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– PAINTED BULLET HOLES AND BROKEN PROMISES: Understanding and Challenging Municipal Dispossession in London's Public Housing 'Decanting'

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Abstract

Low-income municipal housing and its inhabitants have increasingly been construed as disposable within wider global dynamics of real estate speculation, leading to heightened housing insecurity, displacement and forced evictions. In Western cities urban regeneration programmes have long provided the framework for partial or wholesale demolition of public housing, drawing new frontiers of gentrification and accumulation by dispossession. Before and beyond the material loss of home, the dispossession of low-income housing involves a deeper unmaking of the relations that constitute residents' emplacement and political legitimacy. In this article, I present a thick ethnographic account of multiple registers of dispossession and their implications for resistance through a situated reflection on the process of 'decanting'—as resident rehousing is colloquially known—in a South London council estate, The Heygate. Drawing on participation in an anti-gentrification archive as a scholar-activist, I move beyond issues of displacement and grief to analyse three key mechanisms that make becoming dispossessed possible: disowning, disavowal and the administration of differential disposability. Within a resurgent interest in municipal solutions to housing crises, there is an urgent need for understanding municipal dispossession and the role of residents and engaged scholarship in resisting and expanding imaginaries of housing justice.

Introduction

One winter evening in early 2010, I attended a regular monthly meeting of my local neighbourhood assembly in south London. A man whom I had not seen before was also attending: he was introduced as one of the last remaining residents of the Heygate Estate, a high-rise modernist council estate under threat of demolition as part of an urban regeneration programme in an area known as Elephant and Castle. Every day, on my way to work, I had passed the boarded-up estate. From media representation to neighbours' casual remarks, everything seemed to indicate that the estate was abandoned, yet another confirmation of the persistent vision that brought together social housing and urban decay. I did not know then that ten households still lived there, and that I would spend a large part of the following five years visiting the site and piecing together the history of its 'abandonment'. My involvement in this work shifted over time and between different subject positions: those of a concerned neighbour, an anti-gentrification activist and a researcher in solidarity with the remaining residents and surrounding communities (see Lees and Ferreri, 2016).

Since then, the estate has acquired a somewhat emblematic aura as an example of state-led gentrification, displacement and resistance (London Tenants Federation

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. This article has taken many years to write as I've reflected on a time of intense activism and research, in part as a co-investigator on the Antipode Activist-Scholar Award 2012 Challenging 'the New Urban Renewal', with Loretta Lees, the London Tenants Federation and Just Space. I am much indebted to all. I am also truly grateful to all those who have accompanied me from the first to final drafts. Special thanks go to Melissa García-Lamarca, Lorenzo Vidal-Folch, Carina Listerborn, Kirsteen Paton, Kathryn Cassidy, Michele Lancione and Caterina Sartori, as well as to IJURR editors and reviewers. These reflections would not have been possible without fellow anti-gentrification travellers Chris Jones and the members of Southwark Notes, the Elephant Amenity Network and the 35percent campaign. All shortcomings are my own. Funding for this project was provided by the Antipode Foundation Scholar Activist Award 2012 and the writing was supported by a Horizon 2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Grant No 665919.

et al., 2014; Elliott-Cooper *et al.*, 2019). In this narrative, the top-down nature of urban regeneration and the question of physical displacement take dominance, reproducing an idea of urban dispossession circumscribed to the moment of material loss of home. As noted by an increasing number of scholars, however, dispossession is more than its physical manifestations through evictions and displacement. As a process, it is a localized disarticulation of wider social, cultural, legal and political relations: not an event, but a fraught and contested becoming, which is inseparable from dominant subjectivation through disavowal (MacLeod, 2018) and stigma (Shildrick, 2018; Tyler and Slater, 2018).

In this article, I revisit my scholar-activist experience to offer a thick account of the years that preceded the demolition, focusing on ‘decanting’—the slow and fraught process of rehousing residents while the estate was made vacant—a revealing but overlooked key mechanism of dispossession. I argue that understanding and challenging municipal dispossession requires nuanced and situated accounts of processes of disowning, disavowal and disposability, which are inseparable from the undoing of the legitimacy of the political project of low-income municipal housing provision. Undeniably, regeneration-by-demolition is the result of national policy and decision-making (Bridge *et al.*, 2012; Lees, 2014). By naming the ‘municipal’ character of the Heygate dispossession, however, I want to foreground residents’ reflections and experiences of the material, imagined and practised proximity with their local government as landlord, social housing administrator, planning authority and key urban regeneration partner. As there is now a resurgent interest in municipal solutions to housing crises, both nationally and internationally,¹ sharing a critical and cautious reflection on municipal dispossession appears all the more urgent. In this article, I do so from the breaking point of the complex interconnected relations that make up municipal housing provision, to open a space for asking what kind of municipal re-possession might be possible and on what basis.

Becoming dispossessed through ‘decanting’

In British English, the verb ‘to decant’ can be used to refer to ‘rehousing people while their homes are being rebuilt or refurbished’ (Collins English Dictionary); as such, it is commonly used in public policy to refer to the rehousing of council tenants (Crawford *et al.*, 2014). In this usage, residents become an uncountable, faceless entity that can be poured, like a liquid, from one container to another. The term evokes a temporal, suspended dimension: neither evicted nor displaced, people are temporarily ‘decanted’ with the promise of being placed more permanently somewhere else. ‘Decanting’ entails a dehumanizing violence, but also a sort of poetic justice, as it indicates the movement of a collective subject from a collective place of dwelling such as a council estate. It points to a dispossession that escapes the possessive individualism of liberal subjects and legal frameworks (O’Mahony and Sweeney, 2011; Butler and Athanasiou, 2013; Roy, 2016), and challenges understandings of individualized loss of home.

