POLITECNICO DI TORINO
Repository ISTITUZIONALE

Editorial: Carcerality, housing precarity, and abolition

Original
Editorial: Carcerality, housing precarity, and abolition / Vilenica, A., Mcelroy, E., Lancione, M., Thompson, S.. - In: RADICAL HOUSING JOURNAL. - ISSN 2632-2870. - 4:1(2022), pp. 1-8. [10.54825/SSEI7993]

Availability:
This version is available at: 11583/2970918 since: 2022-09-06T08:50:50Z

Publisher:
RHJ

Published
DOI:10.54825/SSEI7993

Terms of use:

This article is made available under terms and conditions as specified in the corresponding bibliographic description in the repository

Publisher copyright

(Article begins on next page)

25 November 2026

Radical Housing Journal, July 2022
Vol 4(1): 1-8
Section: **Editorial**
https://doi.org/10.54825/SSEI7993

RADICALHOUSINGJOURNAL

Editorial: Carcerality, housing precarity, and abolition

Edited by

Ana Vilenica
Erin McElroy
Michele Lancione
Samantha Thompson
Radical Housing Journal collective

Introduction[1]

For a few, now seemingly brief, months in 2020, there was a slowness, a pause, as the Covid-19 pandemic grew. We faced sickness, loss, isolation, unsafe working conditions. We also witnessed state moves to freeze rents and ban evictions due to these 'unprecedented times.' And yet, as quickly as they came, those measures were eviscerated—and the already ever-present criminalisation of houselessness and housing precarity escalated. This of course did not come as a surprise.

In Issue 2.1 (May 2020), our editorial collective published 'Covid-19 and housing struggles: The (re)makings of austerity, disaster capitalism, and the no return to normal' (RHJ Editorial Collective, 2020). In it, we reflected upon the ways that housing and home were (and continue to be) at the core of Covid-19 pandemic injustices, albeit unevenly. From the ability to safely 'shelter-in-place' to the disproportionate risk experienced by those without shelter, from debt incurred from those unable to pay rent to the health risks imposed upon those incarcerated or reliant on overcrowded shelter systems, poor and working-class renters alongside those unhoused and subjected to the carceral state were on the frontlines of pandemic-induced struggles. Meanwhile, those protesting these new and impossible economies and states of repression were also subjected to state violence, with protestors murdered along class and racial lines from Kenya to Colombia, from Brazil to the US (Táíwò,

[1] This issue includes a special issue that is born out of a Call for Papers co-organised with the Unequal Cities Network at UCLA (of which two of the editors are also part). The idea was to reflect on the exacerbation of the 'Criminalisation of Houselessness' that immediately followed the first wave of Covid-19 pandemic in the West and beyond.

2022, p. 1-2). But beyond these reflections, our collective was already very clear about the real use of the 'emergency' measures such as eviction moratoria and mortgage payment freezes. As we wrote:

> 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. [...] 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? (RHJ Editorial Collective, 2020, p. 12).

In light of these reflections, our paper ends with the following provocation: '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' (ibid., p. 25).

Two years later, we reflect on this question through this collective editorial with new clarity. We are writing at a point in which there are old and new wars further degrading the living conditions of many, bolstering the power of fascist regimes. Further, there is a widespread urgency to declare the pandemic over and as an episode of the past, thereby paving the way for a return to 'normal'. What is this normal that too many seem to be longing for? It seems especially clear now that normal simply means the reproduction of a racial capitalist machine that continues to accumulate profit through violence and dispossession. The state has continued to consolidate power, enact violence, and inflict harm upon those who need protection. Rather than safeguard people's homes and communities, the state extends its protection and power to landlords, private property, and capital. This is the context in which we, in collaboration with the Unequal Cities Network, have decided to focus our 4.1 Radical Housing Journal issue on the nexus of continuous crisis, carcerality, housing precarity, and abolition.

To investigate this nexus, we find it crucial to trouble the logics that have entrapped 'housing' as a matter of 'policy' and technical fix. Such fixes mirror those of the prison, which attempts to 'fix' the crises of 'crime' and meet the needs of capitalist production. With this in mind, here we ground the criminalization of houselessness in the reality of how housing systems, globally, continue to be upheld by racial capitalism. In the US context, this means conceptualizing housing systems not separate from, but embedded within, the prison industrial complex (PIC), which Ruth Wilson Gilmore has recently reminded us includes 'the elaborate set of relationships, institutions, buildings, laws, urban and rural places, personnel, equipment, finances, dependencies, technocrats, opportunists, and intellectuals in the public, private, and non-for-profit sectors' that 'shapes political and social life for everyone' (2022,

