



# Beyond efficiency in low-income housing provision: Everyday negotiations of nonprofit staff and the limits to caring through marketized housing in Buffalo, New York

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## **Abstract**

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This paper analyzes how conflicting understandings of housing – housing as a commodity, a financial asset, a human right, and/or a form of service provision – coalesce in and are negotiated by nonprofit organizations that oversee low-income housing in Buffalo, New York. Critically analyzing nonprofit organizations as sites where discourses about housing come into conflict, I argue that the work of nonprofit staff materializes into the conditions of the contemporary system of housing provision and these organizations are important sites of everyday resistance to the marketization of low-income housing in the US. Through an institutional ethnography, I track how nonprofit workers fill the gaps in the private housing market in meeting the housing needs of low-income households. I also show how the marketization of low-income housing constrains nonprofit workers' ability to enact a politics of housing as a right or a form of care. I look to the literature of feminist care ethics to argue that a broader, communal, and embodied understanding of housing provision could provide an alternative, non-marketized basis for a more just housing system – but one that must necessarily exceed the contemporary housing system.

## **Keywords**

Housing, home, care ethics, nonprofit industrial complex, Buffalo

## **Introduction**

‘We could talk all day about the various ways in which organizing– there’s the nonprofit industrial complex as opposed to unpaid organizing-nonprofits ... can only go so far’- Alex, housing organizer, Buffalo, NY

Housing carries various meanings for different people. For occupants of housing, it is a basic need and a place of belonging. For homeowners, it represents one of the biggest investments they will make, and a source of stability in finances and housing tenure. For landlords, housing represents a source of income; for investors, housing is a financial instrument. In the neoliberal-era economy of the United States and, increasingly the global economy at large, the exchange value of housing has been prioritized over the use value of the housing for residents, resulting in the uneven access (Madden and Marcuse, 2016; Farha, 2017). For extremely low-income people, quality housing that is affordable is extremely difficult to find. In the US, there are on average only 37 affordable housing units<sup>1</sup> available to every 100 extremely low-income households,<sup>2</sup> and the quality of such housing is very uneven (National Low Income Housing Coalition, 2021).

With the erosion of the US welfare state over the past 50+ years, nonprofit organizations have become responsible for intervening in the private housing market to provide housing for low-income people (Wolch, 1990). Nonprofits take on a variety of roles, including providing housing directly, incentivizing construction using grants and tax credits, assisting governments in expanding housing access, and organizing tenants to make political demands. In attempting to fill these myriad roles, nonprofit organizations must navigate competing conceptualizations of housing while trying to meet the needs of low-income people.

I conceptualize nonprofits as sites where different discourses around housing – promulgated by actors including local governments, private developers, the financial industry, community organizers, and tenants – come together and are negotiated by nonprofit staff, who are primary actors in producing the contemporary landscape of low-income housing in the US. I look to nonprofits to observe how the tensions between various visions of housing are negotiated. While other literature explores the housing market at broader scales (Madden and Marcuse, 2016), focuses particularly on the processes of housing marketization (Fields, 2018), or examines the political economy of housing nonprofits (Newman and Ashton, 2004), I employ a feminist care ethics to understand the day-to-day struggles of nonprofit staff, draw conclusions about how varied discourses are reflected in the contemporary low-income housing market and how things might be otherwise. I address two central questions: 1.) How do different actors in the landscape of low-income housing provision in Buffalo conceptualize housing in the context of a financialized, marketized

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<sup>1</sup> Housing that is affordable for tenants is defined by the Department of Housing and Urban Development as ‘housing on which the occupant is paying no more than 30 percent of gross income for housing costs, including utilities.’

<sup>2</sup> The National Low Income Housing Coalition (2021) defines extremely low-income households as ‘households with income at or below the Poverty Guideline or 30% of AMI, whichever is higher.’

housing market? 2.) How can feminist approaches to housing and feminist care ethics reconceptualize low-income housing beyond these systems? I answer these questions with an institutional ethnography of the housing nonprofit sector in Buffalo, New York, through the vantage point of a housing justice nonprofit referred to here as Building Tenant Power (BTP).

I bring a feminist ethics of care approach to the study of nonprofits and housing through an institutional ethnography of the housing nonprofit sector through an internship at BTP, triangulated with interviews and observation of other nonprofit housing actors in Buffalo. I explore how conflicting discourses around the meaning of housing materialize into the contemporary low-income housing landscape, how nonprofits shape the private housing market, and how nonprofit staff form an infrastructure of care which both recreates and contests this system. This focus on the everyday processes that recreate the political economy of housing in Buffalo serves to expose the material consequences of attempts to enact care and provide housing through nonprofits which are reliant on the private housing market. Following feminist care ethics approaches to the commodification of care in institutions (Green and Lawson, 2011; Tronto, 2010; Engster, 2007) and infrastructures of care (Danholt and Langstrop, 2012) with approaches to housing as an infrastructure of care (Power and Mee, 2019; Power, 2019; Mee, 2009), this approach to housing provision expands discussions around the political economy of housing to understand how housing is necessarily more than a commodity, focusing on the scale of nonprofit staff who navigate the contradictions of marketized housing and commodified care on an everyday basis.

