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# Covid-19 and housing struggles: The (re)makings of austerity, disaster capitalism, and the no return to normal

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## The RHJ Editorial Collective

### 1. Introduction

Writing collectively from the relative privilege of our (often precarious) homes, we sketch out a space to reflect on the centrality of housing and home to the Covid-19 crisis. Here we engage with conjunctural analysis from the immediate, everyday preoccupation with the safety of loved ones, keeping at bay the relentless onslaught of news about global economic collapse, public policy interventions, increased housing precarity, increased militarization, lack of adequate health care, ecological catastrophe, and grim death tolls.

Seemingly overnight, the use-value of housing as a life-nurturing, safe place is at the center of political discourse, policy-making, and new governmentalities. The right to suitable and secure shelter has suddenly shifted from the “radical” margins to the object of unprecedented public policy interventions worldwide. With the safety of entire communities at stake, housing as a public health issue is suddenly on the agenda. We decided to write this article to disentangle the key nexus between housing, austerity, and Covid-19, connecting current responses to longer-term trajectories of dispossession and disposability, bordering, ethno-nationalism, financialization, imperialism, capitalism, patriarchy, and racism.

Here we also want to consider how, amidst the current moment, we are still living in the aftermath of 2008. This was the subject of the RHJ’s first issue, “Post-2008 as a Field of Action and Inquiry in Uneven Housing Justice Struggles” (Berryessa-Erich et al., 2019). Property ownership and property technology were consolidated in 2008’s shadows, leading to new speculative entry points for dispossession, landlordism, carcerality, and automated property management. These of course were by no means evenly distributed, and also rested

upon various histories of colonialism, racial capitalism, environmental devastation, and private property. Despite calls made for policy reform, the logics of mutual destruction and profit-seeking have not been dented by the pandemic; in fact, they have been intensified, as we delineate below. At the same time, there has been a resurgence of fascistic and militaristic violence in the wake of the pandemic, from white nationalist “liberate Michigan” protests in the US, endorsed by President Trump, to the Brazilian President Bolsanaro joining a right-wing protest demanding a military coup. Meanwhile in the Philippines, President Duterte has ordered police to shoot and kill all who are found outside their homes.

Yet despite this violence, we have seen new forms of organising and international solidarity, despite (and against) the retreat into self-isolation, confinement, and nationalism. Rent strikes are being orchestrated at unprecedented rates as millions are unable to pay rent due to loss of income, and new solidarities are being fomented on hyper local and also international scales. In writing this piece, we consider how this moment might evolve, and what kinds of collective thinking and praxis are required in times of pandemic-induced global governmentality and corresponding contexts of disaster capitalism. By disaster capitalism, here we draw upon Naomi Klein’s work (2007) to refer to the calculated, free-market “solutions” imposed by capitalist interests in the aftershocks of economic crises, wars, and natural disasters. In particular we attend the ways in which viruses and infections are often mapped upon racialized disease vectors in ways that justify imperialism and techno-capitalist intervention, inciting what Neel Ahuja terms *dread life* (2016, 6).

Yet it is not only dread that accumulates in these pandemic times, or what Klein calls *Corona capitalism*. As she puts it, “This crisis — like earlier ones — could well be the catalyst to shower aid on the wealthiest interests in society, including those most responsible for our current vulnerabilities, while offering next to nothing to most workers, wiping out small family savings and shuttering small businesses. But many are already pushing back — and that story hasn’t been written yet” (2020). As we go on to explore, there is much to be learned from collective organizing and mutual aid work in the context of previous moments of disaster capitalism. As we suggest, the ways in which governments, civil society, and movements are responding to the current moment has important implications for the long-term envisioning and work of housing justice.

## **2. The renewed austerity of quarantine politics**

Housing came into immediate focus with shelter-in-place, self-isolation, stay-at-home, and quarantine as primary global responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. The message was clear. We needed to go, and stay, home in order to protect ourselves and others from the deadly virus. The national “disaster capitalist cabinets,” at first hesitant, pushed us into global, national lockdowns, with nuances and variations country to country. In this process, we have all been turned into potential patients who voluntarily have to subject our lives to new pandemic regimes. Some countries, such as Chile, opted for minimal shifts, only after pressure from trade unions, social movements, and leftwing organisations. Others, such as Bolivia, chose more drastic measures, and introduced states of exception and militarization

of discourse, everyday life, and borders. Through state repression, attempted ignorance, and the individualization of responsibility, such countries have been trying to hide the long-term effects of budget cuts in health programs, the privatization and corporatization of the pharmaceutical sector, and structural choices that have led to a neglect of public health care.

Instead of distributing resources (globally) according to those in need, the logic of national quarantine has pushed countries into aggressive national hoarding of sanitary and medical equipment. Covid-19 crises thereby resulted in international competition over the largest number of respirators and protection masks. Meanwhile, in hot-spots, patients and medical personnel have been dying due to lack of personal protective equipment. Global interdependence has been widely underscored, while the state and forms of nationalism have been strengthened worldwide. For instance, in many countries, self-isolated residents have been clapping and shouting from their windows and balconies, waving flags and singing national anthems in support of medical personnel that have been risking their lives due to years of national austerity measures in the healthcare sector. Governments have widely instrumentalized these gestures for building national cohesion in the time of crises, and are in turn gaining broad support for their current and future capital-interested actions. Not least, profit-driven corporate entities are also taking advantage of Covid-19 quarantine regimes to unleash new technologies for surveillance capitalism. For instance, the US/Canadian property technology (proptech) company Naborly is encouraging landlords to report on “delinquent” tenants who fail to pay rent due to the current moment. For Naborly and its investors, Covid-19 is an exciting moment to amplify tenant screening, and to consolidate tenant data. This data will be used against rent strikers in their future attempts at renting properties, thereby reproducing familiar intersections of housing injustice, surveillance capitalism, and houselessness.