p. 272). In other words, rather than hollowing out the PIC to simply signify the expansion of prisons and policing (as many do), we also need to understand the PIC as embedded in racial capitalism's durability and materialities. This requires analysis of how racial capitalism and the carceral state are bound in the project of maintaining the sanctity of private property, often enough upon stolen Indigenous lands. In the case of Europe—as scholars such as Nicholas De Genova (2017) and Camilla Hawthorne (2021) have astutely illustrated—these racialized carceral-property logics are used to diagram expulsive modes of inhabitation at the expense of asylum seekers, and to reinforce exclusionary citizenship politics that ultimately affect one's own access to housing and residency rights. Similar border practices can be found across the globe today, with those fleeing repressive regimes, climate disasters, war, and more are entrapped in purgatory statuses and detention centres, and often enough, subjected to deportation.

The nexus of carcerality, property, and racial capitalism is made evident through the ways that houseless folks and renters unable to pay rent are criminalized today across the globe, as well as through lived realities of eviction, expulsion, and exclusion. Indeed, the carceral state of confinement and exclusion depends upon the reproduction of housing precarity and racial dispossession and will do everything within its means to ensure its endurance. Building upon Gilmore's work which details how the California prison system formed as a result of post-industrial surplus capital searching for new investment opportunities and to support the state in managing its forcibly idled and surplus populations, Neferti Tadiar suggests: 'It comes as almost no surprise that today a similar opportunity has been found in the management of homeless populations' (2022, p. 29). Today, 'contemporary social service programs targeting unsheltered populations have emerged to reduce and manage the negative impact and costs of politically abandoned populations, transforming the illness and death that result from racially organized housing insecurity and deprivation into productive economic enterprises in the post-industrial service and knowledge economies' (ibid., p. 29). While this death drive continues to inform housing relations globally, those committed to the work of abolishing the PIC—which includes borders, private property regimes, prisons, the police, carceral shelter systems, and more—persist in building networks and solidarities for emancipatory collective futures.

In this issue we explore the entanglement between, and co-constitution of, carcerality and housing precarity. Yet we also centre grounded housing justice organizing and abolitionist work mobilizing futures beyond those of policy reform, the carceral state, and the reproduction of 'normal'. As we detail below, the contributing authors of the *Radical Housing Journal's* Issue 4.1 home in on these issues, complexities, and futures as they extrapolate upon local contexts regarding the criminalization of houselessness and crisis, while also looking at how housing justice organizers and unhoused activists are challenging structures of power and imagining different land, housing, and shelter futures. Building upon their work, we aim for this issue to offer space for thinking about 'what to do next with what we have at hand.'

The criminalization of houselessness and evictions as carceral events

Existing research has shown how housing has been a fundamentally spatial continuum of carcerality that regulates poverty, as well as racialized and gendered bodies rendered surplus and productive in the carceral capitalist system (Gilmore, 2022; Hamilin, 2017; Shabazz, 2015; Wang, 2018). In this issue the authors expand upon this continuum by looking at how Covid-19 lockdown logics informed legislation and planning practices criminalizing unhoused and squatters in Europe and North and South America.

In 'Continuum of carcerality: How liberal urbanism governs homelessness', the **After Echo Park Lake (AEPL) research collective** draws upon ethnographic research produced through grounded relations with unhoused comrades in an increasingly carceral Los Angeles. While mapping out the modes through which homelessness is criminalized and made the object of state violence, they also elaborate upon a continuum of carcerality that protracts violence, from encampment sweeps to housing placements. Such placements, they find, are simply a ruse, one that reproduces what they describe as 'permanent displaceability.' At the same time, the AEPL research collective foregrounds the methods through which unhoused residents resist carcerality by refusing the liberal framework of rights that the racial capitalist carceral state inscribes.

Turning towards Italy, in "'Batti il 5!' Grassroots strategies against the administrative invisibilisation of Rome's housing squatters before and during the pandemic," **Margherita Grazioli** writes about housing vulnerability in Rome. Drawing upon ethnographic methods and activist-research with the *Blocchi Precari Metropolitani*, she explores post-recession legislation that invisibilises and targets the unhoused, the poor, and public housing squatters. Grazioli connects this history, as well as those organizing against it, to organizing actions that have transpired since the first Covid-19 lockdown began.

In "Being houseless in the Global South: An update on Fortaleza, Brazil," **Stéfany Grayce Teixeira Barbosa, Lara Aguiar Cunha, and Guilhermo Ribeiro Mastroianni** describe the criminalization of houselessness in Fortaleza, Brazil, and how the Covid-19 pandemic has deepened already-existing inequalities connected to planning practices that perpetuate the exclusion, invisibilisation, and criminalization of houseless people. At the same time, they demonstrate the important role of social movements and civil organizations in challenging violent power structures.