Understanding ‘decanting’ as a key mechanism of dispossession from public housing requires an expanded conceptualization of both evictions and displacement, beyond physical relocation and concrete ‘event-like’ instances and beyond individual experiences. In the global reach of domicide (Porteous and Smith, 2001; Nowicki, 2017), evictions have increasingly been conceptualized as the ‘institutionalization of housing insecurity’ (Roy, 2017: A2) and a key element in the wider precarization of dwelling (Rolnik, 2013; Brickell *et al.*, 2017). In these debates evictions can include socio-symbolic processes beyond material loss of home (Nowicki, 2017), such as the slow violence

1 See for instance through the ‘Fearless Cities’ summits and network of radical municipalist governments and policymakers [WWW document]. URL <http://fearlesscities.com> (accessed 25 April 2018).

of home-unmaking (Pain, 2019) and processes of managed decay and uncertainty, through which homes, and the possibility of emplacement, come undone (Baxter and Brickell, 2014; Brickell *et al.*, 2017). Displacement, too, has recently been rethought as a complex phenomenon, drawn out over time and space, encompassing ‘a wider set of processes than those leading to direct physical relocation of inhabitants’ (Baeten *et al.*, 2017: 632). Particularly in processes of council housing ‘decanting’ through regeneration policies, ‘displacement is never a one-off event but a series of attritional micro-events that unfold over time’ (Elliott-Cooper *et al.*, 2019: 11).

‘Decanting’ entails management and intentionality and is inextricably linked to the historical form and evolution of public housing and its governance. Although the demolition of public housing provision has been described as a global new frontier of ‘accumulation by dispossession’ (Harvey, 2003; Hodkinson, 2012), the grounded, diverse histories of public housing set out the conditions for dispossession as well as resistance to it (Baeten *et al.*, 2017). In European countries where public housing was built and managed municipally, as in the UK, dispossession through regeneration programmes becomes a localized example of the dismantling of the wider political legitimacy of the public housing project (Baeten and Listerborn, 2015; Baeten *et al.*, 2017). Before and beyond physical manifestations through evictions and displacement, municipal housing ‘decanting’ should thus be seen as the disarticulation of social, cultural, legal and political relations around the historical promise of municipal housing. This disarticulation cannot be separated from the dominant subjectivation of municipal housing residents through the powerful signifiers of stigma and victimhood, which dispossess them of legitimacy and produce them as disposable. *Becoming* dispossessed is both a process of subjectivation and a question of material loss, both of which are resisted and contested.

Resistance to municipal dispossession arguably differs from other forms of resistance to housing dispossession. In legal scholarship, challenges to dispossession through claims to home are usually mired in the right to property ownership and its long-term association with liberal notions of personhood. Challenges to what is understood as a ‘strong property rights’ approach, based on individual private property, have been advanced by proposing that ‘the relationship between a person and their home ... can potentially generate the basis for a legal claim’ (O’Mahony and Sweeney, 2011: 6). This kind of claim could be and is used in legal disputes to challenge the rationality of dispossession from public housing, as will be discussed further in the article. On a theoretical level, however, in such rights-based political discourse ‘dispossession carries the presumption that someone has been deprived of something that rightfully belongs to them’ (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013: 6). In the case of municipal housing, both presumptions are open to question. First, the subject being deprived is a collective one: the residents of an estate, an uncountable subject ‘to be decanted’. Second, the homes that they are ‘decanted’ from ‘rightfully belong(ing)’ only in so far as the political promise of a secure, low-income home is kept by a municipal entity that is, simultaneously, the local government, the landlord and the regeneration agent, each different function having a different rationale. In asking what is being dispossessed in municipal housing dispossession, I bring to attention the complex relations that make municipal housing ‘home’, and which come undone through processes of ‘decanting’. I draw on residents’ experiences to show that, rather than a presumed ‘right to property’, they repeatedly invoke a right to ‘propriety’: to be treated properly, to be acknowledged as proper political subjects.

The purpose of this article is to think through the specificities of municipal dispossession as a form of relational disarticulation through a situated, ethnographic account of the Heygate ‘decanting’ process and the local organizing effort to politicize it (see also Lees and Ferreri, 2016). I combine observations with media and policy analysis to examine how this disarticulation took place across a multiplicity of sites and relations, and how it is inseparable from the normative production of subjectivities

as a form of epistemic violence before and beyond the collective loss of home. The challenge is both theoretical and political. It requires addressing what Butler and Athanasiou (2013) have defined as ‘the performative in the political’: how dispossession can usher in a theoretical and political challenge to our understanding of what is being dispossessed, and ask with Ananya Roy (2017) who can claim possession and what type of possession is being (re)claimed. At the seemingly irresistible end of council housing’s ‘long eclipse’ (Cole and Furbey, 1994), this challenge demands a reimagining and reclaiming of the collective relationships that make municipal housing. It has also ethical and methodological implications, demanding a committed urban scholarship that moves beyond tropes and representations of victimhood, and embraces research in solidarity with residents.

Situated research against epistemic violence and ‘agnotology’

At the core of dispossession there is a relationship of *othering* that involves both intensified and diffuse forms of epistemic violence. As argued by Butler and Athanasiou (2013: 2), in dispossession persons are ‘disowned and abjected by normative and normalizing powers that define cultural intelligibility and that regulate the distribution of vulnerability’. Situated research against housing dispossession thus necessarily needs to engage with and counter epistemic violence, which many have argued is a fundamental component of the systemic violence inherent to large-scale renovation of social housing (Thurber and Fraser, 2016; Baeten *et al.*, 2017). On the Heygate, as on many other council estates across the UK, the cultural intelligibility of the lives of residents has long been affected by the territorial stigmatization (Hancock and Mooney, 2013) that has accompanied a policy of residentialization (Cole and Furbey, 1994). As argued by Slater (2018), denigrating discursive constructs such as the ‘sink estate’ trope have played a fundamental role in the ideological assault on social housing and contributed to the wilful production of ignorance—or agnotology—around council housing, with material implications for the lives of residents affected by demolition plans and rehousing processes.