It seems clear to us that the politics of quarantine has been assembled through a mixture of normative measures, biopolitical governance, and nationalistic calls, which have intersected social stratifications around class, gender and race differently in different geographies, ultimately reinforcing the nationalist and securitarian features of contemporary capitalism. This becomes even clearer by looking closely at the number of initiatives that have been devised, at least nominally, “to protect” tenants, home-owners, and the houseless from the virologic and economic effects brought forward by Covid-19. Despite their variety across the globe, and sometimes within the same country, these measures adhere to two broad categories: one aimed at sustaining the *retention* of housing, the other at *rapidly re-housing* the houseless population. The first category includes a partial ban on evictions, mortgage quota payment suspensions, rent support or state-backed microcredits (and some rare cases of rent suspension), and, indirectly related to housing but affecting the ability to pay for it, more substantive financial support for formalized workers (and very rarely informal workers such as undocumented migrant workers in California) affected by the reduced economic flow.<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the second category includes interventions enacted, mostly, by local authorities or charities, including the opening of emergency shelters, requisition of hotel

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<sup>1</sup> At the time of this writing, California’s governor is being sued for having introduced measures to offer aid for undocumented residents.

rooms and redistribution of them to houseless individuals or families, as well as an enhanced effort at running food distribution services beyond traditional soup-kitchens.

The highly selective nature of these interventions - upon which we expand in the next section of this paper - has not gone unnoticed. But even before one gets into the unequal impacts of the Covid-19 quarantine politics, it is important to take note of the *duplicitous nature* of these interventions. While they might be welcomed due to their efficacy in reducing hardship, at the same time, one needs to question their role in protecting the mechanisms that have long rendered housing precarity a lived and felt condition for the many. For instance, right after some of the first grassroots petitions were signed calling for tenant protections, local and national authorities rushed to advance bans on evictions, mortgage quota payment suspensions, and rapid housing programs for the houseless. The extent and rapidity of these institutional announcements, across the Western world and well beyond, demand caution. Who, and what, are these measures really protecting? Who is being really saved by emergency programs advanced by those same institutions that have allowed for financialized, precarious, dwelling to become the norm across the spectrum? It seems to us that the key role played by these programs is to *maintain* the basic infrastructure that allows for the exchange value of housing to be a pivotal axis of capitalist circulations. If everyone were to be evicted, if no one could pay their mortgage, and if the unhoused were allowed to legally occupy vacant property, what would the authorities, the state, and global capital do? The reactionary intention of these preemptive measures seems clear to us.

Pointing out the duplicitous nature of these interventions does not mean feeding the cogs of paranoia around who is 'behind' Covid-19, or who is benefiting from it. A critical analysis of contemporary housing struggles needs to complexly hold together the immediately positive yet long-term problematic effects of institutional reworkings. This is because *capital* is axiomatizing the crisis (that is, it is rewiring itself throughout the makings of the crisis) thanks to these kinds of duplicitous (and therefore harder to detect and challenge) dynamics. Such duplicity is not novel, as we have seen during plenty of crises before. Contexts such as these reveal the bare nature of an economic system that functions because it continuously breaks. In breaking, it splinters short-term positive sentiments into longer-term biopolitical control (of extraction and accumulation) (Hardt and Negri, 2019). As we continue to expound upon, it is crucial to remain alert and to organize also while understanding that 'crisis' is not new within the given moment; it has simply been "renewed." Institutions that don't directly oppose the structural conditions reproducing housing inequalities are, with their "emergency quarantine politics," simply allowing for the renewal of housing injustice.

### **3. The uneven geographies of this 'crisis'**

#### **Intensification of precarity for the houseless and precariously homed**

Despite the circulating discourses -- including celebrity ones -- about the shared experience of COVID-19 as a "communovirus," we are not in this together on equal footing.

The virus infects our bodies in the particular circumstances that it encounters us. For many, this amplifies contexts of housing precarity, mitigated by racial capitalism, colonialism, environmental racism, sexism, heteronormativity, and more.

As feminists have long argued, homes are infused by power dynamics that do not make them safe for everyone. This has come into sharp relief as stay-at-home orders have led to steep increases in cases of domestic violence registered by activists across the globe. Authorities are being urged to lift conditions for leaving home for those experiencing violence and to transform empty spaces into shelters. But the possibility of meeting this demand is already mediated by the pre-existing austerity politics that, in many countries, have effectively dismantled and eliminated the provision of shelters or other supportive resources for those facing gender-based, homophobic, transphobic, and ableist violence.

Staying at home can be tortuous in another (and, often, coinciding) sense: without compensation for job loss amidst times of “shelter in place orders,” many are left without formal and informal incomes. Millions upon millions are struggling to make ends meet, getting into rent debt and facing eviction, even in places where official freezes are in place. Countless have lost their jobs and income, with numerous are ineligible for unemployment benefits and federal stimulus packages, meager as they are. Also, in many contexts, whether due to unregulated or informal rental and credit relationships, or due to being undocumented, households have not been eligible for institutional support. Support would mean their formal recognition by the state, which prefers to ignore their conditions yet exploit their labor. And so, in places like Palermo, where incomes were lost and heavily policed restrictions of movement were enacted, riots erupted after weeks of lockdown: Twenty families filled trolleys with food and tried to escape the supermarket without paying because they were hungry. As a reaction armed police officers have moved in to protect supermarkets.