I bring together literature on the political economy of housing and housing nonprofits, critical approaches to nonprofit organizations and their governance, and feminist care ethics to analyze the nonprofit sector in Buffalo. I argue a feminist ethics of care approach to housing nonprofits reveals the shortcomings of the housing market and nonprofit industrial complex (NPIC)<sup>3</sup> in meeting the housing needs of low-income Buffalo residents through a focus on everyday experiences of nonprofit staff, exploring the varying ends through which care is mobilized in the nonprofit sector. The juxtaposition of these literatures contributes to theories about the shortcomings to commodified housing and nonprofits demonstrating the limits to nonprofits which rely on the affective dimensions of crises to mobilize staff. A focus on the intimate scale of the everyday work of nonprofit staff moves beyond a political economic argument to address the affective nature of such contradictions and how staff strategize to navigate them from the bottom up.

Throughout this paper I explore the ways in which care functions through nonprofits. I use Engster's basic needs approach to care, defining care as 'everything we do to help individuals to meet their vital biological needs, develop or maintain their basic capabilities, and avoid or alleviate unnecessary or unwanted pain and suffering, so that they can survive, develop, and function in society' (2007, p. 28). I expose how housing programs through nonprofit organizations which attempt to meet the needs of service users, which I refer to

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<sup>3</sup> Rodriguez (2007) defines the NPIC as 'a set of symbiotic relationships that link political and financial technologies of state and owning class control with surveillance over public political ideology, including and especially emergent progressive and leftist social movements' (2007, p. 21-22).

as commodified care, often fail to provide quality affordable housing, and perpetuate unwanted pain and suffering, that is, bad care. Furthermore, I argue that good care, consistent with a feminist care ethics, is care through and beyond the NPIC which meets individuals' needs, in this case quality, affordable housing.

### **The Affordable Housing Sector of Buffalo, New York**

Buffalo, NY is a medium sized city and the county seat of Erie County, New York. Since the 1950s, Buffalo has experienced a population decline from 580,000 to about 250,000 in 2019, a trend that follows other Rust Belt cities, although it remains New York's second largest city (Census, 2019; Klotzbach-Russell, 2020). Buffalo's metropolitan area is the sixth most racially segregated in the United States (Blatto, 2018). Though there is substantial research on housing conditions in other post-industrial cities, there is comparatively little scholarship on Buffalo (but see Adelman et al., 2019; Coley and Adelman, 2020; Goldman, 2007).

Buffalo has a shortage of quality affordable housing for low-income residents of the city. According to a report by the Partnership for Public Good, a public policy research institute in Buffalo, over half of Buffalo residents are cost burdened<sup>4</sup> (Wooton, 2017). Demand for Section 8 housing vouchers<sup>5</sup> and project based public housing far exceeds the limited supply (Chou et al, 2018). This parallels national trends in affordable housing. Affordable housing was once largely provided by the government through Public Housing Authorities, but since the 1970s has been contracted out to nonprofit and for-profit affordable housing developers (Smith, 2000). With this lack of affordable housing on the private market, nonprofit organizations in Buffalo are especially important in providing affordable housing. In Buffalo, many nonprofit organizations implement grants to subsidize housing for clients in the private rental market. Other nonprofit organizations develop housing themselves, relying on the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit<sup>6</sup>. These organizations take on the role of the state in providing affordable housing, albeit with significant constraints from the private housing market.

In the Summer of 2021, several visible and contentious political and economic struggles were ongoing in Buffalo. The India Walton Campaign for Mayor of Buffalo brought radical housing politics into the public discourse.<sup>7</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic brought housing

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<sup>4</sup> Cost burdened is defined by HUD as spending more than 30% of one's income on rent and utilities.

<sup>5</sup> Section 8 is a federal program where low-income, disabled, and elderly individuals can receive transferable vouchers to subsidize housing on the private market.

<sup>6</sup> The Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC) program was established in the Tax Reform Act of 1986. Funds are allocated by the Department of Housing and Urban Development to state and local allocating agencies to 'issue tax credits for the acquisition, rehabilitation, or new construction of rental housing targeted to lower-income households' (Department of Housing and Urban Development). This demonstrates substantial state support for this affordable housing development model.

<sup>7</sup> India Walton, the former director of the Fruit Belt Community Land Trust and a democratic socialist with the backing of the Democratic Socialists of America and the Working Families Party, won an upset in the Democratic primary for mayor of Buffalo against four term incumbent Mayor Byron Brown. Walton's grassroots campaign focused on community control of resources, public accountability of city hall, and

justice issues into stark relief in Buffalo, and the presence of a strong local progressive and radical community led to the contestation of racial and economic issues through community organizing and protests for housing justice. This historical conjuncture, alongside the city's strong local nonprofit sector, increasingly financialized housing market, and long-standing residential segregation make Buffalo a prime case for studying housing at this time.

### **Housing, Non-Profits, and Feminist Care Ethics**

In the US, nonprofit organizations, largely funded through government grants and tax credits, take on the lion's share of responsibility for housing low-income and housing insecure people. Researchers in this area have referred to this arrangement by various names, including the 'voluntary sector', the 'third sector', and 'the nonprofit industrial complex.' (Wolch, 1990; Kallman et al., 2016; Gilmore 2007; Rodriguez, 2007). To emphasize this sector's embeddedness within broader neoliberal economic structures – as well as to recognize its complexity and connection to private market structures – I follow Rodriguez (2007) in using the term nonprofit industrial complex (NPIC). Wolch (1990) details the rise of the NPIC in the 1960s and 1970s through the institutionalization of the social movements of the 1960s and the devolution of state functions to non-state actors by the federal government (see also Mitchell, 2001). She and subsequent scholars articulate dilemmas for nonprofits dependent on government funding: this might lessen nonprofits' ability to criticize policy, limit their use of confrontational strategies, and cause a focus on efficiency and accountability at the expense of other goals (Wolch, 1990, p. 216; see also Bartle and Halass, 2008) Gilmore (2007) builds on Wolch's analysis of the shadow state to understand how grassroots nonprofits attempt to carve out space within this system to critique the state. This literature explains how nonprofits are embedded within broader political economic systems as they attempt to balance the needs of service users with the needs of their funders and how grassroots community organizations navigate this structure.