The research that undergirds this article was a collective effort to counter epistemic violence and agnotology during and after the ‘decanting’ of the Heygate residents. As with other activist research into urban evictions and dispossession that has emerged over the past decade (Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, 2019), knowledge was produced in solidarity with former and remaining residents through the creation of a mixed-media archive, online and offline, as a form of anti-gentrification resistance. The archive, hosted on different campaigning websites, combined primary and secondary sources, including press coverage from national and local media, interviews, freedom of information requests to the local authority, and planning policy analysis covering a period of over ten years (see Pell, 2015). Participation as objectors and expert witnesses in the Public Inquiry into the Heygate Estate Compulsory Purchase Order (CPO) enabled activists to cross-examine members of the local government and their decision-making during the ‘decanting’ (Lees and Ferreri, 2016; Ferreri, 2018), setting an important precedent for other housing estates’ CPO Inquiries (Hubbard and Lees, 2018). A significant element in the archive were the counter-narratives about and by remaining and former residents (see also Mann, 2015), based on interviews and transcriptions of footage shared by documentary filmmakers, the latter used in an effort to minimize research fatigue for residents. With the residents’ agreement, short written statements were published on the website *Heygate Was Home*:² they touched upon life on the estate, but mostly focused on their understanding and contestation of decision-making processes during the ‘decant’.

2 The full statements can be accessed on *Heygate Was Home* [WWW document]. URL <http://heygatewashome.org/> (accessed 31 January 2020) and are published with former residents’ real names, which I have maintained in this article.

Literature on the violence of displacement and housing dispossession is often focused on traumatization and grief (Slater, 2013; Pain, 2019). While ‘grief (or bereavement) is of critical importance in understanding the impact of displacement’ in contexts of urban renewal (Slater, 2013: 387), the statements collected on the *Heygate Was Home* site tried to steer clear from reproducing narratives of trauma. Crucially, beyond the grief about the loss of home, residents expressed anger at democratic unaccountability. The overall tone of the statements could be more accurately described as forensic: residents placed emphasis on reconstructing the articulation of the process that led to the ‘decant’ and eventual displacement from the estate. The sober tone was intended to contrast narratives of victimhood and ‘the human story’ that journalists repeatedly demanded from Heygate residents and campaign groups, and which residents found frustrating because they fed into the stigmatization of the estate’s residents as the city’s *other*. In the politics of knowledge production around council estate demolition, reinstating residents as political subjects was a conscious attempt at countering their representation as powerless victims whose contribution to political analysis could only come from a place of raw, traumatic experience.

Rather than representations of experiences, the written statements were negotiated political position-takings around concrete items of contention and belonged to a larger effort and process of community-led accountability. Politically, the emphasis was placed on relations with local rather than central government, the key cause of state-led gentrification (Watt, 2009). The local was not only the primary scale at which urban dwellers experience housing insecurity (Brickell *et al.*, 2017: 10), but also a historically specific result of British ‘municipal landlordism’ (Forrest and Murie, 1988), with significant political implications. In what follows, archival materials are interwoven to analyse the intimate entanglements of residents and local government during ‘decanting’, exploring the multiple dimensions of disarticulation of the social and political relations that made public housing. In dialogue with calls for an expanded understanding of dispossession (Roy, 2017), I ask what is being dispossessed in municipal housing demolition and explore three key mechanisms—disowning, disavowal and the administration of differential disposability—and the ways in which they were challenged on the ground. I conclude by discussing the implications of municipal dispossession for a performative politics of re-possession of municipal housing as a collective, secure and affordable home.

Painted bullet holes: dispossession through disowning

The dispossession of the Heygate began, as with much other low-income housing (Goetz, 2013), in its discursive association with social failure and urban decay. To understand how dispossession is grounded in epistemic violence through processes of othering that deny the cultural intelligibility of people affected by municipal dispossession, it is necessary to address the multiple sites and practices of articulation, as well as the specific moment in the history of decanting when such articulation took place. In 1998 the fully occupied Heygate consisted of 1,212 households, including both council tenants and leaseholders.³ By 2001, the decision to stop issuing secure tenancies led to nearly a third of the total number of dwellings being used as ‘temporary accommodation’ for homeless families. At the same time maintenance of the shared spaces and lifts ceased, generating a sense of dereliction and abandonment. Residents described this period as one in which the council ‘just ran [the estate] down into disrepair’ (J. Colfer, in Reeve and Steel, 2010); in the words of another resident, a leaseholder, ‘the general feeling was that the council was systematically running the estate down’ (T. Redpath). With similar tactics employed elsewhere (Baeten *et al.*, 2017), the high turnover of temporary tenants combined with a deterioration in the physical

3 According to official records, 1,033 units were council-owned and managed, while 179 were owned by leaseholders.

environment ‘fostered a corrosive atmosphere of disorder, instability and abandonment’ and was perceived by residents as ‘dirty tactics in a war waged to expedite their removal’ (Romyn, 2016: 216). Around 2007, the majority of temporary residents were rehoused elsewhere, and the estate became suddenly depopulated. While council tenants were being rehoused, 107 leaseholders were still negotiating a fair relocation or compensation; their number dropped to 10 in 2010. It was in this period that the estate was presumed empty and became the site of intensified representational dispossession through ‘sink estate’ film production.

