



The need to escape: Carceral entrapments and fugitive manoeuvres amidst London's vicious housing circle

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Abstract

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The contemporary housing system in England entraps temporary tenants in ongoing movement between different types of insecure, unaffordable, overcrowded and poorly maintained accommodations. Engaging with carceral geography scholarship and Black fugitive thinking, I argue that a legalised system of carcerality entraps temporary tenants in recurrent movement, thus reproducing a 'vicious housing circle'. However, I also stress how temporary tenants and housing campaigners maintain spaces of care that hold open possibilities to escape the entrapment in movement. Grounded in my ethnographic research with the Focus E15 housing campaign, in the East London borough of Newham, I highlight the struggle of the campaign as urgent call for urban geographic scholarship to foreground and challenge the carcerality of London's 'vicious housing circle'. Based on the struggle of the Focus E15 campaign I offer an extension to debates around the 'right to stay put', considering a fugitive politics articulated around the 'need to escape'.

Keywords

Housing struggle, carcerality, fugitivity, ethnography, London

Living prison-like

In austerity Britain, the racialised and gendered urban poor experience the decline of local, permanent, and affordable housing most drastically. In 2021, around 81.7% (48.7 million) of the English and Welsh population self-identified as white, while 2.5% (1.5 million) self-identified as Black (British Government, 2022), 44% percent of whom receive governmental subsidised council housing, compared to 16% of the former. This overconcentration results from the overrepresentation of Black Britons on housing waiting

lists and in governmental homelessness statistics (Mohdin & Aguilar García, 2023). Given the lack of council housing supply, around 94,000 households lived in temporary accommodations across England in 2022, which are typically reserved for those households who file a homelessness application to their local council (Wilson & Barton, 2023, p. 4).¹ Single-mothers represent 63% of these households; and 50% identify as Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME). Compared to white British households, Black households are 11 times more likely to live in temporary accommodation (Garvie et al., 2023, pp. 22-23). While temporary accommodation facilities are increasing across England, 59% concentrate in London. Low-income families in London are also overrepresented in temporary accommodation as they cannot afford private sector rents, which averaged over £2,257 per month in 2022 (Bosetti et al., 2022). Two-parent households with monthly incomes of £1,300 after housing costs classify as low-income (British Government, 2023a, n.p.). Across London, the East London borough of Newham has the highest rate of households in temporary accommodation (48.8 per 1,000 households) (Trust for London, 2022).

In 2020, I met a young Black British single Mother named Rana during a meeting of the Newham-based Focus E15 housing campaign.² The campaign was founded in 2013 by a group of young single Mothers living in Victoria Street, a council-owned temporary accommodation facility in Newham (see Figure 1).³ The Mothers received eviction notices and expected to be rehoused to cities like Manchester, Hastings, and Birmingham, drawing them and their children away from their local jobs, schools and support networks. Contesting their expulsion, this initial battle has developed into a ten year-long struggle to secure local, permanent, and affordable housing for everyone.

During the meeting, Rana told everyone that she moved into Victoria Street with her daughter, whilst pregnant with her second child. Previously Rana moved between different types of temporary accommodations, mostly within the private rented sector. She was evicted several times after private landlords increased her rent. After 56 days in Victoria Street, when Newham council's promise to rehouse the family was not fulfilled, Rana wrote a letter to the council, but received no response. Due to the small size of her flat, Rana and her daughter had to share a bed and eat without a table. The physical and mental stress on the young family escalated during the Covid-19 pandemic. Rana felt that she had no public or private life, being stuck in her small flat and unable to go outside to keep her children safe. A few weeks after meeting Rana, she received an offer for a privately rented temporary flat. She would not be able to afford the flat should anything change about her financial situation, forcing her to once again be evicted. Rana feared refusing this offer as she could be declared

¹ Temporary accommodations can be within the private rented sector, bed and breakfast hotels, hostels, and council or housing association stock. The term 'temporary' is misleading, however, as residents often stay in such housing from six months to several years (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, 2020).

² To protect the identities of Victoria Street residents and Focus E15 campaigners their names have been anonymised. If not stated otherwise, quotes of residents and campaigners are drawn from audio-recorded interviews. Moreover, to highlight Victoria Street residents as political subjects, self-descriptions like Black and Mother, will be capitalised throughout the paper.

³ Victoria Street was previously known as Brimstone House and Focus E15 hostel.

Figure 1
Victoria Street.
Source: Author, 2022.



‘intentionally homeless’ by the council, which would withdraw its legal obligation to house her (Shelter, 2023a). Feeling trapped inside Victoria Street and fearing the recurrent movement between temporary accommodations, Rana stated: ‘We are stuck in this place. It is just like in a prison to be honest’. Arguably Rana defines her life as prison-like due to her family’s confined living conditions, her inability to move into permanent affordable housing, the disregard towards her situation shown by council officials, and the constant threat of punishment through ‘intentional homelessness’.

Rana’s story represents an urgent call to foreground the extension of prison-like conditions into the domain of housing. Carceral geographers in the US elaborate on how modes of confinement stretch beyond the prison into housing to create systems of punishment (see Bonds, 2019; Shabbaz, 2015). Alongside US carceral geographers, British carceral geographers highlight the control over mobility as central instrument of carcerality, understood as a legalised system of power that unfolds in and beyond the spaces typically associated with criminal confinement (After Echo Park Lake Research Collective, 2022; Gill, 2009). While British carceral geographers show how carcerality is spatialised within and across various institutions of confinement – e.g., the convict ship (Peters & Turner, 2015), the prison (Turner, 2016) and immigration detention centres (Gill, 2009) – housing has been largely neglected as a domain of carcerality. Taking Rana’s story seriously, I engage with British carceral geographic scholarship to emphasise the control over housing mobility as a central instrument of carceral British state power. Whereas British urban geographers stress the ongoing displacement of temporary tenants as consequence of austerity and neoliberal state politics (see Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020; Watt, 2018), I extend these debates to consider how housing insecurity is reproduced by a punitive state apparatus. This endeavour is inspired by the struggle of the Focus E15 campaign, which reveals and contests the systematic entrapment of temporary tenants between different prison-like housing arrangements. The campaign describes this circular entrapment as London’s ‘vicious housing

circle' (Cooper et al., 2022).⁴ To challenge the involuntary movement of temporary tenants, urban geographers emphasise 'the right to stay put' (Annunziata & Lees, 2020; Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020). Drawing on the legacies of Black fugitive thinking (Hirsch, 2021; Figueiredo et al., 2020), I highlight how the struggle of the Focus E15 campaign spatialises possibilities to escape the prison-like conditions of Victoria Street and London's 'vicious housing circle', thus complicating the 'right to stay put'.