A related literature discusses how community land trusts, a mechanism for potential community control of land, have shifted over time from promoting a radical politics around the ownership of land incorporating a broad notion of community control to focus on more limited and technical practices of affordable housing provision. DeFillipis et al (2018) argue that this shift limits the scope of CLT's purposes and continues to disempower marginalized communities. This literature is useful in imagining what is necessary to materialize a different housing system beyond the NPIC.

Feminist ethics of care questions how a recognition of care and interdependence might reshape our understandings of society (Hekman, 1995). Robinson raises questions about how care can be used to adverse ends, arguing that care relations must be understood also as ones of 'domination, oppression, injustice, inequality, or paternalism' (2011, p. 5). Danholt and

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housing justice. India Walton helped found the Fruit Belt Community Land Trust in 2017 and pledged to make housing a central component of her administration through the creation of a city wide system of community land trusts, a rental registry for landlords, and the passage of a tenant's bill of rights in her first 100 days in office.

Langstrup introduce the concept of infrastructures of care, defining them as ‘more or less embedded ‘tracks’ along which care may ‘run’, shaping, and being shaped by actors and settings along the way’ (2012, p. 513). Mindful of Robinson’s critique, I use Engster’s basic needs approach to care, defining care as ‘everything we do to help individuals to meet their vital biological needs, develop or maintain their basic capabilities, and avoid or alleviate unnecessary or unwanted pain and suffering, so that they can survive, develop, and function in society’ (2007, p. 28). This definition can be paired with an understanding of infrastructures of care and attention to the role of power to understand how care mediates relationships between nonprofit staff and clients.

Other scholarship on feminist care ethics raises questions about the commodification of care and how care functions through institutions. Green and Lawson argue that commodification of care obscures the possibility of more egalitarian organizations (2011, see also Tronto 2017). Tronto raises questions about care provision by institutions, noting the need for care through institutions to be attentive to the purpose of the care, the role of power, and the particularities of a specific relationship (2010). She argues that institutions must make space for discussions of the contradictions around care within their work to resolve them (Tronto, 2010, pg. 168). This literature shows how care functions through institutions but has not accounted for the ways in which nonprofit staff act as an infrastructure of care within the constraints of the contemporary political economy of housing.

Housing nonprofits operate within the context of a racialized, marketized housing system, which has been studied by Marxist political economists. Such scholars highlight the social contradictions of commodified housing, in which the use and exchange value of housing come into conflict (e.g., Madden and Marcuse, 2016). Furthermore, literature on the racialization of the housing system points to the ways in which the housing system has been constructed along racial lines including the impacts of the 2008 financial crisis (Rugh and Massey, 2010; Wyly et al, 2010), and how the racism cannot be addressed through the private housing market (Markley et al, 2020; Imbroscio, 2020; Bonds, 2018). The ongoing commodification and financialization of housing have meant that there is little incentive to build affordable housing without extensive subsidies from the government, which are frequently both partial and inadequate. This leaves renters with little control over where they live and the conditions of their housing and leads to displacement and alienation (Aalbers and Gibb; 2014; Wyly et al, 2010). These and similar studies show that there is a disconnect between the provision of housing through private markets and the ability of low-income people to access it. This leads to discrepancies over what the use value of housing truly is: when defined in market terms, access to housing is an ability to afford it<sup>8</sup>. But from the perspective of literature on the politics of housing, simple access does not guarantee a right to quality, affordable, unalienated housing.

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<sup>8</sup> The Department of Housing and Urban Development defines affordable housing as spending no more than 30% of one’s income on housing and utilities. Therefore, from the perspective of the federal government, affordability is determined by the exchange value of one’s housing.

Various scholars have taken a critical political economy approach to housing nonprofits, investigating the ways in which such nonprofits navigate neoliberal commodification of basic needs (what I term commodified care). Newman and Ashton (2004) argue that the neoliberal policy regime has reshaped the ways in which nonprofits redevelop neighborhoods, focusing on homeownership and deconcentrating poverty and relying on discourses from the private market. Furthermore, McQuarrie attempts to understand how housing nonprofits operate in Cleveland, arguing that such organizations rely on narrow, market-based discourses around revitalization, which cannot protect the public from neoliberal shifts in governance (2013, Marwell and McQuarrie, 2013). Hackworth (2014) demonstrates how neoliberal ideologies have shaped urban development in cities from NYC to Seattle to Phoenix, arguing that major changes in such cities can be linked to the rise of a neoliberal policy regime. These scholars demonstrate how neoliberal governance regimes, in tandem with the private market, shape the trajectories of housing nonprofits.

Vincanne Adams (2014) draws on similar arguments to demonstrate how, in times of disaster, market-oriented solutions imposed through neoliberal recovery regimes fail, leading to the mobilization of a growing nonprofit sector funded through philanthrocapitalism and venture philanthropy to address these crises. Adams argues that nonprofits rely on the affective dimensions of disaster, mobilizing volunteers and staff while then lining the pockets of philanthrocapitalists and venture philanthropists, a system she terms the “affect economy”.

