt to invoke because of the comparative intimacy of living with her, compared with the *distanciated* relations typically framing dealings with letting companies like Foxton's. Jonathan described the tense affective atmosphere that had resulted from this proximity. His girlfriend 'was a lot more affected by it […] She started to really feel like she couldn't feel at home there'. She was anxious, he remarked, despite the absence of any 'overt hostility', because the conversation about increasing the rent had 'planted the seeds of a different set of relations. Even though we paid money into her bank account all that time, we'd never felt it until then'. Again, the political economy of affect is salient here–value extraction and payment are only 'felt' following Jonathan's watershed conversation with his resident-landlord, and his appeals for compassion muddy what was initially just a 'transactional' relationship.

Comparable affective politics circulated, too, among informal decision-making positions within shared households, especially where a 'lead tenant' role was assigned. Although they are not legally required, 'lead tenant' agreements are generally mandatory for Tenancy Deposit Schemes; a nominated tenant becomes the point of contact between the landlord and cohabitants regarding deposit divisions, professedly to avoid financial conflict. Maja, for example, brought up a turbulent scenario with a former housemate who had taken up this role. Maja felt that the lead tenant had abused her position after a conflict about a party, sending threatening text messages and turning off the household's utilities:

> It was quite political, just about space. We had a party when they were gone, and they said it was OK […] they had a huge argument and they were just yelling that we had to get the fuck out of there like in a few days, a week. They were like, 'Everyone has to get

out, the police will come'. They'd switched the mains off. I got told I had to, 'OBEY AND RESPECT' her.

Although the lead tenant had no legal power to evict Maja, her authority-by-proxy gave her power over tenants and their money. Maja indeed went on to express suspicions that the lead tenant had defrauded her and other housemates, limiting her financial capacity to leave London–she 'kept jacking the rent up', Maja said, 'and all of a sudden there was this bill'.

Stories such as these speak to the ways in which the politics of feeling assemble and structure space. These stories give voice to the affective politics of displaced sovereignty within insecure rental accommodation that is shared through economic necessity. As a result, this accommodation is mediated by and through uncertain and fractious intimacies–between cohabiting tenants, but also those that emerge between rent-seekers and renters. Put another way, in the vacuum of formal oversight, capital mycoparasitically germinates from the spores of rent-seeking, forming haustoria that weave through, around and attach onto co-habitant hosts, the strength of whose existing, shared subjectivities are subsequently obscured. While no single policy, institution, or structure is the 'originator' of the resulting affects, the relationality of rentier capitalism does not flatten its uneven topographies of power, nor erase the parasitic incursions of capital–wherein the latter, in the words of Clough, has shifted to 'accumulate in the domain of affect' (2009, p. 224). While Clough's analysis relates largely to digital technologies, the unbridled entrenchment of private landlordism in Britain is another domain in which capital's rent-seeking hinges on affective extraction. And while Spinozan *potestas*–rather than any transformative political potential–may seem to be in more consistent circulation within these household constellations of too-nearness and eroded sovereignty, Ruddick reminds us that the challenge is to engage the sad passions 'actively, to uncover the role they can play in the production of thought' (2010, p. 35).

V. Cramped spaces: assembling desire in fissure

The stories discussed in this paper do not paint an exactly joyful picture. From configuring and practicing sexual intimacy amidst constrained space to tense atmospheres with lead tenants and fraught negotiations with erratic landlords, respondents' reflections speak to the entwinement of the economic and somatic, whereby the ordinary affects of everyday life are shaped by the precariousness of neoliberal social relations (Stewart, 2007). It is important to note, too, that the prolonged lockdowns enforced by the British government as part of their failed response to the COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly amplified the involuntary proximities and displaced sovereignties felt by renters in shared housing.[2] Faced with this bleakness, it is not easy to gauge the place of any 'emergent powers' (Bergman & Montgomery, 2017) within Hackney's rental landscape, with its deadened desires and ordinary betrayals. Here, the affective life of relationships are sources of surplus value extraction: intimate compromises made between room-sharing lovers assure a

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[2] However, rents decreased by 34% in London during 2020, owing to an exodus of renters from the city. This paradoxically relieved some spatial pressure upon cohabiting tenants who could subsequently afford more space.

landlord's financial returns; awkward pleas followed by tense silences are the affective means by which resident-landlords might secure higher rents at low emotional costs. As such, I have argued in this article for an understanding of London's rental landscape as an affective political economy. The informal relationships assembling the private rented sector are alienated and damaged by the rentier relation. But more than this, they are often *constructed by and construct* these same conditions. Rentier capital relies upon relational fragility, and–as some of the narratives in this paper speak to–distrust in the potential of cohabiting relationships can feed that same fragility. In this way, it is important for further research to consider the broader implications of housing assetisation for intimate inequalities; as house prices in Britain continue to rise, real wages decline and the private rented sector continues to expand, access to intentional, safe intimacy is increasingly mediated by personal wealth, especially that which is intergenerationally inherited.

Yet, in uncovering the affects of unchosen proximities and displaced sovereignties circulating among the renting respondents of this study, the political agency of affect is also made more visible, if only through bringing less perceptible 'sad passions' to the arena of discourse and thus to political subjectivity. Focusing on the political agency of affect is indeed vital for housing scholarship and activism because individual feelings can be recalibrated into collective action through lifting ambivalence, sadness, and shame from interior emotion to both interior *and* exterior shared experience. Uncovering and visibilising stories of discomfort, suspicion, even resentment–as this paper does–is part of this work. Resonating with Bergman and Montgomery, scholar-activist Adrienne Maree Brown's influential *Pleasure Activism* affirms the liberatory potential of engaging with diversity of feeling. In Brown's words, she has 'seen, over and over, the connection between tuning into what brings aliveness into our systems and being able to access personal, relational and communal power' (2019, p. 8). Amidst the informal and contradictory atomisation-yet-collectivisation of private renting in London, the emergent power of renting cohabitants to tune into this aliveness–and further, to transmute it into communal transformation–is in a battle of will with the mycoparasitism of an asset-driven economy. But still, desires remain, humming amidst and between disparately placed social bodies. It is in these cramped dwelling spaces, and in the everyday social and political fissures that their relations produce, that 'individual concern' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1975/1986, p. 17) becomes 'all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it'. Both housing scholarship and the struggle for a just housing system therefore requires engagement with 'individual concern'–through lifting stories mediated by shame and mistrust to the surface of empirical enquiry and through holding physical space for shared testimony–precisely because these concerns are affectively, and thus relationally, produced.

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