To account for this struggle, I conducted ethnographic research with Victoria Street residents and Focus E15 campaigners in online and physical spaces, conducted over different time intervals from two to six months between 2019 and 2022. As such, I ask: *How do Victoria Street residents become entrapped in movement within London's vicious housing circle? How does the Focus E15 campaign hold open possibilities for escape from prison-like housing?* I foreground the contemporary English housing system as carceral for temporary tenants and highlight ongoing rehearsals of escape.

The following section opens a conversation between carceral geographic scholarship and Black fugitive thinking and outlines the methodology of this paper. Thereafter I illustrate the prison-like conditions of Victoria Street, to then demonstrate how these conditions are enabled by a carceral continuum, specifically London's 'vicious housing circle'. The next section illustrates how desires of escaping this vicious circle are spatialised by the Focus E15 campaign. Finally, I reflect on the 'right to stay put' given the pressing need to escape prison-like housing arrangements.

Rehearsing escape from carceral continuums

British urban geographers have long been concerned with the state-led decline of affordable, council housing (Watt, 2021; Beswick & Penny, 2018; Ward, 1985). Ward (1985) argues that the post-World War II British welfare state centralised governmental control and denied council tenants the freedom to move at will and to control one's own home. While he compliments the decentralisation of governmental power introduced through Thatcher's right-to-buy policy, which enabled council tenants to buy their homes, Ward (1985) also critiqued her policy as it reduced the overall supply of affordable housing stock. Under current austerity politics, Beswick & Penny (2018) emphasise how housing financialization contributes to higher rents and to public-private arrangements, which reduce governmental subsidised housing in new developments. As such, Watt (2021) emphasises how British Conservative and Labour governments enabled unaffordable housing conditions in the private rented sector and eroded council housing. Arguably these political-economic developments contribute to increased homelessness and displacement, especially of working-class Britons, women, and people of colour (Elliott-Cooper et al., 2020; Watt, 2018).

⁴ The term 'vicious housing circle' was coined by the Focus E15 campaign and is based on the lived experiences of Victoria Street residents. I employ this term in relation to the After Echo Park Lake Research Collective (2022) and Watt (2018) to describe the state sanctioned processes by which temporary tenants become enrolled in ongoing circular movement between different types of insecure public and private housing arrangements.

In such conditions, Watt (2018, p. 5) stresses how the lives of temporary tenants are marked by ‘displacement anxiety’, caused by their ongoing movement between insecure tenancies. Elliott-Cooper et al. (2020) thus understand the displacement of temporary tenants not as single event but as state of being, in which one is susceptible to involuntary movement from urban material and cultural resources. They echo Yiftachel’s (2020, p. 155) work, describing this state of being as increasingly global condition of displaceability. Building on Elliott-Cooper et al. (2020), Yiftachel’s scholarship enables me to discern how the displacement of Black and indigenous people through British imperial power has turned inwards and informs an ongoing racialised spatial logic which forces ‘marginalized groups to urbanize into colonial-like forms of exploitation and segregation’ (Yiftachel, 2020, p. 161). Specifically, the lack of public and private life experienced by Rana and other racialised young single Mothers in Victoria Street illustrates the remaking of the imperial city in which legalised and ongoing displacement (re)constructs Blackness as placeless (see Figueiredo et al., 2020).

Carceral geographers attend to these (re)constructions by elaborating on various institutions of confinement (Peters & Turner, 2015; Shabazz, 2015), discursive and material practices of surveillance and control (Turner, 2016; Gill, 2009) as well as to the spatial dimensions of carcerality (Moran et al., 2018; Villanueva, 2018). Specifically, US carceral geographers highlight how a punitive racial-capitalist state order extends carcerality into housing through property-making, thus constructing Blackness as out of place beyond the prison (After Echo Park Lake Research Collective, 2022; Bonds, 2019). For example, the After Echo Park Lake Research Collective (2022) stresses how property-making is enacted on Los Angeles’s (LA) unhoused population through displacement, surveillance, and confinement. These practices then reproduce gendered, racialised, and classed forms of carceral enclosure, expressed through violence towards Black working-class woman or discourses around bad motherhood (Bonds, 2019; Shabazz, 2015). In relation to the British punitive state system, Follis (2015) outlines how prisons form part of an institutional network of carceral confinement in which forced mobility becomes an instrument of control. Gill (2009) emphasises the disciplinary use of mobility by the British state that moves asylum seekers between different incarceration facilities across the country. Thus Gill (2009) elaborates on mobility as an instrument of carcerality, legitimised through racialised fears of immigrants and enabled by the public-private management of incarceration facilities that result in economised and enforced placelessness. Relating to LA, the After Echo Park Lake Research Collective (2022, p. 75) illustrates how this forced mobility creates ‘carceral continuums’ through which lived spaces become intertwined with, and resemble, institutions of confinement. Within these continuums, carcerality is enacted by displacing the unhoused from self-organised communities in public spaces based on the promise of secure governmental subsidised shelter. However, these governmental shelters were closed, and police evicted residents, thus enabling a carceral continuum of ongoing displacement and homelessness (After Echo Park Lake Research Collective, 2022, p. 72). Building on carceral geography scholarship, I interrogate the embodied and affective processes (see Moran et al., 2018) through which circular patterns of carcerality are experienced and enacted daily within England’s housing system. While carceral geographic scholarship accounts for carceral