To understand the broader stakes of marketized housing provision I look to feminist scholarship on housing and home. Understandings of housing and home have been taken up in feminist arguments which argue that so called private spaces are always shaped by outside forces including the housing market (see Easthope, 2004). Home can be a space, place, set of practices, or set of feelings associated with a place, but also sites of both oppression and resistance (Mallett, 2007; Blunt and Dowling, 2007; Thompson, 2021). Further, home studies expose how emotional experiences of home are inseparable from the economic and material elements of housing for residents (Jacobs and Smith, 2008). Easthope et al (2020) encourage scholars to think relationally about housing, arguing that relational approaches allow scholars to move beyond traditional political economic understandings of housing (also see Cook et al, 2016). These literatures teach us to resist conflating the political economy of housing with experiential approaches to home, understanding that housing is necessarily more than its market value for residents.

Recent scholarship in feminist care ethics attempts to understand how housing is experienced as care for residents (Mee 2009; Power and Mee, 2019). Power and Mee argue that the split of studies of housing and home means that studies of care have focused on understandings of home but have little to say about markets, materialities, and governance (2019; see also Power and Williams 2019). Power and Mee study housing as an infrastructure of care and call for future research on how housing as an infrastructure of care is facilitated or undermined by property relationships (2019; see also Power, 2019). This literature highlights the potential for housing to be caring for residents but fails to account for how



internship allowed me to observe and participate in the work of BTP, providing a more holistic picture of how the organization as well as the broader low-income housing sector in Buffalo operates (Dunn, 2007). I include a diagram below which illustrates a partial structure of BTP, including a Housing Justice Committee (HJ Committee) which is the focus of the next section. I include a table of pseudonyms for staff of BTP below.

As a queer person with a background in housing justice organizing and housing nonprofits, my positionality gave me access to this space and allowed me to form relationships with staff with similar identities. I understand this form of research to be mutual aid in that through my work I was able to build new relations with the goal of changing political conditions (Spade, 2020). I include below a table (Table 1) of pseudonyms and titles of BTP. I found the participant's roles at BTP were useful in understanding their differential views and thus highlight how each individual fits within the organizational structure in Figure 1.

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Title</b>
Emma	Housing Justice Organizer
Mia	Legal Tenant Advocate
Alex	Director of Movement Building
Diane	Facilities Manager
Anna	Community Development Manager

### **Multiple meanings of housing in one nonprofit organization**

‘...we need to make sure we're not touting [government subsidies for affordable housing development] as the answer, right... I was feeling, like several weeks ago [at a HJ Committee meeting that] we don't want to become a CDA, a community development association... but we're taking that kind of money... But yeah, that is where the money is... That's like the obvious way to go.’- Emma

The above quote from Emma, a housing justice organizer at BTP, illustrates tensions about developing housing and organizing tenants in the same organization. Emma's day to day work consists of hosting tenant's rights trainings, doing one-on-ones with tenants to bring them into organizing, and mobilizing tenants to support a Tenant's Bill of Rights. She regularly facilitates a Housing Justice (HJ) Committee which attempts to navigate the tensions between housing provision and organizing. At the heart of these tensions are conflicts between several discourses on the meaning of housing, which were both advanced and challenged by staff of BTP. In this section I discuss how these meanings materialize through conversations at BTP in this committee.

BTP was founded in 2005 to create strong neighborhoods, decrease the numbers of abandoned housing, and develop leaders to fight gentrification on the West Side. In the past, BTP created a Green Development Zone in which they work to build affordable, green energy efficient housing. The Green Development Zone is a 20-block zone on the West Side where BTP staff and volunteers developed community gardens, affordable housing, and

weatherized existing housing (Hart and Magavern, 2017). BTP further expanded their affordable housing development in 2009, creating a nonprofit development company and then a neighborhood plan for the West Side with extensive public engagement (Hart and Magavern, 2017). Recently, BTP has developed a former public school that was vacant into 30 affordable senior apartments with the support of various government tax credits after the school was targeted for development into high end condos.

The housing justice organizing team and affordable housing development department have become increasingly siloed in their work since BTP took on larger, more professionalized development projects. For example, BTP continues to organize tenants in Buffalo, lobby local officials to pass a Buffalo Tenant's Bill of Rights and work in state and national coalitions for state and federal tenant protections. Recently, the organization was part of a coalition that was successful in passing the Housing Our Neighbors with Dignity Act in New York State, which provides financing for the development of hotels and other commercial properties into affordable housing by nonprofit organizations.

The organization, however, faces challenges in remaining accountable to local community members and to its mission of creating community control of housing in Buffalo. The HJ Committee was formed in response to criticism from former staff and community members that BTP had become disconnected from the local community and was now becoming just another housing developer. The committee's purpose is to coordinate aspects of BTP's housing work, stay connected while working from home, and deepen their collective work for housing justice.

