

Snakes and ladders: legal coercion, housing precarity, and home-making aspirations in southern England

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Abstract

The potential for eviction is an ordinary condition of domestic life for many in Europe and North America. This poses a challenge to anthropological theories of the state's presence in ordinary homes, which have accounted for public housing and mass displacement, but not liberalized settings where the state has ostensibly withdrawn from the home. Studies of housing precarity identify state policy and capitalist transformation among its sources, but the consequences of housing precarity for domesticity itself have not been fully explored. Private renters on a housing estate in southern England responded to the bleak prospect of eviction with home-making pursuits that would instil a sense of optimism in their homes, including mortgage-based ownership and immersive home entertainment technology. By examining the interplay between fears of eviction and home-making aspirations, this article argues that the British state's organization of legitimate coercion has a subtle but significant influence on tenants' ethical visions of what constitutes a good home.

Eviction has surged across Europe and North America recently, in no small part as a consequence of liberal reform to housing. Recent advances in research on housing precarity mean our understanding of the emotional, practical, and financial costs of eviction is now significant and growing. Yet anthropology has been less attentive to the optimistic visions of domesticity and the peculiar feelings of homeliness that often, if surprisingly, spring from precarious homes. Among private rental tenants on a housing estate in England where I have conducted fieldwork since 2012, which I call Woldham, the bleak prospect of losing their home spurred on home-making pursuits that would instil a sense of optimism within it. These included striving for mortgage-based home-ownership and installing immersive home entertainment technology, the latter of which transformed the sensory environments of people's living rooms. By closely examining the interplay of fears of eviction and home-making aspirations among precarious private renters, this article argues that the British state's organization of legitimate coercion is intimately involved in the processes by which tenants form ethical visions of what constitutes a good home.

By exploring the subtle influence that state coercion has on private renters' home-making aspirations, this article contributes to anthropological research on the relation between the home and the wider political order, and especially the relation between the home and the state. It focuses on two questions: in what guise or manner is the state present in precarious tenant homes in contemporary Britain, where economic liberalization has led to an increase in market-mediated, legally enforceable home dispossessions? And how do residents respond? It advances existing research on how the state materializes in ordinary homes, by proposing a way to study homes in which the state does not take a material form yet is present nonetheless. Drawing on studies of housing precarity, I contend that in liberalized settings, the state is present in ordinary tenant homes in the form of legal coercion. It can be observed by studying the futures people envisage in response, including hopes as well as apprehensions.

Since its inception, the anthropology of the home has detailed the home's involvement in broader fields of power, as opposed to straightforwardly reproducing vernacular concepts of the home as a sanctuary, isolated from the wider world. This includes the role of the home as a unit of sociopolitical organization (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995); the spatialization of gendered hierarchy within the home (Bourdieu 1979; Cieraad 2006; de Mare 2006); the home's mediation of property markets and consumer markets (Casey & Martens 2007; Chapman & Hockey 1999); its denotation and leveraging of social class (Clarke 2001; Saunders 1984); and its role in the regeneration of capitalism (Allon 2014; Bear, Yanigasako, Ho & Tsing 2015; Federici 2012; Mollona 2009). This research affirms long-standing feminist critiques both of the state's surveillance of women's home-making and child-rearing practices (Jensen 2018; Walkerdine & Lucey 1989) and of 'an under-theorised public/private ideology' (Lacey 1998: 64; see also MacKinnon 1989; Smart 1984). Showing the home to be a conduit for vaster political and economic relations (Alexander, Bruun & Koch 2018), this research consistently undermines the liberal assertion that the home, being a zone of freedom, autonomy, and self-determination, is 'the antithesis to the state' (Saunders & Williams 1988: 88).

One strand of anthropology's interest in the relation between home and polity that is particularly pertinent to the case under study concerns the way in which the modern state is present within the space of ordinary homes. This research has settled upon the description of various kinds of *unhomeliness* to encapsulate the state's presence, so far in cases where it materializes in a direct and immediate fashion in many homes at the same time (Miller 1988; 2001*b*; Navaro-Yashin 2012). In his classic article on British council housing, Miller (1988) challenged portrayals of the home as a straightforwardly expressive unit of consumption and conveyed the limited agency of London council tenants to make their homes homely, given restrictions from the local council on decorating and doing up their flats. Putting alienation centre-stage in his analysis of the home, Miller argued that the kitchen fixtures and fittings that

council tenants felt unable to modify objectified the ‘alien presence’ of the council in their homes (1988: 365).

In Navaro’s study of the northern Cypriot home (Navaro-Yashin 2012), in the aftermath of invasion by the ‘illegal’ Turkish-Cypriot state, objects left behind by a former Greek-Cypriot owner before fleeing – her divan, armchairs, clothes, and so on – in the home now inhabited by a re-housed Turkish-Cypriot woman stand as emblems of the Turkish invasion. The new occupant is compelled to drive out this unhomely presence, and the uneasy affects it generates, through relentless housework (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 184-6). As such, ‘the *unheimlich* [uncanny, or unhomely] is part of the everyday experience of homeliness’ there (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 184). In both of these studies, the material culture of the home objectifies state control and intervention, and this performs a metonymic function in the analysis. In Miller’s case, the material culture of the home comes to stand analytically for all the contingencies of the multi-stranded relation between council tenant and municipal landlord. In Navaro’s case, the material trace of a former owner stands for invasion, forced displacement, and resettlement.