mobilities (Peters & Turner, 2015; Follis, 2015), enabling displaceability, it offers limited insights into how escape from carceral continuums unfolds. Notable exceptions include Shabazz (2015), who emphasises the community-organised creation of green spaces as ‘counter’ to the historical carceral conditions of Chicago’s Black communities. Additionally, the After Echo Park Lake Research Collective (2022) illustrates practices of sweep blockages, enacted by LA’s unhoused population to resist inclusion into the city’s carceral housing arrangements. Inspired by these accounts of struggle against carcerality, I point towards enactments of carceral housing in Britain and its contestations, which I conceptualise through Black fugitive thinking.

Fugitivity presents the historical escape of enslaved African people from the plantation in the Americas and the Caribbean, as well as a practice of countering the violent geographies of racial-capitalism in the present (Winston, 2021; Wright, 2020; Figueiredo et al., 2020; Harney & Moten, 2013). While accounts of fugitive practices of escape and refusal mainly focus on the Americas and the Caribbean, the legacies of Black fugitive thinking and practice also become apparent in Britain (see Hirsch, 2021; Okoye, 2021; Télémaque, 2021; Noxolo, 2018). For example, in East London, Hirsch (2021) stresses Black joy as fugitive place-making practice of Black Britons, who publicly asserts Blackness through music and dancing, amidst immanent threats of policing. Accentuating Black joy as defiant spatial practice, Télémaque (2021) accentuates how Black Britons initiate a Black British sense of place amidst the imperial legacies of a London council estate. Further elaborating on forms of Black British creative expression, Noxolo (2018) points out how community organised dance performances strengthen ties between Black and multi-ethnic Britons in the face of ongoing displacement. Extending these conversations, Okoye (2021) illustrates practises of care in online spaces as fugitive expressions of place-making that enable spaces of Black British mutual support from within racialised academic institutions. These Black British geographers follow the tradition of Black fugitive thinking by highlighting movement, emotionally and physical, as place-making practice and form of refusal amidst racialised constructions of Blackness as out of place, i.e. placeless (see Figueiredo et al., 2020). In doing so, they document how Black and multi-ethnic working-class Britons continuously rehearse escape from racialised, classed, and gendered spatial enclosures, such as council estates (Télémaque, 2021), the British police (Hirsch, 2021), or academic institutions (Okoye, 2021). Based on the insights of Black British geographers, I open a conversation between carceral geographies scholarship and Black fugitive thinking.

By focusing on Black fugitive practices beyond the US, I follow the examples of Figueiredo et al. (2020) and Wright (2020) who emphasize heterogenous fugitive practices of escape and refusal across the Americas and Asia. Specifically, I follow the interconnected geographies of the Black Atlantic that are shaped by the ongoing legacies of slavery and imperialism, but also enable the exchange of political dissidents (Gilroy, 1993). As such, I consider London as an imperial city shaped by displaceability, but also punctuated by defiant place-making practices that escape and refuse racialised constructions of Blackness as placeless. Based on the insights of Black British geographers and British carceral geographers, I illustrate how temporary tenants become entrapped in ongoing movement

between different carceral housing arrangements. Simultaneously, I point to the struggle of the Focus E15 campaign as place-making practice that holds open possibilities to escape and refuse this entrapment.

These theoretical arguments arise out of my ethnographic research with the Focus E15 campaign. Since 2019, I took part in the campaign's weekly street stalls and demonstrations, handed out leaflets alongside campaigners, talked to passers-by and residents, and became an active participant in campaign meetings. Hereby, I carried out 52 participant observations with Victoria Street residents and Focus E15 campaigners. Building close relationships with campaigners and residents, a Focus E15 campaigner named Hailey identified my positioning, during a campaign meeting in 2021, as 'research-activist'. Inspired by the work of urban geographers who conducted research with housing movements across London (see Watt, 2016; Lees, 2014), I consider this positioning as possibility for a shared struggle (in and outside of academia) against broader carceral systems. In centring the voices of Victoria Street residents, my work exposes the carceral conditions experienced by London's temporary tenants and works against the historical construction of Blackness as placeless in urban studies (Figueiredo et al., 2020, p. 59).

The close relationships established through my ethnographic work with residents and campaigners enabled me to conduct 10 interviews. These took place in 2022 and were held in settings that could be easily accessed by interviewees, such as parks, restaurants, playgrounds, libraries, and cafes. As extension of my participant observations, interviews were unstructured to allow for the generation of questions in the natural flow of an interaction. Hereby the interviews did not follow predetermined questions but utilised an *aide memoire*, a broad guide on issues that might be covered in the interview to ensure comparability of the interview data and to provide a structure for the data analysis (Patton, 2002). This guide was created based on the insights obtained through participant observations. Given the immense physical and mental stress placed on Victoria Street residents, the interviews have not been analysed with them but have been shared with the Focus E15 campaign with the consent of residents.

During interviews and participant observations I realised that, due to the physical and mental stress placed on them, children often had difficulties to verbalise their experiences of living in Victoria Street. To account for the children's non-verbalised experiences, I analysed drawings made by them through visual discourse analysis (Albers, 2011). These drawings have been obtained through the Focus E15 campaign, who published the drawings with the consent of the children. Including the children's drawings in my research, I reveal their often-disregarded lived experiences of carceral housing. Moreover, through analysing 10 years of blogposts within the campaign's online archive, I document the ongoing rehearsals of escape from London's 'vicious housing circle'. In this respect, the following section illustrates the prison-like conditions of Victoria Street.