During the Summer of 2021, I interned with BTP, creating a series of maps to illustrate changes in property values across Buffalo and slumlord owned properties. These maps are used by the nonprofit to organize tenants against gentrification and in slumlord owned buildings. BTP was working remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so I completed my fieldwork virtually. The CDC eviction moratorium<sup>9</sup> and the unexpected primary election victory of a socialist political candidate, India Walton, raised housing justice to the forefront of political conversations in Buffalo. Walton ran against Democratic Mayor Byron Brown, a four-term incumbent who advanced a market driven model of development while implementing austerity measures over local government. Walton, a democratic socialist, campaigned on a platform of housing, racial, and economic justice, founded the Fruit Belt Community Land Trust, and is a prominent community organizer in Buffalo. At a state and national scale, housing justice and COVID-19 pandemic recovery were at the forefront of political and economic conversations and the focus of state and national organizing movements such as the Cancel Rent movement<sup>10</sup>. I detail some of the operations that BTP took in the Summer of 2021, as well as how I participated in and observed these initiatives.

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<sup>9</sup>A nationwide, temporary moratorium on evictions due to nonpayment of rent implemented by the Center for Disease Control.

<sup>10</sup>The Cancel Rent movement included a series of protests, rent strikes, and other actions across the country but especially in New York State demanding the cancellation of any back rent owed during and from before the COVID-19 pandemic (Weaver, 2021). This movement led to the introduction of several bills in the New York State legislature, none of which were passed.

BTP's affordable housing development team used real estate narratives about housing strategically to develop affordable housing. These narratives focused on the value of housing as a commodity and a financial asset, for example communicating that their rents were lower, and properties better maintained than other subsidized rental properties in the city. In one HJ Committee meeting staff checked in by sharing 'wins' from across the different departments. Anna shared that a recent project by BTP received a state-wide affordable housing award and stated that BTP is a model for channeling progressive values into affordable housing development. Other staff congratulated the development team and then gave feedback, as Alex stated,

'This is a huge win across the board... We sometimes miss the mark for how we want to interact with people. [I] hope we can continue to challenge ourselves to super exceed that mark.'

Alex noted that while this award was laudable, BTP needed to hold close the tensions between using such development mechanisms and their mission for community control of housing. This interaction illustrates how BTP used funds that were available for affordable housing development by nonstate actors, in this case the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit (LIHTC), to provide housing for some low-income Buffalo residents. The LIHTC is a complex subsidy administered by the IRS and implemented by state governments in which housing developers gain a tax subsidy for developing low-income housing. As Anna told me, many housing developers, including BTP, work with an investor who provides equity to finance the development of housing through a joint LLC in exchange for a tax credit. The mechanism does result in affordable housing construction but does not meet the needs of all low-income people in Buffalo, as more than half of city residents are rent-burdened (Wooton, 2017). This example shows how BTP, like many affordable housing developers, is deeply reliant on private equity to develop housing. Though not unique, the fact that BTP, an organization that professes to work towards community control of housing relies on private equity to develop affordable housing demonstrates the limits of degree to which housing nonprofits are embedded in a private housing market even as they attempt to imagine a different housing system.

Below I synthesize three thematic areas (constraints, contestation, and divergent visions) to further explore how housing is provided, how staff resist this system, and varying visions for the future of housing in Buffalo.

### **Constraints: Everyday Ways Commodified Care through Nonprofit Organizations Reproduce Inadequate, Marketized Housing**

'...Sometimes people will be like I need to find a three-bedroom apartment, and my budget is \$400 a month. ... It doesn't exist. We can't conjure places out of nothing that you can afford...'- Fair housing educator

Through an analysis of several housing nonprofits in Buffalo grounded in semi-structured interviews, this section demonstrates how the NPIC and private housing market

are cocreated and work together to reproduce lack of access to affordable housing. The quote above illustrates how nonprofit staff faced limited options in assisting clients in finding housing on the private market.

The booming housing market during the summer of 2021 disadvantaged clients of nonprofits that subsidize homeownership. The director of a nonprofit that assists first time home buyers told me how houses were selling for over listing price, making the private market inaccessible to clients who could not match these prices even with support of their program. The nonprofit encouraged working class people to buy houses, but then was limited by the private housing market in ways they could not address. Such asset-based welfare models are foundational to US social policy beyond the Buffalo context to adverse effects. Despite these limits, homeownership is vital to achieving upward mobility and is seen as a primary mechanism to building stable communities, as the director shared with me. He lamented that in participating in this vision of homeownership as the path out of poverty, the nonprofit reinforced a racialized and exclusionary private housing market. He stated

‘Real estate has always been very rooted in racism; it still is... this is something that we struggle with, I’ve had conversations with my board... It’s still there, whether it’s, you know, as intentional as it was in the past, probably less so. But it’s still everywhere.’

Therefore, the program is constrained by a racialized housing market which reproduced racialized outcomes in access to homeownership. This example demonstrates the limits in addressing a racialized housing market through homeownership, even with nonprofit support. The director envisioned the nonprofit sector as a site where another meaning of housing could be advanced, except for limits from his board of directors. When I asked him about BTP, he stated

‘it’s really like it’s the best of both worlds. Like my board would never, like they’re not into the organizing thing... I’m not one to judge, but they just have made it clear, that is not what we’re gonna do. And that’s cool. You know, we all have our own’

This nonprofit director saw his nonprofit as a site whereby the meaning of housing could be challenged but was limited by the NPIC, in this case through the board of directors, to service provision.

Similar challenges were faced by nonprofits that assisted unhoused individuals in finding and maintaining housing. Emma, the BTP organizer, previously worked as a social worker in a rental assistance program. She told me about how the program assumed that clients could become self-sufficient in a few months, which was not possible for many clients. She said,

‘I was taking incredibly traumatized people and being like, great, we finally found a house for you. Now you’ve three months or less not paying your rent... To settle into potentially the first time in your life, feel safe, process your trauma, and also start working at least full time or you’re not going to be able to afford it.’