Cycles of housing precarity and carcerality

Cycles of housing precarity and carcerality are reproduced via formal as well as informal practices, with zones of confinement, expulsion, and denial expanding to include precarized subjects. While state and corporate interests undergird these processes, they at times use techniques of 'divide and conquer' to pivot targeted and vulnerable groups against each other in negotiating for housing and land rights. Authors of our issue examine such contexts in

Thessaloniki, Lisbon, and São Paulo, while acknowledging how racial capitalism underpins dispossession.

In "Towards a political economy of violence: Property and revanchism in West Thessaloniki," **Nikos Vrantsis** takes us to the neighbourhood of Ksiladika, Thessaloniki in Northern Greece, where a vigilant evictions campaign of migrant squatters by local property owners is taking place. By bringing together Wacquant's conceptualization of 'advanced urban marginality' alongside rent gap theory he suggests that the zone of precarity is expanding and that neoliberal governing is now attained via a diversified repertoire of responses, including through governing precarized subjects.

Saila-M Saaristo's paper, "Improvised lives and informal modes of governance: Negotiating evictions and housing rights in Lisbon, Portugal," draws attention to how families who occupy council housing negotiate their housing rights with council housing managers. The paper is based on fieldwork in the metropolitan area of Lisbon, in close collaboration with the Association Habita. This research shows how both everyday modalities of government, as well as the everyday practices of occupiers, are enmeshed with forms of informality producing housing exclusions and inclusions.

In "Houselessness, infrastructural exclusion, and stigmatization," **Giuseppina Forte** looks at the feet of the Serra da Cantareira forest in São Paulo, where informal land grabbers sell land to houseless people. Forte critiques sanitation discourses as well as the racialized and gendered ideologies that together shape the environmental imagination of squatter camps along the Tremembé River, inhabited mainly by Black and Brown women from rural Brazil.

Housing justice organizing and abolitionist work

These perpetual cycles of carcerality and housing precarity have not been left unchallenged. People's resistance has been growing with the unbearable housing conditions, increasing racist police violence, rising rents, and violence against unhoused people. There have been protests, encampments, interventions in the legal system to protect land and homes, and attempts to create long term solutions. In many places, an abolitionist politics of resistance has shown multiple ways in which carcerality and housing precarity are a class and racist war. Considering the function of carecerality in how states and capitalism do housing expands abolitionist politics to imagine homes and housing futures beyond current horizons of property ownership and poverty management.

In "Picturing the Homeless, building international solidarities," **Rob Robinson**, in conversation with Erin McElroy, describes his ongoing work in New York City and internationally to support unhoused organizing. With Picture the Homeless and the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project in New York City, as well as *A Város Mindenkié* (the City is for All) in Budapest and Take Back the Land in Miami, Robinson has worked with hundreds of organizers and unhoused residents globally. Here he reflects upon some of this work, particularly the importance of organizing against police violence while maintaining groundedness in international solidarity networks and relations.

In "'The rents keep on rising and so do we': Reflections on the 2021 Rent Strike at the University of Sussex," **Roseanne Steffen** and **Billie Krish**, in conversation with Michele Lancione and Samantha Thompson, discuss the evolution of the rent strike of over 700 students in university accommodations at the University of Sussex. The rent strike grew in defiance of unacceptable housing conditions and rent costs as the university promised a 'normal' student experience despite the Covid-19 pandemic. The conversation offers important conceptualizations of the university-as-landlord, the strength of collective action, and valuable connections between the neoliberalization of higher education and unaffordable student accommodations.

In "Community land trusts in contexts of informality: Process, politics and challenges of implementation," **Patricia Basile** and **Tarcyla Fidalgo Ribeiro** tackle issues related to community land trusts (CLTs) in contexts of informality in the urban Global South. They consider the potentiality of CLTs to support housing struggles and mitigate long-lasting dispossession in Puerto Rico and Brazil informal settlements. This article identifies four critical moments in the process of CLTs community implementation: building community awareness, mobilization, community planning, and implementation. The authors look at both specificities and challenges emerging from these four moments to develop an understanding of CLTs' ability to reduce the risk of displacement and facilitate community control.

Sterling Johnson's "Marronage and Philadelphia's housing justice fight" reflects upon Philadelphia Housing Action's work organizing encampments, squats, and protests despite rampant police violence during the Covid-19 pandemic in Philadelphia. Based upon the work of poor and Black unhoused residents, the group collectively organized over 200 homeless people with the goal of forcing the city to transfer vacant properties into a community land trust. The group also launched a Housing Takeover campaign to better support homeless families. In this piece, Johnson theorizes the marronage politics that has informed this work, and also details meaningful relationships and loss experienced along the way.