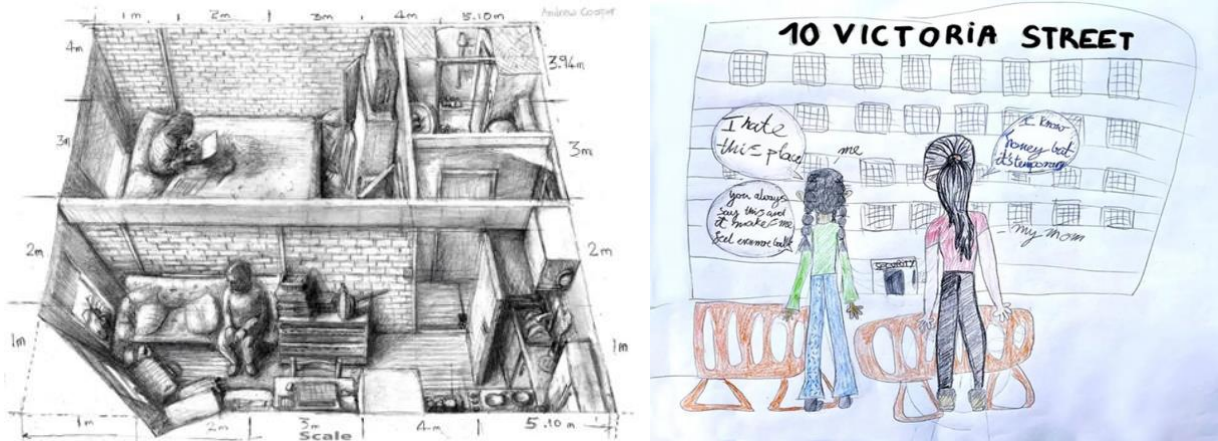
The cells of Victoria Street

The East London borough of Newham consists of 120,000 dwellings, 87,000 are owned or rented privately, 15,000 are owned by Newham council, 14,000 are owned by housing associations, and 293 are other public sector dwellings (Newham Council, 2022a). In February 2022, around 34,000 households were registered on the council's housing waiting list, resulting in an average waiting time for council housing of more than 13 years (Newham Council, 2022b; Newham Council, n.d.). Waiting to be housed locally, Rana and other young single Mothers and families, most of whom self-identify as non-white British, currently reside in Victoria Street. During a campaign meeting in 2020, a young Black British single Mother called Erma stated that the building's small corridors create a feeling of isolation amongst residents. Rala, a young Black British single Mother, emphasised during an online meeting in 2021 that this estrangement is fostered by violence and drug abuse in and around Victoria Street. In the same meeting, Mula who also self-identifies as young Black British single Mother highlighted that the cameras installed on every floor create an atmosphere of constant surveillance and insecurity, as during violent instances these did not work. Throughout several meetings and conversations on the Focus E15 campaign's street stall, most Victoria Street residents described their flats as 'cages' or 'cells' due to their cramped conditions. A layout of one of these 'cells' can be seen in Figure 2.

In the flat depicted in Figure 2, a young white British single Mother named Josy lives with her young daughter of mixed-ethnicity. While interviewing Josy, she stressed the two of them must share a bed, use shelves to store their clothes, and have no table to eat from. In another interview, a young single South-Asian British Mother named Sana explained her children wake up constantly due to the fire alarm, and furniture blocks the only window. During an interview with Primm, a young white British Mother, she stated some residents pay £800 per month to live in these 'cells'. Such overcrowded conditions are legalised through the current Housing Act, in which children under the age of one are not counted as persons and only count as half a person until the age of ten (British Government, 2023b). The physical confinement of residents also affects their mental health, as becomes apparent in Figure 3.

A young child, living in Victoria Street exclaims that: 'I hate this place', while illustrating the building as prison. Her Mother tries to comfort her by stating: 'I know honey, but its temporary'. The young girl replies: 'You always say this, and it makes me feel even more bad' (see Figure 3). The mental stress put on children reflects in and on their bodies through asthma attacks and skin irritations. Feeling the seemingly never ending physical and mental stress placed on him, Sana's son asked her: 'Mommy when are we going home?'

In an interview, Erma outlined that these experiences of physical, mental, and temporal confinement are reinforced through Newham council officials who do not respond to residents' requests for maintenance. During another interview with Adesh, a young South-



Figures 2 & 3

Figure 2 (left): Living conditions in Victoria Street.
Source: Cooper & Victoria Street residents, 2022.

Figure 3 (right): Child's drawing of Victoria Street focus E15 campaign.
Source: Focus E15 campaign & Victoria Street residents, 2022

Asian British father, he highlighted that council officers often blame residents for their conditions, making them feel humiliated. Primm expressed that she fears mentioning her physical and mental struggles because social services might take her children away. At a campaign meeting in 2021, Talin, a young Black British single Mother described her interaction with the council as follows: 'Every time I call them, I cry'. Over the course of my ethnographic research, a lot of young Mothers expressed due to this treatment they feel like failing in their motherly duty to provide a safe home to their children.