Many clients became homeless again after their assistance ran out. This shows how such temporary assistance programs were not able to meet the housing needs of residents of

Buffalo, resulting in service users losing their housing because the nonprofit assistance was not sufficient to keep them housed. This is an example of how commodified care, delivered through housing assistance programs in nonprofits often results in inadequate support for service users,

Housing justice organizers found their work challenged by the municipal government's private sector driven approach to housing development. Emma told me the municipal government supported the private market model of affordable housing with little support for people who were unable to find housing in this marketplace. In my conversations with organizers, they indicated this meant that the government gave little recognition of the conditions of housing on the ground including the reality of housing unaffordability for many low-income Buffalonians, and the poor quality of housing stock in the city resulting from continued disinvestment. The challenges that organizers reported were extensive, including limited access to information about landlords, little regulation of the housing market or housing code enforcement, and limited support for tenant rights.

Thus, NPIC limits the abilities of staff to materialize quality, affordable housing for their clients, and thus staff often provide bad care because of social and economic dynamics inherent to the NPIC. Mia stated that white saviorism, and thus bad care, was endemic in the social service industry which limits the agency of service users and assumes a superior knowledge by the service provider than by users. Such paternalistic approaches to service provision fail to recognize systemic oppression and privilege and assume that people need resources because of individual failings instead of recognizing unjust systems that create uneven access to resources, ignoring the full humanity of service users and the universal need for care and resources. Commodified care through nonprofits (re)creates these power dynamics between service users and staff which then lead to further marginalization of marginalized people.

### **Contestation: Caring through and against the NPIC**

Staff of many nonprofits recognized that the marketized housing system was not working to meet the needs of their clients and advanced a discourse about housing as a human right. Many staff spoke with frustration about the political economy of housing in Buffalo and the limits to providing housing through the private market. They attempted to meet the housing needs of their clients in the face of this system and often went outside the formal expectations of their positions, acting as an infrastructure of care to meet their clients' needs. In this section I investigate how staff of nonprofits contest the logics of the NPIC and marketized housing, embodying a feminist care ethics. I argue that contestation in nonprofits is an embodiment of a feminist care ethics, arguing that nonprofit staff contest the NPIC through caring in ways that go beyond the norms and expectations of routinized social services in nonprofits. That is, contestation in nonprofits looks like resisting the expectations and norms of the NPIC, in the below case through intimate, small-scale acts of care. Contestation within the NPIC could take other forms, and functions at various scales, but embodies care for service users and the community. Contestation within the NPIC could

also recognize the exploitation of care of nonprofit staff in the affect economy and envision other ways of relating beyond commodified service provision.

Nonprofit staff functioned as infrastructures of care to meet the needs of their clients beyond the procedural relationship between client and service provider created through the commodification of care. A case manager talked about going beyond simply placing their client in a unit to ensure they have higher quality housing.

‘... My client ... wanted to go see this apartment ... It was really bad... We [went to see it and I] ... asked him what he thought of it. And he's just like, ‘It's okay.’ And I'm ... really pushing, pushing it a farther, [asking] ‘What's your honest opinion? What do you honestly think about it?’ And he said, ‘I didn't really like it.’ I was like, ‘okay, that's kind of what I was thinking you would say, cuz I wouldn't want you to live there either.’”

This provider embodied a feminist care ethics despite demands from their program to place clients in units, recognizing that this program did not account for quality of housing. They could easily have suggested that they rent this apartment, regardless of the quality. Thus, the provider felt a responsibility to find not just housing but high-quality housing for their client.

I did not find out whether in this specific case the case manager was able to find better quality housing for their client. If the case manager was able to find better housing for this client, this would demonstrate that such small-scale acts of care within the NPIC can subvert the logic of the NPIC and lead to better outcomes for service users. If the case manager was not able to find better housing for this client, this example demonstrates that such small-scale contestation within the NPIC is not enough to materialize better housing for service users, and that, despite the best intentions and care of nonprofit staff, contestation of these logics within the present political economy of housing is simply insufficient. Regardless of the outcome of this situation, this embodiment of a care ethics by the case manager breaks down the binaries between service users and nonprofit staff, exposing the affective components of this relationship, and thus contests the routinized violence of the NPIC.

### **‘We are providing resources’- Resistance to Commodified Care**

On the other hand, the notion that providing service provisions could be caring was contested by staff of BTP, emphasizing the ways in which commodified care through nonprofits rarely leads to longtime improvements in the lives of unhoused people and a recognition that the responsibility to provide sufficient care should not fall on community organizers and nonprofit staff who do not have the resources to meet every need. In response to a question about whether they saw their community organizing work as caring, Alex said

‘... where care may go wrong, and where we organizers ... within the NPIC, it [that care] can be too much like hand holding or overextension ... like doing self-harm, because you are not putting boundaries or containers around what should take place

here. So, I think where organizers go too far is that organizers have to realize that like you're inviting people into a place to be self-determined...'