Those staying-at-home are also facing another harm: the hyper-exploitation of domestic space (Cavallero and Gago, 2020), alongside the continued expectation of free reproductive labor. “Nonessential” workers have had to, overnight, begin working or running their businesses from home, with demands for productivity that include tasks for which no training has been provided. This has, for most, taken place in confinement within small spaces and without access to the outside, while also assuming a range of full-time care duties. A continuous double-shift of labor has been absorbed mainly by women, who have become the chief healthcare, entertainment, and education officers of their homes. For those over 65, some countries have limited movement to shopping once a week in the middle of the night. Under such conditions, it is no surprise that except for a privileged segment of society, staying at home has increased frustration, loneliness, poor mental health, depression, anxiety, extreme financial pressures, confusion, and anger. The “harms of home” in the midst of Covid-19 are beginning to be academically dissected (Gurney 2020), and important feminist critiques from around the world are emerging about the potential deepening of traditional gendered roles according to the capitalist logic that devalues the labor of social reproduction.

But not everyone has the privilege to practice self-isolation at home. Many have been forced to go to work in order to maintain what has been defined as “essential” to the



functioning of a particular country. Though the definition of essential work varies, in most places it includes health care services, pharmaceutical and food supply, hygiene workers, the military, the police, as well as the industrial, construction, and finance sectors. In northern Italy, factory workers that have been forced to work with weak protections (and thereby endanger their families back home) have been protesting and striking for protective equipment against profit-driven delays caused by the industrial lobbies (Sidera, 2020). Logistics and gig economy workers such as 'self-employed' delivery drivers have recently raised their voices to protest, share information and demand protection and sick pay in the US and Spain. Amazon workers, Instacart delivery providers, Uber and Lyft drivers, and more have been continuing to work often without proper protection, while their CEOs and companies' shareholders are seeing unprecedented wealth. Meanwhile, around the world, grocery workers, hygiene workers, and public transport drivers have threatened to strike due to the miserable work conditions, while nurses and healthcare professionals have been demanding greater participation in the decision making-processes from which they largely have been excluded, and which have direct bearing on their survival.

The insecurity of work outside the home is perhaps most starkly felt by the global majority living in informal shanty towns, slum-like conditions, refugee camps, and reservations often without proper access to electricity, clean water, and other basic necessities. These populations have been left to fend for themselves. In places like Slovakia, five Roma settlements were sealed off in the name of containing Covid-19, rendering them a surplus urban population threatening the white, middle-class majority. In the so-called United States, the Navajo nation has been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19, yet for the most part has been ignored by national efforts such as federal stimulus packages meant to "revive" the economy. Rather than frame this elision as a violent and ongoing instantiation of settler colonialism, US leaders have instead made disturbing comments about the demise of Native American and Alaskan Native Peoples. In the Amazon, Indigenous communities have received little to no relief, and now can't access basic needs that they otherwise would have in local markets. Many have in recent years lost access to land due to exploitation, mining, deforestation, and more, so also can't retreat to their territories and land. Despite racist and colonial framings of pandemic unevenness, local mobilisation and self-organising efforts have developed to provide relief. This too varies tremendously, from residents of the Western Cape townships and shack settlements demanding services from the government to queer Indigenx collectives such as Seeding Sovereignty organizing rapid relief for Tribal Nations. Meanwhile there are Indigenous Amazon communities planting medicinal trees to offer Covid relief.

For those already incarcerated and detained, the risk of infection and death has been even greater, as social distancing measures are nearly impossible to achieve in prisons, jails, and detention centers. Still, prisoners, detainees, and their advocates (including long-term prison abolitionists) have been organising to demand early (conditional) release in order to preserve life. In some countries, such as Afghanistan, and some states in the US, governments have been releasing some formerly incarcerated people held in pretrial detention centers. Youth, those with limited time remaining on their sentences, and those

charged with non-violent offences are also being selectively released. Yet in other places, new restrictive measures or explicit neglect of preexistent overcrowding and unsanitary conditions have brought mass riots and extrajudicial killings. In Italy, six people have passed away in the Sant'Anna prison of Modena during riots, while in Latin America, hundreds have died during riots, prison breaks, and police retaliations. Twenty-three people were killed in Bogotá alone. Meanwhile, 70 inmates have escaped from Saqqez Prison in Iran's Kurdistan province, where the pandemic has been exacerbated by US sanctions.

In many countries, the pandemic has been used as an excuse to further discriminate against migrants. As countries began sealing their borders and banning the possibility of entry, many migrant workers were forcibly relocated from place of residence to the place of (national) origin. In Serbia, those returning to their country ended up stuck in improvised collective and life-threatening quarantines without any conditions for maintaining basic hygiene and social distancing, while the rest, as potential virus carriers, wound up under house arrest for 28 days, threatened with three year prison sentences and 1.500 € fines. Overnight, these migrant workers became public enemies who allegedly returned to spread the disease. In India, a 24-hour curfew transpired alongside the suspension of trains and buses, forcing many internal migrants to walk back home. Dozens died in the process. At the same time, the closure of borders, quarantine policies and restrictions of movement have brought considerable challenges to the refugees trying to reach European core countries. Thousands stuck in Bosnia and Herzegovina, for example, have been detained in existing temporary refugee reception centers, where refugees' living conditions have sharply deteriorated due to lack of food, limited access to drinking water, along with the intensification of psychological and physical violence.