– The estate as an ‘abandoned movie set’

During spring and summer 2010, newspaper and TV coverage of the Heygate by local and national media across the spectrum peaked. Among similarly negative depictions, the estate was called ‘infamous’ (*The Independent*, 29 March 2010), ‘a notorious sink estate’ (*Evening Standard*, 8 July 2010) and ‘a sort of human dustbin’ (*The Telegraph*, 18 September 2010). By the time the council signed the regeneration agreement for the Elephant and Castle with Australian real estate developer Lend Lease in May 2010, the estate was presented as vacant and derelict, which conveniently supported the argument for its disposability. The cultural association of the estate with high crime, as well as economic and social deprivation, had direct correspondences in visual cultural production, particularly television and films. Between the decision to terminate temporary licenses in 2007 and the signing of the regeneration agreement in 2010, Southwark Council allowed the semi-vacant estate to be used as a shooting location for over 70 film and TV productions (see Mann, 2015); by some residents’ estimates there were two film shoots a month. A high proportion were thrillers set in urban dystopias, such as *The Veteran* (2011) and the disaster zombie film *World War Z* (US, 2013). Most films did not explicitly identify the estate, but the association between urban dystopias and modernist social architecture was often picked up in reviews and newspaper articles and contributed to perpetuating the myth of council housing, particularly high rise and in inner city areas, as a failed utopia turned urban nightmare. An extreme case was the vigilante action thriller *Harry Brown* (UK, 2009) whose main protagonist, British actor Michael Caine, expressed judgements about the Heygate in high-profile interviews (*Evening Standard*, 3 September 2010).

The relationship between urban dystopias in films and the material deterioration of the urban areas where they are shot is not novel. In her work on the municipal bankruptcy of New York in the 1970s and 1980s, sociologist Miriam Greenberg (2009) analysed how the municipality allowed the use of inner-city areas which were experiencing public neglect and rapid loss of population, as scenarios for Hollywood productions of action movies. Despite protests from residents, in many cases ethnic minorities, deprived neighbourhoods started to be treated as ‘an abandoned movie set’. Not only was residents’ right to a peaceful home undermined, but their homes and living spaces were stigmatized and became emblematic of a specific cultural association with the genre of ‘vigilante action’ films, which offered ‘viewers the pleasurable fantasy of killing off the bad guys along with the degenerate city that bred them’ (Greenberg, 2009: 156).⁴ The use of British council estates as backdrops for imaginaries of urban and social dereliction have given rise to ‘sink estate spectacle’, which has, since the 1990s, ‘become a major trope in mainstream popular culture’ (Campkin, 2013: 100).

On several occasions the last remaining leaseholders still living on the estate were told by unknowing security guards that they could not enter the estate because

4 In a more recent parallel, a Channel 4 ident logo film sequence featuring the Aylesbury estate, also in Southwark, as a ‘desolate concrete dystopia’ (Campkin, 2013: 102) led to complaints by residents and to changes in the local policy of filming on estates.

it was 'a film set' and 'empty'. The everyday visual and aural landscape was also transformed. Windows were smashed and bullet holes painted on walls and columns, to make the area look more derelict (see Figure 1 and Campkin, 2013). One evening at the local neighbourhood assembly I learnt of a particularly distressing instance. A young man walking his dog on the estate had suffered a knife attack and lay on the ground bleeding before someone came to his aid. Production companies had leafleted the houses in the area to forewarn of 'sudden loud noises' and his cries for help were mistaken by neighbours for the synthetic screams of characters from the action movies which had become so common at the time. Beyond symbolic disposability, the practical effects of 'sink estate spectacle' had created a powerful barrier to recognizing ordinary life on the still lived-on estate.

These examples show how the analysis of municipal housing dispossession needs to begin with its disowning as a dignified home as the ground for a consistent denial of the legitimate position of tenants and residents in making claims to place. The discourse of urban regeneration often targets public housing through narratives of urban dereliction and underuse that devalue existing residents and their homes. In London, imaginaries of urban decay have historically been mobilized to accompany attempts at remaking the metropolis; more recently, they have been used to promote 'clean slate' urban regeneration policies (Campkin, 2013). Devaluing the experiences and



FIGURE 1 Painted bullet holes, Heygate Estate, March 2012 (photo by author)

lives of council estate dwellers is part and parcel of the justification of regeneration-by-demolition. As noted by Luna Glucksberg in her ethnography of the (now demolished) ‘Five Estates’ in Peckham, South London, ‘if [the residents] did not matter, if they were like waste already, then it was acceptable—morally right, even—to demolish the estates’ (Glucksberg, 2014: 113).

‘Broken promises’ and the disavowal of democracy

The second dimension of municipal dispossession concerns the disavowal of the promise of municipal housing, articulated in the breakdown of institutional accountability, which precedes rehousing and demolition. The disowning of municipal housing as a dignified *home* runs parallel to the consistent delegitimization of council housing dwellers’ demand for accountability, which MacLeod (2018), writing about Grenfell Tower, has defined as a disavowal of democracy. As mentioned earlier, it is tempting to represent residents as passive receivers of such a disavowal. In his analysis of the final years of the Heygate estate, for instance, historian Michael Romyn defines the process of disavowal of its residents as one of neglect: ‘in all the grand glossy designs, false starts and political bickering that came to characterize the process, Heygate residents, it seemed, were treated as an afterthought’ (Romyn, 2016: 215). In contrast to this reading, it is my contention that housing dispossession would be better understood as a process of subject formation, dynamic and contested. A slow process of delegitimization performatively produced Heygate residents as disposable through the corrosive workings of a string of changing promises, stretched across a period of several years, that were consistently reneged on. The sense of disillusionment with the local government in its multiple roles as landlord, social housing administrator, planning authority and key urban regeneration partner, emerges in the written statements through the recurring phrase ‘broken promises’.