Here he made a distinction between a relationship which was without boundaries and an organizing relationship through which an organizer provides political education and allows for self-determination with a clear purpose and recognition of power dynamics. Thus, Alex notes the ways in which caring for others can come into conflict with self-care, demonstrating that the commodification of care through the NPIC dismisses vicarious trauma experienced by staff and the reality of a capitalist system whereby the NPIC can never meet the needs of all exploited people. Therefore, he shows how nonprofits can be sites of exploitation of workers through the mobilization of care. Emma noted that her role as an organizer meant prioritizing organizing towards systemic change, meaning she could not always meet tenant's immediate needs

'... It's having to constantly hear people tell you their horrible housing stories and the answer is always you're at the wrong place and there isn't a right place. And because there isn't a right place that's why we're organizing to demand that you have access to the things that you need. ... I think it's especially human nature to want to say yes, I can help. But I see a lot of agencies ... even a lot of unpaid organizers really sucked into that... And then they kind of become quasi service providers especially when they are not funded for it and they get overwhelmed or burnt out.'

Here she argues that service provision cannot create structural change, noting the limits to care through nonprofits with limited resources. She advances a vision of a housing system in which this relationship would not exist. She demonstrates tensions between meeting immediate needs and systemic change, showing how the NPIC encourages inadequate care which maintains the status quo over organizing for a different housing system. These critiques of care by staff show how commodified care is used to uphold and justify the NPIC, while the previous examples of a care ethics point to the ways in which good care can contest the NPIC.

### **Divergent Visions for the Future: Limited Market Based Reforms, Housing as a Human Right, and as Care**

One alternative vision of housing that was advanced by BTP organizers was echoed by India Walton's progressive mayoral campaign in the summer of 2021: a recognition that the private housing market and nonprofit affordable housing development have failed to provide adequate housing in Buffalo. Housing justice organizers organized towards a housing system that values the affordability and quality of housing for residents. On the other hand, staff of other nonprofits in Buffalo had more limited visions, arguing for limited market-based reforms.

India Walton articulated a vision of affordable, community-controlled housing as a human right and as a basis for building communities. She stated that 'housing is a human right' on her website and connected housing justice to an equitable recovery from the

pandemic, arguing that community control of housing is central to creating a more just Buffalo (Walton, 2021). She built on her previous experience in community land trusts and envisioned a city-wide land trust federation which could give residents control over their housing. This platform envisions community control of housing as necessary for creating a more just housing system.

Housing organizers at BTP advocated for a housing system which valued quality housing as a human right and connected notions of community control of housing to a higher quality of life for residents. Alex put it this way:

‘I kept on trying to figure out like, what is... because I was going deeper and social, racial, and economic justice issues, like what is the ... fundamental need that people had to really live, not just to live, but really thrive. And what is that thing? And it was... community control [of housing].’

He argued that housing needed to be controlled by the community beyond the NPIC to meet the needs of residents.

Staff at social service-oriented nonprofits discussed limited market-based reforms to the housing system. The fair housing educator advocated for Section 8 vouchers for all who qualify and enforcement of housing voucher discrimination law. He noted that housing quality is another issue and questioned the ability of policies to address substandard housing conditions.

‘If everybody who's eligible for a voucher was able to get one... [that would help]. If landlords are just pretending [source of income protections] don't exist, and there's no enforcement... then it doesn't do any good. ... [This] wouldn't necessarily solve like the quality of the housing because that's a different side of the story... which is a huge problem and not something that's going to be solved by any sort of policy’

He imagined a limited vision of market-based reform to the housing system through section eight vouchers but noted that this system relied on the cooperation of private landlords.

The director of an organization that coordinates the Continuum of Care for Western New York was hesitant to endorse tax-credit based housing development, as such housing was not affordable to very low-income people. She noted that increasing the number of section eight vouchers did not guarantee that those with vouchers could find housing

‘... And a lot of the units that we've been building in Buffalo are not really, yes, they say market rate, but they're not affordable. They're like way above what our clients could afford... Like we have to kind of see both [the developer and tenant] sides... we need to fund them more, get them more money and then require them to have more affordable units available. And not only for the 50% AMI<sup>11</sup> or 60% AMI, we have to go down to 30% AMI or, um, how about they create even zero income... [Discussing section 8 vouchers] We just cannot find housing. Even [when] we have the money.’

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<sup>11</sup> AMI stands for Area Median Income.

She notes the limits to tax-credit based development and proposed more public funding for housing. She recognized constraints from the private market but did not offer an alternative beyond the private market.

These visions of the future of affordable housing in Buffalo show how housing organizers connect issues of housing quality and experiences of home with community control of housing beyond the NPIC. Staff of other nonprofits recognized that the current housing system was not meeting the needs of their clients but could not conceive of systemic reforms to the housing system and NPIC. These more limited visions of housing advanced by nonprofit staff, even as they recognize their shortcomings, show us the contradictions to materializing a caring housing system through the NPIC and private market.

### **Discussion: Towards a Feminist Care Ethics Approach to Housing Provision**

Through an institutional ethnography of the housing nonprofit sector in Buffalo I have demonstrated the everyday constraints to community organizing and housing provision through the NPIC and marketized housing and the ways in which even progressive housing nonprofits are reliant on marketized housing. Therefore, my research explores the political economy of low-income housing provision at a personal, intimate scale, and makes visible the everyday contradictions in providing housing through housing nonprofits which are embedded in the private housing market. Such constraints from the NPIC and marketized housing limit the actions of nonprofit staff, who then attempt to contest this system and advance divergent visions for the future.