Left unanswered by most governments is what happens to those completely bereft of a home, when the instruction is to go home. Some without homes opted to squat or take over vacant buildings, while others, such as in Las Vegas or Los Angeles, have been “sheltered” without shelters in parking lots, ensconced in small squares. In Italy, those without a home have been charged fines for occupying public places. Where measures have been put in place to address the needs of those without shelter, policies directly benefit those *with* shelter. This is evident in considering that the target population for recent rapid re-housing schemas have been rough sleepers (people sleeping in the open-air) in high density areas in wealthy, “Northern” cities. The authorities instantiating these measures have done absolutely nothing to intervene regarding the housing conditions of so many, from migrant workers crammed up in abandoned buildings at the edge of tomato fields in Southern Italy, to Roma families residing in dilapidated camps throughout Europe, to individuals imprisoned in overcrowded jails throughout the globe, to hundreds of thousands of refugees locked in “no man's land” between Turkey and Greece, Australia and New Guinea, and beyond. Instead of offering promised protections, we thus are witness to new forms of racialized punishment being introduced for those most vulnerable to epidemics.

The emerging picture regarding many of the so-called “benefits” of the state in response to Covid-19 is nuanced, to say the least. The cruelty enacted through bare minimum forms of provided shelter, such as parking lots, reinforces our earlier point about the duplicitous



nature of selective measures. By continuing to refuse care for the unhoused, the evicted, the incarcerated, slum dwellers, refugees, Indigenous folks, migrants, and other poor and racialized residents, state policies perform another function: they help sustain the specter and (b)order of “the marginal other” -- a necessary figure (symbolically and materially) to the logics and infrastructures of racial capitalism, and the exchange value of housing.

### **The precarisation of formal housing exposed**

Household debt, the lifeblood of any system where the only way to secure housing is through mortgage-backed ownership, has filled the wedge between historical decline of wages and unprecedented increases in real estate values. If anything has been learnt about the “mortgaged lives” of the past financial crisis (García-Lamarca and Kaika, 2016), it is that “housing normality” for the precarized middle classes in many countries across the world is deeply financialised. As we note earlier, governments have swiftly moved to back the mortgage sector and shore up access to credit. But the last ten years of austerity have done little to ease the debt burden -- quite the opposite. In the UK, the median household asset-backed debt (chiefly mortgages) is on the rise (ONS, 2019), while unsecured debt (which includes credit card payments, bank loans, payday loans, and student loans) is now 30.4% of household income, the highest to date (TUC, 2018). For how long, then, can “debt holidays” stem the wave of personal bankruptcy and foreclosures?<sup>2</sup>

Formal rented housing - which in many places houses migrants, younger generations, those with unstable incomes, and everyone unable to access ownership - is exposed, once again, as unsuitable, insecure and unregulated. Facing the risk of mass homelessness, different policy mechanisms to defer or cover rental payments have been proposed and implemented across the world, all with social and temporal caveats that divide and exclude. In the US, Federal stimulus checks of \$1200 can not even cover one month of rent in many cities of rent, and millions of undocumented immigrants are not eligible. For many who are eligible, these checks have not yet arrived and there is mass confusion as to how and when they will show up. There are also countless who have filed for unemployment but have yet to receive unemployment benefits. Even still, the unemployment filing process (which allows those who have lost jobs to file for financial support) uses an inaccessible website that many are discouraged from using.

In Spain, while vulnerable tenants in properties owned by large-scale landlords receive rent reductions or rent payments restructuring during the state of emergency, tenants living in properties owned by small-scale landlords have been offered access to state-backed microcredit. Thus new frontiers of housing debt and financialization beyond mortgages are in the making. In England, the response to Covid-19 has been a “rental holiday” to be repaid at a later date. Yet this is nothing more than a deferral mechanism that acknowledges rather than suspends the stranglehold. Nonetheless, tenant responses have been astonishing. In March, a survey estimated that 1 in 2 tenants in the UK did not pay rent (47% in contrast to

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<sup>2</sup> Debt and payment holidays are temporary suspensions of monthly repayment installments based on a household's cashflow being stymied by the pandemic.

90% for the same period in 2019) (Montague-Jones, 2020). Meanwhile, it has been estimated that 31 percent of renters in the US did not pay rent in April. These are, *de facto*, the largest (if invisible, temporary and unorganized) “rent strikes” in the history of both countries.

The ability to pay rent is, however, only one of many tenant insecurities. Overcrowding, even for the so-called middle classes in Global North cities, is often the norm, affecting the ability of people to self-isolate if showing symptoms, and the ability to work and live in confinement. The lack of tenants’ and lodgers’ rights, moreover, has placed many at risk even when they can afford to pay, with reports in London of short-notice evictions of frontline medical workers and taxi drivers because of fear of contagion. Similarly, doctors, nurses, and medical workers have been evicted in India due to fear of their own contamination.

Finally, intergenerational inequality caused by relative easier access to affordable housing by the “baby boomer” generation is revealing its contradiction in the face of a virus whose effects are worse for the elderly. Older people living on their own are at greater risk of isolation and neglect. Even worse, those who spent their property’s equity to move to expensive, often privately owned and managed senior care homes, find themselves in hyper precarious situations, with families struggling for residents’ safety and survival. Death counts senior home care facilities, many of which have been neglected, have been on the rise globally. In Italy, some estimate that up to 40% of deaths to date have occurred in care homes. In France, one in three deaths likely take place in these homes. The coronavirus massacre in Spanish care homes bears pre-Covid roots. This can be traced back fifteen years, when residences were privatized to the benefit of multinationals and vulture funds. These transformed senior homes into precariously staffed “parking lots for grandparents.” By the beginning of April, Madrid alone counted over 4,000 senior home fatalities linked to coronavirus symptoms. Emerging data from the UK, Canada, and the US show similar trends (Comas-Herrera et al., 2020). In the blurring of boundaries between housing and social care, the situation of older people’s homes reveals ageist geographies of disposability and dispossession that for too long have been marginalized in mainstream housing struggles. Against a return to normal, a new optic of care towards life-sustaining housing practices should act to understand this situation as closely intertwined with other international housing struggles post-2008.