The ‘broken promises’ that marked the process of disavowal did not occur overnight and cannot be encapsulated into one, eventful moment: it was rather a form of ‘slow violence’ (Pain, 2019) whose dismantling force requires recounting, in detail and chronologically, the profound unmaking of the relationship of trust in the local council, differentially articulated over time and according to tenure. Many residents’ statements began in the late 1990s with a careful deconstruction of the alleged consensus over the demolition of the estate. In April 1999, an independent MORI poll opinion survey was conducted among the estate’s dwellers. The results showed that 63% of Heygate estate residents wanted to continue living on the site, if the estate were to be refurbished or redeveloped, and only 29% of respondents stated that they were dissatisfied with living on the estate (Southwark Council, 2004). As explained by former resident and campaigner Jerry Flynn, the local government used the results to declare publicly that a majority of residents wanted the estate demolished, despite attempts at contesting this claim (Flynn, 2010).

To many, this was a deliberate reframing of the results of the poll which aligned with the negative depictions that legitimized the state-led urban regeneration plans. Key to the process of legitimizing ‘decanting’ and demolition was the institutional disavowal of plausible alternatives to demolition, which contradicted the knowledge of residents involved in the early negotiations. Again, it is important to examine closely how this disavowal took place. In 1997, the council commissioned a comprehensive option appraisal study of the Heygate Estate to establish and evaluate cost estimates for repair and refurbishment versus demolition. The survey, presented in September 1998 by engineering firm Allott and Lomax Consulting, found that the buildings were structurally sound and recommended refurbishing the maisonette blocks whilst redeveloping the perimeter blocks on the north and west ends of the estate. Several former residents explained that the recommendations of the survey were widely and publicly known at the time of the first round of consultation, yet it was only with great

difficulty that a copy was unearthed from a local history archive. When the report was presented by the CPO objectors as evidence in support of the residents' statements during the Public Inquiry, the barrister representing Southwark Council underplayed the survey as 'only a scoping exercise'. In fact, as was later acknowledged in the written statement by J. Abbott, the Elephant and Castle Project director, the partial demolition and refurbishment of the estate had been recommended by independent consultants in the late 1990s: the option had 'the lowest capital cost but it did not represent best value for money' (London Borough of Southwark 2013: 12), and was therefore discarded (Ferrerri, 2018).

– An elusive 'right to return'

A key element in the dispossession of trust concerned the shifting promises around the provision of replacement homes for existing residents. Early statements had promised a net replacement of the 1,033 Heygate social rented homes. In 2004, the Council's 'New Homes for Heygate: Residents Re-housing Pack' booklet promised the construction of 1,100 replacement properties on early housing sites in the area and the direct re-housing of residents (Southwark Council, 2004). This was a major change of direction as residents were no longer going to be rehoused on the footprint but on adjacent sites. As recounted by a former Heygate resident and long-term campaigner:

I can remember them presenting us with a great big ring-binder file which said 'New Homes for the Heygate' and it had about 18 sites in it for something over 1000 homes and they said 'these are what you're going to get' and everyone just accepted it.

And Southwark [Council] says 'we own all these sites' and so we didn't question it, what could be the problem? (J. Flynn, transcription of personal conversation).

The ring-binder file and the authority of the local government as both promoter and landowner lent material consistency and weight to the promises of regeneration for the Elephant and Castle and fair treatment of its existing residents. By 2007, however, none of the 'early housing sites' had been built nor had any planning applications for those sites been submitted. Nonetheless, in 2007 Southwark Council approved the 'Heygate Action Plan', which accelerated the 'decant' process. By Autumn 2007 there were still 650 council tenants living on the estate, and 400 non-secure tenants. The initial regeneration promise of new homes was reduced to a so-called 'right to return': residents were now expected to move twice, the first time to existing council housing stock, and then to the new apartments on the 'early housing sites' still to be built. According to the Council's own data, only 250 out of approximately 1,000 secure tenants signed up for the 'right to return'. Some of the former residents explained this fact by pointing out that many residents were elderly or were families with school-age children, who would be understandably reluctant to face a stressful double move.

As noted by Romyne (2016: 215), 'the long shadow of regeneration not only bred uncertainty, it also fostered mistrust of the council'. A magazine article at the time recorded that 'despite a written commitment by Southwark Council Leader Nick Stanton, most [residents] believe that they will never be allowed to move back. "The council has lied to us so often", said a long-term resident' (Fitzharris, 2007: 20). By 2011, only 176 secure tenants had registered for the right to return, and by 2013 only 45 tenants had exercised that right and moved into new homes in the area. While many residents relocated within the borough, according to the council's own data only one in five Heygate secure tenants remained in the Elephant and Castle SE17 postcode area. By 2013, only 536 'affordable' rent units had been built in the Elephant and Castle Opportunity Area (2013), and on the estate's site only approximately 86 units would be

social housing.⁵ The deep sense of betrayal of trust in the relationship with the local council as a planning and urban regeneration authority is summarized in the statement of T. Redpath, a long-term leaseholder who was active with the Tenants and Residents representative board and with the Elephant and Castle consultation: ‘like so many other residents, my Heygate experience was a feeling of being totally duped, misled and lied to’ (in Bell and Novaković, 2014). As has been observed with similar processes elsewhere, the temporal extension of these processes serves the tactics of displacement in several ways: on the one hand, it gradually removes potential disagreement, while on the other it ‘exhaust[s] tenants and produce[s] the feeling that resistance is meaningless’ (Baeten *et al.*, 2017: 646). Detailed reconstruction of the shifting promises and negotiations over time is thus fundamental to understanding the long-term production of dispossession of residents’ trust in the local government, enacted through top-down decisions as well as more personal, one-to-one interactions.