I demonstrate how nonprofit staff act as an infrastructure of care to fill the gaps created by the commodification of care in nonprofits. On the other hand, I note the resistance to the commodification of care advanced by community organizers at BTP who recognize the ways in which the affective economy operates to continue to propagate neoliberal logics around basic needs instead of a fundamental change in the housing system to one in which housing is a recognized human right. This demonstrates the limits to caring through institutions, and the ways in which power dynamics between nonprofit staff and community members or service users can lead to bad care. Such embodiment of a feminist care ethics and then resistance to the notion of care, highlights the contradictions in providing housing through nonprofits, in which the commodification of caring relationships frequently leads to bad care, and raises questions about the limits to the NPIC, affective economy, and marketized housing in materializing quality, affordable housing for all.

Divergent visions for the future of housing in Buffalo were advanced by various actors in the nonprofit sector in Buffalo. Service providers advanced limited, market-based visions for the future of housing, noting ways in which existing state programs could be better funded or expanded. They discussed a commodified housing system that was mediated by state and nonprofit actors to correct any shortcomings of the private housing market and did not envision the decommodification of housing or the abolition of the NPIC. On the other hand, community organizers at BTP advanced a vision of housing envisioning community control and decommodification of housing. Such visions for the future

demonstrate how different nonprofit actors advance divergent imaginaries of a housing system, demonstrating the ways in which the NPIC limits the visions for a housing system to commodified care, reinforcing marketized housing. These visions also show how community organizers, acknowledging and navigating the constraints of the NPIC, work both within and beyond nonprofits to create a system which prioritizes the use of housing for residents over the commodification of housing for a profit.

A feminist ethics of care approach to housing provision leans into critiques of marketized housing and the NPIC in how they recreate alienated housing and bad care and rely on the mobilization of care labor in the affective economy to meet the gaps in state functions and envisions an alternative housing system. One place to start in reshaping such nonprofits within these institutions is the creation of spaces such as the HJ committee at BTP where these concerns can be made visible and discussed collectively. Ultimately, acting on discourses around community control of housing voiced by organizers would require a recommitment to democratic control of BTP by the community in which it is based, and a recommitment to the radical politics on which it was founded. Drawing on critiques of community land trusts moving away from community control and a radical politics around property ownership, such an approach by housing justice organizations would be to critically examine their current work to determine the degree to which they advance, and enact community control beyond community engagement, critically examining their governance structures and their development work beyond the creation of affordable housing to a broader notion development shaped by the community. Only through direct mechanisms of community control of housing justice organizations as well as a commitment to a radical politics through which such groups refuse co-option by the private market and NPIC could such an organization empower marginalized residents of Buffalo.

This model is attentive to the ways in which housing functions as an infrastructure of care for households and communities and privileges such notions of care beyond the limits of the NPIC. Further, a feminist care ethics approach to housing provision would necessitate the abolition of the NPIC and affect economy in which power dynamics between service providers and users and reliance on the private housing market thereby led to bad and inadequate care, and unaffordable, alienated housing. This would therefore necessitate the decommodification of housing and community control beyond the NPIC.

## **Conclusions**

These results bring attention to housing nonprofits as sites of future research on the contestation of housing justice. My results show the everyday, often overlooked, ways in which marketized housing is recreated through nonprofits and the contradictions within nonprofits that attempt to provide housing and commodified care for housing insecure people. I highlight the everyday contestation of marketized housing and the NPIC by nonprofit staff who act as an infrastructure of care to support their clients while also, in the case of BTP organizers, resist commodified care in the affect economy. I demonstrate how

a different housing system is being imagined by nonprofit staff, highlighting the varieties of visions for the future.

This research extends literatures on the political economy of housing and feminist care ethics to ground research on housing markets and infrastructures of care in an often-overlooked site, nonprofits. I demonstrate how staff make sense of the contradictions and limitations to providing housing and care through this marketized housing system and NPIC. This work brings together literature on the NPIC, feminist care ethics, and critical political economic approaches to housing and nonprofits to consider how staff navigate the commodification of care and housing. I extend scholarship on feminist care ethics by drawing attention to the ways in which care can be mobilized to both uphold the NPIC and resist it, highlighting the need to understand contextual dynamics around the mobilization of care in nonprofits.

Future research could consider nonprofits as sites where the commodification of care and housing are negotiated, incorporating the experiences of staff and clients. Other directions might include how housing-insecure people navigate the NPIC and privatized housing system, further highlighting the limits of this system in providing housing and care. Finally, research could consider the role of care in social movements, building on the critiques of commodified care by community organizers at BTP to explore how a feminist care ethics is embodied in unpaid community organizing.

The fundamental contribution of my research is demonstrating, at a fine grained, everyday level of staff operations, how the private housing system limits nonprofit organizations' ability to provide housing in a caring, socially just manner. Responsibilizing the NPIC to provide low-income housing supports the continued reproduction of a marketized housing system, to the detriment of Buffalo residents, and provides one of the primary limits to organizing work oriented around care and housing justice. This research demonstrates the distinctions between commodified care and a feminist care ethics both that breaks down binaries between service users and staff, critiques the NPIC and housing system, and affirms housing as a human right for all. These contradictions are illustrated by BTP organizers who also worked on the politically radical India Walton campaign but were unable to make professional connections between the two or enact community control of BTP. The nonprofit sector leaves little space for radical alternatives, even within nominally progressive organizations. Based on the arguments made by organizers at BTP, the decommodification and community control of housing beyond the NPIC are necessary to achieve a housing system which provides quality housing as a human right. As Alex stated, '[organizing through] nonprofits can ... only go so far.'

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