In the conversation piece "Gentrification and state violence," **Andrew Szeto, Terra Graziani,** and **Erin McElroy** describe one of seven chapters from the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project's new atlas, *Counterpoints: A San Francisco Bay Area Atlas of Displacement and Resistance* (PM Press). The eponymously titled atlas chapter is explored through the lens of carcerality, eviction, houselessness, and policing, as well as abolition in the San Francisco Bay Area. Graziani and Szeto detail why they found this framework important to study and map, grounding their analysis in widespread efforts to abolish the prison industrial complex, the police, and what Lacino Hamilton describes as the 'the gentrification to prison pipeline' (2021, p. 176).

What to do next with what we have at hand

We arrive at the writing of this editorial physically and emotionally exhausted, with our collective capacity to work stretched thin after two intense years of collective, community, and family care. For many of us, this meant having to relocate, change lives, and re-arrange

patterns. Yet, we are moved, together with our authors, by the urgency to put our epistemic and material privilege at work in order to produce relevant housing knowledge with organizers and scholars alike.

When we say 'relevant', we return to the original understanding of the notion of 'radicality' that underpins the foundations of our journal, and which is to date reflected in the ethos of our Radical Housing Justice manifesto. Per our manifesto, relevancy lies in the capacity of what we publish to connect with imminent and long-term struggles, speaking truth to comrades' insurgent power alongside the power that continuously, yet always in geographic and historically specific ways, dispossesses and violates. Relevancy here becomes radical when that 'capacity to connect' is not only declared, but engrained in the epistemic and material grammars deployed *to connect*. Relevancy underpins the open access nature of the articles that comprise this and all of our journals' issues, for instance: in their being peer-reviewed by scholar-activists; in our own efforts to switch from Google to an open access, more inclusive, and less predatory set of editorial management platforms, Open Journal Systems (OJS) and Nextcloud; and lastly, in our efforts to continuously rework our internal structures to make them even more horizontal while endeavouring, although always a work in progress, to connect with transnational geographies and struggles.

What we have learned and continue to learn during these pandemic years is that only in nurturing our capacity to stay afloat ourselves will we be able to continue to hold space for housing scholarship grounded in the lived and felt racialized realities of housing injustice and organizing across the globe. The scholarship foregrounded in our journal weaves together communities of radical housing thinkers teaching us praxes of housing politics and how that is ingrained theory and action. This scholarship, including that comprising our 4.1 issue, instructs us that successful struggles are those that carve out spaces of care and endurance *in the face* of state, carceral, and capitalist power. In some geographies there is perhaps some hope for major state reforms leading to massive housing programs for many (though never all). But what happens when the state is the problem, silencing, punishing, and incarcerating those endeavouring for housing and racial justice? What if the state specifically targets those unable to secure housing due to policies crafted by the very state to maintain the prison industrial complex? The crafting of sustainable forms of lateral sustenance, mutual aid, and grounded solidarity becomes, then, the only terrain to house, to remain in community, and to continue to collectively inhabit the earth while organizing towards a more just inhabitation for all.

In solidarity,
The 4.1 Editorial Team

References

De Genova, N. (2017) *The Borders of 'Europe' Autonomy of Migration, Tactics of Bordering.* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

Gilmore, R. W. (2022) *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation.* (New York: Verso Books).

Hawthorne, C. (2021) 'L'Italia Meticcia? The Black Mediterranean and the Racial Cartographies of Citizenship', in: G. Proglio, C. Hawthorne, I. Danewid, P. K. Saucier, G. Grimaldi, A. Pesarini, T. Raeymaekers, G. Grechi, & V. Gerrand (Eds) *The Black Mediterranean*, pp. 169–98 (Cham: Springer International Publishing).

Hamlin, M. R. (2017) *Chicago's Carceral Geographies: Public Housing and Prisoner Reentry in the City*. Theses - ALL. 129. https://surface.syr.edu/thesis/129

Hamilton, L. (2021) The gentrification to prison pipeline, Gentrification & state violence, in: Anti-Eviction Mapping Project (Ed) *Counterpoints: A San Francisco Bay Area Atlas of Displacement and Resistance*, pp. 176-180 (Oakland: PM Press).

RHJ Editorial Collective (2020) Covid-19 and housing struggles: The (re)makings of austerity, disaster capitalism, and the no return to normal, *Radical Housing Journal*, 2(1), pp. 9-28;

Shabazz, R. (2015) *Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press).

Tadiar, N. X. M. (2022). *Remaindered Life*. (Durham: Duke University Press).

Táíwò, O. O. (2022). *Elite Capture: How the Powerful Took Over Identity Politics (And Everything Else)* (Chicago: Haymarket Books).

Wang, J. (2018) *Carceral Capitalism* (Cambridge: MIT Press).