Dispossession through differential disposability

Cutting across disowning and disavowal was a third dimension of dispossession: the differential distribution of disposability. For historical reasons, in the Heygate estate (as in many contemporary council housing complexes) multiple tenures co-existed: residents might be leaseholders, social tenants, or even temporary licensees and private tenants.⁶ In the process of becoming dispossessed, the distribution of disposability was differentially articulated according to tenure positions, as became apparent in the space of the law, both conceptually, in terms of the grounds upon which some subjects are entitled to make claims, and in the practices and materialities of legal enforcement (Baker, 2017; see also Fernández Arrigoitia, 2014). With private property a central element in the construction of rights in Western liberal societies, home-ownership has been conceived as worthy of special protection because of its role in constituting personhood, a position that legal scholars qualify as a ‘strong property rights’ stance (O’Mahony and Sweeney, 2011). In municipal housing ‘decanting’, however, this stance is turned on its head as it was council tenants who had a right to rehousing. In the compulsory purchase of leaseholders’ homes, on the contrary, even the legally definable ‘strong property stance’ came undone in the name of the ‘common interest’ of redevelopment (Porteous and Smith, 2001). Close scrutiny of lived experiences of ‘decanting’ enables a better understanding of differential processes of dispossession, in their individual and collective cross-tenure dimensions.

With non-secure tenants gone, the ‘decant’ of the Heygate Estate involved the rehousing of over 600 households, both leaseholders and council tenants, who experienced different processes of home-unmaking. Council tenants on secure tenancies had a right to be rehoused either in municipal or third-sector social rented housing. When it became clear, in 2007, that the promised ‘early housing sites’ for the Heygate residents would not be built, tenants began the lengthy process of seeking rehousing through a bidding process administered by the council via an online platform called Homesearch. Many tenants described the process as technically complicated and stressful, as they were asked to compete against each other over a small number of properties. According to a restricted internal report from October 2008, discussed during the CPO Inquiry, a total of 315 households were bidding on just 35 available properties on the council’s ‘Homesearch’ system. Moreover, tenants often complained that the replacement homes on offer were of lower quality, smaller and further away from places of work or socialization.

5 The exact figure is unknown, as the new developments are still under construction and will depend on the ‘financial viability’ of the successive phases of development.

6 The presence of the latter two is rarely acknowledged in accounts of dispossession from municipal housing.

That the process was causing grief and anxiety was known to the Council and led to an attempt to appease the tenants through the commissioning in 2018 of ‘The Happiness Project’, which offered emotional counselling to residents still living on the estate. The introduction of the programme was a textbook example of using therapy as a form of citizen ‘non-participation’, famously denounced by Sherry Arnstein (1969: 27) as dishonest, arrogant and invidious for pathologizing those who are victimized and for assuming that ‘powerlessness is synonymous with mental illness’. The critical response of the Heygate residents was neatly summed up by a council tenant precariously awaiting rehousing: ‘all they need to do to stop tenants feeling anxious is to talk to us and give us what we need ... We just want to be treated properly, we don’t need therapists’ (E. Hart, in the *South London Press*, 7 October 2008). The demand for ‘proper’ treatment once again pointed to the expectation of a dignified relation with the local government and its rehousing officers. The refusal to be victimized and pathologized through counselling was a refusal of the attempt to delegitimize the rational basis for their emotional state.

Tenants who failed to successfully bid on a property within 6 months or who rejected three offers of a replacement home could be subjected to repossession proceedings under the 1985 Landlord & Tenant Act. Despite vehement denials by the council, a Freedom of Information request revealed that a total of 198 households were issued with such ‘Notices to Seek Possession’. Technically, these were not ‘eviction notices’ and CPO witnesses on behalf of the council argued that it was improper to describe them as such as they were only the first of several steps in a long legal procedure that could eventually lead to eviction (Planning Inspectorate, 2013: 31). The point was hotly contested by local community organizers and former residents, who retorted that the appreciation of legal subtleties was often unclear to tenants, many of whom felt pushed to accept what they were offered. As explained by A. Ampomah, a tenant who had lived on the estate for 25 years: ‘[the council officers] said if I don’t take this place then I am sorry but we will have to take you to court, and the courts won’t have pity on you—they will tell you to take something and you could end up with a worse flat than this’. In one-to-one interactions with the emissaries of the local government, the line between advice and threat was thin: in the proximity of the local state, the individualization of the threat became a strong tool to cajole residents into acceptance.

– The ‘long and weary battle’ of leaseholders

The disposability of leaseholders in the process of ‘decant’ was different; overall, they were the ones to lose the most in both economic and social terms, because the valuation of their properties and the corresponding compensation were often below market prices for the area, which led to their relocating further afield, in many cases even outside Greater London.⁷ According to the residents, a significant proportion of Heygate leaseholders were former council tenants who had bought their homes in the 1980s and 1990s through the ‘Right to Buy’ policy. The fact that many decided to stay was presented by both leaseholders and tenants as evidence of their long-term commitment to living in the area and on the estate, and as a counter-narrative to a representation of the Heygate as a ‘sink estate’ where no-one wanted to live. The promises made to leaseholders in the context of the regeneration plan initially acknowledged their desire to continue living locally, but this, like their relationship to the local authority, changed over time. According to local government’s own publicity, in 2000 Heygate leaseholders were promised a ‘retained equity’ option that would assist them in buying a new-build house on the redeveloped Heygate or on one of the early housing sites; however, the option was never included in the agreements with developers and housing associations. Leaseholders were also initially offered a

7 See Southwark Notes (2013) Heygate Displacement Maps [WWW document]. URL <https://southwarknotes.wordpress.com/heygate-estate/heygate-displacement-maps/> (accessed 8 December 2018).

cost-free exchange for another council-owned flat elsewhere in the borough, which was later withdrawn in favour of ‘shared ownership’ options in the new Housing Association developments, which many viewed as a lesser form of ownership than their original lease.