#### **4. Responses from housing activists**

##### **The challenge of reinventing housing organising and grassroots campaigning**

The policies forcing housing quarantine, aimed at the *retention* of housing and *rapidly re-housing* the unhoused, has produced a mixture of feelings amongst housing activists, organizers, and campaigners since the Covid-19 pandemic began. In many countries, sizable gatherings have been banned or have been strongly discouraged due to the risk of contagion. Policy aside, many fear meeting in person as organizers do not want to risk spreading the virus. Removing the possibility of in-person collective assemblies and meetings that so many movements, housing and otherwise, rely upon in order to build power and coordinate actions creates significant challenges for sustaining housing justice struggles long term. This is

especially true because any form of virtual engagement is limited to having a stable internet connection, access to a mobile phone or computer, technical savviness, and time. This takes place on top of paid and domestic care work made particularly difficult for those living in housing precarity. That said, there have been inspiring car protests in cities such as San Francisco, Oakland, and Los Angeles in which demonstrators maintain physical distance while nevertheless engaging in non-virtual forms of dissent.

As an immediate response to quarantine, many housing activists, organizers, and campaigners opted to petition local and national governments, along with supranational institutions, with demands for urgent housing measures. These included placing moratoriums on evictions, banning utility cutoffs, cancelling mortgage and rental payments, suspending auctions and home foreclosures, immediate public requisitioning of empty property for those unhoused and overcrowded, decriminalizing the occupation of empty buildings and all informal forms of housing, protecting all in collective accommodations, and supporting victims of domestic violence. After governments selectively and partially introduced some of these measures, many people in movements have asked themselves if these achievements should be celebrated as victories. After all, these temporary and emergency policy measures clearly don't address structural problems, but instead stave off any immediate housing disasters. At a closer look, it has become clear that the time being bought now through these measures will have to be paid off by individuals and families in the future -- a future imbued in deep economic, social, and racist crises.

While some housing activists and organizers began planning rent strikes, others began squatting housing to ensure the right to safe and stable homes, while creating common tools to make sense of the current situation. They also began organising mutual aid, mutual care, and different types of solidarity work. These responses have been dependent on the context and measures that were, or were not, introduced by the state to provide or protect shelter. Importantly, many grassroots actions that seek to ensure housing equality in the face of absent or empty coronavirus legislation connect the pandemic to colonial, racialized, capitalist and gendered realities. Responses, in other words, make visible and directly upend how countless government approaches to Covid-19 perpetuate existing inequalities plaguing cities and cultures globally.

Squatting in the times of Covid-19 has endeavors to find places in which the unhoused can find a safe space in which to shelter in place. Groups of unhoused mothers and families in Los Angeles, inspired by the important Moms 4 Housing movement in Oakland, have squatted housing for stable "shelter during the storm." In British Columbia, poor and houseless activists squatted a vacant community center, seizing public property built on unceded and occupied First Nations territory to protect themselves from Covid-19. Encouraging others to act in militant self-defense, organizers have stressed that shelters, Single Room Occupancy (SRO) hotels, and temporary modular housing are *bothouses* for the spread of the virus due to the impossibility of self-isolation. In Zurich and Berlin, local groups have occupied Airbnb flats, empty apartments and houses for people who need a safe place during the pandemic. They emphasize the confiscation of empty apartments and buildings as a social duty in the current coronavirus situation.

With millions out of work as much of the economy has been shut down, vast swaths of urban residents globally are unable to pay rent. Calls for rent strikes started in mid-March and have picked up steam through April, particularly across Europe and North America. Rent strike demands include cancelling rent for everyone unable to pay during the duration of the coronavirus crisis, freezing rental prices, suspending utility payments, housing the unhoused, and expropriating housing owned by banks and vulture funds. With slogans such as “Can’t pay, won’t pay” and “Si no cobramos, no pagamos,” rent strikes are underway in [Philadelphia](#), [Oakland](#), [London](#), and in countries ranging from South Africa to New Zealand. Tenants unions have reported [16,000 renters on strike across Spain](#) since April 1st, while a new “[massive wave](#)” of rent strikes is being anticipated in New York for May 1st.

Finally, many tools have been created to support, visibilise and extend housing justice struggles during Covid-19. [Rent Strike 2020](#) provides a wide range of resources on how to form a tenants’ union, write a letter to your landlord, create a petition or general organising resources. The Anti-Eviction Mapping Project has spatialized the emergency tenant protections proposed and implemented by US state officials and the locations where [#RentStrike2020](#) [#CancelRent](#) are or may be occurring through this [interactive map](#). As part of the current issue of the Radical Housing Journal, the AEMP’s crowdsourced mapping initiative has been extended to visualise anti-eviction and tenant protection measures across the world. We invite you to take part by filling in information on your country through the forms in [the map](#).

### **Relearning mutual aid, care and solidarity**

Mutual aid, mutual care and solidarity had been practiced in many different ways during the pandemic. When the crisis began, it became clear that public healthcare’s leftovers in the wake of deep austerity, never mind private decentralized healthcare systems such as those in the US, would be insufficient in handling the vast number of sick people. Thus many chose to help ‘flatten the curve’ as a strategy for collective survival. This approach has aimed to follow public health experts’ advice in order to lower the spike by practicing personal hygiene, social distancing, and self-isolation.