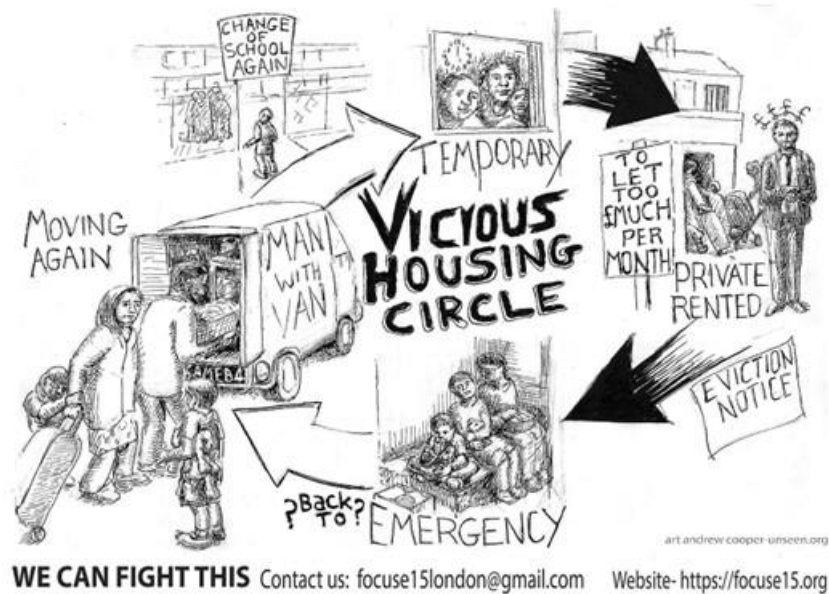
Within Victoria Street, carcerality expresses itself as material, embodied, and affective experience (Moran et al., 2018). As such, residents experience carcerality not only as material condition, as enclosure within 'cells', but also through internalised discourses of bad motherhood, (self-)isolation from other residents and through feelings of placelessness with no home to return to. The British government legalises this carcerality through national legislation, and local council officials reproduce it in everyday interactions with Victoria Street residents. The following sections illustrates how these carceral conditions extend beyond residents' time in Victoria Street.

London's vicious housing circle: A carceral continuum

In September 2021 across England, local authorities placed around 26,000 households in other locations than indicated in their homelessness application. Out of these households, 37% that were accepted as homeless by a London borough were moved out of the borough (Wilson & Barton, 2023, p.35). The 2011 Localism Act enabled this development by allowing local councils to house their homelessness applicants within privately rented housing across England. This process is deeply racialised as non-white British households are more likely to be placed out of area than other groups, sometimes moving more than 10 times (Garvie et al., 2023; Wilson & Barton, 2023). During campaign meetings, several Victoria Street residents described that after rising rents within their temporary private accommodations,

Figure 4

London's vicious housing circle. Source: Cooper et al, 2022.



they were evicted and had to make a homelessness application once more. This carceral continuum (see After Echo Park Lake Research Collective, 2022) is described by residents and Focus E15 campaigners as ‘vicious housing circle’ (see Figure 4).

Victoria Street residents mostly receive housing offers within the private rented sector. For example, Josy explained that a Newham council officer made her an offer without checking if the property is affordable for her. She was offered a badly maintained private rented two-bedroom flat with a monthly rent of £1,700. Her salary was £1,300 per month. Maria, a young Black British single Mother explained, during a meeting in 2020, she fears to refuse an offer because social services might take her children away. Moreover, Erma illustrated that the ability of residents to speak English affects how they are moved or can complain. Trish, another young single Black British Mother recalled, during a meeting in 2021, that a few African, Afro-Caribbean, and South-Asian residents have not been contacted by the council and are waiting for two years to be rehoused. Especially young single Mothers are often left without a choice, as Sana sated: ‘I didn't want to accept it. I closed my eyes, and I said yes to the offer because I had no choice. I didn't want to be intentionally homeless’. Reflecting on Sana’s situation, Adesh stated while the council says that residents are being moved to so-called ‘suitable’ accommodation, they often do not get to view their offers and they cannot decide whether it is suitable for them based on the constant fear of being declared intentionally homeless if they refuse an offer.

Due to previous experiences of unaffordable private sector rents, young single Mothers fear being evicted and returned to emergency accommodation (see Figure 4). For Josy this forced mobility produces an ongoing trauma: ‘Most of my adult life I was privately renting and that cost me my mental health. Moving from place to place, from one nasty place to another. I've been through more than 10 landlords, and it's mostly in Newham’. Jana, one of the founding Mothers of the campaign, recalls similar experiences after being moved out of Victoria Street:

Well, I never was housed in a decent place by the council. My housing now is only because my uncle owns the flat that I'm in. So yeah, I was moved into private rented accommodation that still wasn't great, after Victoria Street, but it was so much better, because it had space, I just had to take it. And then from there, the 12-month contract ended. And then I was moved on and on, and on and on until my uncle let me move into his place.

She added that her uncle's flat is outside of London, in an area where her young daughter of mixed-ethnicity often gets yelled at with racial slurs. Sana emphasises that the private temporary apartment she moved in after being moved out of Victoria Street was not furnished, did not have hot water, and had almost £2,000 unpaid on the gas and electricity. Hala, a young Black British single Mother stated during a campaign meeting that after being moved to a temporary private rented flat: 'Everyday water is coming. It is like rainfall'.

Being evicted from private rented accommodation, many residents move to emergency housing (see Figure 4). Emergency housing, like hotels or hostels, is usually provided to those in most urgent housing need and limited to a period of around two months. Adesh and his family, however, were kept in a badly maintained hostel emergency accommodation for much longer than Newham council told them. After two months, residents are usually rehoused to more permanent, yet still temporary, accommodations, thus closing the vicious housing circle (see Figure 4). In one instance, a young Black British single Mother was initially told that Victoria Street is an emergency accommodation. She received a letter, after two months, stating that the accommodation is suitable as long-term temporary accommodation, making her feel dumped (Focus E15 campaign, 2018). Within this ongoing movement, Sana stated that the constant change of schools (see Figure 4) affects her children's mental health and school performance as they cannot form lasting friendships and feel distressed in class due to their living conditions.