What distinguishes the private tenant homes I visited on the Woldham estate in southern England from those discussed by Navaro and Miller is that the presence of the state in the former was often obscure. With a sharp rise in private rental tenancies in Britain since the 1980s and with much of what remains of public housing now outsourced to third-sector housing associations, the state figured in the lives of my interlocutors merely as a gatekeeper for public housing, a provider of rental subsidies (in the form of Housing Benefit), and, finally, as the authority that could give legal sanction to forcible intrusions. The state’s disinvestment in public housing, which led to the managed deterioration of much of its public housing stock, as I describe below, could *prima facie* be interpreted as a withdrawal of state intervention in ordinary homes. But narratives of state withdrawal often mask a more complex transformation

in the manner and locus of state intervention (Read & Thelen 2007). In Woldham, tenant homes' relation to the state was mediated by markets, and state intervention in the form of eviction occurred piecemeal. The approach of Miller and Navaro, which takes the home's material culture as a metonym for the presence of the state, cannot, therefore, account for the state's involvement in such homes.

A body of recent research that has substantially advanced our understanding of the state's involvement in the home amid liberalized property markets concerns eviction, mortgage foreclosure, and the condition of 'housing precarity' (Sullivan 2017). It has shown that 'interlinked shifts' in capital accumulation and state policy together generate insecurity in housing tenure (Wilde in press). These shifts include: liberal policies that favour the interests of landlords and lenders, including by removing rent controls and barriers to eviction (Gutierrez-Garza in press; Wilde in press); austerity; the securitization of mortgages (Sabaté 2016*b*) and capital's increased reliance on financial extraction generally (Suarez 2017); models for economic growth reliant on property prices (Dorling 2014); subsidies for home-ownership (Palomera 2014); de-industrialization causing wage stagnation and volatility (Desmond 2017); and urban redevelopment and compulsory purchase orders (Ho 2013; Lewis 2017). I build on this research by arguing that liberalization is a process whereby the discretion to adjudicate on legally enforceable intrusions into the home is distributed among state and market agencies such as landlords, lenders, and bailiffs (also known as 'enforcement agents'). Drawing on the concept of sovereignty as a discretionary power to make decisions that can be enforced with physical violence (Hansen & Stepputat 2006), I describe this as a 'distributed sovereignty'.

But the state's involvement in ordinary homes can go further than contributing to their precarity. Research on housing activism has shown counter-hegemonic moral economies forming in response to possible dispossession (Gutierrez-Garza in press; Sabaté 2016*b*; 2016*b*;

Suarez 2017; Wilde in press). Comparable moral reasoning also arises on-line (Stout 2016). Adding to this, my article examines ethical responses to housing insecurity that extend beyond political convictions about rights, distribution, and justice. It finds that housing insecurity also elicits particular visions of domesticity, subtly redefining the qualities that people desire in a home. Thus it seeks to unfurl the paradox that, for many, the risk of losing one's home forms the inescapable foundation of domestic life. So while this article bears witness to the profound practical, financial, and emotional costs of eviction, it also takes seriously the acts of home-making that people carry out under its shadow.

This is aided by work showing that the home is an ongoing process rather than a finished product (Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995; Clarke 2001; Miller 2001*a*), and a site of mobilizing discrepancies between the ideal and the actual (Chapman & Hockey 1999). Indeed, anthropological studies of home-making abound, from DIY to domestic consumption (Casey & Martens 2007; Dolan 2006; Hurdley 2013; Miller 1988; Putnam 2006). However, in generally painting home-making as unilinear, rather than recursive, these studies fall back on a broader tendency of taking the home's longevity for granted (cf. Carsten & Hugh-Jones 1995; Navaro-Yashin 2012). (Miller's [2001*b*] argument that the materiality of the home exerts its own agency on inhabitants, for instance, only holds as long as that materiality is not ruined or removed.) In conditions of housing precarity, an optimistic sense of longevity may be the object of home-making, rather than its precondition.

My research shows that as well as inducing fear, anxiety, tension, depression, shame, and even grief (Desmond 2017; Dudley 2000; Han 2011; Sullivan 2017), the threat of eviction also spurs on particular hopes and peculiar feelings of homeliness.¹ By this I do not mean that housing precarity causes a predetermined subjectivity, but rather that the tenants I met responded to the possibility of coercive force in variously optimistic or fearful ways, and that

when their responses were optimistic this optimism interacted complexly with their aspirations. These tenants regularly found themselves facing a bleak prospect of losing their homes. They dispelled the apprehensions this elicited through home-making practices that would instil a sense of longevity or of bright futures – including mortgage-based home-ownership and immersive home entertainment technology. This article therefore argues that specific visions of the good domestic life arise out of, and correspond to, particular forms of unhomeliness – in this case, the threat of eviction. In doing so, it challenges assumptions that precarity of tenure is in any way neatly opposed to vernacular concepts of domesticity, and that humans are generally at one with their dwellings (Navaro-Yashin 2012). Departing from much recent work on ethics and freedom (e.g. Laidlaw 2013), it shows that ethical visions are sometimes formed in response to the possibility of violent force.

I draw inspiration from two studies that highlight a complex interplay between housing precarity and people's affective attachments to their homes. Studying urban regeneration in East Manchester, Lewis (2017) argues that amid demolition, home-building, and the displacement of many residents, the instability of the physical environment was the basis on which remaining residents invested financial and emotional resources into local social relations. This in turn generated the sense of belonging necessary to 'make houses into homes' (Lewis 2017: 1335). Lewis shows that instability, if commonplace, can be 'central to rather than distinct from notions of home' (2017: 1335). Thus, 'home' can entail a connection to place rife with the dynamics of major political and economic upheaval (Jansen 2007). Khalvashi (2015) writes that defaulting mortgagors in Ajara, on Georgia's Black Sea coast, forged optimism for a 'normal life' by clinging onto houses they had already technically lost – taking out further loans, negotiating with banks, visiting clairvoyants, and, in one case, renting out part of the house to a pimp to use as a brothel. As she shows, the looming prospect of losing your home

can propel what may seem like wildly optimistic hopes, ‘as affective mechanisms for overcoming uncertainties’ (Khalvashi 2016: 2).