The ‘flattening the curve’ approach has been adopted by most countries worldwide, with countless people staying home in isolation. This situation has brought collective-mutual-surveillance practices to the fore in the name of survival. Daily on the news and social media, stories abound of residents accusing each other of inhuman behavior because they dared to leave their home. In this way, rather than practicing solidarity, people have been treating each other as a potential threat.

On the other hand, the ‘flattening the curve’ approach has also been adopted by numerous progressive groups, leftist organizations, and autonomous collectives. They have been working towards collectively producing and distributing knowledge about how to assist those in need and organizing care, and how to practice physical distancing in extreme conditions. For instance, the [Pirate Care Syllabus](#) has emerged as “a collective note-taking project to document and learn from organising solidarity in response to the urgency of care

precipitated by the pandemic of Coronavirus (SARS-Cov-2).” Care is also being politicised with organisations like the Colectiva Feministas en Construcción in Puerto Rico, which produces information about the lack of tests, resources, and food scarcity, as well as local corruption related to the government’s response to Covid-19. They bring this knowledge directly to people waiting in grocery and pharmacy queues.

As an immediate response to worsening existential situations, we have also witnessed many hyper-local relief-orientated mutual aid and solidarity initiatives providing food, medicine, and money to those who need support. Worldwide, people have been creating Signal Groups, Telegram channels, Jitsi calls, Facebook groups, Slack channels, and numerous spreadsheets in order to find each other – sometimes offering to help those in need. Many signed up to volunteer in soup kitchens and deliver food, while others began offering food and provisions for free. In the UK alone, over 700 mutual aid groups emerged. In Barcelona, neighborhood-based mutual aid networks are already providing food and essentials to 5,500 people. After the temporary pause on evictions introduced in Serbia, the anti-eviction organization, the Roof, began crowdsourcing money and distributing food and other basic necessities. The Roof has also been creating antagonistic public narratives pointing to the failure of the state in responding to needs of those most vulnerable. The No Name Kitchen migrant solidarity group of international volunteers has been working in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Greece, and has had to change its way of functioning during the pandemic. After the lockdown was introduced, volunteers with foreign passports were forced to leave Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the group started relying on the local human and infrastructural capacities. They launched the No Name Bakery in collaboration with a local shop paid by the group to provide burek and bread to migrants living in squats. In this way, while providing food to people in processes of migration, they have been supporting local business at critical times.

Indeed, what is often devalued, radical collective care has come into focus during the Covid-19 emergency. Many have been providing material relief for those neglected by the system. The crisis even temporarily brought into focus precarity’s root causes. Mutual aid is necessary and welcome. That said, in the wake of disaster capitalism, mutual aid has always been a struggle over who will control social relations and how social reproduction will be reorganized according to profit imperatives.

## **5. No return to normal: Lessons from disaster capitalism**

Big catastrophes often work to speed up everyday political and economic disasters that people are already struggling with. Writers and political theorists have demonstrated how crises are often used to implement “shock doctrines” (Klein 2007) that see the implementation of austerity measures, privatization of public goods (including land and housing), deregulation, militarization, surveillance regimes, borders, and criminalization. This exacerbates existing inequalities and injustices. During and in the aftermath of such catastrophes, the goal of nation states has long been to preserve and deepen the existing order. States therefore collaborate with, or turn a blind eye towards, disaster (vulture)

capitalists, particularly during moments of chaos, confusion, and collective trauma. This allows for inordinate private profits made from individual and shared wreckage. This process of extricating corporate, stock-market benefits from local forms of ruination makes the work of a just and equitable long-term recovery all the more difficult to achieve.

Lessons from recent climate disasters — including the devastation caused by Hurricane Maria across the Caribbean — demonstrate how their “aftershocks” are in fact landscapes of “state failure, social abandonment, capitalization on human misery, and the collective trauma produced by the botched response” (Bonilla and LeBrón 2019). What follows these events reveals and multiplies pre-existing conditions of racial, class-based, and gendered inequalities across all societal sectors, including health and housing in their various lived interconnections (Cruz Martínez et al., 2018).

Following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, on September 4th 2005, police officers opened fire and killed two Black men and injured four more while they were trying to flee the flooded city. These racist acts were followed by years of state-sponsored housing, health, and educational dispossession that have disproportionately impacted Black and minority communities. In the US, this “brutality of our social hierarchy” is clearly repeating itself in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis, where the majority of those impacted are African American communities already disadvantaged and discriminated against by national social and health care systems (Crenshaw et al., 2020; Taylor, 2020). As such, anthropologist Vincenne Adams asks whether “...we might say that what makes Covid-19 a disaster is its arrival to a country that has a woefully underinsured, unhealthy population. The disaster already wrought by capitalist free markets on the bodies of many Americans is at least as much to blame as the virus” (2020; p. 4). In other contested colonial geographies like the US territory of Puerto Rico, the effects of Covid-19 also need to be understood by taking into account ongoing colonial relations of racialized second-class citizenship. Here, historical layers of political, military, socio-economic, and environmental exploitation are the foundations upon which the most recent forms of privatization, extraction, and new green colonialism were laid after Maria. With its range of punitive and anti-democratic proposals, as well as imputed cases of political corruption, the post-Covid response so far is already demonstrating a repetition of that historic reality.

