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Housing Movements and Care: Rethinking the Political Imaginaries of Housing

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Abstract

Care is a practice and labour making human survival and flourishing possible. This Symposium explores the place and work of care within housing movements, asking how care operates as a politics, an ethics, and a set of practices through which tenants survive—and ultimately seek to transform—the structural violence of capitalist housing systems. Situated in US cities with abiding associations with Blackness and indigeneity, papers in the Symposium examine housing movements that take care as the starting point. As we discuss in this introduction to the Symposium, in such movements, care operates as connective tissue across households and modes of difference; challenges relations of racial capitalism and settler colonialism that underlie dominant understandings of who deserves and can demand care; and drives calls for public care and experiments with non-propertised forms of ownership. Housing systems are care infrastructures, making housing movements a vital place for care work.

Keywords

care, housing movements, tenant movements, racial capitalism, settler colonialism, feminist theory

Introduction

In the past decade, “the housing crisis” has been invoked with a frequency pointing to a more enduring state of affairs than the language of crisis conveys. Housing systems post-2008 are not undergoing an acute interruption. Instead, they are undergoing a step change in the structural violence inherent to racial capitalism, in which housing is treated as an asset and organised through markets. This violence manifests in the dramatic growth of unaffordability, substandard conditions, police-imposed evictions, and homelessness alongside capital’s ongoing innovation and refinement of accumulation strategies. Yet, we are also witnessing a surge of housing movements globally, encompassing: the formation of new tenant unions (e.g. London Renters Union, Los Angeles Tenants Union, Veritas Tenants Association); the election of activists into municipal leadership (e.g. Barcelona, Kansas City); the passage of referendums to expropriate large rental portfolios (e.g. Deutsche Wohnen & Co. Enteignen); the vision of a Homes

Guarantee linking racial and climate justice (People’s Action 2019); and the fight against evictions and the squatting of vacant properties galvanised by COVID-19 (RHJ Editorial Collective 2020). These examples represent only the tip of the iceberg.

In the realm of housing movements, care is often present, usually overlooked, and immanently important. This Symposium explores the place and work of care within housing movements. We question how the ethics, practices, and politics of care operate across a range of tenant movements, as an ethics and set of practices through which tenants survive—and seek to ultimately transform—the structural violence of capitalist housing systems.

Care and the Political Imaginaries of Housing

Informed by a feminist ethics of care, we understand care as:

...a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Fisher and Tronto 1990: 40)

This definition recognises care as a practice and labour through which human survival and flourishing are made possible. Housing and care are connected in important ways. Housing is an important location of care work and much scholarship has attended to this work, including the unequal distribution of domestic care and how care shapes experiences of home. More recently, research has recognised housing as a care infrastructure. Housing systems are the key infrastructures that organise how people give and receive care in most places across the world and inequitable access to housing drives care inequality (Power and Mee 2020; Power et al 2022). In this Symposium our interest is in the care ethics and labours of housing movements that question and intervene in unequal housing systems. Our question is around the place of care within these movements, and the ways that care operates as a practice and ethics that motivates, energises, sustains, and organises housing movements.

To think with care is political. Tronto (2013) makes the point that the normative value of care comes from the political theory that it is located within. Understandings of care that inform financialised housing systems are grounded in individualist logics, reflecting liberal and

neoliberal ethics of care that understand care as an individual responsibility and practice—one that can be delegated to and performed via the private market (Power and Gillon 2021). Feminist care ethics offer a political alternative, one that starts by recognising the fundamental relations that connect people and the worlds that they inhabit. To care within a feminist ethics is to work together to imagine and create worlds in which everyone can flourish. In their work on radical care, Hobart and Kneese emphasise this relational work, conceptualising care as “an affective connecting tissue between an inner self and an outer world, ... a feeling with, rather than a feeling for, others” (2020: 2). They make the point that care is “fundamental to social movements” (2020: 1), sustaining individuals and the movements they are part of, while also potentially having a dark side as a set of values that “can be used to coerce subjects into new forms of surveillance and unpaid labour, to make up for institutional neglect, and even to position some groups against others, determining who is worthy of care and who is not” (2020: 2). Such ‘care’ is often administered by “the humanitarian, the state and its police” and is rooted in efforts “to ‘save’ and to ‘fix’” (Lancione, 2023, p. 3), reinforcing power relations that require dominance and dispossession (see also Lancione, 2019).