All this has a direct bearing on the presence of the state in precarious homes. Critically extending the work of Miller and Navaro, I propose a methodology for investigating the liberal state’s presence in ordinary homes when not firmly objectified in those homes’ materiality. I argue that a key way the British state is present in such homes is in *the presence of a potentiality for legally enforced evictions* – in other words, in the form of coercion.² I understand ‘coercion’ not only as the actual exercise of violent physical force, but also as any action that takes place under its express or implied threat (Graeber 2015: 105). By doing so, my research affirms Stewart’s (2007) point that violence – in this case, the violence of the law – suffuses everyday life as a potentiality which takes the form of affective intensities.

The potential for eviction generates an affect that I describe as ‘anticipatory uncanniness’, where physical presences evoke their own future absence. By examining close-up the interaction between the presence of legal coercion and the home-making aspirations that arise in its midst, I show that the state (through its organization of legitimate coercion) subtly shapes the aspirations people pursue through their homes. I therefore propose that one way to bring a recognition of housing precarity into anthropological theories of the home’s relation to the political order is to study the interplay between fears of eviction and home-making aspirations as this unfolds in everyday life. Aspiration is a normative category in post-industrial Britain, with successive governments urging working-class people to be independent of welfare and ultimately to own property (Allen 2013). The influence of legal coercion on aspirations is therefore but one dimension of multiple processes in which ‘aspirations . . . are formed in interaction and in the thick of social life’ (Appadurai 2004: 67).

My fieldwork took place in 2012-13 in a city of around 250,000 people in the south of England. It comprised residential participant observation on a ‘deprived’ housing estate I call Woldham, on the outskirts of the city. Woldham has around five thousand inhabitants, of whom over half live in social housing, just over a third own their own homes, and the rest live as private renters, often with the assistance of Housing Benefit. Among tenants in Woldham, some were employed and others unemployed, but what was common to nearly all was that wage work was not enough to get by on, leading them to turn to consumer credit, welfare benefits, and informal economic practices for the sake of their livelihoods. This reliance exposed them to the possibility of dispossession, in the form of disconnected energy supply, bailiffs seizing household goods in lieu of debt repayment, eviction, or (in some cases) police arrest.

The homes I visited in Woldham had been shaped by dramatic shifts in Britain’s tenure structure over the last century: shifts to public housing, private tenancy, and owner-occupation; and shifts in the political projects that went alongside, primarily the erosion since 1979 of ‘the role of the state in directly meeting housing need’ (Hodkinson, Watt & Mooney 2013). Since the start of the twentieth century, public housing had grown steadily in Britain – from almost nothing (1 per cent in 1918) to nearly a third of households in 1981 (ONS 2013). However, Margaret Thatcher’s government reversed this with the Housing Act 1980. It established the famous Right to Buy, whereby long-term council tenants could purchase their homes from the council with a discount of up to 50 per cent. By 2001, only 18 per cent of households lived in public housing (ONS 2013). The 1990s saw transfers of public housing stock from local authorities to voluntary-sector housing associations, such that, in the city where I conducted fieldwork, by 2012, there were no council homes as such. The private rental sector, which had steadily fallen throughout the twentieth century, from 76 per cent in 1918 to 9 per cent in 1991, was revived by Thatcher’s government, partly through the creation of a specific type of legal contract, called the Assured Shorthold Tenancy, which removed the protections against eviction

formerly enjoyed by tenants, and partly through the removal of rent controls that had been in place since 1915 (ONS 2013). Owner-occupation rose steadily from the 1950s (32 per cent) until 2001 (69 per cent), in part because wages rose faster than property prices for a time. But since 2001, the percentage of owner-occupied homes has fallen for the first time in a century; and the number of private tenancies has more than doubled.

Assured Shorthold Tenancies allow landlords to evict tenants using a ‘Section 21’ eviction. The landlord must give the tenant at least two months’ notice, but does not have to give any reason.³ If the tenant stays, the landlord may apply to a court to order them to leave. If the tenant remains in the property, the landlord can apply to the court for bailiffs to evict. An alternative legal process is a ‘Section 8’ eviction, but they can only take place for rent arrears, antisocial behaviour, or a breach in contract.⁴ Social housing tenants have better protections. Yet even before the resurgence of private renting, large-scale regeneration of council estates since the 1980s displaced many families (Lees 2014; Lewis 2015; 2017), constituting a form of housing precarity in its own right. In the rest of this article, I examine how, for a couple I befriended in Woldham, to whom I give the names Kerry and Daniel, the ongoing prospect of their tenancy being terminated threatened to interrupt the multiple futures they pursued through their home. Yet amid the unease this generated, they also entertained alternative bright futures, to keep it a hopeful and homely space.

Moving up in the world: the interruptible futures of tenancy

Kerry and Daniel’s domestic life featured a confluence of aspiration and half-expected defeat: an incremental movement along an aspirational trajectory coupled with the ongoing prospect of their eviction, or their tenancy otherwise being prematurely terminated. When I met them, they made up a family of five people (six, including Kerry’s dad, who was staying for a few months), who were living in a two-bed flat, where they had resided for nine years. The couple

met through working at a frozen foods factory, and Daniel had initially moved in as Kerry's lodger. Their relationship and their family had grown from there.