Those who did not accept those options entered the complex and long process of negotiating compensation, which, for some, eventually led to the compulsory purchase of their homes. In the leaseholders’ statements much contention surrounded the gap between the council’s valuations and those of independent surveyors, as well as the individualizing tactic of undertaking negotiations on a case-by-case basis, which led to a perception of being ‘picked off one by one’ (T. Redpath, in Bell and Novaković, 2014). Even within a legal framework of relatively ‘strong property rights’, litigation over valuation was often not an option because many could only afford surveyors whose fees were capped and who did not have the resources to continue fighting their defendant’s case. The experience of negotiating with the local authority was described as a ‘long and weary battle’ by those who remained after 2009, when conditions on the estate had deteriorated and personal safety had become an issue after a series of physical attacks and burglaries. In 2010, the lifts and the district heating services ceased to work in the high-rise tower where a Heygate leaseholder was living with her partner and teenage sons while they negotiated a fairer valuation: ‘[w]e were given an electric hot-water heater and a couple of electric fan heaters and told to reconsider the council’s offer as it could no longer guarantee our safety on the estate’ (M. Ojeikere). When presenting her testimony at the Heygate CPO Public Inquiry, she was accused by a legal representative of the council of delaying a regeneration project undertaken in the name of the ‘public good’ out of individual ‘greed’.

Invoking the ‘public good’ to justify demolition and displacement is a common rhetorical construct in development-led domicide (Porteous and Smith, 2001). Extending the disposability of council tenants, the Heygate CPO enacted a reversal of the coupling of homeownership and citizenship: the ‘proper’ claim to place through property ownership was denied by the state’s prerogative to carry out compulsory purchase in the name of urban regeneration (van der Walt, 2011; see also Cole and Robinson, 2000). Beyond pre-established tenure differentials, understanding municipal dispossession requires a more in-depth and political engagement with subject-formation processes of *becoming dispossessed* that actively dismantle residents’ attempts at claiming the right to a secure home through contractual relations and property claims. In the differential disposability of municipal housing dispossession, the answer to Ananya Roy’s question ‘who can count as the subject who can claim home and land?’ (Roy, 2017: A3) is, in a strictly legalistic sense, ‘no-one’.

Municipal dis/possession?

Reflecting on the long struggle against dispossession on the Heygate clearly shows how municipal housing destruction requires a more expanded and nuanced understanding of the multiple relational disarticulations at play. A situated, thick ethnographic account has enabled me to explore how resistance to ‘decanting’ was articulated in response to the three interconnected mechanisms of the disowning of municipal housing, the disavowal of democratic processes and accountability and the differential disposability produced and exacerbated by the distribution of vulnerability across multiple tenures. Challenging narratives of victimhood, residents’ consistent demand to be treated ‘properly’ conflicted with the mechanisms of disowning, disavowal and disposability that cast them as ‘improper subjects’ to inhabit urban land valuable for development (Rolnik, 2013). Such impropriety was differentially articulated based on their diverse legal positions from which to claim a right to dwell. As discussed above, the fragility of becoming ‘proper’ subjects through the possessive individualism of normative home-ownership was particularly visible in the case of tenants who became

leaseholders through the Right to Buy and whose claim to home was met with the state's prerogative to threaten or enact dispossession for reasons of economic development. A relational understanding of municipal housing dispossession further complicates questions of what is being dispossessed and, politically, of who can claim possession, and what type of possession is being (re)claimed. In this scenario, what would be needed for resistance to demolition to enact the potentiality of 'dis/possessive collectivism' (Roy, 2017)?

As explored in the previous section, individualization and divisions along tenure were mechanisms in the administration of differential vulnerability. Discursively, residents countered individualization by shifting the frame from individual loss of home to a question of collective dispossession, emphasizing devalued social relations and shared histories. Narratives of extended family and neighbourly relations were a conscious attempt to reclaim a time and a history before social and territorial stigmatization and fragmentation. The key narrators were often long-term residents—many of whom had moved into the estate shortly after its construction in 1974—a large proportion of the population on the Heygate (Allott and Lomax Consulting, 1998: 82) as on many other local council estates under threat of demolition (see Ailes, 2012). As early as 2007, the Heygate Tenants and Residents Association had warned that the 'decanting' would be particularly traumatic for those residents, mostly in their seventies and eighties (*The Big Issue*, 29 October 2007), due to the loss of established lifelong relationships. While 'not all who dwell on estates form affective ties with other estate residents' (Hubbard and Lees, 2018: 19), the manufactured 'villages' and 'communities' imagined by municipal housing planning (Boughton, 2018) became for many the lived everyday of neighbourly support. As explained by an elderly London-born council tenant, leaving the estate before her long-term leaseholder neighbours, a first-generation migrant couple in their eighties, made her feel 'a little bit like a traitor. That they were so good as neighbours and we looked out for one another' (L. Grace, in Reeve and Steel, 2010). The administration of differential disposability by tenure was lived by some as a betrayal of the interpersonal relations that made the Heygate a collective home.