Recent years have seen a newfound vibrancy of housing research owing to scholarship rooted in lived experience and freedom struggles, and that interrogates the relations (including racial capitalism, colonialism, and imperialism) that shape the structural violence of housing markets (see McElroy 2020; Roy and Malson 2019). However, the emergent tenant movements—led by precarious tenants, always under-resourced, and strained—remain challenged by internal tension over ideology and tactics (Card 2018), emphasising the existential necessity to interrogate, understand, and uplift practices of care in all their complexity. We position this Symposium within the larger body of work that attempts to advance an analytic of housing justice and theorise the fundamental transformation of housing systems (Bradley 2014; Brenner et al. 2009; Card 2022; Castells 1983; Dreier 1984; Fields 2015; Gonick 2018; Gray 2018; Haas and Heskin 1981; Heskin 1981; Holm 2021; Huron 2018; Kropczynski and Nah 2011; Leavitt 1993; Levy et al. 2017; Malson 2023; Marcuse 1999; Marcuse and Madden 2016; Martínez and Gil 2022; Mayer 1991; Parson 1987; Reyes et al. 2023; Rodriguez 2021; Slater 2021; Tattersall and Iveson 2022; Vollmer 2020; Whitlow 2019). Among multiple issues, scholars have unpacked underlying dynamics like rent strikes (Castells 1983; Piven and Cloward 1967), tenant ideology (Heskin 1983), residential self-management (Katz and Mayer 1985;

Leavitt and Saegert 1984, 1990), struggles against financialisation (Fields 2015), squatting (Martínez 2020), and mechanisms influencing policy (Card 2022). But what is the place and role of care within this work?

This Symposium advances previous work by examining cases where care serves a *fundamental* role in housing movements. Spaces of care are produced as people willing to engage in care gather together, recognising and taking practical action to advance other's needs and well-being (Conradson 2003). Spaces of care are created through this work and are often conceived in relation to physical places where this gathering occurs, including homes, schools, and community centres (Power and Williams 2020). Movements can serve as an example of the collective willingness to care. Care draws people into movements and is often necessary to sustain them: as Lancione (2019: 216) argues, being part of a movement is about “caring for the endurance of a collective struggle”. We thus understand care in the urgent and radical sense, proposed by Hobart and Kneese (2020: 2), as a “critical survival strategy” deployed “against immediate crises and precarious futures”. The rethinking of care within housing movements offers a critical politics that transcends market liberalism, instead centring public and collective responsibility for care, with broader ramifications for how we not only survive but flourish.

This Symposium responds to *Antipode's* core commitment to “make interventions in the order of things” through setting out new housing and political futures. All four articles are situated in the United States, in cities (Oakland, California; Detroit, Michigan; Atlanta, Georgia; and Seattle, Washington) with long, deep, and ongoing associations with Blackness and indigeneity. Collectively, this work grapples with how the political economy of race in the United States has—in contributor Jessi Quizar's (2022: 7) telling—produced a “near constant state of crisis created by cycles of organised racial capitalist abandonment” that have also cultivated traditions of radical struggle by marginalised groups. If housing is “the infrastructure of American racial capitalism” (Raghuveer and Washington 2023: 1), theorising housing movements and care from American cities demands engagement with postcolonial theory, Black radicalism, and Black feminism. But as contributor Akira Drake Rodriguez (2022) argues, such perspectives have largely been omitted from feminist theories of care and social reproduction (see also Raghuram 2016; Quizar 2022), making the praxis of housing justice less comprehensive than it might otherwise be. The articles in this Symposium make a critical intervention by reading racial capitalism and settler colonialism into care theory, a move that

works against what Seiler (2020: 18) terms white care, “a surround of institutions and infrastructure dedicated to the education, health, security, mobility, and comfort of the white citizenry” (see also Thompson 2022: 5). Although the hierarchies of human worth that define racial capitalism have a specific manifestation in the United States, racial capitalism is a global process. This Symposium is broadly instructive for recognising how, as Rodriguez (2022: 19) puts it, “Theory is practice, and omissions from one permeate the other”.

Contributions in this Symposium develop critical perspectives on the politics of care through attending to how: housing systems shape intersectional care inequality; care serves as a starting point for reimagining housing systems; and care is embedded and embodied in housing movements.