Consequently, carcerality in the context of London's 'vicious housing circle' is enabled by permanent displaceability. Temporary tenants experience this carcerality through the ongoing threat of institutional care for their children, through the recurring extraction of capital in the private rented sector and through feelings of neglect by the council. The lack of public and private life, experienced by Rana in Victoria Street, is hereby transported beyond the building's walls, due to racialised encounters in the areas to which residents were forced to move and due to the bad conditions of private rented sector flats. Arguably the reproduction of the imperial city is upheld through legally sanctioned forms of mobility in which temporary tenants become entrapped (see Yiftachel, 2020). The mental stress caused by being moved, waiting to be moved, and by threats of social services, hereby enforce carcerality through 'displacement anxiety' (Watt, 2018). As such, British state officials reproduce carcerality through the ongoing threat of punishment which conditions residents' experiences and practices (see Villanueva, 2018). It becomes apparent that London's 'vicious housing circle' resembles the characteristics of the carceral continuum experienced by Echo Park Lake residents (After Echo Park Lake Research Collective, 2022). However, while the carceral continuum described by the After Echo Park Lake Research Collective (2022, p.76) focuses on the racialised urban poor, my considerations around London's 'vicious housing

circle' extend these debates by pointing towards the intersection of race, class and gender in the production of carcerality. As such, as result of mental and physical stress placed on them, several young single Mothers expressed during conversations that London's 'vicious housing circle' enables violence against women and premature death, in the form of miscarriage and suicide. I illustrated how these intersectional inequalities are exacerbated through private landlords, who extract capital from temporary tenants until they are unable to pay rents and get evicted. Thus, London's carceral housing continuum is legalised by British state authorities and upheld through public-private housing arrangements. Finally, London's 'vicious housing circle' points towards the carceral effects of housing on the children of the racialised and gendered urban poor, expressed in mental and physical illness, as well as premature death. How Victoria Street residents and Focus E15 campaigners rehearse escape from this 'vicious circle' presents the focus of the following section.

Focus E15: Spatialising possibilities for escape

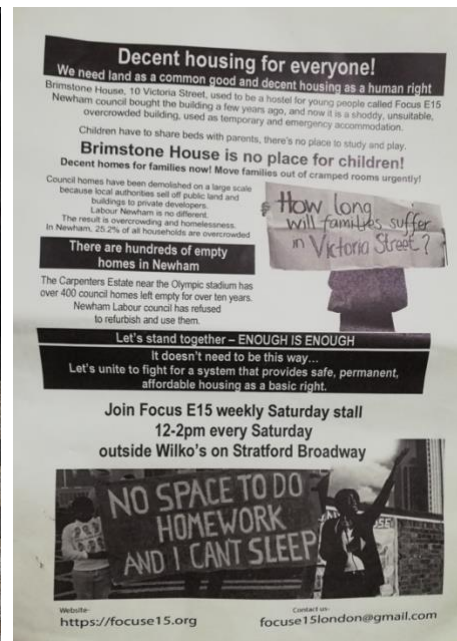
This section highlights how the Focus E15 campaign and Victoria Street residents are refusing the entrapment within the 'vicious housing circle'. I illustrate the campaign's struggle to escape in and through three different spaces, namely the campaign's weekly street stall, its meeting and office space called 'Sylvia's Corner', and Victoria Street itself.

The street stall

Since 2013, the Focus E15 campaign's street stall takes place every Saturday on Broadway in Stratford, a ward of Newham (see Figure 5). During the stall, campaigners hand out leaflets to passers-by (see Figure 6), display banners that illustrate the prison-like conditions inside Victoria Street, offer support to Victoria Street residents, as well as advice for people struggling with housing across London.

The leaflets feature the voices of Victoria Street residents who express their suffering, describe statistics that outline the state sanctioned production of carceral housing, and depict the struggle of residents (see Figure 6). Garry, an artist and Focus E15 campaigner, stated during an interview that the leaflets do not only appeal to the situation of Victoria Street residents, but also enable passers-by to relate to their struggle. The presence of the stall however is not a given condition, but an outcome of previous struggles. For example, in 2015, a law enforcement officer tried to confiscate the table of the campaign to shut down their protest (Focus E15 campaign, 2015). Garry thus considers the ongoing presence of the stall as 'holding of space' enabled through a core group of campaigners that set up the stall every week.

Another Focus E15 campaigner named Steff highlighted in an interview that the street stall also presents a 'cultural spot' in which people from different backgrounds come together. During the stall campaigners encounter people from Newham, who are disillusioned by politics. Especially racialised non-white Britons feel not represented by British politics as right-wing movements grow and the Labour party is unable to find an



Figures 5 & 6

Figure 5 (*left*): Focus E15 Street stall.
Figure 6 (*right*): Leaflet Focus E15 campaign.
Sources: Author, 2022

adequate response. Hailey stated that this development becomes apparent during the stall through narratives of ‘lazy people’ and ‘increased immigration’. To counter these racialised and classed narratives, the campaign takes an anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist position reflected through banners displayed on the stall, but also in the interactions with passers-by, in which campaigners continuously stress that immigrants and jobless people are not the reason behind London’s housing crisis.

For Josy the stall presents a space of support and care that always remains open to them, even if they cannot always be present. Here children can express their experiences in Victoria Street by painting banners or staging an improvisation theatre. When residents feel discouraged, Focus E15 campaigners uplift them. Steff stated:

Because of that stability that I have, that means that I need to spend time to try and fight so that other people can have that stability. It’s your role to bring the energy and to bring positivity and to bring a bit of faith, even if you don’t feel it sometimes.

While based locally, the stall also enables the campaign to build networks of solidarity with international housing campaigns, like the Hungarian housing movement *A Város Mindenkié* (AVM) who visited the stall to demonstrate international solidarity and to learn from the Focus E15 campaign (Focus E15 campaign, 2016). The campaign’s international connections became a crucial resource during the pandemic, as the street stall moved online. Anna, a Focus E15 campaigner, stated in an interview that the online street stall enabled the campaign to learn from and express their solidarity with housing struggles in London as well as in the US, the Philippines, India, Ireland, and Palestine. Hailey added that the stall also forms a ‘street university’ in which Victoria Street residents, campaigners, passers-by, as well as local and international movements share knowledges and plan actions.