In September 2012, Kerry told me she and Daniel had been looking for a bigger place to live. A few weeks later, she informed me via Facebook that they had found somewhere. Her messages conveyed the surge of activity and stress, along with the strain on their finances, that had accompanied securing the new home:

K: Hiya ryan how r u? Jus thought we wud send u a msg see what u have been upto ... we have been super busy the past few days, found out we got that house up near the school so all systems go, pop down soon when u have some free time

R: Hey Kerry ... Brilliant news on the house, congratulations! will pop down a bit later if it's not too late.

K: Hiya ryan, we r gonna have an early nite, stressful few days but if your not busy tomoz nite or saturday your more than welcome to pop down

R: No worries Kerry... i bet you are ready for a rest! ... Not sure if you were still doing the [birthday party] for your dad on sat but if you do wish him a happy one from me!

K: ... probz not doin him a party money is very very tight at the moment trying to get the first months rent sorted ...

The house in question was a three-bed terraced house with a garden, at the top of the hill in Woldham – a clear improvement in terms of space and amenities. But Kerry had mixed feelings

about the move, as I learned when I bumped into her and her friends a few days later on their way back from the morning school run. I asked her if she was excited about the new place. ‘Err ...’, said Kerry, seeming tense. ‘She is and she isn’t, you know?’ said her friend, diplomatically stepping in. ‘Yeah, it’s kind of scary’, Kerry added. I ventured: ‘You’ll have a bit more space I guess’. She said: ‘Yep. There’s even a garden. Don’t know what we’re gonna do with that – I think it’s all overgrown’.

Whatever the jobs awaiting them in their new home, her and Daniel’s tasks were doubled with the work they deemed necessary to their current flat. That evening, Daniel told me of the repairs he was undertaking, and I asked if his aim was to ensure they retrieved their rental deposit. But he said he was confident they would get it back in full, given how long they had lived there. I was confused, therefore, as to why Daniel and Kerry would go to such lengths to restore the flat: he replaced doors and did odd repair jobs around the flat; they painted all the black-gloss wooden beams back to their original white, upstairs and down; and they scrubbed the living room carpet clean by hand.

A fortnight later the landlord visited. Daniel, afterwards, said that everything had gone well. Despite the foregoing crescendo of anxious preparations, however, he did not seem particularly relieved. He said the landlord might still find things, such as a crack in the balcony glass, once they had moved out. Again, I was confused as to Daniel’s unease. Perhaps noticing this, he said: ‘I dunno if he’s gonna tell [the new landlord] about all the rent arrears’. Daniel, I finally understood, had once had rent arrears and did not want their new landlord to find out about them for fear that he would withdraw the tenancy he had offered them, or, at best, that it would get their relationship off to a bad start.

Had I not been so naïve and repeatedly expressed my confusion, this might have gone without saying. Indeed, because talk of rent arrears could pose such a risk, Daniel may have been following a rather generalized code of discretion in which their occurrence could become something for which express explanation was neither needed nor desired. Given Daniel and Kerry's past rent arrears, their relationship with their landlord had become, instead of a clear, contractual relation with specified rights and responsibilities, a blunter hierarchy of generalized deference. This is why they were so keen to fix everything back to its original condition, and even to remove the trace of their residence. The sense of having to fulfil their side of an agreement had lost its specificity: instead, they seemed to be on a much vaguer terrain of keeping on their landlord's good side.

In sum, Kerry and Daniel's experience of home comprised a keen sense of their landlord's ability to interrupt the future they projected for it. Granted, some of their anxieties around moving home were related to the intimidation of being around people from 'different backgrounds', Kerry's euphemism for people with more money. But in a crucial way, their anxieties fixed upon the capacity of their landlord to retract his offered tenancy or subsequently to evict them. And it formed an enduring preoccupation: when the landlord visited her a few months after moving in, Kerry remarked that he was old and that she wondered what would happen if he 'popped it' (died): for instance, would the family want to sell the house?

As it happened, the move went without a hitch, Daniel telling me with gleeful relief that they had installed nearly all their belongings before their official moving-in date. I visited him at the new house a few days before the rest of his family joined him. As he and his dad were in the living room, screwing a wall bracket for their flatscreen TV onto the wall above the mantelpiece, he turned and said to me with a laugh: 'I feel like we're moving up in the world'. Thus, whatever the anxieties of taking on greater rent liabilities and neighbours 'from different

backgrounds', moving to a bigger, better, warmer home constituted an incremental move up a socioeconomic hierarchy and would provide an arena for a brighter family future. Partly, by the expression 'moving up in the world', Daniel was joking about his new house being a steep, five-minute walk uphill from their old flat on a street I shall call Kirklees Gardens. But he referred as well to the better conditions of the new house, the social class identities of his neighbours, and the relative undesirability of the housing stock on Kirklees Gardens – a series of medium-rise blocks of flats which were long blighted by disrepair and underinvestment.