Paying close attention to how short-term housing solutions came about after disasters like Hurricane Maria can offer important warnings and lessons regarding the duplicitous nature of Covid-19 housing-relief efforts already mentioned. When that devastating hurricane hit in 2017, the total and partial destruction of homes that followed led to the gradual implementation of previously unprecedented measures, including three month moratoriums on foreclosures. From the beginning, information about how to and who could apply was patchy and inaccessible for those who needed it the most — an issue that repeats itself today in the context of the digital divide in time of Covid-19 pandemic. Following the hurricane, it soon became very clear that entire sectors of the economy would probably never “return to normal” and that a three month foreclosure moratorium was insufficient to grapple with the enormous loss of income this represented. Extensions to foreclosure moratoriums were eventually granted for another six months on government loans, but



private banks did not partake in the same way. In the end, there was no fundamental restructuring of the system or long-term pardoning of debts (including, a \$73b national debt), while private rental payments were never pardoned, frozen or eased. Instead, new packages and programs were devised (e.g., the Federal Housing Administration's Disaster Standalone Partial Claim option) to assist with the interest on future mortgage loans, and foreclosures later returned at similar pre-hurricane rates. Similar measures are now being taken amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, with the Director of the PR Fiscal Agency and Financial Advisory Authority clearly stating the fear and lack of social altruism that motivates them: "If everyone stopped paying their mortgages, this would affect financial institutions, banks and coops, and therefore the economy."

In Maria's wake, a number of federal grants (managed by the Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA] and the Housing and Urban Development Agency [HUD]) were also handed out to individual applicants in a way that reproduced the neoliberal logic of individualized solutions. These were accompanied by a language of illegality that, like the punitive provisions for homeless populations mentioned before, would in this case render insecure, informal housing construction "illegal." This move served to legitimate long-desired plans to literally remap the island by rezoning entire territories and "formalizing" large swathes of the population who had managed to stay and survive at the margins by handing out private titles and deeds to their self-built houses. This effectively used existing structural vulnerabilities to double down on logics of contempt for and criminalization of the poor, while facilitating their possible future evictions, displacement, and privatized land sale. In addition to raising questions about the way in which these programs determine eligibility (who counts) and how access is granted, they raise larger ones about who stands to benefit the most and whose long-term interests and pre-existing agendas for the rolling back of existing legal protections are getting advanced.

Nevertheless, disasters don't only create space for expansion of state and capital. They always open space for potentially different scenarios and resistances that are dependent on already existing political and solidarity structures. In PR's post-Maria landscape, this included island-wide mutual aid brigades, occupations of abandoned schools and public kitchens, and more, all of which collectively have had longer-term consequences for the distribution of energy, food, and knowledge (Klein 2018). This is not to say that disaster capitalism has not reaped the benefits of collapsing infrastructures, but rather that the political subjectivities that developed from local actions in the absence of a trustworthy state have generated new spaces of more dynamic contestation and action that are now manifesting themselves in further mutual aid and protests (from cars, moving ambulance caravans, etc.) against the evident corruption or lack of care in some of the Covid-19 responses taken by the appointed interim governor.

A final, further event here to help generate hope was the ousting of the governor and many of his corrupt allies. This took place two years *after* the disaster, following evidence of how they held the hurricane's dead in contempt and how they used the human tragedy for their own political and financial benefits. The full scale of how disaster capitalism and necropolitics will intersect in this deadly global event is yet to be seen, but this colonial

island's peaceful revolution may be an indication of how the biopolitics of life and death in the context of collective trauma can become deeply felt. Such shared realities can significantly fracture the current order of things, creating cleavages for a future unknown and transformative disruptions.

The Covid-19 crisis is, no doubt, of a scale and magnitude not witnessed in our lifetime. But its political life — that is, everything that animates its presence in the social sphere as we know it — is based on existing experiments, practices, and knowledge gained from the aftermath of previous local, regional, and global disasters of various kinds. When seen through the lens of disaster capitalism, then, the language, mechanisms, and governance enacted around COVID-19 become much more familiar to us than the language of currently being used of “unprecedented” times.

## **6. Envisioning a space for action**

The language of “envisioning the future” has been taken from us and reduced to corporate tales of self-proficiency and success. But at this time, when a re-shuffling of the old line of segmentation, expulsion, and extraction is transpiring with an energy and an intensity that have few parallels with what has come before, *envisioning* becomes a necessary tool for collective action. To a certain extent, events occur as they did in 2008. A renewed crisis is in the making, and so we come together, to think and act together. But also importantly, the world is very different from what it was in 2008 and other moments of collective crisis and action cutting across the last several centuries. Of course, this time, the crisis has reached the *within*, engendering the most intimate fears of death and personal annihilation for many.

Of course this is not the first time of such intimacy; colonial, imperial, chattel slavery, nuclear, redevelopment, and gentrification histories, to name a few, are rife with stories of death, violence, disease, apocalypses, and “the ends of worlds” (Barad 2017). It is important to consider these past world disruptions, and the ways in which various apocalyptic temporalities live within each other, reproducing necropolitical contexts of racism, colonialism, and more. Even in recent times (times haunted by the legacies of prior annihilations), there have been ample epidemics that have disrupted so many people's worlds, often upon familiar racial, gendered, colonial, and geopolitical lines (Byrd et al. 2019). Yet, as we have discussed above, there is also so much to learn from how people overcome apocalypses, disaster capitalism aside. Today, as US state officials talk about how Covid-19 might “wipe out” entire Indigenous communities (who have been denied federal aid just as they have continually been denied sovereignty), Native American activists remind us that this is not the first time that settlers envisioned Indigenous decimation through disease. And yet, just as settlers have always failed to completely raze First Nations people, so will they now.