Consequently, the street stall offers a space of care and solidarity in which Victoria Street residents can express, but also escape, their isolation in Victoria Street, through shared actions and the exchange of knowledges. This enactment of care departs from the carceral care offered by Newham council, as Hailey stated that ‘the stall allows people to find their strengths, and to realise they’ve got something to contribute’. Jade further expressed that the networks of solidarity, formed through the stall, sustain an ongoing infrastructure of refusal:

It’s like a solid place where people know, even if they don’t come to the stall for three years, that the stall is there. (...) So, they know that they can come to the stall, and they know that they’re part of Focus E15. Yeah, there’s thousands of people that are part of Focus E15 and it’s huge. When we do come together, you feel it.

Sylvia’s Corner

Sylvia’s Corner (see Figure 7), the campaign’s office and meeting space, is located close to the stall and Victoria Street. Its name alludes to Sylvia Pankhurst, an East-London suffragette, who organised around women’s rights and against British imperialism. Through its name, this space links past local and global struggles to current struggles of young Mothers and families in Victoria Street. During the pandemic, Sylvia’s Corner could not be used for the campaign’s meetings and was instead given over to a local food bank, which continues to distribute food for people in the area.

During meetings, residents, campaigners, supporters, invited speakers and others educate each other about the causes behind London’s housing crisis, update each other on the situation of Victoria Street and plan their next actions. In these meetings, Victoria Street residents often get to know their neighbours for the first time and learn about their different situations. Through the presence of former Victoria Street residents, current residents become aware of the long struggles and victories of the campaign. Hereby Jana and other former residents, who often remain in London’s ‘vicious housing circle’, offer support to current residents in their struggle as they regard their ongoing involvement as part of a bigger housing struggle.

Figure 7

Sylvia’s corner.
Source: Author, 2022



Through talks by guest speakers, the campaign foregrounds anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist narratives. Garry stated the campaign thus challenges right-wing discourses and council officers' narratives that blame residents for their own situation. Hereby residents gain confidence as they learn how to organise against the large-scale processes that enable their situation in Victoria Street. Campaign meetings also present possibilities for residents to get practical support from the campaign in relation to their individual housing cases. This includes accompanying residents to viewings, responding to council correspondence, and filing legal challenges against decisions of 'intentional homelessness'. Residents emotionally and practically care for each during the meetings. This takes the form of consolation, planning actions together and helping to express feelings that are too hard to express. This is illustrated by Josy, who said that 'sometimes I don't have words to describe it and someone else will describe it'.

The meetings are organised by a core team of Focus E15 campaigners that includes no current residents. Steff is aware that the prison-like conditions of Victoria Street make organising almost impossible for residents: 'It is because everyone is battling tooth and nail. And we're here to do the things that people do not have time to do; to allow them to fight their battle'. For Josy, this organisational structure provides possibilities for epistemological escape from carceral logics. In relation to campaign meetings, she stated that 'there are always some new ideas you can come up with, someone will always add something, find a new article, find a new source, find a new example. Every time I go, I'll hear something that will help me'.

Consequently, Sylvia's Corner offers a space to escape carceral logics through mutual learning and organising. Anna emphasized however that this space is not static but riddled with uncertainties as 'you don't quite know what's going to spark people, you can't predict things'. Arguably, to make this escape from carceral logics possible, Anna added that Focus E15 campaigners must 'think on their feet' to remain open to new knowledges and suggestions for actions. In this escape, especially young single Mothers realise themselves as radical thinkers who learn to apply anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist and feminist frameworks. Hereby, analogue to Yiftachel (2020), the campaign stresses how current constructions of young Black and differently racialised single Mothers as placeless, within Victoria Street and London's 'vicious housing circle', are a direct consequence of the remaking of the imperial city. Through this epistemological escape, Sana expressed that residents come to regard themselves as part of a collective and historical struggle for liberation as they realise that 'you can fight this battle'.

Victoria Street

During the pandemic, residents' desire to escape the prison-like conditions of Victoria Street became acutely pressing. Remembering the conditions in Victoria Street during the pandemic, Jana expressed that 'people were just so ready to escape and fight. I think people are ready to fight for each other too'. Understandings of fighting as flight, enacted in solidarity with others, date back to the campaign's founding in 2013. Reflecting on her days

in Victoria Street, Jana continues: ‘And we were there for different reasons. As the mums, we knew each other was there. And we all felt each other's pain and just wanted the best for each other’. This solidarity however is challenged by Newham council. On several occasions residents were told by council officers to keep to themselves, residents were made different housing offers, and some were moved quickly into different temporary arrangements within the ‘vicious housing circle’, making organising very difficult.

Being inspired by campaign meetings and street stalls, residents came together and started organising in Victoria Street. Refusing to be dealt with as individual cases within a carceral system, residents set up their own organising group. In their first meeting, held in the staircases of Victoria Street, they agreed to do regular door-to-door knocking to inform other residents about the Focus E15 campaign. As such, residents utilise the prison-like conditions of Victoria Street to disrupt the ‘viscous housing circle’ from within. Sana stated:

Our step is to help these residents speak out. Like me, I was scared to speak out before. But through Focus E15, I felt that I can speak out to the highest level. Because that's the confidence that Focus E15 gave me. And it can happen the same way for others if more and more residents get involved.

Organising with each other, residents contest their physical and structural positioning within the ‘vicious housing circle’: ‘it did let me know that I could do something more than just be a single Mom in a temporary accommodation and be another system number in the statistics that the council already had’, said Erma. Through organising then, the classed, racialised and gendered positionings of residents, within the ‘vicious housing circle’, are utilised to care for each other. This is highlighted by Sana, who emphasized that ‘the amazing thing about all of us is we have members who can speak different languages. And that's the way we help others. The council took advantage of people that stay quiet’. Consequently, inside the prison-like conditions of Victoria Street, residents utilise their different knowledges to rehearse escape from the ‘vicious housing circle’. Hereby the material conditions of Victoria Street, supposed to isolate residents from each other, are used to form and extend networks of mutual care.