Structures of Intersectional Care Inequality

Housing is a precondition for sustaining life, social reproduction, and shapes how households are able to meet their essential needs. This perspective emphasises the infrastructural qualities of housing and how they organise care and access to care at a household and social scale (Power and Mee 2020). Through its material forms, modes of governance, and the organisation of markets, housing iteratively shapes what it means to care and who is able to meet their needs for care. At the same time, the classification of social difference as race (Benjamin 2019; Carby 2019) is a core logic driving accumulation and dispossession in capitalist housing systems (Dantzler 2021; Fields and Raymond 2021). Poor people of colour are exploited to fuel accumulation strategies by financial institutions, landlords, and institutional investors (Raghuveer and Washington 2023). Racialised subjects are subject to unhoming, “the deliberate undertow of propertied space that exhausts, suffocates and depletes racialized subjects as they make their homes, that ‘disorients’ racialized subjects caught in its currents”, pulling them under so as to hold others afloat (Nethercote 2022: 937). Samantha Thompson’s (2022: 9) contribution to this Symposium emphasises the histories underlying the contemporary exploitation of poor people of colour in the contemporary housing market, including “racial segregation, restrictive covenants, and other racist laws [which] restricted where Black, Indigenous, and people of colour could live and own property” thus enabling “disproportionate access to housing, and property ownership (and the associated wealth)” for white communities.

This reality drives intersectional care inequality, channelling marginalised groups into insecure or unaffordable housing and heightening their risk of experiencing eviction and homelessness. Responding to the increasingly ubiquitous “speculation-driven displacement” (2022: 10) that disproportionately affects Oakland’s Black residents, the contribution from Brandi Summers and Desiree Fields expresses intersectional care inequality in terms of the “material contradiction” that is Black housing under racial capitalism: at once central “to life, safety, and welfare” and rendered precarious by the state and the market (2022: 2). Their article shows how the occupation of a vacant, investor-owned home by Moms 4 Housing, a group of homeless Black mothers, operates as an emplaced symbol of this contradiction.

Movements for housing justice led by marginalised groups are legible as efforts to enlarge “*the idea of the public* who were cared for” in state and local housing policies (Rodriguez 2022: 2). Rodriguez mobilises the concept of care capital—which encompasses “people capable of caring with; time to care for others; financial resources to arrange care; and a place to distribute and house this care” (2022: 4)—and shows how policy responses to housing movements have often expanded care capital, but in fundamentally racialised ways. For example, the American welfare state constructed in the aftermath of Great Depression-era foreclosures laid the foundation for a “single-family private housing market that subsidised and perpetuated white, heteronormative households through the provision of financial capital” (2022: 5), while Black neighbourhoods were marginalised through disinvestment in public care capital and discriminatory lending practices that reduced access to mainstream mortgaged homeownership—a form of private care capital. In other words, the financial and regulatory apparatus of the 20th century ownership society constituted white care (Seiler 2020). So too do we see care for white propertied interests manifesting in responses to the coronavirus pandemic, as Thompson’s article underlines. Eviction moratoria and rent freezes became “newly possible solutions” when a housing crisis long borne by Black and Indigenous tenants threatened to impact landlords and the white middle class (Thompson 2022: 14).

The contributions to this Symposium show that refusing the intersectional care inequalities produced by dominant housing systems can also be productively advanced using theory that imagines other possible worlds. This thinking offers a scaffold for dismantling what Nethercote terms the “mindwalls” of racial capitalism, its “visceral territorialities” (2022: 936), “cognitive boundaries assembled through ideas, models and narratives – that operate as powerful

devices of division, more insidious arguably than actual securitised borders and barriers” (2022: 940). For example, Thompson draws on what critical race and Indigenous scholar Tuck (2009) terms a desire-centred (as opposed to damage-centred) approach to theorise housing futures. Such a framework does not reduce the precariously housed to their experiences of suffering or domination, but recognises their active role “in the provision and receipt of care” that both enacts “their survival in a settler colonial and racial capitalist housing system” and offers a vision beyond a system that naturalises market-led displacement (Thompson 2022: 4). For Quizar, a deliberate focus on care as not only a *practice*, but a *logic*—“a system of analysis, politics, collective understanding, and collective common sense” (2002: 3)—underlines the intellectual work involved in arguing and strategising against the violence of eviction and displacement. In their studies of housing movements led by Black women, both Rodriguez (2022) and Summers and Fields (2022) mobilise Black feminist bell hooks’ (1990) theory of home as necessary to Black bodily survival *and* political conscientisation. Given “Black women’s lived experience and socio-spatial relations as ‘peripheral and marginalized’” (Summers and Fields 2022: 9, quoting McKittrick 2006: 55), this vision of a caring housing justice centred on homeplace (hooks 1990) evokes a housing politics that brings both subversive and transformative potential.