The material stigmatization of public housing

Liberal reform to housing in Britain, including disinvestment in public housing and the consequent managed decline thereof, had physically reshaped the terrain on which Kerry and Daniel's home-making aspirations could unfold. The fact that local residents like Kerry and Daniel saw the flats on Kirklees Gardens as being less desirable than other housing in the area was an effect, in part, of state policies which compounded the discursive stigmatization of 'welfare dependency' (Tyler 2013) with a material stigmatization – literally, a blighting – of buildings associated with it. The relative desirability of Kerry and Daniel's new home, therefore, was an indirect result of state disinvestment. Even though the residents of Kirklees Gardens comprised a mixture of employed and unemployed, 'private' and 'council' tenants, the blocks of flats there were readily enough misunderstood by people in the city as homes for the 'welfare-dependent'. The condition of the housing was, for everyone I knew, an object of dissatisfaction and complaint. Damp was endemic, mould tough to banish, and temperatures very low during the winter, even with the flats' old storage heaters switched on. As Daniel had warned me, 'It's like an igloo in these flats in the winter'. Yet the housing association, which I shall call Domus, seemed averse to expenditure on repairs or maintenance, let alone building new homes.

The blocks of flats along Kirklees Gardens were made of timber and concrete, built in the 1970s as temporary structures, and had long outlived their intended lifespan. To top it off, the city council had recently granted planning permission for the construction of a waste incinerator about thirty metres from the flats. Daniel later joked with a friend of his, who had also recently moved from the street, about living on ‘death row’ – suggesting an emotion, obviously exaggerated in Daniel’s phrasing, of grim expectancy and the absence of prospects. As the buildings fell into enduring neglect and became widely undesirable, so did the fact they were seen as welfarist homes (‘council flats’) lead people within Woldham and around the city to see the condition of the buildings as proof of both the failures of state welfare projects and the moral failings of those project’s beneficiaries.

The fact that Daniel and his neighbours ended up living in these once-temporary buildings, a matter of yards from the perimeter fence of an adjoining military base, was itself an effect of the state’s changing relation to the provision of public housing. As a result of Thatcher’s restrictions on funding for public housing, the City Council faced a critical shortage of council homes in the early 1990s. It pressurized the Ministry of Defence (MOD) to sell some of its vacant housing stock in Woldham, which was then one of the largest military housing estates in the country and grossly underpopulated. In a scheme touted in the local press for its pioneering circumvention of the need for capital funding from government, the MOD sold the flats on Kirklees Gardens to a property developer, which proceeded to long-lease it to the Domus Housing Association. These developments could well be framed as a straightforward withdrawal of the state from the provision of housing. Yet alongside disinvestment, a more complex transformation was underway in the manner of state intervention in ordinary homes, as I elaborate below.

With Kirklees Gardens behind him, Daniel aspired, falteringly, to home-ownership. Late one evening, after numerous beers, he expressed his hope of clearing his debts through steady repayment, getting a mortgage, and owning his own home. His tone had been sombre, confessional, and then a little unsure. Almost as soon as he had voiced it, he dispelled the aspiration with a laugh and a shake of his head: 'It'll probably never happen'.

Distributed sovereignty

Having shown how home-making aspirations coexisted with an ever-present worry of eviction, and how disinvestment in public housing made aspirational advances all the more appealing, I turn now to the question of the state's role in generating housing precarity for lower-income households like Kerry and Daniel's. Some might say the source of this precarity lay entirely in the hands of their private landlord – after all, it was his discretion to evict. Indeed, in the anxieties that Kerry and Daniel articulated about the interruptibility of their tenure, their relationship with their landlord was foregrounded. They also expressed a clear sense of social hierarchy based on housing tenure – comprising 'council', 'private', and home-owners – and related deferentially to landlords and home-owners. Yet besides the social distribution of ownership, the relation of ordinary homes to the state was also a critical source of the coercion that was present in them. It was landlords' capacity to evict, but that capacity was routed through the state. What distinguishes liberalized from informal arrangements for tenancy is that the violent enforcement of contracts is sanctioned by the state. Although bailiffs themselves are legally prohibited from using physical violence during an eviction, reports of non-compliance are widespread (Wheble 2006). Moreover, tenants who resist eviction by bailiffs can be arrested by the police for breaching the peace; and the police are allowed to use physical force against tenants who resist arrest.

Liberalizing reforms to housing in Britain reorganized the social distribution of the capacity to evict by increasing the number of buy-to-let landlords and increasing their powers of eviction. Kerry and Daniel's private, contractual relation with their landlord took the form of an Assured Shorthold Tenancy. The UK Parliament created this type of legal contract in 1988 to encourage landlords to let vacant properties. This measure constituted a radical removal of protections for tenants compared both historically and internationally. The growth of the private rental sector was also dependent on the removal of rent controls and the planned diminution of the supply of public housing through the discounted sale of council properties under the Right to Buy and an accompanying prohibition on local authorities from reinvesting in public housing. Finally, the private rental sector's re-emergence depended on the state's subsidization of market-rate rental payments for tenants (whether council or private) living on low incomes through Housing Benefit. In all, since the 1980s, the British state had side-stepped the direct provision of housing and turned instead towards the facilitation of a property market, in the process making it easier for landlords to evict. The insecurity of private tenancy and the scarcity of decent public housing meant Daniel's expressed impulse for longevity of tenure necessarily coincided with an aspiration for mortgage-based ownership.

The state's involvement in the generation of housing insecurity may seem paradoxical given the notion that liberalized markets are free from the interference of the state (Joyce 2013). Yet liberalization does not diminish the presence of the state, but rather transforms and relocates it (Riles 2011; Zhang 2001). As Joyce writes, 'the small state of neoliberal aspirations . . . only leads to the big state of ... coercion [and] security' (2013: 310). To a degree, this echoes Wacquant's characterization of the neoliberal state as a 'Centaur-state', with 'liberalism at the top of the class structure and punitive paternalism at the bottom' (2012: 66). However, in my case the state's contradictorily 'uplifting' and 'castigatory' visages (Wacquant 2012: 74) were far from neatly divided.