Overall, it is through the street stall, Sylvia’s Corner, and Victoria Street that paths of escape and refusal from the ‘vicious housing circle’ are maintained. These spaces, however, do not form a linear trajectory for escape (see Hirsch, 2021). Rather the carceral continuum is present in each of these spaces as it seeks to enclose on the campaign’s fugitive politics. Sana makes this apparent by illustrating that escape is ambivalently experienced by residents: ‘So you know, we’re still struggling, but we’re better where we are’. To maintain the possibility of escape, campaigners and residents hold onto each other, giving each other emotional and practical support, inspiring each other through the sharing of knowledge and shared actions.

The refusal to leave and the need to escape

At the beginning of this paper, I asked: *How do Victoria Street residents become entrapped in movement within London’s vicious housing circle? How does the Focus E15 campaign hold open possibilities*

for escape from carceral housing? Based on the lived realities of Victoria Street residents and the ten year-long struggle of the Focus E15 campaign, I illustrated that the housing system in England entraps temporary accommodation residents in a carceral continuum. This continuum is upheld by the legal sanctioning of forced mobility, prison-like housing conditions, through day-to-day interactions with council officials and desires of profit maximisation by private landlords. The Focus E15 campaign then enables possibilities for escape from this continuum by maintaining spaces in which, through the exchange of knowledge and shared action, care is enacted as fight and flight in solidarity.

Through their manifold practices, the Focus E15 campaign exposes London's 'vicious housing circle' as carceral continuum in which carcerality is achieved as material, embodied, and affective experience (Moran et al., 2018). Specifically, the campaign emphasises how carceral mobilities extend beyond prisons and detention centres (Turner, 2016; Gill, 2009) into housing. Enabled by a punitive British state order, carceral mobilities are achieved through the ongoing threat of 'intentional homelessness' as well as through the material conditions of temporary accommodations that reinforce the urgency of residents to move. I thus argue that displaceability in the context of London relies on a punitive British state system, which utilises its legal control over housing mobility as instrument of carceral power that continuously extracts capital from the racialised and gendered urban poor and punishes them with 'intentional homelessness' if they refuse to move.

Enabling a dialog between carceral geography scholarship and Black fugitive thinking, I revealed how carceral housing arrangements in London operate, but also demonstrated that these carceral spaces are punctuated by practices of escape and refusal. By moving beyond the Americas to elaborate on these conditions, this paper opens a forum for dialog between movements that rehearse escape from gendered and mobile forms of racial-capitalist enclosures, on either side of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy, 1993). Hereby my elaborations on London's 'vicious housing circle' highlight the gendered dimensions of carceral housing mobility in England, its public-private arrangements, and its effects on children, thus offering an extension to current debates held in this journal around carceral housing continuums (see After Echo Park Lake Research Collective, 2022). In this regard, the Focus E15 campaign demonstrates how differences across race, gender and class are mobilised to keep open routes of escape form carceral continuums.

While presenting opportunities for living otherwise, fugitivity remains conditioned on the existence of modes of enclosure, thus serving as constant reminder of unfreedom (Walcott, 2018). Following Simone (2022, p.6), I showed that fugitivity also presents an ongoing reminder that spaces that are partly carceral, domestic, and administrative, are never fully stable. Rather they are punctuated by populations defined as temporary, holding onto each other, reforming spaces like Victoria Street into spaces of mutual care and solidarity. In these spaces, care is not enacted as form of carcerality, namely as threat by social services. Instead, care is enacted by residents and campaigners through affective and material practices that are 'concerned with' a collective endurance (Lancione, 2023, p.2). This endurance reflects the maintenance of routes of escape and refusal from the 'vicious housing circle'. Being attentive to these fugitive politics allows urban geographers to account for the myriad

of ways in which people enact a different world on the way to freedom. As Erma stated in relation to her situation: 'I wouldn't say I'm on the other side. Well, I'm halfway. I'm shooting'.

Being halfway, I argue, describes a spatio-political manoeuvre that keeps moving through constant acts of care, and is not fully enclosed by displaceability. Thus it marks an ongoing effort to hold open ways of escape for others to become halfway too. Arguably, being halfway extends the 'right to stay put', which signals the production of a variegated set of alternatives, and/or to the action of surviving in the midst of things (Annunziata & Lees, 2020). This survival – amidst reconstructions of placelessness through displaceability (Yiftachel, 2020) – is highlighted by Reese & Johnson (2022, p.32) who outline how networks of care provide infrastructural material through which people can both have their needs met and practice relationality that is not rooted in extraction. Hereby they echo Ward's (1985) emphasis on mutual aid amongst the urban poor as a practice to contest British state efforts of housing control. Departing from violent institutional care, these material care infrastructures, spatialised through the street stall, Sylvia's Corner, and the staircase of Victoria Street, present fugitive place-making practices that continuously escape being absorbed fully into London's 'vicious housing circle' (see Télémaque, 2021; Reese & Johnson, 2022). I demonstrated that it is by ensuring the ongoing forging of solidarities amongst strangers, the continuous provision of mutual affective support, practical advice, and epistemological escape, that these infrastructures spatialise the possibility of movement beyond carcerality. Consequently, I argue that 'the need to escape' reflects the Focus E15 campaign's fugitive politics that secure the spatialisation of material care infrastructures beyond full state control, and thus enact movement to keep open the possibility of staying put.

Fugitive politics of escape and refusal become possible through campaigners, who continuously 'think on their feet'. Hereby, thinking on your feet forms an essential part of 'the need to escape', as it pushes urban geographers to pay attention to how populations defined as temporary, continue to form ways of escape from their carceral entrapment, ways that do not always end in their former local area. The 'need to escape' however, does not fetishise movement for movement's sake (Watt, 2016, p. 317), but takes seriously the prison-like conditions of Victoria Street residents whilst highlighting their place-making practices. These practices spatialise routes of escape from within London's 'vicious housing circle' and thus hold open the possibility of life beyond prison-like housing.

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