Reimagining Housing Systems

US housing policy, echoing that in other settler colonies and liberal welfare states like the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, has produced a housing system in which access to care capital is both privatised and individualised, mediated by access to mainstream mortgage finance and single-family homes, and benefiting white households at the expense of Black, brown, Asian, and Indigenous households (see Rodriguez 2022; Thompson, 2022). Relations of racial capitalism and settler colonialism—as Thompson (2022) points out—underlie understandings of who is deserving and can demand care in a profit-driven system and inevitably produces housing precarity. Housing movements that reimagine housing systems with care as the starting point challenge these relations. Quizar (2022) uses an abolition feminist framework to understand the struggles against capitalist housing systems as efforts to build societies where all life is precious, no lives are seen as disposable, and all are worthy of care. The contributions to this Symposium offer a view of a caring housing justice that questions the privatism of home and responsibility for housing and centres relationality and collective embeddedness in place (see

also, on connecting care and justice, Williams 2017). Mobilising care as connective tissue across households and modes of difference yields calls for public care (Rodriguez 2022; Thompson 2022) and moves toward non-propertised ownership (Quizar 2022; Summers and Fields 2022).

Correspondingly, shared exposure to conditions of organised abandonment—like the disinvestment experienced by Black Detroiters (Quizar 2022), or the insecure housing and homelessness Black Oakland faces due to housing speculation (Summers and Fields 2022)—shape Black spatial imaginaries of land and housing, as “shared social space rather than disposable private property” (Lipsitz 2011: 52, quoted in Quizar 2022: 9). Black radical and Black feminist theory and practice are thus characterised by “shared responsibility to the wider community” (Summers and Fields 2022: 7) and “building collective good” (Quizar 2022: 4). The movements addressed by the contributions to this Symposium reimagine housing systems based on “the view that sustainable life systems must be available to everyone” (Spillers and Smith 2019, quoted in Summers and Fields 2022: 7).

A view of land and housing as vehicles for collective welfare and surviving white supremacy underpins the claims of non-propertised ownership constructed by Moms 4 Housing in Oakland and Detroit Eviction Defense and Freedom Freedom Growers in Detroit. The Moms 4 Housing movement overwrites the logics of investor property ownership that abstract away the social relations of housing and urban space so as to prioritise capital accumulation and fungibility that also effect the dispossession and displacement of subordinated social groups. Their occupation drew on a sense of ownership rooted not in rights of exclusion, but in collective claims to place established through deep connections with “people, place, and land”, the necessity of housing within practices of care and social reproduction, and the home as a site of “(Black) motherhood, i.e. ‘collective mothering’” (Summer and Fields 2022: 3). Similarly, Quizar’s (2022: 10) contribution shows how Black practices of land stewardship and claiming in Detroit are negotiated, always involving neighbours—revealing land as something that relationships are built on and around. Centring the relational, rather than financial, value of land and housing enabled these movements to fortify their claims to space: neighbours welcomed the Moms with plants, flowers, and food; the Freedom Freedom Growers could operate an unfenced garden without fear of vandalism or theft. As Michele Lancione (2023) argues in his commentary on this symposium, radical housing justice depends on escaping the trap of reducing “the many into one” (p. 5), as these struggles do, by challenging housing systems based on

Eurocentric, neoliberal property relations and reimagining ownership in collective and relational terms.

The recognition that care is inaccessible to the subordinated groups disadvantaged by dominant housing policy also inspires demands for public care, as documented in the contributions from Rodriguez and Thompson. In Atlanta, public housing tenant associations led by Black women engaged in strategies designed to secure housing policies that would enable “non-white, working-class, unmarried renters excluded from market-rate home purchases” to build care capital (Rodriguez 2022: 3). The networked housing stability that public housing’s secure tenancies made possible constitute one example of public care, insofar as the ability of Black women to collectively remain in place also supported their subversive potential to deliberate and organise around community needs (Rodriguez 2022). The 1990s-era demolition and redevelopment of public housing thus also “demolished the conditions that created and sustained political opportunity for a disempowered population” (Rodriguez 2022: 13). Rodriguez reminds us that movements for housing justice by socially and politically marginalised groups are not only seeking more housing or housing in different locations; they are demanding housing policy that allows all the benefits of shelter, that is, to embedded and emplaced care capital. This demand for public care is also evident in the movements for rent control that Thompson (2022) examines. Seattle tenants facing rapidly rising rents formulated their fight for rent control in terms of how rent increases are fraying community ties by displacing the neighbours who help to ensure their survival (Thompson 2022). Such movements envision how housing policy can afford “radically different, just, and caring housing futures” (Thompson 2022: 17).