Yet for those unfamiliar with ends of worlds, because the threat to intimate life is so profound and so visceral (so virological), many many now accept the unacceptable more promptly and effectively than ever. The circulatory regimes of global capital - which have for so long entangled with the intimacies of our bodily lives and spaces of home (most recently

through digital technologies, McElroy 2019) have now found a new biological hook (Lancione and Simone, 2020).

*Housing* is the most immediate extension of that “hook.” This is why it has become the central terrain of the austerity-assemblage (“stay home!”) but also of contestation (“don’t pay your rent!”). As we have said, the felt and lived ways through which this regime of austerity is impacting individual and collective lives throughout the globe are uneven. Its effects are different according to the histories and geographies of dispossession of which the virus intersects. And its impacts are not going to simply evaporate into thin air. If the biopolitics of Covid-19 are using the threat to life posed by a virus as a means of restructuring old and new forms of dispossession, accumulation, and control - we are offered the possibility of rethinking our approaches and modes of contestation. This is true in the short-term as we can’t meet, we can’t discuss, we can’t feel each others’ affective presence as easily as we are accustomed to. Yet, we have to organize and go on. But it will also be true that in three, six, nine months time, when we will be able to meet again, we will be faced with an altered terrain of action. The landscape will be one populated with new calls of nationalism, amplified closures, exacerbated xenophobia cuts on social expenditures in the name of debt repayment and polarizations along the lines of who can and cannot pay for protection, which includes housing. These processes won’t be new, but, the *intensification* of their unfolding, structured around the fear of sudden biological death - will be for many.

We need to ask ourselves what new meanings home takes in the context of a “war at home,” one has implicated the domestic sphere in new and unexpected ways for many unfamiliar with the lived realities of war, colonialism, biological weaponry, and slavery. As outlined earlier, the reality of violence and dispossession by the state, capitalism, and colonialism or by family members and partners has long been present. It is merely exacerbated by this new contagion and the political and corporate realities it transits. For others, the so-called sanctuary of home has only just become politicized in a deeply personal way for the first time, becoming an enforced space of isolation and confinement. Yet for others it has become an everyday command center for social or economic reproduction.

In this context, what does it mean to talk of ‘Radical Housing’? To us, this is about re-envisioning propositions for collective autonomous organizing in the face of the renewed austerity and disaster capitalism in the making. The ‘Radical’ here is about relinking *Housing* to the question of inhabitation - how to, for whom? How can this be reconnected via a praxis of thought and action that can be experimented with and collectively nurtured by the many. This is of course an on-going struggle around the use value of housing (Chakravartty and Silva, 2013; Glynn, 2009; Ward, 1985). Now, thanks to Covid-19, we have the opportunity (and the duty!) to enhance a wider and more profound conversation around *the kind(s)* of ‘use value’ we would like to attain. Is this the same “use value” that has allowed governments to confine us in our homes, or to re-house the houseless in parking lots in Las Vegas? Is it the same “use value” that has been used to allocate mask provision to refugees in “the comfort of their tents” in Calais, or to chase Muslim migrants with batons in the streets of many Indian cities? We know it is not. But how do we go about constructing a renewed use value, one that at the same time demolishes the ever-present enemies populating our homes

(patriarchy, racism, heteronormativity, settler colonialism, and class exploitation) *and* envisions a new, autonomous, cultural, and material politics that defies appropriation by whatever pandemic, war, or general chaos that may be thrown our way?

Our comrades know that the only starting point is the point that says: *there is no return to normal*. As Arundhati Roy writes, the pandemic is a portal. As she suggests:

“Whatever it is, coronavirus has made the mighty kneel and brought the world to a halt like nothing else could. Our minds are still racing back and forth, longing for a return to ‘normality,’ trying to stitch our future to our past and refusing to acknowledge the rupture. But the rupture exists. And in the midst of this terrible despair, it offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality. Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it” (Roy 2020).

Following these hopes, and in considering what this means in terms of radical housing, it is imperative to make the impossibility of returning to normal a praxis: a terrain of inquiry *and* a terrain of struggle. This means that we need to think about what to do next with what we have at hand. For us, at this moment, within and beyond the groups we are a part of, what we have at hand is the Journal that you are reading on your screens. Our final proposition for you, for us, from and for our Journal and extended network, is an open call to join in, shape, and share across your collective endeavors the will *to not return to normal*.

Via refusing the option that an academic Journal is a Journal only for academic production.<sup>3</sup> We are here to exploit our epistemological privilege and to make good collective use of it, for the struggles we are in now, and the ones that we have yet to join and imagine (Moten and Harney, 2004);

Via continuing to facilitate the creation of international tools for collaboration across histories and geographies - such as the one offered by our comrades at the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project - engendering discussions between activists and researchers and continuing to work on articulating and rearticulating radical housing politics;

Via continuing to promote a critical conversation around the legislated measures around housing and Covid-19 - like banning evictions, freezing rent and mortgage payments - understanding them as more than just matters of “political will.” They require “deep, abiding, transformations” (Taylor 2020) of the entrenched dispossessions that they intersect and often expand (Roy 2019);

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<sup>3</sup> There are other journals that have chosen this path. See for instance a call for contribution made by Interface a journal for and about social movements to activists around the world to share stories of what movements are doing as an answer to mainstream analyses that have focused mostly on state actors and corporations.

Via enriching our imaginary and making bolder, deeper, and more transformative demands of what true housing justice can be, a practice requiring a tiresome collective work to cut across neo-colonial understandings of the 'housing question' across geographies. We need to cultivate the multiple and the particular (Rolnik 2020);

Via admitting that this list is incomplete, partial, rushed - and for this very reason fundamental, open and joyful. We commit to keeping the experiment going.

In solidarity,

Ana, Erin, Mara, Mel, Meli and Michele

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