Kerry once told me: ‘My whole life is like a game of snakes and ladders’, explaining that should she and her family be evicted for rent arrears, they would not only struggle to find as decent a home, but would also be categorically excluded from social housing (being classed ‘intentionally homeless’) and would be unable to find a private landlord willing to take them on in anything other than severely inadequate housing (see Desmond 2017: 283). Thus, tenants like Kerry and Daniel alternated between, on the one hand, aspiring to move up in the world as eventual owner-occupiers and, on the other, defending against losing everything in the meantime. Every aspiration was founded on the condition that the ground on which it unfolded could be pulled from beneath their feet. Hence, the role of the liberal British state to facilitate ordinary households’ aspirational participation in property markets was accompanied by its proliferation of landlords’ discretionary power to call for legal action and, when it came down to it, its readiness to enforce this. The liberal principle of non-interference regarding the domestic lives of the propertyless comprised a reorganization of the conditions in which landlords can trigger evictions and potential arrest.

Hansen and Stepputat, writing of sovereignty as a ‘form of authority grounded in violence’, propose the notion of ‘the sovereignty of the market’ (2006: 295, 309). I would suggest that any such sovereignty is rather *distributed between* legal and market agencies, such as landlords and the law.⁷ Thus, the law specifies the parameters of a landlord’s discretion to evict, then enforces any such decision by the landlord. Still, this distributed sovereignty is ‘unpredictable ... in its punishment of those who fail to perform or fall behind’ (Hansen & Stepputat 2006: 309).⁸ The ‘entanglement between government and financial markets’ (Gutierrez-Garza in press) in housing provision in Britain leads to a distribution of sovereignty between state and market actors. However, while the precarity of housing tenure that this generates is often understood in terms of anxiety, fear, and depression (Desmond 2017; Sullivan

2017), I show in the following section that it also spurred on particular home-making pursuits, undertaken in order to drive out unhomely affects and instil a sense of optimism.

Beholding the future of home entertainment

As I mentioned above, on my first visit to Kerry and Daniel's new home, I met Daniel and his dad installing a wall mount for their flatscreen TV above the mantelpiece. More widely, despite the prospect of their tenancy ending prematurely, once moved into their home, Daniel set diligently about making lasting improvements to it, from laying wooden decking in the garden to painting the exterior of the entire row of four terraced houses, along with a neighbour. In doing so, he advanced their home along an aspirational trajectory and lent a settled quality to their tenure. But it was through equipping their home with home entertainment technology that their home became especially future-orientated. Alongside DIY and domestic consumption (Chapman & Hockey 1999; Cieraad 2006; Hurdley 2013; Miller 2001*a*), my interlocutors' engagements with home entertainment technology constitute a specific kind of home-making activity. Their enthusiasm for it forms part of an ethical idea of what constitutes a good home. I argue that this was an ethical response to the bleak prospect of eviction induced by the aforementioned distribution of sovereignty.

Home entertainment was an important leisure activity for many of my interlocutors. Most could not afford to go out to the cinema, theatre, football games, music concerts, restaurants, pubs, or nightclubs. For the majority who had children, the cost of childcare made this more difficult still. The professional debt advice workers I met locally sometimes said their clients spent too much money on TVs. 'The size is more than *I* can afford', said one. But the residents themselves said that home entertainment was more economical than going out. 'If I pay forty quid on a new game, I can get a whole month out of that', one man said, 'but if I go out in town I can spend twice that in one night'. Still, there was a normative dimension. It was

a matter of pride, or even self-respect, to have a functioning set-up. Kerry and Daniel's flatscreen Smart TV took pride of place, mounted on the wall above the long-disused hearth in their mid-century home, echoing Hurdley's (2013) observation that mantelpieces provide an enduring focal point in many contemporary UK living rooms despite the absence of a functioning fireplace. TVs and consoles also formed a medium for social connectivity within and beyond the neighbourhood: for instance, some of the men and women I knew used the Sony Xbox console's online multi-player function to play a game with friends living in the same block of flats or just up the road, chatting through their headsets before, during, and after.

In several ways, when people engaged with home entertainment technology they beheld and drew nearer to a particular future: namely the future promised by consumer markets. This future was virtually guaranteed to be progressive and bright, in contrast to the threat of eviction. First, there was a value placed on having the very latest technology, in terms of both hardware and software. When I shopped around for a second-hand Xbox myself, Daniel urged me repeatedly to buy one with a 'Kinect' sensor, which can detect your body moving in front of it – so bodies substitute for a handheld controller. He argued that it enhanced the capacity of the console. Second, the release or acquisition of new home entertainment technology was often met with fanfare and excitement. 'The new Xbox is going to be out for Christmas', one resident enthused to me and a couple of others. This was itself a mode of 'looking forward' elicited by home entertainment.

Third, residents spoke with admiration of the technological sophistication of their devices and the films and games they screened on them. They particularly valued the ability of equipment like large flatscreen televisions, 3D-TVs, surround-sound speakers, and games consoles to *immerse* the viewer: their ability to conjure up audio-visual worlds that, with the lights dimmed, could fill the space of the living room. While residents did not always find the

technology lived up to its promises, immersiveness was the virtue that manufacturers and retailers touted through their advertising. Part of enjoying the 2011 superhero film *Thor*, for instance, was appreciating its use of state-of-the-art CGI to depict the mythical realm of Asgard. While the technology was new, people's enthusiasm for it realizes a longer-standing virtue of modernity in working-class British homes, summed up in the term 'mod cons' (modern conveniences), and prefigured in narratives of tenants' delight at the modernity of post-war council housing.