Care Embedded and Embodied in Movements

Underlying the more visible dimensions of housing struggles are practices and relations of care; these enrol individuals as “accomplices” in collective resistance toward housing justice (see Lancione 2019: 217) and sustain such struggles over time and space through emotional and human-to-human support processes (Gould 2009; Thompson 2022). In attending to how care is embedded and embodied in housing movements, we highlight “caring with”, a practice that Tronto (2013) identifies as the fifth, and ideal, phase of care. Caring with describes a relational “practice of communal solidarity” (Power 2019: 766) within which care (and the capacity to care) is envisioned as a public, rather than individual, concern. This is a central logic of housing

movements across the world, which work to secure the collective right to housing as a basic human need. Caring with also speaks to the relational nature of care and caring capacity, recognising that care is necessarily a collective practice that is generatively shaped through its relational context. Figured this way, caring with brings attention to how care takes place “in imperfect worlds, where resources for care are unevenly distributed, where public policies do not necessarily support optimal caring and where some are over-burdened or under-rewarded for the care they assume” (Power 2019: 766). This approach speaks to the changing modalities and approaches of housing movements as they adapt to changing housing policy.

In reconsidering housing movements in terms of the multi-scalar relationality and ongoing critical reflection that characterises caring with, this Symposium aims to centre the everyday and cumulative spatial practices of such movements, and their temporal qualities. The latter involves thinking about care embedded in housing struggles through the broader arc of historical consciousness. One stopping point is recognition of how caring practices flex and change in response to the changing nature of housing struggles and adversaries. Rodriguez’s contribution, for example, charts the changing dynamics and “membership geographies” (2022: 15) of collective care in response to changing state housing policies. Where the co-location of public housing in earlier periods enabled geographically based coalition building and action grounded in “shared grievances across public housing authority jurisdictions” (ibid.), the demolition of public housing and dispersal of tenants, alongside the foreclosure crisis, led to disintegrated “‘membership geographies’ that structure[d] ... different housing movements” (ibid.), including social media campaigns, negotiations with lenders, and occupation of individual properties. Rather than being defined through connections in place, these housing movements took on a relational focus, for instance, “bundling campaigns of homeowners with the same lender” (Rodriguez 2022: 16).

Another stopping point is the broader logics of care that are mobilised through housing movements. Movements are often evaluated on the basis of their successes or failures in achieving their objectives, but the Black radical tradition also reminds of the role of historical consciousness as movements in particular places and times see themselves as part of a lineage bigger than the here and now. Quizar, in this Symposium, for instance, sets out how “Detroiters, working in the Black radical tradition, claim land through a logic of care based on: (i) stewardship—who is taking care of the land; (ii) relationships—the kinds of caring relationships

and histories that take place on that land; and (iii) well-being—the ways that the land contributes to the well-being of local people” (2022: 2). These logics are shaped—but also exceed—Black experiences of racial capitalism, building “possibilities for relating to land in ways that prioritise the needs of people and communities over the needs of capital” (2022: 3). Such efforts to claim property are not always successful, but are powerful in the continued performance and cultivation of alternative ethics of property and collective relations. AbdouMaliq Simone’s (2018: 134) insistence on “seeing care in the way in which holes are made in all of the enclosures that mark a particular propertied settlement and to see these apertures as forms of care” operates as a kind of metaphor for such historical consciousness: individual struggles may not topple the structural violence of housing markets, but they nonetheless accrue over time in ways that inform the caring capacity of subsequent struggles (Summers and Fields 2022; see also Rodriguez 2022).

Embodying the work of maintenance and repair (Fisher and Tronto 1993), care envisions worlds that better enable survival and bring the potential to flourish. Housing is a vital place for this work, as it underpins the capacity for care and for social reproduction. Housing is also increasingly central to the organisation of state welfare rights and responsibilities. Through exploring how housing is reimaged within tenant movements across diverse settings and communities, this Symposium foregrounds the caring limitations and possibilities of housing systems and raises new and striking questions about what it means for housing and broader urban systems to care.

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