The potential of moving from 'decanting' resistance to political responsiveness for social justice has become more apparent in recent years, with new waves of mobilizations placing council estates at the centre of intensified and networked housing organizing, combining institutional pressure and civil disobedience, for instance through occupations and protests (see Watt and Minton, 2016) which enacted 'a politics of emplacement' (Roy, 2017). Celebrating positive memories of neighbourliness has long been a strategy for mobilizing against stigmatization, demolition and 'decanting' in London and elsewhere, through political campaigning, art and archival projects, documentary filmmaking and performative practices. Threatened estates have been reclaimed by residents as objects of positive attachment—as in the 2016 London-wide campaign 'We love Council Housing' by the Radical Housing Network—often through a recognition of shared lived experiences (see Cooper, 2017). Reclaiming municipal housing against dispossession means to resist stigmatization and agnotology (Slater, 2018) around council housing. Such celebratory moves, however, often tread the difficult line between documentation and myth-making. The Heygate, for instance, was far from an idyllic cohesive community unchanged throughout its 40 years of history; like many other council estates, it was affected by shifts in housing policy and changes in race and class composition (Romyn, 2016), residualization and a disruptively high turnover of temporary residents, as already mentioned. Invoking the notion of 'community' as a 'vector of justice' against displacement from council estate demolition (Hubbard and Lees, 2018: 20) requires a careful and situated analysis of the difference between 'community' as a performative formation of political subject, and as actual, lived experience.

Understanding and challenging municipal dispossession in light of the potential for dis/possessive collectivism raises a fundamental political dilemma. Countering the stigmatizing logics of abjection and disavowal through positive representations tends to cast a return to municipal-led housing as the political goal of a performative reclaiming of collective rights. But the political crux of the issue is that dispossession from municipal housing is inseparable from a profound and consistent disowning not just of its residents but, more widely, of the legitimacy of the political project of public housing. After 40 years of disavowal, privatization and demolition, what kind of municipal re-possession is possible and on what basis? In the UK, calls for a return to the ideals of British housing's 'municipal dream' (Boughton, 2018) can lead to an uncritical and nostalgic vision for preserving and expanding state-built and state-managed housing as it was. Brushing aside long histories of undemocratic decision-making, little institutional accountability, and the making of differential individual and collective disposability, such a vision risks perpetuating what Marcuse and Madden (2016) have called the 'myth of the benevolent state'. On the ground, the dispossession of municipal housing as a disarticulation of relations has bred a fundamental and justifiable distrust of national and municipal governments, as has become all the more evident after the 2017 Grenfell Tower atrocity (MacLeod, 2018; Hodkinson, 2019) and subsequent Public Inquiry. Despite recent enthusiasm about a resurgence in local house-building, with the Royal Institute of British Architects 2019 Stirling prize going to a new council housing project, campaigns on estates under threat unsurprisingly combine resistance to demolition with demands for resident-led forms of collective ownership and management (Douglas and Parkes, 2016; Just Space, 2016). The collective political reflection underpinning these demands is beginning to address the still-unanswered question of what forms of dis/possessive collectivism can emerge from resistance to 'decanting'; this question is fundamentally and inextricably linked to a reimagining of municipal politics and its 'proper' subjects.

Conclusions

As a key mechanism of dispossession, the logic of 'decanting' goes deeper than a question of fairness in rehousing, and its implications are wider than both physical displacement and state-led gentrification. In this article, I have explored the systemic violence of municipal housing dispossession through the three interconnected processes of disowning, disavowal and the differential disposability imposed on stigmatized low-income urban residents. Acknowledging the 'municipal' in housing dispossession, I have argued, requires understanding the transformation of the relationship between council residents and the local state in its lived, intimate implications. It demands, ethically and politically, that residents be placed at the analytical core of dispossession: as subjects affected by the loss of home and emplacement, and as political agents demanding democratic accountability, exposing 'broken promises', and making claims to dignified secure homes outside individualistic legal frameworks and state-facilitated market logics. While the effects of dispossession are displacement and the loss of home, these are only the tangible manifestation of a deeper dispossession of a relationship of trust in the local government as a municipal landlord. I have put forward the notion of *municipal* dispossession to name the process of disarticulation of the multiple relationships that make public housing a lived and imagined answer to the need for secure low-income housing.

Thick descriptions of resistance during 'decanting' reveal the need for rethinking the Heygate story beyond questions of eviction and displacement. It raises the question of what political response is not only possible but desirable, not informed by abstract policies but by the lived experiences of those who have experienced being made disposable. At a time when municipalism has become a cipher of hope for urban and housing justice (Blanco *et al.*, 2019), an expanded understanding of municipal dispossession can inform a critical assessment of the inherent fragility of municipal

housing when subjected to epistemic violence and when the functions and rationales of municipal governments are transformed beyond recognition. This issue has significant consequences for radical housing and urban scholarship. If we take dispossession to mean, beyond material loss of home, the production of disposable subjects in contemporary cities, then engaged urban scholarship has an important role to play in solidarity with those affected, first and foremost to challenge representations of victimhood that foreclose the intelligibility of residents' demand for 'proper' treatment. It is in this sense that residents' counter-narratives are being produced and disseminated in an effort to recover and restore collective knowledge and memory. Such a task requires not only detailed work on historical accountability but also the everyday work of knowledge-sharing and solidarity, within and across the boundaries of individual estates, which ground this article. Such a project is not only academically significant, but it is necessary to support political responsiveness beyond individual claims to housing through possessive individualism, to explore possibilities for the enactment of dis/possessive collectivism. Practices of resistance challenge a return to the status quo and point instead towards the need for greater community control and democratic decision-making over a collective home. In this project, engaged urban scholarship produced at the edge between academia and activism is necessary to expand imaginaries of housing justice beyond the false binary of possessive individualism and a return to undemocratic and revocable public provision. Between resisting demolition and imagining alternatives, this challenge appears to be both theoretically and politically urgent.

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