An encounter with Daniel and a neighbour outside the latter's flat one Sunday afternoon illustrates the collectivized appeal of newness and immersiveness in home entertainment technology. After I greeted them, Daniel and the neighbour, who stood inside his ground-floor balcony, resumed a conversation about the *Call of Duty* series of video games. First appearing in 2003, *Call of Duty* is a first-person shooter game franchise that contains several sub-series, including *Modern Warfare*, which depicts a modern-day World War III, and *Black Ops*, which hops between past and future historical times and features zombie opponents. In all, a male soldier battles through scenes of devastation.

Daniel's neighbour said he had bought the newly released *Call of Duty: Black Ops 2* that weekend and spoke enthusiastically of its features. Daniel complained that he had only just got the hang of the previous release in that series, *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3* (released a year earlier). I said to the man, half-teasing: 'You weren't one of those people camping outside the shop the night before, were you?' He replied: 'No, but some people did'. Such dedication was of no issue to him, other than for its lack of nous: 'I pre-ordered it on Amazon, so when they released it, it came straight away. I got it on Wednesday'. Ignorant of the buzz of new releases myself, I asked him if any people were even playing *Black Ops 2*, yet given how recently it had been released. Daniel said with a weary look that a lot of people would have

been waiting for its release date. He added: 'You've got a chance of doing alright if you get in there early'. He told me it was advantageous to learn the game layout and features of a particular level such as useful hiding places, and spots where enemies tended to bottleneck. Further, achievements, rewards, and progress were structured within the *Call of Duty* games in a self-reinforcing way. This meant an early head-start could generate lasting, and even exponential, advantages.

The neighbour started talking with relish about how he and a friend had played one of the *Call of Duty* games from 11 one night until 11 the next morning, only realizing how much time had passed when they stopped. He then said he was going to get a wall-mounted projector for their living room soon. I said, 'Won't you have to close the curtains in order to see it? Then you're really going to lose track of time'. He told me the projector he was going to get, unlike the ones his friends had bought, could withstand daylight. Daniel excused himself to return home as Kerry had visitors. On the neighbour asking him if he was going to purchase *Black Ops 2*, Daniel said its £45 price tag was too much. The man replied by wryly rubbing his left forefinger and thumb together (in a gesture for monetary concerns) and said: 'What's this?' Daniel looked blankly at him. Framing Daniel's claim of insufficient means as a lame plea for sympathy, the man answered: 'World's smallest violin'.

In pursuit of immersive, mediatized experiences, then, Daniel and his neighbour sought to capacitate their living rooms using state-of-the-art technology and new releases, as far as they could afford. By doing this, Daniel and his neighbour tried to situate their living rooms on the cusp of the future. The temporality is complexly layered. The content of the films and games they screened was as often dystopian or historical as it was brightly futuristic. And there were often attempts to forget the mundane passing of time. Hence, in one regard, these practices constitute an attempt to immerse oneself in the present, 'living for the moment' through 'a

commitment to the here and now' which enables 'a transcendent escape from time itself' (Day, Stewart & Papataxiarches 1999: 2-4). Yet my interlocutors talked about these activities in a way that made an explicit virtue of the latter's future orientation. They ascribed a linear progressive temporality to consumer markets for electronics and technology, and they 'folded' this into the immediacy of their here-and-now (Nielsen 2011; 2014). They made their present anticipate this future.

Species of unease: the anticipatory uncanny

Earlier I described how the prospect of eviction threatened to interrupt the multiple aspirational futures that Daniel and Kerry projected onto their rented family home. Considering home entertainment as a home-making practice allows us to characterize the affective state of anticipating such an interruption. Existing studies link uneasy affects in the home to the lingering material trace of the past. In Navaro's case, the remnants of a displaced former owner transmitted an uncanny affect (Navaro-Yashin 2012). Miller (2001*b*) implies a similar temporality in discussing homes 'haunted' by the intransigence of their material culture (see also Bear 2007: 37).

But Kerry and Daniel's unease was rather future-orientated. They believed the regular practices they undertook to make their home a comfortable, welcoming space could become the grounds on which their landlord might lawfully evict them. This became clear when some neighbours, who snobbily disapproved of their lifestyle, threatened to bad-mouth them to their landlord. 'You run your house like a drop-in centre', said the neighbour, suggesting that the couple received too many visitors. They believed that if the neighbour passed this complaint on to their landlord, this could jeopardize their tenancy.

This situation is central to Kerry and Daniel's domestic condition. They felt their everyday practice of domesticity could be held against them as a reason for eviction. Consequently, domesticity itself could conjure up fantasies of its forcible cessation. The four walls of the house could evoke fantasies of their violation, and the sight of household possessions could call to mind their forcible seizure by bailiffs. The species of unease this generates is more specific than simple worrying, because it comprises a way of encountering the home's ordinary material culture whereby one apprehends its loss. Further, while Navaro says of the uncanny that it is not repressed or 'phantomic' but 'out in the open', 'tactile', and patent (2012: 191), the anticipatory version of uncanniness I encountered was at once tangible *and* phantomic: the material culture of the home 'reminded' tenants of its possible disappearance; presences evoked their own absence.

Given this, part of the appeal of home entertainment was its potential to hold such apprehensions at bay. It did so by transforming the ordinary material culture of the home – which evoked fantasies of eviction – into something extraordinary with a different repertoire of fantasies. My interlocutors projected images and sounds onto the surfaces of their living room, imbuing it with an immersive atmosphere. For many, these actions provided a space in which to rest amid the tumult of daily life, by warding off fears of eviction and dispossession (Davey 2019). Their enthusiasm for the progressive, technological future held by consumer markets constituted an alternative experience of domesticity to their usual sense of potential eviction – an 'attempt to overcome feelings of the uncanny' (Navaro-Yashin 2012: 186). The technological future, folded into the present (Nielsen 2011), displaced the potential future of dispossession. This attempt to drive out feelings of unhomeliness should not be understood as a method of 'repression' in the psychoanalytic sense of burying feelings deep within the psyche. Instead, it amounts to the residents' active transformation of their sensory encounter with the materiality of their home – and, so, a kind of home-making. Home entertainment was a practice

of domesticity paradoxically premised on *not-dwelling*, in the sense that it was a way of being at home that allowed residents to avoid dwelling on the futures that threatened always to escape them.

Conclusion

This article has studied residents' responses to the presence of legal coercion in ordinary tenant homes. It affirms the importance for anthropological studies of the home to attend to the state (Koch 2015; Miller 1988; Mollona 2009; Navaro-Yashin 2012). It shows how the state is present in ordinary homes in a setting when housing and property have been heavily marketized and liberalized. Although not objectified in the material culture of the home, the British state was present in tenant homes in Woldham through its role in generating a future potential for violence. Given this, we can study the presence of the state in such homes by attending to the futures that arise in response: residents' apprehensions, aspirations, and anticipatory affects.

This is likely the case for the increased numbers of private rental tenants in the United Kingdom living on low and precarious incomes, as well as in the growing number of other countries with liberalized and marketized arrangements for housing.⁹ It may also apply to mortgagors at risk of default. As I showed, the coercion present in ordinary homes is generated through a distribution of the sovereign capacity to decide when forcibly to evict a tenant. When the state is present in the homes of working-class tenants not as a municipal landlord, but as the coercive force behind bailiffs and evictions, then it generates an affect of anticipatory uncanniness. This affect is at once tangible and phantomic, in the sense that tenants' sensory encounters with their homes' materiality – household possessions, bricks and mortar – are suffused with anticipations of that materiality's abrupt loss.

Contrary to many accounts of eviction (e.g. Desmond 2017; Sullivan 2017), the presence of legal coercion within the home does not fill the home only with worry or despair (although of course it also does that). Tenants in Woldham often tried to drive out the unhomey affects generated by the presence of coercion in their homes. In the process, they formed and pursued new futures. As I showed, home entertainment, by offering contact with the bright technological futures held by markets for commodities, was, in effect, a method for not-dwelling on the bleaker possibility of being evicted. For Kerry and Daniel, the potential loss of the aspirational futures bound up in their home stoked the appeal of the unswervingly progressive, technological future of home entertainment. This is not to say that they and others would have had no time for home entertainment otherwise, but rather that it provided a much-needed source of optimism in and for the home when the options were scant.

A similar point holds for aspirations for upward mobility and eventual property-ownership. Insecure private rental tenancies and the scarcity of public housing – both consequences of the British state pinning its hopes for collective prosperity on the growth of property markets, and its decision to facilitate the operation of those markets through liberal reform and rental subsidy – meant mortgage-based ownership was Kerry and Daniel’s only real option for a permanent home. The exposure to eviction that the couple experienced as Assured Shorthold Tenants incited them to pursue an impulse for permanence of dwelling through this particular artery of ambition.

Adding to scholarship on home-making, I have tried to show how home-making aspirations may partly be responses to the possible loss of home. Home-making, in conditions of insecurity, is a recursive process of driving out unhomey affects and forces. Therefore, specific moments of unhomeliness form the starting point for making the home homely (once more). They inform the particular vision of homeliness that tenants pursue.

In sum, a trace of the state's coercive function – or, more accurately, a trace of the coercive function of a sovereignty that is distributed between state and market agencies – lingers in the home-making aspirations of insecure tenants. Indeed, it spurs those aspirations on. My interlocutors' home-making aspirations, that is, were also ways of optimistically disregarding the possibility of legal force. One cannot clearly separate their home-making pursuits from their attempts to instil a sense of optimism in response to the threat of forcible dispossession. Hence legal coercion is present in a very mundane fashion in the homes of tenants who, amid liberalized arrangements for housing, have few protections against eviction. This coercion suffuses their everyday domestic lives and their home-making aspirations.

NOTES

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¹ I mean neither to celebrate optimism nor to characterize it as uniformly alienating (see Berlant 2011).

² My focus on evictions is not meant to obscure the state's non-coercive functions, such as providing social welfare (see Koch 2015), but to identify the state's contribution to housing precarity.

³ https://england.shelter.org.uk/housing_advice/eviction/section_21_eviction/ (accessed 8 November 2019).

⁴ https://england.shelter.org.uk/housing_advice/eviction/eviction_with_a_section_8_notice (accessed 8 November 2019).

⁵ I follow Mitchell's (1991; 2005) argument that the distinction between state and market is an effect of a broader political order.

⁶ See also Ong's concept of graduated sovereignty (2000).

⁷ The tenants I met in Woldham were exposed to eviction in a way that is perhaps not the case for most people one would casually or intuitively think of as being middle class, even if they are tenants rather than home-owners. They were not only propertyless but were also somewhat prone to eviction.

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